

# **The Yemen Theatre: Historical Motivations in the Saudi-Iranian Proxy Drama**



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# Abstract

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This thesis seeks to contribute to Andrew Mumford's proxy war theory by applying it to the ongoing regional conflict in Yemen. Mumford's definition of proxy war expounds that ideology is the primary underlying motivation for benefactors to engage in proxy conflict. This thesis proposes to include a three dimensional framework that asserts that ideology, economics, and regional power interests intertwine to account for the underlying motivations of a benefactor. In order to build an unabridged understanding of Saudi-Iranian motivations, the research delves into the historical chronology of the Saudi-Iranian proxy war from 1979 onwards. Through the evaluation of the three motivational dimensions in the historical Saudi-Iranian proxy war, climaxing in the most recent theatre of Yemen, the thesis sets out to refine Mumford's theory. The thesis conclusively finds that Saudi Arabia and Iran are primarily motivated by regional power interests in Yemen. By extension, the research recommends that Mumford's conceptualization of proxy war should be set to include both economic and regional power interests, alongside ideology, as motivating factors for benefactors engaging in proxy war.

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## Introduction

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The great proxy game between Iran and Saudi Arabia has embittered the Middle East in conflicts since 1979, with their adversal dynamic festering itself within preexisting local hostilities in the region. Their heated rivalry envelops a complex history amongst both sectarian and political lines. Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979 proved to be the nascency of their archnemesis dynamic.<sup>1</sup> Centuries of religious contestation between the Islamic sects of Sunni and Shia would further be exacerbated by naturally opposing political systems that launched the two nations into a zero-sum game of antimony. Their contest would go on to influence the state identities of both countries, with Iran rooting itself in its revisionist policy under the conceptualization of Islamic unity through Khomeinism, whilst Saudi Arabia revitalized its state acquiantancy to the Wahhabi movement. At the cost of civilian lives in Iran, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and beyond, the two regional hegemons have exerted various tools in an attempt to gain the upper hand in their ceaseless struggle - a struggle fought now for more than 40 years in the form of veiled or unveiled proxy wars. The most recent theatre of their antagonism manifests itself in Yemen.

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<sup>1</sup>Kadhim, Abbas, and Mohammed Soliman. *Iran and the Gulf States 40 Years after the 1979 Revolution*. 12 Jan. 2021, [www.mei.edu/publications/iran-and-gulf-states-40-years-after-1979-revolution](http://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-and-gulf-states-40-years-after-1979-revolution). [Accessed 14 January 2021]

Seeking to understand the underlying motivations of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni theatre, this thesis will use the theory of Andrew Mumford on proxy wars. The concept of proxy war was first proposed in 1964 by Karl Deutsch, describing them as;

“International conflicts between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country; disguised as conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some or all of that country’s manpower, resources, and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies.”<sup>2</sup>

Deutsch’s theorization of proxy war, similar to consequential perspectives up to 1989, was rooted in Cold War themes of bipolarity in which the proxy served as a dependent instrument of a superpower moving proxies around like pieces on a chessboard. Given the contemporary shift in proxy warfare symmetry since then, scholar Andrew Mumford has aptly aimed to redefine proxy wars in 2013 as;

“Proxy wars are the product of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, seeking to pursue ideological objectives, and the chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor’s weapons, training and funding.”<sup>3</sup>

Mumford recognizes that the undertaking of proxy conflicts by states is inextricably linked with their geostrategic concerns, prompted in the main by interests, ideology, and perceptions of risk.<sup>4</sup>

Modern-day proxy wars are accordingly executed with specific objectives, such as the

<sup>2</sup> Deutsch, Karl. “External Involvement in Internal War.” In Harry Eckstein (Ed) *Internal War: Problems and Approaches*. New York; The Free Press. pp. 100-110. p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Mumford, Andrew. “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict.” *Taylor & Francis*, 4 July 2013, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733). [Accessed 14 October, 2020]

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

containment of perceived existential threat, without risking foreseen consequences and at an acceptable monetary cost. The alluring combination of plausible deniability and lower risk, according to Mumford, have ensured that proxy wars are attractive to states seeking to defend or expand their interests or ideology. Mumford acknowledges the risk that proxy conflicts pose; proxies have their own agendas, which makes the management of the relationship between the benefactor and the proxy during conflict challenging, especially as proxies begin to develop greater perceptions of autonomy or forge differing interpretations of strategic objective to the benefactor. Proxy wars are therefore naturally plagued with relational complexities for all warring parties.<sup>5</sup>

Mumford's theory on proxy wars offers a useful contemporary framework that does well in recognizing the advantages and disadvantages of engaging in proxy war and in highlighting the intricacies of a benefactor-proxy relationship. Mumford does however not pay much attention to the underlying motivations of why a benefactor chooses to initiate a proxy war in the first place. As proposed by IR scholar Richard Ned Lebow, less than thirty percent of all wars from 1618 to 2008 were motivated by resource acquisition or pure security concerns.<sup>6</sup> Mumford identifies, similarly to Lebow, ideology as the defining factor behind the decisions of states to embrace proxy warfare in the modern age.<sup>7</sup> Mumford recognises that this is changing however, stating:

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<sup>5</sup> Mumford, Andrew. "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict." *Taylor & Francis*, 4 July 2013, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733). [Accessed 14 October, 2020]

<sup>6</sup> Roquen, Jeff. *Book Review: Proxy Warfare by Andrew Mumford*. 26 Mar. 2014, [blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2013/09/06/book-review-proxy-warfare/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2013/09/06/book-review-proxy-warfare/).

<sup>7</sup> Mumford, Andrew. "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict." *Taylor & Francis*, 4 July 2013, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733). [Accessed 14 October, 2020]

“A shift in the character of these wars (*since the Cold War*) from internationalised conflicts of an ideological nature to regionalised interventions motivated by inter- and intra-state competition for power and resources.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite Mumford’s recognition of the fact that post-cold-war proxy wars are increasingly less ideologically motivated in nature, and more inclined to be fought on a regional rather than global scale, the case studies of his work still rest on internationalised accountancies of bipolar proxy wars between superpowers. His definition of proxy wars in turn maintains that ideology is the sole motivating factor. Mumford further notes:

“...focused on the waging of conventional war to the exclusion of other, more politically acceptable approaches, indeed opens the door for more, and not fewer, proxy wars in the future.”<sup>9</sup>

Taking in consideration the possible increase in proxy wars, not only between superpowers but also between regional powers, and the deficit of case studies applying proxy war theory, this thesis will focus on the Saudi-Iranian animosity of the past 40 years. The context, relevance, objectives and methodology of this research will be explained below. The research question posed is;

***What does the Yemeni theatre, in light of the historical Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict, demonstrate about the underlying motivations of its benefactors?***

<sup>8</sup>Mumford, Andrew. “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict.” *Taylor & Francis*, 4 July 2013, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733) [Accessed 14 October, 2020]

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

Mumford calls for further research on proxy wars at the end of his book *“Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict”*, stating;

“In short, the history of proxy wars needs closer inspection if their manifestation in the foreseeable future is to be appropriately understood, adequately contextualised and sufficiently critiqued.”<sup>10</sup>

In essence, this is what this thesis sets out to do by applying Mumford’s theory on Proxy Warfare to the historical Iranian-Saudi conflict. Firstly by a close inspection of the chronology of Saudi-Iranian animosity from the 1979 revolution to the contemporary situation in Yemen during the COVID-19 outbreak, the thesis emphasizes an appropriate understanding of this specific proxy conflict. Emphasizing this historical approach is tantamount towards consummating the second goal. Secondly, and most importantly, by focusing on the underlying, often mixed, motivations of why benefactors chose to engage in a proxy war this thesis seeks to add to Mumford’s approach by refining it. This is the main objective of this thesis. This will be done by applying a three-dimensional framework by which the following underlying motivations are reviewed: sectarianism (ideology), resources (economics), and regional power interests. The thesis proposes that these three underlying motivations provide a more holistic perspective as to what drives benefactors to engage in proxy wars. A further assessment of these underlying motivations through the tutelage of Mumford’s theory can in turn indicate the direction of the Yemen conflict.

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<sup>10</sup> Mumford, Andrew. “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict.” *Taylor & Francis*, 4 July 2013, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733). [Accessed 14 October, 2020]



The relevancy of this approach is hedged in the application of Mumford's theory to a practical case study. The Yemen conflict has been thoroughly studied through traditional IR paradigms such as constructivism and the security dilemma, as evaluated in other dissertations such as "*The Race to Regional Hegemony: A Case Study of the Iran-Saudi Rivalry in Yemen*",<sup>11</sup> a bachelor of Arts thesis by Micaela Tierce published in October of 2020 and "*Regional or Religious Hegemony? An Examination of the Saudi Arabia-Iran Rivalry vis-à-vis Yemen*"<sup>12</sup> published by Nehal Hussein on the 10th of January 2018 as his master's thesis. Further studies, such as Merel Martens' master's dissertation published on the 6th of June 2017, "*What Kind of War is this?*",<sup>13</sup> examines the Yemen civil war through the lens of proxy war theory to contribute to the new wars debate. Previous literature however lacks the direct application of contemporary proxy war theory to empirical case studies. Furthermore, specifically assessing the underlying motivations of benefactors has not been previously applied.

<sup>11</sup> Tierce Micaela, "The Race to Regional Hegemony: A Case Study of the Iran-Saudi Rivalry in Yemen" Honors Thesis. *University of North Georgia*, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Hussein, Nehal. "Regional or Religious Hegemony? An Examination of the Saudi Arabia-Iran Rivalry Vis-à-Vis Yemen." MA Thesis. *Leiden University*, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Martens, Merel. "What Kind of War Is This?" MA Thesis. *Utrecht University*, 2017.

## **Methodology**

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The research question will be tackled by utilizing secondary sources, academic journals, and scholarly accounts to construct a thorough chronology leading from the 1979 revolution to the Yemen conflict. Secondly, first-hand accounts in the form of speech and interview excerpts from Iranian & Saudi ministers, religious leaders, and academics will be utilized to auscultate personal and unblemished motivations behind their proxy campaigns.

Chapter one delves into the foundation of their rivalry from 1979 forth. Chapter two accounts for the initiation of their proxy duel in Iraq and other theatres. Chapter three describes the early history of the Yemeni civil war. Chapter four discerns the outbreak of proxy war in Yemen. The conclusion at the end of chapters one to four will conjoin these histories with Mumford's proxy war theory. Finally, Chapter five will analyze the three thematic motivations of the Saudi-Iranian relationship. The conclusion will finalize which contributions this case study might substantiate to Mumford's theory and employ suggestions for further research.

## Chapter One: Historical roots of Saudi-Iranian rivalry

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**Overview:** In chapter one, the foundation of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry will be analyzed by taking the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution as its genesis. This will be followed by Saudi Arabia's ideological ties to Wahhabism and reaction to the 1979 revolution, demonstrating how these junctures would embed the Saudi-Iranian dynamic in a sectarian substratum.

### 1.1: The Iranian revolution

Prior to 1979, the ruling house of Saud and the Pahlavi dynasty of Iran can be ascribed as cordial neighbors, that under the signing of the 1929 Friendship treaty maintained an evenhanded state of affairs. Through the US-led 'Twin pillar diplomacy' the two nations shared commutuality in their alignment with the west against the Soviet Union and their economic ambitions regarding the exportation of oil.<sup>14</sup> The Iranian revolution of 1979 would prove to irrevocably change their dynamic. Prior to the outbreak of this momentous juncture, the Iranian people had grown increasingly discontent with the authoritarian Shah, who in his attempt to push for radical modernization and westernization, alienated much of Iran's historically traditional peoples.<sup>15</sup> Under the Shah, Iran's Shi'ite clergy had undergone a period of religious marginalization that further exacerbated tensions.

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<sup>14</sup> Weddington, Drika. *Rivalry in the Middle East: The History of Saudi-Iranian ...* 2017, [bearworks.missouristate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4139&context=theses](http://bearworks.missouristate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4139&context=theses). [Accessed 25 October, 2020]

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Opposition to the Shah's rule was widespread amongst various political and religious factions in Iran, including Islamic socialists, marxists, secularists and Shia Islamists.<sup>16</sup> Central to the revolutionary movement was Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, an Islamic scholar who had been in exile for 15 years prior to 1979 due to his opposition of the Shah's westernization policies.<sup>17</sup> Khomeini, within his role as marja, the highest level of Shia religious authority, had motivated the masses by posing the revolution as a means of replacing the Shah with a pure Islamic government. Khomeini's rhetoric, centred around freeing Iran from Western imperialism and cultural colonization facilitated by the Shah, was extremely popular. In combination with his religious motives of reinstating 'true Islam', his ideology equipped him with a dual legitimacy rooted in both popular consent and religious doctrines that had been suppressed under the Shah.<sup>18</sup> In the wake of the Shah's fall and the end of 2,500 years of Persian monarchical rule, Khomeini supinely arose as the Supreme leader of Iran's new Islamic republic following overwhelming support in a national referendum on the 1st of April, 1979.

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<sup>16</sup> Kurzman, C. "Historiography of the Iranian Revolutionary Movement, 1977-79." *Jstor*, 1995, [www.jstor.org/stable/4310916](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4310916). [Accessed 14 October, 2020]

<sup>17</sup>Regencia, Ted. "40 Years on: Khomeini's Return from Exile and the Iran Revolution." *Middle East News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 1 Feb. 2019, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/1/40-years-on-khomeinis-return-from-exile-and-the-iran-revolution](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/1/40-years-on-khomeinis-return-from-exile-and-the-iran-revolution). [Accessed 25 October, 2020]

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

The foundation of this new republic would be built on the theory of *Velayat-e faqih*, or Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, which called for theocratic political rule by Islamic jurists<sup>19</sup>. Khomeini envisioned the government should be run in accordance with Sharia law, and for this to be successfully done a leading Islamic Jurist must provide political guardianship over the nation. As such, Khomeini would serve as the leading Jurist from 1979 onwards. The conceptualization of *Velayat-e faqih* had been a scholarly work of Khomeini nearly a decade earlier and had first been published in 1970.<sup>20</sup> The fundamental teachings of this new guiding principle would also underline the beginning of an aggrandizing dynamic between the newly founded Islamic republic and its neighboring countries. Central to *Velayat-e faqih* is that Islamic government is naturally superior to alternative forms of government and the belief that all Shia muslims should adhere to its principles. Khomeini further states that non-Islamic governments are inherently weak, creating an unjust economic order that divides the people into two groups: oppressors and oppressed.<sup>21</sup>

Likened to that of a Islamic papacy, the foundation of the new Iranian Islamic republic on the merits of *the Velayat-e faqih* instinctively threatened Iran's secular and monarchical Arab

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<sup>19</sup> Aarabi, Kasra. "What Is Velayat-e Faqih?" *Institute for Global Change*, [institute.global/policy/what-velayat-e-faqih](https://institute.global/policy/what-velayat-e-faqih). [Accessed 27 October, 2020]

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

neighbors.<sup>22</sup> Foremost to this was the illegimitization of their rule on the basis of naturally superior Islamic governance. Secondly, the rejection of foreign meddling and Western fealty affronted nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq with their political and economic ties to Britain and the United States. Lastly, the *Velayat-e faqih* calls to allegiance from Shia muslims across the region reinvigorated anxieties from these nations that Shia populations in their domains could undermine the political status quo.

By late 1979, Khomeini began to expand Iran's role as one of exporting revolution.<sup>23</sup> The new constitution formed by Khomeini's regime outlines its intention to form a single world community under the ideals of Khomeinism. On the eve of the Iranian new year, Khomeini would address his nation stating;

“We should try hard to export our revolution to the world, and should set aside the thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the oppressed people of the world... we shall confront the world with our ideology.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Salam, Imad. “The Encroachment of Iran's Velayat-e Faqih Raises Tensions: Imad Salamey.” *AW*, 22 Jan. 2016, [thearabweekly.com/encroachment-irans-velayat-e-faqih-raises-tensions](http://thearabweekly.com/encroachment-irans-velayat-e-faqih-raises-tensions). [Accessed 29 October, 2020]

<sup>23</sup> Hafizullah , Emadi. “Exporting Iran's Revolution .” *JSTOR*, Jan. 1995, [www.jstor.org/stable/4283695](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4283695). [Accessed 25 October, 2020]

<sup>24</sup> Khomeini: ‘We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology.’” *MERIP Reports*, June 1980.

