

SAUDI-IRANIAN COMPETITION IN YEMEN: CAUSES AND ESCALATION (2010–2015)

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Abstract: The Arab uprisings, began at the end of 2010, have shaken the balance of power in the Middle East and have brought opportunities and concerns for both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Instability in Yemen brings Riyadh and Tehran to confront each other due to the importance of its geographic location as any development in Yemen directly affects both Saudi Arabia and Iran. So as to curtail the influence of each other in Yemen, both Riyadh and Tehran effort to have dominance over there. Although these efforts run through the local actors of Yemen, in the case of their inability, Saudi Arabia has a direct military involvement in 2015. While Saudi Arabia's approach is to maintain the *status quo*, Iran conversely attempts to challenge the *status quo*. The article attempts to answer the question of how and why Saudi Arabia and Iran compete with each other in Yemen between 2010 and 2015 within framework of security dilemma.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; Iran; Yemen; Arab uprisings; proxy wars; geopolitics; security dilemma

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has been one of the arenas for the world's most intensive armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War. The Iranian-Saudi confrontation is best understood as an indirect struggle for regional influence rather than a conventional military confrontation, such as the Egyptian-Saudi conflict during the Yemeni Civil War from 1962 to 1970 (Percze, 2024). Both states have sought to advance their strategic interests by cultivating and supporting non-state actors within politically fragile and unstable states. Through these proxy relationships, Tehran and Riyadh aim to expand their influence while simultaneously constraining each other's reach, particularly in contexts where central governments lack the capacity to effectively govern or suppress domestic dissent (Rasler, 2020, p. 175).

Saudi-Iranian confrontation escalated after the Arab uprisings that broke out in 2010. Saudi Arabia was concerned that Iran would incite Shia communities within its own territory and in other Gulf Arab states. The 2011 uprising of the Shia majority in Bahrain against the Sunni minority government was suppressed with the support of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Saudi Arabia's primary concern was the 2014 seizure of the capital Sana'a by the Houthis in Yemen, which it considers its backyard.

Although Saudi Arabia and Iran confront and challenge each other in many areas (Partrick, 2016), during these armed conflicts, particularly with the beginning of Arab uprisings, Yemen became a battleground for power and influence between them. The main factor that confronts Riyadh and Tehran in Yemen is security concerns rather than sectarian ideology. Within this context of security concerns, the sectarian ideology remains as a tool on the strategies followed by both power houses. For instance, Iran's support for Shia groups in the Middle East has been a significant source of concern for Saudi Arabia (Mirza et al., 2021). Furthermore, Riyadh is concerned about Iran's influence over Shia Muslims, who constitute around fifteen percent of Saudi Arabia's population (Bradley, 2006). It is worth noting that Saudi Arabia's Shia population is concentrated in the Eastern Province, where the country's key oil facilities – forming the backbone of its economy – are located. Similarly, Iran's ethnically and religiously diverse population includes approximately 10% Sunnis, a smaller proportion than the Shia population in Saudi Arabia. However, Saudi Arabia's incitement of Arab and Sunni Baloch minorities remains a source of concern for Iran.

In this context, the main aim of this article is answering the question of how and why Saudi Arabia and Iran compete with each other in Yemen between 2010 and 2015. On February 6, 2015, the Houthi takeover of power prompted Saudi Arabia to form a military coalition and launch a direct intervention, fundamentally changing the course of the conflict. In this context, generated hypothesis is the escalated Saudi Iranian competition that was created by Arab uprisings caused a security dilemma that resulted in Saudi Arabia's direct military involvement in Yemen.

