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## *The Iranian-Saudi Rivalry: Prolonging the War in Yemen. External Actors, Securitisation, Sectarianisation, and Digital Media.*

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# The Iranian-Saudi Rivalry: Prolonging the War in Yemen

*External Actors, Securitisation, Sectarianisation, and Digital Media*

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# Abstract
## The Iranian-Saudi Rivalry: Prolonging the War in Yemen
*External Actors, Securitisation, Sectarianisation, and Digital Media*

Despite the scale of the conflict in Yemen and the influence of external actors, few studies to date have analysed the nature, impact, and scope of their media campaigns surrounding the war. Across digital media, especially on online news platforms and social media, Iran and Saudi Arabia have exhibited a range of behaviours, in attempts to frame their involvement in the conflict. Thus, this thesis addresses the following research question: *How have Saudi Arabia and Iran used digital propaganda to legitimise and frame their involvement in Yemen to international audiences?*

This is the first study to examine the impact of these two competing propaganda networks on the Yemen War. In doing so, it traces Iranian and Saudi securitisation narratives across the conflict, testing their success in gaining the support of elite and non-elite actors in the international arena. It also shows the ways in which these narratives have aided Iran and Saudi Arabia in their struggle for supremacy in the region. The thesis develops an innovative approach to securitisation theory. It also incorporates critical discourse analysis and visual analysis to explore how Tehran and Riyadh have used digital media as part of their regional competition.

Using evidence from the most intense periods of fighting in Yemen and tension between the two actors between 2015 and 2021, the thesis show that Saudi Arabia successfully securitised their intervention in Yemen. Ironically, however, this worked to benefit Tehran far more than it did Riyadh. Several episodes of significance for the Saudi-Iranian relationship, and for the war in Yemen, are analysed, including: Operation Decisive Storm in 2015, The Riyadh Conference in 2017, instances of prominent Saudi airstrikes in 2017-18, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and the Houthi 'Operation Victory from God' in 2019. Through discursive and visual analysis, the thesis explores the ways in which the representation of these events had an impact on framing the conflict, to the detriment of the people of Yemen. Securitisation narratives, dispersed across the Internet, regularly had a sectarian tone. These narratives fanned the flames of war, preventing any room for a meaningful prospect for peace. They also exacerbated the humanitarian situation, a dynamic properly detailed in the thesis' conclusion.

Such narratives created a deeply polarising environment, in which extraordinary measures were justified. Through visual analysis, critical discourse tracing, and analysis of dynamics specific to the world of digital media, this thesis traces this process, providing a holistic analysis of the impact of the Iranian-Saudi rivalry on the war in Yemen. The thesis offers new methodological, theoretical, and empirical insights, emphasizing the importance of digital narrative warfare as a worthwhile and insightful field of study.

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## Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| API | Application Programming Interface |
| AQAP | Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula |
| BBC | British Broadcasting Corporation |
| CDA | Critical Discourse Analysis |
| CNN | Cable News Network |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus Disease 2019 |
| CS | Copenhagen School |
| DT | Discourse Tracing |
| EU | European Union |
| FBI | Federal Bureau of Investigation |
| FTO | Foreign Terrorist Organisation |
| GCC | Gulf Cooperation Council |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| HRW | Human Rights Watch |
| IRGC | Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps |
| IRIB | Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting |
| IUVM | The International Union of Virtual Media |
| JCPOA | Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action |
| MSF | Médecins Sans Frontières |
| MSNBC | Microsoft and the National Broadcasting Company |
| NDC | National Dialogue Conference |

| | |
|---|---|
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| NMECW | New Middle East Cold War |
| OCHA | Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| ODS | Operation Decisive Storm |
| ST | Securitisation Theory |
| STC | Southern Transitional Council |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| UK | United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland |
| UN | United Nations |
| US | United States of America |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |
| USD | United States Dollars |
| VDT | Visual Discourse Tracing |
| WMD | Weapons of Mass Destruction |

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## Statement of Copyright

## Declaration

# Introduction
## *Iran and Saudi Arabia: Polarity, Propaganda, and a Prolonged Conflict*

### *Iran and Saudi Arabia: A Balanced Approach*

This thesis portrays both Riyadh and Tehran as distorters of truth, who have misrepresented the war in Yemen as part of their struggle for regional supremacy. Not only have they lied, but they told selective truths, and omitted crucial parts of the story. Furthermore, they have over-emphasised relationships to fabricated levels of threat. The claim of this thesis is forceful, in arguing that information warfare has been key in justifying extraordinary measures to elite international audiences, and exacerbating conflict and insecurity in Yemen. Riyadh has gained prominent support from the United States (US), essential to its war effort. Iran has gradually solidified its reciprocal relationship with the Houthis and dragged Saudi Arabia deeper into the conflict. Through focusing on reciprocal discursive processes between state leaders, other state leaders, and leaders of non-state actors like the Houthis, this thesis examines specific and new processes of securitisation. 'Securitisation' here refers to the artificial construction of threat through discourse. The thesis details the ways in which Iran and Saudi Arabia have used discourse, often sectarian in nature, to instrumentalise the conflict as a tool of power politics in their quest for international support and regional hegemony.

The world of digital media has provided multiple plains on which Tehran and Riyadh have been able to fight their digital battle. As Helal Aljamra wrote in 2018, in an article entitled *Propaganda as "Cover" for Unpunished War Crimes*: "[t]he conflicting parties… each rely

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on the media as a mechanism for manipulation of facts and justification for their actions.

Even though each is perpetrating war crimes, each holds the other responsible for the crime

relying on falsehood and propaganda" (Aljamra, 2018).

As with all things, social media has created an emotional, distorted, and polarised

conversation. The two sides focus on the negatives of their antagonist and fail to take any

accountability of their own actions. This, in turn, has made critical, truth-seeking researchers

open to allegations of bias and partisanship. On social media, there is little room for nuance –

and Yemen is one of the conflicts in which, to note the old adage, truth has been the first

casualty of war. In an attempt to resolve this, this thesis tells several stories about how

propaganda has had a profound and negative impact on the conflict in Yemen. As Aljamra

goes on to write:

They repeat fallacies in a desperate attempt to convince the public of the legitimacy of the
war – whether it is the Saudi-Emirati alliance through the justification for its intervention in
Yemen "at the request of the legitimate government," or the Houthis who claim they are
defending "Yemen sovereignty" (Aljamra, 2018).

In the face of such a dire and tense regional quagmire, it is very easy to attribute bias to

researchers, with the temptation to pigeonhole thinkers in such a polarised digital

environment. To unlock the truth of this crisis, balance is the researcher's only viable tool.

This thesis looks at what was said, its hold on real-world events, and the impact it has had on

exacerbating the conflict or otherwise. Bertrand Russell summarised this ethos perfectly,

when giving advice to future generations of academics. He opined:

When you are studying any matter or considering any philosophy, ask yourself only what are
the facts and what is the truth that the facts bare out. Never let yourself be diverted either by

what you wish to believe, or by what you think would have beneficent social effects if it were believed. Look only, and solely, at what are the facts (Open Culture, 2018).

This thesis encourages others not only to point out disinformation, but to unpack the real-world effects of disinformation. No place has such malign distortion been more damaging than the war in Yemen – this era's worst humanitarian crisis.

*Precursors to War - 2011-2015*

Many Yemenis, as well as international scholars such as Phillips (2011), had predicted the downfall of President Ali Abdullah Saleh prior to the Arab Spring reaching Sana'a. By 2011, the regime was facing a plethora of potentially existential crises. As Helen Lackner put it: "oil production fell and exports were reduced"; "there was (and continues to be) a worsening water crisis"; "the six Huthi wars... were also very damaging to the regime"; "the anger and bitterness of southerners had been a constant"; and "poverty was increasing rapidly" (2016, 16-17). By 2011, President Saleh had ruled for 33 years, through patrimonialism, authoritarianism, and polices of divide and rule. With the aid of Saudi Arabia, he had exercised significant brutality in suppressing the Houthis; then, a militant organisation based in Yemen's northern highlands, between 2004-2010. Far from destroying the movement, it had the counter-intuitive effect of emboldening them, creating a generation of battle-hardened men united against his regime. Such was the complexity and difficulty of Saleh's attempts to hold onto power, facing opposition from multiple angles, he often compared it to "dancing on the heads of snakes" (Clark, 2010).

In February 2011, these disparate movements united, inspired by events in North Africa during the Arab Spring. Cutting across tribal and sectarian divisions, people from across Yemen came together to call for the removal of Saleh. Saleh's suppression of the movement, as with many of his North African counterparts, quickly turned violent. On the 18th of March 2011, known as Yemen's "Friday of Dignity", Saleh's snipers shot dead 50 civilians. An attempt was made at assassinating him in retaliation. On the 3rd of June, a bomb killed 13 people, injuring many others, in his mosque. However, he survived, travelling to Saudi Arabia for medical support before returning to Sana'a in September.

The instability and violence resulted in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative, which was signed in November 2011. It included not only the signatures of the Gulf monarchies with Saudi Arabia at the helm, but also of the European Union (EU), and the US. It paved the way for "what many hoped would be Yemen's transition towards a peaceful and democratic future" (Lackner, 2016, 8). Controversially, it granted Saleh immunity, as well as many of his associates – replacing them with a 'government of national unity'. His former vice-president, Abdu Rabbuh Mansour Hadi stood in a single-candidate election in February 2012 and became president. The GCC Initiative paved the way for what would become the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013, a process apparently designed to create a new peaceful, federalised, constitutional basis for Yemen. One of its conclusions in January 2014 was to extend Hadi's tenure beyond the previously agreed 2-year term. This move angered the Houthis and other minority groups, who viewed him as a stooge of Saudi Arabia and the West (Riedel, 2017). Hadi had certainly endeared himself to Riyadh and Washington, who

viewed him as a leader pliant to their interests surrounding security, oil, gas, and terrorism. As regards the US, he had allowed them to conduct a comprehensive counterterrorism effort across the southern and central regions of Yemen (Hartig and Hathaway, 2022).

Following months of protests and violence in the northern highlands, the Houthis began to cause disruption in Sana'a on the 18th of August 2014. By the 16th of September, this had erupted into full-scale fighting and by the 21st they had taken control of the capital. Throughout the coming months, they set about dismantling Hadi's institutions, resulting in his 'resignation' on the 22nd of January 2015. On the 6th of February, the Houthis declared the establishment of their own ruling council, taking full control of Sana'a. From this time onwards, Iranian officials, including Qasem Soleimani, were publicly declaring their support for the Houthis, goading the Saudis and framing Houthi rule as evidence of growing Iranian influence (Badran, 2015; Juneau, 2016, 655). Hadi was placed under house arrest but fled to Aden on the 21st of February, where he rescinded his resignation. However, "a Houthi advance forced Hadi to flee Aden for exile in Saudi Arabia" (Global Conflict Tracker, 2023). For the next 7 years, he would rule in exile. In March 2014, the Houthis raided the NDC Secretariat. Many regard this as clear evidence of the failure of the peace process (Elayah et al., 2020, 432).

Citing the legal justification of 'intervention by invitation' (Ruys and Ferro, 2016), a Saudi-led coalition launched Operation Decisive Storm (ODS) on the 26th of March 2015. ODS amounted to both a comprehensive bombing campaign and the blockading of Yemeni ports

and airports. Its stated aims were to eliminate the Houthis and restore what the Saudis called

the "legitimate government" of Yemen (Al-Arabiya, 2015a). It portrayed the Houthis as a

dangerous radical group and an Iranian proxy. They also spoke of protecting the people of

Yemen and protecting Saudi Arabia's border. Then Saudi Ambassador to the United States,

Adel al-Jubeir, announced the intervention in Washington, the day prior, on the 25th of

March. Then US National Security Council Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan echoed his

lines of justification, stating:

The United States strongly condemns ongoing military actions taken by the Houthis against
the elected government of Yemen… The United States coordinates closely with Saudi Arabia
and our GCC partners on issues related to their security and our shared interests. In support of
GCC actions to defend against Houthi violence, President Obama has authorized the
provision of logical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations (Meehan, 2015).

From the very beginning, the US was the most important backer of the Saudi-led coalition,

without which its bombing campaign would have struggled to have left the ground. This

relationship only grew stronger under President Donald Trump, who adopted the Saudi

narrative so totally, blaming the conflict entirely on Iranian expansionism, that he essentially

became a Saudi sectarian actor (Ahmadian, 2018). Counter-intuitively, the discourse of 'the

Houthis are an Iranian proxy' came closer to reality the more it was used. Both the Houthis

and Iran became increasingly cognisant of the fact that this narrative had the potential to

serve their interests, undermining Saudi Arabia in the process. To some degree, the narrative

became a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Juneau, 2016; Clausen, 2022), even though the Houthis

managed to retain their own agency.

This thesis is motivated by the black hole that exists where one would expect there to be research into the war in Yemen. For over eight years, a costly war has raged in what the Romans first called Arabia Felix. With a few notable exceptions, there has been little coverage of this seismic world event. In particular, there has been little analysis of how the conflict has been instrumentalised and justified by Iranian and Saudi media. Here, the absence of meaningful analytical understanding has helped to facilitate the internationalisation of false narratives.

Throughout this period, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been using digital media to propagandise about the conflict. Through focusing on the positive sides of "us" and the negative sides of "them", the two have securitised each other, framing their opponents as sectarian antagonists, representing existential threats to Yemen and the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia have done so, largely through politicising sectarian identity. They have instrumentalised concepts of 'sect' to construct grand narratives, framing the conflict to fit their purposes. In turn, these discourses have been co-opted by their allies (state and non-state governmental elites), who have adopted them to frame their own involvement in a positive light. This thesis refers to this process as 'sectarianisation' – instrumentally constructing sect-coded discourses as a means of securitising the enemy as an existential threat, uniting against them, justifying extraordinary measures taken against them, and obscuring more cynical motivations for involvement in the conflict. This thesis understands 'sectarianisation' as a specific, nuanced example of 'securitisation'. Innovatively, these

specific securitisation narratives, instrumentalising the Yemen conflict to gain international support, are new and thus far under-researched areas of the Iranian-Saudi rivalry. In this way, the thesis makes a unique contribution to knowledge.

For Saudi Arabia, the primary target has been the US – without which their air campaign would have found it difficult to conduct its mission. The thesis argues that by the end of Trump's tenure, the White House's discourse was essentially reciprocating and 'parroting' the sectarian, anti-Iranian narrative of the Al Saud. Iran has attempted to alienate and provoke Saudi Arabia's leadership directly, whilst also targeting regional allies, sympathetic Western audiences, and various leaders of its extended Axis of Resistance. Across their respective media networks, English-language formats are by far the most popular and most visited platforms. As such, the thesis focuses on English language sources as international tools of Iranian and Saudi securitisation.

The penultimate chapter of this thesis details the ways in which the Houthi leadership eventually adopted many Iranian narratives, taking the blame for attacks on Saudi Arabia that were most likely conducted by Tehran. Iran's narratives also frustrated, provoked, and angered Saudi Arabia, dragging it deeper into the conflict. In terms of international reciprocity, however, Iran's narratives largely fell on death ears, viewed as a pariah by many state leaders.

Largely, both discourses have taken the form of alienating the "other". A shorthand for this process, sectarian entrepreneurialism, was coined by Toby Matthiesen. He defines sectarian entrepreneurs as those "whose political, social, and economic standing depends on the skilful

manipulation of sectarian boundaries and who profit if these boundaries become the defining markers of a particular segment of society" (Matthiesen, 2013, 127). Through various linguistic and visual forms of digital discourse, the two have used the Internet as a method of securitisation, justifying and artificially framing their involvement in Yemen. Here, another black hole exists, as "there has been virtually no research on securitisation on the Internet" (Gaufman, 2014). Taken together, this thesis makes a unique contribution to knowledge, analysing the ways in which Tehran and Riyadh have used digital media to legitimise and frame their involvement in Yemen through sectarianisation and forms of 'othering' propaganda. Sectarianisation is defined as the elite use of sectarian narratives for the advancement of cynical political ambitions.

As well as inflaming tensions between Tehran and Riyadh, these processes have increased hostility and insecurity within Yemen itself. The physical involvement of external actors in the country has had a significant impact on the worsening humanitarian situation within the country. As Peter Salisbury aptly wrote: "the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional influence is exacerbating a number of existing disputes in the region… including Yemen" (2015, 1).

Regarding Yemen, this thesis examines the propaganda emanating from both sides across digital media platforms, focusing on the period 2015 to January 2021. Since 2021, there have been tentative steps towards peace, with airstrikes decreasing and more prolonged periods of ceasefire. Focusing on 2015-2021 is done in order to trace the process of justifying extraordinary measures, mostly consisting of violence. This period also constitutes a time of

heightened tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, facilitating a thorough analysis of this dynamic. Alexandra Siegel's (2015, 1) work has proved instrumental in choosing case studies around particular violent rupture points, as these correlate with the highest spikes in sectarian rhetoric across Middle Eastern media. Analysis of this period focuses on answering the following central research question:

### *Core Research Question:*

*How have Saudi Arabia and Iran used digital propaganda to legitimise and artificially frame their involvement in Yemen to international audiences?*

The thesis also speaks to three sub-questions:

### Research Sub-Questions:

*What effect have Saudi and Iranian propaganda narratives had on the Yemen conflict?*

*How has sectarianisation been used as a tool of securitisation by Iranian and Saudi elites?*

*How do digital images, distributed via social media, contribute to the securitisation process?*

The thesis argues that these processes have heightened tension, prolonged conflict, and exacerbated the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Constructing a new approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), incorporating Discourse Tracing (DT), and advancing a new methodology called Visual Discourse Tracing (VDT), this thesis demonstrates the ways in which language has constructed false realities, pushing the narrow agendas of Iranian and Saudi state elites. DT and VDT follow similar patterns, asking the researcher to collect representative samples of linguistic and visual discourse respectively, before undergoing several steps of analysis. They encourage specific attention to be paid to the actualities of the discourse, before attempting to understand the production, distribution, and consumption of the content, and applying it to wider contextual realities and social practices.

Innovatively, this thesis advances several further stages to understanding the visual. Before attempting to conceptualise the contextual realities surrounding visual discourse, it is essential to identify and understand the specificity of prominent and recurring frames. The specific, nuanced, nature of prevalent identities also have to be sensitively unpacked before any attempt is made to understand real-world context. Furthermore, this thesis encourages researchers to consider what is not shown in particular images – consideration of omission is a useful tool in identifying biases, propaganda, and the way in which states conceal their own faults. Visuality is conceptualised as immediate, circulable (easily spread), and often unambiguous. The visual has been vastly undertheorized in international relations and the social sciences more broadly. This thesis seeks not only to remedy this, but to offer a concise, transferable methodological approach to its study.

Similarly, these critical perspectives are aptly suited to unpicking the complex narratives that are pushed by Iran and Saudi Arabia, in their attempts to garner favour, support, and legitimisation from state elites and, in the case of Iran, from leaders of non-state actors like the Houthis. Primarily concerned with power, these forms of discourse tracing attempt to reveal the nature, intentionality, and function of these discourses. Furthermore, as they focus on chronological process, they detail the nuance behind the development of these stories, the involvement and reciprocity of their audiences, their connection to events on the ground, and their actual effect on policy. It is hoped that this approach to linguistic and visual discourse can be writ large, and applied to other case studies in future, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

State agendas have become securitised, legitimising extraordinary foreign policy. Saudi Arabia, whilst relatively successful in legitimising its campaign of bombing and blockading to the US, has suffered significant financial and reputational costs as a result of their prolonged engagement. Furthermore, some have argued that it was Riyadh's over-exaggeration of the Iranian threat that encouraged Tehran to increase their support for the Houthi movement (Juneau, 2016; Johnsen, 2021; Clausen, 2022).

This thesis will examine how Saudi Arabia and Iran have used digital media as a vehicle for their processes of securitisation, to legitimise their involvement, and gain capital from exaggerating the other's involvement, in Yemen. They have harnessed the potentials of these new technologies, having witnessed their transformative impact during the Arab uprisings. By developing an innovative approach towards securitisation theory (ST), this thesis explores

how social media and news websites have been weaponized by elites as part of a wider regional struggle that undermines the emancipatory potential previously associated with the Internet and social media across the Middle East.

Thinkers have identified social media infiltration in the Middle East (Siegel, 2015; Jones, 2019), but have not yet contextualised its use theoretically. This thesis argues that Iran and Saudi Arabia use digital methods as tools of securitisation and sectarianisation, to justify extraordinary behaviour in Yemen to particular audiences. Furthermore, they have utilised these methods to alienate the other, gaining political capital in the regional struggle for power. The thesis makes a unique contribution to the theoretical literature, shifting the focus from elite-domestic securitisation to state elite-state/non state actor elite considerations. It focuses on the international face of Iranian and Saudi propaganda, and as such it focuses on English-language content. The widespread use of English-language news websites and social media accounts confirms the importance Tehran and Riyadh place on external processes of securitisation within the New Middle East Cold War (NMECW).

The thesis devises an innovative model of reciprocal elite securitisation, focusing on securitisation processes that occur between state leaders and/or leaders of prominent non-state governmental groups like the Houthis. Previously, securitisation theorists have considered the speech act to be a case of an elite "convincing" a non-elite audience, be it a group or individual. So, when the discourse is reciprocated, for instance, this is a case of the audience being manipulated into a belief. This understanding does not translate to international elite-elite processes. ST analyses how accepted narratives create "existential

threats, emergency action and effects on interunit relations by breaking free of rules" (Buzan et al., 1998, 26). Traditional theorists (Wæver, 1989; Buzan, et al., 1998) understand this process as transactional – elites speak; audiences accept. In a fractured, increasingly globalised region and world, Middle Eastern powers are engaged in a more complex process, having now to legitimise their efforts to domestic, regional, global, and international elite audiences. Elites certainly *can* be convinced, but it is more often the case that elite audiences simply *artificially co-opt* the discourse, as a means of justifying their own foreign policy. This is especially relevant for understanding the way in which the Houthis came to assimilate with many of the key lines of Iranian securitisation as the conflict developed, as did Trump with the Saudis. Securitisation has not been previously understood in this way. In this sense, the thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge.

Furthermore, securitisation here is often about an issue being framed in such a way that it suspends the norms of day-to-day politics. Extraordinary behaviour becomes justified against an existential threat that is said to constitute an existential threat to the state. It removes the issue from normative political debate and turns it into one of undisputed national importance. Against such threats, all manner of measures can be justified, including airstrikes on civilian infrastructure.

On social media, audiences have become active in the securitisation process. This is a notable shift, as "the ability of audiences to engage actively in the process is nearly non-existent within securitization theory" (Côté, 2016). Digital media is of unique value here as "the blogosphere gives an opportunity to assess the audience's reaction in real-time" (Gaufman,

2014), mapping the inter-relational process by which issues are securitised. Whilst traditionalists saw securitisation as linear, digital media shows a more circular process, involving reciprocal meaning-making processes. The "audience" is no longer a passive legitimiser, but an active part of securitisation. This thesis therefore aims to shed light on social media's role in challenging conventional understandings of securitisation: it reimagines power relations and portrays the process not as an isolated speech (or visual) act, but as a "(pragmatic) practice… including the context… and the power that both speaker and listener bring" (Balzacq, 2005).

Power relations are central to this thesis. Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model argues that powerful elites use the media as a tool of narrative warfare, to manipulate information, and secure the consent of audiences. This will be integrated with ST to provide a structural framework for analysing the media itself, as well as adopting a critical focus on state-society relations and power, pivotal to understanding contemporary dynamics in the Middle East. Siegel (2015) showed that Saudi Arabia and Iran have infiltrated social media to gain the consent of audiences for their involvement in conflicts – applying Herman and Chomsky's ontological approach will conceptualise the power-dynamics behind this process.

A contextual, causal analysis will be developed through Discourse Tracing (DT) (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009) and Visual Discourse Tracing (VDT). Methods critical of power, they evaluate discourse at micro, meso, and macro levels – focusing on the speech act, or visual act, itself; the identities, ideologies, and contexts that frame them, and the policies they

inform. Rather than an ethnography, one could call this an "automatography" (Jones, 2019) –
deploying a holistic method to understand the mechanisms that cause successful
securitisation across digital media platforms.

These methods will facilitate understanding of this geopolitical struggle, and its role in
exacerbating the war in Yemen. Methodologically, the thesis will provide an innovative,
transferable model for globally analysing state manipulation of digital media.

*Justifying the case studies*

As stated, Saudi Arabia and Iran have both prominently used the English language as a tool
of international securitisation. The thesis focuses on the development of the securitisation
narrative between Riyadh and Washington, as the US constituted Saudi Arabia's most
financially, politically, and militarily significant backer for their intervention. Whilst Saudi
Arabia did not get prior approval from the United Nations (UN), the support of the US
ensured that they were able to continue with their conflict for the next 8 years. There were of
course other Western allies, such as the United Kingdom (UK) and France, but the US
trumped them all when it came to the scale and span of its support.

Analysis focuses specifically on events from the beginning of the intervention in 2015, up
until 2021. The relationship between Riyadh and Donald Trump is examined, as it
demonstrates the development of a deeply successful securitisation narrative. The way in
which he 'parroted' Saudi narratives surrounding the war meant that he became a vital part of

Riyadh's sect-coded securitisation narrative. As Ahmadian put it - "Obama's balancing policy distanced the US from sectarian rhetoric and its effects on the ground, Trump's anti-Iran policy risk[ed] making Washington a sectarian actor" (2018, 143). When Saudi Arabia faced international condemnation for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October of 2018, Trump was one of the few to continue to echo Saudi disinformation. It is telling that one of Trump's final acts in office was to label the Houthis a foreign terrorist organisation in 2021. Also, the years 2015-2021 mark the most intense period of the conflict, after which there have been tentative movements towards peace, compromise, and consolidation.

From the other side of the digital battlefield, as Brooking and Kianpour (2020) have argued, Iran have consistently tried to cast as wide a net as possible. The most popular versions of many of their state-controlled media outlets are the English-language versions – Ayatollah Khamenei even has his own English-language Twitter account. In 2015, evidence of their involvement with the Houthis was scant; but, by 2021, the Houthis had become partially integrated into the wider Axis of Resistance. The way in which Iran used the English-language to publicly exaggerate its influence, provoking Saudi Arabia and its allies, grew in vociferousness as their relationship with the Houthis deepened. Through visuality and the English language, they created a prominent, unnerving counter-narrative. Through this, they sought to increase international condemnation of Saudi Arabia, develop relations with the Houthis, and divert attention away from its own poor record of human rights abuses.

*Chapter One:* The theoretical framework of the study is defined. This chapter plays the crucial role of framing the entire study. Theoretically, the thesis innovates around notions of ST, updating some of the more tired principles, establishing an approach suitable for the contemporary case study. Securitisation is understood as a complex, context-specific, reciprocal *process* as opposed to a simple illocutionary speech act. The audience is ascribed an active role, and functional actors such as the media are heightened to the status of *propaganda agents*, crucial to state securitisation processes in the Middle East. The preference for discourses that predominate around "othering" the enemy, and their enduring quality, are framed within the notion of ontological security – identity is regularly defined in opposition to other identities. Lastly, the chapter adapts ST to fit the study of the contemporary Middle East, defining "extraordinary measures", ontological security, and beginning to discuss the specificity of sectarian identity as a tool of securitisation.

*Chapter Two:* Sectarianisation is advanced as a key conceptual tool for understanding Iranian and Saudi propaganda, justifying, and framing their involvement in Yemen. It suggests that researchers drop the terms "sectarianism", due to the term denoting some troubling ideological assumptions, including the idea that "sect" can be "used as an all-purpose explainer for the region or as an example of the nefarious machinations of Orientalists" (Haddad, 2020, 15). There are many faces to 'sectarian identity'. Sectarianisation is put forward as the most relevant term for the purposes of this thesis, referring to the politicisation of sectarian identity by elite state actors. Alienating and Unifying sectarianisation narratives

are defined, demonstrating that whilst the two have distinctive features, they often work together in a pattern of mutually reinforcement. The chapter also innovatively portrays the importance of digital media as a weapon in Iranian and Saudi arsenals of digital warfare, and how they use variations on sectarian identities to appeal to international audiences.

*Chapter Three:* As well as outlining the methodological motivations behind this study, this chapter provides a systematic method for the following research. The ontological position of CDA, as well as its phenomenological research agenda, play key roles in the thesis' argument. Viewing discourse primarily as a constructed reality, CDA aims to unpick the power-relations hidden within language. However, the discipline has yet to be sufficiently applied to the digital arena, in which state actors have accelerated their manipulation. The chapter draws on lessons from mediatisation theory to update discourse analysis for contemporary analysis. A further problem is the study of visuality, which has been similarly ignored. This chapter addresses the notable gap in the literature here, adapting Wang's (2014) method for visual analysis to construct a methodology suitable for the study of discourse surrounding the war in Yemen. The penultimate section focuses on the vagueness of CDA. To remedy this, LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) highly structured approach of DT is defended as the most suitable methodological approach. The thesis' model of VDT is also outlined. Finally, the wide variety of sources are detailed, and a method of data collection outlined.

*Chapter Four:* This chapter focuses on the wider context of the Iranian-Saudi relationship, providing a historiography dating primarily from the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Pre-revolution

events are briefly detailed to show that relations between the two actors have not always been antagonistic generally, nor in terms of Yemen specifically. Post-revolution, key ideas are drawn out in order to contextualise the findings of the thesis. These are categorised into: "The United States", "Regime Type", and "Leadership of the Muslim World". The contention of this chapter is that antagonisms surrounding these issues continue to dictate the rivalry and shape the discourse today. They can be observed in the contemporary war of words over Yemen.

*Chapter Five:* This chapter analyses the Iranian-Saudi relationship within the context of Yemen, prior to the Saudi-led intervention in 2015. It does so, through focusing, respectively, on Houthi, Saudi, and Iranian involvement in Arabia Felix. The analysis of each actor's involvement is split into pre-2011 and post-2011 sections. 2011 is significant due to the Yemeni Uprising, and the seismic changes this brought to the country; as well as the roles played by Tehran and Riyadh in its subsequent trajectory. The chapter contributes to knowledge by offering evidence to suggest that the "over-exaggeration of Iranian involvement" is a key narrative for understanding the trajectory of the entire conflict, and its role within the regional struggle for power.

*Chapter Six:* This chapter traces the discourse surrounding the commencement of Operation Decisive Storm (ODS) on 25th March 2015, which marked the beginning of the Saudi-led intervention. It focuses on Saudi narratives of securitisation, defined as 'over exaggerating Iranian involvement', 'protecting the legitimate government', 'defending Saudi Arabia's

border', 'protecting the people of Yemen', and 'the Houthis are radicals/extremists'. Each narrative is analysed in turn, assessing the effectiveness of each as a tool of international securitisation. They are also analysed through the lens of events on the ground, and counter-narratives suggesting different Saudi priorities. The chapter provides the thesis' first thorough analysis of Saudi discursive justifications and motivations for ODS.

*Chapter Seven:* This chapter conducts analysis of Iranian state narratives, throughout the first year of the Saudi-led intervention in 2015. A thematic analysis is conducted of speeches and Tweets from Khamenei and 23 articles from the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting's Press TV platform. This provides a holistic characterisation of the Islamic Republic's propaganda regarding the war in Yemen. Fundamentally, it was used as an opportunity to undermine Saudi Arabia, increase Riyadh's sense of insecurity, and spread the narrative of anti-Western Resistance. Tehran invested considerable effort undermining Saudi Arabia's stated reasons for intervening in Yemen and played a significant role in creating a toxic digital environment, increasing insecurity, and contributing to the prolongation of the conflict in Yemen.

*Chapter Eight:* Here, the focus of the thesis jumps to two years into the conflict. Focusing on events from 2017-2018, this chapter details the acceleration of discursive animosity from Saudi Arabia and their core ally in Washington. Whilst 2016 was a year of intense conflict, there were not prominent changes in Iran's limited relationship with the Houthis. By 2017, there were significant increases in Tehran's support for the rebel group. Furthermore, in

2016, President of the United States of America Barack Obama showed a degree of restraint in his discourse around Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, whilst continuing to pursue a nuclear deal with Iran. By 2017, the US had doubled down on its support for Riyadh under US President Donald Trump. As the thesis is primarily concerned with external actors, jumping to this period of heightened animosity between the rival actors is justified. Specifically, the chapter details the Saudi process of international securitisation, through an analysis of Donald Trump's discourse and behaviour at the Riyadh Conference, and Saudi media surrounding the event. Donald Trump was not simply a receptive audience, but was behaving as a Saudi sectarian actor, parroting their narratives, and adopting a position amounting to reciprocal positionality. The key Saudi frames, outlined during ODS, were now being used to justify US support for the war in Yemen and to legitimise arms sales to Riyadh. These same frames were present within Saudi visual propaganda.