## 1.2: Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi foundation

The ideological threat that the Iranian revolution of 1979 posed to Saudi Arabia is one that can only be understood by tracing back to the establishment of the House of Saud and their religious roots. The House of Saud has historically rested its political legitimacy and national identity on its propagation of Wahhabism.<sup>25</sup> From Saudi Arabia's foundation up to the present day, Wahhabism remains the official state-sponsored form of Sunni Islam practiced in the nation. Wahhabism is in essence a Sunni religious and political movement that was founded by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the 18th century, which strove for a moral reconstruction of society by purifying Islam and returning Muslims to the fundamental principles of Islam. The movement sprung up in reaction to the perceived moral decline of Muslims in the Arab world. Wahhabism opposed saint worship and viewed assigning authority to anyone other than God as heretical.<sup>26</sup> A strict exertion of Sharia law was also viewed as imperative, with strict gender roles and the use of alcohol, tobacco, and music being banned. Abd al-wahhab also preached the *fatwa* of Jihad, stating that violence would be necessary in achieving the reinstatement of pure Islam.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Niblock, Tim. *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival*. Taylor & Francis, 27 Feb. 2006, p. 51

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

The eternal alliance of the House of Saud and Wahhabism would come to be in the year 1744.<sup>28</sup> Al-Wahhab, who fled his hometown due to opposition regarding his radical beliefs, found refuge in Najd under a local chieftain named Ibn Saud. Ibn Saud, an ambitious chieftain in the sporadic and splintered landscape of Arabia, saw Al-Wahhab's teachings as a means to unite the religiously and ethnically divergent tribes of the Arabian peninsula.<sup>29</sup> Together they would go on to form the first Saudi dynasty and the basis of Saudi monarchical rule with Al-Saud controlling military, political and economic arena's and Al-Wahhab forming a religious creed and serving as a religious leader.<sup>30</sup> What was unique about Al-Saud's strategy and that of his future successor, Al-Aziz Ibn Saud, was best said by Madawi Al-Rasheed, a renowned Arab historian;

“The immediate emergence of a state imposed on people without a historical memory or unity or national heritage which would justify their inclusion into a single entity.”<sup>31</sup>

Al-Aziz Ibn Saud leveraged Wahhabism as a means to unify the politically divided groups under a single authority.<sup>32</sup> By combining his religious authority as a leader in the Wahhabi order and

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<sup>28</sup>Jamsheed K, and Carol E. B. Choksy. “The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad.” *The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad* | *YaleGlobal Online*, 14 May 2015, [yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/saudi-connection-wahhabism-and-global-jihad](http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/saudi-connection-wahhabism-and-global-jihad). [Accessed 29 October, 2020]

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Crooke, Alastair. “You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 30 Mar. 2017, [www.huffpost.com/entry/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia\\_b\\_5717157](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157). [Accessed 29 October, 2020]

<sup>31</sup> Rasheed, Madawi Al-. “A History of Saudi Arabia.” *Amazon*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, P22

<sup>32</sup>“Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the ... - Brookings.” *Brookings Institute*, [www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Kings-and-Presidents\\_TOC.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Kings-and-Presidents_TOC.pdf). [Accessed 10 January, 2021]



his role as a victorious warrior-chieftain, Ibn Saud managed to maintain his territories. By disseminating Wahhabism to the various peoples of his lands, Ibn Saud provided the divided tribal community with a sense of unity and mission in furthering the Wahhabi doctrine of Islam. By empowering the *ulama* alongside his monarchical rule, the commitment of the tribes to the house of Saud was aptly entwined with their commitment to their faith.

The key revelations that are divulged in this early history of the Saudi kingdom is that the house of Saud rested its political legitimacy on its union with Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine. In duality with the kingdom being the birthplace of Islam, and Saudi Arabia upholding its role as "custodian of the two holy mosques"<sup>33</sup> in Mecca and Medina, maintaining this religious preeminence was instrumental to the constitutionality of the house of Saud. Furthermore, the advent of Wahhabism was naturally designated to foment Sunni-Shi'ite relations. Wahhabi rejection of the "heretical" beliefs and values of Shi'ite Muslims would form the fundament of the bitter ideological disillusionment between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

### **1.3: Saudi Arabia's reaction to the 1979 revolution**

Prior to the 1979 revolution, the Shah's Iran had formed a state identity directed towards being modern, secular and Westernized.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, this did not threaten Saudi Arabia's

<sup>33</sup>"Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the ... - Brookings." *Brookings Institute*, [www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Kings-and-Presidents\\_TOC.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Kings-and-Presidents_TOC.pdf). [Accessed 10 January, 2021]

<sup>34</sup> Gambrell, Jon. "Shah of Iran Modernized His Nation but Vacillated in Crisis." *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, 17 Jan. 2019, [apnews.com/c037d5af8b3b4be6ae47f125d847d0f0](http://apnews.com/c037d5af8b3b4be6ae47f125d847d0f0). [Accessed 28 October, 2020]

identity as leader of the muslim world as the ideals of Khomeini's revolution eventually would. Immediately following the revolution, a cautious but optimistic Saudi Arabia was initially welcoming of the new government, internationally recognizing Khomeini's regime and Saudi King Khalid extending his eagerness for cooperation between the two countries to Khomeini. Prince Al-Aziz, the then deputy prime minister, would expand on this by stating;

“Islam is the organizer our of relations. Muslims interests are the goals of our activities and the Holy Qur'an is the constitution of both countries...the fact is that we are very relieved by the Islamic Republic of Iran's policy making islam, not heavy armaments, the organizer of cooperation, a base for dialogue, and the introduction to a prosperous and dignified future.”<sup>35</sup>

Initial enthusiasm stemming from the Saudi court about the potential for collaboration on the basis of religious solidarity quickly dimmed as Khomeini's calls for an Islamic revolution grew.<sup>36</sup> Concurrently, Khomeini self-professed identification as the new leader of the Islamic world forewarned the house of Saud and its sensitive identity built on claims to Islamic leadership. As Saudi fears mounted regarding opaque Iranian intentions, two cataclysmic events would hit the nation in the closing months of 1979. The Grand Mosque seizure and the Qatif uprisings of 1979 would entirely exacerbate Saudi concern regarding Iran's regime change and reverse the socio-cultural ambitions of the nation.

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<sup>35</sup> Safran, Nadav. "Saudi Arabia: the Ceaseless Quest for Security." Cornell University Press, 1988. p.42

<sup>36</sup> Upi. "Khomeini Urges Export Of Iranian Revolution." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 15 Oct. 1981, [www.nytimes.com/1981/10/15/world/around-the-world-khomeini-urges-export-of-iranian-revolution.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/15/world/around-the-world-khomeini-urges-export-of-iranian-revolution.html). [Accessed 10 January, 2020]

## **Grand mosque seizure of 1979**

On the 20th of November, 1979, roughly 500 militants led by Juhayman al-Otaybi stormed Mecca's great Mosque and occupied it for two weeks.<sup>37</sup> Al-Otaybi, a former corporal from the Saudi National Guard, called for the overthrow of the House of Saud since they;

“(The ruling Al-Saud dynasty) lost its legitimacy because it was corrupt, ostentatious and had destroyed Saudi culture by an aggressive policy of Westernization.”<sup>38</sup>

Al-Otaybi and his followers had been operating under an association called al-Jamaa al-Salafiya al-Muhstasiba, a Sunni-salafist extremist group, which was strictly opposed to what it saw as the degeneration of social and religious values in Saudi Arabia.<sup>39</sup> Following the attainment of extreme oil wealth in the mid 1970's Saudi Arabia had indeed been urbanizing with men and women mixing in public, new technologies becoming readily available, and movie theaters and televisions becoming sought-after.<sup>40</sup> The group aired their demands on the Mosques loudspeakers, calling for the expulsion of all foreign citizens and the cut-off of oil exports to the United States. Al-Otaybi, unlike previous anti-monarchical protestors, had also been critical of the wahhabi ulama, accusing them of accepting the rule of an infidel state and offering loyalty to

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<sup>37</sup> “The Seizure of the Grand Mosque: The Event That Shook Saudi Arabia.” *Fanack.com*, 18 May 2020, [fanack.com/religions-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/seizure-of-the-grand-mosque/](https://fanack.com/religions-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/seizure-of-the-grand-mosque/). [Accessed 5 November, 2020]

<sup>38</sup> Crooke, Alastair. “You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.” *Wiley Online Library*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 20 Jan. 2015, [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/npqu.11504](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/npqu.11504). [Accessed 6 November, 2020]

<sup>39</sup> Mecca 1979: The Mosque Siege That Changed the Course of Saudi History.” *BBC News*, BBC, 27 Dec. 2019, [www.bbc.com/news/stories-50852379](https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-50852379). [Accessed 10 January, 2020]

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

corrupt rulers in “*exchange for honours and riches.*”<sup>41</sup> Only after receiving assistance from French special forces, a bloody retaking of the mosque succeeded.

The Grand mosque seizure had terrified the house of Saud in revealing systemic weaknesses in what it had seen as the legitimizing factor of the Saudi political establishment. Moreover, al-Otaybi’s rhetoric had emulated the vehement themes of the Iranian revolution regarding Islamic purification and a rejection of Westernization.<sup>42</sup> Instead of cracking down on religious zealots, King Khalid moved to empower the Wahhabi ulama more than ever before. During this timeframe the Kingdom was simultaneously witnessing the insurrection of another existential threat in its eastern provinces.

In late November of 1979, Shi’ite muslims in Qatif and Al-Hasa began to protest in light of what they saw as widespread discrimination and exclusion by the Saudi regime<sup>43</sup>. Incentivized by the success of the Iranian revolution, the Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian

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<sup>41</sup>Commins, David. “The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia.” *Barnes & Noble*, [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/wahhabi-mission-and-saudi-arabia-david-commins/1100601775](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/wahhabi-mission-and-saudi-arabia-david-commins/1100601775). p.24-71

<sup>42</sup>Crooke, Alastair. “You Can’t Understand ISIS If You Don’t Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.” *Wiley Online Library*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 20 Jan. 2015, [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/npqu.11504](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/npqu.11504). [Accessed 6 November, 2020]

<sup>43</sup>Jones, Toby Craig. “REBELLION ON THE SAUDI PERIPHERY: MODERNITY, MARGINALIZATION, AND THE SHIA UPRISING OF 1979: International Journal of Middle East Studies.” *Cambridge Core*, Cambridge University Press, 24 Apr. 2006, [www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/article/rebellion-on-the-saudi-periphery-modernity-marginalization-and-the-shia-uprising-of-1979/499FCA054963D10A97B9FBCC7BA CE00C](http://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/article/rebellion-on-the-saudi-periphery-modernity-marginalization-and-the-shia-uprising-of-1979/499FCA054963D10A97B9FBCC7BA CE00C). [Accessed 6 November, 2020]

Peninsula (OIR) was founded in the same year that worked to mobilize the masses in the Shi'ite-dense provinces of Saudi Arabia.

This would also mark the first open calls from Iran to topple the Saudi regime.<sup>44</sup> Radio stations began to broadcast their appeals to Saudi Shi'ites to rise against the tyrannical rule of the Saud's, with Radio Tehran broadcasting messages of the OIR and the group opening an informational office in the capital.<sup>45</sup> Saudi anxieties about Iranian aspirations and the revitalization of local sectarian insurrections seemed to be coming true. Worse yet, the eastern provinces in which the majority of Saudi's shi'ite population resided was also home to the vast majority of the oil and natural gas fields in Saudi Arabia's possession. Only after a violent repression by the Saudi National guard and the promise of local reforms was the Qatif uprising quelled.

The Grand Mosque seizure and Qatif uprisings of 1979 would be incendiary to the relationship of Saudi Arabia and the new state of revolutionary Iran. The bifurcation of both events demonstrated that various forces in the kingdom stood poised to topple the Saud dynasty.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the rebels in Mecca had called upon a return to a past and purer Islam under theocratic rule. The protestors in Qatif under OIR had called upon the forming of a revolutionary Shi'ite

<sup>44</sup> Gause, F. Gregory. "The International Relations of the Persian Gulf." *Amazon*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, [www.amazon.com/International-Relations-Persian-Gulf/dp/0521137306](http://www.amazon.com/International-Relations-Persian-Gulf/dp/0521137306). p.39

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Jones, Toby Craig. "REBELLION ON THE SAUDI PERIPHERY: MODERNITY, MARGINALIZATION, AND THE SHIA UPRISING OF 1979: International Journal of Middle East Studies." *Cambridge Core*, Cambridge University Press, 24 Apr. 2006, [www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/article/rebellion-on-the-saudi-periphery-modernity-marginalization-and-the-shia-uprising-of-1979/499FCA054963D10A97B9FBCC7BA CE00C](http://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/article/rebellion-on-the-saudi-periphery-modernity-marginalization-and-the-shia-uprising-of-1979/499FCA054963D10A97B9FBCC7BA CE00C). [Accessed 6 November, 2020]

state. Both movements had, incidentally or not, reverberated the exact sentiments of Khomeini and his calls upon Islamic revolution. Within this tender political climate, the stage was set for the degeneration of Saudi-Iranian relations.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter one unveils that the 1979 revolution would prove to be a critical juncture ushering in a new chapter of worsening Saudi-Iranian relations. These events served as the primary catalyst of what would be the emergence of proxy conflicts around the regions. In line with Mumford's theory on proxy wars, the initial motivating factor behind their animosity was undividedly ideological in nature.

## Chapter Two: Initiation of proxy war

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**Overview:** In Chapter two, the initiation of proxy strategies by both nations is elucidated in the theatres of Afghanistan and Iraq. This is followed by a period of reconciliation, demonstrating how economics can be a motivating factor for rapprochement. Chapter two ends with the theatre of Iraq in the aftermath of the removal of Saddam Hussein, outlining which underlying motivations Iran had in furthering its proxy exertion in the region.

### 2.1: Initial hostilities & foundation of proxy conflict

In reaction to the ideological threat of the Iranian revolution and its domestic revolts, bringing to question the legitimacy of the house of Saud, Saudi Arabia turned to revitalizing its religious constitutionality.<sup>47</sup> Traditional Islamic laws were immediately reinforced, cinemas and music stores were shut down, and women were banned on television. The Ulama were empowered and given growing control of school curriculums and religious police became increasingly assertive in enforcing sharia law. The global propagation of wahhabism was intensified in what was an already pre-existing policy of soft power exertion by the Saudi state.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Paracha, Nadee. "1979: The Year That Sent Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan down the Path of Conservatism." *Scroll.in*, 2 Nov. 2019, scroll.in/article/941902/1979-the-year-that-sent-iran-saudi-arabia-and-pakistan-down-the-path-of-conservatism. [Accessed 6 November, 2020]

<sup>48</sup> Crooke, Alastair. "You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia." *Wiley Online Library*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 20 Jan. 2015, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/npqu.11504. [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/wahhabi-mission-and-saudi-arabia-david-commins/1100601775](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/wahhabi-mission-and-saudi-arabia-david-commins/1100601775) [Accessed 6 November, 2020]

In culmination with the overwhelming oil wealth suddenly generated during the 1970's and 80's, Saudi Arabia was enabled to further spread its Wahhabi doctrine across the region.<sup>49</sup> By enunciating its role as the self-proclaimed leader of Sunni Islam, Saudi Arabia aimed to counteract the revolutionary message of Iran. 70 Saudi embassies around the region, stretching from Sudan to Northern Pakistan, were tasked with funding the construction of religious institutions that sermonized Wahhabism.<sup>50</sup> Further funding was directed at educating a new generation of wahhabi imams, publishing 138 million copies of the Wahhabi interpretation of the Quran, and persuading existing mosques to propagate the *dawah wahhabiyya*. From 1982 onwards, King Fahd, the successor of King Khalid, would spend an estimated \$75 billion on efforts to spread wahhabi Islam during his reign.<sup>51</sup>

The explosion of oil profits had entirely enabled the Kingdom of Saud to wage this ideological war.<sup>52</sup> At the beginning of the decade in 1970, Saudi crude oil was evaluated at \$1.39 per barrel. By January of 1974, the price had risen to \$8.32. By the end of the decade the price had risen to

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<sup>49</sup> Crooke, Alastair. "You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia." *Wiley Online Library*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 20 Jan. 2015, [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/npqu.11504](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/npqu.11504). [Accessed 6 November, 2020]

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Kane, Frank. "The 1970s - a Seismic Decade for Saudi Arabia's Economy." *Arab News*, 24 Sept. 2019, [www.arabnews.com/node/1558251](https://www.arabnews.com/node/1558251). [Accessed 9 November, 2020]



\$32 per barrel, skyrocketing Saudi's annual oil income from \$4 billion a year a decade earlier to almost \$102 billion by 1981.<sup>53</sup> Parts of this newly attained wealth would be directed to a number of international organizations that propagated fundamentalist Islam, such as the Muslim World League and the International Islamic Relief Organization. In turn, Saudi funds also reached the more militant organizations of those of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezb-e Islamic and Jamaat-e-Islami.<sup>54</sup>