Regarding methodology, in order to answer the research question and verify hypothesis, the article examines the reasons behind the escalation of competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their approaches at the regional level through a relative weakening in Yemen during and after the Arab uprisings as gaining power for one means relatively reducing power for the other one. The hypothesis is formulated on the basis of observations of strategies that two countries followed with regard to confrontation to threat perceptions from each other. Therefore, the article uses content analysis related to the use of discourse analysis methodology. The content analysis made it possible to determine the features of the materials under examination, such as speeches. Both primary and secondary sources were used. Primary sources include speeches of both countries' circle of decision makers, their state medias. Secondary sources, on the other hand, include monographs, articles in magazines, articles in peer-reviewed journals.

The article is structured as follows: It begins with explanation of the theory of security dilemma. After that it presents a brief Saudi Iranian relations. Following this, it explains the place of Yemen on the Saudi-Iranian confrontation. Then, the article consecutively presents the approaches of both Saudi Arabia and Iran toward Yemen. Lastly, the article ends with conclusion part, in which research question is answered.

SECURITY DILEMMA

According to John H. Herz, individuals or groups situated within a society characterized by a security dilemma experience persistent fears of attack, domination, or even annihilation by others. In response to these perceived threats, they adopt precautionary measures aimed at minimizing vulnerability. Efforts to avoid or deter such dangers typically necessitate the accumulation of power, compelling all parties to prepare for worst-case scenarios. Consequently, an atmosphere of mutual insecurity emerges, in which each side, driven by its own sense of insecurity, engages in a continuous competition to enhance its strength (Herz, 1951, p. 157). The security dilemma, in international relations studies, describes the barriers that prevent two countries to achieve peace and cooperation. Robert Jervis defines the security dilemma as “many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security and decrease the security of others” (Jervis, 1978, p. 169). His offense–defense theory provides a framework for assessing the intensity of the security dilemma. To describe the intensity of the security dilemma, Jervis uses four scenarios: First, when defensive and offensive behaviors are not distinguishable but offense has an advantage, then the security dilemma is “very intense” and environment is very dangerous. *Status quo* states behave in an aggressive manner and that led arise the possibility of an arms race (Jervis, 1978). Second scenario arises when offensive and defensive postures are indistinguishable, but the defense has the advantage. In this case, the security dilemma remains significant, though less severe than in the first scenario. Under such conditions, states are better able to enhance their own security without substantially threatening others. As a result, efforts to increase defensive capabilities are less likely to be perceived as aggressive, reducing the risk of escalation and making the environment comparatively more stable (Jervis, 1978). Third scenario occurs when offensive and defensive postures are distinguishable, but the offense retains the advantage. In this case, the security dilemma is relatively limited in intensity, though security concerns do not disappear entirely. The environment is generally more stable because states can differentiate between threatening and non-threatening actions. However, the advantage of offense sustains the potential for future aggression, meaning that despite the lower intensity of the dilemma, underlying tensions and risks of conflict persist. The fourth scenario arises when offensive and defensive postures are clearly distinguishable and the defense holds the advantage. In this case, the security dilemma is minimal or effectively absent,

creating what Jervis describes as a “doubly safe” environment. Because the likelihood of offensive action by other states is low, states can enhance their security with little risk of provoking fear or escalation. Under such conditions, increases in defense spending are less likely to be interpreted as threatening, thereby supporting stability and reducing the prospects of conflict (Jervis, 1978). When it comes to Yemen, the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been maintaining since 2010 in particular. Both offensive (Iran) and defensive (Saudi Arabia) behaviors are not distinguishable. However, since Iran has the advantage of its affiliation to Houthis – the most well-organized and powerful actor in Yemen – in comparison to Saudi Arabia, “security dilemma” is very intense.