*Chapter Nine:* This chapter focuses on Iranian visual propaganda, dating from the period 2017-2018. The International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM) is a nefarious, covert network of websites and social media accounts, many of which have now been removed from the Internet by US intelligence services. A lone account continues to exist on Twitter, IUVM Pixel EN. 53 of its images were collated, which directly referenced the war in Yemen. Using the software provided by "waybackmachine.com", it has been possible to backdate the images shared by this account, proving their connection to the wider Iranian propaganda network, as well as getting closer to an understanding of their origination date. As with everything in social media studies, attribution is a difficult and imprecise process. That being

said, these images provide compelling insight into the development of Iranian discourse around Yemen. Ironically, as Iran began to increase their support for the Houthis, they spent little time praising the rebel group. The images centre around othering, alienating, sectarian, frames. The most popular frames analysed in this chapter are: "Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (Mohammed bin Salman) and King Salman", "US and Weapons Sales", "Israel and Anti-Semitism", and "War Crimes and Dead and Dying Children". This chapter provides a particularly innovative contribution to knowledge, providing researchers with insight into a little understood arm of the Iranian propaganda nexus.

*Chapter Ten:* This chapter analyses the Houthi military campaign, 'Operation Victory from God'', which ran from August-September 2019. The operation marked a period of intense Houthi propaganda, accompanying their victories over Riyadh, in an attempt to further humiliate the Kingdom and increase their threat perception. Analysis 'proving' that the "Houthis are an Iranian proxy narrative" became, in part at least, a self-fulfilling prophecy (Juneau, 2016; Clausen, 2022). Whilst the Houthis retained their autonomy, it pragmatically integrated itself within the Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus, sharing verbatim articles from Iran's Press TV and Hezbollah's *Al-Manar*. They began to understand that association with Iran increased international threat perception, providing them with a stronger hand in any future peace negotiations. The chapter focuses predominantly on the Houthis claiming responsibility for the attacks on the Saudi Abqaiq-Khurais oil facilities, despite significant evidence that Iran was behind the attack; and the Houthi victory over the Saudi-led coalition on 28th September 2019. The former example shows the Houthi's willingness to protect

Tehran, whilst advancing its own interests within the conflict. The latter is demonstrative of the Houthi tactic of humiliating the Saudis, and their use of visual propaganda. In summary, the chapter argues that the conflict gradually pushed the Houthis closer to Iran - precisely what the Saudi-led coalition had hoped to avoid.

*Chapter Eleven:* The final analytical chapter focuses on Saudi-US discourse surrounding events dating from 2018 leading up to early 2021, ending with Trump leaving office. The chapter traces the final steps of Saudi-US discursive reciprocity over Yemen, completing the process of legitimisation. Trump's words and actions served the Al-Saud perfectly throughout this period. To demonstrate this reciprocal positionality, a suitable number of articles from the Saudi-owned *Arab News* have been analysed. Many of these contain direct quotes from the Trump Administration. These quotes are triangulated with other Administration statements across the period, to show the ways in which US discourse mirrored Saudi discourse regarding a number of issues. The three case studies here are: the reaction to the disappearance and murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Trump's decision to cut aid from northern Yemen, and Trump's decision to label the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO).

# Chapter One
## *Securitisation Theory as a Context-specific, International, Process*

This chapter devises a new approach to ST. It does this through a critique of the traditional arguments of the Copenhagen School (CS). First, it is necessary to clarify what is meant when one uses the term "securitised". This thesis understands an issue to be successfully securitised when it is raised from the norms of political discussion and is used to legitimise extraordinary measures. Securitisation is achieved through complex processes of propaganda, which focus on ideas of fear and identity (Côté, 2016, 541). The process consists of a re-imagining and then entrenchment of the relationships, dispositions, and responsibilities of agents, in turn justifying a break with standardised political procedure (Watson, 2011, 3).

A clear view on the role of the audience is central to understanding the development of these changes. Within traditional CS theory, the role of the audience "remains both theoretically and empirically under researched" (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016, 725). Buzan et al., understand securitisation as a simple transactional speech act, in which the audience merely accepts elite security measures (1998, 32). By contrast, this chapter argues that in the modern era securitisation has become an increasingly complex, internationalised, and multi-faceted process. Within this context, the audience is playing an increasingly active role. Therefore, theoretical understandings of the securitisation process, and the role of the audience, require revision to account for this new reality.

Reimagining the role of the audience is of the utmost importance. Nevertheless, within critical security studies, there has been somewhat of a scholarly fixation on this area. This has inadvertently led to the negation of another equally crucial area - the relationship between securitising actors and functional actors. Functional actors are defined as those parties which exert some influence on securitisation, for instance the media, but are to be treated as distinct from securitising actors, as they cannot "complete" the securitisation process (Buzan et al, 1998, 36). By contrast, this chapter will argue that their power is far more influential, and that they should be treated as part of a unified whole. The separateness of state elites and their mass media is a highly mythologized notion. They are not functional actors but catalysts of securitisation. Adapting Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model to fit an international relations context will provide the basis for this argument.

Following from this, the chapter will outline its understanding of the ideational factors associated with securitisation, through extending the notion of ontological security beyond the individual, arguing that it also has relevance to ruling regimes and nations at large. Ontological security is closely connected to our confidence in our sense of self-identity, which is of particular significance when tracing the foreign policy of Middle Eastern regimes (Giddens, 1991). In the power vacuum that has followed the Arab Spring, Middle Eastern states have increasingly felt that their regime security is under significant threat. In turn this has led to the fuelling of sectarian antagonisms, extending this fear to the general population's sense of identity, helping to legitimise militaristic foreign interventions in Syria, Yemen and beyond (Krieg, 2017, 17).

The applicability of ST to autocracies requires a rethinking of ideas of physical and national security (Bilgin, 2014; Mitzen, 2006). Furthermore, it is crucial to define what counts as extraordinary in a state that lacks democratic norms. In conclusion, this chapter will argue that securitisation is not an illocutionary speech act, but "a strategic practice that occurs within, and as part of, a configuration of circumstances" (Balzacq, 2005, 172). This understanding covers the range of different factors discussed above, allowing scholars to apply ST in a measured, context-specific manner.

### *1.1 A brief outline of the Copenhagen School*

The CS argues that there is nothing that you "can hold onto" that is, by definition, a threat. Rather, they contend that they are constructed by elites for a purpose. Securitising rhetoric puts forward an understanding of an issue that poses a threat to the target audience. This perception then serves to legitimise extraordinary policy measures aimed at tackling this issue. Put simply, "by saying the words, something is done, like betting, giving a promise, naming a ship" (Buzan et al., 1998, 26). Words do not merely describe reality but constitute it. This idea can be applied to threat-perception. Many actors, ideas, or communities are not inherently threatening, but are imbued with exaggerated threat by elites. State actors regularly feel partially threatened, whether that is for reasons of national security, or regime security, as is primarily the case in the Middle East (Ryan, 2014, 45). In order to allay these fears, securitisation narratives, usually focused on notions of identity, are constructed to exaggerate this threat to a level of existential panic, justifying extraordinary measures against it. The

issue is raised to one that poses a risk to the ontological security of the state and its people – a threat to its very identity and existence.

As Darwich and Fakhoury put it: ST "is a discursive construction rather than an objective reality" (2016, 715). Regimes are often insecure and will use language to bolster their chances of survival. In this sense, realist priorities and behaviour can involve identity construction. For instance, in 2015, the Saudis were increasingly under pressure in the face of growing Iranian regional dominance. The resulting insecurity led to more brazen policy decisions including the Yemeni intervention. To gain support for these measures, and ensuing counter-measures, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have constructed discourses around sectarian identity that hold little endemic basis (Salisbury, 2015, 37; Salloukh, 2017, 49). Both parties use alienating sectarian rhetoric as a method of legitimising their humanitarianly questionable foreign policy decisions. This masks the realpolitik concerns, which are at the heart of these measures, via a representation of the enemy as posing a threat to the very identity of the nation's people (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018).

For the CS, an issue is securitized when "its audience collectively agrees on the nature of the threat and supports taking extraordinary measures against it" (Eroukhmanoff, 2018). This treats securitisation as a self-contained transactional act, with an elite uttering, and an audience accepting. As this chapter will go on to argue, reconfiguring the debate to include context facilitates a more universally applicable understanding of the theory, as "a strategic (pragmatic) practice that occurs within, and as part of, a configuration of circumstances, including the context, the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both

speaker and listener bring to the interaction" (Balzacq, 2005, 72). State elites have huge

power in their words, but only in their ability to reflect already pre-existing dispositions

within communities, whether they are domestic, regional, elite, or international. Audiences do

have agency, and the securitisation process is inter-relational, rather than transactional. Thus,

it is notable that "the ability of audiences to engage actively in the process is nearly non-

existent within securitization theory" (Côté, 2016, 543). This is a gap that needs to be

explored in more detail.


*1.2 The Audience – Active Audiences, Elite-Elite securitisation, and Social Media*

The common contention amongst critics of the CS is that it has neglected the important role

of the "audience" within the securitisation process. Underlying this critique is the CS's

narrow focus on a transactional understanding of the "speech act". Furthermore, it has largely

ignored the possibility of multiple targets of securitising discourse.  Balzacq summarised this,

stating "the assumption of a speech act approach ultimately reduces security to a

conventional procedure such as marriage or betting" (2005, 72). In short, the audience has no

real agency, and is simply there to sign off securitisation measures. Furthermore, the CS's

understanding has tunnel vision, whereby elites pick one audience (usually domestic) that is

most relevant to legitimise their rhetoric. In their understanding, securitising actors do not

have to consider broader contexts, onlookers, or structures to any level of detail (Stritzel,

2007, 362)

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Through a use of examples, one begins to see this understanding as problematic, especially within the increasingly interconnected international community. Take for instance Saudi Arabia and their attempts to justify their intervention in Yemen. In this instance, the Kingdom does not necessarily *need* active approval from its general public in order to engage in conflict, due to the autocratic nature of the state. However, it is still important for maintaining regime security, as "even tyrants need people to do their bidding" (Vuori, 2008, 68). Nevertheless, it is only one of several targets of their securitising discourse, as they look to stir fear and thus gain support both regionally (from the Gulf) and internationally (from the US). A good example of this is the concerted effort of Abed al-Jubeir to securitise the Yemeni intervention to an international audience through the use of the English language (CNBC, 2017). On the domestic front, securitisation is a fairly straightforward process, as most of the population only have access to government-controlled media outlets, suppressing the pre-eminence of counter-narratives. Initially, social media looked as if it could pose a challenge to this reality. The Internet provided revolutionaries and dissidents with a voice during the Arab Spring. However, this initial hope has been quashed, as state elites are now heavily infiltrated across Middle Eastern social media platforms (Siegel, 2015; Abdo, 2016).

It may be easier for authoritarian regimes to gain popular support, yet this does not negate its importance. Despite the assertion that they do not necessarily *need* it, they still depend upon the 'ritual of conformity' (Havel, 1992). The popular mandate in the Middle East is often religiously guided, through the ulema, and in many cases their fatwas, rather than by democratic processes. Furthermore, autocratic regimes still have internal adversaries, or 'elite

audiences', who seize upon opportunities presented by a perceived lack of public appeal (Vuori, 2008, 93). One could even argue that it was such thinking that led to the rise of Mohammed bin Salman. Fundamentally, this example demonstrates the complexities of the securitisation process in the modern, globalised world.

Each speech act does not occur in a vacuum but is instead heavily dependent on not only the various audiences it needs to appeal to, but also the contextual factors surrounding the argument (Balzacq, 2005). This is a point that the CS has often overlooked. Compare Saudi interventionism in Yemen to the UK's invasion of Iraq in 2003. Within democracies different narratives are freely allowed to flourish. Prime Minister Tony Blair faced a massive struggle to legitimise the war, with protesters in their millions marching in London (Roe, 2008, 630). No such protests were seen in Riyadh over Yemen. The likelihood of popular dissent is largely lower in autocracies, where counter-narratives are suppressed, and their parameters defined by the regimes. Furthermore, fear prevents large-scale dissent, as protesters are severely punished (Wæver, 1989). Despite this, the two examples have similarities, in that both securitising rhetorical lines lacked foundational proof. Thus, the disparities in their levels of success are not about the content of their discourses, but the context within which they operated.

Saudi Arabia's main line of securitisation amounted to portraying 'the campaign against the Houthis as part of… the containment of Iran' (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018). The UK's justification for the Iraq War contended that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass

destruction (WMDs), which posed an imminent risk to British interests. The existence of Iraqi WMDs was unsubstantiated at the time of intervention; however, Blair's actions yielded mass opposition and, over time, undermined his and his party's credibility (Seldon, 2015). Whilst he won another election after this, the Labour Party never fully recovered.

In Riyadh's case, they were able to easily secure domestic and regional support (Cerioli, 2018, 298). In part, this may be down to the resurgence in the capital of Islamic notions of identity throughout the Arab world following the Arab Spring in 2011. However, protecting the region from the Shi'a aggressor had traction not primarily due to an endemic sectarian hatred, but the propagandised fear that the Sunni way of life may be under threat (Gause, 2014, 17). In the insecure contemporary Middle East, interventions are therefore regularly framed as a protection of shared identities (Mabon, 2018, 36). Thus, securitisation is not as simple as an elite uttering and an audience legitimising. It is a multi-faceted, context-specific process that can only be conceptualised through an understanding of the relative power of various actors and various ideas.

Another closely related point is that 'the success of securitization is highly contingent upon the securitising actor's ability to identify with the audience's feelings, needs and interests' (Balzacq, 2005, 84). The success of a securitisation measure is contingent upon the actor's rhetorical appeal to the audience's primary concerns. This is hugely difficult as the 'international audience', for instance, does not represent a homogenous whole, and there are many different sub-groups that will have different primary concerns (Balzacq et al., 2016).

Thus, understanding the complex nature of each audience is essential in analysing securitisation processes.

Furthermore, with social media, the 'audience' are also theoretically capable of being securitisers themselves.  Later, the thesis will test this possibility through an analysis of data collected from across digital media. One would hypothesise that the audience's role is less likely to be this meaningful within autocratic regimes, due to the concentration of power within the state elite. On Twitter, for example, "the audience participates in the securitising process as securitising actors as well, because their articulations contribute to the overall construction of a discourse and ultimately can lead to their potential partaking in the legitimisation of certain policies" (Gaufman, 2014, 120).

This is especially true when considering international state elite-state/non-state actor elite securitisation processes. Previously, most of the literature has focused on elites justifying measures to non-elite audiences (Wæver, 1989; Buzan et al., 1998). This thesis is primarily concerned with understanding international processes of securitisation, in which both actors contribute to the meaning-making process. As regards Saudi securitisation, the thesis primarily focuses on foreign elites, as they were the primary target of their discourse. This kind of securitisation is not as simple as one actor "convincing" another. Responding actors hear a narrative that, if adopted, would seemingly suit their own realist interests. In these cases, they often co-opt the narrative, and use it to justify their own extraordinary behaviour. This idea is one of this thesis' key contributions to ST. In later chapters, it will be shown how

a multitude of elite-level policy aims can be legitimised through reciprocal positionality on particular narratives.

With Iran, their discourse sought to cause disruption, appealing to non-elite international actors, rebel groups, sympathetic left-leaning Westerners, and Tehran's enemies. The main purpose was to create a prominent counter-narrative that would increase the insecurity of the Al-Saud. Whilst their narratives were limited in their scale and reach, they managed, at least, to achieve their aim of drawing Saudi Arabia deeper into the conflict through gradually over-exaggerating their own connection to the Houthis.

## *1.3 The Myth of 'Functional Actors'*

It can be argued that the current fixation on the relationship between aggressors and audiences has negated a thorough examination of the role played by functional actors. The new scholarly consensus is willing to accept that audiences can be multiple, intertwined, and complex (Balzacq, 2005; Léonard and Kaunert, 2011; Roe, 2008), yet still treats the "aggressor" as a somewhat autonomous arbiter of securitisation. This creates two separate but closely connected issues. Firstly, from a substantive perspective, the minimal weight afforded to "functional actors" has been misplaced. Securitisation theorists simply argue that these actors can exert some influence, but cannot deliver successful securitisation themselves (Buzan et al., 1998, 36). Furthermore, they are treated as categorically distinct from "securitizing actors". Perhaps unwittingly, the effect this has had is that functional actors,

including the media, the Church, and financial elites, have not been thoroughly studied

through the lens of ST, as their causal weight in the process is methodologically undermined.

ST regularly treats functional actors as completely separate from securitising actors. In this

thesis, it will be argued that it is more prudent to see them as part of a nexus of active

securitisation, without which state actors would find it impossible to accomplish

securitisation processes. This position is encapsulated by Hannah Arendt's words:

[T]he stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer... The perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion . . . we never can point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome (1958, 184).

Secondly, it raises the question of what defines 'successful securitisation'. The likes of Floyd

(2016) have argued that only a real-terms change to policy constitutes a 'successful

securitisation'. This sets the standard too high and negates the importance of the study of the

audience altogether, affording it no role of significance. The emphasis placed on the

aggressor, or state actor, is all encompassing, as securitisation amounts to actual changes in

state behaviour or law, which can only be affected by said actors. In doing so Floyd (2016)

ignores the "idea that successful securitization (as a political status transformation) can have

its own independent effect on domestic and external political relations" (Côté 2016, 544).

Functional actors, and in some cases audiences, constantly cause these ideational shifts across

digital media platforms, which have direct impacts on the successful deployment of

'extraordinary measures'. Siegel's (2015) study demonstrates the symbiotic relationship

between the Saudi and Iranian regimes and senior members of their ulema, who were

tactfully sent into the Twittersphere to legitimise their efforts in Syria and Yemen. In many cases, functional actors can be the primary securitisers to specific audiences.

Yet even those who afford significant agency to audiences such as Balzacq (2005) and Côté (2016), fall into a similar, yet nevertheless more nuanced trap. They deal with the issue of audience agency, but do not extend their conclusions to a discussion of functional actors. They argue that "multiple audiences may exist within a single securitization process, and that audiences often possess differential powers and influence, leading to differing effects on securitization outcomes" (Côté, 2016, 547). It avoids rigidly categorising audiences, or focusing on singular targets, by seeing them as part of a wide and diverse picture of sanctioning security measures. Nevertheless, they have not made attempts to apply this approach to securitising actors/aggressors and functional actors. Just as with audiences, aggressors do not act in isolation, and in fact they *need* other supporting networks to affect the legitimation they so seek.

The media is vital for state elites in securitising issues from an early stage. The psychological appeal of 'othering' is well summarised by the thoughts of Campbell (1992), who argued that, as our identity lacks a tangible, intrinsic essence, we are naturally drawn to rhetoric that aligns ourselves as distinct from the 'Other'. This is why ideations such as nationalism and sectarian identity have such wide-ranging appeal. These constructions are sometimes referred to as embryonic securitisation (Gaufman, 2014, 126), which for decades has been the main method for accruing public support for otherwise unacceptable policies. Throughout the last

century, whether it was Nazism in Germany, the "Muslim Country" flight ban in America, or the Saudi blockade in Yemen – the primary tool to create mass approval for such measures has been the media. They are not merely supportive – they act as the primary catalyst for the legitimization of extraordinary measures. Understanding this facilitates a multi-faceted understanding of securitisation, as a process, rather than an illocutionary speech act. As Stritzel summarises:

Securitization can thereby be defined as a discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed to treat something as an existential threat, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat, which typically involves sociolinguistic as well as socio-political processes of production/genesis, diffusion/transfer and reception/translation in a discourse (2014,4).

Individual discourse networks must be thoroughly contextualised to trace the securitisation process. This chapter's central belief is that elite actors and their propaganda networks securitize for explicitly realist considerations, for example, for reasons of regime security. They tap into pre-existing animosities, to securitise the 'Other'. Saudi Arabia is a majority Wahhabi Sunni state increases the capital of anti-Shia rhetoric. The narrative of anti-Shiism is so deeply embedded within the majority Wahhabi population and the cultural history of Saudi Arabia that narratives of the 'Other' are more readily accepted around this particular identity marker. These animosities are easily exploited by the Al-Saud. The thesis is not saying that endemic sectarian divisions fuel regional insecurities nor that they have 'naturally re-emerged'. In fact, it says quite the opposite. They have been artificially exploited as part of a grand strategy of power politics in an increasingly insecure region.

Crucially, the control of methods of discourse dispersion is key for increasing the appeal of ideational narratives. Understanding this dynamic is key when attempting to cater ST to a given nation-state. Even more so than in democratic states, Herman and Chomsky's contention that 'the media serve, and propagandise on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them' (1998, xi), runs true. In Saudi Arabia and Iran, there is no freedom of the press, and media outlets are heavily controlled by the ruling regimes. Thus, discussing outlets as autonomous has little merit. They are not functional actors, but rather a political arm of the elite. Their mass media, and social media presences, 'focus on the negative side of Others actions on the one hand, and illuminate positive parts of Ours on the other hand' (Abdi and Basarati, 2016, 50). Autocratic regimes have propaganda systems; within which mass media is their primary ally. Put simply, "a propaganda system will consistently portray people abused in (by) enemy states as worthy victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be unworthy" (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, 37).

Functional actors do not simply have a small influence - they are just other complimentary securitising actors, who gather significant domestic support for extraordinary policy measures and solidify support for ruling elites, through growing the seeds of embryonic securitisation. Concerted misrepresentation of the 'Other' is widespread across various aspects of Middle Eastern media in regard to current conflicts.

So far, this chapter has looked at the units of analysis within ST. Equally important is

challenging the ontological claims made by the likes of Buzan et al. (1998). They are

influenced by the Neorealist School, and the likes of Walt (1985), whose central claim was

that states only engage in conflict if they are under significant physical threat. Following

from this, states artificially construct security narratives to support their extraordinary

measures in responding to their new heightened sense of insecurity. Securitisation, then, is a

discursive tool used to protect a state's physical security, meaning its continuation and

survival as a sovereign entity. Summed up, they see it as an extreme reaction to an all-

pervasive threat – "security should be seen as a negative, as a failure to deal with issues as

normal politics" (Buzan et al., 1998, 29).

Yet, security understood in this way does not account for why many modern states "pursue

security-producing programs that ultimately perpetuate their own insecurity" (Kamrava,

2018, 13). If such extraordinary measures are only deployed as a final act of desperation, why

do so many countries sustain mutually unbeneficial conflicts? One answer to this is that there

is something else about security, which is closely connected to identity. On a human level,

the oneness of our idea of self is fundamental to our sense of individual security. Giddens

termed this "ontological security", defined as the "confidence that most human beings have in

the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and

material environments" (1991, 92).

For many states, like individuals, conflict dominates their existence, and subsequently comes to define them. Routines embed the maintenance of negative patterns of behaviour within state security measures, just as within personal lives. A classic example is the person who stays with their abusive partner, as their harassment becomes the norm over years of repetition. By comparison, take the Iranian-Saudi rivalry, which has been spiralling out of control for years. Most of the regional rhetoric from both states' elites has been about the evil of the 'Other', and their own valiant defiance (Darwich, 2019). This has been played out in actions, including proxy wars, which have helped to embed a new aspect of Saudi and Iranian identity. These identities (anti-Saudi and anti-Iranian) complement pre-existing religious, political, ethnic, and other factors that have come to define national identity over time. In short, "a key part of society is its identity and distinctiveness vis-à-vis other societies" (Mitzen, 2006, 352). Furthermore, the idea that they are somehow superior to the other has come to partially define their identity and reinforce their struggle against this 'other'. Not only do they deem their identities as superior, but also their claims to regional power. Any challenge posed to this notion of superiority is considered a threat, and accelerated to one of existential threat, against which extraordinary actions are justified. These processes have been occurring sporadically between Iran and Saudi Arabia ever since the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

This is not to say that threats are never real, and that they are only ever artificially constructed. The Houthis in Yemen do pose a degree of threat to Saudi physical security, for instance. As another example, the Yom Kippur War of 1973 was primarily about actual

material threat (Kumaraswamy, 2000, 205). Nevertheless, in almost all cases of war, there is a profound sense of ideational threat present, which reinforces or over-emphasises the vociferousness of the physical threat, as opposed to undermining it. The enemies against which the most extreme measures are taken are those who pose a threat to a nation's individual and collective identity. This synthesis between physical and ideational fear makes action an absolute necessity. Furthermore, where there is a lack of physical threat, ideational threat is developed through propaganda to justify militaristic interventions, as was the case in the Vietnam War of the mid 20th Century (Herman and Chomsky, 1998, 252).

The routinization of hatred and conflict against an evil other entrenches it, legitimising interventions such as the Saudi invasion of Yemen. This war has been of huge cost to the kingdom; despite the fact the Houthis do not represent a force that could topple their regime. At the very least, the severity of their assault has been exacerbated by the fear and hysteria generated by their exaggeration of Iranian involvement, and their broader hatred of the 'Shia aggressor' Iran. Although not the only factor, ontological security helps to understand how certain antagonisms come to define state identity and thus dominate foreign policy. The broader point is that the Saudis have gradually been convinced by their own securitisation narrative. They view the Houthis as a longer-term threat, and the spearhead of an Iranian plot to undermine the Al-Saud in their own back garden.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has been locked in a hostile relationship with Yemen for even longer than with Iran, which may tell us something further about the vociferousness of their

intervention (Salisbury, 2015). The Houthis pose a threat to their territorial integrity, as they contest the territories of Najran, Jizan, and Asir, that currently reside within the borders of the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia are also able to denote a lineage of Houthi aggression across their border during the Six Wars between 2004 and 2010. In this sense, their growing power has created a sense of Saudi weakness, exposed on their southern border. The Houthis pose a threat to Saudi identity in these provinces in particular, and as such, create a sense of ontological insecurity.

A great example of ontological security is that engendered by sectarian identity, which "provides stability and continuity in identity narratives for some actors in an uncertain environment, and actors become attached to this sort of stability and distinctiveness" (Darwich, 2019, 23). It has become a securitized issue, as "the sense of being part of a greater whole, i.e. the 'we' dimension of their relationship, remains implicit or submerged, making this type of conflict particularly difficult to overcome" (Mitzen, 2006, 360). When one understands such identities within the framework of securitisation, one can better understand the enduring nature of certain conflicts. It also helps to construct a model of ST that treats securitisation as a process that develops over time, rather than a simple illocutionary speech act, to be treated in isolation (Bourbeau, 2011).

Identity constructions are the phenomena that bind elites and audiences together. Benedict Anderson's work, which treats the idea of nation-ness as "malleable and can be adapted, both consciously and sub-consciously" (Anderson, 1983, 48), has influenced the understanding of

this thesis. The essential view of this thesis is that many religious, ethnic, national, and cultural identities can become deep-rooted through propagandised discourse, and take on enduring value. The example of anti-Saudi sentiment within the Iranian propaganda nexus is detailed in future chapters as a prescient example.

## 1.5 Securitisation theory, non-democratic states, and the Middle East

Within ST, there is a fixation on this idea of physical security, the survival of the nation-state, and the liberal principle that governments protect their general publics. This conclusion is not self-apparent across the world. It is an idealised view, drawn from observations of Western state behaviour. In the Middle East, foreign policy is guided more by regime security as opposed to the physical security of the national population. Through propaganda, "elites can choose aspects of their regime identity, attach new meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilise people" (Darwich, 2019, 9). ST can be applied to the region, but its central concepts need to be reimagined. This avoids doing away with theory altogether, whilst ensuring that these traditional theories do not remain expressions of narrow Western mindsets, a concern raised by Edward Said (1978).

One may see the difference between national and regime security as somewhat superficial. Actually, it causes huge differences in foreign policy, and its motivation. Compare Moroccan/Sudanese and Saudi motivations for the current Yemeni intervention. The ruling regimes in Morocco and Sudan rely on the Gulf States for aid, and thus felt compelled to intervene in ODS. Their security concerns were not centred around a fear of the Houthis or

the Iranians themselves, "but rather in maintaining the good graces (and relatedly, the security and well-being) of rich aid donors such as the Arab Gulf States" (Ryan, 2014, 42). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia engaged in this war for a number of reasons, but national security was definitely one of them (Carapico, 2014). They now share a border with the Houthis, who have fired missiles into the Kingdom and committed numerous war crimes.

Nevertheless, the scale of Saudi Arabia's intervention is guided by a deeply entrenched fear that the rise of Iran's Shia theocratic model will destroy Wahhabi-style monarchies in the region (Stein, 2014, 70). This has been a consistent part of their foreign policy, as evidenced in the past by the significant support they provided Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War. In both cases, Saudi Arabia was responding, at least partially, to an actual physical threat. Nevertheless, like the Moroccans and Sudanese in Yemen, their primary driver is consistently regime security. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this is closely tied to a deeply embedded anti-Iranian sentiment.

Furthermore, the Saudi response illustrates another closely connected point. It is especially true in the Middle East, that, "in the post Cold War world, where the battle over economic systems has been largely won, the most salient divisions in the world relate to political systems" (Stein, 2014, 70). One can see this apply to the ways in which Middle Eastern states conduct their relations. Research shows that autocracies will structure their policy, both domestically and internationally, in alignment with countries that possess similar state structures (Olar, 2019). Olar specifically studied the diffusion of repression in the Middle

East, showing that "autocracies adjust their levels of repression based on observed levels of repression in their institutional and domestic peers" (Olar, 2019, 67). Although the focus here is primarily domestic, there is ample room for reapplying this to the international field.

This has been evident in the similarly heavy-handed responses to the Arab Uprisings in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, as "foreign policy actors support the same kinds of political structures they enjoy, or would like to enjoy, at home" (Stein, 2014, 68). An area that has not been studied is testing the hypothesis that there is a cross-national securitising nature to this behaviour. In other words, 'if we engage in similar policy to our political-structural allies, we can solidify our form of government and/or alliance system, through unified action and alignment, thus protecting our regime'. Put simply, this thesis contends that securitisation can have a secondary, homogenising effect that can serve to protect particular political systems, alliances, and constructs, whilst symbiotically securitising specific national regimes.

Another key issue is how one defines 'extraordinary measures', when there is a lack of constitutional constraints, which one would find in a democracy. Floyd argues the best running definition here is "whatever most reasonable persons would agree constitutes exceptional measures mostly in terms of the harm… or level of violence employed" (2016, 2). This seems a little vague but nevertheless raises an interesting point. There are certain acts that can universally be seen as disproportionate and extreme. However, there is a broader point. Even in autocratic states, there are norms of behaviour. In 2019, Iranian airstrikes against Saudi Arabia represented a significant departure from usual Iranian foreign policy,

which traditionally relies on proxies. ODS similarly marks a departure from foreign policy norms, constituting the first concerted air operation Saudi Arabia had ever engaged in. One does not have to fixate on the narrow Western notion of legality; one can discern something as a product of successful rhetorical securitisation and therefore "extraordinary", when the action epitomises disproportionality, and breaks with the traditional approaches of a given state. This approach is especially relevant to the modern context – "in a time where state-society relations have frayed… the need to offer context-specific explorations that are not solely based upon Western ontologies appears to be of paramount importance" (Kapur and Mabon, 2018, 2).

*Conclusion*

In summation, the understanding of securitisation in this thesis is as a context-driven, inter-relational process, not just as an illocutionary speech act. In order to properly understand this, researchers must be prepared to analyse the audience, relinquishing the idea that it can ever count as a simple homogenous entity. The audience's power is context-driven, and one must look specifically to the given example for answers, rather than inductively applying traditional CS theory. This does not negate clarity of theoretical rigour however; merely a re-imagining of ST to make it a malleable, contemporary theory. This necessitates understanding the realist concerns of state actors, but also that ideational and contextual factors have significant causal weight in the securitisation process. Furthermore, ST must be applicable to the modern context, in which mainstream media, as well as social media, serve as key tools for the dispersion of "othering" rhetoric. Here, sources close to the state act as

primary catalysts for the approval of securitising discourse. Influencing the development of this thesis is that "there is virtually no research on securitisation and the Internet" (Gaufman, 2014, 119). Addressing this gap is of central importance to understanding the current instability in the Middle East. This is especially vital when considering the inflammatory impact of sectarian discourse within the digital arena.

# **Chapter Two**
## *Sectarianism, Sectarian Identity, and Sectarianisation*

This chapter provides a holistic analysis of the contemporary nature of sectarian identity in the New Middle East Cold War. This thesis places significant value on the impact of language and leads with the purpose of exploring the divisive power of discourse. The chapter begins by unpacking the assumptions loaded within the specific word 'sectarianism', arguing instead that scholars should adopt the more measured term 'sectarian identity', when it comes to fully understanding its nature. Furthermore, when referring to the specific politicised use of sectarian identity by state actors, a more effective word to use is sectarianisation. This is a relatively new term, which allows scholars to analyse the impact of state-sponsored propaganda, whilst understanding that sectarian identity has many other faces. This chapter will understand sectarianisation as "a process shaped by political actors, operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve political mobilisation around particular (religious) identity markers" (Hashemi and Postel, 2017, 4).