When the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan started, it were these same Sunni fundamentalist groups that began to take up arms and form a confederation of mujahideen fighters opposing the Soviet occupation. Iran, equally opposed to the foreign occupation of muslim lands but ideologically at odds with Sunni fundamentalist militia's, began to support its own Shia militia's in Afghanistan. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps or IRGG, a branch of the Iranian Armed Forces charged with the protection of the country's Islamic republic political system, began to directly finance and arm groups such as Pasdaran-e Jihad-e Islami and Sazman-e Nasr.<sup>55</sup> Within the anti-Soviet insurgent camps, these groups began to vy for power and would soon

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<sup>53</sup> Kane, Frank. "The 1970s - a Seismic Decade for Saudi Arabia's Economy." *Arab News*, 24 Sept. 2019, [www.arabnews.com/node/1558251](http://www.arabnews.com/node/1558251). [Accessed 9 November, 2020]

<sup>54</sup> Crooke, Alastair. "You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia." *Wiley Online Library*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 20 Jan. 2015, [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/npqu.11504](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/npqu.11504). [Accessed 6 November, 2020]

<sup>55</sup> "Iran's Policy on Afghanistan: The Evolution of Strategic Pragmatism." *SIPRI*, [www.sipri.org/publications/2013/irans-policy-afghanistan-evolution-strategic-pragmatism](http://www.sipri.org/publications/2013/irans-policy-afghanistan-evolution-strategic-pragmatism). [Accessed 6 November, 2020]

come to clash. This would be the first instance in which proxy groups aligned with the Iranian revolutionary republic and the Kingdom of Saud would clash.<sup>56</sup>

The trilateral events of 1979 had quartered Saudi Arabia back onto its Wahhabi identity. This entrenchment of Saudi Arabia in its wahhabi identity, and Iran in that of Khomeinism, and *Velayat-e faqih*, would create an ideological enmity that would prove near irreparable. As Iranian-American historian Vali Nasr would write 25 years later;

“The Brand of radical Islam that began spreading across Central Asia and the Caucasus...was a Sunni radicalism born of the deliberate Saudi policy of containing Iran.”<sup>57</sup>

## 2.2: Iran-Iraq war of 1980

Saudi Arabia had not been alone in its fear of Revolutionary Iran. Saddam’s Ba’athist Iraq would invade Iran’s Khuzestan province on the 22nd of September, 1980, rationalizing that this would cripple Iran and prevent Khomeini from exporting the Iranian revolution to its neighbors.<sup>58</sup> Saddam Hussein, susceptible worried about this prospect given Iraq’s Shia-majority

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<sup>56</sup> Steinberg, Guido. *Exploring Iran & Saudi Arabia’s Interests in Afghanistan & Pakistan: Stakeholders or Spoilers - A Zero Sum Gam*. Barcelona Centre of International Relations, Apr. 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*. Reprint ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, p. 158

<sup>58</sup> Nelson, Chad. “Revolution and War: Saddam's Decision to Invade Iran.” <https://Brightspotcdn.byu.edu/Fd/De/1caa93b14ef8ac3cacd77b40e45f/Nelson-Revolution-and-War.pdf>, Middle East Institute, 2018 [Accessed 10 November, 2020]

population, hoped to take advantage of Iran's post-revolutionary chaos and anticipated a quick victory. Notwithstanding this also fit the naturally expansionist ambitions of Saddam and occurred in the backdrop of what had been a long-running history of Arab-Persian rivalry and border disputes.<sup>59</sup>

With the offset of war, Saudi Arabia sensed an opportunity to suppress the revolutionary fervor spouted by Iran. Despite declaring neutrality at the outbreak of war, the Saudi's would inconspicuously support Iraq over the eight year conflict with an estimated \$25 billion dollars in low-interest loans and grants, reserved part of oil production for Iraqi customers, and assisted in building an oil pipeline across Iraqi territory.<sup>60</sup>

For Iran, the Iraqi war would be a bloody inauguration for the new regime and its ideals. Facing an arms embargo, a technologically superior Iraqi army, and a regional alliance endorsing its downfall, the war would epitomize the value of Iran's proxy strategies. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), one of the first military wings formed after the creation of the new state, would initiate Iran's employment of foreign militant proxies.<sup>61</sup> In the wake of the

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<sup>59</sup> Nelson, Chad. "Revolution and War: Saddam's Decision to Invade Iran." <https://Brightspotcdn.byu.edu/Fd/De/1caa93b14ef8ac3cacd77b40e45f/Nelson-Revolution-and-War.pdf>, Middle East Institute, 2018 [Accessed 10 November, 2020]

<sup>60</sup> Steinberg, Guido. *Exploring Iran & Saudi Arabia's Interests in Afghanistan & Pakistan: Stakeholders or Spoilers - A Zero Sum Gam*. Barcelona Centre of International Relations, Apr. 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 292–94.

Iraq-Iran war, the IRGC began to organize Iraqi Shiite emigrants and prisoners of war into the first Iraqi militias, namely the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its military wing, the Badr Corps.<sup>62</sup> Other Iraqi militant groups would follow, including Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). These groups would fight alongside Iran for the entirety of the conflict until 1988 and would in turn form the foundation of Iran's proxy groups in Iraq following the downfall of Saddam Hussein. The IRGC would also ally itself with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP), which it supplemented with financial and arms support in an attempt to further pressure Iraq's northern front.<sup>63</sup>

The IRGC's exhaustive endeavours in establishing non-state militant partnerships had come as a result of what Iran saw as the international system meticulously working against it.<sup>64</sup> The neighboring Arab states, with the exception of Syria, had collectively backed Iraq. The Western powers, including the United States, The United Kingdom, and France had supported Saddam through financial means, intelligence, and military sales.<sup>65</sup> In what had been a lonesome struggle

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 292–94.

<sup>63</sup> Parsa, Fariba, et al. "The Kurdish Factor in Iran-Iraq Relations." *Middle East Institute*, 13 Jan. 2021, [www.mei.edu/publications/kurdish-factor-iran-iraq-relations](http://www.mei.edu/publications/kurdish-factor-iran-iraq-relations) [Accessed 15 January, 2020]

<sup>64</sup> Nelson, Chad. "Revolution and War: Saddam's Decision to Invade Iran." <https://Brightspotcdn.byu.edu/Fd/De/1caa93b14ef8ac3cacd77b40e45f/Nelson-Revolution-and-War.pdf>, Middle East Institute, 2018 [Accessed 12 November, 2020]

<sup>65</sup> Alaaldin, Ranj. "How the Iran-Iraq War Will Shape the Region for Decades to Come." *Brookings Institute*, 6 Nov. 2020,

against the Iraqi's, Iran soldered itself into a belief of military self-reliance. The IRGC, recognizing that open conflict was a destitute venture against the multi-pronged alliances of its Arab rivals, would recognize the underlying value of employing militant clients as the foremost tool of extending Iran's strategic footprint in the region.<sup>66</sup>

### **2.3: Reconciliation**

Shortly after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Ayatollah Khomeini succumbed to a heart attack on the 3rd of June, 1989. His death would initiate a sluggish reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Reviewing this phase of their dynamic is instrumental to understanding which circumstances create a synopsis for de-escalation.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei replaced Khomeini as Supreme Leader of Iran, with Hashemi Rafsanjani being elected as the new president. Crown Prince Abdullah had taken charge of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia due to the deteriorating health of King Fahd in the early 1990's.<sup>67</sup> Khamenei and Rafsanjani had both taken a more pragmatic stance regarding Iran's relationship with the Gulf states. This union would be facilitated by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which

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[www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/10/09/how-the-iran-iraq-war-will-shape-the-region-for-decades-to-come/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/10/09/how-the-iran-iraq-war-will-shape-the-region-for-decades-to-come/). [Accessed 12 November, 2020]

<sup>66</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 292–94.

<sup>67</sup> Bahgat, Gawdat. "Iranian-Saudi Rapprochement: Prospects and Implications." *Jstor*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20672579](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672579). [Accessed 17 December, 2020]

quickly fractured the previous matrimony of Saddam's baathist regime and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and Iran shared concerns regarding the threat emulated by a posturing Iraq and found common ground in their aims to support international efforts to disarm Iraq. This would be followed by the reinstatement of official ties between the two countries in 1991, during which Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati would visit Saudi Arabia to propose an Iranian-Gulf Council in reaction to the invasion of Kuwait.<sup>68</sup>

The two nations would soon discover the necessity for collaboration in yet another theatre; oil. Whilst the 1980's had been a golden age for oil with prices and demand skyrocketing globally, the 1990's instead demonstrated a severe fluctuation of oil prices that trended steadily downwards. Tehran and Riyadh's economic lifeline had been entirely sustained by oil, with roughly 80% of Saudi Arabia's GDP and 40% of Iran's GDP accounting for oil production.<sup>69</sup> When oil prices collapsed in 1997 it dealt a heavy blow to both respective economies in which Saudi Arabia was losing an estimated \$2.5 billion in revenue and Iran \$1 billion in revenue for every one dollar drop in the prices of a barrel of oil. In light of extreme economic pressures, this would mark the first official visit of an Iranian president to Saudi Arabia in February of 1998. President Khatami, succeeding Rafsanjani, had looked to cut back OPEC's (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) producing quota's in light of the oil collapse and needed strong

<sup>68</sup> Bahgat, Gawdat. "Iranian-Saudi Rapprochement: Prospects and Implications." *Jstor*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20672579](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672579). [Accessed 17 December, 2020]

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

Saudi support to achieve this objective. This historic meeting would be superseded by the signing of a comprehensive Cooperation Agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in May of 1998.<sup>70</sup>

President Khamenei's appointment mirrored a shift to a more pragmatic regional approach by Iran. Khatami would state in 1997;

“My government considers dialogue between civilizations essential, and will avoid any action or behavior causing tension...cultivating confidence is the first and most appropriate strategic approach to ensuring regional security by regional powers themselves.”<sup>71</sup>

The sentiment of leaders during this time had been in absolute contrast to the inflammatory rhetoric exchanged during the 1980's. This reconciliation would not last however; the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 would again launch the two nations into a bitter spiral of regional proxy opposition.

## **2.4: Post-Saddam Iraq**

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<sup>70</sup> Bahgat, Gawdat. “Iranian-Saudi Rapprochement: Prospects and Implications.” *Jstor*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20672579](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672579). [Accessed 17 December, 2020]

<sup>71</sup> Holliday, Shabnam. “Khatami's Islamist-Iranian Discourse.” *Jstor*, 1 Apr. 2010, [www.jstor.org/stable/25702895](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25702895). [Accessed 14 November, 2020]

Following George Bush's declaration of the war on terror, the US launched a swift invasion of Iraq in 2003 in light of Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons programs and assumed ties to international terrorism. The removal of Saddam's baathist regime would come to serve Iran with a myriad of opportunities. Saudi Arabia, initially ambivalent, handled its reaction carefully as to not upset its strategic alliance with the US whilst simultaneously maintaining the semblance of Arab solidarity against US aggression to appease its own population. Wishing to see an aggressive and unpredictable Saddam go, the Saudis were also worried about the prospect of a Shia pro-Iranian government being installed in his wake.<sup>72</sup> Iraq's removal from the regional security paradigm naturally preceded a regeneration of tensions between Riyadh and Tehran. In part due to its geographic position between the rivals, Iraq had already proven to be a flashpoint of contestation and fraternization between the two nations during the Iraq-Iran war and Gulf war. As stated by American scholar Frederic Wehrey;

“A weak Iraq can arguably be said to increase the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, whereas a strong Iraq can stabilize or moderate the tensions.”<sup>73</sup>

After the fast-winded defeat of Iraq's army, the nation would erupt into a civil war with American 'anti-baathification' policies further escalating sectarian tensions as various groups vied for power in the superseding power vacuum.

<sup>72</sup> Holliday, Shabnam. “Khatami's Islamist-Iranian Discourse.” *Jstor*, 1 Apr. 2010, [www.jstor.org/stable/25702895](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25702895). [Accessed 14 November, 2020]

<sup>73</sup> Wyss, Michel. “Iranian Proxy Warfare in Iraq and Yemen.” *ICT*, 1 Apr. 2016, [www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/ICT-Rag-Iranian-Proxy-Wyss.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/ICT-Rag-Iranian-Proxy-Wyss.pdf). [Accessed 17 November, 2020]



## **Iran's role in Iraq**

Iran, which had already created a backbone for its Iraqi proxy exertion through the creation of the SCIRI and the Badr corps during the Iraq-Iran war, utilized these same groups to initiate its domination of the new Iraqi political system.<sup>74</sup> US foreign policy had strictly banned former members of Saddam's Baathist party from participating in the new parliament, heavily benefitting Iran's allies in the region. Iran would further expand its support to a variety of Shi'ite militia's including the AAH, KH, and Jaysh al-Mahdi army (JAM). Its strategy of supporting multiple proxies, intelligence experts theorize,<sup>75</sup> serves as a hedging strategy in the scenario that certain groups either disobey Iranian command or fall out of favor with the Iraqi public, ensuring Iranian influence by shifting its alliances.

It further chose to back the Islamic Dawa Party in Iraq's new political landscape,<sup>76</sup> which would go on to win a plurality of seats in the 2005 elections. Iran's ideal version of Iraq would be one ruled by a Shia government that emulates the Iranian model of Velayat-e faqih, but it's practical concerns revolve around furthering its own sphere of influence.<sup>77</sup> Iraq's majority-Shia population, in combination with simmering sectarian frustrations following 400 years of Sunni

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<sup>74</sup> Nada, Garrett. "Part 1: Iran's Role in Iraq." *Wilson Center*, 26 Apr. 2018, [www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-irans-role-iraq](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-irans-role-iraq). [Accessed 18 November, 2020]

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

rule in the region, appeared to be a fertile ground for such Iranian ambitions. Furthermore, the presence of two important Shia holy sites, Karbala and Najaf, make the country ideologically important to the Iranians.

On its military front, Iran would have IRGC Quds Force troops on the ground in Iraq under the command of Qasem Soleimani, training and advising Shia militias.<sup>78</sup> Iranian dominion over its proxies was ensured by the strict management of the IRGC-QF, with its main proxies of the SCIRI and Badr Corps adhering to the ideological rule of the velayat-e faqih. In addition to training in collaboration with the IRGC, these groups would generally receive cash payments estimated to be around \$150 to \$200 million every year, even receiving an occasional supplementation of indigenous Iranian fighters. Further assistance was provided by the arming of its proxies with mortars, improvised explosive devices, EFPs, and rockets.<sup>79</sup> As Iran consolidated its political control of the shattered remnants of Iraq through its proxies, it would simultaneously look to strengthen its economic ties. Diplomatic exchanges would significantly increase between the two countries with the new Iraqi government headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki demonstrating extreme eagerness for ties with Iran.<sup>80</sup> This resulted in the signing of more than a 100 cooperation agreements and the explosion of trade between the two countries. Iraq

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<sup>78</sup> Nada, Garrett. "Part 1: Iran's Role in Iraq." *Wilson Center*, 26 Apr. 2018, [www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-irans-role-iraq](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-irans-role-iraq). [Accessed 18 November, 2020]

<sup>79</sup> Asli, Kelkitli Fatma. "Saudi-Iranian Entanglements in the Persian Gulf: Is Rapprochement Possible." *Milletleraras*, vol. 47, 2016, pp. 23–44.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

subsequently became one of Iran's five most important trading partners, and by the end of 2013 the bilateral trade between Baghdad and Tehran reached \$12 billion dollars.<sup>81</sup>

In terms of its regional power exertion Iran had made Iraq one of its closest allies whilst it had served as a Sunni bulwark against perceived Iranian aggression for the Gulf states since the inception of the Iranian revolution in 1979. This had given Iran a direct landline to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria, raising concerns by the Gulf states over the formation of 'Shia crescent', entailing an ideological belt of sympathetic shiite governments and factions stretching the Persian Gulf region.<sup>82</sup> Despite succeeding in erecting a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, Iranian ambitions fall short from installing a regime that emulates Iranian clerical rule. This is due to certain Iraqi shias, most importantly Ayatollah al Sistani, Iraq's Grand Ayatollah and spiritual leader of its Shia community, resisting Iran's political influence.<sup>83</sup> Sistani, who believes in the quietest trend of Shia Islam and separation from religion and politics, rejects the concept of the Velayat-e faqih. Tehran is therefore preparing for the succession of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, at 84 years old, by financing pro-Iranian Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi-Shroudi, who believes in clerical rule along the lines of Iran's Islamic republic.