BRIEF ANALYSES OF BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia and Iran are two states having ancient histories, large populations, multiple ethnicities, and significant human and natural resources. Having the legitimacy of the Saudi family’s alliance with the Islamic reformer Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, which dates back to 1744, Saudi Arabia views itself as the leader of Sunni Muslims. Moreover, Saudi King proclaims himself as the custodian of two holy mosques, located in Medina and Mecca which is the compulsory destination for each Muslim to visit at least once during life as one of the five pillars of the Islamic belief. Conversely, having the largest percentage of Shia Muslims, Iran views itself as the leader of the Shi’a Muslims while their holy cities Najaf and Karbala and the holiest shrines, located in Iraq, which is a Sunni Arab state. In Shi’a Islam, spiritual authority and political power are separate roles. Najaf and Karbala are sacred in Shi’a Islam because they are the resting places of two highly venerated figures. Cities contain the tomb of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law and the first Imam in Shi’a belief and Husayn ibn Ali, the Prophet’s grandson, who is buried after being martyred in the battle of Karbala (Hylén, 2025). Their legacy and sacrifice are fundamental to Shi’a identity, giving these cities their deep religious importance. While Sunni-Shia sectarian differences undeniably influence the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, however, the core of their rivalry lies in a geopolitical struggle for regional supremacy. Additionally, both states benefit domestically from sustaining external hostilities as this helps legitimize their regimes, divert public attention from internal issues, and preserve political stability at home (Garlick, Havlova, 2020, p. 89).

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran seek to maximize their power and reduce their rival’s power relatively to each other. Saudi Arabia, thus, delegitimizes Iran by portraying the Tehran and Shia as the main threat to regional security, whereas, Iran appeals the Muslim world and Shia population in the region to challenge the legitimacy of Saudi regime (Mohammad Nia, Abdolmajid Seifi, 2015). Although, Saudi Arabia’s political system is based on religion and sectarianism

has always played a key role in Saudi political decision-making, with the Arab uprisings, sectarianism was used more often in its foreign policy. The Yemen case was not an exception among others such as Bahrain, Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia.

Following the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, relations between the two countries began to deteriorate and the conflict between them manifested itself in many regions of the Middle East. For example, the rhetoric of exporting revolution from the Islamic Republic of Iran was seen by Saudi Arabia as an existential threat. Iranian clerics and state officials, particularly Khomeini, made claims that the Saudi family was unfit to guard the sacred sites of Islam, that they were ruling against Islam and that they were corrupt leaders who had turned into Western-dependent hubs of espionage and sedition. These claims helped to turn relations between the two nations into a hostile rivalry (Rubin, 2014, p. 52).

While some brief improvements were achieved in bilateral relations after Khomeini's death, they were not enough to change the hostile nature of the relationship between the two countries. Especially, the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003, which led to the Shia gaining an influential position in Iraq, disrupted the balance of power in the region and intensified the conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia through their proxies. For example, while Saudi Arabia supported Sunni groups in Iraq, Iran supported Shia groups, particularly political parties such as Dava Party led by Nuri al-Maliki. Saudi Arabia often criticized al-Maliki government of acting as an Iranian agent in the region. For instance, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, a prominent newspaper of Saudi Arabia, declared that "Nouri al-Maliki is worse and more dangerous than ISIS and Al-Qaeda" (Symonds, 2014). Similarly, Iran accused Saudi Arabia's engagement on Iraq by expressing Saudi Arabia shows a hostility towards people of Iraq (Dehghan, 2017).

After the 2011 Arab uprisings, the rivalry between the two countries evolved into a darker phase and as the number of conflicts increased between Saudi Arabia and Iran that began to be dubbed the "New Cold War of the Middle East" (Santini, 2017). The cold war between the two countries is less a military confrontation than a struggle to expand their spheres of influence and dominance. In this context, competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran have escalated in Yemen.

As Geneive Abdo clarifies, "the increase in sectarian conflict is primarily the result of the collapse of authoritarian rule and a struggle for political and economic power, and over which interpretation of Islam will influence societies and new leaderships" (Abdo, 2017, p. 50). In this regard, sectarianism, among regimes and their allies in the Sunni elite, has been used to deepen divisions among oppositions to consolidate the support of domestic population against the external threat from Iran (Wehrey, 2014). Nonetheless, as Marcel Serr points out "although the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is often referred to as a struggle between Sunnis and Shi'a, it is their regional aspirations rather than religious one that drive rivalry. Both countries vie to maximize their spheres of influence in the Middle East" (Serr, 2017, p. 5).