A further definitional problem arises when examining sectarianisation, as it is often too narrow. The chapter deals with these issues by dividing it into two types - unifying and alienating sectarianisation. The first will be defined as processes of sectarianisation which aims to promote shared value of us, whilst the latter refers to processes which alienate and misrepresent the evils of the Other. However, it is relevant to consider whether the two can convincingly be separated. Even if not making explicit mention to any shared Sunni identity, for instance, Saudi anti-Iranianism appears to unify Sunnis by opposition. The two different

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faces of sectarianisation contribute to a grand narrative that deifies the glory of 'us' and alienates the evil 'other'.

Finally, sectarian identity will be placed within the context of the digital age, suggesting it might be just one part of a global trend of a rise in the popularity of ethno-religious identities. This will include discussion of social media, satellite television, and radio stations.

The aim of the chapter is to define sectarian identity, and sectarianisation, but also to situate these concepts within the specific context of the Iranian-Saudi rivalry. This is a fundamental part of the thesis, as its overall purpose is to understand the ways in which Iran and Saudi Arabia have sectarianised the conflict in Yemen to justify, frame, and gain regional and international support, for their involvement in the conflict. The chapter argues that the model of sectarianisation is counter-intuitively of great use when understanding the impact of Saudi and Iranian securitisation narratives amongst a wide variety of audiences, including Western, non-Islamic audiences.

## *2.1 The problem with sectarianism*

'Sectarianism' has become one of the most ideologically loaded terms in researching the contemporary politics of the Middle East. It is used to refer to several distinct things: an age-old dispute between rival sects, to denote an impression of sectarian identity as a political legitimizer, and to account for sub-national struggles for power. As Valbjørn and Gunning argue: "these debates are frustrating; both material and ideational factors must be taken into

account but each is alone insufficient" (2020, 44). Similarly, Fanar Haddad (2020) argues that we are mistaken to isolate these issues into binaries. Often, scholars fixate on one understanding, or face, of sectarian identity to understand its nature and functionality. In doing so, they over-simplify the reality of sectarian identity. Hashemi and Postel argued that this problem extends to language, stating that sectarian identity can also amount to "a static given, a trans-historical force – an enduring and immutable force of the Arab-Islamic world from the seventh century until today" (2017, 4-5). There is an assumption that sectarian animosity has remained an ever-present – a clear error of historiography.

The term 'sectarian-ism' encourages thinkers to find a succinct answer to a deeply complex concept. Turning any form of identity into an "ism" constitutes it as either a simple top-down instrumentation, or as an endemic primordial ideation, rather than a complex and multi-faceted reality (Haddad, 2020, 74). Accordingly, Haddad asks us to drop the term altogether, and focus our attention instead on providing a holistic account of "sectarian identity". He writes that we should treat: "sectarian identity as the sum of its parts; specifically, it will be argued that sectarian identity is simultaneously formulated along four overlapping, interconnected and mutually informing dimensions: doctrinal, subnational, national and transnational" (Haddad, 2020, 5). According to Haddad, the prominence of each dimension will be entirely dependent on the context surrounding the case study in question. He goes on to provide a definition for each of these dimensions, or faces:

*"Doctrinal:* At the level of doctrine and religious truths; in other words, as an identity organized around a set of religious truths and as a global or anational identity.
*Subnational:* At the local level within a given national setting.

*National:* At the level of the nation-state and as a prism through which national identity is mediated.
*Transnational:* As a prism for international relations, international or transnational solidarities, and geostrategic competition" (Haddad, 2020, 82).

For Haddad, one of the biggest problems with the study of sectarian identity is the tendency to apply simplistic, narrow, explanations for deeply complex realities. Through his model, he speaks to the "need to view sectarian identity as a composite, multi-layered identity: it is not any one thing nor does it operate on any single level" (Haddad, 2020, 82). Each of his four dimensions play some role in analysing sectarian identity; but some will be more important than others, depending on the situation. He encourages researchers to look at the complexities of the real-world context, before drawing conclusions about the specificities of sectarian identity or animosity. He also encourages scepticism of orientalist approaches to the subject.

Whilst he argues that there are doctrinal realities to sectarian identity, he does not believe that Islam is inherently at odds with itself. Thus, he affords no credibility to the orientalism of Bernard Lewis (1990), who argued that Islam was inherently at odds with itself. Bernard Lewis argued that sectarian divisions have always existed to a greater or less extent within Islam, dating back to schisms from the 7th Century. He argued that Islam does not respond well to the advent of secularism and modernity, and that upheaval and change unleash hatred between sects. Lewis writes,

[I]n moments of upheaval and disruption… dignity and courtesy… give way to an explosive mixture of rage and hatred which impels even the government of an ancient and civilized country… to espouse kidnapping and assassination, and try to find, in the life of their Prophet, approval and indeed precedent for such actions (Lewis, 1990, 59).

For him, there has always been deep-seated resentment between Sunni and Shia, fundamentalist and modernist, Islam and the West, bubbling just below the surface. It is the changing nature of the world, challenges to the Islamic narrative, and the supposed cultural superiority and popularity of Western values that is unleashing ancient hatreds. It would be naïve to think this understanding no longer has relevance amongst Western policymakers. In 2016, President Obama famously stated that "the Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia" (Fisher, 2016).

Offering a more balanced perspective, Haddad argues that there are aspects of Shi'ism and Sunnism that dictate certain forms of lifestyle and behaviour. Often, in times of insecurity and conflict, the symbolism of these behaviours is harnessed to foster unity in opposition. However, he makes it abundantly clear that there is nothing about Sunnism or Shi'ism that makes hatred of the other a necessity.

The post-structuralist distaste for false binaries has become central to the contemporary study of sectarian identity and sectarianisation (Menshawy, 2022, 136). Over time, scholars have realised that the debate between primordialism and instrumentalism is misguided (Phillips and Valbjørn, 2018; Mabon, 2020; Malmvig, 2021). Instead, they advocate for an approach which takes sectarian identity and sectarianisation seriously – "the ambiguities, paradoxes and 'tip-toeing' related to sectarianism should be part of our analyses and prompt further empirical investigation" (Malmvig, 2021, 5). Before turning to this novel approach, it is

necessary to explain the two, previously assumed to be incompatible, approaches of primordialism and instrumentalism.

The prevalence of sectarian identity is understood in two competing ways. These can most readily be defined as primordialism and instrumentalism. Geneive Abdo's work *The New Sectarianism* argues that sectarian identity's resurgence is natural. States who use it, are tapping into a naturally re-emerging identity (Abdo, 2016, 6). Primordialists contend that contemporary sectarian identity is deeply "rooted in a solid, theological articulation proposed by classic Islamic political theory" (Ghobabzdeh and Akbarzadeh, 2015, 691). The rise of sectarian conflict is primarily down to this, not geopolitical rivalry and opportunism (Rabinovic, 2014; Majin, 2017). The post-Arab Spring vacuum was primarily an ideational one, into which antagonistic sectarian identity naturally re-emerged.

Instrumentalists reverse this argument, claiming that the current realities of sectarian identity are not natural reoccurrences, but instead have been instrumentally constructed by state actors (Lynch, 2013; Gause, 2014; Hashemi and Postel, 2017). These thinkers afford little endemic cultural basis to the rivalry, or the spread of sectarian identity across the region. They critique primordialism, arguing that such explanations play into the hands of the powerful, tending "to lead towards solutions involving the heavy hand of authoritarian states to suppress the supposedly inevitable clash of sectarian communities" (Lynch, 2013).

Asher Susser has attempted to counter this way of thinking, arguing that instrumentalists have taken Said's (1978) Orientalism to its "absurd extreme through the imposition of a Saidian-McCarthyist straightjacket, whereby anyone engaging in the study of political culture would invariably face intellectual excommunication and/or condemnation for being "essentialist, "orientalist," or even "racist"" (Susser, 2012, 111).

The political capital of sectarian identity cannot be separated from the prevalence of sectarian identities throughout the region. According to Susser's logic, the very least they should do is remember Balzacq's contention that 'the success of securitization is highly contingent upon the securitising actor's ability to identify with the audience's feelings, needs and interests' (Balzacq, 2005, 84). Many securitisation theorists of the Middle East, such as Simon Mabon (2020) now broadly agree with this contention.

On the other hand, even the most strident primordialists acknowledge that 'Iran and Saudi Arabia… encourage Shi'a-Sunni animosity to advance their own geopolitical aims' (Abdo, 2016, 144). There is a consensus that the two states have played a role in the exacerbation of sectarian tensions. Key disparities primarily focus on the degree of accountability afforded to the rivalry. Primordialists contend that they are tapping into a naturally re-emerging identity, and so focus their analysis on a bottom-up understanding of sectarian identity (Majin, 2017). Instrumentalists argue that the two states have systematically promoted sectarian antagonisms to galvanise populations against the 'Other' (Wehrey, 2014; Gause 2014; Darwich, 2019). In

turn, this legitimises the extremity of their measures, used in proxy wars across the Middle East.

Hashemi and Postel (2017), and Mabon (2020) continue this line of reasoning. For them, sectarian identity is to be understood as a kind of securitisation process, used to protect regimes under threat. As Mabon puts it, in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, "the cultivation of sectarian differences has served as a means of regimes operating to ensure their survival, with religious identities mapping onto socio-economic contexts, creating a complex web of forces regulating life" (Mabon, 2020, 1).

Mabon, however, is not a pure instrumentalist and advocates for the third way approach of Helle Malmvig (2021). The third way approach acknowledges that in the Middle East, both historical, regional, and domestic realities as well as top-down analysis of state institutions are equally important. As Mabon writes, "whilst sectarian difference can be shaped and cultivated by regional forces and state elites 'from above', it can also emerge 'from below'" (2018, 4). The false binary of instrumentalism vs. primordialism is misguided because it encourages scholars to arbitrarily pick a side and thus a hierarchy of one over the other, without sufficient justification. Through such thinking, it is possible that scholars could arbitrarily choose case studies to prove these hierarchical preferences (Abdo, 2016). This encapsulates the broader critique post-structuralists posit towards such an approach in philosophy and the social sciences. As Derrida writes, binary oppositions only serve "to locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with

the positive lever of the signifier, to reserve the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to

dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed" (Derrida, 1978, 55).

Conversely, a potential pitfall of the third-way is that it can be accused of saying it is

everything, but then failing to attach significant weight to one element over another. Whilst

that critique may be valid in some instances, it is not particularly relevant to this thesis'

understanding of the third-way. This thesis is not attempting to throw the theoretical baby out

with the bathwater - but to encourage scholars to critically assess which approaches are most

relevant in a given context. In terms of Yemen, which has a limited history of sectarian

violence and animosity, the instrumental face of sectarian identity is most relevant. The

approach encourages researchers to look at the case study first, before deciding upon the

character of sectarian identity. Through this, theoretical approaches can be properly catered to

the example, avoiding the pitfalls of orientalism. This thesis sees the utility of theory, but

only if it has a nuanced and truthful relationship to the subject matter.

Whether sectarian identity is primarily natural, or instrumental, is specific to the given

context of each case study. There is no necessary absolute truth that applies to all nations,

conflicts, and time periods. The primordialism vs. instrumentalism binary is just one instance

of these false distinctions. There are many contained within the study of sectarian identity,

including the domestic vs. regional and foreign vs. local. As Haddad states, "[r]ather than a

binary, the drivers of sectarian relations come both from above and from below in a circular, mutually reinforcing fashion" (Haddad, 2020, 74).

This thesis is concerned with the fallout from the Arab Spring. In the Middle East, the last ten years have been characterised by power vacuums and rivalries. Sectarianisation has fuelled these divisions. Actors have undertaken this political project to secure and extend their power. Whilst internal actors are primarily concerned with survival in the short term, involvement in foreign wars allows external actors to extend their security networks into the future, as well as changing the balance of power. In Syria, for instance, Saudi Arabia "sidelined the non-violent local opposition and contributed to the transformation of Syria's peaceful national uprising into a sectarian military conflict" (Salloukh, 2017, 45). This was done to undermine Iran, as well as protecting the security of its monarchical form of government against the democratic cries of the Arab Spring.

Iraq was different to Yemen and Syria; in that it had a more profound history of sectarian violence. However, all three conflicts are similar in that sectarian identity became militarised following the collapse of state structures. Scholars who have taken sectarian identity seriously have focused on these contexts of weak, and failed, states (Matthiessen, 2013; Malmvig, 2014; Phillips, 2015). The simple thesis is that when power is decentralised, nationalistic identities begin to disintegrate, to be replaced with sub-national and trans-national ideas and identities. The reason sectarian identity specifically re-entered the conversation was different depending on the historical context of each conflict. Syria, like

Iraq, possesses a sect-coded history. The governmental structure has been rigidly defined along sectarian criteria, and this has wrought long-festering animosity between sects. It is perhaps this sect-coded history that may help scholars to understand the success of sectarianisation on the ground in Syria, in contrast to its limited success in Yemen. Another part of the explanatory picture here speaks to Yemen's distinctly tribal make-up, with tribal identities routinely taking precedence over sectarian affiliation (Lackner, 2016).

As this thesis will go on to discuss, Yemen has little significant history of explicitly sectarian violence. There was a religious/sectarian dimension to the civil war between 1962-68 and the eventual fall of the Imamate, but the lines were typically blurred (Orkaby, 2017). The Zaydi Imamate was supported by Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, for instance. Alliances and affiliations have been much more to do with cynical elite interests. If they have been about identity, they have more commonly been related to tribal affiliation. This means that it is incorrect to afford significant weight to the endemic, primordial basis of sectarian conflict in these states. That is not to say that all contemporary instances of sectarian identity fall into this description. However, in Yemen, more recently, sectarian identity has primarily become mobilised through processes of sectarianisation as a product of the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It has had limited success on the ground but has been heavily instrumental as a method of international power politics and securitisation. In these instances, Haddad's (2020) transnational face of sectarian identity is the most relevant. This face will henceforth be referred to as sectarianisation.

*2.2 Alienating vs. Unifying Sectarianisation*

Another linguistic issue is that there has not been enough work done to understand specific

types of sectarianisation. For instance, Farha claims that ""sectarianism" is never openly

embraced, but instead invariably denounced and used as a slur to… deflect blame" (2016,

24). Farha (2016) is right to emphasise that the use of unifying sectarian discourse and

propaganda is not something states often promote as a first option. In Syria, for instance, Iran

and Saudi Arabia both initially backed secular, nationalist organisations. These were the

Syrian Arab Army and Free Syrian Army respectively. They did so, knowing full well that

sponsoring "ultra-sectarian actors would struggle to win in multi-faith Syria" (Phillips, 2018).

This suggests that the nature of sectarianisation depends entirely upon the realities and

context of the given conflict. What it also shows, it that there appears to be a trend in regional

preference for certain types of state-sponsored sectarian discourse, which tends to follow

Chris Phillips' (2018) contention that "unifying" sectarianisation is most commonly a plan B.

Instrumentalists bring important, but limited, understanding to the case studies at hand, as

they are reluctant to afford any specificity to sectarian identity. As they treat the

contemporary prevalence of antagonistic sectarian identity as an artificial construct, they

afford the study of sectarian identity little importance. There is also a second issue, which

reverts back to what Asher Susser referred to as the "Saidian-McCarthyist straightjacket"

(2012, 11). Many of the scholars of sectarian identity are western and therefore, quite rightly,

conscious of coming across as orientalists. As stated, Said (1978) was right to make Middle

Eastern researchers more culturally sensitive. Nevertheless, this should not be taken to its

logical extreme, forbidding the practice of attributing any kind of distinct nature to sectarian identity. For the sake of academic rigour, we must take sectarian identity seriously.

A concept central to the contemporary Middle East is "the sectarian taboo" (Van Dam, 1979; Haddad, 2011). This refers to the taboo of explicit appeal to unifying sectarian discourse in the region. This reality has stemmed from the prominence and political capital associated with pan-Arabic and pan-Islamic identity in the 20th Century. Prior to the Arab Spring, the most successful trans-national identities consisted of appeals to Arab and Islamic unity against the non-Arab and non-Islamic Other. This came in the form of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, seizing control of the means of production from former colonial powers. It also came in the form of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, espousing anti-sectarian, pan-Islamic unity against the west and its allies in the region. These identities both placed anti-Israeli sentiment at the top of their regional agendas. This was relevant as Israel was seen as the central enemy for most Middle Eastern states in the late 20th Century, a colonial imposition that usurped the rights of the Arabs. One can see the capital these ideals hoped to accrue for particular state actors when it came to regional popularity. However, the movements themselves stemmed primarily from explicit appeals to Arab unity or Islamic unity as a key part of the discourse from the very beginning (Bishku, 1988; Paul, 1999). This makes them different in nature to sectarian identity.

Unifying sectarian rhetoric is rarely the first choice of political actors when it comes to deciding on lines of securitisation. This works for both exogenous regional actors, as well as

endogenous state actors. This becomes even clearer when looking at conflicts with little history of sectarian violence. In Syria, for instance, a convoluted appeal to secularism was the cornerstone of maintaining Baathist rule for decades under Hafez al-Assad (Dibo, 2014). As recently as 1994, one Syrian General, Ali Hayder, was arrested for speaking on behalf of the Alawites, the ruling sect in Syria. In Yemen, Zaydis and Sunnis have long co-existed, with, as noted, more meaning placed upon tribal identity (Salmoni et al, 2010). This tells researchers even more about why, especially in the early stages of the conflicts, sectarianisation took the form of Othering, or alienation, in which "the Other is… accused of being sectarian, while the (sectarian) Self is portrayed as non-sectarian" (Malmvig, 2021, 5). Whilst unifying sectarian rhetoric has gradually emerged in the legitimising discourse and visualities of both narratives, alienating rhetoric remains the predominant form of sectarianisation. This will be evidenced in the evaluation of data collected from across digital media platforms in the following chapters.

## *2,3 The Internet and Satellite TV*

In order to discuss the contemporary nature of sectarian identity, it is crucial to analyse technology and its impact. There has been a global revolution in our obsession with identity, within the hyper-reality of social media. Across the world, individuals are creating artificial constructions of themselves. These constructions are often based on half-truths, exaggerations, and falsities. Researchers only need to scroll through Instagram to observe this phenomenon. At a time of such falsity, it is understandable why ethno-religious identities are increasingly popular, as a way of giving disaffected people a sense of belonging. Sectarian

identity, and its resurgence, may not be a unique case in point. Malmvig argues: "sectarianism… may be seen as a much more common sign of nostalgia and wish for myths of origin that proliferate at ever higher speed to catch up with a despairing cycle of second-hand truths and simulations" (2021, 191).

Historically grounded ideations appear to be making a resurgence in the form of nationalism, populism, conservatism, and sectarianisation. Malmvig's (2021) assertion may be true, that social media and the realities of fake news may be producing a grassroots desire for the re-establishment of ethno-religious identities. That being said, it is also true that there are elites pushing these narratives for rational, realist reasons. These include securing votes and protecting regime security (Krieg, 2017). Scholars must be careful not to view sectarian identity, or populism, as naturally re-emerging identities. Rather, they should view them as multi-faceted, complex realities, with both top-down, and bottom-up causes. It is true that identities cannot be artificially created in the short term, but it is also true that "their credibility and popular resonance depends on memories of long historical experience… constructed over the long durée" (Hinnebusch, 2016, 122). Each ideology and ideation has its own specific character. Whilst similarities can be drawn between the politicisation of sectarian identity, and the resurgence of populism, they remain distinct phenomena. One core distinction between sectarian identity and populism, for instance, is that there are many more immediate local drivers that impact upon sectarian identity's popularity, resonance, and influence (Gengler, 2019, 57).

That being said, sectarian identity's specificity does not stop it from bearing resemblances to other types of identities. The taboo of invoking unifying sectarian identity is not entirely dissimilar from the taboo of invoking white supremacy in America. The focus upon the Other is prominent in right-wing nationalism, populism, and Middle Eastern sectarianisation. ST can help us to understand this reality. Donald Trump's Islamophobic Muslim Flight Ban can readily be described as an 'extraordinary measure' (Eroukhmanoff, 2018). It certainly meets the standard for breaking with the central norms of American politics, involving democratic pluralism and tolerance. Whilst campaigning, Trump used social media to securitise the Muslim as the Other (Khan et al., 2019).

Technology now enables trans-national identities to spread rapidly across the world. It provides state actors with the potential to gather mass support through propaganda on social media. Social media is crucial in understanding the contemporary character of sectarian identity. However, it is important to remember that it should not be afforded entire causality – social media is merely one vehicle through which sectarian identity has been mobilised and popularised. In a time of withering national, Arab, and pan-Islamic identity, this sectarian securitisation filled the ideational vacuum, justifying the conflicts through the lenses of jihad and martyrdom. The distribution of these narratives has contributed significantly to Yemen's instability. As Salloukh writes:

[O]nce securitized, sectarian identities assume a life of their own, permeating identity politics and public discourse, and feeding on state weakness, civil wars, communal fears, and powerful media platforms, with devastating consequences for the territorial integrity and national unity of a number of Arab states (2017, 49).

Social media remains but one part of this complex process. Older technologies, such as satellite TV and radio stations, have profound reach across the Middle East. A British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary released in 2014 called *Freedom to Broadcast Hate* conducted a comprehensive investigation into channels accused of inciting sectarian hatred (BBC, 2014). The research was highly relevant as it looked at both Shia and Sunni broadcasters, analysing not only their discourse but also their funding streams. They were able to demonstrate that the Sunni sectarian channels were receiving their primary funding from wealthy donors, connected to state regimes in the Gulf (BBC, 2014, 34:20). They also showed the realities of Iranian channels such as Anwar 2, which urged men to defend shrines through engaging in jihad in Syria (BBC, 2014, 9:05). The most enlightening part of the documentary was when they showed how the discourse went back and forth, with Shia channels reacting to Sunni channels (BBC, 2014, 15:39). This went both ways, and over time the level of hatred steadily increased. It is pertinent to remember this was only in 2014 – sectarianisation still had not reached its peak. This piece of investigative journalism adds robust evidence to the scholarly consensus (Phillips 2018; Behravesh, 2019; Mabon 2020) that Saudi Arabia and Iran have used various forms of media to sectarianise regional conflicts, providing a public rationale that legitimised their increased engagement in these civil wars.

As time has developed, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry has become one of, if not the, primary struggle for power in the Middle East. Crucially, the US has remained closest to Saudi Arabia, and deeply sceptical of Iran. As Saudi securitisation of their intervention primarily targeted western, international audiences, this thesis focuses on this discourse, found across digital media platforms. This thesis' understanding of processes of sectarianisation, as a political construction used to gain support for extraordinary measures through fear, is fundamental in understanding how Riyadh has increased American hostility towards Iran. During the Trump Administration, it was possible to observe the realisation of this process of sectarianisation. His speech at the infamous Riyadh Conference in 2017, along with his discursive reciprocal positionality with the Al Saud, amounted to him condoning Saudi propaganda. As Ahmadian wrote, "Trump's anti-Iran policy risk[ed] making Washington a sectarian actor" (2018, 143).

Profit, uncertainty, violence, and the resulting fear, have crystallised these new identities, adding to other pre-existing identities that are part of the national and trans-national ideational tapestry. In the American case, anti-Iranianism had been present since the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979 (Eizenstat, 2017; Kamarck, 2019). Through the Saudi securitisation process over Yemen, it became the centripetal force of Trump's Middle East policy. This is not to say that it was the Saudis who convinced the Trump administration; but rather that the 'Houthis are a Shi'a Iranian proxy' narrative allowed for lucrative arms deals to be negotiated and helped to justify American support for the Saudi-led intervention. Riyadh was largely

successful in legitimising their intervention to the US, even though, counterintuitively, it ended up being a disaster for the Kingdom. Their securitisation campaign was not entirely without fault, however, as they faced increasing criticism over Yemen following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

Conversely, Iran and their allies have spent many virtual column inches highlighting the human rights abuses and war crimes of the Saudi-led coalition. In doing so, they have attempted to shift focus away from their own offences both domestically and in Syria. They have specifically targeted populist audiences, regional minorities, and left-wing westerners with their narratives of anti-westernism and anti-Wahhabism. A lineage can be denoted of the utility of such discourse, all the way back to pre-revolution Iran, where many left-wing academics were wooed by Ayatollah Khomeini, including Michel Foucault (Afary and Anderson, 2005). The thesis shows that whilst Iranian discourse contributed to Saudi anxiety, achieving Tehran's aim of dragging Riyadh deeper into the conflict and depleting its resources, ultimately their securitisation narratives had no provable impact on mainstream international opinion. Tehran remains a pariah state in the minds of most regional and western policymakers.

From both the Saudi and Iranian perspective, it is particularly important to examine those articles that were purposefully translated into English. The prevalence of English-language content across the two propaganda nexuses provides further evidence that processes of sectarianisation have international relevance, affect, and purpose. Implicit sectarianisation has

the most impact when aimed at Western elites; but even explicit sectarianisation has a contributing impact on the mindset of policymakers. Implicit sectarianisation is defined here as: *unifying "us" or alienating "the other" through vague allusions to shared or divergent sectarian identity, that perpetuate fear, mistrust, and hatred.* Explicit sectarianisation is defined as: *politicised sectarian identity that makes explicit references to Sunni-Shia differences, either through unifying "us" or alienating "the other".* Both of these forms of sectarianisation contribute to the two opposing grand narratives:

**Saudi-American narrative:** The Houthis are a Shi'a Iranian proxy, and terrorist organisation, against which extraordinary measures are justified.

**Iranian-Houthi-Resistance narrative:** The Saudi-led coalition is a violent invading force, motivated by Wahhabism, which is unjustifiably killing innocent civilians and starving Yemen.

*Conclusion*

This chapter has not only defined sectarian identity, and sectarianisation, but has also established the context through which the Iranian-Saudi rivalry will be discussed. The chapter recognised that it was important to go past the traditional debate between primordialists and instrumentalists, as the compartmentalisation of discussion limited understanding. Instead, a third-way approach has been advanced as the most useful way of examining sectarian identity in the Middle East. Helle Malmvig (2021) best encapsulates this ethos, encouraging us to drop all of our prejudices when approaching sectarian identity and to look at the context of the time. What is found is that there is some specificity to sectarian identity in the recent

history of the Middle East, as it has traditionally been seen as a taboo. This tells researchers a lot when it comes to understanding the nature of sectarian discourse on social media as primarily a process of Othering (Siegel, 2015; Darwich, 2019).

Furthermore, the thesis understands sectarianisation within the context of the conflict in Yemen. Outside interaction, and the promotion of ethno-religious trans-national identities have been prominent tools for the Iranians and Saudis. Building on work by Matthiessen (2013), Phillips (2015), and Robinson et al. (2018), sectarian identity and sectarianisation have been understood within the specific context, to elucidate "how conflicts across the region, that were not initially sectarian… became sectarianised" (Malmvig, 2021, 3).

Whilst this thesis acknowledges that internal state actors within Yemen are part of the answer to this question, it accords with Gregory Gause's (2014) conclusion that the Iranian-Saudi rivalry is the most important framework when it comes to understanding the use of politicised sectarian identity. In order to contextualise this, various types of discourse analysis are essential.

# Chapter Three: Methodology
*Discourse Tracing, Visual Analysis, and Data Collection*

## *3.1 Outlining the Methodological Project*

This chapter devises a new form of critical methodology. Whilst this thesis relies heavily on data, it is not primarily quantitative in nature. Concerning social media analysis specifically, quantitative approaches, whilst essential for ascertaining the scale of operations, are less well suited to answering 'how, why, and with what consequences [people] use social media' (Postill and Pink, 2012, 125). Qualitative methods are required to properly understand the context behind social media discourse, securitisation, and propaganda. Discourse is not a numerical reality, but a complex, context-driven process. The thesis agrees with Fairclough's contention that 'no real understanding of the social effects of discourse is possible without looking closely at what happens when people talk or write' (2003, 3). Thus, qualitatively, CDA provides the conceptual starting point. Overall, the methodological framework consists of a streamlined, integrated approach, consisting of ideas from CDA, Discourse Tracing (DT), and Visual Discourse Tracing (VDT) (term coined by author).

The central goal of CDA is 'to reveal discourses buried in language used to maintain power and sustain existing social relations' (Bouvier and Machin, 2018, 178). This understanding of discourse as a power-laden, socially constructed process is consistent throughout post-structuralism (Foucault, 1972; Fairclough 2003). Post-structuralism is defined here as a worldview whereby no one theory or methodology can explain everything, as 'meaning can

never be finally fixed; it is always in flux, unstable and precarious' (Wetherell, 1998, 397).

This style of thinking has been critiqued as being vague, narrow, and difficult to understand

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). CDA specifically is accused of not providing a methodological

roadmap for conducting analysis. Put simply, 'the systematic ways in which the methods

unfold are left implicit' (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009, 20).

To deal with this criticism, LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) process of DT will be integrated,

providing the thesis with a clear methodological framework. DT provides a step-by-step

guide for analysing discourse at the micro, macro, and meso levels. It does this without

forgetting the central purpose of critical theory, to uncover the power dynamics in discourse

as a form of liberation. DT "not only follows the theoretical process of constituting discursive

practices, it does so in a way that also prioritizes transparency" (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009,

38). It is post-structuralist epistemology which has inspired DT to exist as a methodology that

uses elements of many other qualitative approaches. Rather than rigidly sticking to the

paradigms of one approach, they have borrowed ideas from discourse analysis, process

tracing, and content analysis. This has resulted in a framework that is theoretically grounded,

tightly structured, and that encourages a detailed reading of data. For these reasons, it is well-

suited for understanding the development of Saudi and Iranian sectarian discourse across

time.

Before continuing with the chapter, it is important to clarify that whilst this thesis is

influenced by post-structuralism, it is not atheoretical. By innovating around ideas of ST, this

thesis uses deductive reasoning from a position of balance. Contemporary academics have become particularly preoccupied with post-structural thinking, amounting to calls for traditional theories to be abandoned (Derrida, 1967). Whilst it is a noble intellectual task to think innovatively, and radically, it is wrong to throw the proverbial theoretical baby out with the bathwater. For instance, whilst Marxist understandings of economics cannot explain the exact nature of 21$^{st}$ Century capitalism, some of the frameworks still have functional resonance. In this sense, the approach of this thesis offers a third way, both accepting and critiquing aspects of the existing order. The theoretical underpinnings of CDA are similar to those of propaganda studies and ST (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Balzacq, 2005; Wodak and Meyer, 2015). That political discourse is a tool of narrative warfare, used to legitimise certain ideas and entrench certain identities in its target audience, is a fair and accurate conceptualization of elite-sponsored rhetoric in the Middle East. With this in mind, these theoretical underpinnings can allow for a realistic deductive analysis of the raw data, to understand the complexities of sectarian discourse.

This chapter innovates around ideas of CDA. Firstly, it provides a summary of its core principles - defined as audience, power, ideology, and context. However, CDA needs updating to apply it to the modern world. Secondly, the chapter focuses provides innovations within three categories – the unique nature of Internet discourse, a developed understanding of the "visual", and the specific realities of the Middle East. In turn, innovations around these key themes will aid in developing a suitable methodological framework for the analysis of Saudi and Iranian discourse across digital media. To help make sense of the specific

importance of visuality in Yemen, data from researched conducted by the author on the social media analysis platform "Scraawl" is included.

Thirdly, once an understanding of Middle Eastern internet discourse has been established, the next part of this chapter will focus on setting out the precise approach of the thesis. Broadly, this amounts to an integrated methodological framework, consisting of CDA, DT, and Visual Discourse Tracing (VDT). CDA provides the underlying epistemological framework, and DT and VDT provide the concise methods for analysing linguistic and visual discourse. Critical methodologies are regularly critiqued as being deductive, ambiguous, and difficult to mobilise (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). LeGreco and Tracy (2009) provide a compelling refutation of this criticism. It is compelling because they do not fall into the academic pitfall of portraying traditional methodologies as archaic. Instead, they look to some of these approaches to provide a detailed roadmap for achieving the goals of CDA. They developed a methodological approach called DT, which "enables scholars to critically analyse the power relations associated with change and proceed with a systematic data analysis process that is accessible and transparent" (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009, 17). This deals with the two main critiques of CDA, that it is vague and that it cannot accurately map developments across time. Similarly, VDT, a model constructed around Wang's (2014) framework for visual analysis, provides a clear and concise model for analysis of visual discourse.