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<sup>81</sup> Nada, Garrett. "Part 1: Iran's Role in Iraq." *Wilson Center*, 26 Apr. 2018, [www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-irans-role-iraq](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-irans-role-iraq). [Accessed 18 November, 2020]

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Mohammad R. Kalantari, Ali Hashem. "Washington Doesn't Understand Shiite Clerics in Iran or Iraq." *Foreign Policy*, 30 Jan. 2020, [foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/30/washington-doesnt-understand-shiite-clerics-in-iran-or-iraq/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/30/washington-doesnt-understand-shiite-clerics-in-iran-or-iraq/). [Accessed 20 November, 2020]

## **Saudi role in Iraq**

The US strategy of ostracizing Iraqi Sunni's under its wider policy of anti-ba'athification from the new political system shocked Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah considered US actions to aid in "handing over Iraq to the Iranians on a silver platter."<sup>84</sup> Simultaneously fearing to upset its ally, the Saudi's did not attempt to publicly assist sunni factions in Iraq following the invasion. In the summer of 2006 Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki would have his first meeting with King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia. Abdullah concluded after this meeting that Maliki and his government were clear stooges of Iran that could not be trusted.<sup>85</sup> The Iraqi shift to a pro-Tehran regime had left the Saudi's anxious about the new power arrangement in the region, removing a bulwark between the two nations that had previously served as a modus for fraternization.<sup>86</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The initiation of the Iranian-Saudi proxy wars in the region demonstrates the early motivations behind their strategies. In validation of Mumford's theory, the Saudi's would back

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<sup>84</sup> Riedel, Bruce, and Katherine Harvey. "Why Is Saudi Arabia Finally Engaging with Iraq?" *Brookings*, Brookings, 4 Dec. 2020, [www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/04/why-is-saudi-arabia-finally-engaging-with-iraq/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/04/why-is-saudi-arabia-finally-engaging-with-iraq/) [Accessed 8 December, 2020]

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Iraq in its conflict with Iran, motivated primarily by the need to contain the ideological threat emulating from Tehran. Simultaneously, the Saudi's would deny any partiality in the conflict publicly whilst covertly supporting Iraq with abundant financial means. This demonstrates an early strategy of plausible deniability as put forth by Mumford. During the period of reconciliation that followed, the economic downturn in oil would be a critical factor in rekindling friendly relations, demonstrating how the significance of this economic dimension essentially allowed Tehran and Riyadh to temporarily put their ideological enmity aside.

In the post-Saddam theatre of Iraq, Mumford's definition that ideology accounts for the singular motivation behind proxy war initiation seems to be less fitting. Despite Iranian intentions to install a pro-Tehran regime emulating the clerical rule of the Velayat-e faqih in Baghdad, the economic practicality of exerting its proxy control over Iraq hovers to be a subsequent motivating factor. The consequential power disbalance this created in the region in turn acted as a catalyst for Saudi countermoves in theatres elsewhere.

Lastly, Iran demonstrated a compelling capacity to employ multiple proxy forces in Iraq, first during the Iraq-Iran war with the Badr Corps and various Kurdistan resistance groups, and again from 2003 onwards with the AAH and JAM militia's. In doing so, Tehran exhibited an early adaptation of a hedging strategy in order to ensure its control over a region in the scenario that proxies begin to self-determine their objectives. This offers an imperative contribution to

Mumford's idealization of risks that proxies pose in developing autonomous goals countering those of the benefactor.

## Chapter Three: Historical roots of the Yemen civil war

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**Overview:** Chapter three paints a synopsis of the roots of the Yemeni civil war, initially looking at the early history of the Yemeni state and how this led to the creation of the Houthi movement. This is then followed by the 2011 Arab spring revolution as it unfolded in Yemen. Finally, chapter three ends on outlining the historic roles of both Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen.

**Note:** Given the focus of this thesis, this chapter purposefully occludes historical dimensions that do not align with Saudi-Iranian involvement, specifically the creation of the secessionist movement in Southern Yemen.

### 3.1: Early history

The true roots of the current Yemeni war cannot be explained without delving into the fractious history that has led the country down its current trajectory. For nearly a thousand years until 1962, Yemen had been dominated by *Sayyid* families, descendants of the Prophet Muhammed, and ruled by an Imam who exerted his central control from Sana'a throughout the country's northern highlands and west coastline through a loose coalition of tribes.<sup>87</sup> This long lineage of rulers had been followers of Zaydi Islam, a Shia sect named after Zayd ibn 'Ali, a

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<sup>87</sup>Orkaby, Asher. "Yemen: A Civil War Centuries in the Making." *Origins*, May 2019, [origins.osu.edu/article/yemen-civil-war-Houthi-humanitarian-crisis-arabia-zaydi](https://origins.osu.edu/article/yemen-civil-war-Houthi-humanitarian-crisis-arabia-zaydi). [Accessed 8 November, 2020]

direct descendent of Muhammad who had led an unsuccessful revolt against the Ummuyad Caliphate during the 8th century. The Zaydi's, accounting for roughly 30% of Yemen's population,<sup>88</sup> enjoyed positions of privilege within the imperious political system of the Imamate. The foundation of the modern Yemeni republic would ironically begin under the last ruler of the Imamate, Imam Yahya. In a bid to accelerate the modernization of his country, Imam Yahya began to finance a study abroad program for 40 students of the country's most talented youth in the 1930's, with the vision that these selected individuals would form the future core of his administration and spur the nation forward. The imamate had historically insulated itself under the autocratic rule of the Imams and had faced economic and political stagnation as a consequence. Facetiously, as these 40 students began to return to Yemen post-graduation, they would become the core of a growing republican revolutionary movement that were discontent with the repressive rule and dearth of opportunities under the rule of the Imamate. With the death of Yahya's successor, Imam Ahmad, in September of 1962, the republican movement spearheaded by the famous 40 succeeded in overthrowing the Imamate and establishing the Modern Republic of Yemen.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Orkaby, Asher. "Yemen: A Civil War Centuries in the Making." *Origins*, May 2019, [origins.osu.edu/article/yemen-civil-war-Houthi-humanitarian-crisis-arabia-zaydi](https://origins.osu.edu/article/yemen-civil-war-Houthi-humanitarian-crisis-arabia-zaydi). [Accessed 8 November, 2020]

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*



### 3.2: Birth of the Houthi movement

The New republic would be inaugurated by an eight year long civil war in which Zaydi Imamate royalists fought bitterly against the new political order. The eventual quelling of the civil war would be followed by the economic and political marginalisation of the Sayyid families and tribal leaders that had ruled Northern Yemen for centuries. This would spark the eventual founding of the Houthi movement, a religious revivalist group spearheaded and named after Hussein al-Houthi.<sup>90</sup> The Houthi's, officially known as Ansar Allah, epitomised the Zaydi religious sect that had faced suppression under the rule of the new republic of Yemen and had opposed the more conservative Salafi interpretation of Islam perceptively propagated in its stead. The approximate genesis of the Houthi movement can be traced to the founding of the Believing Youth Movement by Al-Houthi in 1990, which aimed to teach young persons about Zaydi and its history to revive Zaydism.<sup>91</sup> The movement's original political nemesis formed to be Ali Abdullah Saleh, the then president of the Yemeni republic, who they charged with corruption and collusion with Saudi Arabia and the United States at the cost of the Yemeni people. Ali Saleh, a former republican army general, had come to power in 1978 following a series of coups and would come to be Yemen's longest serving president. Fearful of the quick demise of his predecessors and the fractious Zaydi tribes, Saleh employed a strategy of appointing his own relatives and rival northern highland tribe chiefs as colonels in the army,

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<sup>90</sup> Ardemagni, Eleonora. "Framing Yemen's Zaydi Shi'a." *Fondazione Internazionale Oasis*, July 2019, [www.oasiscenter.eu/en/framing-yemen-s-zaydi-shi-a](http://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/framing-yemen-s-zaydi-shi-a) [Accessed 9 November, 2020]

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

known as ‘colonel shaykhs’ to limit the power of the Zaydi’s and in an effort to build a coup-proofing strategy.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, Saleh was closely linked to the United States and aligned his foreign policy with the American War on terror. In January 2002, during a conference held at Imam Al Had madrasa in Sa’da province, Hussein Al-Houthi invited his followers to repeat;

“God is great!, Death to America!, A curse upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!”<sup>93</sup>

initiating a new slogan that would become central to the Houthis rhetoric. President Saleh would become increasingly concerned with the perceived revolutionary fervor spouted by al-Houthi and his growing movement, leading to his calls for the arrest of Hussein al-Houthi in June of 2004. On the 10th of September, Yemeni armed forces would kill Hussein, sparking a rebellion by his supporters that would last until 2011.<sup>94</sup>

### **3.3: 2011 Yemeni revolution**

Following the initial stages of the Tunisian revolution occurring simultaneously as the Egyptian revolution of 2011, protests began to take form in Yemen in January of 2011, calling

<sup>92</sup> Ardemagni, Eleonora. “Framing Yemen's Zaydi Shi'a.” *Fondazione Internazionale Oasis*, July 2019, [www.oasiscenter.eu/en/framing-yemen-s-zaydi-shi-a](http://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/framing-yemen-s-zaydi-shi-a) [Accessed 8 November, 2020]

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

for the overthrow of the regime of President Saleh.<sup>95</sup> The early stages of the protests were in opposition to the allegations of corruption as well as the high unemployment rates Yemen had suffered in the preceding years. A major demonstration of 16,000 protestors took place in Yemen's capital Sanaa on the 27th of January, marking the first of a growing number of anti-government protests organized by the Houthis, Hashid tribal confederation, the Southern movement and other political parties that had grown increasingly disenfranchised under the leadership of Saleh.<sup>96</sup> President Saleh would resign in November of 2011 upon the initiation of Saudi Arabia and the intervention of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In exchange for immunity for him and his relatives, Saleh agreed to step down in favor of his Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. Hadi would officially take office on the 21st of February 2012 as an interim president, ending the 33-year rule of Saleh. Several opposition parties, including the Houthis, would however reject the new formation of government.<sup>97</sup> The withdrawal of governmental troops from Northern Yemen, in coalescence with the structural void left behind by the Saleh regime, placed the Houthis in a prime position to further their own ambitions. The continuous strain of previous conflicts involving the Houthi's had made them a potent and organized military force that could exploit the post-revolution chaos unfolding in Yemen. On March the 26th, the Houthis declared the creation of their own regime based in the Saada Governorate, ruled independently from Hadi's new regime.

<sup>95</sup> Al-Muslimi, Farea. "Why Yemen's Political Transition Failed." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 16 Apr. 2015, [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59803](http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59803). [Accessed 12 November, 2020]

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

Over the next years leading up to the outbreak of the civil war, the Houthi's would continue to clash with pro-government tribes such as the Kashir and Ahmar,<sup>98</sup> and various Sunni Salafi factions under the Al-Islah party, a Sunni salafi political movement. Al-Islah served as the Yemeni equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood and was Yemen's second biggest party, comprising of Aghan returnee's, Sunni conservatives and tribal leaders.<sup>99</sup> The inability of the Hadi regime and the Gulf Cooperation Council's proposed transition process to reconcile Yemen's fractured groups would lead to the eventual outbreak of civil war. In essence, the UN-backed Gulf Cooperation Council initiative put forth to end Yemen's political crisis had largely been negotiated among the traditional elite and power brokers under Saleh, the Ahmar, Islah, and the General People's Congress (Saleh's political party), and had excluded the Houthis and Southern separatists.<sup>100</sup> Within this preceding backdrop to the Civil war, Saudi Arabia had already played a significant role in the formation of events.

### **3.4: History of Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism in Yemen**

The preferred alliances of Saudi Arabia's local partners in the aftermath of the civil war are rooted in the nation's previous endeavours in Yemen. The concurrently shifting form of

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<sup>98</sup> Al-Muslimi, Farea. "Why Yemen's Political Transition Failed." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 16 Apr. 2015, [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59803](http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59803). [Accessed 12 November, 2020]

<sup>99</sup> Ardemagni, Eleonora. "Framing Yemen's Zaydi Shi'a." *Fondazione Internazionale Oasis*, July 2019, [www.oasiscenter.eu/en/framing-yemen-s-zaydi-shi-a](http://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/framing-yemen-s-zaydi-shi-a) [Accessed 8 November, 2020]

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

alliances demonstrated in this history reveals the interwoven complexities that have come to epitomize the Yemen conflict. During the 1960's, as the Imamate and its Zaydi royalists were fighting against the republic insurrection, the Saudi's had actually supported the Zaydi's in a bid to maintain the status quo.<sup>101</sup> Following the assertion of control under the Republican regime, and in line with Saudi propagation of Wahhabism following the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Saudi's began to campaign for the spread of Wahhabism in Yemen.<sup>102</sup> One the first and most prominent Salafi preachers to introduce Wahhabism to Yemen was Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi'i, a Zaydi born Yemeni who had been indoctrinated in Najran, Saudi Arabia. Wadi'i, who had travelled to Saudi Arabia following primary school, had spent two decades studying Sunni Islam. In 1979 he would return to Yemen, establishing his own teaching institute in the outskirts of Sa'ada called Dar al-Hadith and receiving funding from Salafi institutions in Saudi Arabia. The growing success of his institutions in line with the formation of other Salafi schools in the Zaydi heartland would lead to the religious marginalization that would in part trigger the foundation of the al-Houthi movement; in conglomeration with the despotic rule of Saleh.

During the Sanaa wars between the Houthis and Saleh's government, students of the Dar al-Hadith institute would come into conflict with Houthi rebels, forming the first signs of an intricate alliance between Saudi Arabia, Salafi militia's, and the Yemeni government.<sup>103</sup> When

<sup>101</sup> Bonnefoy, Laurent. "Deconstructing Salafism in Yemen." *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 20 Jan. 2018, [ctc.usma.edu/deconstructing-salafism-in-yemen-2/](http://ctc.usma.edu/deconstructing-salafism-in-yemen-2/) [Accessed 15 November, 2020]

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Saleh started his military operations against the Houthis in 2009, Saudi Arabia would enter the fight against them and launched a military operation on its southern border. Saudi reasonings for supporting Saleh against the Houthis stemmed from its fears that the group's rise would in turn inspire its own Zaydi and Shia minorities.<sup>104</sup>

### **3.5: History of Iran in Yemen**

The Houthi movement had started developing friendly ties with Iran starting in the early 1990's, when small groups of Yemeni Zaydi's travelled to Iran to study in Qom.<sup>105</sup> This would include Badr al-Din al-Houthi, who brought his sons Hussein al-Houthi and Abdul Malik al-Houthi with him, the eventual founders and subsequent leaders of the Houthi movement. Despite forming no substantiated government ties, it did seem Hussein al-Houthi was influenced by the religious rhetoric preached in Qom, coining the Houthi slogan in homologous terms to that of the anti-imperialist idioms of the Iranian revolution.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Salisbury Email Peter , Peter. "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'." *Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank*, 6 Oct. 2020, [www.chathamhouse.org/publication/yemen-and-saudi-iranian-cold-war?37555%2CBIS529%2CBGC30%2C](http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/yemen-and-saudi-iranian-cold-war?37555%2CBIS529%2CBGC30%2C). [Accessed 16 November, 2020]

<sup>105</sup> Harrop, Froma, and Rachel Bovard. "Rise of the Houthis." *Newsweek*, 5 Apr. 2016, [www.newsweek.com/photo-essay-rise-Houthis-305511](http://www.newsweek.com/photo-essay-rise-Houthis-305511). [Accessed 16 November, 2020]

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Despite these early interactions, there is little public evidence of direct Iranian support to the Houthi movement until 2011.<sup>107</sup> Earlier accusations of Iranian interference had been propagated by the Saleh government, with Yemen's counter-terrorism chief Yahya Salih accusing Iran of training and funding the group during the Sanaa wars in an effort to appeal to Saudi Arabia and the United States for assistance.<sup>108</sup> In fact, a 2013 Chatham house report demonstrates evidence that Iran was funding senior southern secessionist leaders including Ali Salem-Al-Beidh in the early 2000's, a party diametrically opposed to that of the Houthis.<sup>109</sup> This demonstrates similar behaviour to that of Iran in Iraq, where it hedges its 'bets' among varying and often clashing proxies to ensure its long-term influence in the scenario of unforeseen power transitions. Two key outbreaks in Yemen, consisting of the removal of President Saleh in 2011 and the outbreak of the Yemeni Civil war in 2015, created circumstances that led to the emergence of the Houthis as a dominant military actor, making investment in the Houthis more attractive for Iran.<sup>110</sup>

This Iranian strategy is in contrast to its historical choice to support Shi'ite dominated proxies, which can in part be attributed to the differences between Houthi Zaydism and Iran's Twelver Shiism. Zaydism, akin to Fiver Shiism, is a distinct and regionally unique branch of Shia Islam..