THE PLACE OF YEMEN ON THE COMPETITION BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

Yemen holds varying degrees of importance for Saudi Arabia and Iran. For Saudi Arabia, it is important for security reasons as it shares the longest border with the country. For Iran, on the other hand, its importance is less than that of Saudi Arabia. Importance of Yemen for Iran stems from its strategic location, proximity to Saudi Arabia, and to countering the country's Salafist movement. Strategically, Yemen has a critical location, which is next to one of the major oil producers in the world – Saudi Arabia – and a vital waterway linking to the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea and Suez Canal (Serr, 2018). As Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp indicate, Iran and Saudi Arabia have their footprints on every battleground in the Middle East (Chubin, Tripp, 2014). Yemen is one of the locations where proxy wars have been fought most due to Saudi Arabia and Iran's competition (Al Alkim, 2021, p. 394).

The Arab uprisings, which spread from Egypt to Yemen, reshaped the architecture of the regional system and re-divided the regional states into two categories; rival regional powers – Saudi Arabia, Iran – and battleground states – Egypt, Syria, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen (Hinnebusch, 2015). These developments in the region forced the regional players to show a reaction (Haji-Yousefi, 2012). Particularly, when it comes to Yemen, both Saudi Arabia and Iran did pay a close attention since, due the political instability in the country, both Saudi Arabia and Iran struggle to protect their national interests in Yemen through the local actors such as Houthis. Because of the sectarian diversity in the Middle East, during such rivalries, both Saudi Arabia and Iran effectively use sectarian ideology as a tool (Hurd, 2015).

In this context, as the gateway to the Red Sea, Yemen entered a devastating crisis under the influence of the Arab uprisings. While local issues contributed to the crisis, the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia gradually relegated these internal issues to the background, leaving Yemen as a battle ground. Whereas Iran supported the Houthis who attempted to overthrow the regime, Saudi Arabia confronted by supporting the regime. In September 2014, the Houthis captured Sana without resistance and continued their military takeover of Yemeni territory. Hadi resigned in January 2015 and fled to Riyadh on March 25 due to the Houthi push on Aden (Soage, 2018, p. 13). The occurrences started with the internal conflicts dragged the country to a battlefield for regional powers: Saudi Arabia and Iran. The 2014 seizure of the Sana'a by the Shia-affiliated Houthi movement was seen by the Saudi regime – which regarded Iran's ideological expansionism as its primary threat – as part of the broader "Shia Crescent" threat. Following Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad, the Shia's rise to an influential position in another Arab capital has alarmed many Sunni countries, including the Saudis. In this regard, Saudi Arabia led the formation of a military coalition that launched a direct operation to restore the balance of power.

SAUDI ARABIA'S APPROACH TOWARDS YEMEN

Riyadh has always evaluated Yemen as a core national security interest (Cambanis, 2015). Therefore, Saudi Arabia's desires to assert dominance in Yemen dates back much earlier to the Arab uprisings (Gregory, 2011). For instance, in the 1930s, the Saudi Kingdom waged war with the Yemeni Imamate and captured three Yemeni provinces – Jizan, Najran, and Asir – and established a border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Besides that, historically, millions of Yemeni migrants crossed the border to settle down in Saudi Arabia (Feierstein, 2019). After the US' military involvement in Iraq in 2003, a group within the Houthis were radicalized and engaged in massive protests against the US, which is the security provider to the Saudi Arabia in the region. Furthermore, Houthis started a military rebellion against the Saudi ally's Saleh regime and crossed the Saudi border and captured several Shia villages in November 2009. Saudi response was a full-fledged attack, which defeated Houthi forces from the Saudi soils and forced them signing a ceasefire agreement with Riyadh (Rezaei, 2019).