Fourthly, the chapter details the quantitative data collection methods. This thesis uses a variety of different sources to help in the analysis of discourse. Significant research has been

done to identify a number of news websites, which have strong connections to the Saudi and Iranian regimes. Also, a number of prominent Saudi and Iranian accounts have been identified on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. This thesis will use evidence to test the pre-eminence of sectarian, alienating, and "othering" rhetoric during particularly volatile moments in Yemen. The justification for this approach comes from previous research, specifically Siegel's work, which showed that specific events, such as Operation Decisive Storm, produced particularly "dramatic surges in the volume of online sectarian rhetoric" (Siegel, 2015, 1). Disinformation and propaganda were widespread across a number of different, yet connected, ideas to sectarian identity at these times.

3.2 *Summarising Critical Discourse Analysis*

*Audience, production of texts, and interaction*

CDA was created during a time in which the majority of news still came from newspapers, television, and radio. The methodological approach was formed prior to the creation of the Internet. Thus, understandings of elite discourse were more straightforward than are seen today (Wæver., 1989). It is important here to point out that CDA theorists, from the beginning, have not seen the role of the listener, or audience, as passive. This is an advantage CDA as a methodology has over ST as a theoretical framework. Critical discourse analysts claim that in order to develop a full picture of the realities of a particular discourse, the study of the interests of the powerful is equally important as the study of "the social structures and

processes within which individuals or groups as social historical subjects, create meanings in their interaction with texts" (Wodak, 2009, 4). Thus, meaning is created through discourse by interplaying behaviours between the powerful and the powerless.

This understanding enables one to understand the way that CDA theorists broke analysis down into three distinct levels. Fairclough's levels were: the production of texts, the text itself, and the reception of texts (2003). The production of texts, if understood in ST terminology, was the remit of the aggressors, the media itself, who are understood as being closely connected to state elites. The reception of texts, if understood in similar terminology, consisted of the audience, or the general public. Whilst CDA has never treated the audience as passive, they were not considered an involved party in the development of the text itself. Rather, they are understood as attributing the text with further meaning based upon their reception and engagement. Broadly speaking, this worked when analysing newspaper articles and radio transmissions. However, with the all-pervasive influence of social media, ideas of "authorship and authority in texts needs to be rethought" (Bouvier and Machin, 2018, 179).

*Power*

Despite this, many of the original understandings behind CDA are significant for this study. CDA is concerned primarily with power relations, in terms of their production and reproduction. As van Dijk put it, CDA aims to shed light on "social problems, and especially the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination" (2001, 96). As this chapter will explain, elite discourse, most commonly spread by the media,

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is loaded with a series of ideological dispositions. These dispositions are targeted at specific audiences as tools of legitimization. State-sponsored rhetoric consists of an "act of controlling and constraining the contributions of the non-powerful participants in society" (Ramathan and Bee Hoon, 2015, 2).

This may appear a generalised, or somewhat radical view when applied to the western context. In liberal democracies there are explicit constitutional protections for the freedom of the press, for instance. Many herald the media as a democratising force, which holds the powerful to account, rather than legitimises their abuses of power (Habermas, 1989; Baker, 2002). However, Herman and Chomsky's (1988) understanding of the media casts doubt over this positive view.

There is, in the west, a media elite. Scholars argue that they have more control than ever, with their newfound domination of social media (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2017). However, true control of information thus lies with the state, and the media must extract that information from them. A relationship must exist between the two for the media to function. Herman and Chomsky (1988) claim that this means western media refrain from producing content that is overtly damning of the state. However, in a democratic society, there is room for free and open debate, without a fear of retribution. For instance, mainstream media sources the New York Times (Mazzetti and Schmidt, 2013) and *The Guardian* (2013) ran detailed stories reporting the revelations of US whistle-blower Edward Snowden. These revelations were incredibly damning of the US government and state system.

In the contemporary context, Herman and Chomsky's understanding makes more sense when applied to autocratic states in the Middle East. In Saudi Arabia and Iran, without even a functional principle of a free press, mainstream media channels are effectively dominated by the state. In his study of Iranian and Arab newspaper headlines, in reference to the Yemeni war, Abdi concluded that 'mass media is in the service of politics' (Abdi and Basarati, 2016, 47).

*Legitimisation/Ideology*

Van Dijk's (1993) ideological square continues to function as a simple tool for spotting media manipulation and propaganda. As Abdi and Basarati point out, identification of Middle Eastern propaganda continues to fall within this framework, as social media posts continue to "focus on the negative side of Others actions on the one hand, and illuminate positive parts of Ours on the other hand" (2016, 50). Van Dijk's (1993) ideological square says that articles of propaganda tend to exhibit at least one of the following behaviours:

1) Emphasise positive things about us.
2) Emphasise negative things about them.
3) De-emphasize negative things about us.
4) De-emphasize positive things about them.

This framework bears marked resemblance to Chomsky's analysis on the reporting of particular atrocities in Manufacturing Consent (1988). He looks at a variety of different conflicts, including the Vietnam War, to show how selective reporting frames particular states' involvement as positive. Omission, or what is not said, is also a significant part of this process (Abdulmajid, 2019, 29). The decisions made about what is contained and not contained are of acute importance when attempting to understand the nature of legitimising discourses.

Furthermore, understanding the production of texts as a power-laden process, in which the media and the state elite are deeply intertwined, helps to overcome the binary distinctions of ST. This particularly pertains to the tendency of ST to treat functional actors as separate entities (Buzan et al., 1998). Fairclough (2003), like Herman and Chomsky (1988), believes that media outlets are so closely connected to state elite narratives, that we can treat them, not as separate, but as a unified unit of analysis. This thesis' understands analysis of state-sponsored rhetoric as an integrated, inter-penetrating process, enabling:

[T]he illumination of some of the shifting relations between and across multiple actors and media, rather than having them off into separate decontextualized zones for analysis, as though they existed in isolation (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015,1325).

The media is the primary tool for the dissemination of ideological discourse, which legitimises the behaviour of state actors.

These sentiments are echoed by the idea of mediatisation, especially in the context of the Yemen war. Mediatisation is here defined as "the process by which warfare is increasingly

embedded in and penetrated by the media, such that to plan, wage, legitimize, assuage, historicize, remember, and to imagine war requires attention to that media and its uses" (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015, 1323). These approaches have provided the motivation for focusing on digital media across the Internet to analyse Saudi Arabia and Iran's discourse surrounding Yemen.

*Context*

Context, and its central importance to the understanding of textual meaning, is the key area in which CDA differs from prior forms of discourse analysis. Harris (1952) and Mitchell (1957) are emblematic figures in the study of phonology. They focused primarily on sentence structure, and understanding the complexities of meaning that can be ascertained from textual analysis alone. This is a pattern that continued for a good part of the 20th Century, with Hymes (1972) alluding to the need for a more universal, contextual, social, and interactive theory of speech acts, but failing to offer a detailed framework suitable for the study of social sciences.

There has been a need, especially within the social sciences, to understand discourse in a contextual manner. CDA filled this void, with Halliday (1978) providing the impetus for its development. He acknowledged that language acts as an expression of social processes, as well as a metaphor for them (Halliday, 1978, 3). Thus, it is wrong to analyse language purely in its textual form. We must look outwardly, to understand the influence of social practices, institutions, and identities on the production of discourse. As Fairclough argued, "we can

attribute causal affects to linguistic forms but only through a careful account of meaning and context" (2003, 13).

To try to understand the development of sectarian discourse within Saudi-Iranian relations, solely through systematically unpacking sentence structure, would not make sense. That is not to say that textual analysis is redundant. It is a necessary part of understanding the realities of language and imbuing it with meaning. However, it is not sufficient to understand such complex realities. This is true for the majority of political analysis, but especially so when it comes to analysing state-sponsored rhetoric on the Internet. On social media for instance, tweets cannot be unpacked without being "understood both in the context of what the original tweets were used to do, and in terms of what the journalists or news outlets used them for" (Bouvier and Machin, 2018, 184).

Thus, in understanding political discourse, a form of ethnography is essential. Ley defines ethnography as methodology which "is concerned to make sense of the actions and intentions of people as knowledgeable agents; indeed, more properly it attempts to make sense of their making sense of the events and opportunities confronting them in everyday life" (1988, 121). When it comes to analysing social media posts, it is not as simple a task as that facing the anthropologist, who can go into a community and observe their subjects with their own eyes. Understanding the identities of the institutions and individuals behind tweets is a complex task, which relies upon looking at recurring themes across a particular social media account. LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) notion of DT can aid the researcher in this project.

The importance they place on context, like CDA, is essential in developing what Marc Owen

Jones (2019) refers to as an "automatography". This seeks to understand discourse within the

particular technodiscursive realities of social media (Oprea, 2019). 'Technodiscursive' refers

to the particular form of socio-digital exchanges, which are non-linear, collaborative, loaded

with forms of digital tools, and often contain images (Oprea, 2019). This considers the

realities of textual production, which are specific to digital media. Actually, knowing the

person behind a tweet, post, article, or nefarious media platform is not always possible, but

one can get an overall impression of their character, and the likelihood of their connection to

state elites. Whilst it is a difficult task, the twin processes of CDA and DT can make it

possible to construct a picture of the ideological standpoints from relatively subtle

mechanisms and devices. Looking at alternative constructions of the same reality, such as

different media reports, is a helpful strategy (Carvalho, 2008, 170). This, along with the

contextual chapters, which characterise the specific realities affecting Saudi and Iranian

discourse, will provide for a holistic, contextually-grounded analysis.

## 3.3 Contemporary realities of discourse

*Discourse analysis in the digital age*

Due to the explosion of social media during the diffused era, linear analysis is no longer

relevant, when it comes to analysing Internet discourse. The relationship between author and

audience has become difficult to establish methodologically, as "content and applications are

no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all

users in a participatory and collaborative function" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, 61). However, there is also a second, deeper issue, which has made a revised approach to CDA of central importance.

The world has now entered a third stage of mediatisation, the arrested period. Hoskins et al. refer to this new reality as deeply sinister – "professional media and military institutions have arrested the once-chaotic social media dynamics and more efficiently harnessed them for their own ends through new understandings, strategies, and experiments" (2015, 1320). This is true across many states in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt. There is a whole school of social media theory, which argues that, rather than freeing citizens from the hegemony of state-sponsored discourse, social media has now been co-opted by the elite, to indoctrinate the people in a more vehement and sinister way than ever before (Morozov, 2009; Seo, 2014; Siegel, 2015). Interestingly, the thinkers mentioned above all specialise in analysing social media within the context of the Middle East, in which control of social media has become particularly acute, in response to the regime insecurity generated by the Arab Spring.

In the broadcast era, identifying Saudi and Iranian propaganda was a fairly straightforward task. It was normally overt and blatant. Now, the task has become covert and complicated. Far from liberating and democratising media, digital media has revived ancient navigational functions, amounting to the end goal of deference towards particular leaders. Put simply, digital media "point us in space and time, index our data, and keep us on the grid" (Durham

Peters, 2015, 7). This makes it easy for autocratic governments to control their publics. Ironically, it has the opposite effect for researchers. Establishing agency to regime-sponsored media sources is a complicated task.

*Proving* that certain Twitter accounts or hashtags are connected to a particular regime is difficult. This is because there are endless ways of identity masking, such as the use of virtual private networks, and bots. In reality, this thesis lands at attributing a sense of likelihood that social media accounts are connected to particular regimes. In the modern reality of social media, discourse analysts have to navigate the multimodal nature of state-sponsored propaganda, in order to establish "how ideologies are disseminated across such bundles of activity" (Bouvier and Machin, 2018, 185). For this reason, when analysing discourse on social media, innovation around the framework of CDA is essential.

In terms of the Middle East specifically, there has been limited research into social media dynamics. Marc Owen Jones pioneered this new approach in his study of the Saudi-Bahraini relationship (2016) and the Saudi-Qatari Gulf Crisis (2019). However, there are few studies which compare Saudi and Iranian discourse across digital media. Furthermore, there is yet to be research that makes an outright attempt to go beyond the tracking of tweets. In other words, no holistic study of Middle Eastern securitisation, which understands discourse in relation to those in power, has yet been realised. As Jones acknowledges:

While metadata and the content of the tweets can offer important clues about who pulls the strings, the difficult yet important quest to find the puppet masters will involve a close examination of the relationships between organizations, governments, and individuals (2019, 1410).

As mentioned in the context section, this thesis aims to shed more light on the specific context of sectarian discourse on social media, through providing what we may call an 'automatography'.

*The Importance of the Visual*

On social media, the specific impact of the visual as a tool of propaganda has become acutely realised. Seo's (2014) study of the Israel-Hamas conflict of 2012 demonstrated that Middle Eastern countries use visceral images of death to support their war efforts. Bouvier and Machin later added to this understanding of the use of imagery in the Middle East, stating that 'it has been observed that conflict images often depict children as part of signifying breakdown, and to resonate with Western readers' (2018, 180). The power of the visual is especially acute amongst particular demographics in the Middle East, where levels of literacy are low.

The initial findings of this thesis from Scraawl identified the tendency for images of dead and dying children, often accompanied by sectarian slogans, to be used in reaction to the war in Yemen. Between 11th-18th March 2020, a search was run on Scraawl, a social media analysis platform, to pick up 5000 of the most popular posts containing both the words "Yemen" and "Saudi" (Scraawl, 2020). Of these 5000 posts, 236 contained pictures. Almost all of these pictures focused on the human impacts of the Saudi campaign, with 74.7% of the tweets

coming from Yemen. Approximately 24.2% of the pictures contained images of actual dead or dying children. Many of the others contained political cartoons and propaganda. Overall, there is a consensus that "images shared via social media served as powerful propaganda tools during conflicts" (Seo, 2014, 150). Together, these findings mean that the significance of the visual cannot be ignored in any study of contemporary propaganda networks in the Middle East.

CDA conventionally focuses too heavily on language, and the context surrounding its production and reception. Thus, conventional CDA alone cannot understand the visual. As Wang noted – "in more than 20 years' development of CDA, it has mainly focused on verbal texts, and ignored the visual as secondary to verbal texts" (2014, 265). With the interdisciplinary spirit of this thesis in mind, there is therefore a necessity to look to visual culture and media studies for a systematic method of analysing the visual. Fortunately, this is a task that has already been started.

Schlag (2016), provided a framework for analysing the visual, catered specifically for those studying international relations and security studies. In doing so, she uses the principles of CDA as justification for emphasising the essential necessity of including the visual within research. Images now form a significant part of propaganda campaigns on digital media platforms, used as a way of establishing self/other belief systems, to justify certain policies. They form a crucial part in the construction, and maintenance, of particular identities. It is therefore perplexing that IR largely ignores the visual as "symbolic forms do themselves

constitute meaning and cannot be reduced to the spoken or written word alone" (Schlag, 2016, 181).

That images are impactful as a tool of propaganda is an uncontroversial topic. What is uncertain is what gives the visual its particular power. Hansen (2011) was the first scholar to provide an examination of the specific power images can have as tools of securitisation. For Hansen, images are distinct from discourse due to their "immediacy, circulability, and ambiguity" (2011, 55). They are immediate, because images elicit an immediate emotional response, which is not the case with texts. Going back to the example of images of suffering – when one sees an image of this nature the emotivity of the image affects the viewer straight away. However, Hansen did not go as far as explaining the added dimension that social media brings to the concept of immediacy. Not only are images immediate in eliciting an emotional response, but social media is also set up in a way where one can be exposed to images without any foresight whatsoever. Thus, "the possibility of seeing – even if one decides not to – is in itself an important condition" (Hansen, 2011, 57).

This directly relates to Hansen's second classification: circulability. This explains the rapid dispersion of images. Images, even before social media, spread rapidly across the world (James Der Derian, 1992, 134). One only has to hear the term 'Napalm Girl' to envisage that picture and understand its context within the context of the Vietnam War. Once they enter the public realm, visceral and disturbing images have a unique ability to find a place in the consciences of people internationally.

Immediacy and circulability are well formed, and highly relevant ideas, which are applicable to the study of sectarian propaganda in the Middle East. However, Hansen's idea of images as ambiguous is not as relevant. Of course, captions of images help to imbue the visual with a specific message. However, this is not to say that human beings are not capable of extracting meaning from an image without the aid of the written word. This is particularly true of images of suffering. The 'Tank Man' picture at Tiananmen square explains a lot, and elicits a lot of emotion, purely within its stand-alone visuality. In the image, a lone civilian man stands in front of a formation of Chinese tanks following Beijing's violent suppression of the Tiananmen protests. The contrast between militaristic authoritarianism and peaceful defiance is so clear that words are not required.

Nevertheless, CDA can guide researchers broadly in terms of the philosophy of analysis of images. Just as with discourse, visual propaganda, and the way in which images are cropped, framed, and presented, consists of an intention to sustain power relations via producing a particular representation of an issue to an audience. Images can be used to construct an artificial, political, and ideological representation of "the truth". Researchers can look to CDA's emphasis on context to help situate the visual within the overall outlook of state-sponsored propaganda. Methodologically, it is important to remain critically aware of the various ways in which pictures can be artificially edited and framed to create ideologically loaded meaning. Images should never be taken at face value.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to develop a specific methodological approach for the analysis of visual propaganda. Researchers into multimodality have made concerted attempts to bridge this gap, between discourse analysis on the one hand, and the multimodal approach on the other (Baldry, 2000; O'Halloran, 2004; van Leeuwen, 2006). Multimodal discourses refer to those "discourses which involve more than one mode of semiosis" (O'Halloran, 2004). In 2020, social media networks such as Instagram are structured entirely around the sharing of images and video, often accompanied by captions, which themselves can be words, pictures, emojis, gifs, and a whole variety of other forms of semiosis. Multimodal researchers have become increasingly concerned with the way elites are using these images as tools of disinformation to instil fear amongst populations.

Reid (2019) discusses the way in which the image of the 'Breaking Point' poster spread across social media during the 2016 UK European Referendum. The image in question was of a line of exclusively non-white migrants walking towards the front of the poster. Reid's concern is that "imagery like this cultivates an environment where some citizens cannot participate fully in politics, especially when it is deployed by actors with perceived authority" (Reid, 2019, 624). However, this may have been an intended effect, as it specifically targeted an ethnically white audience, preying on long-standing fears around immigration, to secure support for the Brexit vote. Political propagandists are aware of their audiences, and target their imagery to appeal to their sentiments, biases, and prejudices. Images, as discussed, have immediacy to them. Also, human beings have a tendency to ascribe a certain degree of truth to photographs, which they do not ascribe to words. This image, rather than instigating

debate, manipulatively simplifies discussion around immigration into a picture intended to establish an us vs. them mentality.

In the Middle East, visceral imagery is abundant across social media (Fahmy, 2005; Seo, 2014). This would require an integration of CDA with multimodal research. Kay O'Halloran (2004) suggested that, if achieved, we might call this methodology "systemic multimodal discourse analysis". Wang (2014) noticed that there was a growing need to apply the central ethic of CDA to analysis of the visual. That is, that power-laden discourse must be analysed to show how it affects the individual's right to self-determination and agency. As Wodak wrote, CDA is a necessity, in choosing the: "perspective of those who suffer, and critically analyses the language use of those in power, who are responsible for the existence of inequalities and who also have the means and opportunity to improve conditions" (Wodak, 2009, 9)

Wang argued that, so far, attempts at applying this ethos to the visual have made the mistake of being "more critical-analysis-oriented than CDA-oriented… it does not sufficiently apply mainstream theoretical paradigms of CDA to visual analysis" (Wang, 2014, 266). The model he constructed in answer proved highly influential to this thesis' method of VDT. This is outlined in the 'Methodological Framework' section.

*Critical Discourse Analysis and The Middle East*

Middle Eastern "sectarian" discourse is the particular focus of this thesis. As is the case with many methodologies, CDA originated from a collection of scholars focused on explaining Eurocentric realities. It looked, most famously, at ideas of capitalism in western societies (Fairclough, 2003). Themes here include ideas of class, profession, and gender. When looking at under-researched digital discourses, such as sectarian identity, it is paramount to identify their specific character. That is not to say that there is anything inherently volatile or negative about sectarian identity. Rather it is to say that there is a specific nature to sectarian discourse and identity in the Middle East, and that there is a way in which certain types of alienating sectarian identity can be converted into appealing narratives for non-Muslim international audiences.

Developing a methodology suited to analysis of the Middle East is essential here. If one uses CDA critically, one can pinpoint the assumptions which are not relevant, as well as those which are. In this sense, CDA can be of significant benefit when looking at the Middle East. Furthermore, the deductive logic of applying ST is of merit. At the same time, the thesis acknowledges that "accusations of bias are not uncommon in the social sciences" (Hammersley and Gomm, 1997). This thesis has done sufficient work to innovate around particular presumptions of the theoretical and methodological perspectives used, to make them as balanced and as relevant as possible to the cases at hand.

Sensitivity to these issues is particularly important due to the positionality of the researcher. As a white male western academic, particular attention needs to be paid to biases (conscious and unconscious) that may have steered the research in an orientalist direction. Edward Said warned specifically of stamping the subject with an otherness and adopting "an essentialist conception of the countries, nations and peoples" (1978, 97). Many of the theories and methodologies discussed above were predominantly created in the west. As such, there needs to be careful sensitivity to the resonance of these ideas to the Middle East. This thesis has endeavoured to look at the context of the Yemen War first, before seeing which theories (in what form) apply.

This was especially true in the previous chapter, Sectarianism, Sectarian Identity, and Sectarianisation. Here, a detailed understanding of sectarian identity was provided to ensure that the discourse analysis is sufficiently grounded, to make it relevant to the case-studies at hand. It is important to state that this thesis sees sectarian identity as a multi-faceted ideation, which has doctrinal, subnational, national, and transnational faces. For the purposes of this study, the doctrinal face is the least important, as the specific strength of deductive international relations theory is that "can tell us much about sectarian identity in foreign policy and geopolitics" (Haddad, 2020, 88). Furthermore, the subnational, national, and transnational are particularly relevant when analysing the state-centric media of the Middle East.

As pertains to the methodological framework, this section's critical revision of CDA has created the epistemological foundation block, from which the more specific methodological projects are built. DT and VDT, the latter of which has been developed through an adaptation of Wang (2014), provide concise methods for analysing linguistic and visual discourse. Both are imbued with CDA's aim of unlocking meaning hidden within discourse. This section's innovations have updated this ethos, suiting it to the technodiscursive, visual, and regional nature of this thesis. There is no separation between CDA, DT, and VDT within the ensuing research – the three work together as an integrated methodological approach.

### *3.4 Methodological framework: Discourse Tracing and Visual Discourse Tracing*

Whilst some of the Eurocentric focuses of early CDA have been critiqued, Fairclough's (2003) overall method, seeing discourse as a three-dimensional field of analysis, will be implemented. It is important to note that these three levels are not treated as entirely distinct, and often overlap and permeate into one another. Broadly, the three areas of analysis are description, interpretation, and explanation. This aims to bring together three different traditions:

[C]lose textual and linguistic analysis within linguistics, the sociological tradition of analysing social practice in relation to social structures, and the interpretivist… tradition of seeing social practice as something which people actively produce… on the basis of shared commonsense procedures (Abdi and Basarati, 2016, 41).

For each collection of articles or social media data, grouped together by time periods, these three key areas will form the structural basis of analysis. For example, when looking at tweets, it is important to critically *describe* the particular realities of sectarian language being

used. However, one cannot treat the words in isolation. The analysis has to interpret these

particular terms. This goes back to CDA's focus on context. In order to conceptualise the use

of these terms, the researcher must look at the prevailing common-sense assumptions of the

particular time, to see how the text is interpreted. The explanatory level looks to the power

structures involved in the dissemination of this discourse. This thesis will look at the

intertwined purpose of state elites and the media, to show how they protect their security, and

legitimise their extraordinary foreign policy measures.

DT appears to be immediately loaded with irreconcilable contradictions. For decades,

discourse analysis and process tracing have been described as opposites. Post-structuralism,

rather than hindering, has helped LeGreco and Tracy (2009) to break down this unfair binary.

In doing so, they have provided a concise, functional methodology for understanding the

development of discourse across time. CDA is useful for analysing specific instances of

discourse, in line with the three-level approach of Fairclough (2003). Process tracing, of the

likes of George and Bennett (2005), is defined as "a method that identifies causal processes

across time and space… offers some useful language for analysis, including their method of

structured, focused comparison" (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009, 21). Integrating that central idea

allows for a process of discourse analysis that can map the progression of discourse

chronologically. DT also integrates the data-focused framework of qualitative content

analysis within their succinct approach (Altheide, 1987; Berg, 1995).

DT provides a clear, step-by-step guideline for the analysis of discourse across time, especially relevant in the pursuit of contextualising the development of sectarian rhetoric in the New Middle East Cold War. The process of DT is as follows:

1) Define the case around a particular rupture point, and review the literature on the topic.

2) Gather micro data (news articles and tweets), meso data (e.g. governmental foreign policy documents), and macro data (contextual information). Following this, data should be ordered chronologically, before reading it through and identifying recurrent themes.

3) Create structured questions around these themes, and then write up the case study based upon the answers to these questions.

4) Address the overall theoretical conclusions of the case and develop practical implications for future research.

This thesis' approach of Visual Discourse Tracing (VDT) shares many similarities with DT. Borrowing from Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) understanding of 'visual grammar', Wang presented a three-step process for visual analysis.

Step 1: Visual design – this entails a close analysis of the actualities of the image. Examples of this would include the scene depicted, the characters involved, and the actions occurring. This is similar to Fairclough's (2003) process of description of language.

Step 2: Visual interpretation – this is an adaptation of Fairclough's (2003) second stage of interpretation. This focuses on three stages of analysis – production, distribution, and consumption: "during 'production', producers… are the main focus; 'distribution' focuses on how the news media disseminate ideologies…; and 'consumption' is concerned with how viewers unconsciously assimilate the ideology" (Wang, 2014, 269).

Step 3: Visual explanation –this applies Fairclough's (2003) framework for contextual understanding to the visual. This looks to the wider social practices that go into the presentation of the visual, for instance the particularities of sectarianisation and regime securitisation.

This framework works well to analyse instances of visual propaganda, found across Saudi and Iranian media and social media platforms. Nevertheless, it is important to account for the technodiscursive realities of the Internet, and the varying primacy and spreadability of images. Furthermore, it is essential to remember the particular nature and importance of the visual within the Middle Eastern context. To this end, in the paper 'How to analyse visual propaganda in the Middle East', Walsh made several innovations to Wang's model. The first two additions came as supplements to Step 3:

"Innovation A: It is important at this stage to consider the idea of frame, or narrative. Borrowed from semiotic analysis, this concept refers to "a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, 143). Awareness of prominent narratives is important, as it allows for better understanding of purpose and meaning" (Walsh, 2022, 7).

"Innovation B: To be comprehensive, research projects should consider the specificities of these relevant identities, for example, sectarian identity in the Middle East. This requires significant analysis of data and literature, as well as theoretical innovation" (Walsh, 2022, 7).

The author also added an additional step, Step 4. Walsh named this step 'Omission', encouraging researchers to ask themselves "what is missing?". One way of doing this is to think about visual depictions that would change the tone, truth, or nature of the image and what impact this would have on the responses of viewers. Another, more nuanced, tool that Walsh (2022) references is called the commutation test. In short, "by substituting various elements in your mind's eye… it is possible to build a more nuanced understanding of each to the overall meaning of the image and its dependence on cultural codes and myths" (Hansen et al., 1998, 213). For instance, researchers can imagine substituting alienating cartoons constructed to undermine the enemy with cartoons of the leaders of the propagandizing country – to see how the meaning would change. Overall, the idea of omission, or what is not shown, is crucial for this thesis's understanding of framing, propaganda, and securitisation and has been integrated into those chapters that conduct VDT.

This consideration of omission is also relevant to the chapters more focused on linguistic discourse. It is not just about what is said, but what is not said. This idea possesses prescient meaning within the character of Saudi and Iranian propaganda. With these innovations to Wang's model, the overall method is referred to as VDT. VDT, whilst influenced heavily by

Wang (2014), is a new, updated, model for conducting visual analysis within security and propaganda studies. It constitutes a unique contribution to knowledge.

Together, CDA, DT, and VDT work as three prongs of an integrated methodological framework for unpacking meaning in linguistic and visual discourse.

*3.5 Data Types and Collection Methods*

This thesis adopts an eclectic approach to sources, spanning a range of digital media formats. A number of prominent Saudi and Iranian news platforms have been identified, which are closely associated with the ruling regimes of those countries. These are easier to analyse than content on social media, as it is easier to prove these websites' connection to the ruling elite. Furthermore, these sources, fall within the elite power focus of CDA. Here, state-sponsored media push rhetoric in one direction. The majority of these websites do not allow the opportunity for audience participation. This means that audiences do not play a significant role in the formation of the discourse itself; rather, they ascribe meaning to it with their reception. Furthermore, with Middle Eastern news sites, it is also easier to get a representative understanding of the make-up of the target audience than it is on social media. Many of these websites are targeted at international or broad regional audiences, using the English language.

Speeches by elites have also been considered, as they help to contextualise the overarching meta-narratives, which then appear in news articles and tweets. Key themes are identified, logged, and presented in tables throughout the analysis chapters. These speeches have been

made available through transcription and YouTube videos, translated into the English language by sources close to the regimes.

Data has also been collected from Twitter accounts, including that of Ayatollah Khamenei. Although it can be fairly surmised that Khamenei himself is not in charge of actually typing out the tweets, the account is representative of the discourse contained within his speeches, and is at the very least, controlled by close and trusted advisors. Tweets are especially useful as Twitter restricts them to two-hundred and eighty characters. They therefore contain a condensed summation of securitisation narratives. Furthermore, their reception can be traced through examining numbers of comments and shares. They also often include visuality, a core focus of this thesis.

Visual data has been collected from Twitter, YouTube, and state-backed news platforms. Both still and moving images are considered, to highlight the specific value of the visual within processes of securitisation. As previously discussed, visuality has an emotivity and immediacy that creates a visceral impact within its audiences. The data considered in this thesis focuses on highly propagandised, violent, and alienating visual propaganda – highlighting the extraordinary lengths Iran and Saudi Arabia went to in securitising the Yemen War. Many instances of visuality are accompanied with linguistic securitisation narratives, so processes of DT and VDT are often integrated within chapters.

In each of the analysis chapters, several key events from the Yemen conflict will be analysed

in detail, tracing the content, spreadability, and reception of the dissemination of sectarian and 'othering' propaganda across elite speeches, social media, and news sites in Saudi Arabia and Iran. The emphasis of CDA to look at context will provide an ethnographic understanding of why these spikes in propagandised rhetoric are unusual, and worth considering. As the narratives develop, and are actualised in American and Houthi discourse, consideration of the meaning-making impact of these elite audiences are also considered. As such, data is also included from American and Houthi news platforms.

The first analysis chapter, Chapter Six, analyses the core Saudi securitisation narratives, which served to justify Operation Decisive Storm (ODS) in the early days of the conflict. It includes official documents such as statements from the Saudi-led coalition, excerpts from interviews conducted with then Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel al-Jubeir, press releases from the US Department of State, and the responses of international institutions such as the UN. Together, these data types work to contextualise the narrative starting point, from which Saudi propaganda developed over the rest of the Yemen War. It also provides insight into the ways in which the international community reciprocated these ideas. As one of Saudi Arabia's core assets in its project of international securitisation, Adel al-Jubeir's discourse is the best representative of Riyadh's attempts to justify ODS in 2015. To provide some indication of the sectarian elements of this process, some brief data is included from Saudi state-controlled news platforms *Al-Arabiya* and *Arab News*, as well as some tweets from radical Saudi clerics. These speak to initial Saudi attempts at sectarianising the Yemen War.

Chapter Seven works to contextualise Tehran's securitisation narratives, in response to ODS. It considers data from all of Khamenei's speeches that mentioned Yemen in 2015, as well as all of his tweets that do the same. This is crucial, as it shows the character of the process of 'othering' that begins at the top of the Islamic Republic, before gradually filtering down into the wider propaganda nexus. Further down the line are Press TV, an IRIB-controlled Iranian news platform, who reciprocated Khamenei's discourse and amplified it, spreading it across the Internet to an international audience. A high number of articles have been analysed in order to trace this process.

Chapter Eight integrates visual and linguistic discourse analysis, to show the acceleration of discursive reciprocity between Riyadh and Washington under US President Donald Trump. It focuses specifically on one key event – The Riyadh Conference in May 2017. It considers speeches from the Trump Administration, responses from Saudi officials, and visual data (pictures) from the conference and the other moments of Trump's visit. Combining these different data types, from Saudi and US sources, is crucial in highlighting the nature of their reciprocal positionality. The data works to characterise Trump as a Saudi sectarian actor, crucial to the continuing international securitisation of their intervention in Yemen.