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<sup>107</sup> Johnston, Trevor, et al. "Could Yemen's Houthis Be the Next Hizballah?" *RAND Corporation*, 13 July 2020, [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2551.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2551.html). [Accessed 17 November, 2020]

<sup>108</sup> "Yemen Says Iran Funding Rebels." *Saudi Arabia News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 16 Nov. 2009, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2009/11/16/yemen-says-iran-funding-rebels/](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2009/11/16/yemen-says-iran-funding-rebels/). [Accessed 19 November, 2020]

<sup>109</sup> Johnston, Trevor, et al. "Could Yemen's Houthis Be the Next Hizballah?" *RAND Corporation*, 13 July 2020, [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2551.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2551.html). [Accessed 19 November, 2020]

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

Zaydism, which has been described as theologically closer to Sunnism than Shi'ism, has identical elements to Sunni schools of jurisprudence. Zaydi's do not place emphasis on the position of the imam, even rejecting the concept of the infallible imam.<sup>111</sup> By extension, this makes the Houthis averse to the practical implications and rule of the Velayat-e faqih. A history of Zaydi marginalization by other Shia Muslims and further doctrinal differences complicate this ideological affiliation between Iran and the Houthi movement compared to Iran's other proxies.

As the Houthi movement demonstrated its prowess following the Arab Springs of 2011, Iranian support started to become evident for the first time in January of 2013, when the Yemen coast guard intercepted the *Jihan 1*, an Iranian ship carrying a large cache of weapons including surface-to-air missiles.<sup>112</sup> This would initiate a trajectory of Iran using undeclared shipping routes to move arms into Yemen by sea, with multiple Iranian-made shipments being seized in the following years by both Yemeni coast guard and UN investigators.<sup>113</sup> Houthi gains following the outbreak of civil war would precipitate an escalation of evidenced Iranian support.

## Conclusion

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<sup>111</sup> "Zaydism: Overview and Comparison to Other Versions of Shi'ism." *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen the Huthi Phenomenon*, by Barak A. Salmoni et al., RAND, 2010. [Accessed 19 November, 2020]

<sup>112</sup> Charbonneau, Louis, and Michelle Nichols. "Exclusive: Arms Ship Seized by Yemen May Have Been Somalia-Bound: U.N." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 2 July 2013, [www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-arms-un-idUSBRE96101E20130702](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-arms-un-idUSBRE96101E20130702). [Accessed 19 November, 2020]

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.



Initiations of Saudi support for the Yemeni regime against the Houthis were motivated in part by sectarian fears that the Zaydi revivalist movement could ignite local shi'ite groups alongside its border region. The Saudi propagation of Wahhabism in the Zaydi provinces had in turn created an ideological enmity between the Houthis and the House of Saud. This reasoning should be taken with nuance in light of Mumford's proxy war theory however; this Saudi motivation came in coalescence with a need to exert its regional power and control the political status quo in Yemen.

The Iranian strategy of hedging was again on display. Its initial support for the Southern secessionists rather than the Houthi's demonstrated Tehran was examining which proxy could best facilitate its clout in the region. The rise of the Houthis as an efficacious military force in the wake of the 2011 Arab Springs allowed Tehran to support the group with modest arms shipments and still exert considerable influence over the region. In line with Mumford's theory, this strategy had the two-fold benefit of bearing a low financial cost and risk. These precursive events would lead to the escalatory involvement of both nations at the outbreak of the Yemeni civil war.

## Chapter Four: The Yemen Civil War

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**Overview:** Chapter four initially outlines the eruption of civil war, followed by the roles of both Saudi Arabia and Iran and concludes with the influence the outbreak of COVID-19 has had on the two benefactors. The application of discourse excerpts will be especially prevalent in this chapter to reflect the underlying motivations of both nations.

### 4.1: Outbreak of Civil war 2014

Following weeks of street protests against the Hadi regime, exacerbated by unpopular fuel subsidy cuts to the Houthi Sadaa region, Houthi forces stormed and seized control of Yemen's capital, Sana'a in September of 2014. Strong-arming President Hadi into an immediate deal, Hadi's government resigned and guaranteed cuts to the price of fuel and the appointment of Houthi political leaders in the new government.<sup>114</sup> Sequentially, the National Dialogue Conference would take place to find a resolution to the situation, proposing that Yemen would be transformed into a six-region federal system on the 18th of January 2015.<sup>115</sup> The proposition further proposed to ban political parties based on religious or ethnic affiliation. The Houthis,

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<sup>114</sup> "Houthis Sign Deal with Sanaa to End Yemen Crisis." *Al Arabiya English*, Al Arabiya English, 20 May 2020, [english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/09/21/Clashes-in-Yemeni-capital-cast-doubt-on-deal-signing.html](http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/09/21/Clashes-in-Yemeni-capital-cast-doubt-on-deal-signing.html). [Accessed 20 November, 2020]

<sup>115</sup> Shankar, Sneha. "Gunmen Kidnap Yemeni President's Chief Of Staff Ahmed Awad Bin Mubarak, 2 Security Guards." *International Business Times*, 28 Dec. 2020, [www.ibtimes.com/gunmen-kidnap-yemeni-presidents-chief-staff-ahmed-awad-bin-mubarak-2-security-guards-1786646](http://www.ibtimes.com/gunmen-kidnap-yemeni-presidents-chief-staff-ahmed-awad-bin-mubarak-2-security-guards-1786646). [Accessed 4 January, 2021]

diametrically opposed to the news and considering it a plot to curtail their political representation,<sup>116</sup> rejected the proposition and responded by kidnapping the president's chief of staff, Ahmed Mubarak, and surrounding the presidential palace in Sana'a.<sup>117</sup> On the 22nd of January, President Hadi and his prime minister would resign,<sup>118</sup> creating a power vacuum in the country that would further lead to calls of independence, particularly by the Southern secessionist movement.<sup>119</sup> On the 6th of February a Houthi representative declared from the chambers of the presidential palace that the group was taking control of the country.<sup>120</sup> Unsurprisingly, the sequence of Houthi actions led to widespread condemnation from various Yemeni factions, with protests taking place in Adan, Tai'izz and other major cities on the 7th of February.<sup>121</sup> Two weeks later, former president Hadi would manage to escape his residence in Sana'a and travel to Aden on the southern coast, where he would declare that he was still

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<sup>116</sup> Shankar, Sneha. "Gunmen Kidnap Yemeni President's Chief Of Staff Ahmed Awad Bin Mubarak, 2 Security Guards." *International Business Times*, 28 Dec. 2020, [www.ibtimes.com/gunmen-kidnap-yemeni-presidents-chief-staff-ahmed-awad-bin-mubarak-2-security-guards-1786646](http://www.ibtimes.com/gunmen-kidnap-yemeni-presidents-chief-staff-ahmed-awad-bin-mubarak-2-security-guards-1786646). [Accessed 4 January, 2021]

<sup>117</sup> Almosawa, Shuaib, and Kareem Fahim. "Coup Fears Rise in Yemen as Rebels Storm Palace." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 20 Jan. 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/01/21/world/middleeast/presidential-residence-in-yemen-is-attacked.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/21/world/middleeast/presidential-residence-in-yemen-is-attacked.html?_r=0). [Accessed 24 November, 2020]

<sup>118</sup> "Yemen Crisis: President Resigns as Rebels Tighten Hold." *BBC News*, BBC, 23 Jan. 2015, [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30936940](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30936940). [Accessed 24 November, 2020]

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Al Jazeera. "Thousands Protest against Houthi Coup in Yemen." *Houthis News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 7 Feb. 2015, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/2/7/thousands-protest-against-Houthi-coup-in-yemen](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/2/7/thousands-protest-against-Houthi-coup-in-yemen). [Accessed 24 November, 2020]

president and condemned what he saw as a “coup.”<sup>122</sup> As Hadi pronounced Aden as his new capital, the Houthis would be hot on his trail, marching on Aden on the 22nd of March, seizing its international airport and bombing Hadi’s headquarters. Soon after Hadi would flee to Saudi Arabia, calling upon external intervention to restore his rule.<sup>123</sup>

## **4.2: Saudi involvement since 2015**

On the 25th of March, 2015, Saudi Arabia launched a unilateral attack on Yemen under the name “Operation Decisive Storm,” with the aim of restoring the government of Hadi and preventing the Houthis from taking control of the country.<sup>124</sup> As Saudi Ambassador to the United States, Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, would announce on the same day;

“Saudi Arabia has launched military operations in Yemen to a direct request from the legitimate government of Yemen....designed to protect the people of Yemen and its legitimate government from a takeover by the Houthis, a violent extremist militia.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Almasmari, Hakim, and Jason Hanna. “Yemen's Deposed President Flees House Arrest.” *CNN*, Cable News network, 22 Feb. 2015, edition.cnn.com/2015/02/21/world/yemen-unrest/index.html. [Accessed 25 November, 2020]

<sup>123</sup> Darwich, May. “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen:Struggling for Status.” *CORE*, 2018, core.ac.uk/reader/287036439. [Accessed 27 November, 2020]

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> “Statement by Saudi Ambassador Al-Jubeir on Military Operations in Yemen | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” *Saudi Embassy*, 25 Mar. 2015, [www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/statement-saudi-ambassador-al-jubeir-military-operations-yemen](http://www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/statement-saudi-ambassador-al-jubeir-military-operations-yemen).

Saudi Arabia undertook immediate action by initiating airstrikes on Houthi targets around Aden and Sanaa. This would be swiftly followed by allegations that Saudi-led coalition airstrikes were unlawfully striking hospitals, aid organizations, and other civilian targets according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>126</sup> Simultaneously, the Saudi's started providing support and training for Yemeni forces loyal to President Hadi, forming the new Yemeni National Army (YNA) with the Al Anad Airbase in the Lahij Governorate as their primary basis. The YNA would consist of previous Yemeni army units loyal to Hadi, popular mobilization militia's akin to allied tribes, and the militia factions of al-Islah. Furthermore, the Saudi-led coalition would enforce a national air and sea blockade on Yemen, moving a squadron of Egyptian and Saudi Warships into the Bab el-Mandeb strait, in order to avoid potential military shipments from reaching the Houthis.<sup>127</sup> The Saudi tactic of utilizing various militia's and the YNA under Hadi in synergy with coordinated airstrikes would remain its primary strategy in Yemen for the following years.

Saudi demands to bring its intervention to a stop would be made clear during the 26th Arab League Summit in Sharm al-Sheikh on the 28th of March, stating;

“The arab leaders expressed hope that the compelling military measures would restore security and stability to all Yemen under constitutional legitimacy, countering Houthis’ attempts supported by external parties. These external parties aim to threaten the security of Yemen, the region and Arab national security.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> “Statement by Saudi Ambassador Al-Jubeir on Military Operations in Yemen | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” *Saudi Embassy*, 25 Mar. 2015, [www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/statement-saudi-ambassador-al-jubeir-military-operations-yemen](http://www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/statement-saudi-ambassador-al-jubeir-military-operations-yemen).

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

Despite making no immediate mention of Iran within its definition of external parties, this reveals that no longer than three days after the launch of Decisive Storm, Saudi leaders were defining the Yemeni civil war as a conflict primarily spurred by proxy involvement. The statement goes on to announce its demands from the Houthis;

“The Arab leaders urged the Houthi militias to immediately withdraw from the capital Sana'a, other towns, and the government institutions as well as normalizing the security situation in Sana'a and other governorates, besides returning its heavy and medium weaponry to the constitutional legitimate authorities.”<sup>129</sup>

Early expectations from the Saudi-led coalition reveal to demand what equals a complete surrender from the Houthi insurgency, encompassing a disarmament and a return of all captured territories. These steep demands, in retrospect, were set under the expectation by the Saudi's, and then deputy crown-prince and defense minister Mohammed bin-Salman, that their coalition force would take a matter of weeks to defeat the Houthis.<sup>130</sup> Within the first several months it became immediately apparent that this would not be the case; which would coalesce with a change in tone regarding external involvement in the conflict. Only six months after the initial launch of Decisive Storm, a wave of accusations would lament the Iran-Houthi connection;

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<sup>129</sup> “Statement by Saudi Ambassador Al-Jubeir on Military Operations in Yemen | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” *Saudi Embassy*, 25 Mar. 2015, [www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/statement-saudi-ambassador-al-jubeir-military-operations-yemen](http://www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/statement-saudi-ambassador-al-jubeir-military-operations-yemen).

<sup>130</sup> Al-Rasheed, Madawi. “King Salman Needs Total Victory in Yemen.” *Al, Al-Monitor*, 11 Apr. 2018, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/saudi-arabia-finds-no-quick-victory-yemen.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/saudi-arabia-finds-no-quick-victory-yemen.html). [Accessed 24 November, 2020]

“Denying that Iran is backing the Houthis in Yemen is like denying that the sun rises in the east.”<sup>131</sup>

Stated Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi foreign minister in October of 2015. As the civil war protracted into its second year, the conflict was starting to take a drastic humanitarian toll in the already impoverished country, with 13 of Yemen’s 23 million people already being defined as “food insecure.”<sup>132</sup> Aid agencies were attributing key causes of this crisis to the Saudi blockade of ports and airports, in combination with its bombing of civilian targets. As a consequence, the Saudi’s would face increasing international pressure to address these issues, with even its main allies, the US and Britain, growing disquiet.<sup>133</sup> Despite coalition support for Hadi and his alliance with the southern separatists succeeding in retaking Aden from the Houthis,<sup>134</sup> further progress proved cumbersome. Hadi’s forces would only retake minor settlements in the coming two years in Yemen’s Shabwa and Al Hudaydah Governorate in the south, but would fall short of being able to challenge the Houthis in the capital Sana’a or northern provinces.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, the Houthis

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<sup>131</sup> Black, Ian. “Saudis Strike in Response to Houthi Scud Attack as Forgotten War Rages On.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 15 Oct. 2015, [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/15/saudi-arabia-strike-response-Houthi-scud-attack-forgotten-war](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/15/saudi-arabia-strike-response-Houthi-scud-attack-forgotten-war). [Accessed 27 November, 2020]

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> “Saudi-Led Coalition Warns Iran over Yemen Missile Launch.” *CNBC*, CNBC, 6 Nov. 2017, [www.cnb.com/2017/11/06/saudi-coalition-yemen-missile-launch-could-be-an-act-of-war.html](http://www.cnb.com/2017/11/06/saudi-coalition-yemen-missile-launch-could-be-an-act-of-war.html). [Accessed 27 November, 2020]

<sup>135</sup> Seif, Islam. “Yemeni Army Captures 80 Houthis within Two Days in Shabwa.” *Al Arabiya English*, Al Arabiya English, 20 May 2020,

would succeed at stepping up their campaign against the Saudi's on their own soil, with drone attacks, missile strikes, and cross-border incursions becoming increasingly common across the Yemeni border from 2017 onwards.<sup>136</sup> This would include the utilization of ballistic missiles aimed at cities like Jeddah and Mecca, amalgamating with a shifting Saudi perception that these attacks were the direct doing of Iran. Following the interception of a ballistic missile headed for Riyadh on the 4th of November in 2017, Saudi military command would release a statement reflecting this perceived association;

“Iran’s role and its direct command of its Houthi proxy in this matter constitutes a clear act of aggression that targets neighboring countries, and threatens peace and security in the region and globally...therefore, the coalition’s command considers this a blatant act of military aggression by the Iranian regime, and could rise to be considered as an act of war against the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”<sup>137</sup>

Distinguishment between the Houthi-Iranian relationship begins to drastically fade as the Civil war spurts on from the Saudi perspective, identifying Houthi actions as a mere intermediary force to that of Iran.