Most importantly, once the wave of Arab uprisings on the end of 2010 arrived in Yemen, the peaceful demonstrations in Yemen's capital against President Ali Abdullah Saleh's administration turned into sectarian riots and it brought Houthis back into the action. The IRGC's (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) Quds Forces – a unit specializing in unconventional warfare and military intelligence operations abroad – seized on the opportunity to engage more decisively in Yemen through the strategy which was already developed in Iraq (Rezaei, 2019) as Iran has to rely on armed non-state actors and irregular warfare (Calabrese, 2020, p. 71). "Especially given Iran's conventional military limitations, the survival and stability of its network of allies and proxies remains a priority – enabling Tehran to project power and to prosecute its struggle with Saudi Arabia well beyond its own borders" (Calabrese, 2020, p. 72). For such reasons, Saudi Arabia's strategy towards the Houthis in Yemen (and towards the Shia in the Middle East in general) has been influenced by the regional threat's perception and the convergence of domestic vulnerabilities.

In the same vein, in the perception of the Saudi ruling family, Iran has represented a strategic and ideological rivalry which challenge the legitimacy of the Saudi family in terms of both national and regional stage (Wehrey, 2014). For instance, toppling Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003 was significant for Saudi Arabia in terms of power equilibrium. In this context, Iraq became a gateway for Iran to enlarge its sphere of influence from Yemen to Lebanon. This line of the sphere of influence provided a possibility to Iran by projecting its power in Yemen through more peripheral conflicts regarding Houthi rebellions in Yemen.

With regard to that, with the Houthis' occupation of Sana'a on September 21, 2014, the military conflict that broke out in Yemen turned into a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Particularly Iran's declarations of support to the Houthis, led Saudi Arabia to react sharply to the Houthi advance, and the proxy war

between the two countries became deeper. Ultimately, the Houthis' takeover of power on February 6, 2015 led to comments that Yemen has fallen into Iran's orbit. At Yemeni Mansour al-Hadi's request, to pull Yemen back from Iran's orbit, Saudi Arabia started a military operation in the region to "protect the administration," which is considered to be an effort to directly prevent Iran's influence in the region. In such an equation, in March 2015 Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia when Houthis were preparing to capture the Aden.

On the other hand, as Khaled Fattah claims, "from the point of view of the Saudi intelligence and security apparatuses, Yemen is the weakest link in the chain of security of the Arabian Peninsula and thus easy prey for Tehran to penetrate and manipulate" (Fattah, 2013). Obviously, al-Qaeda's strongholds in Shabwah, Ma'rib, and Abyan pose serious threats to Saudi Arabia's national security (Osiewicz, 2017). In this manner, the concerns of Saudi Arabia stem from two factors which are politics and religion. Politically, Riyadh's perception is shaped by Iran's influence in the region. Hence, Saudi Arabia views Houthis that – unless stopped – will be Yemeni Hezbollah on the doorsteps of Saudi Arabia. By the same token, many Yemenis try to return to Saudi Arabia after being deported. Due to more than a million refugees seeking asylum in Saudi soil, the migration issue takes a central place on Riyadh's policy towards Yemen.

When it comes to religion factor, al-Qaida's operations from Yemen poses a severe threat to Saudi Arabia (Esfandiary, Tabatabai, 2016) since it is worth to note that Iran's presence in the Middle East is pragmatic as well as ideological. Iran's leaders, as Thannassis Cambanis points out, are theocrats, but they are pragmatic geopolitical worker bees: They have so far backed Sunni Islamists, the Zaidi Houthis in Yemen, and Christians which they do not share their views on religious rule (Cambanis, 2014). In this regard, Saudi Arabia faces the challenge from terrorist infiltration and weapons smuggling from Yemen as terrorist organizations regroup and reorganize in the country. For instance, Al-Hadi asserted that since 2003, 16,000 alleged al-Qaeda militants were expelled from Yemen. However, after the fall of Taliban in 2001 in Afghanistan, many of them were relocated in Yemen (Ulrichsen, 2015, p. 55). Saudi Arabia's 1,800-kilometer border with Yemen shows its vulnerability.