Chapter Nine considers data from IUVM, a nefarious network established by the IRIB. The chapter is primarily concerned with visual analysis. The images are drawn from a copycat Twitter account 'IUVM Pixel EN", which has a small number of followers. This was the only

way to easily access IUVM content, as most of the webpages and social media accounts have been removed by the FBI and Twitter. However, to prove their connection to the IRIB and wider IUVM platform, the images were backdated using reverse image search tools. These images show the extremities of Iranian propaganda, that sought to conspire against Saudi Arabia, undermining their intervention in Yemen. IUVM, through its various incarnations, has had websites in a whole array of languages, aiming to cast as wide a net as possible. The English-language platforms have been by far the most popular, speaking to Iranian attempts at international securitisation.

Chapter Ten contains a comprehensive dataset from the Houthi's *Al-Masirah* news platform. This data is used to analyse the Houthi response to the strikes on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities in Saudi Arabia. *Al-Masirah* is especially useful here as it shows the increasing reciprocity between Houthi and Iranian discourse. In fact, many of the *Al-Masirah* articles are direct copies from IRIB-controlled *Press TV* and *Mehr News*. Some are copies of articles from the wider Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus, quoting sources from Hezbollah's *Al-Manar.* The chapter also contains visual analysis of a video, created by the Houthis, but shared by Iran's *Press TV*, detailing a Houthi victory over Saudi forces. This specific video is important because it is a core example of Houthi militarism, exaggerating international threat perception.

Finally, Chapter Eleven uses data from *Arab News* to trace the way in which Saudi Arabia attempted to cover-up its involvement in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. As a state-ran news

organisation, which specifically targets international audiences using the English language, *Arab News* is key to Riyadh's processes of securitisation. *Arab News* works as the perfect source here, as it reflects Saudi elite-level discourse throughout this period. Consideration of a large number of articles, from the months following the Khashoggi affair, works to detail Riyadh's slippery and unsuccessful attempts at maintaining its international credibility. In turn, this had a negative impact for its intervention in Yemen, drawing criticism from across the international community.

Data from large numbers of articles from specific state-ran news sites and social media have been systematically collated, in line with the approach of DT. This falls under "micro-data", within LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) model. "Meso data", official documents and speeches, and "Macro data", contextual information, are used to analyse the key frames that appear across these data-sets - detailing the impact they had on the overarching discourse, and how that influenced the war in Yemen. It is through DT and VDT, that the prevalence of these frames across collected datasets is contextualised, analysed, and used to answer the thesis' research questions. Fundamentally, they facilitate an answer to the question:

*How have Saudi Arabia and Iran used digital propaganda to legitimise and frame their involvement in Yemen to international audiences?*

*Conclusion*

This chapter has set out the precise framework for quantitatively collecting, and qualitatively analysing the data. This involves the integration of CDA, DT, and VDT. The principles of these methodologies have been adapted to fit the particular realities of Internet discourse in the Middle East. It has also defined the key forms of data collection across news websites and social media. The following chapter provides a background to the case study, providing a historical contextual framework through which to conduct this analysis. It considers the Iranian-Saudi rivalry prior to the Arab Spring, tracing the development of real and discursive animosities.

## Chapter Four
### *Iranian-Saudi Relations Prior to 2011*

This chapter examines the historical development of sectarianisation, and similar forms of "othering" propaganda, and their contemporary use by Iran and Saudi Arabia. The history shows that the characterisation of the enmity between Riyadh and Tehran as one of resurgent ancient hatreds is simplistic and misguided. The chapter characterises the fundamental ideology of the Islamic Republic as a regional alternative to westernisation. As such, their processes of securitisation focus primarily on narratives of anti-Westernism. This is supported by their networks of propagandised news websites, such as IUVM (Stubbs and Bing, 2018). This is further compounded by their extensive use of proxies in regional conflicts. Riyadh's economic and security interests are deeply intertwined with the US. Whilst they also target regional audiences, there is a continual focus on legitimising foreign policy to the West, especially within the context of the Yemen conflict (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018).

The chapter also gives some consideration to the pre-revolution period, characterised by 'positive engagement and collaboration between the two countries' (Menshawy and Mabon, 2021). It is important to understand this historical period, to show its stark contrast with the post-revolution climate. There is a modern temptation to refer to the Iranian-Saudi relationship as inherently antagonistic, but this was not always the case. Prior to 1979, there was tension, but it was largely contained within the realm of economic competition.

Following the Iranian revolution, tension grew and metastasized into one of struggle, "for political, economic and military supremacy and religious legitimacy" (van der Heiden and Krijger, 2018, 11). Thus, this chapter's core focus is on events from the Iranian revolution in 1979 onwards. The revolution, alongside other events that year, were the catalysts for the development of a deepening regional contempt that came to inform processes of sectarianisation.

This chapter is not concerned with providing a chronological historical account of the relationship. Instead, it consists of evaluating the development of several key trends within the Iranian-Saudi relationship, which, when analysed, help to contextualise the descent into sectarianisation, conflict, and digital warfare. As such, this chapter is not an exhaustive account of every event in Iranian-Saudi relations post-1979, but rather an analysis of the key themes that have contributed to the development of these realities. Its purpose is to provide an historical framework, through which the ensuing chapters on the conflict in Yemen can be understood.

Following analysis of the pre-1979 relationship, the role of the US will be evaluated. Prior to the revolution, Iran and Saudi Arabia represented twin regional economic pillars for Washington (Brannon, 1994). This changed dramatically after 1979. There is then a short section on the significance of regime type, which concludes that the shared monarchist systems of pre-revolution Iran and Saudi Arabia helped to facilitate alignment in foreign policy. Following this, the importance of Islamic legitimacy will be explored through the

challenge of the Islamic Republic, and the threat it posed to Saudi Arabia. This discussion is inseparable from analysis of the contested role of 'leader of the Islamic World' after 1979, the death of King Faisal's brand of pan-Islamism (Sindi, 1986), and the politicisation of sectarian identity. Throughout the chapter, consideration will be paid primarily to historical events between 1979-2011, providing a contextual framework for the ensuing chapters on the Yemen conflict. Attitudes towards Israel, Nasserism, and the Soviet Union are also analysed to characterise the sources of alliance and division.

The New Middle East Cold War, following the Arab Spring, represented the crescendo of the increasingly cacophonous rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Gause, 2014). Since 1979, tensions had flared and fluctuated between the two rival countries. These tensions are characterised by the threat the Khomeinist revolution posed to the legitimacy of the House of Saud. Here was a popular Shi'a theocratic ideologue, who championed the goals of the oppressed across the Muslim World. The Islamic Republic emerged as a nation anew, ruled for Muslims by Islam under the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist). This chapter contends that the politicisation of sectarian identity began in Riyadh, as a reaction to the threat posed by the Islamic Republic. Iran's Shi'a identity is not an insignificant part of their foreign policy decisions. However, in the early days of the Islamic Republic, pan-Islamism was the principal guiding force of international relations, to establish Khomeini as a trustworthy leader of the Islamic World (Aarabi, 2019). This was securitisation in a profoundly Middle Eastern way, used as a means to protect the regime first and national security second. Between 1979-2011, events such as the Afghan-Soviet War, Iran-Iraq War,

and the US-led invasion of Iraq have embedded processes of securitisation within the foreign policy repertoires of Tehran and Riyadh. These events have proved the short-term efficacy of sectarianisation as a tool of securitisation to both countries' state elites.

Parallel to these developments were reversions to Islamic fundamentalism in domestic policy. For Iran, Islam formed the basis of its anti-western legitimacy. For Saudi Arabia, the religious challenge posed by the Islamic Republic was compounded by the violent Wahhabi dissent displayed in the storming of the Grand Mosque on 20th November 1979, as well as the Shi'a Intifada in the Eastern Province between 26th November and 3rd December the same year. The *Mutawa* (Saudi religious police) were given more powers, women's rights were severely restricted, while access to Western art and culture were restricted (Ghattas, 2020, 74). Together, these phenomena led to the primacy of socio-religious identities which reinforced securitisation processes.

### *4.1 Iranian-Saudi Relations prior to the Islamic Revolution*

Prior to 1979, Riyadh and Tehran peacefully co-existed, with only one significant break in diplomatic relations that lasted just three years in the 1940s. This friendship was due to, and sustained by, several important factors: rhetorical pan-Islamism, fledgling oil economies, shared dynastic regimes, shared security concerns, anti-communism, and in turn, close relations with the West. Due to sharing such a multiplicity of domestic concerns and foreign interests, "[o]verall, Saudi-Iranian foreign policy and bilateral foreign relations from 1932 to 1979 were as good as could be expected" (Badeeb, 1993, 68).  They collaborated on many

issues, including efforts to counter the threat of pan-Arabism. Although they certainly had their disagreements, prior to 1979, the two nations were aligned and cooperated on many issues. Broadly speaking, this thesis agrees with the scholarly consensus that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 represented a revolution in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, from one of peaceful tolerance to one of outright hostility (Macris, 2010; Ghattas, 2020).

This is not to say that the friendship was entirely without incident. Like all relationships, there were periods of complexity, mutual distaste, and tension. Reza Shah, the first of the Pahlavi dynasty, was a known admirer of and collaborator with Nazi Germany leading up to, and during, World War II (Michael, 2021). Whilst both Iran and Saudi Arabia publicly declared neutrality, the Allies were not naïve to the Shah's true allegiance. He was forced to abdicate following the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran on 16th September 1941. It is important to remember this reality, as it helps to understand the lineage of anti-Semitism within Iranian politics, which predates the Islamic Republic. This is especially useful for understanding the domestic and regional political capital behind the Holocaust-denial of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and, conversely, the ability of Mohammed bin Salman to raise international and regional anxiety by comparing Khamenei to Hitler (Goldberg, 2018). Anti-Semitism in Iran predates the Islamic Republic. However, this is not to say that this has always translated into an antagonistic relationship with Israel. In fact, Iran had very close relations with Israel under the Shah from 1953 onwards.

Reza Shah's son and successor Mohammad Reza Shah facilitated a relationship with Israel

that lasted from the 1950s deep into the 1970s. This reached its zenith "in the wake of the

June 1967 Six-Day War when Israel convinced Iran to jointly establish the Eilat-Ashkelon

pipeline connecting the Red Sea and the Mediterranean" (Furlan, 2022, 2). There were

regular flights between Tehran and Tel Aviv (Menashri, 2006, 23). Relations between the

Savak (Iranian secret services) and Mossad (Israeli secret services) were close during this

period. By 1958, the two agencies were meeting regularly, along with the Turkish National

Security Service, to suppress Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arab movement

and the growing wall of Arab superiority (Segev, 1988, 34-36). As Kaye et al. explained:

The Mossad created a formal trilateral intelligence alliance (codenamed Trident) with Iran
and Turkey in 1958; the three countries exchanged intelligence and performed joint
counterintelligence operations. Iranian-Israeli ties, driven by Ben-Gurion and the Shah,
solidified by early 1959, and Tehran and Tel Aviv developed a close military and intelligence
relationship that would continue to expand until the Islamic revolution (2011, 11).

This did not extinguish anti-Semitism from Iranian politics, but it certainly demonstrated that

it was not official policy, as it became under the rule of the Islamic Republic.

Due to Reza Shah's alignment with the anti-Semitic Nazi Party, it is ironic that his son,

Mohammad Reza Shah, established and maintained economic ties with Israel after World

War II. The new Shah was seen by many as a puppet of the West and, as such, a defender of

their regional security interests (Saikal, 1980; Bayandor, 2019). Compared to the current

context, in which Riyadh has a de facto alliance with Israel (Rahman, 2021), it is interesting

to note that the Shah's relationship with the Jewish State was a sour point for the Kingdom,

who, at the time, depended on Arab and pan-Islamic unity as core sources of their domestic

and regional legitimacy. This was encapsulated in the Islamic Solidarity Policy of 1964. Despite differences over Israel, Iran was persuaded to sign the policy in 1965 "united by King Faisal's efforts to visit Islamic countries not only as Arab King but as the Custodian of the Holy Cities of Makkah and Madinah" (Badeeb, 1993, 58).

The modern state of Saudi Arabia was founded by the Al Saud family in 1932, who were in charge of governance, and the Al-Sheikh family, who were responsible primarily for judicial matters, in line with the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence. Within the borders of Saudi Arabia are the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. The House of Saud has had to justify its legitimacy as Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques to their people, and to the rest of the Muslim World. They continued to faced competition from the Jordanian Hashemites, who still had a claim as legitimate custodians. The Hijaz region in Saudi Arabia, which contains Mecca and Medina, used to belong to the Hashemites, provoking ongoing tensions and counterclaims. Jordan's King Abdullah was the protector of Jerusalem. From the Saudi perspective, championing the voices of oppressed Muslims was understood as an effective political tool to ensure the Islamic legitimacy of their regime, especially when it came to the Palestinian question. This was most prominent in the policies of the charismatic King Faisal.

In Iran, Reza Shah inherited an already established and reasonably sophisticated governmental system from his previous colonial rulers. Because of the Shi'a belief in the hidden Twelfth Imam, who is viewed as the only true and legitimate political leader amongst Shiites, he could not claim his legitimacy by appealing to holy sites nor to Islamic law.

Nevertheless, despite being widely acknowledged as non-religious, he recognised the importance of appeasing the majority Shi'a population by making Shi'ism the state religion. However, "he ruled despite it, not under it as Abd al-Aziz (Ibn Saud) attempted to do under Sunni Islam" (Badeeb, 1993, 41-42).

Nevertheless, shared interests, and the overarching structure of monarchy helped to mitigate differences in governmental structure and religious primacy between the two countries. The secularism of Reza Shah, and his son, was always counterbalanced with a strong understanding that they must be seen to support the cause of Islam as a tool of legitimacy. On 1st April 1924 Reza Shah proclaimed "I… have considered the care and the preservation of the glory of Islam as one of the greatest of our duties and objectives" (Ansari, 2017, 80). This knowledge was passed down to Mohammad Reza Shah, who viewed King Faisal's policies of Islamic unity as a vital tool to ensure peace between the two prime movers in the Muslim World and deter criticism about his stance on Israel.

Pan-Islamism, the antonym of militarised sectarian identity, grew as the foundation of Iranian and Saudi regional legitimacy. King Faisal was considered central to its development, attempting to solidify his legitimacy and regime security by uniting the fractious and impoverished Muslim World. Pan-Islamism was also seen as an effective way of countering the Soviet-backed pan-Arabism of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, which posed a significant threat to both Iran and Saudi Arabia. From 1964, King Faisal conducted a tour of the Islamic World, aiming to heal divisions and remind the wider population that they were united by

their faith. This resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Solidarity Policy of 1964. The following year he visited Iran and established the Iran-Arab Friendship Association. On 9th November 1968 the Shah called Faisal "*Amir al-Maminin*" (Fürtig, 2006), or 'Prince of Believers'.

The concord between Iran and Saudi Arabia was partially explained by a profound fear of the rise of President Nasser's pan-Arabism, which had some support from the Soviet Union, and posed a serious threat to the future of monarchical rule in the region. This fear was most visibly expressed in their joint efforts to reinstate the Imamate in Yemen, following the Nasser-backed coup of September 1962 which overthrew Imam Mohammed al-Badr. The Imamate, which Saudi Arabia was seeking to reinstate, was a Zaydi Shi'a system of monarchical Islamic rule. It is important to remember this, to avoid making the mistake of labelling the antagonistic Saudi attitude towards the Houthis as grounded in sectarian animosity. During the 1960s, Riyadh supported the Zaydi cause, knowing that the monarchical structure would be preferable for Saudi regime security and state security. In the 21st Century, Riyadh has sought to undermine the Zaydi Houthis, knowing that they posed a threat to their regime security and state security. Saudi foreign policy is pragmatic, but the core motivation remains constant.

The key tool for understanding foreign policy decisions is not religion or sectarian identity but simply the primacy of regime security calculations.

The example of Yemen perfectly illustrates the fallacy of the sectarian argument. Just as in the 1960s, "Wahhabi Riyadh" and "secular Tehran" backed the pro-imamate Zaidi Shia

forces out of political considerations rather than religious ones, after 2011, they supported various political players depending on their current interests (Menshawy and Mabon, 2021).

Whilst Tehran's involvement was a light touch, they aided efforts to facilitate Nasser's loss in Yemen.

As already noted, another shared concern was that of communism and the Soviet Union. For Faisal, this represented a significant challenge to his rule. The atheism of communism was seen as a great threat to Islam and threatened a core source of his legitimacy. For the Shah, the fear was centred on the idea that the Soviet Union was literally on Iran's border. They were also sponsoring the Tudeh party. The Tudeh party was regarded as Stalinist in its leanings, and Chaqueri argued that it "was a creation of the Soviet state, through the agency of its Red Army" (1999, 523). The Russians were also using the pro-Israel stance of the US to garner Arab support, in turn making them more suspicious of Iran (Badeeb, 1993, 65).

Iran and Saudi Arabia both developed strong connections with the US throughout the mid-20th Century. Saudi Arabia's relationship with Washington dates back to the 1930s, when diplomatic relations were established. In collaboration with American companies, Saudi Arabia founded the California Arabian Standard Oil Company in 1933, in which "the Kingdom entered into a concession agreement with the Standard Oil Company of California for exploration" (Kultgen, 2014, 153). Oil was first discovered in 1938. Such was the prospective value of the company and the oil it produced; the company was renamed The Arabian America Oil Co. (ARAMCO).  The relationship was cemented with the meeting of

President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud in 1945 on the USS Quincy in the Red Sea. It centred around two issues – oil and security. The structure of their relationship continues to be influenced by these early interactions.

Although the relationship was partially strategic, pursued in an attempt to undermine the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Bronson, 2006, 15-17), this thesis primarily understands Western support for Saudi Arabia as conditional upon oil. The example of the CIA and MI6-backed coup to overthrow Iran's first democratically elected leader Mohammad Mossaddegh, who nationalised the oil industry and expelled the British, in 1953, demonstrates this reality (Zahrani, 2002; Brew, 2019). Oil was the dominant force in American relations with Middle Eastern states. As Saudi Arabia emerged as a successfully managed rentier economy, providing significant benefits to the west, the Pahlavi dynasty began to lose its grip on the economic foundation of its domestic and international legitimacy. Nevertheless, US foreign policy under the Nixon Doctrine in the late 1960s assured Iran that it would be a key player in the Gulf. It aimed to balance between Iran and the Saudi Arabia, as both were deemed essential strategic and economic partners. Nixon's approach was known as the 'Twin Pillars' strategy (Macris, 2010). He saw the two states as fundamental to combatting communism in the region. Furthermore, he remained concerned about communism within Iran itself. From the Iranian perspective, the Shah benefited from the US disaster in Vietnam, as Washington sought to become the arsenal, as opposed to the policeman, of the anti-communist world:

[I]n cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to

the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility for providing the manpower for its defense (Nixon, 1969).

In real terms, Tehran purchased billions of dollars of highly advanced weaponry from the US to counter Soviet-backed pan-Arabism, making it the chief client state of the US in the region. Furthermore, "the Doctrine… became the means through which the Shah developed into the dominant power in the region" (Guittard, 2010, 10).

A key moment for the region was the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971. This represented an opportunity for Tehran to expand its influence in the region and as a means through which to stake territorial claims (Mobley, 2003). They continued to spend heavily on weapons and rapidly seized several islands - Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs – in the same year. Initially, this looked like creating a period of tension between Tehran and Riyadh, with the Saudis initially siding with Bahrain and Kuwait, the former the subject of Iranian territorial claims. Rhetorically, the Shah became increasingly irritated by Riyadh's continual insistence on referring to the Gulf as 'the Arabian Gulf' as opposed to 'the Persian Gulf' (Zraick, 2016).

Washington feared that this power vacuum would create the conditions for the Soviet Union to gain influence across the region. In response, they sought to create a security system that would soften tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, encouraging them to work together (Haas, 1981, 160). Both burgeoning oil economies, Iran and Saudi Arabia competed economically and frequently disagreed on pricing and on the politics of the resource. Economically, pre-revolution relations could be characterised by "mutual suspicion, but a

capacity to work together" (Mabon, 2018, 4). Yet, in the 1970s, Iran wanted to increase the price of oil, seeing it primarily as a commodity to exploit and sell on a mass scale. By contrast, Saudi Arabia wanted to decrease oil prices, and also tied its oil production to the Arab-Israeli conflict. They used the political capital oil gave them to try to encourage the US to challenge Israel, most clearly demonstrated by their involvement in the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973 (Brosche, 1974). They were not prepared to meet the full demands of the West until the Palestinian question was addressed. Riyadh attempted to use oil, particularly after the October 1973 War, to force the US to put pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, captured by Israeli forces in the June 1967 War.

Iran possessed fewer religious constraints on its economic behaviour and so could focus on maximising profits. Despite these differences, for its own benefit, America finally managed to get the two nations to compromise on freezing oil prices in 1977. US mediation ensured that disputes over oil prices did not reach boiling point. However, Reza Pahlavi was belligerent in many of the OPEC discussions. As such: "the Shah's refusal to bend in the months leading up to Doha, and the Saudis' willingness to sacrifice profits and prestige within the Arab world, earned the gratitude of the Washington foreign policy establishment" (Cooper, 2008, 591).

At the same time, Washington, now under the Democratic Presidency of Jimmy Carter, grew increasingly critical of the Shah's history of human rights abuses. Some scholars even argue that Carter's insistence helped to encourage the protests that led to the overthrow of the regime (Muravchick, 1986).

## 4.2 Iranian-Saudi Relations after the Islamic Revolution

*The United States*

The return of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from exile, in 1979, marked the end of Iran's relationship with the US. Furthermore, during the first year of Khomeini's rule, the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran was revolutionised. Economic competition turned into antagonistic political and ideological competition, fuelled by Iranian ambition, and exacerbated by Saudi anxiety. The change from a dynastic pro-American monarchy to an Islamic Republic whose core slogans included 'Death to America', changed the course of the relationship, as well as the future of the region. Although the Shah was losing the Americans' favour, he continued to seek their support right up until the revolution. He saw Iran's future as one in which it maintained strong ties with the West.

Khomeini had a radically different approach, establishing the Islamic Republic as a complete rejection of secular modernity, which impacted upon the legitimacy of many secular Arab regimes. They engaged in active hostility towards what he regarded as the colonial West and their Israeli allies, who they blamed, along with their puppet, the Shah, for the deteriorating position of Iran domestically, regionally, and internationally (Alpher, 1980, 70). Despite a brief period of rapprochement under Rafsanjani and Khatami in the late 1980s and 1990s, Iran has sought to establish itself as an alternative to Western interests across the Middle East, and as champions of the Third World (Posch, 2013). This is crucial in understanding the development of Iranian processes of securitisation, which are finely tuned to appease specific regional, and Muslim, audiences, as opposed to the likes of the US and Israel.

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The new Iran was structured around the notion of Vilayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist). Based on Twelver Shi'a Islam, this concept gives the Islamic jurist the right to custodianship over the people, in the absence of the Hidden Imam. The Hidden Imam or '*Mahdi*' is considered to be the last Imam within Twelver Shi'ism, who will reappear during the end times to save Islam and its loyal Shi'a followers. In Iran, the concept of the Vilayat takes an absolutist form, with Khomeini, and subsequently Khamenei, both referred to as Supreme Leader. The Vilayat meant that the Islamic Republic was now directly vying for spiritual leadership of the Islamic World; a markedly different approach from the secular Pahlavis.

A core part of ensuring the continuation of the regime was to externally secure itself through exporting the revolution (Marsh, 2009). This began very early on after the revolution, with the sponsorship of poor Shi'a groups in Lebanon. In 1982, these groups would go on to form Hezbollah, a Lebanese militant and quasi-political organisation utterly dedicated to the Vilayat. As Ram put it, "[e]xporting the Islamic revolution is one of the chief pillars of Iran's revolutionary ideology, and to many… the principal goal of Iranian foreign policy" (1996, 7). Ehteshami (1995) summarised this position succinctly, characterising the first phase of Khomeini's foreign policy. He stated that it consisted of an:

[I]nitial overhaul of Iran's foreign policy away from proximity to the West and towards non-alignment, Third Worldism and a populist 'anti-imperialist' strategy. Islam as an infrastructural element of foreign policy surfaced at this early stage, unambiguously depicted as such in the constitution of the republic (Ehteshami, 1995, 144)

A core part of this ideology was the rejection of monarchical structures as un-Islamic. This posed a direct challenge to the Gulf monarchies, and in particular Saudi Arabia.

Shaken by the siege of the Grand Mosque and the overthrow of the Shah, the Saudis feared how Islam was being used as a vehicle for radical change. They doubled down on their own Orthodoxy while presenting their support for the Mujahideen in Afghanistan as part of their mission to defend Islam. There was a mass expansion of Saudi-funded mosques and madrassas across the Middle East and wider Sunni world as a means of reinforcing their Islamic credentials. A profound cultural war existed between Riyadh and Tehran.

The storming of the US embassy represented a key turning point in US-Iranian relations. A group of radicalised Iranian students, committed to, but not an internal faction of, the Iranian Revolution, stormed the American Embassy in Tehran on 4th November 1979. They took 52 Americans hostage for a total of 444 days. They did so because they wrongly believed that the US intended to orchestrate a coup to overthrow Khomeini, in a not-dissimilar way to their ousting of Mossadegh in the 1950s. Based upon this belief, the students saw taking control of the embassy as "a defensive action vital for consolidating the Revolution" (Emery, 2013, 3).

Up until this crisis, Iran did not figure in the psyche of the average American. The crisis showed, however, that Tehran had the power to deeply affect US politics and security. The mishandling of the calamity by President Jimmy Carter brought deep embarrassment to the White House. In 1980, he commissioned Operation Eagle Claw, a mission involving

warships and helicopters in an attempt to save the hostages. The helicopters that turned up

were not fit for purpose and the mission was aborted. Making matters even worse, one of the

helicopters crash-landed when withdrawing, killing one Iranian civilian and eight US service

personnel (Bowden, 2006). The failure fed a particular Iranian narrative – that God was on

the side of the Islamic Republic and the Americans were doomed to fail in undermining the

regime.

Many of the commentators believe it was Carter's inability to free the hostages following a

failed rescue bid that ultimately led to his loss to Ronald Reagan in 1981 (Kamarck, 2019).

The hostage crisis was the beginning of mutual animus between the two countries, and the

development of anti-Iranianism as a fundamental guiding force within American Middle East

policy. Saudi Arabia came to play on this emotive and visceral contempt as a guiding

principle for their international securitisation processes, most recently when justifying their

intervention in Yemen.

While Washington had always demonstrated a deep distaste for the Baathist party in Iraq.

However, such was their contempt for the newly established Islamic Republic, they leant

towards Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Riyadh shared Washington's

distaste for Baathism yet agreed with America that the primary threat to their shared

economic, security, and strategic interests was posed by Iran. The years 1979-1980

represented the beginning of the development of animosity between the Iran axis and what

this thesis will call the "US-Saudi alliance" within the context of war. Within a year of the

Iran-Iraq war, 'Gulf countries had given oil-rich, prosperous Iraq a $14 billion loan to help war efforts' (Ghattas, 2020, 88). The war, from the beginning, reinforced their determination to protect themselves by whatever means possible. Heavy investment in Lebanese Shi'a groups accelerated throughout 1981 and 1982, leading to the creation of Hezbollah. The war:

[C]reated a mindset among Iranian national security officials that Tehran needed to be able to deter any such invasion in the future through a variety of means, including the development of a ballistic missile program and cultivation of militant Shia groups among Sunni-Arab ruled neighbours (Slavin and Kadhim, 2021).

These proxies have come to represent central tools of Iranian securitisation. The pursuit of the ultimate defence, the nuclear deterrent, also re-entered the conversation. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had previously begun a nuclear programme before his downfall in 1979. Despite signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968, it purchased significant numbers of nuclear reactors (Quester, 1977). However, these were never completed. Reacting to the Indian nuclear test in 1974, the Shah told Le Monde that one day "sooner to be believed", Iran would be "in possession of a nuclear bomb" (Milani, 2010). The shah used the subsequent fear around the bomb to facilitate further deals for developing nuclear energy capacity, and "under Carter, finally, the shah was willing to make the kinds of concessions that proved he wasn't seeking a bomb — such as forgoing plans for plutonium processing plants — and the president permitted U.S. companies to sell reactors to Iran in 1978" (Milani, 2010).

Renewed Iranian nuclear ambition, under the Islamic Republic, similarly increased anxiety regionally and internationally. Negotiations and tensions around the Joint Comprehensive

Plan of Action (JCPOA) under Obama, Trump, and now Biden, are central to understanding the Iran-Saudi rivalry. The nuclear threat, combined with repeated Iranian calls to "wipe Israel from the map" have also culminated in a now de facto tacit security regime between Saudi Arabia and Israel, united by their shared security interests (Jones and Guzansky, 2020; Niu and Wu, 2021). This is far removed from the pro-Palestine, pan-Islamist approach of King Faisal in the 1960s and 1970s.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the neo-conservative prime minister who spoke of the "Second Islamic Revolution" in the 2000s, epitomised the anti-Western, anti-Semitic, face of the Islamic Republic. Referring to the fall of the Shah, Saddam Hussein, and the Soviet Union, Ahmadinejad said, "they say it is not possible to have a world without the United States and Zionism. But you know that it is a possible goal and slogan" (New York Times, 2005). The Islamic Republic's processes of ensuring regime security have consisted of positioning itself as a regional, Islamic, champion of the oppressed as opposed to a puppet of the West. The regime has been dogged in its determination to protect its security and economic interests in the "Persian" Gulf: "the actual power of the US in the Gulf is seen in diametrically opposed ways by Tehran and Riyadh – for Iran it constitutes a military threat; for Saudi Arabia it is the best guarantee of military security" (Chubin and Tripp, 1996, 8).

Although there are notable differences over, for instance, how to contain Iran and the JCPOA, it is difficult to entirely separate Israeli and American regional interests in the region, as they are so intimately intertwined. Another core slogan of the revolution was, and

remains, "Death to Israel". Causes have been cynically championed by both Riyadh and Tehran as a means of regional legitimacy, portraying themselves as saviours. These constructions create binaries, designed to embarrass the regional competitor. Cold War, and neo-realist literature helps scholars to characterise this tit-for-tat style of international relations as a zero-sum game (Walt, 1985). The Iranian-Saudi rivalry constitutes a security dilemma, in which "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decreases the others" (Jervis, 1978, 169). Tehran has been successful in positioning itself as an Islamic, Middle Eastern alternative to a supposedly corrupt, Western-backed, Saudi Arabia. This is despite corruption being endemic in Iran. Hezbollah's claims of victory over Israel, during their invasion of Lebanon in 2006, solidified the regional popularity of Hezbollah and Iran (Telhami, 2008). Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah became the most popular leaders across the Sunni world (Aarabi, 2019).

As well as appealing to Arabs, as Shi'as, the Khomeinist regime understood the importance of appealing to minority rights as part of their anti-Western framework. They played on the pre-existing perception that "in general, Western countries' potentially laudable defence of minority rights seems to be less fervent when it comes to defending the rights of Shias" (Mikaïl, 2012, 4). Khomeini was an alternative to this history, who, at least rhetorically, sought to unify all Muslims under a Shi'a leadership.

On 11th September 2001, four planes were hijacked in the US, two of which crashed into the Twin Towers in New York, and one into the Pentagon in Washington DC. Fifteen of the

nineteen hijackers were Saudis. The fact that Riyadh suffered no severe penalties for this is indicative of the magnitude of the shared interests on which the "US-Saudi alliance" continues to exist. The US had allowed Saudi Arabia to gain profound influence within their country by allowing Riyadh to donate to Islamic charities. By 1999, it was estimated that "80 percent of mosques in the US [were] subject to Wahhabi manipulation, through financial subsidies" (Schwarz, 2001). Through this, they were able to soften US attitudes towards the Saudi brand of Wahhabi Islam, distancing itself from connections to extremism. There is a now infamous picture of US President George W. Bush in a mosque on 12th September 2001, surrounded by predominantly Wahhabi clerics. The irony was seemingly lost on him and his administration.

Tehran managed to prove to the international community that its brand of fundamentalism could not be directly linked to Al-Qaeda, but this did not stop Bush including them within his rhetorical "Axis of Evil" speech before Congress in 2002 (Washington Post, 2002). Washington was able to denote a lineage of Iranian aggression against the US that constituted them as an enemy of state. This included, but was not limited to, the hostage crisis of 1979, the bombing of the embassy in Beirut and of the US marine base in 1983, the Iran-Contra deal in Nicaragua in 1985, and multiple attacks on US shipping lanes in the Gulf. The Bush regime, like its predecessors, saw reducing Iranian influence as fundamental in its pursuit of domestic and regional security. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 ended up having the opposite effect.