[english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/12/17/Yemeni-army-captures-80-Houthis-within-two-days-in-Shabwa.html](http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/12/17/Yemeni-army-captures-80-Houthis-within-two-days-in-Shabwa.html). [Accessed 29 November, 2020]

<sup>136</sup>Al Jazeera. “Timeline: Houthis' Drone and Missile Attacks on Saudi Targets.” *Houthis News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 14 Sept. 2019, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/14/timeline-houthis-drone-and-missile-attacks-on-saudi-targets](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/14/timeline-houthis-drone-and-missile-attacks-on-saudi-targets). [Accessed 30 November, 2020]

<sup>137</sup>“ Saudi-Led Coalition Warns Iran over Yemen Missile Launch.” *CNBC*, CNBC, 6 Nov. 2017, [www.cnbc.com/2017/11/06/saudi-coalition-yemen-missile-launch-could-be-an-act-of-war.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/06/saudi-coalition-yemen-missile-launch-could-be-an-act-of-war.html). [Accessed 30 November, 2020]



Crown Prince Mohammed's frustrations with the quagmire that Yemen had become, at the perceived hands of the Iranians, would be reflected in the rehashing of perpetuated sectarian rhetoric haunting the Saudi-Iranian dynamic. Reacting to a question regarding collaborating on a solution in Yemen, crown Prince Mohammed answers;

“How do you have a dialogue with a regime built on an extremist ideology ... that they must control the land of Muslims and spread their Twelver Jaafari sect in the Muslim world...We know that the aim of the Iranian regime is to reach the focal point of Muslims (Mecca) and we will not wait until the fight is inside Saudi Arabia and we will work so that the battle is on their side, inside Iran, not in Saudi Arabia.”<sup>138</sup>

The threatening overture of the Crown Prince demonstrates one of the few instances in which Saudi discourse resorts to sectarian themes during the Yemeni civil war. This could be perceived, in part, as Saudi justification of continued operations in Yemen following stiff international criticism. Framing the Yemeni situation within the historical context of the menacing existential threat that Iran poses could serve to legitimize Saudi actions in light of growing humanitarian concerns. It is important to note that sectarian idioms started to be used increasingly in the latter stages of the conflict from 2017 to 2020.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>Aboudi, Sami, and Omar Fahmy. “Powerful Saudi Prince Sees No Chance for Dialogue with Iran.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 2 May 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-prince-iran-idUSKBN17Y1FK](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-prince-iran-idUSKBN17Y1FK). [Accessed 6 December, 2020]

<sup>139</sup>Al-Muslimi, Farea. “How Sunni-Shia Sectarianism Is Poisoning Yemen.” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 29 Dec. 2015, [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62375](http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62375). [Accessed 6 December, 2020]

The damage done since the initiation of the conflict was undeniable; only two years into the conflict an estimated \$14 billion dollars was reported in economic loss for Yemen, with 1,671 schools reportedly damaged.<sup>140</sup> The cost for the Saudi's was equally surmountable, its yearly GDP expenditure accounting for roughly \$60 billion dollars going to its military during 2015 to 2018.<sup>141</sup> In the early stages of the conflict, security experts believe as much as \$200 million dollars was being spent daily by Saudi Arabia on its Yemen front.<sup>142</sup> The economic costs of the conflict were ludicrous by any standard; further exacerbated by the need for aid funding. The Saudi government's intention to take upon this responsibility was made apparent during an interview with foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir in September of 2018;

“Do we want to give Yemen to the Iranians? No. Ten percent of the Yemeni population, as we speak, lives in Saudi Arabia. We have incredible ties with Yemen historically - familial ties and political ties...once this war is over, and it will be over, we will be able to go back and reconstruct Yemen and turn them into a good partner of ours. We have provided Yemen with \$13 Billion in humanitarian assistance since the war began, which is more than the rest of the world combined. We have set aside \$10 billion that we will increase to twenty billion for a fund for the reconstruction of Yemen.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Bayoumy, Yara. “Exclusive: Civil War Costs Yemen \$14 Billion in Damage and Economic Losses - Report.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 16 Aug. 2016, [www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-damages-idUSKCN10R2B7](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-damages-idUSKCN10R2B7). [Accessed 6 December, 2020]

<sup>141</sup> “Saudi Arabia Military Expenditure 1963-2018 Data: 2020-2021 Forecast: Historical.” *Saudi Arabia Military Expenditure | 1963-2018 Data | 2020-2021 Forecast | Historical*, tradingeconomics.com/saudi-arabia/military-expenditure. [Accessed 6 December, 2020]

<sup>142</sup> Carey, Glen. “The Saudi Town on the Frontline of Yemen's War.” *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, 21 Dec. 2015, [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-21/in-one-saudi-town-gunfire-all-day-brings-yemen-war-near-home](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-21/in-one-saudi-town-gunfire-all-day-brings-yemen-war-near-home). [Accessed 8 December, 2020]

<sup>143</sup> “A Conversation With Adel Al-Jubeir.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, 26 Sept. 2018, [www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir](http://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir). [Accessed 8 December, 2020]

This further demonstrates the economic burden that Yemen has come to be for Saudi Arabia and also unveils the economic dimension at play in the Yemen-Saudi relationship. 1.8 million Yemeni workers comprise roughly 14% of Saudi Arabia's expatriate workers, forming an important basis of the Kingdom's lower-income workers.<sup>144</sup> Speaking on the presence of the Houthis, al-Jubeir further states;

“And it [Houthis] will block 13 percent of the world trade through Bab-el-Mandeb strait. And this 13 percent, they've tried to block it, and they couldn't because of the work of the coalition.”

The importance of the El-Mandeb strait is clearly vocalized as the single most important economic dimension for the Saudi's concerning the Yemeni civil war; within this 13% of global trade passing its waters, Saudi Arabia ships roughly 600,000 barrels of oil daily through it to its European and American customers.<sup>145</sup> Despite this, the Saudi's could bypass this threat by delivering oil on-land to its Red sea port of Yanbu at a significantly higher cost. In combination with the economic importance of the El-Mandeb strait, the large share of expatriate workers from Yemen in Saudi Arabia comprise of the two most relevant economic factors at stake in the Yemeni civil war. In comparison to Saudi expenditure regarding its intervention in Yemen, this is a relatively trivial dimension.

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<sup>144</sup> A Conversation With Adel Al-Jubeir.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, 26 Sept. 2018, [www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir](http://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir). [Accessed 8 December, 2020]

<sup>145</sup> “Explainer: What Is the Bab El-Mandeb Strait and Why Is It Important?” *GCaptain*, 2 Aug. 2018, [gcaptain.com/explainer-what-is-the-bab-el-mandeb-strait-and-why-is-it-important/](http://gcaptain.com/explainer-what-is-the-bab-el-mandeb-strait-and-why-is-it-important/). [Accessed 8 December, 2020]

To add to the already frustrating financial quagmire Yemen had become, the situation would further deteriorate for the Saudi's when President Hadi's fragile local alliance would fracture in January of 2018.<sup>146</sup> The southern separatists, represented by the Southern Transitional Council, had become growingly frustrated with perceived acts of corruption and discrimination at the hands of Hadi's government, resulting in gun battles in and surrounding Aden. The Saudi's would spend the next two years painstakingly working to reunite the disenfranchised groups, resulting in an eventual reconciliation in November of 2019 under the Riyadh agreement. The split had further demonstrated to the Saudi's that Hadi's regime realistically lacked political legitimacy amongst the local factions.

Saudi weariness regarding its role in Yemen was reflected during a 2019 interview with Al-Jubeir;

“Unfortunately we took a beating in the media. The Houthis lay siege on towns and villages, people starve, and we get blamed. The Houthis lobbed 260 missiles at Saudi Arabia as well as three hundred missiles inside Yemen randomly at civilians; we get blamed. The Houthis steal humanitarian assistance; we get blamed. The Houthis stopped the World Health Organization from distributing cholera vaccines that we paid for, and we get blamed for cholera outbreaks.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Darwich, May. “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status.” *CORE*, 2018, [core.ac.uk/reader/287036439](http://core.ac.uk/reader/287036439). [Accessed 9 December, 2020]

<sup>147</sup> “A Conversation With Adel Al-Jubeir.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, 26 Sept. 2018, [www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir](http://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir). [Accessed 8 December, 2020]

The compounding effects of international condemnation, the collapse of its proxy alliance under Hadi, and the financial sinkhole Yemen had become would lead the Saudis to look increasingly for a political resolution. Al-Jubeir continued by stating;

“But anyway, put that aside. We have supported every agreement to reach a political settlement. We’re still working with the U.N. envoy. We’re working...to bring about reconciliation. We’re optimistic that this will happen fairly soon.”<sup>148</sup>

### **4.3: Iranian involvement since 2015**

Ayatollah Khomeini’s harsh words on the 9th of April, 2015 followed shortly after the initiation of Saudi intervention in Yemen, would mark the beginning of an escalatory tone in Iranian discourse in coalescence with an evident rise in material support;

“The aggression by Saudi Arabia against Yemen and its innocent people was a mistake...it has set a bad precedent in the region. This is a crime and genocide that can be prosecuted in international courts....{Riyadh will} not emerge victorious.”<sup>149</sup>

During 2015 and 2016, there were four confirmed seizures of weapon shipments at the Gulf of Aden by US navy patrols that were evidenced to be of Iranian origin. Out of these four seizures, the UN panel of experts could link 2,064 mainly light weapons directly to Iranian manufacture.<sup>150</sup>

<sup>148</sup> Darwich, May. “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen:Struggling for Status.” *CORE*, 2018, [core.ac.uk/reader/287036439](http://core.ac.uk/reader/287036439). [Accessed 9 December, 2020]

<sup>149</sup> “Yemen Crisis: Iran's Khamenei Condemns Saudi 'Genocide'.” *BBC News*, BBC, 9 Apr. 2015, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-32239009](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-32239009). [Accessed 10 December, 2020]

<sup>150</sup> Saul, Jonathan, et al. “Exclusive: Iran Steps up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War - Sources.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 21 Mar. 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-Houthis-idUSKBN16S22R](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-Houthis-idUSKBN16S22R). [Accessed 10 December, 2020]

Furthermore, several UN reports have identified that advanced weapons used by the Houthis were not proven to be part of the Yemeni military inventory prior to 2014.<sup>151</sup> In some of these cases, UN experts have come to the conclusion that these weapons were undoubtedly of Iranian origin.<sup>152</sup> This includes anti tank guided weapons (ATGWs) that have been manufactured in Iran.

Unproven claims by Saudi officials and intelligence agencies also indicate that small numbers of Houthi fighters have been trained in Iran and Lebanon.<sup>153</sup> Despite mounting evidence of Iran's support for the Houthis, including Iran articulating its moral support for the Houthi cause,<sup>154</sup> the Iranian government has officially maintained that it has played no role in backing the Houthis financially or militarily. During a speech on May 6th, 2015, Khamenei states;

“We wanted to send the Yemenis medications, not weapons. They do not need our weapons. [Houthis] has full control over Yemen's military bases and army...The Iranian nation has chosen the right path. Even Mecca pagans used to stop war in the sacred

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<sup>151</sup> Saul, Jonathan, et al. “Exclusive: Iran Steps up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War - Sources.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 21 Mar. 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-Houthis-idUSKBN16S22R](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-Houthis-idUSKBN16S22R). [Accessed 10 December, 2020]

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Allen, John R., and Bruce Riedel. “Ending the Yemen War Is Both a Strategic and Humanitarian Imperative.” *Brookings*, Brookings, 17 Nov. 2020, [www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/16/ending-the-yemen-war-is-both-a-strategic-and-humanitarian-imperative/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/16/ending-the-yemen-war-is-both-a-strategic-and-humanitarian-imperative/). [Accessed 10 December, 2020]

<sup>154</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. “Yemen War Heats Up Iran's Anti-Saudi Rhetoric.” *The Washington Institute*, 18 May 2015, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemen-war-heats-irans-anti-saudi-rhetoric](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemen-war-heats-irans-anti-saudi-rhetoric). [Accessed 10 December, 2020]

month of Rajab. Today those who bomb Yemen a hundred times in twenty-four hours are worse and uglier than Mecca pagans.”<sup>155</sup>

Whilst denying the link between Iran and Houthis, Khamenei lambasts the Saudi’s for their air campaign in Yemen. ‘Mecca pagans’ refers to the pagan tribes living around Mecca before the arrival of Mohammed and Islam to the region; Khamenei blasts the Saudi’s as ‘worse’ than pagans for continuing their campaign in the Islamic month of Rajab in which battles are forbidden. This is in line with Iran’s sectarian rhetoric meant to undermine the religious authority of the Kingdom of Saud and framing them as quintessentially unislamic.

Markedly enough, Iranian discourse regarding its Yemen policy demonstrated a steep divide between the stance of the Iranian government and the statements of members from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Whilst Khamenei and his ministers maintained denying claims of Houthi collaboration throughout the years, the IRGC has done quite the contrary. Deputy armed forces chief Ali Shadmani stated during an interview on the 25th of April 2015;

“In the resistance front, in the course of eight years of war with Iraq, we were only able to organize some of the Kurds in northern Iraq against Saddam. Now all those people who are interested in fighting against arrogant powers in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen stand under the flag of Iran’s Supreme leader...We declare publicly that we will support [Yemeni resistance] as we did in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. “Yemen War Heats Up Iran's Anti-Saudi Rhetoric.” *The Washington Institute*, 18 May 2015, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemen-war-heats-irans-anti-saudi-rhetoric](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemen-war-heats-irans-anti-saudi-rhetoric). [Accessed 10 December, 2020]

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

The IRGC would continue to claim that the Houthis served under their command,<sup>157</sup> revealing a potential demarcation in the political objectives of the IRGC and the Iranian government.

Khamenei might seek to employ plausible deniability whereas the IRGC looks to exert its power.

One explanation proposed by regional experts is that the IRGC's embracement of the Houthis is meant to exacerbate Saudi worries and further deepen their resolve in the quagmire, diverting attention away from other contention points in the region.<sup>158</sup> In reality, the control exerted by Iran over the Houthis is perceived to be widely overstated. In stark contradiction to IRGC claims, American intelligence officials revealed that prior to the Houthi invasion of Sanaa in 2014, the Iranians warned them not to march on the capital.<sup>159</sup> The decision by the Houthis to entirely disregard this advice and take Sanaa regardless demonstrates that their dynamic is not representative of a client-agent relationship.

In April of 2015, Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif presented a four-point plan to the United Nations security council in a perceived effort to stop the war in Yemen. Zarif called for an immediate ceasefire and end of all foreign military attacks, humanitarian assistance by

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<sup>157</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. "Yemen War Heats Up Iran's Anti-Saudi Rhetoric." *The Washington Institute*, 18 May 2015, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemen-war-heats-irans-anti-saudi-rhetoric](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemen-war-heats-irans-anti-saudi-rhetoric). [Accessed 10 December, 2020]

<sup>158</sup> Al-Muslimi, Farea. "How Sunni-Shia Sectarianism Is Poisoning Yemen." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 29 Dec. 2015, [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62375](http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62375). [Accessed 8 December, 2020]

<sup>159</sup> Watkins, Ali, et al. "Iran Warned Houthis Against Yemen Takeover." *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 20 Apr. 2015, [www.huffpost.com/entry/iran-houthis-yemen\\_n\\_7101456](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/iran-houthis-yemen_n_7101456). [Accessed 10 December, 2020]



ending the blockade, a resumption of broad national dialogue and the establishment of an inclusive national unity government,<sup>160</sup> stating;

“This critical situation is escalating and the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is approaching catastrophic dimensions...it may result in further exacerbation of the already tense circumstances in a region that has been plagued by the most barbaric types of extremism and a multi-pronged vicious campaign of foreign backed terrorists.”<sup>161</sup>

The villainization of the Saudi regime utilizing expressions such as terrorism, extremism, and barbarism proved to be a continuous theme in Iranian oration regarding the Yemeni crisis. The Iranian regime would continue to point to its four-point plan as a means to achieving peace in the country. As speculated by the Carnegie Endowment Institute, Iran informally maintains two conditions necessary for its support of the peace process; the inclusion of the Houthis as an official member of Yemen’s governing coalition and the preservation of Yemen’s geographic integrity.<sup>162</sup> Iran considers the partition of the country into multiple regions as a move meant to weaken the Houthis and enable Saudi Arabia to exert further influence over the region. The

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<sup>160</sup> Charbonneau, Louis. “Iran Submits Four-Point Yemen Peace Plan to United Nations.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 17 Apr. 2015, “Saudi Arabia Looks for an Exit to the War in Yemen.” *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, 18 Apr. 2020, [www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/18/saudi-arabia-looks-for-an-exit-to-the-war-in-yemen](http://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/18/saudi-arabia-looks-for-an-exit-to-the-war-in-yemen) [Accessed 13 December, 2020]

<sup>161</sup> Charbonneau, Louis. “Iran Submits Four-Point Yemen Peace Plan to United Nations.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 17 Apr. 2015, “Saudi Arabia Looks for an Exit to the War in Yemen.” *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, 18 Apr. 2020, [www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/18/saudi-arabia-looks-for-an-exit-to-the-war-in-yemen](http://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/18/saudi-arabia-looks-for-an-exit-to-the-war-in-yemen) [Accessed 13 December, 2020]

<sup>162</sup> Al-Muslimi, Farea. “How Sunni-Shia Sectarianism Is Poisoning Yemen.” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 29 Dec. 2015, [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62375](http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62375). [Accessed 13 December, 2020]

contradictory nature of opposing narratives being spurred by the IRGC and governmental factions in Tehran severely muddies the water however; whether all political forces within Iran truly desire the implementation of Javad Zarif's perpetuated four-point plan is questionable at best. It is speculated that Iran views Yemen as a low-cost environment to enact attrition against Saudi Arabia, poising them to sabotage Houthi-Saudi reconciliation efforts to further perpetuate the quagmire.<sup>163</sup> As stated by Ali Velayati, a senior adviser to Ayatollah Khamenei in a 2018 interview points to this;