Having managed to flee from home arrest in Yemen and arrived in Saudi Arabia, President Hadi on March 24, 2015 called for urgent support, including military intervention, based on the principle of self-defense in Article 51 of the UN Charter and the collective defense mechanism of the Arab League Charter (Al Arabiya News, 2015). Therefore, Riyadh formed a coalition of ten Sunni Arab states, consisting United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Sudan, and Senegal, and launched a military operation at the end of March 2015 (Riedel, 2017). The coalition's objective was reversing Houthis' expansion, bringing the exiled Hadi the successor of president Ali Abdullah Saleh, back to power.

As, according to both Hadi government and Saudi Arabia, Houthis are Iranian proxy, the war was framed as encountering Iranian influence in Yemen

(Juneau, 2016). In the same vein Gerald Feierstein points out that Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen in March, 2015, was a direct result of threat perception from growing Houthi-Iranian alliance, which poses a threat to Saudi security (Feierstein, 2019). What is more, two years prior to the Saudi military intervention in Yemen, Faysal bin Turki al-Saud, former head of Saudi intelligence, during a conference, was clarifying Saudi Arabia's stance on Yemen by saying that "Saudi Arabia will oppose any and all of Iran's interference and meddling in other countries... especially those of Arab states" (Al-Faisal, 2013). In this context, as Faisal Abualhassan pointed out, Saudi-led coalition was not driven by sectarianism (Abualhassan, 2015). Instead it was driven by geopolitical realities as a part of pragmatism, which is a predominant segment of foreign policy of Saudi Arabia towards Yemen.

IRAN'S APPROACH TOWARDS YEMEN

Contrary to popular conception, Iran chooses its local partners based on more general strategic considerations rather than a theological framework connected to Shi'a religious beliefs (Khalili, 2014). Hence, Iran's choice is based on local actors who oppose the *status quo*, challenge the regional order, and confront the local partners of Iran's regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia. Therefore, instability and presence of dissatisfied actors provide the suitable ground for Iran's intervention. Moreover, Iran attempts to penetrate the states where central authority is weak (Juneau, 2016). In this context, Yemen is a quite suitable ground for Iran. Especially, Houthis provide required potential to meet Iran's need.

Therefore, similar to Saudi Arabia, Iran's desires to have dominance in Yemen, dates back much earlier to Arab uprisings. According to Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Tehran focused on building capacity among the Houthis. It helped build a culture of effective internal administration and management of security. Tehran also welcomed individuals from the Houthis and other Yemeni groups for religious education" (Esfandiary, Tabatabai, 2016, p. 165). For instance, alongside a numerous Zaidi leader, a prominent Saada cleric, Badr Al-Din Al-Houthi, who supported Zaydi revivalism against Wahhabi's influences since the 1970s studied in Iran at the Hawzat of Qom during the years 1994–1997 (Baron, Al-Muslimi, 2016).

Furthermore, since Saudi Arabia's influence on Yemen through the Wahhabi ideology poses a crucial threat perception for Iran, after Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, plenty of Zaydis travelled to Iran in order to study Shia Islam in Qom. Abdul Malik al-Houthi, leader of the Houthis, and his brother Hussein, the late founder of the movement, were among them as well. Such investment by Tehran reflects Iran's influence in the region. For instance, Saudi led-intervention in Yemen, as Eleonora Ardemagni points out, has pushed Houthis more into the Iranian orbit and Najaf and Qom Hawzat condemned the intervention against the Houthis (Ardemagni, 2019).