Iraq is now widely regarded as being under the control of Tehran (Azizi, 2022). America's decision to set up democratic elections following the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 resulted in the Shi'a majority taking control of Iraq. In the following years, Tehran has gradually cultivated this new site of Shi'a influence, establishing it as one of the pillars of the Axis of Resistance, along with Lebanon and Syria. The Quds Force, led by Qasem Soleimani, was fundamental in developing Iran's key security tactic – the cultivation of foreign Shi'a proxies (Gause, 2007; Friedman, 2019; Ostovar, 2019; Tabatabai et al., 2021). They have united along sectarian lines to great effect, most notably to defeat ISIS in Iraq, and to ensure that one of their key allies, Bashar al-Assad, is protected (Ostavar, 2019; Juneau, 2020; Akbarzadeh et al., 2022).

It is tempting to portray the US as the primary antagonist in the region's descent into war and chaos. However, Saudi Arabia is not simply reacting to the whims of Washington but has systematically and arbitrarily cultivated anti-Iranian sentiment to justify its abuse of human rights to international audiences. As regards Yemen, Riyadh has constructed an image of itself as just defenders of the legitimate government and its people, against a tyrannical and expansionist Shi'a aggressor. During Operation Decisive Storm, then Foreign Secretary Adel al-Jubeir echoed this sentiment to an international audience. In March 2015, Cable News Network (CNN) presenter Wolf Blitzer asked: "How much did Iran have to do with the Houthis?". Al-Jubeir responded: "A lot. The Houthis are ideologically affiliated with Iran. The Iranian have provided them with weapons. The Iranians have provided them with advisors. And the Iranians have provided them with money" (CNN, 2015).

This was process of securitisation, exaggerating threat perception. As Debord writes: "When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings – dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behaviour… Wherever *representation* becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself" (2014, 11).

Yemen is a crucial case study for this thesis, as it is widely acknowledged that Tehran's footprint has been lighter than suggested by Riyadh and the international community. It is not Iranian involvement that is a 'mere image', but rather the extent of Iranian involvement, which has been represented as extensive and multi-faceted by Saudi Arabia. During the early days of the Yemeni intervention, particularly around Operation Decisive Storm, notable Saudi establishment figures such as the former Ambassador to the United States Adel al-Jubeir, were systematically portraying the war as a just defence of a legitimate government against an Iranian-backed terrorist group. Rather than understanding the complexities of the Houthi movement, extraordinary violence was legitimised on an over-exaggerated basis. As Kim Ghattas noted, in the US, "the only word that everyone seemed to retain from the information coming out of Saudi Arabia was: "Iran"" (2020, 63).

*Regime Type*
Long before the revolution, in 1970, Khomeini declared: "[m]onarchy and hereditary succession represent the same sinister, evil system of government that prompted the Lord of the Martyrs (peace be upon him) to rise up in revolt and seek martyrdom in an effort to

prevent its establishment" (Khomeini, 1981, 31). Desperate to hold onto their legitimacy, centred around Custodianship of the Two Holy Mosques, Riyadh engaged in processes of overt alienating sectarianisation. The early 1980s saw Riyadh compare the Islamic Republic to the brutal Safavid Empire of the Middle Ages, fearing their expansion throughout the region (Badeeb, 1993; Fürtig, 2006). From the beginning, Riyadh used fear to attempt to combat the rise in popularity of the Islamic Revolution.

Olar (2019) argues that similar regime types adopt similar approaches to repression. They effectively watch how each other operate and implement similar measures. Olar (2019) refers to this concept as "diffusion of repression". This chapter extends this argument to suggest that, in the Middle East, similar regimes are often more likely to collaborate on foreign policy to protect regime security. The Shah's decision to work closely with Riyadh to combat the Nasserist threat in North Yemen is one historical example that shows the salience of this argument. Iran and Saudi Arabia feared the spread of ideologies that posed alike threats to their regime types. These threats centred around Nasser's pan-Arabism and communism. Royalists stick together. This was the case in the 1962 Yemeni Civil War, where Saudi Arabia and Iran both supported the Zaydi Mutawakkilite Kingdom (Hashemi and Postel, 2021), and in the Dhofar War in Oman between 1970-1976 (Al Kharusi, 2018).

This thesis' theoretical framework established the importance of avoiding simplistic arguments. Regime-type is not the only important factor to account for pre-revolution cooperation, but it is nevertheless an important part of the story. It is not sufficient to ensure

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like-minded security concerns, but it does condition those concerns – making cooperation probable. Whilst the two monarchies were radically different in their bases of legitimacy, their monarchical structures meant that they responded similarly to threats that directly challenged their regime security. There are no better examples than their joint actions to counter Nasserism and pro-democracy movements. The creation of the theocratic Islamic Republic led to a rapidly growing disparity between Riyadh and Tehran's security interests.

*Leadership of the Muslim World/Regional Popularity*

Prior to 1979, Riyadh faced no challenge from Tehran on the grounds of religious legitimacy. The Shah gave explicit approval to the House of Saud as legitimate and trustworthy custodians of the Two Holy Mosques (Badeeb, 1993). Regional competition was economic in nature and was managed effectively by America's mediation. Post-revolution, sectarianisation and proxy wars were considered extraordinary by both sides of the rivalry, as they had not been experienced in this context in contemporary history. Khomeini declared himself as rightful ruler of Iran, based on Islamic legitimacy. His Iran was "shaped by Islamic ideology, revolutionary aspirations and singular political thought controlled by religious leaders" (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007, xiv). As with his position on western interests, this role immediately challenged one of the fundamentals of the enduring success of the Al Saud.

Once the Kingdom became aware of this dynamic, they began making efforts to discredit Tehran and infect the ideational battle with sectarian venom: "Riyadh sponsored the production of an expansive array of anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian tracts, designed to highlight

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the narrowly ethnic and sectarian aspirations of the Khomeinist regime and mitigate its more universal appeal throughout the region and the world" (Wehrey et al., 2009, 14).

It is arguable that Khomeini may have learnt from King Faisal's successes with pan-Islamism. Faisal also used *Zakat* (charitable pillar of Islam) on a regional basis to propagate Wahhabi ideals via the backdoor. Faisal used these as political tools to secure his Islamic legitimacy through regional influence and popularity. Wehrey argues that, at least up until the Arab Uprisings, the Islamic Republic not only pursued a pan-Islamic approach to regional policy, but an aggressively non-sectarian approach (Wehrey et al., 2009, 21). The ayatollahs have been defenders of the Palestinian cause, and Tehran have been funders of Hamas, who are a Sunni organisation with links to the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood are a core adversary of Riyadh and Iran's ties to them can be viewed, in part, as an example of Realpolitik. Along with the history of 20th Century cooperation between Shi'a/secular Iran and Sunni/conservative Saudi Arabia, such realities have been overlooked by some, but not all, scholars and policymakers. In terms of US policy making, it is essential for them to see sectarianisation for what it is, a "Plan B" (Phillips, 2018), or a political construction used in extraordinary circumstances of insecurity, as "a policy that either knowingly or inadvertently attaches too much weight to these sectarian and ideological factors – in effect conflating the symbolic vocabulary of the bilateral relationship with its substance – could actually provoke greater tensions and potential conflict" (Wehrey et al., 2009, 12).

Khomeinism represented a rival claim to leadership of the Islamic world, a rival political system, and heightened fears about revolt within Saudi Arabia's Shi'a Eastern Province. Regionally, what plagued the relationship, as it continues to today, was Saudi Arabia's "unwillingness to be a junior partner in the local system, and its inability to be an equal partner" (Chubin and Tripp, 1996, 9). Tehran has often been regarded as the natural leader in the Middle East (Aarabi, 2019), and the pan-Islamist approach of Khomeini, as well as his sponsorship of Anti-Israeli proxies, saw the country's popularity surge, especially amongst Arabs. According to the Annual Arab Public Opinion Poll, following the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War, the Axis of Resistance leaders were the most popular world leaders amongst Arabs. When asked, "Please tell me which world leader (outside your own country) you admire most?"; the Arab participants' top three answers were Hassan Nasrallah (26%), Bashar al-Assad (16%), and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (10%) (Telhami, 2008). Riyadh became increasingly fearful that the Axis of Resistance could spread into Saudi Arabia and cause an uprising amongst its Shi'a minority - a fear that reappeared in 2011.

This thesis does not undermine the impact the revolution had on the Shi'a communities of the region. Whilst pan-Islamist in its official message, the new Iran actively sought to agitate the Shi'a to organise, mobilise, and revolt through radio stations and propaganda: '[t]here is little doubt that Iran's revolution helped galvanize politics and energize dissent amongst Shi'is in neighbouring countries, who had long suffered various forms and degrees of repression' (Jones, 2006, 214). In Saudi Arabia, the 1970s consisted of processes of westernisation and modernisation that actively excluded and marginalised the Shi'a communities of the oil-rich

Eastern Province. Whilst this Shi'a population did not accept Khomeini as their religious ruler, they were inspired by his revolution to conduct an Intifada (revolt), against the Al Saud's repression of their Ashura celebrations. This uprising, which overlapped with Juhayman al-Otaybi's siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, compounded Saudi anxieties, centred around a challenge to their regime survival, which had traditionally been grounded in their Islamic legitimacy. As al-Rasheed writes: "the riots were products of the success of the Iranian revolution whose leadership began to attack Saudi Arabia for corruption, alliance with the West and above all questioned the Saudi leadership's claim to protect the two Muslim shrines in Mecca and Medina" (2002, 147).

In 1979, Saudi sectarianisation was not solely a reaction to the threat posed by the structural challenge of Khomeinism. Sectarianisation also began as a reaction to the seizure of the Grand Mosque, protests in the Kingdom's Shi'a Eastern Province, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Ghattas, 2020). Together, these developments produced a reversion back to an ultra-conservative form of Wahhabism, to appease dissenting religious voices and prevent further acts of terrorism; brutal crackdowns on protest including new anti-protest laws; and the sponsoring of fundamentalist mujahidin to re-establish the Kingdom as protectors of the Muslim World. The line that ran through all of these policies was active sectarianisation, in both its alienating and unifying forms. Thus, the enduring character of the Iranian-Saudi rivalry from 1979 onwards.

The Iranian Revolution and the siege of the Grand Mosque left Riyadh scrambling to ensure its legitimacy. It is within this context that, "from the point of view of Saudi Arabia, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a godsend: a chance to reaffirm its Islamic legitimacy in the face of challenges by Khomeini, both to international audiences and to domestic constituents" (Wehrey et al., 2009, 14).

United by shared anti-communism and anti-Iranianism, the US and Riyadh seized the opportunity to re-establish their regional power base. Blinded by this short-term realist game of balance of power, the US-Saudi alliance overlooked the potential long-term consequences of training and funding Islamists in the form of the Afghan Mujahidin. With its ideological roots in Saudi Wahhabism, the Salafist Mujahedin were used effectively to defeat the Soviets. In January 1980, the CIA announced that the Saudi ulama had issued a fatwa authorising the payment of *zakat,* encouraging Muslims to donate a portion of their income to support Islamic charities, to the Mujahedin (US Embassy Saudi Arabia, 1980).

So began the trend of justifying involvement in contemporary foreign wars under the declaration of jihad. Iran was equally guilty of using zakat for political ends, most notably in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. In Afghanistan, US and Saudi contributions amounted to an approximate annual donation of $120 million per annum between 1981-1983 (Coll, 2004, 151). Some fighters of the Mujahedin later went on to become members of the Taliban, as well as forming Al-Qaeda. These organisations have posed severe challenges to the national security of both Riyadh and Washington throughout the 21st Century. Clouded by their new-

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found insecurity and encouraged by the US, Afghanistan was viewed by Riyadh as "an opportunity: a playground where they could export the countless Juhaymans their system had created, and a noble cause around which these zealots could rally, shifting focus away from the sins of the royal family" (Ghattas, 2020, 83-84).

Overall, the religious intensity that emanated from the Saudi reaction to the Intifada and the sponsorship of the Afghan Mujahedin was used to counter the Iranian brand of revolutionary Islam and the spread of atheistic communism. This was a key tactic, used in the aim of protecting US and Saudi interests in the region (Mamdani, 2004, 120).

*Conclusion*

The Iranian revolution fundamentally changed the country socially, religiously, structurally, domestically, and regionally. Iran sharply veered from a pro-Western secular stance to one of Islamic fundamentalism, united under the concept of Vilayat-e Faqih. Since 1979, Tehran and Riyadh have vied for control of the Islamic World and the Middle East. Whereas previous disputes centred narrowly around economics, current animosities constitute a vast multiplicity of tensions around security, ideology, regional popularity, and Islamic legitimacy. The explosion of proxy wars and sectarianisation now justifiably constitute the Iranian-Saudi relationship as a Cold War. This chapter has provided a historical analysis of its development, representing the Axis of Resistance as a regional anti-Western alternative to the pro-Western Saudi camp. This dynamic characterises the disparity in their approaches to processes of securitisation, with Iran focusing primarily on regional audiences. Saudi Arabia

similarly seeks regional legitimisation, but also appeals to the wider international community. These processes accelerated following the Arab Spring, as the regional rivals struggled to maintain their regime security. The following chapter analyses the rise of the Houthis, its impact on Riyadh and Tehran, and the acceleration in tension between the two state actors.

## Chapter Five
### *2011-2015 – The Houthis, Saudi Arabia and Iran*

This chapter traces the development of Houthi, Saudi, and Iranian interests in Yemen, leading up to the beginning of the Saudi intervention in 2015. First, the chapter provides a brief analysis of the frustrations that arose from the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013. The conference brought many festering animosities between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia into open view. Secondly, the chapter analyses the development of the Houthis, considering their faith, status as a domestic minority group, their involvement in the "Six Wars", and how these bubbling resentments led to their violent seizure of Sana'a in September 2014. Thirdly, the chapter analyses the Saudi perspective, looking briefly at their attitude towards the Houthis prior to 2011, before spending time detailing what led them to ODS and how they justified it. Finally, the chapter analyses Iranian involvement between 2011 and 2015, arguing that it was a light touch that garnered significant results.

Since March 2015, Yemen has witnessed complex, violent, and multi-layered conflict. Hard power has been exercised by a number of external state actors to protect strategic interests in the region. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has backed a series of southern secessionist movements, including the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The US and the UK have been engaging Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Southern Yemen (Robinson, 2022). Yemen has fractured into what has become a quagmire of factionalism, division, and infighting. Allies become enemies and then become allies again. Insecurity and

unpredictability have come to characterise Arabia Felix. The one unflinching constant has been the battle between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis.

On 26th March 2015, Riyadh announced that it had commenced a comprehensive bombing campaign, termed Operation Decisive Storm (ODS). This was the beginning of Riyadh's overt military engagement in Yemen. In language reminiscent of American discourse during the Iraq War, Riyadh claimed victory by 3rd April. A dispatch from the Saudi Embassy in Washington stated: "[t]en days into Operation Decisive Storm, military operations by a coalition of nations led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been successful at thwarting the Houthi militia's goal of taking over Yemen" (Saudi Embassy, 2015). The tone of this statement evokes images of George Bush's appearance on the USS Abraham Lincoln in front of the Star-Spangled Banner, emblazoned with the words "Mission Accomplished" on 1st May 2003. Such claims to victory, however, have proved hollow. The United Nations (UN) Development Programme estimated that there was anything up to 377,000 casualties caused through direct and indirect impacts of the war by the end of 2021 (CAAT, 2022)

Like Iraq, the Yemen conflict has developed into a costly, prolonged, multi-faceted war. It has had profoundly negative effects on Riyadh's standing within the international community and has in turn emboldened Iran.

This chapter develops an innovative understanding of the Yemen conflict through a historical analysis of events leading up to ODS. In doing so, it directly confronts various attempts to

over-simplify the conflict. For instance, whilst Iran certainly possesses a growing influence over the Houthis, they enjoy "little direct control over Houthi behavior and decisionmaking" (Johnston et al., 2020, 64). The Houthis do not constitute an ideological arm of the Islamic Republic and are not a classic Iranian proxy. From the Iranian revolution onwards, a precondition of becoming a firm Iranian proxy has been adherence to the notion of Vilayat-e-faqih, something the Houthis have not done. The Houthis have always retained their own identity and decision-making processes. Furthermore, labelling them a proxy diminishes their significant agency within the conflict. Of course, a proxy could still have agency. However, in this case, the exaggeration of Iranian involvement characterised the Houthis as a puppet of the Islamic Republic. This has had the adverse effect of deflecting accountability away from the Houthis' repeated abuse of human rights since 2014.

Saudi Arabia has led a direct intervention in Yemen as a sovereign nation-state. The tendency to portray Yemen as a classic proxy war may have stemmed from a miscalculation of Iran's involvement with the Houthis in the early days of the conflict. Concurrently, these simplifications help to perpetuate a continuing misunderstanding of Iranian involvement. This, despite some members of the House of Saud now accepting they were wrong to assume that Iran had deep and meaningful ties to the Houthi movement leading up to Operation Decisive Storm (Al-Saud, 2021).

Furthermore, the rise of the Houthis, and their conflict with Saudi Arabia, cannot be over-simplified as sectarian in nature. Whilst many Houthis are devoted to their Zaydi beliefs, they

have enjoyed cordial relations with moderate Sunnis. Yemen's divisions were not caused by a Shi'a, Iranian-backed conspiracy, but instead are scars, left from historical splits, years of foreign intervention, war, and domestic insecurity. Gause offers a more nuanced understanding, claiming that Yemen's modern history can be characterised through historical, geographical division – "[t]he split of the population in the tenth century AD into Zaydi Shi'i in the northern highlands and Sunni Shafii elsewhere has complicated the development of a legitimizing ideological basis for rule over all of geographic Yemen" (1988, 34). In this sense, Yemen has never truly possessed a homogenous national identity.

Feierstein (2019) refers to the current Yemen situation as a '60-Year War'. The 1962 coup set in motion a prolonged period of foreign intervention and internal conflict, carving deeper chasms into the fabric of the country. As the importance of oil increased to the international economy, having allies in Yemen became of increasing value. Around 30% of the world's oil and natural gas pass through the narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait, located on Yemen's Western coast (Binwaber, 2019).

Understanding key motivations, threat perceptions, identities, and Realpolitik interests, will facilitate the construction of a conceptual framework, through which policy, and its legitimising discourse, can be understood. This chapter was informed by Malmvig's research design, aiming to situate "sectarian identity politics in a specific historical moment of state collapse, elucidating how conflicts… that were not initially sectarian… have become

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sectarianized" (Malmvig, 2021, 3). This is done in the aim of understanding the specific nature of processes of securitisation and sectarianisation in the Yemen conflict.

## 5.1 The Arab Spring comes to Yemen

When the Arab Spring erupted across the Middle East, Ali Abdullah Saleh had been in office for almost 33 years. From 1978, he was the leader of the Northern Republic of Yemen, before becoming leader of the entirety of Yemen in 1990. Through policies of divide-and-conquer, and carefully devised practices of patrimonialism, he had maintained an iron grip on power. However, by 2011, his regime was facing a wide range of profound social, economic, and political crises. The six wars had hardened and emboldened armed resistance groups, as well as exacerbating internal divisions; the country was facing an ever-worsening water crisis; oil production was plummeting; and poverty was increasing.

Inspired by events in Egypt and Tunisia, in February 2011, a multiplicity of protestors marched on the streets of Sana'a, including "[m]arginalized populations... southerners, the Houthis, tribal youth, and the Shafi'i population in the midlands" (Feierstein, 2019, 12). Despite their varying identities, all parties were determined to remove Saleh from power (Lackner, 2016, 14). There was genuine hope in the early days of the movement, as people from a variety of tribes, sects, and political ideologies united behind one cause. However, as these protests accelerated and surged, so too did Saleh's violent repression of them. During the 'Friday of Dignity' protest on 18th of March, 50 civilians were killed by Saleh forces (Phillips, 2011). On the 3rd of June, Saleh was injured in an attack on his mosque, which

killed 13 other people. He was flown to Riyadh for treatment, but later returned to Sana'a in September.

In November 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative was signed by the Gulf monarchies, the EU, and the US. This set out a plan to decide on what the new government of Yemen would look like, and the way in which the new Yemen would be organised. This would eventually lead to the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), allegedly aimed at creating a peaceful, democratic, constitutional future for Yemen. The GCC Initiative also granted immunity to Saleh, who ceded power to a government of national unity. Abdu Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, Saleh's former number two, was elected president in February of 2012, in a single-candidate election. Initially meant as a temporary measure, Hadi immediately began consolidating his hold on power, putting his people into key governments posts (Lackner, 2016, 9), and promoting himself to external backers as a leader pliant to GCC and Western interests. Hadi, in particular:

[E]mbraced the United States and, over the next two and a half years, the United States conducted one of its most intense counterterrorism campaigns in Yemen... [flushing] AQAP out of its strongholds across Southern and central Yemen (Hartig and Hathaway, 2022).

He continued to stay in power after his mandate of two years expired. This, controversially, was one of the outcomes of the NDC.

The NDC began in March 2013, and by January 2014, an outcomes document was signed containing "a roadmap towards a new territorial division and the set-up of more inclusive institutions" (Elayah et al., 2020, 432). It also resulted in the extension of Hadi's Presidency, a move that proved divisive amongst parties both within and outside of Yemen. However, the NDC was historic in that it included a role for women and youth groups. Whilst its organisation was riddled with the involvement of external actors, under-representation of certain groups, failings, and agendas, many Yemenis saw it "as a valuable stepping stone towards the eventual pacification and development of Yemen" (Elayah et al., 2020, 452-53).

Another, more popular view of the NDC, was that it was fundamentally flawed as it paid too much attention to intra-elite struggle, rather than to the interests of ordinary Yemenis. As such, "many of the worst elements of Yemen's political class were allowed to operate virtually unfettered throughout the transition process" (Lackner, 2016, 8). This ordering, it is argued, was no coincidence. The most prominent forces within the NDC were those who would protect Saudi interests, such as Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The GCC Initiative was loaded with the central motivation of establishing a regime, which would be pliant to Riyadh. It contained within it Ibn Saud's enduring ambition to keep Yemen weak and subservient, in order to protect Riyadh's economic and security interests.

It is important to remember that the Houthis did participate in the NDC. However, there has been a tendency to make too much of their mere inclusion in the process. Their inclusion "in the most toothless of the transitional institutions underscored their exclusion from institutions of transitional governance with the power to shape policy" (Yadav, 2017, 195). It is through this lens, compounded by their oppression under Saleh, that scholars can view their discontent. Such was their discontent, that some scholars argue that the Houthis were themselves never truly interested in a 'national dialogue'. Desiring an unreasonable level of power, they deliberately agitated militarily and politically to undermine the reconciliation process (Schmitz, 2014). The Houthis began their military campaigns in September 2014, but it was their raid of the NDC Secretariat in Sana'a in March 2015 that "was perhaps the most tangible sign that the broad national dialogue initiated in 2013 had failed to set Yemen on a pathway out of conflict" (Elayah et al., 2020, 432).

The Houthis' primary anger was directed at Saudi Arabia, who had for decades sought to undermine their involvement within Yemeni politics. The Houthis positioned themselves as a domestic alternative to President Hadi, who they viewed as a Saudi puppet.

## 5.3 Who are the Houthis?

*Prior to 2011*

Throughout the Yemen conflict, Riyadh has referred to the Houthis as an Iranian proxy. As such, "the Kingdom attempted to portray its intervention in Yemen as being at the center of a Sunni regional effort to counter the threat of Iran and the expansion of Shiism in the Gulf" (Darwich, 2018, 129). This narrative has appeal to regional and international audiences, united against Iranian expansionism and behind the War on Terror.

Whilst simple explanations for complex realities have their appeal to state-led securitisation processes, in reality the Houthis are their own strategic actor. On many fronts, their representation as an Iranian proxy is misguided, simplistic, and overstated (Juneau, 2016; Clausen, 2022). These include a lack of evidence of historical, political, or religious alignment, as well as evidence disproving Iranian leadership. These factors will be dealt with in the section on Iranian interests in Yemen. For now, it is important to understand that the Houthis, rather than a Shi'a proxy, are in fact "a strategic actor with clear interests. At their core the Houthis are focused on "domestic issues and historic grievances"" (Johnston et al., 2020, 7). Although they are not a conventional state actor, the Houthis now recognise themselves as the legitimate government of Yemen, as do Iran. Like state actors, they emphasise, adapt, and change elements of their identity to fit certain target audiences. For instance, during the oppression they faced under President Saleh, the Houthis primarily emphasised discourses of Zaydism and minority rights (Lackner, 2017); whereas they adopted a more secular stance during the Arab Spring (Johnston et al., 2020, 57).

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*Zaydism*

The Houthis, also known as *Ansarallah* (Supporters of God), are occasionally called Zaydi revivalists. It is crucial to remember that Zaydi does not mean Houthi. Not all Houthis are Zaydi, and not all Zaydis are Houthi. Nevertheless, Zaydism does have significant influence. Throughout President Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule, the Houthi movement objected to "Zaydi marginalisation in the power structure" (Lackner, 2017, 147). Prior to the revolution of 1962, a Zaydi imamate had ruled Yemen for nearly a thousand years. Ever since, the Zaydis have been marginalised, most acutely by Saleh. Central to the Houthis, is a goal of redressing this recent historical under-representation.

Zaydism technically constitutes a branch of Shiism. However, this technicality does nothing to elucidate upon its unique character. The very name "Zaydi" was chosen by its creators to distinguish the sect from Twelver Shiites, who refused to back Zayd bin Ali, son of Ali ibn Husayn, in his fight against the Ummayids in 740 AD. Zayd bin Ali was a descendent of the Prophet, but it was his decision to defend the Shia World against the tyranny of the Umayyads that constituted him as the rightful Imam. Twelver Shias believe Muhammad al-Baqir to have been the fifth Imam, Zayd's elder half-brother. Theologically, there has always been a strong revolutionary spirit within Zaydism, acknowledging rulers as rightful, based on their willingness to defend the people, fight against corrupt rulers, and defend territorial integrity. This factor is crucial in understanding the way in which the Houthis use discourse in an attempt to claim legitimacy, which has little hold on reality. When it comes to the Houthis as a political entity, they have supported a whole host of regressive forms of tribal

control and sided with corrupt and dubious actors including their old enemy, Saleh (Al-Akwaa, 2017).

The Houthis' core political slogan bears the hallmarks of the Islamic Republic: "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam". It is naïve, however, to equate this discursive alignment with ideological alignment. The Houthis are not the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and they are not a conventional terrorist group.

Zayd is regarded as a martyr and important religious figure by all sects of Islam. Sunni Jurist Abu Hanifa issued a fatwa supporting Zayd in his fight against the Umayyads. The respect he has been afforded by Sunnism helps to understand the lack of sectarian violence between these two sects. In Yemen, Zaydis and Sunnis have intermarried, and prayed in the same mosques. The Zaydis of Yemen "are more Sunni than any other Shia in the world" (Peterson, 2009). In the 19th Century, it is argued that they "Sunnified" (Haykel, 2003), focusing more heavily on Quranic literalism, and the study of the Hadith. This distanced them from traditional teachings of Shiism. In terms of Islamic jurisprudence, modern Yemeni Zaydism is closest to the Hanafi school of Sunnism. However, "unlike Sunni quietist fundamentalism, Zaydism is intrinsically and explicitly political" (Lackner, 2017, 151). This comes in the particular form of standing up to tyrannical leaders and ensuring minority rights. Zaydi conflicts have not historically amounted to sectarian hatred, but more complex domestic, tribal, economic, and political considerations. It is true to say that there have been conflicts

between majority Sunni groups against majority Zaydi groups, but it is not *because* of sectarian dealignment that these conflicts have proliferated.

This is not to say that there is nothing religious about the Houthi movement. Some elements of the Houthi movement desire a return to a Zaydi Imamate (Juneau, 2016, 652; Alziady, 2021, 812). As Fiver Shias, Zaydis believe that blood relatives of Ali and Fatima are the only eligible candidates for rightful rulers. However, because they do not believe this has to be a strict connection between father and first-born son, for instance, there is room for manipulation. Hussein al-Houthi, the first leader of Ansarallah, claimed to be one such descendent. This noble class is called '*sada*' or '*sayyed*'. In terms of the fusion of religion and politics, the Houthis' "main distinguishing feature is the belief in the innate right of [S]ada to rule" (Lackner, 2017, 15).

*The Houthis as a domestic minority group.*

The Houthi movement is analogous in its complexity to broader Yemeni society. Their character is an amalgamation of different identities and intentions. One key area factor is their minority status, and subsequent marginalisation, within Yemen. This has translated into the form of their discourse, which, especially during the 1990s and 2000s, was centred on domestic grievances, social justice, and economics. It focused not on sectarian identity, nor on the advancement of Zaydism, but on an "intense criticism of the Saleh regime for its economic neglect and underdevelopment of the North" (Feierstein, 2019, 10). As Brandt

writes: "the economic and political marginalization of the Saada region, the uneven distribution of economic resources and political participation, and the religious discrimination against its Zaydi population provided fertile soil in which the Houthi movement could take root and blossom" (Brandt, 2017, 135).

The current leader of the Houthis, Abdulmalik al-Houthi, is frequently referred to as "Leader of the Revolution". The 'revolution' here pertains to the Houthis' violent uprising, beginning in 2014. Interchangeably, he goes by "Leader of the Quranic March"; a true defender of Islam, standing up to oppressive leaders and foreign actors. This is an acutely Zaydi conception of leadership. Ansarallah understand how to attain social capital amongst the people of North-West Yemen. His father, Husayn, instilled a clear raison d'être within the Houthi framework, "driven by a sense of sectarian marginalization, economic underdevelopment, and displeasure at governmental policies with the United States and Saudi Arabia" (Boucek and Ottoway, 2010, 4).

Saudi Arabia began sponsoring Salafist projects in north Yemen in the 1980s. Ever since, the Houthis have "accused Riyadh of seeking to split Yemen along sectarian… lines" (Davidson, 2016, 350). Bonnefoy argued that rather than a conscious foreign policy decision, Saudi Arabia is only partially responsible for the spread of Salafism in Yemen, due to "the indirect effects of migrations and the interpenetration of societies and of religious fields" (2011, 138). Yet, as the sponsorship of Salafists has been a key priority of Riyadh for decades, to blame it on simple migration may be misplaced (Schwarz, 2003). What is without question is that

Saudi Salafi clerics have gradually penetrated the religious conversation in North-West

Yemen and converted local tribesmen. This had profound influence, embedding a new

mentality that encouraged anti-Shi'a and anti-Zaydi discrimination. Salafists see Shi'a

practices as constituting *shirk* [idolatry and polytheism], and often advocate violence against

them. This view became militarised during the Sada'a Wars, in which "[s]ome tribal groups

were opposed to the H[o]uthis and sided with the government because of their prior exposure

to Salafi influence" (Brandt, 2014, 114). During the Third War, converted tribesmen went on

to establish the Sunni, sectarianist, "Popular Army", stating their intention of punishing the

Houthis with "divine retribution" (Salmoni et al., 2010, 163).


*The Six Wars: 2004-2010*

From 2004-2010, the Houthis fought six wars against President Saleh. The impact of this

intensive period of conflict was profound. Modern day Ansarallah represents a movement

consisting of a group of men shaped by war and hardened by battle. Furthermore: "the

government's armed forces carried out the wars with such brutality that the Houthi movement

continuously grew in size and fighting ability, gaining sympathy from people who were

suffering" (Lackner, 2017, 152). This period strengthened the Houthi movement with

numbers and provided them with battle-hardened fighters.


In response to Saleh's oppression of minority groups, Ansarallah positioned themselves as

"an alternative to the state patronage system of previous decades, so often decried for

producing division and delivering wealth to some of Yemen's sheikhs at the expense of their

tribes" (Brandt, 2014, 119). Many of these sheikhs were co-opted by Saleh as leaders of local militia in the Saada region, which contributed to their wealth accumulation. 'Alienation' characterised the relationship between these wealthy sheikhs and their impoverished tribal constituencies (Puin, 1984, 489). This pushed local tribespeople to view the Houthis as a more desirable alternative.