“Saudi Arabia should expect to see Yemen turn into another Vietnam for that country.”<sup>164</sup>

Iranian awareness of this asymmetrical cost of the Yemen conflict is undeniable; despite clearly evidenced political and financial support Iran contributes to the Houthi cause, this has been speculated to amount to roughly \$30 million dollars annually.<sup>165</sup> This price tag demonstrates the miniscule investment Iran needs to provide at the comparable cost of roughly \$60 billion dollars

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<sup>163</sup> Al-Muslimi, — Farea, et al. “Iran's Role in Yemen Exaggerated, but Destructive.” *The Century Foundation*, 3 June 2019, [tcf.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/](http://tcf.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/). [Accessed 14 December, 2020]

<sup>164</sup> “Iran's Velayati: Saudi Arabia Should Expect to See Yemen Turn into Another Vietnam.” *English*, 1 Feb. 2018, [en.abna24.com/news/iran/irans-velayati-saudi-arabia-should-expect-to-see-yemen-turn-into-another-vietnam\\_880264.html](http://en.abna24.com/news/iran/irans-velayati-saudi-arabia-should-expect-to-see-yemen-turn-into-another-vietnam_880264.html). [Accessed 14 December, 2020]

<sup>165</sup> Torommah, Hashem. “How Iran's Financing Of Houthi Rebels In Yemen Has Prolonged The War.” *The Media Line*, 10 May 2018, [themedialine.org/news/featured/how-irans-financing-of-houthi-rebels-in-yemen-has-prolonged-the-war/](http://themedialine.org/news/featured/how-irans-financing-of-houthi-rebels-in-yemen-has-prolonged-the-war/). [Accessed 14 December, 2020]

by that of Saudi Arabia. As an anonymous Western security council diplomat puts it during an interview with the Century Foundation;

“The Iranians throw a dollar at Yemen, knowing full well that Saudi Arabia would in turn spend 2 million, which means it is a winning battle for Iran according to this standard.”<sup>166</sup>

The idealization that the Iranian-Houthi relationship was brought forth due to a sectarian bondage between the two respective entities was further disproven when the Houthis published their national vision for the Modern Yemeni State document in 2019, which presents a secular and representative vision for how the Yemeni government should function.<sup>167</sup> It further rejects the conceptualization of religious rule and looks to include Sunni factions. The document rejects the implications of the Velayat e-faqih in contrast to Iranian proxies in Iraq and Lebanon. In amalgamation with historic religious differences between Zaydism and Twelver Shia Islam, as well as the Iranian choice to back opposing parties in Yemen preceding the civil war, testifies to the fact that the Iranian-Houthi relationship is opportunistic rather than driven by sectarian ideals.

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<sup>166</sup> Al-Muslimi, — Farea, et al. “Iran's Role in Yemen Exaggerated, but Destructive.” *The Century Foundation*, 3 June 2019, [tcf.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/](https://www.centuryfoundation.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/). [Accessed 15 December, 2020]

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

In the latter years of the civil war, Iranian rhetoric continued to echo Zarif's four-point plan, calling upon the immediate lifting of the Saudi blockade and a halt to all airstrikes as the only basis for peace.<sup>168</sup> During a interview in April of 2018, Mohammad Zarif would state;

“It makes us uncomfortable to see the continuation of bloodshed in our region because there are some rather young and ambitious leaders who believe that they can have military victory in Yemen in two weeks. They believe that they could unseat Bashar al-Assad....now we are close to the end of the seventh year of conflict in Syria, into the fourth year of conflict in Yemen. I believe these illusions need to be abandoned....and reach a political solution. Iran has been calling for that.”<sup>169</sup>

#### 4.4 Outbreak of COVID-19

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Yemen was announced on the 10th of April in Hadhramaut province.<sup>170</sup> For the country's aid workers this signalled a nightmare scenario; six years of civil war had already created one of the world's worst humanitarian crises and further exacerbation could deliver a devastating blow to the 24 million Yemeni civilians already in need of humanitarian assistance. Half of Yemen's health care facilities had been destroyed in the

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<sup>168</sup> Al-Muslimi, — Farea, et al. “Iran's Role in Yemen Exaggerated, but Destructive.” *The Century Foundation*, 3 June 2019, [tcf.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/](http://tcf.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/). [Accessed 15 December, 2020]

<sup>169</sup> “Transcript: Full Interview with Mohammad Javad Zarif.” *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 22 Apr. 2018, [www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-extended-interview-with-mohammad-javad-zarif/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-extended-interview-with-mohammad-javad-zarif/). [Accessed 10 December, 2020]

<sup>170</sup> “War and COVID-19 in Yemen.” *Human Rights Watch*, 5 Nov. 2020, [www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/14/war-and-covid-19-yemen](http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/14/war-and-covid-19-yemen). [Accessed 13 December, 2020]

fighting, much-needed national coordination was nonexistent, and aid funding was sharply falling as nations turned inwards to mitigate their own outbreaks.

Saudi Arabia and Iran were not exempt from the fallout that would ensue. Iran would suffer one of the first COVID-19 outbreaks in the region in February of 2020, turning the country into an infectious furnace that would eventually infect over 1 million of its citizens resulting in an excess of 50,000 deaths.<sup>171</sup> These official figures by the Iranian regime are however speculated to be heavily underreported, with leaks from health ministry officials indicating the actual number is three times as high.<sup>172</sup> Saudi Arabia would follow shortly after, announcing its first case on the 2nd of March, 2020. As of December, 2020, it has reported 360,000 infections with 6,300 deaths.<sup>173</sup>

In sequence with the health crises unfolding in both countries, the economic downturn ushered in by the pandemic could be seen to deliver an even more severe setback to the nations. Following the partial shutdown of industry and transportation on a global scale, the price of oil would crash to its lowest level in 18 years from roughly \$65 dollars per barrel to \$22.58 dollars per barrel on

<sup>171</sup> Sadjadpour, Karim. "Why Iran and Its Proxies Remain Undeterred by the Pandemic - Conflict Zones in the Time of Coronavirus: War and War by Other Means." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 17 Dec. 2020, [carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/17/why-iran-and-its-proxies-remain-undeterred-by-pandemic-pub-83467](https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/17/why-iran-and-its-proxies-remain-undeterred-by-pandemic-pub-83467). [Accessed 20 December, 2020]

<sup>172</sup> Al-Muslimi, — Farea, et al. "Iran's Role in Yemen Exaggerated, but Destructive." *The Century Foundation*, 3 June 2019, [tcf.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/](https://www.tcf.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/). [Accessed 13 December, 2020]

<sup>173</sup> "Saudi Arabia: WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, [covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/sa](https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/sa). [Accessed 16 December, 2020]

the 28th of March,<sup>174</sup> within the first two months of the pandemic. The oil dependent economies of Saudi Arabia and Iran were desecrated; Saudi Arabia's economy shrank by 7% in just the second quarter of 2020<sup>175</sup> whilst Iran was forecast to witness a GDP decline of 8.5% by the end of the fiscal year.<sup>176</sup>

On the ground in Yemen, 2,034 cases of COVID-19 would be reported by the 26th of September, 2020.<sup>177</sup> Given the lack of testing capacity and the geographic isolation of varying authorities, this number is likely to be much higher and impossible to follow. The local response has been detrimental at best; the Houthis originally lamented the disease as an American biological weapon and have stated to have no cases of COVID-19 in their territories.<sup>178</sup> International calls for a peaceful resolution to the conflict rose as fears of an impending humanitarian disaster grew.

<sup>174</sup> "Coronavirus: Oil Price Collapses to Lowest Level for 18 Years." *BBC News*, BBC, 30 Mar. 2020, [www.bbc.com/news/business-52089127](http://www.bbc.com/news/business-52089127). [Accessed 18 December, 2020]

<sup>175</sup> Barbuscia, Davide. "Saudi Unemployment Spikes as Virus-Hit Economy Shrinks by 7% in Second-Quarter." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 30 Sept. 2020, [www.reuters.com/article/saudi-gdp-int/saudi-unemployment-spikes-as-virus-hit-economy-shrinks-by-7-in-second-quarter-idUSKBN26LOTW](http://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-gdp-int/saudi-unemployment-spikes-as-virus-hit-economy-shrinks-by-7-in-second-quarter-idUSKBN26LOTW). [Accessed 18 December, 2020]

<sup>176</sup> Bantillo, Pearl. "Iran Economy Set for Deeper Contraction amid US Sanctions, Pandemic." *ICIS Explore*, 10 Nov. 2020, [www.icis.com/explore/resources/news/2020/10/09/10561412/iran-economy-set-for-deeper-contraction-amid-us-sanctions-pandemic](http://www.icis.com/explore/resources/news/2020/10/09/10561412/iran-economy-set-for-deeper-contraction-amid-us-sanctions-pandemic). [Accessed 24 December, 2020]

<sup>177</sup> "War and COVID-19 in Yemen." *Human Rights Watch*, 5 Nov. 2020, [www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/14/war-and-covid-19-yemen](http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/14/war-and-covid-19-yemen). [Accessed 13 December, 2020]

<sup>178</sup> Al-Dawsari, Nadwa, and Ibrahim Jalal. "The Houthis' Response to COVID-19? Pre-Emptively Blame Their Enemies." *Middle East Institute*, 22 Dec. 2020, [www.mei.edu/publications/Houthis-response-covid-19-pre-emptively-blame-their-enemies](http://www.mei.edu/publications/Houthis-response-covid-19-pre-emptively-blame-their-enemies). [Accessed 28 December, 2020]

Following calls by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in March for a global ceasefire to advance peace and combat the pandemic, Saudi Arabia would announce a unilateral ceasefire on the 9th of April.<sup>179</sup> The reason for the ceasefire, as stated by a Saudi official, was to “alleviate the suffering of the brotherly Yemeni people and maintain their health and safety.”<sup>180</sup> Regional experts however speculate that plummeting oil revenues, accounting for 80% of the Kingdom’s income, have further pressured Saudi Arabia to end its financial quagmire in Yemen.<sup>181</sup> Utilizing the worsening humanitarian crisis caused by COVID-19 as a reasoning for its departure rather than a failure in its own policies allows for the Kingdom to somewhat mitigate its reputational damage in conceding an exit strategy. As stated by a Yemeni analyst, Abdulghani al-Iryani;

“The Saudis want a way out and are using the coronavirus as a figleaf.”<sup>182</sup>

This was followed by the Saudi invitation for the Houthis to come to Riyadh for direct peace talks. To the detriment of the Saudi position at the negotiating table however, the southern

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<sup>179</sup> “Saudi Arabia Declares Unilateral Cease-Fire in Yemen.” *DW.COM*, 9 Apr. 2020, [www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-declares-unilateral-cease-fire-in-yemen/av-53074862](http://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-declares-unilateral-cease-fire-in-yemen/av-53074862). [Accessed 13 December, 2020]

<sup>180</sup> “Saudi Arabia Looks for an Exit to the War in Yemen.” *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, 18 Apr. 2020, [www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/18/saudi-arabia-looks-for-an-exit-to-the-war-in-yemen](http://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/18/saudi-arabia-looks-for-an-exit-to-the-war-in-yemen) [Accessed 8 December, 2020]

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

separatists re-initiated their campaign against President Hadi's government in late April, announcing plans to self-govern Aden and its southern provinces, once again fracturing the fragile alliance the Saudis have in Yemen. The Houthis meanwhile, have seemed to sense the desperation of the Saudis and have rejected the ceasefire whilst putting forward their own peace plan. In its deal, the Houthis demand that Saudi Arabia pay reparations for the damage caused, pay ten years worth of government salaries, lift its air and sea blockade of Yemen, and recognise the Houthis as the legitimate government.<sup>183</sup> The Kingdom's lack of political leverage six years onwards in the conflict is apparent, and to avoid having to succumb to Houthi demands the Saudis have pushed for the US to designate the Houthis a terrorist group. As Al-Jubeir states in a interview on November 20th, 2020;

“We believe that the designation of *Houthis* as a terrorist organization would add to the pressure on them to come to a negotiating table and find a political solution, we can move Yemen from the state of war to the state of rebuilding.”<sup>184</sup>

With the Houthis officially designated a terrorist group by the Trump administration as of the 10th of January, 2021, this could twofoldedly ease Houthi demands or counterproductively fuel

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<sup>183</sup> “Saudi Arabia Looks for an Exit to the War in Yemen.” *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, 18 Apr. 2020, [www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/18/saudi-arabia-looks-for-an-exit-to-the-war-in-yemen](http://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/18/saudi-arabia-looks-for-an-exit-to-the-war-in-yemen) [Accessed 8 December, 2020]

<sup>184</sup> Al Arabiya English. “Al-Jubeir: US-Saudi Relations Have Grown Stronger with Every Passing Decade.” *Al Arabiya English*, Al Arabiya English, 22 Nov. 2020, [english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/11/21/al-jubeir-us-saudi-relations-have-gone-stronger-with-every-passing-decade](http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/11/21/al-jubeir-us-saudi-relations-have-gone-stronger-with-every-passing-decade). [Accessed 26 December, 2020]



the Kingdom's resolve.<sup>185</sup> Withall, the willingness of Saudi Arabia to seek out a swift resolution has noticeably increased with the implementation of its ceasefire and peace talk invitations, Al-Jubeir has further stated that Saudi military operations in Yemen have been reduced by 80% and confidence building measures associated with prisoner exchanges and aid deliveries have improved.<sup>186</sup> Despite these manifested signs that Saudi's role in Yemen could come to an end, this has not been reflected in the post-outbreak rhetoric shared by Iran and Saudi Arabia. In a statement on the 24th of November, Javad Zarif states;

“Enough is enough! It is a moral responsibility, long overdue, for the international community to end the Yemen tragedy. And hold invaders - and their masters trading Yemeni lives for cash - to account....the only viable path is to end the bombardments, allow urgent humanitarian aid and political talks.”<sup>187</sup>

Zarif's tone has not changed following the outbreak of COVID-19, he continues to emphasize his four-point plan but does so whilst simultaneously disparaging the Saudi regime. Evidence of continued Iranian support has been confirmed by a US seizure of an Iranian ship in June of 2020

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<sup>185</sup> “Terrorist Designation of Ansarallah in Yemen - United States Department of State.” *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, [www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-ansarallah-in-yemen/](http://www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-ansarallah-in-yemen/). [Accessed 26 December, 2020]

<sup>186</sup> Al Arabiya English. “Adel Al-Jubeir: Iran 'Largest Sponsor of Terrorism in the World'.” *Al Arabiya English*, Al Arabiya English, 20 May 2020, [english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/01/22/Adel-al-Jubeir-Iran-largest-sponsor-of-terrorism-in-the-world-](http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/01/22/Adel-al-Jubeir-Iran-largest-sponsor-of-terrorism-in-the-world-). [Accessed 27 December, 2020]

<sup>187</sup> Mehr Agency. “Ending Yemen War 'Intl. Community's Long Overdue Duty'.” *Mehr News Agency*, Mehr News Agency, 24 Nov. 2020, [en.mehrnews.com/news/166269/Ending-Yemen-war-Intl-community-s-long-overdue-duty](http://en.mehrnews.com/news/166269/Ending-Yemen-war-Intl-community-s-long-overdue-duty). [Accessed 27 December, 2020]

carrying anti-tank missiles and 1,700 assault rifles.<sup>188</sup> This is however in a steep decline to confirmed seizures in preceding years, despite unconfirmed reports by Saudi media outlets of other seizures.<sup>189</sup> The role of Iranian support of the Houthis during the pandemic has otherwise remained as enigmatic as usual. Revelations of its support for proxies in other theatres might reveal indications of its changing role in Yemen however.