When the wave of Arab uprisings on the end of 2010 arrived in Yemen, Iran put its strategy of supporting non-state actors into effect to projecting its influence and confronting Saudi Arabia. As a result of it, following the civil war in Yemen, the Houthis improved their know and how by receiving mentoring and technical military training from Hezbollah fighters and the IRGC's Quds Force. According to Ardemagni, Iran provides necessary drones and anti-tank guided weapons to the Houthis. It has also been said Iran has transferred technology to the Houthis to carry out unmanned remote-controlled attacks in the Red Sea (Ardemagni, 2019). Houthi attacks on the Red Sea began in October 2015, targeting coalition and commercial vessels with small arms, RPGs, and naval mines – over 80 of which were later cleared by Saudi authorities. Some claims, like the strike on the Egyptian vessel *Al Mahrousa*, were disputed. These early operations launched a broader maritime campaign that later incorporated remote-controlled explosive boats and anti-ship missiles (Weiss, 2019). Similarly, drone attacks on Saudi Aramco can be assessed within this context. Without comprehensive external support it would not be possible to bypass Saudi defense systems which are counted among top developed security systems produced by the present super power – the US. Therefore, as Mahjoob Zweiri clarifies, “obviously, this rise in power is not merely a result of local support, but also the alleged support of Iran in Yemen. [...] This external support allows the Houthis to become a potential springboard for Iran to use its influence in the Gulf States and the region as a whole” (Zweiri, 2016, p. 5).

In this regard, “after the ousting of Saleh, Tehran expressed support for the Houthis’ cause and celebrated its progress. An Iranian clergyman spoke favorably of the Houthis’ rise as a political organization, championing that they should assume a similar role as the one Hezbollah has in Lebanon” (Cerioli, 2018, p. 307). In the same token, with the following of Houthis’ advance in Yemen, Iranian politicians revealed their intention. For instance, Tehran MP Alireza Zakani, close to former supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stated that Sana is the fourth Arab capital – after Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut – is ruled by Tehran (Nakhoul, 2015).

Although the ideological infrastructure has played a significant role in Iran’s foreign policy since the early years of the revolution, pragmatism has been more effective than ideological understanding so far. For example, despite Khomeini’s reluctant after years of largely inconclusive fighting, Iran changed its stance and agreed to a ceasefire that Iraq had originally proposed earlier in the conflict, under essentially the same conditions as those offered in 1982. The agreement was facilitated by the United Nations and was based on United Nations Security Council Resolution 598, which called for an immediate halt to hostilities and encouraged UN involvement in mediating negotiations between the two sides. Following both countries’ acceptance of the resolution in 1988, the United Nations Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG) was sent to monitor the situation and ensure compliance, including the cessation of fighting and the withdrawal of troops. The ceasefire officially took effect on August 20, 1988 (Peace Research

Center Prague, n.d.). Likewise, although Khomeini had labeled the US the “Great Satan” and Israel the “Little Satan,” he authorized arms purchases from both during the Iran-Iraq war. In 1981, during the initial year of substantial arms sales under Operation Seashell, Israel exported USD 75 million in weaponry, including anti-tank guns and shells. Over the early 1980s, annual sales averaged approximately USD 500 million, encompassing aircraft parts, artillery, and ammunition (Winston, 2024). Regarding the US, instead of formally lifting the embargo, the US officials authorized covert arms sales to Iran beginning in 1981. The final delivery, consisting of anti-tank missiles, occurred in October 1986 (Fields, 2026). “By the time the sales were discovered, more than 1,500 missiles had been shipped to Iran” (PBS, n.d.). In this framework, Iran’s approach to Yemen, with the onset of the Arab uprisings, too can be assessed within this context, meaning although Iran penetrated into Yemen and built ties with Houthis via ideology, nevertheless, its main goal is pragmatic.