Saleh's policy of divide-and-rule finally backfired, and by the end of the sixth war in 2010, the Houthis were the dominant actor in Saada. Saleh's sheikhs immediately fled the region or were killed by the Houthis. Due to the proliferation of violence by the Houthis from 2014, it has been forgotten that local tribal norms were geared towards peace, having "well-established and effective mechanisms for channelling crises into negotiations and mediation, and hence preventing the outbreak of feuds" (Brandt, 2014, 112). The six wars began as the Houthis confronted Saleh on his consistent oppression of their region. Before the war, many tribes favoured the regime, due to their prior exposure to anti-Zaydi sentiment. This says a lot about the patronage networks that Saleh built up over time. Even some Zaydi tribes willingly supported him. However, such prejudices were overshadowed by the impact of Saleh's militarism, pushing many tribesmen towards the Houthis. This truly was "dancing on the heads of snakes" (Clark, 2010). Saleh brutalised the Houthis, and alienated Yemenis from the government. More Yemenis came to support the Houthis, especially as they began to provide "education programmes and alternative offers of employment" (Brandt, 2010, 113).

This ability to provide the core resources of societal security, in the absence of strong state institutions, is something the Houthis have used as a recurring political tool to garner support and domestic legitimacy. The Houthis have learnt two crucial lessons from these six wars: how to fight and how to use the tools of societal security as a means of controlling the population. To emphasise their success, the population of Sana'a has increased from 2 million in 2010 to 7 million in 2022, following Houthi rule (Jumaan, 2022). The "six-wars" are crucial for understanding the character and development of the contemporary Houthis.

*The Houthis: 2014-2015*

The Houthis are regularly characterised as a disorganised gang of militiamen. Regularly, they are referred to as 'the Yemeni rebels'. In fact, they have demonstrated sophistication, agency, and strategic awareness throughout the Yemen conflict. This is not an ethical, nor a pejorative judgement. Much of this sophistication and strategic positioning has been used to restrict the flow of humanitarian aid into certain parts of the country, and to bomb targets in Saudi Arabia. They demonstrated agency in 2014, when they ignored the advice of the IRGC, and seized Sana'a.

They have demonstrated sophistication in discourse. They framed their seizing of Sana'a as an anti-colonial revolution, defending minority rights, Islam, and the people of Yemen. Their proclamations evoked memories of 2009, when Abdelmalek al-Houthi stated, "our elder sister, the Saudi kingdom, doesn't respect the Yemenis and wants to impose here in Yemen

the sequence of events and divisions that happened in Libya" (Al-Haj, 2015). Here, he referred to Saudi Arabia's policy of preventing democratic change and keeping pliant regimes in charge, through a policy of divide-and-rule. Their sponsorship of Khalifa Haftar in Libya was a particularly evocative and poignant example of this. The Houthis positioned themselves as an endogenous alternative to the old patronage system (Brandt, 2014, 114).

Aisha Jumaan, in her article '*Deconstructing the Saudi narrative on the war in Yemen'* (2022) pointed to a number of factors that prove the Houthis are doing better than expected. Compared to the disastrous efforts of President Hadi to ensure stability in Aden, Sana'a is a relative safe haven. As well as a more favourable exchange rate, there is relative security in Sana'a. People are keen to flee the repetitive cycles of conflict between the STC and internationally recognised government in Aden. Jumaan (2022) argues that, generally, communication services are better, and ethnic and religious tolerance is higher. However, it is important to note that, whilst there may be some positives compared to other parts of Yemen, the Houthis still constitute a deeply repressive governing force (Amnesty International, 2022). As the International Crisis Group put it: "the Huthis, their opponents say, enforce conservative norms, such as gender separation in public spaces and bans on music and certain forms of dress, and stifle freedom of expression, often brutally" (ICG, 2022, 10)

The Houthis are a criminal enterprise in many ways. As the Organised Crime Index reports, "[g]angs and mafias linked to the Houthi militia are involved in arms, oil, drug, and human trafficking" (2021, 4). Nevertheless, their ability to govern and create stability is much better

than is reported in Saudi and Western media. In the chaos of conflict, Yemenis are primarily concerned with survival. The Houthis provide the basics for this, in exchange for a surrender of basic civil liberties, especially freedom of speech. In fact, crushing dissent was one of the first policies they actioned after taking Sana'a. Four journalists, captured in 2015, were sentenced to death in April 2020 by the Houthis' Specialized Criminal Court in Sana'a. They were simple critics of Ansarallah, but their crime was labelled "espionage" (Freedom House, 2021). Any idea that the Houthis have a liberal democratic future in mind for Yemen is deeply misguided.

### *5.4 Saudi Arabia in Yemen*

*Prior to 2011*

In order to understand Riyadh's involvement in Yemen, it is fundamental to understand the geographic significance of Arabia Felix. Bab al-Mandab has consistently remained "a crucial junction for world trade: Almost all of the trade between the European Union and China, Japan, India and the rest of Arabia passes through the… strait" (Shay, 2018, 1). As a neo-rentier state, Saudi Arabia depends on allied control of the ports along Yemen's west coast, to ensure the safe passage of its oil and natural gas. Ibn Saud's (the founder of Saudi Arabia) dying order to "keep Yemen weak", can be viewed through this lens. Its coasts are of paramount significance to the enduring success of Riyadh's economy. Having an ally here, ensures dynamic and safe shipping routes, through a channel of pertinent significance to Saudi ARAMCO.

Saudi Arabia supported the forces of the Zaydi Imamate in the North Yemen Civil War. Along with Shi'a Iran, they sought to preserve the monarchical regime of Muhammad Al-Badr. Twelver Shi'as, Zaydis, and Sunnis cooperated, to counter the republican threat. In 1962, once the republican threat became actualised, Riyadh and Jordan sent arms shipments to the royalists (Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 1997, 324-325), with the covert support of Britain and Israel (Kessler, 2015).
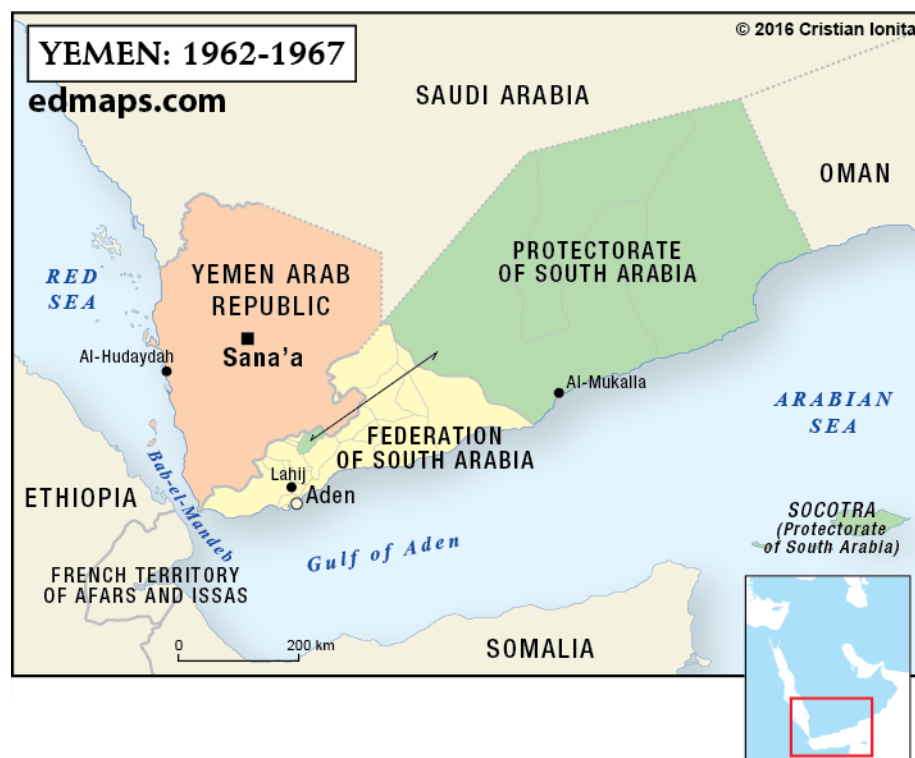


*Image 1. Map of regional control in Yemen – 1962-1967 (Ionita, 2016)*

The republicans accepted a hybrid regime that the Saudis had promoted. The only significant compromise that the republicans 'won' was that the Imam could not return, but most of the

princes did (Feierstein, 2019, 4-5). North Yemen essentially became a Saudi protectorate as Riyadh oversaw a hybrid government of Zaydi and Shafii tribes that aimed to keep the Soviet influence at bay. In order to do so, they had to agree to a ban on the Imamate - a price they were willing to pay (Jones, 2004). Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Riyadh has learnt that it cannot rely upon the longevity of regional monarchical systems. From Egypt, to Yemen, and eventually Iran, dynastic monarchies were replaced with new forms of government. These victories were imbued with broader anti-monarchist sentiments, which made constructing stable alliances particularly difficult for Riyadh. A further challenge for stability was that, between 1967-78, North Yemen had a series of short-lived political leaders. The first two were removed by coups; the second two were assassinated. Saudi Arabia supported these regimes against the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, but the relationship was characterised by cyclical uncertainty and insecurity.

In 1978, following the assassination of President Ahmad al-Ghashami, President Ali Abdullah Saleh brought the stability that Yemen had so long been seeking – "Saleh quickly restructured Yemen's military and security apparatus, empowering relatives and trusted clansmen of his Sanha tribe by giving them top military positions or their own security forces" (Johnsen, 2021, 8). This system of patrimonial order was the social glue that ensured the survival of Saleh's regime for twenty-two years. Dancing on the heads of snakes was not a mere proclamation (Clark, 2010). It accurately describes Saleh's alliance formation policy over the ensuing decades. Marriages of convenience characterised his entire premiership,

from Saudi Arabia, to al-Islah (Yemen's answer to Sunni political Islam, connected to the Muslim Brotherhood) (Yadav, 2015), to the Houthis.

In the 1990s, the regional conversation was dominated by the first Gulf War. Saleh sided with Saddam Hussein, backing him in his decision to invade Kuwait. Although Riyadh had previously supported him in the war against Iran, this particular invasion overstepped the thin foundational line of their relationship with the Baath party. The kingdom was deeply critical of Saleh's decision and expelled around 1 million Yemeni migrant workers as a response. This has been heralded as a fundamental part of Yemen's economic crisis. Most of these 1 million workers were indentured labourers, working in the oil industry. Their families depended on remittance payments coming home. Once these stopped, many fell into crisis. Furthermore, this expulsion drastically increased the population, crippling Yemen's economy (Johnsen, 2021, 4).

Despite their contempt for Saleh, Riyadh lent support for his military action against the Houthis in 2004. By 2009, they were engaging the Houthis directly. The Houthis had fostered contempt for Saudi Arabia, due to Salafi proselytising in Saada, as well as their interference in Yemen governmental affairs. This led to clashes across the border, and the Houthis' eventual encroachment into the Kingdom, capturing small towns and killing border guards. Riyadh responded with concerted military operations through direct intervention into Houthi territory, contributing to Saleh's "Operation Scorched Earth" (Boucek, 2010, 11). There is some suspicion that Saudi Arabia orchestrated this whole scenario to provide it with a reason

to attack the Houthis (Boucek and Ottoway, 2010, 11). What is clear is that Riyadh viewed the Houthis as a group that presented an acute risk to their enduring regime security, and the status of the Saudi economy. It is also crucial to note that there is a history to Saudi military engagement against the Houthis, from which Riyadh was able to denote a lineage, as a further tool of foreign policy justification, especially of ODS.

*Post-2011*

There was understandable concern in 2011 that the Arab Spring could spread into parts of Saudi Arabia. As it reached Yemen, Ibn Saud's edict to "keep Yemen weak", re-emerged as a central priority for the Al Saud. From the very beginning of the uprisings, Riyadh mobilised to ensure the next leader would protect Saudi interests in Yemen. Riyadh pushed for the removal of Saleh from power through the GCC Initiative, which he eventually signed in November 2011, after putting up significant resistance (Hill, 2017, 240-241). The Houthis later went on to murder him in November 2017. Riyadh always viewed him as a challenging, slippery, and dangerous leader. President Hadi, a former soldier from Southern Yemen, and Saleh's former number two, now represented Saudi interests in abundance, and was pushed, through various processes, as the natural replacement. In February of 2012, Hadi was selected in a single-candidate referendum to serve as a caretaker President of Yemen. However, this regime proved corrupt and deeply unpopular (Lackner, 2019, 40-41). To strengthen this new government, gain further legitimacy, and canvass the views of a wide section of Yemeni

society, the National Dialogue Council (NDC) began in March 2013. A GCC-led initiative, it was claimed to be in aid of creating a more representative, fairer, and more democratic government. In reality, it led to Hadi and Riyadh strengthening their grip over the structures of power.

*Iran in Yemen: A product of the Saudi imagination?*

Saudi Arabia's primary concern is with its regime survival (Ryan, 2014), and not with a genuine fear that Iran is out to kill Sunnis and roll back the influence of Sunni Islam. Nevertheless, the narrative has extreme levels of capital, as the Iranian threat is regularly used as a galvanising force across the Arab World. Riyadh has framed its intervention in Yemen as a defensive move against a pernicious sectarian aggressor.

Despite the over-exaggeration of scale, Iran was providing discursive support to the Houthis, especially during their rise to power in 2014 (Juneau, 2016, 655). Tehran used this as a tool to increase Saudi anxiety over Iranian encirclement, which worked effectively. A young and inexperienced Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (Mohammed bin Salman), could not hope to protect his loose grip on power with an Iranian-backed group controlling the ports of the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Through fear, exaggerating Iranian involvement provided Mohammed bin Salman with an internationally salient justification for his intervention, which he viewed as an opportunity "to assert the Kingdom's status as a regional power in the Middle East" (Darwich, 2018, 125). As researchers are now aware, the conflict had the opposite effect, depleting Saudi resources and international credibility.

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Mohammed bin Salman's decision-making was not solely clouded by inexperience. The context of the JCPOA is also fundamental, as Riyadh increasingly feared rapprochement between the US and Iran (Black, 2013). The nuclear talks reached their final stages at precisely the same time as ODS, which may not be entirely coincidental. The UAE, who backed Riyadh in the early days of the intervention, expressed similar contempt for the JCPOA in 2015. These concerns were not limited to Yemen. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and even Bahrain was concerned at the idea of growing Iranian influence, which was increasing across the Shi'a crescent. The Iraqi government was controlled by Tehran, Hezbollah were at their most powerful in Lebanon, and the IRGC sponsoring and training militias across Syria and Iraq. Yemen was merely part of a bigger fear and a deep anti-Iranian sentiment.

The JCPOA represented a step too far. UAE academic Sultan al-Qassemi declared: "[t]his deal is the grand bargain Kerry is denying it is. It is giving Iran carte blanche in exchange for empty promises. Iran is on the ascendant. Iran has the winning hand in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen" (Nakhoul, 2015). Overall, the emerging regional view was that a nuclear armed Iran would empower the regime to interfere more in regional affairs, even if Tehran framed it as a defensive strategy. Tehran's priority, like Riyadh's, is also with regime survival.

In summation, Riyadh saw the intervention in Yemen as essential for power-projection, security, and the endurance of their economy. They thought it would be a low-cost and quick way to re-establish their control of Arabia Felix and undermine Iran's attempts at agitation.

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To justify this, they portrayed the Houthis as an Iranian proxy, against which all acts would be justified in defensive terms. Many academics now argue this to be an over-exaggeration, used to overshadow and cloud Riyadh's true geostrategic motivations: oil, gas, and security (Juneau, 2016; Hill, 2017; Darwich, 2018). They were not alone, as successive Yemeni presidents pursued the same narrative.

*5.5 Iranian involvement in Yemen prior to 2015*

Despite the lack of evidence, Saleh and Hadi continued to over-emphasize Iranian involvement from 2010 onwards. The tendency of the Houthis to adopt anti-Israeli, anti-Semitic, and anti-American discourse, was harnessed by the regime in Sana'a "to characterise the Houthis as radical and terrorists before an international, and particularly American, audience" (Terrill, 2014, 433). These edicts also bear direct resemblance to those of the Islamic Republic, providing another front on which the government could make connections between the Houthis and Iran. In 2012, Ali Hassan al Ahmadi, then Yemen's Chief of National Security, claimed that Houthis were consistently travelling to Qom to receive religious training (McDonald, 2012). The regime also alleged that the Houthis were moving away from Zaydism, and towards a more radical form of Twelver Shi'ism, similar in form to that of the Ayatollahs. It is true that, since 2004, "many Zaydis who later became Houthi leaders… were enticed to go and study in schools in Iran" (Lackner, 2017, 80).

The attempted arrest of Hussein al-Houthi in 2004, for anti-government protesting, sparked Houthi expansion. Noticing their militarisation, and seizing an opportunity, the decision to

invite its members to Iran was a carefully calculated move by the Islamic Republic. Whilst the Houthi ideology explicitly rejects vilayet-e-faqih [Guardianship of the Jurist], alignment and solidarity grew around the causes of minority rights, anti-Saudi, and anti-colonial sentiment during this period. As Saleh accelerated his narrative, over-emphasizing Iran's role, Tehran "added to this perception with rhetorical and diplomatic support for the Houthis in a policy of religious solidarity" (Terrill, 2014, 433). Religious solidarity here should not be confused with absolute religious alignment. Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has offered its solidarity to oppressed Shi'a minorities, and other groups such as Sunni Hamas, across the Middle East, as part of a wider tactic for regional legitimacy. The Houthis are another case in point. They represent a particular type of geostrategic opportunity for the Iranians in the NMECW, due to their proximity to Saudi Arabia (Hill, 2017).

In terms of material support, Iranian involvement is more difficult to prove. It took until 23rd January 2013 for the government to intercept any shipment of arms near Yemen that they could connect to the Islamic Republic. The Jihan I was intercepted just off of Yemen's coast and was loaded with an array of different weapons and tactical gear, including Composition C-4, improvised explosive device equipment, anti-aircraft missiles alleged to be Iranian Misagh-2s, and Iranian-manufactured night-vision goggles (Michetti, 2020). However, Reuters reported that the UN believed that this shipment was more likely to have been headed for Somalia than to the Houthis (Charbonneau and Nichols, 2013).

Whilst there is some, albeit limited, evidence of increased Iranian support following the Arab

Spring, Iranian influence was greatly exaggerated. Throughout this period, Iranian

involvement with the Houthis was partial, limited and, materially, relatively insignificant

(Juneau, 2016). Yemen poses little significance to Tehran. They possess very different

priorities in terms of security, economics, social issues, and regional ambitions. Clausen

stated that:

The Houthis were framed as a proxy of Iran which served as a key factor in legitimising and
garnering international support for the intervention. Saudi Arabia has especially sought to
link the Houthis to a broader securitisation of an Iranian threat to the US which continues to
attach strategic importance to the Gulf region. However, there is limited evidence pointing to
substantial Iranian involvement in Yemen before 2015 (2022, 161-162).

However, later chapters will show how Iran has incrementally increased their support for the

Houthis, as it has become clearer that they can use the alliance as leverage in its dealings with

the Gulf and the west. This is not to suggest that the Houthis do not have agency, but that

Tehran has developed its appreciation and views of the Houthis as a strategic partner. Iran's

use of cyberspace to lord this connection over Riyadh, as well as their supply of ballistic

missiles to the Houthis, which have hit Saudi infrastructure, are key tactics of externally

protecting the regime of the Islamic Republic (Bahgat and Ehteshami, 2021).

Not only are Tehran exaggerating the narrative of Iranian-Houthi collaboration; they are also

exaggerating the narrative of Iranian-Houthi religious and ideological alignment. Over time,

Saudi Arabia's instrumental use of alienating sectarianisation, to garner support for its

regional exploits, has become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Juneau, 2016; Clausen, 2022). That

does not mean that the Houthis have necessarily gravitated towards an Iranian outlook, nor

does it mean they have moved toward Twelver Shi'ism. Rather, it means that the fear Riyadh has generated, both at home, and internationally, has become actualized and now feels real to the Saudi regime. Rather than outright deny this propaganda, Tehran has capitalised upon it, embedding the anxiety within state actors as a form of securitisation.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Yemen. When the Houthis seized Sana'a in 2015, Iranian MP Alireza Zakani stated that Tehran had solidified its "fourth Arab capital, after Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus" (Juneau, 2016, 655). Although not explicitly mentioned, the Shia dynamic is implicit in this remark. There is a central dichotomy at play here. On the one hand, Iran is determined to represent itself as a truly 'Islamic Republic', both in terms of piety, but also in terms of its anti-sectarian stance. An oft-cited example of this is their dedicated support for the Palestinian cause, and Hamas in particular, who are a Sunni organisation. On the other hand, Tehran is more than happy to emphasise their strength as leaders of a union of Shia groups across the Middle East, if it can further entrench Saudi insecurity. This attitude manifests itself in the limited support Iran provides for the Houthis, used, "to poke Riyadh in the eye" (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016, 157). Saudi Arabia's increased anxiety has made the kingdom's foreign policy more erratic, channelling resources into an unwinnable conflict, whilst, in the background, steadily losing any chances of a Sunni ally in Syria.

Nevertheless, the mere fact that the Houthis and Iran are allies at all, puts Saudi Arabia on the backfoot in the struggle for regional hegemony. The Saudis feel that they are being steadily

encircled by Iran. This is not a pure fear of the Shi'ism the Islamic Republic espouses, but about the threat the alternative model poses to Saudi totalitarian monarchy. Ever since the fall of the Shah in 1979, Tehran has been determined to challenge the legitimacy of antiquated dynastic regimes across the region. The consequences of having an Iranian sympathiser controlling Yemen are more than simply symbolic for Saudi Arabia, as it would "undermine Saudi Arabia in its own backyard" (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016, 163). Furthermore, Yemen's geographical and strategic significance represents opportunities for Iran to extend its influence.

As Terrill writes, "[t]hese areas offer a place to support an intelligence outpost and covert weapons distribution network for supporting its interest in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa" (2014, 431). Within the context of the Cold War, "for Iran, Yemen represents opportunities, not threats" (Juneau, 2016, 661). Via providing rhetorical, and to some extent strategic, support to the Houthis, Iran has been able to divert Saudi attention from Syria. They have played into the Saudi narrative that the Houthis are an Iranian proxy, to further increase anxiety in the Gulf, shifting their resources away from the Syrian opposition and towards the Yemeni problem (Milani, 2015). Iranian involvement in Yemen is best described by Ginny Hill, who claimed that Tehran is simply "trolling the Saudis, for apparently minimal capital investment" (2017, 285).

## Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has used new narratives to obscure old motivations in Yemen. Determined to keep Yemen weak and its government pliant, the Al Saud manipulated Yemen's path to peace through the NDC. Along with their sponsorship of Salafism in the North, their hold over Yemen has gradually emboldened the Houthis, drawing more Yemenis to the cause. Once Ansarallah took Sana'a, Riyadh began to act erratically, fearing the potential impact on their security and economy. To justify a full-scale bombing campaign and blockade, they chose to over-exaggerate the Houthis' connection to Iran. This, despite the Houthis constituting an autonomous political unit, with their own domestic grievances and decision-making structures. The Saudi narrative of 'the Houthis as an Iranian proxy' had the adverse effect of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy (Juneau, 2016; Clausen, 2022), as Iran seized the chance to undermine Riyadh's resources, regional standing, and international credibility. As Milani put it – "any losses for the Saudis represent gains for the Iranians, and Iran benefits from the distraction of Saudi's investment in the expensive conflict" (2015). Yemen poses no profound risk to Iran, but significant opportunities. Through over-emphasising its involvement, Tehran has pulled Riyadh yet deeper into a costly war. For relatively minimal capital investment, they have managed to adopt a policy of 'guerrilla geopolitics', striking the most tender of Saudi nerves. Saudi Arabia's intervention in 2015 was largely justified along the lines of 'defeating an Iranian proxy', a core frame within the following chapter.

## Chapter Six
### *2015 – Riyadh and the West - Legitimising Operation Decisive Storm*

This chapter characterises the nature and tests the validity of several different securitisation narratives during the months of Operation Decisive Storm (ODS). The Saudi government gave five justifications for their intervention in Yemen: to combat an Iranian threat, to defend the legitimate government of Yemen, to defend Saudi Arabia, to protect the people of Yemen, and to combat a radical terrorist group. There are two motivations, which were notably omitted from Saudi discourse: namely, the protection of Riyadh's oil and natural gas corridors, and the furthering of Mohammed bin Salman's project of status-seeking within the context of the NMECW. Particular attention will be paid to anti-Iranian framing throughout this period, which presented domestic, regional, and international actors with appeal and utility. Riyadh's primary audiences were international – the most significant of which was the US. Able to frame the conflict as one of defensive necessity, a host of actors were able to legitimise their role in Yemen and in turn further their economic and geopolitical interests.

Before conducting DT, the chapter first outlines the central importance of Mohammed bin Salman within ODS. As then Minister of Defence, he was the architect of the intervention, viewing it as essential for establishing Saudi Arabia as a strong military power. Following this, the chapter deals with each of his lines of securitisation in turn. The primary role of this chapter is to situate each frame within the context of ODS and judge their validity. It does this by situating the stated motivation against the historiography of ODS and the drivers behind it. By starting at the beginning of the war, the discussion of these ideas creates a

starting point for the more thorough processes of discourse tracing later on in the thesis, showing their development throughout the conflict. The inclusion of data here is purposefully minimal, as this chapter's purpose is to analyse contextual factors framing these recurrent themes. This sets a picture for the following section's analysis, which aims at demonstrating the success of these frames in fostering the support of Western actors. There is a final section, which examines the central importance of the ulema, and their effectiveness in mobilising domestic and regional Sunni support. This, in turn, demonstrates a shift to sectarian language. The structure of this chapter, and this final part, is in line with the model of Saudi Arabia's 'triadic nexus of securitisation' – consisting of the state elites, media elites, and religious elites. As stated in the theoretical framework, the media and ulema are not merely "functional actors", but active and essential parts of the Al-Saud's securitisation network.

The Houthis took Sana'a on 21st September 2014, following several months of protests and violence in the northern highlands. Over the coming months, they would gradually dismantle the government, resulting in the 'resignation' of President Hadi on 22nd January 2015 and the establishment of a Houthi-led ruling council on 6th February 2015. It took little over a month for Riyadh to intervene, declaring their ambition to "protect and defend the legitimate government" (Al-Arabiya, 2015a).

On 26th March, Saudi Arabia launched a comprehensive military campaign against the Houthis, who they declared to be an Iranian-backed terrorist group. This was to consist of a series of military strikes, and a blockade of Houthi-controlled ports along Yemen's Red Sea coast. Saudi officials and Coalition partners invoked Article 51 of the UN Charter to justify

its intervention, despite the fact that "it received no prior fiat from the UN Security Council"

(Ruys and Ferro, 2016, 61). Article 51 states:

Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security (United Nations, 2022).

The UN remained sceptical of Saudi Arabia, but other actors were far more forthcoming with their defence of Riyadh, especially the US and the UK. Designed to be a quick resolution to a profound security-threat, Mohammed bin Salman saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate a new assertiveness in Saudi foreign policy (Darwich, 2018). Over the next four years, Riyadh would spend at least $265 billion on its military intervention in Yemen (Jalal, 2020). Reminiscent of American overconfidence in Vietnam, the inexperienced Saudi regime made a gross miscalculation. Now, eight years after ODS, the Al Saud are increasingly resigned to the unwinnable nature of the conflict.

To develop legitimacy, Riyadh solicited support from its Sunni allies. The Saudi-led Sunni coalition eventually consisted of ten states: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Sudan, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Senegal, and Morocco. There is a certain irony in the fact that Riyadh deplored the Houthis as an alleged sectarian Shia Iranian proxy, only to establish an entirely Sunni coalition to combat it. Fundamentally, the "multinational approach… enabled Saudi

Arabia to launch proactive security operations that it would not have been able to undertake unilaterally" (Miller and Cardaun, 2020, 1516).

In 2017, Elisabeth Kendall wrote: "the Iranian threat, whether real or perceived, has been a powerful justification before both domestic and international audiences for Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen" (2017, 5). 'International' here seems to focus too heavily on Western actors such as the US and the UK. A third category can be added to this list of audiences – 'regional/Sunni'. The inclusion of the term Sunni here is not meant to oversimplify these actors, attributing their geopolitical action to a simplistic calculation of sectarian affiliation. It points to the reality that all the regional actors that signed up to the Saudi-led coalition were Sunni. Their reasons for doing so often had little to do with their sectarian identity, or narrow security calculations; in many cases they were more about specific economic considerations. For instance, Morocco and Sudan did not lend their support due to primary fears of Iranian expansionism, or of the Houthi threat, but to ensure the continued support of their wealthy Gulf benefactor in Saudi Arabia (Ryan, 2014, 42). Framing the war as one of defensive moral necessity has clouded analysis of the vast multiplicity of state motivations.

### 6.1 Mohammed bin Salman – The Architect of Operation Decisive Storm

Mohammed bin Salman (Mohammed bin Salman) is the seventh son of King Salman of Saudi Arabia. When King Salman's predecessor, King Abdullah, died, one of Salman's first acts was to appoint his 29-year-old son as Minister of Defence. Within this role, Mohammed bin Salman was the architect of ODS. As the war progressed, he solidified his hold on power,

displacing his cousin Muhammad bin Nayef as Deputy Crown Prince on 29th April 2015. By 21st June 2017, he had displaced Muhammad bin Nayef as Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia and became heir apparent. However, as his aging father grew increasingly frail, Mohammed bin Salman became de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia.

Following the death of King Abdullah, "the ascendant branch of the Saudi ruling family appear… to be willing to compensate for what they conceive as Abdullah's failure in acquiring the Kingdom's status" (Darwich, 2018, 135). Their view was that they needed to be more forward-thinking in their approach to defence and security. When Sana'a was captured by one of their enemies, Mohammed bin Salman saw it as an opportunity to assert the new leadership's status in the region. Furthermore, this was part of Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious attempt to solidify his ascent to power, along with Vision 2030 which he announced in June 2016, designed to "diversify the country's economy to include income from oil, technology, and tourism" (Cochran, 2019, 369).

Mohammed bin Salman saw himself as a visionary powerful young leader, willing to push Saudi Arabia into a position of renewed power on both the regional and international stages. However, he is a leader of contradictions. On the one hand, Mohammed bin Salman has modernised elements of Saudi society, decreased the influence of Wahhabi fundamentalists, and opened the Kingdom up to the international tourism industry. On the other hand, the Al-Saud's leadership has become even more authoritarian under his rule, solidifying his hold over the wider Al-Saud and the military (Ardemagni, 2020). His authoritarian control of

social media represses dissent, justifies his war in Yemen, and spreads false narratives (Benner et al., 2018). Furthermore, in the early days of the conflict, he sent out Wahhabi fundamentalists to legitimise ODS (Siegel, 2015).

The young Mohammed bin Salman was determined to prove himself as an effective military leader, protecting the Kingdom's borders and shipping routes along the Red Sea coast. He set about framing the intervention as a sectarian proxy war, representing himself as a noble Sunni leader, defending the borders of his Kingdom against a pernicious Iranian-backed aggressor. He appealed to and exaggerated a sense of ontological insecurity – suggesting that Iranian presence on the Saudi border posed and existential threat to the security and identity of the region. The New Middle East Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia had come to dominate the regional landscape (Gause, 2014). As a result, anti-Iranian sentiment had grown within Riyadh. As such, Mohammed bin Salman saw the utility in framing ODS within this framework. However, as Darwich noted, "the recent crisis in Yemen can be viewed as a civil war between groups in a political struggle; the image of a Sunni-Shia proxy war in Yemen is only a distorted narrative presented by the Saudi Kingdom to legitimize its aggression" (2018, 131).

He framed the conflict as an attempt at combatting an Iranian proxy, to reinstate the legitimate government of Yemen, to defend Saudi borders, to protect Yemen's population, and to combat a radical terrorist group. The Qatari Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs narrowed this down to what he deemed as the two most important factors, arguing that the

conflict was waged, "to restore the legitimate government and… to eliminate the security threat along the Saudi border. None of these have been achieved until now and many people are paying the price and still the security threat has increased" (Al-Thani, 2018, 5).

Mohammed bin Salman was determined to succeed in Yemen, launching a comprehensive air campaign and blockade in March 2015. He used the tools at his disposal to legitimise and validate international support for the conflict, including government officials, the ulema, and the media. However, the conflict is not purely reducible to a vanity project. As Marie-Louise Clausen noted, "Saudi Arabia has long considered Yemen a real and existential security threat… as the Houthis' military and political power grew, they increasingly posed a direct security threat to Saudi Arabia" (Clausen, 2022, 161). He was able to denote a lineage of Houthi aggression across Saudi Arabia's border and he possessed a genuine fear of the impact Houthi control of Red Sea ports could have on the flow of oil and natural gas through the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Yet, rhetorically, the regime focused heavily on framing the war as defending the Sunni World against an Iranian proxy on the Kingdom's southern border.