In an anonymous Reuters interview with three Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy commanders in July, interruptions caused by the virus have apparently drastically cut Tehran's cash supplies to their militia groups.<sup>190</sup> Since the outbreak in February, Iran has reduced its monthly payments to each of the top four militia groups in Iraq to between \$2 million to \$3 million from \$5 million, stated one of the commanders.<sup>191</sup> He further went on to say that the reduced funding had impacted operations and had forced the militia groups to seek alternative sources of funding from their own business interests. According to him, the US sanctions in combination with the coronavirus and a decline in oil prices had forced Iran to limit its military spending on the Revolutionary

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<sup>188</sup> "Pompeo Says U.S. Seized Iranian Weapons on Way to Houthi Rebels in Yemen." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 8 July 2020, [www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-pompeo/pompeo-says-u-s-seized-iranian-weapons-on-way-to-Houthi-rebels-in-yemen-idUSKBN2492AV](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-pompeo/pompeo-says-u-s-seized-iranian-weapons-on-way-to-Houthi-rebels-in-yemen-idUSKBN2492AV). [Accessed 29 December, 2020]

<sup>189</sup> "OP-ED: Evidence Suggests Iranian Weapons Being Trafficked by Criminal Networks into the Horn of Africa." *Daily Maverick*, 16 Aug. 2020, [www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-17-evidence-suggests-iranian-weapons-being-trafficked-by-criminal-networks-into-the-horn-of-africa/](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-17-evidence-suggests-iranian-weapons-being-trafficked-by-criminal-networks-into-the-horn-of-africa/). [Accessed 29 December, 2020]

<sup>190</sup> "Coronavirus and Sanctions Hit Iran's Support of Proxies in Iraq." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 2 July 2020, [www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-proxies-insight-idUSKBN2432EY](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-proxies-insight-idUSKBN2432EY). [Accessed 3 January, 2020]

<sup>191</sup> "Coronavirus and Sanctions Hit Iran's Support of Proxies in Iraq." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 2 July 2020, [www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-proxies-insight-idUSKBN2432EY](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-proxies-insight-idUSKBN2432EY). [Accessed 3 January, 2020]

Guards. This compelling information could lend credence to a larger regional shift in Iranian strategy concerning proxy involvement; one born out of economic necessity. The accounts coming out of Iraq do correlate with the reduction in seized Iranian shipments.

Despite the practical prognostics that both Iran and Saudi Arabia are set to play a reduced role in Yemen following the outbreak of COVID-19, the rhetoric exchanged by the nations continues to remain counterindictive. On the 23rd of September, the aged King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia would give a speech wholly focused on repulsing Iran at the 75th UN General Assembly stating;

“The Iranian regime interfered in Yemen by supporting the coup carried out by its surrogate, the *Houthi* militia, against the legitimate government. This has led to a political, economic, and humanitarian crisis from which the fraternal people of Yemen are suffering. The Kingdom will not hesitate to defend its national security...If we intend to win in our battle against terrorism, we must not waiver in facing the countries that sponsor terrorism and sectarianism.”<sup>192</sup>

The tone of the Saudi regime regarding Iran had remained identical over the course of the conflict, as would the tone of the Iranians. Responding to the heavy-handed remarks of King Salman, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh would fire back:

“Saudi Arabia has become delirious due to back-to-back defeats it has suffered both on the ground and on the political front in Yemen, and Riyadh wants to shirk responsibility

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<sup>192</sup> “Saudi King Outlines Country's Contributions to Pandemic Response, Denounces Attack on Its Oil Facilities || UN News.” *United Nations*, United Nations, 23 Sept. 2020, news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073312. [Accessed 4 January, 2020]

for the war crimes it has committed against Yemeni women and children. As the base and birthplace of the ideologies of Takfiri terrorist groups and the main financial and logical supporter of terrorism in the region, Saudi Arabia has, for years, been pursuing a blame-game policy and seeking to distort realities in order to escape the realities and not be held accountable for its crimes.”<sup>193</sup>

## Conclusion

The depth of Saudi commitment in Yemen from the onset of the civil war transformed it into a hybrid benefactor, still employing a proxy strategy in its support for Hadi’s forces and various allied militia’s, whilst simultaneously increasing its conventional role by directing an air campaign against Houthi positions. In line with Mumford’s proxy war conceptualization, this came at the immediate cost of its ability to employ plausible deniability. Mounting international pressures in light of the growing humanitarian crisis would exacerbate Saudi aspirations to exit the Yemeni theatre. Its ability to maintain a relatively low risk and financial cost dissipated.

Iran has continued its limited support for the Houthis, employing Mumford’s prescribed advantages of proxy conflict effectively. Jostling an impressive strategy of denying its role and lambasting Saudi Arabia for its alleged war crimes, Tehran maintains a subsided stream of material support for the Houthis at a financially insignificant cost whilst wrecking extensive havoc upon its regional rival.

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<sup>193</sup> “Spokesman Rejects Saudi King’s Baseless Accusations.” *En.mfa.gov.ir*, 24 Sept. 2020, [en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/611514/spokesman-rejects-saudi-king%E2%80%99s-baseless-accusations](http://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/611514/spokesman-rejects-saudi-king%E2%80%99s-baseless-accusations) [Accessed 3 January, 2020].

Both nations have experienced the relational complexities as prescribed by Mumford; the Houthis have demonstrated to initiate their own objectives in contradiction to Iranian advice whilst Saudi Arabia struggles to keep its fragile alliance from infighting. The Saudi strategy of supporting multiple groups accounting for the YNA, various tribal militia's and al-Islah correlates with the documented strategy of hedging as employed by Iran.

## Chapter Five: underlying motivations in the Yemen theatre

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**Overview:** As this paper has set out to do, there are historic lessons to be learned that could unveil the motivating dimensions of the Yemeni war within the larger Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict. In this section, the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen will be paralleled with the historic insights of chapters one and two by looking at the three motivating dimensions of their relationship individually; sectarianism, economics, and regional power.

### 5.1: Ideology & sectarian dimension

Chapters one and two determined that the Saudi containment strategy in response to the 1979 Iranian revolution was to regenerate conservative Wahhabism as its state religion and to employ the propagation of wahhabism as an ideological tool to counter the revolutionary fervor spouted by Khomeinism. Wahhabi schools began to take shape around the region, with indoctrinated students forming an initial wave of Sunni fighters spurred on by their clerics. Facetiously, it was this Saudi strategy that would cause the formation of Wahhabi and Saudi sponsored schools such as Dar al-Hadith in the Houthi homeland of Sa'daah. In coalescence with the historic removal of Zaydi imamate rule, this threatened the Houthi Zaydi identity to a point where opposition to Saudi Arabia became a primary objective of the group. In the ensuing civil war, this would inevitably lead to the Saudi government allying with Sunni fighters associated

with local salafist factions, namely Al-Islah. This created an initial basis for the sectarian overtones present in the Yemeni civil war.

The early ideological dimension of the Saudi-Iranian dynamic was directly tied to the existential threat the Kingdom of Saud was facing in light of the Qatif Uprisings and the Grand Mosque seizure; invoking such rhetoric serves as a potent political lever in justifying its role in Yemen.

Iran, utilizing similar sectarian themes it has used in the past, described Saudi involvement along the lines of ‘barbaric’ and ‘terroristic’, rooting such discourse in the Wahhabi association to regional salafist groups. The identification of the Yemeni civil war alongside the historic sectarian dimensions of Iran and Saudi Arabia’s rivalry has largely been their own doing.

Veritably, the ideological connection between Iran and the Houthis has been wrongly overstated.

The initiation of the Yemeni civil war was born out of various disenfranchised groups, both Sunni’s and Zaydi Houthis, being discontented with the corruption and political marginalisation perpetuated by an elitist republican regime. Iran’s other primary proxies in the region, such as the SCIRI and the Badr Corps were born out of deep sectarian histories of marginalization and abide by the Velayat-e faqih. Unlike the Houthis, they belong to the same Twelver Shia sect of Islam and emulate Iranian clerical rule. Iranian ambitions in other proxy theatres have a clear trajectory; in Iraq they look to replace the Iraqi grand Ayatollah al-Sistani with Mahmoud Hashemi-Shrairdi, furthering their idealization of establishing a Iraqi political entity that mirrors Iranian clerical rule. In Yemen these ambitions are unfounded; the Houthis have an independent

agenda that lends credence to the idea that their relationship with the Iranians is opportunistic in nature.

A worrying trajectory that has continued during the COVID-19 outbreak is that the Saudi regime still does not differentiate politically between Iran and the Houthis, referring to them simply as a ‘surrogate’ of Iran. Classifying the Houthis within the same ideological paradigm as Iran’s dynamic with Hezbollah or its Iraqi proxies is incorrect and will likely lead to a Saudi policy of exclusion set to exacerbate the civil war. The staunch Saudi effort in Yemen has been a reaction to the growing influence of Iran in regions such as Iraq; the issue being that Iran’s control over Iraq was facilitated by the Saudi decision to completely disassociate itself from its neighbor following the US invasion. King Abdullah’s shift decision that the then prime minister of Iraq, al-Maliki, was an Iranian stooge, led to a policy of exclusion that it is set to repeat in Yemen if it does not recognize the Houthis as a politically independent entity.

## **5.2: Economic dimension**

The economic dimension to Yemen would in turn also reflect this sentiment. The Iranian regime has shown to support its proxies in Iraq with direct training by the IRGC, military equipment, annual funding upwards of \$200 million every year, and even the supplementation of its own fighters on occasion. On the Yemen frontier, this Iranian expenditure was estimated to only account for roughly \$30 million per year based on scholarly accounts and annual seizures of Iranian equipment. In relativity to the economic reciprocity of its investments, this would be seen



to be logical. Iraq remains one of Iran's most important trading partners, helping it circumvent the exclusionary economic policies of the West. For both Iran and Saudi Arabia, Yemen does not pose much of an economic opportunity aside from its strategic proximity to the Red Sea Gulf and el-Mandeb strait. Iran's self-admitted awareness of the financial morass Yemen has become for the Saudi regime exemplifies its utilization of Mumford's idealization of proxy war; maintaining a financially low cost to economically devastate its main rival.

The economic dimension has a revitalized importance in the COVID-19 scenario. Under the yoke of declining oil prices, Saudi Arabia has been pressed to hasten its exit from the exorbitantly costful conflict as it appears to step down the intensity of its military operations. The role of oil has deemed to play an essential but obscure role during the COVID-19 pandemic as it has in the past. The Saudi regime was able to afford its original campaign of wahhabi exportation during the explosion of oil profits in the 1970's. Consequently, it was the oil collapse in 1998 that would lead to the first state visit of an Iranian president to Saudi Arabia, with their collaboration in OPEC becoming a foundational pillar of their reconciliation up to 2003. From this historical perspective, the crash of the oil price during COVID-19 could set the stage for Iranian-Saudi collaboration born out of pure economic urgency.

### **5.3: Regional power dimension**

Throughout the conflict, Saudi minister Al-Jubeir and crown prince Mohammed bin-Salman concurrently utilize phrases [*aimed at Iran and the Houthis*] emphasizing 'security

and stability' for Yemen and the entire region as their main concern and justification for involvement. Their initial reasonings could be perceived to be directly motivated by its regional power politics. Both the late entry of sectarian rhetoric and the practical evidence that Iran only stepped up its support for the Houthis in late 2015, point to the fact that the Saudi entry was primarily motivated by its need for control over its neighbors and its need to counter Iranian regional influence. Unlike during the Iraq-Iran war, Saudi Arabia was not experiencing an ideologically existential threat manifesting itself within its borders. Moreover, Iran's initial backing of the Southern secessionist movement rather than the Houthis proves that Iran was motivated primarily by its own need to exert power in the geographically sensitive arena of Yemen by means of the most effective proxy, not by need of an ideological affiliation or responsibility to a certain group. Despite the sectarian overtones that have incorrectly been applied by both parties to the Yemen conflict, the exertion of regional power seems to be the most authentic reasoning for their continued involvement.

In spite of the Saudi desire to exit Yemen as swiftly as possible, the tone of its rhetoric insinuates the opposite. Stating that it "*will not hesitate to defend its national security*" and "*we must not waiver in facing the countries that sponsor terrorism and sectarianism*",<sup>194</sup> the Saudi regime sounds more resolute than ever before to make its stand against Iran. The US designation of the Houthis as a terrorist group may also give the Saudis renewed vigour in pressuring the Houthis

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<sup>194</sup> "Saudi King Outlines Country's Contributions to Pandemic Response, Denounces Attack on Its Oil Facilities | | UN News." *United Nations*, United Nations, 23 Sept. 2020, news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073312. [Accessed 4 January, 2020]

into a political resolution. Moreover, the Saudi regime looks to puff its chest in light of evidenced fallbacks in Yemen, hoping Tehran does not perceive it as a sign of defeat. The Iranians seem to be onto it regardless though, shrewdly stating that the Saudis had become delirious due to their defeats in Yemen. Despite this, Iran has little to gain in the country if not for the political bargaining chip it possesses by being a continuous thorn in their side. If the Saudi regime commits itself to a full withdrawal, choosing to contain the Houthis inside Yemen similarly to how Israel contains Hamas inside Gaza, Iranian support for the Houthis against their local adversaries will prove less fruitful. Nonetheless, the discourse by both nations during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that even in the precarious climate of domestic health crises and financial desiccation, their devoir for exerting regional power is not sated.

## Conclusion

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True to Mumford's definition of Proxy Wars, and the nature of bipolar conflicts, the foundation of the Saudi-Iranian proxy drama is festered in ideological motivations. By applying a three-dimensional framework aimed at capturing a more holistic reflection of their motivations throughout their tumultuous history however, a more nuanced perspective is invoked. An evaluation of the three motivating dimensions in the theatre of Yemen authenticates that their underlying motivation stems primarily from a necessitation of regional power exertion. Despite the clear presence of sectarian overtones in Yemen, its imploration deems to serve as a political lever for justification rather than constitute either benefactors' motivation. The comprehensive assessment of their historical proxy roles indeed reveals that their motivations have long been intertwined with economic and power-related factors. By extension, the case of Yemen illustrates that Mumford's definition of proxy war, in which he accounts for ideology as the sole motivating factor, should be refined to include the dimensions of regional power exertion and economics. The addition of these dimensions should work to evolve contemporary proxy war theory away from archaic arguments built on bipolar conceptualisations of the Cold War era, and towards the increasingly regionally complex proxy conflicts of the present.

The application of Mumford's theory to this case study revealed one other peculiarity.

Mumford's addresses that one of the foremost risks of modern proxy wars is that of a proxy that begins to develop greater perceptions of autonomy or forges differing interpretations of strategic

objective to that of the benefactor. The two benefactors of this case study, Iran and Saudi Arabia, both demonstrated a hedging strategy to overcome this obstacle, essentially ordaining multiple proxies in the scenario that a proxy either disobeys the benefactor or loses its potency. As such, the benefactors have developed a strategy to overcome the mounting interrelational complexities between that of a benefactor-proxy relationship. Further evaluation of this hedging strategy should be undertaken with future case studies to reveal whether this dimension should be included in Mumford's proxy war theory as an emerging trend.

There were ascertained limitations to the approach undertaken in this thesis. First and foremost, empirically demonstrating which underlying motivations a benefactor has, proved to be a challenging task in the research. Given the lack of previous conceptual frameworks by which this has been applied to case studies, this thesis attempted to do so through the moderately chaotic amalgamation of discourse excerpts and secondary sources. Evidently, this made the research speculative in nature. The inherent clandestineness of both Iranian and Saudi decision making led to a dependency on media sources and official governmental statements that do not best reflect intrinsic motivations of either state. Working towards a conceptual framework that has clear empirical criterion will contribute to our understanding of what underlying motivations a benefactor demonstrates to have. Furthermore, the chronological approach employed in the research, despite unveiling compelling transitions in the Iranian-Saudi dynamic, was amply broad in scope. Venturing to evaluate a holistic history of Iranian-Saudi motivations consequently constrained the research from qualitatively expanding on key themes.

The historical accountancy of the Iranian-Saudi proxy conflict through the lens of proxy war theory has however contributed to revealing practical implications for the Yemen theatre. The single most crucial diagnosis is that the Yemeni civil war has been misidentified as a sectarian conflict mirroring other theatres such as Iraq. The Saudi regime has classified the Houthis as sole surrogates of the Iranians, refusing to recognize the clear signals of nonalignment between Iran and the Houthi movement. As Saudi Arabia looks to make its exit in Yemen, identifying the Houthis as an independent entity will be crucial in facilitating a political solution that includes the Houthis, as well as auxiliary splinter groups, into a comprehensive peace process.

COVID-19 seems to be accelerating the abating role of both nations, with Riyadh leveraging the worsening humanitarian climate as a face-saving rationale for its exit and Iran being constrained by financial curtailment. Despite the pandemic promoting their decreased involvement in the Yemen conflict, this might matter little for the overarching Iranian-Saudi rivalry in the region. Riyadh's egression from Yemen is likely to accentuate anxieties the house of Saud has had about regional losses in Iraq and Syria. This could result in increasingly defensive posturing by the Saudi's as hinted at in the most recent address of King Salman at the 75th UN General council meeting. Similarly, the situation on the ground in Yemen is not naturally set to improve following the exit of the Saudi coalition. The multifarious local factions contending for power will continue their strife at the detriment of Yemen's citizens unless a binding political resolution

is introduced. Both Riyadh and Tehran, corrupted by their predilections, will need to step out of the historic specters of their dynamic to bring lasting peace to fruition.

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