CONCLUSION

This article has explained Saudi-Iranian competition within the framework of security dilemma and explains the ways of both regional powers’ strategies towards each other in Yemen. In this context, right after the US military involvement in Iraq in 2003, an opportunity emerged for Shia administrations in the Middle East. Having Iran profited from that opportunity quite effectively and strengthened ties with Houthis in Yemen it has created a national security threat in terms of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh perceives that such a movement can mobilize Shia population not only in its own Eastern province, but also those are in neighbor countries such as Bahrain. In the same vein, when the wave of Arab uprisings arrived in Yemen and when Ali Abdullah Saleh left the power, Saudi concerns were rapidly peaked. Therefore, the internal instability in Yemen, derived by Arab uprisings, caused escalation of Saudi-Iranian competition for power and influence which is driven by geopolitics rather than Sunni-Shia divisions. While Saudi Arabia efforts to keep threats away from its borders by keeping the *status quo* in Yemen, Iran tries to push threats to Saudi borders by challenging the *status quo* in Yemen. For instance, having already keeping oil flow in the Gulf under control through its dominance on the Strait of Hormuz and once gets control over the North of Yemen through its ties to the Houthis, Iran will be able to take energy routes to under its patronage. Hence, Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy towards the region is to protect the *status quo*. The rise of Houthis has threatened the Saudi interests since Saudi allies, Islah and Ali Mohsen, were defeated by Houthis. Therefore, the Saudi intervention in Yemen can be interpreted as Saudi’s efforts to restore the balance of power.

In this context, by diminishing Iran’s influence in Yemen, Riyadh has increased its military spending to ensure its own security, paving the way for military intervention in Yemen. From Iran’s perspective, the war in Yemen has

presented Tehran with a convenient opportunity to shift the balance of power in the region in its favor. Therefore, Iran did not hesitate to support Houthis to increase its relative power in the region *vis-a-vis* Saudi Arabia. In other words, Yemen has become the focal point of a struggle for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran that caused a security dilemma between two regional powers. In this regard, the uprising in Yemen caused an escalation for the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran that can be explained by security dilemma. One of Riyadh's primary concerns in Yemen was that Iran, with its close cooperation with the Houthis, would pose a new threat to Saudi Arabia's security. Thus, Yemen was the region to which Riyadh reacted most strongly. Having a perception of concrete concerns for its national security, deriving from a bordering country, paved the way for Riyadh's military intervention in Yemen in 2015. In this context, the escalated Saudi Iranian competition that was created by Arab uprisings caused a security dilemma that resulted in Saudi Arabia's direct military involvement in Yemen. Furthermore, one can predict that the Saudi-Iranian competition over Yemen will maintain until the next turning point, which will shape the balance of power in the region.

RYWALIZACJA SAUDYJSKO-IRAŃSKA W JEMENIE:
UWARUNKOWANIA I ESKALACJA W LATACH 2010–2015

Streszczenie: Powstania arabskie, które rozpoczęły się pod koniec 2010 roku, zachwiały równowagę sił na Bliskim Wschodzie oraz przyniosły zarówno szanse, jak i obawy dla Arabii Saudyjskiej i Iranu. Niestabilność w Jemenie prowadzi do konfrontacji Rijadu i Teheranu ze względu na znaczenie jego położenia geograficznego, ponieważ wszelkie wydarzenia w Jemenie bezpośrednio wpływają zarówno na Arabię Saudyjską, jak i Iran. Aby ograniczyć wzajemne wpływy w Jemenie, zarówno Rijad, jak i Teheran dążą do uzyskania tam dominacji. Choć działania te realizowane są poprzez lokalnych aktorów w Jemenie, w przypadku ich nieskuteczności Arabia Saudyjska zdecydowała się na bezpośrednie zaangażowanie militarne w 2015 roku. Podczas gdy podejście Arabii Saudyjskiej polega na utrzymaniu *status quo*, Iran z kolei stara się je podważyć. Artykuł próbuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie, w jaki sposób i dlaczego Arabia Saudyjska oraz Iran rywalizują ze sobą w Jemenie w latach 2010–2015 w kontekście dylematu bezpieczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: Arabia Saudyjska; Iran; Jemen; arabskie powstania; wojna zastępcza; geopolityka; dylemat bezpieczeństwa

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