### 6.2 Exaggerating Iranian involvement and its effect on Western audiences

On 12th February 2015, the US Department of State said in a daily press briefing, "we are aware of reports of a variety of support provided by Iran to the Houthis, but we have not seen evidence that Iran is exerting command and control over the Houthis activities in Yemen" (US Department of State, 2015a). This was quickly forgotten once ODS commenced, with Riyadh's concurrent over-exaggeration of Iranian involvement. On 24th March, Saudi Arabia,

the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain signed a joint letter addressed to the UN Security

Council, outlining their justification for ODS. In this statement, explicit reference is made to

the Houthis "being supported by regional powers that are seeking to impose their control over

the country and turn it into a tool by which they can extend their influence in the region"

(Coalition Statement, 2015). In a letter addressed to the UN Security Council on 26th March,

"the alleged foreign-backed 'aggression' emerge[d] as the main justification for the

intervention" (Ruys and Ferro, 2016, 71). The letter referred to the Houthis as 'puppets'

(Coalition Statement, 2015). Whilst neither of these letters named Iran, "it is clear from… the

continued labelling of the Yemeni crisis as a 'proxy war', that references to a 'foreign',

'regional', or 'outside' force allegedly behind the Houthi uprising alluded to… Iran" (Ruys

and Ferro, 2016, 73-74). The reach of the line that "the Houthis are an Iranian proxy" was

vast, working as an effective tool of legitimisation to international Western audiences.


US National Security Council Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan said the day before ODS on

25th March:

"[t]he United States strongly condemns ongoing military actions taken by the Houthis against
the elected government of Yemen… The United States coordinates closely with Saudi Arabia
and our GCC partners on issues related to their security and our shared interests. In support of
GCC actions to defend against Houthi violence, President Obama has authorized the
provision of logical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations" (Meehan,
2015).

Iran is not explicitly mentioned here, but the signalling of "shared interests", implicitly

evokes shared fears of Iranian expansion. The UK went further, specifically naming Iran and

referring to the conflict as a potential proxy war. Similarly allied with Riyadh, primarily due

to shared perceptions of terrorist threat and sizable defence contracts involving BAE systems

(Kennard and Miller, 2021), UK Foreign Secretary Phillip Hammond said in Washington on 27th March 2015:

"[T]he Saudis are very exercised by the idea of an Iranian-backed regime in Yemen. They cannot accept the idea of an Iranian-backed regime in control of Yemen, which is why they felt compelled to intervene the way they have… We know there has been Iranian support for the Houthi and we are all concerned to avoid this becoming a proxy war" (Reuters, 2015).

During the same period, then Saudi Ambassador to the US, Adel al-Jubeir, was drawing American attention to an exaggerated narrative of Iranian involvement with the Houthis. In March, the American news programme *Face the Nation* asked Al-Jubeir: "How much did Iran have to do with the Houthis?". Al-Jubeir replied: "A lot. The Houthis are ideologically affiliated with Iran. The Iranians have provided them with weapons. The Iranians have provided them with advisors. And the Iranians have provided them with money" (Face the Nation, 2015).

Iranian involvement was minimal during this period. There is a strong consensus on this within the academic literature (Juneau, 2016; Hill, 2017; Kendall, 2017). As Hokayem and Roberts wrote, "Tehran [had] no decisive say over Houthi decision-making, and the relationship between them [was] recent and opportunistic" (2016, 163). Ginny Hill (2017) categorises Iranian involvement during this period as primarily discursive, amounting to a kind of geopolitical trolling. Tehran gave their verbal support to the Houthis when it became clear that they had taken Sana'a. They did so because they knew the insecurity this would generate for Saudi Arabia. Within the context of the NMECW, "any losses for the Saudis

represent gains for the Iranians" (Milani, 2015). To generate the support they required,

Riyadh purposefully over-exaggerated Iranian influence in Yemen. Milani opined that "Saudi

Arabia [was] grossly over-exaggerating Iran's power in Yemen to justify its own expansionist

ambitions" (Milani, 2015).

It is important to note that some argue that Iran has had a significant connection with the

Houthis throughout, and even prior to, the conflict (Khalaji, 2015; Orkaby, 2015). However,

there are others who argue that Al-Jubeir's claims were exaggerated (Juneau 2016; Clausen,

2022), and mirrored President Saleh's tactic of classifying the Houthis as an Iranian proxy to

gain US support. When Saleh did so in 2009, Wikileaks published a cable sent from the US

Embassy in Sana'a, which quoted a Saudi member of Riyadh's Special Committee for

Yemen Affairs, which stated "[w]e know Saleh is lying about Iran, but there's nothing we

can do about it now" (WikiLeaks, 2009).

If both Riyadh and Washington viewed Houthi-Iranian collusion as a misnomer in previous

years, it is puzzling as to why they now spoke of an ideological affiliation between the two.

American intelligence services raised doubts in February 2015 - the month prior to ODS

(DOS, 2015). It also raises the question as to why Washington suddenly believed the same

narrative, but this time pushed by an ally, who had shared economic and security concerns.

ODS was framed as a defensive war against an expansionist aggressor, in the name of

humanitarianism, legitimacy, and democracy. The US knew there was a lack of evidence but

bought into the Saudi line regardless. The core Western supporters of the conflict were the UK, US, France, and Canada, who all had and continue to have significant trade relations with Riyadh, centred on the oil and natural gas industries. On 22nd April, President Obama appeared on *MSNBC*, stating that regional insecurity: "is not solved by having another proxy war in Yemen… and we've indicated to the Iranians that they need to be part of the solution; not part of the problem", adding, "what we've said to them is if there are weapons delivered to factions within Yemen… that's a problem" (MSNBC, 2015). Washington and Riyadh were both aware of the fear that the Iranian threat can generate across the region. It poses an existential threat to the ontological security of Sunni Muslims, many Arab states, and American interests in the region.

*6.3 Protecting the legitimate, internationally recognised government of Yemen*

The Saudis justified ODS as an attempt to "protect the legitimate, internationally recognised government". The intervention was framed as responsive, answering the call of President Hadi for "support… to protect Yemen and its people from the aggression of Houthi militias" (Coalition Statement, 2015). Throughout ODS, this line appeared across the breadth of the international community. It appealed to the legal precedent, that the state "enjoys the rights inherent in full sovereignty" (UNGA Res 2625, 1970), and so therefore has full control over its territory, allowing it to invite military intervention within its borders.

Doswald-Beck argued that to exercise such power, the sovereign must (1) have effective control over the territory of the state, and (2) be internationally recognised (1985, 199-200).

The latter is what the coalition fell back on, as Hadi's government fulfilled this criterion. Whether Hadi possessed "territorial control", "legitimacy", or "consent" are all open to significant doubt. As Ruys and Ferro wrote: "[g]iven that President Hadi and his government were engaged in a non-international armed conflict with the Houthi rebels and lacked effective control over significant parts of the territory at the moment the letter was sent, it can be questioned whether they still had that authority" (2016, 72).

Hadi's regime met the accepted definition of "legitimate government" under international law, which led to the justification of so many extraordinary measures to defend it. This was confirmed by UNSC Resolution 2216, which reiterated that Hadi was the legitimate ruler of Yemen, and condemned the Houthis (UNSC, 2015b).

However, in a wider, conceptual sense, legitimacy is best understood as establishing the primacy of consent and the existence of public faith in a functioning social order as necessary conditions for legitimate government. The Lockean understanding is used here, in that "no one can be… subjected to the political power of another without his own consent" (1980, 53). Furthermore, Weber's (1964) notion of faith is also useful, in establishing the importance of the state's social order as an essential pre-condition for legitimate government. These conceptions of legitimacy pose significant challenges to the coalition's narrative of Hadi as the "legitimate government of Yemen".

Hadi was the GCC's preferred candidate, chosen by the GCC-led NDC, to stand in a single-candidate election. Consent requires the option of choice as a necessary condition, which was entirely absent from Yemen's 2012 elections. By 2014, Hadi's economic incompetence and taste for corruption became clear. Support for Hadi's government was low, especially leading up to the Houthi rebellion of 2014 (Radwan, 2014). Furthermore, "Hadi was deeply unpopular and seen as a Saudi stooge" (Riedel, 2017). The President's control over the social order was collapsing around him.

Later his sons would be described as the masterminds of a "vast network of corruption" (Al-Deen, 2022). There are reports of Jalal Hadi being the "man to contact and essentially pay off in order to obtain… fuel import permits"; "Jalal reportedly not only demanded commission for fuel imports, but for all imports entering Hudaydah" (Sana'a Centre, 2018, 35). Essentially, the Hadi family were profiteering from the blockade of Yemeni ports, making money through granting much sought after commercial import licenses.

Still, the international order recognised Hadi's government as the legitimate government of Yemen. Therefore, the coalition's actions against the Houthis, classified as a rebel non-state actor, have been effectively legitimised. This tentative notion of legitimacy played a central role in the justification of airstrikes and the blockade of Hudaydah. Combined, these actions led to the death of hundreds of thousands of innocent Yemenis. The repeated phrase "internationally recognised legitimate government" has been so profoundly effective that it has fostered support for actions that created the world's worst humanitarian crisis. For the

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Saudis, "Hadi's value as president is solely in the cover he provides for the continued implementation of Security Council Resolution 2216" (Al-Deen, 2022).

It was not until 14th April 2015 that the UN Security Council openly addressed ODS. Resolution 2216 gave "support for the legitimacy of the President of Yemen" and condemned "in the strongest terms the ongoing unilateral actions taken by the Houthis" (UNSC, 2015b). No mention was made of conspiratorial Iranian influence, and the UN stopped short of providing *ex post facto* legitimisation for ODS. It is pointed, however, that their resolution did "not contain any explicit or implicit criticism of the operation" (Ruys and Ferro, 2016, 69). For the UN, the issue was simple. The Houthis had overthrown the internationally recognised government, making actions to restore Hadi legitimate. Saudi Arabia did not need to try particularly hard to push for this resolution, as three of the five permanent members in the 2015 UNSC were its close allies - the US, France, and the UK. The remaining two members have been getting increasingly close to the Kingdom.

China accepted the motion, and, even Russia, "whose ability to veto often has historically acted as a counterbalance to US dominance in the council, had enough geostrategic interests that benefited from building on and improving its relations with the kingdom to merely abstain" (Alhariri and Ask, 2020). China regards Saudi Arabia as a crucial energy partner (Houghton, 2022, 135). Russia has sought to use its relationship with Saudi Arabia to undermine the US in the region – a trend that has accelerated in recent years (Issaev and Korotayev, 2020; Katz, 2021; Mezher, 2021). Alhariri and Ask (2020) went on to add that

"every resolution on Yemen in the past five years has been considered by a council overshadowed by Saudi Arabia's influence and willingness to strategically spend money".

The international community's recognition of Hadi as a sufficient justification for ODS is wrought with problematic implications, in that "international recognition is a fickle barometer and inevitably introduces an element of subjectivity in the application of the legal framework" (Ruys and Ferro, 2016, 97). Focusing on whether a government is "internationally recognised", negates the central importance of whether the government is "domestically supported". Furthermore, by choosing a side in a civil war, the international community has broken a central principle, in denying "the right of a nation to decide… by a physical contest if necessary… the nature and form of its government" (Lauterpacht, 1947, 233). It has another effect of politicising the notion of "international recognition" to only recognise those state actors that are in keeping with Western geopolitical interests.

As this war was about "protecting an internationally recognised government", Western allies were able to find a neat justification for their complicity in ODS and the subsequent humanitarian disaster. In reality, their main concern was with ensuring the free flow of oil to markets to enable the free market of the global economy to function. It is widely accepted that the Saudi-led coalition must shoulder most of the blame for the exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis (HRW, 2017; MSF, 2020), whilst acknowledging that the Houthis have also contributed (Simpson, 2020). At the same time, they had a trump card to use when any

suggestion was made that their involvement was due to cynical energy-based and economic considerations.

## 6.4 Defending Saudi Arabia's Border

In his interview with the veteran news anchor Wolf Blitzer, Adel al-Jubeir said "[w]e are ready to do anything it takes to protect the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and we are willing to do so" (CNN, 2015). This stated justification featured heavily in Saudi and Coalition press releases during this period (Coalition Statement, 2015). The frame appealed to a sense of direct threat posed to Saudi Arabia, portraying an Iranian presence on the border of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, posing a threat to the ontological security of the Arab World and to American interests in the region. As Ruys and Ferro wrote:

The presence of heavy weapons beyond the control of legitimate authorities, the build-up of military presence in the border-region, and the former attack against Saudi Arabian territory (in 2009)… allegedly qualify as a grave threat to the region in general and Saudi Arabia in particular (2016, 70).

The attack referred to the Houthi encroachment into Saudi territory during "The Six Wars", referred to in the previous chapter. Whilst this did constitute a cross-border military incursion by Ansarallah, it is not sufficient to justify a full-scale Saudi intervention by air, land, and sea, six years later. The Houthis had not fired missiles into Saudi territory in the months leading up to their siege of Sana'a and would only come to do so in retaliation for ODS in May 2015. They had, however, begun to attack Saudi shipping in an attempt to disrupt Riyadh's oil industry.

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Most importantly, encroachment into Saudi territory in 2009 does tell a very important story as to why Riyadh views the Houthis as a genuine security threat. It demonstrates their violent antipathy towards Riyadh, who they blamed for meddling in North Yemen, spreading Salafism, and dividing the region (Brandt, 2014, 114; Davidson, 2016, 350). It also raised Saudi insecurity about the limitations of their armed forces. As Lackner wrote, "[i]t demonstrated the military superiority of the Huthis over trained Saudi forces who were, for the first time, involved in fighting when the Huthis crossed into Saudi Arabia" (2017, 153). This might suggest why they focused so heavily on attacking Yemen from the air and blockading from the seas. Furthermore, deploying air power has reach and immediacy. Air power works best for Saudi Arabia it is relatively cost effective. Riyadh were also aware how Zaydi tribesmen decimated the Egyptian army in the mountains in the 1960s war. The Saudis did not want to make the same mistake.

It is impossible to say whether the Houthis would have attacked Saudi Arabia if Riyadh had not intervened, but a simple calculation of assets suggests not. The comparatively limited economic weight and weapons' capabilities of the Houthis in 2015 means that it would have been unlikely to attack Saudi Arabia. As noted, the Houthis are primarily a domestic force, and not concerned with geopolitical dynamics. Before the Saudi-led intervention, the nature of unrest in Yemen was pitting Yemenis against Yemenis. Saada and Sana'a are both close to the Saudi border, and it is understandable why Houthi control of these areas would cause security concerns for Riyadh. However, their continual exaggeration of Iranian involvement suggests a concerted effort to categorise Ansarallah as part of an expansionist Shi'a axis. This

was the only way they could convince domestic and regional audiences that the Houthis posed a profound threat to their hard security.

*6.5 Protecting the People of Yemen*

Throughout Saudi discourse, ODS was justified in the name of "protecting the people of Yemen". However, the Saudi blockades of Yemeni ports "severely restricted the flow of food, fuel, and medicine that the vast majority of the civilian population depended on, in violation of the laws of war" (Simpson, 2020). The blockade fulfilled the criteria of illegality according to Section 102 of the San Remo Manual, an international legal framework concerning the laws of the sea, as "the damage to the civilian population [was]… excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated from the blockade" (Doswald-Beck, 1995). Furthermore, the blockade and many of the airstrikes fell afoul of the International Committee of the Red Cross' criteria for proportionality, which sates "launching an attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, is prohibited" (ICRC, 2023). Whilst this framework of international humanitarian law is more commonly applied to concrete "attacks", like airstrikes, the blockade has nevertheless resulted in an excessive loss of civilian life, in relation to military advantage.

*The Guardian,* quoting UN statistics, reported that by June 2015, 80% of Yemen's 30 million people were dependent on humanitarian aid for survival (Borger, 2015). Human Rights Watch and Médecins Sans Frontiers concurred with the UN in arguing that the Saudi blockade was the primary cause of this crisis (Simpson, 2020; MSF, 2020). The Saudi blockade had the following effect – "[a]bout 90 percent of Yemen's basic food intake… came from imports, with only 15 percent of prewar imports reaching the country as of June 2015 (Borger, 2015). This created the conditions under which cholera and diphtheria began to flourish, most prominently by 2017. As Reuters' Matthew Ponsford (2017) wrote, "the majority of deaths from Yemen's cholera outbreak have occurred in rebel-controlled areas cut off Yemenis from access to clean drinking water, forcing them to drink contaminated water instead".

In an interview with the American Press on 2nd April 2015, Adel al-Jubeir referred to Yemeni casualties as "collateral damage" (AP Archive, 2015). Judging legal precedent based on Section 102 of the San Remo Manual, the blockade was not only ethically questionable, but in fact illegal. To offset criticism, in an 15th April address, al-Jubeir said: "we are working with international humanitarian assistance in order to… bring badly needed humanitarian assistance to the people of Yemen" (Saudi Embassy USA, 2015).

Data from Human Rights Watch (HRW) (Simpson, 2020), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (2020), and the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (Global Humanitarian Overview UNOCHA, 2021), dismantle this image of the "Saudi saviour". They

note that Saudi blockades during ODS were "unlawfully disproportionate in that the expected harm to the civilian population exceeded any apparent military benefit" (HRW, 2017). The Al Saud's claims of protecting the Yemeni people have been brought into question. The blockade amounted to a profound obstruction of humanitarian aid, resulting in the deaths of many innocent Yemenis.

The stated reason for the bombing mission was the destruction of the Houthis. HRW showed that many of the airstrikes did no damage to the Houthis or their infrastructure, and in fact targeted civilians (HRW, 2015). Data from the Yemen Data Project recorded 843 Saudi airstrikes in March-April 2015. Of these airstrikes, 281 were on non-military targets (YDP, 2022). They showed that at least 3876 Yemeni civilians were killed by Saudi airstrikes and a further 4521 were injured (YDP, 2022). These figures do not do significant justice to the deaths resulting from the infrastructural devastation caused by Saudi airstrikes. For example, a strike in October 2015 which hit a hospital in Saada did not kill any civilians immediately but resulted in 200,000 people being left without healthcare (BBC, 2015b). Many of the bombs used in such strikes were supplied by the US and UK (Motaparthy, 2016).

### 6.6 The Houthis are a Radical/Terrorist Group

On the day following ODS' announcement, 26th March 2015, Saudi-ran *Al Arabiya* framed "the military mission by the Kingdom's armed forces… confronting the Houthis… as part of Riyadh's larger anti-terrorism efforts" (Abbas, 2015). In doing so, they were working to label Ansarallah as a terrorist organisation. This line was frequent in its application but limited in

its international reception. Whilst actors bought the argument that the Houthis were an Iranian proxy, they were understandably nervous about attributing them 'foreign terrorist organisation' status during this period. To do so would involve heavy sanctions, resulting in measures that would exacerbate the speed and intensity of humanitarian disaster.

Scholars can assume that, by using words like "radical" and "terrorist", Riyadh were referring to the Houthis as an ideologically driven militant organisation. Whilst not all Houthis are Zaydi, Zaydi ambition forms a key part of the leadership of Ansarallah. They do not subscribe to Iran's understanding of Vilayat-e-Faqih [Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist]. They do not view Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei as the legitimate ruler of the Islamic World, nor as their superior. Nevertheless, it is the case that some Houthis seek to establish something close to a Zaydi Imamate. As Zaydis, they believe only relatives of Ali and Fatima can serve as imams, or rightful rulers. Hussein al-Houthi claimed to be from this noble class, known as sada, and constructed much of his legitimacy around it. Thus, the Houthi leadership do have something of a fundamentalist goal, based on their religious beliefs. They desire a return "of the Imamate with the political form of a republic, in similarity to the Iranian sample" (Alziady, 2021, 812). However, unlike Hezbollah, they do not view Khamenei as leader; instead preferring the al-Houthis.

Riyadh's discursive focus on the Houthis as a radical group worked to securitise them as a threat to regional actors. The Saudis feared the impact such a group would have for their interests in Yemen, as, "a group who believe that non-sada are illegitimate rulers is a

challenge to the al-Saud rulers' claim to legitimacy" (Lackner, 2017, 148). Furthermore, the Houthis are radical in their approach to repression, their suppression of freedom of speech, and their widely reported use of child soldiers (Becker, 2022).

*6.7 The Ulema and Social Media – The Seeds of Sectarianisation*

The ulema form a fundamental part of Mohammed bin Salman's propaganda nexus. Unifying and defensive sectarian sentiment acted as powerful tools in creating the multinational security coalition of Arab states. In the early days of the conflict, this was especially fundamental, as the "[t]he kingdom have used them as vehicles through which to construct a leadership role for itself" (Miller and Cardaun, 2020, 1516). This multilateral approach increased the legitimacy of Saudi operations, acting as an effective part of its securitisation of the Houthi threat. Continuing to view itself as leader of the Sunni world, and rightful Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques, the Al Saud used sectarianisation as part of its ongoing securitisation process. This reading contends with May Darwich's reading of "an alternative explanation for the Saudi intervention in Yemen... the Kingdom's will for status" (2018, 126).

At the beginning of ODS, Saudi Arabia's Council of Senior Religious Scholars issued a fatwa, promoting martyrdom as "one of the greatest ways to draw closer to God almighty is to defend the sanctity of... Muslims" (Batrawy, 2015, 11). On Twitter, the religious establishment followed suit. Through these avenues, Saudi Arabia "sought Sunni cover

through the formation of a symbolic coalition of Sunni countries" (Hokayem and Roberts, 2016, 17).

Furthermore, here Alexandra Siegel's (2015) work showed that the months of ODS consisted in the highest surges of sectarian Tweets and propaganda on social media. Her vast database of over 7 million Arabic Tweets from February-August 2015 conclusively showed that "the online volume of sectarian rhetoric increases sharply in response to violent events on the ground – particularly in reaction to the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen" (Siegel, 2015, 22). She also noticed that Saudi clerics Mohammed al-Arefe, Naser al-Omar, Saud al-Shureem, and Abdulaziz al-Tarifi, "tweeted messages containing anti-Shia rhetoric… forming the largest core of the network" (Siegel, 2015, 18). Other key antagonists included Saudi businessmen, Saudi news networks, and explicitly anti-Shia accounts.

Siegel showed that ODS counted as one of the "most influential events producing dramatic surges in the volume of online sectarian rhetoric" (Siegel, 2015, 1). She noted that "Gulf rulers and the Saudi state media in particular have continually fixated on the common thread of Shia Islam that loosely connects these groups to one another – as well as to Iran" (Siegel, 2015, 10). The legitimacy of the Al Saud is intimately connected to their close ties to the Wahhabi establishment, the media are entirely under the control of the Al Saud, and Mohammed bin Salman has tightened his grip on senior members of the Al Saud through corruption purges. This particular nexus of propaganda is more closely controlled than ever before, under the grip of Mohammed bin Salman.

In Saudi Arabia, radical Wahhabi clerics have achieved pop star status. Perhaps the most popular was the "Brad Pitt of Muslim clerics" (Siegel, 2016), Muhammad al-Arefe, who amassed 24 million followers, until his account was removed by Saudi authorities in 2018. Prior to deviating from the official establishment line, he had lent significant support to Riyadh's interventions in Syria and Yemen, declaring them both to be holy wars. Between February and August 2015, the most popular hashtags within anti-Shia tweets were #Yemen #Houthis #Iran #SaudiArabia. As Siegel pointed out, "for a sense of scale, #SaudiArabia was tweeted 1.4 million times, and [the] other hashtags appeared over 500,000 times each" (Siegel, 2015, 8). Saudi Sunnis were the overwhelming producers and audiences of these tweets. Saudi cleric al-Omar preached to his 1.8 million Twitter followers that "it is the responsibility of every Muslim to take part in the Islamic world's battle to defeat the Safawis and their sins" (al-Omar, 2015).

Table 1. shows data from several state-backed Saudi news-sites, demonstrating a growing preference for sectarian and anti-Iranian narratives, even in the English-language versions displayed here. The two articles from 26th March, seen in the order of reference in Table 1. (Al-Arabiya, 2015b; al-Shibeeb, 2015) are from *Al-Arabiya*. Those from 11th April (Taheri, 2015) and 18th April (Arab News, 2015) are from *Arab News*.

| Type of Word | 26th March a | 26th March b | 11th April | 18th April |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sectarian | | 5 | 14 | 7 |
| Iran/IRGC | | 10 | 24 | |
| Legitimate government | 2 | 2 | | |
| Radical | 3 | 4 | 6 | |
| People of Yemen | 2 | 1 | | 8 |

*Table 1. Saudi News Sites - Rhetoric during Operation Decisive Storm*

The 18th of April *Arab News* Articles, entitled "Imams Endorse war on the oppressor" (Arab News, 2015), contained a series of religious justifications for the war in Yemen. Depending heavily on quotations from pre-eminent Wahhabi clerics, the article constructs an image of legitimacy around ODS, framing it as defensive jihad. They report that the then Imam of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Sheikh Abdul Muhsin Al-Qassim "said Almighty Allah had ordered believers to fight oppressors and help protect the oppressed" (Arab News, 2015). They also evoked the then Head of the Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques, Sheikh Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais, who, they said, "praised the soldiers on the front line, saying they were brave and fighting a holy war to protect their country and religion. The youth should rally behind their leaders" (Arab News, 2015).

Such articles demonstrate the deeply embedded synthesis between the Al Saud, the media, and the ulema. Whilst Saudi foreign dignitaries spent their efforts portraying ODS as an effort to quell the expansionist Shi'a Iran, at home, clerics and journalists were framing it as a unifying moment for Sunni brethren to unite under the banner of jihad. Here, researchers can

observe the adherence to alienating sectarianisation when addressing international, Western audiences; and the tendency to slip into unifying sectarianisation when focusing on domestic/regional audiences. However, what unifies these two narratives is a shared construction of ODS as a defensive, necessary, and legitimate intervention.

This is not to say that the Saudi propaganda machine omits 'othering' rhetoric from its discourse when addressing domestic and regional audiences. It remains present, but becomes more violent, and explicitly sectarian. In the *Al-Arabiya* article from 26th March, the Houthis are referred to as a "Shiite group", and a "Shiite Muslim Houthi movement" (Al-Shibeeb, 2015). This is a continuous and recurring theme within Saudi propaganda, to portray the Houthis as ideologically affiliated religious cousins of the Islamic Republic.

 In the 11[th of] April article from Arab News, Amir Taheri refers to Iranian moves at "empire-building enterprises", claiming that "[t]he reason for the failure of Iranian designs in Yemen is that it is a pathetic copy of Tehran's Lebanon strategy" (Taheri, 2015). A growing image was beginning to be constructed by the Saudi propaganda nexus, of an expansionist Shi'a Islamic Republic in the mould of the Safavid Empire of the Middle Ages. In April 2015, Al-Omar posted a video of himself addressing Saudi men in a mosque, claiming that 'their "brothers in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan are fighting a jihad, or holy war, against the Safawi" (Siegel, 2017). Thus, Yemen was added to a collection of wars presented as *just* jihad, constructing a fatwa calling on young Sunni men to take up arms against Shi'a "oppressors".

*Conclusion*

This chapter has introduced the key frames behind Saudi securitisation processes in Yemen. During the early days of ODS, the Saudi propaganda nexus acted unilaterally to successfully securitise the military intervention to regional and international audiences. Ultimately, few of their narratives represented the truth. Iranian involvement was over-exaggerated, the legitimacy of Hadi's government misrepresented, the threat to Saudi Arabia overstated, and the protection of the people of Yemen abused. The Houthis are "radical", and the Hadi government is "internationally recognised", but these frames alone do not lead to the conclusion that ODS was proportionate, legitimate, or in fact legal. Ruys and Ferro (2016) noted that Saudi Arabia pursued six lines to legally justify ODS: the right to collective self-defence, the right to individual self-defence, pro-democracy (through the GCC initiative and the NDC), counter-intervention, anti-terrorism, and intervention by invitation. The pro-democracy line could, due to their interference in the NDC, be doubted from the outset. None of these criteria were met in full accordance with international law. The Saudi frames analysed in this chapter contorted, changed, and adapted to fit changing dynamics over the following eight years. Later chapters will trace these developments across time, to establish the effect these narratives had on the proliferation of war and suffering in Yemen. Chapter Seven analyses the Iranian response to ODS and Saudi securitisation narratives, detailing the tit-for-tat nature of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

# Chapter Seven
## *2015 - Iranian Propaganda and the "Iranian Saviour" Narrative*

This chapter analyses the key dynamics of Iran's securitisation narrative in Yemen in 2015. In addition, it provides a contextual reading of the Islamic Republic's Twitter-based information war, demonstrating the recurring nature of anti-Saudi sentiment. It argues that Iranian priorities include factors such as the JCPOA, regime security, regional popularity, and undermining Saudi Arabia both regionally and internationally. Iran does not focus its efforts solely on spreading randomised disinformation. Instead, "Iran advances a distorted truth: one that exaggerates Iran's moral authority while minimizing Iran's repression of its citizens and the steep human cost of its own imperial adventures in the Middle East" (Brooking and Kianpour, 2020, 2). This deification of the Islamic Republic is done primarily through undermining and delegitimizing their key adversaries: Israel, the US, and Saudi Arabia. They used numerous different securitisation frames across their propaganda network. The most important narratives, which form the basis of this chapter's analysis are: attacking the Saudi claim of protecting the "legitimate" government, underplaying Iranian involvement, focusing on Saudi atrocities, connecting Saudi Arabia to terrorism through alienating sectarianisation, undermining Riyadh via connecting them to an Israeli-American conspiracy, and praising the Houthis. Although limited in terms of global impact (especially when compared to the effectiveness of Saudi discourse), Iranian securitisation had some partial success in that it created a troublesome counter-narrative, which arguably dragged Riyadh deeper into the conflict.

Omission, or what is not present, plays a key role in understanding the Iranian propaganda nexus. Explicit, unifying, sectarianisation rarely appears and is thus notable for its absence. Tehran are pragmatists when it comes to securitisation and realise that focusing on the minority identity of Shi'ism would have limited appeal to international audiences. The region, and Yemen, is overwhelmingly Sunni, and so focusing on sectarian identity is of little benefit for the Islamic Republic. Instead, the emphasis is on constructing a narrative of clientelism - arguing that Saudi Arabia is essentially a puppet of American and Israeli interests. It also attacks the expansive and aggressive nature of the Saudi state, and its geopolitical ambitions. The focus is more on a state-state narrative, rather than shifting the focus to sectarian identity, religiosity, or explicit contestation over leadership of the Islamic World. In this sense, their English language propaganda attempted to cast a wide net, to appeal to as wide a range of audiences as possible, including, but not limited to, Yemenis, sympathetic Arab audiences, left-leaning academics, human rights organisations, Western international actors, and regional minority groups. Through constructing a populist narrative, the hope was that this would appeal to a diverse set of actors both regionally and internationally. Constructing conspiracy theories, largely centred around anti-Western and anti-Semitic tropes, they sought to suggest that Saudi Arabia posed an existential threat to the physical and ontological security of the region.

Structurally, this chapter follows the logical progression of DT (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009). First, it spends time contextualising the macro-data, or contextual information, that is essential for characterising Iranian digital propaganda. This data shows Tehran have used

social media, transcribed speeches, and digital media as tools of outward-seeking securitisation. Through these mediums, they have attempted to construct the Islamic Republic as the champion of the oppressed in the region, and Saudi Arabia as the enemy. Secondly, the chapter expands upon these findings, applying them to the specific case study of ODS. It argues that Tehran was determined to stoke Saudi anxieties around Yemen, to draw them deeper into the conflict, away from Syria, in turn undermining their international credibility and depleting their resources. Thirdly, three types of data are then provided: Khamenei's 2015 speeches regarding Yemen, Khamenei's tweets regarding Yemen, and data from 23 Press TV articles. For each of these, core frames have been identified and counted, and data has been ordered chronologically, in line with LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) framework. Lastly, the chapter conducts a discourse analysis to assess and evaluate these frames, concluding that Iran attempted to construct a counter-narrative to the Saudi-led coalition, portraying Tehran as the moral actor and Saudi Arabia as evil.

In 2018, and led by the cybersecurity company FireEye, a vast Iranian propaganda network was uncovered across digital media platforms, especially social media. By January 2020, Facebook had identified 766 Pages with 5.4 million users, and Twitter had identified 7896 accounts responsible for approximately 8.5 million messages.

Following the regime insecurity caused by the Green Movement in 2009, and the Arab Spring in 2011, Iran tightened its digital security. Facing an increasingly hostile U.S. and Saudi Arabia, then intelligence minister Heidar Moslehi declared: "we do not have a physical

war with the enemy, but we are engaged in heavy information [warfare]" (Tehran Times, 2011). Digital warfare is a key battlefront for the Islamic Republic, who have created their very own propaganda network: the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). This institution can be understood as a core vehicle, through which the Islamic Republic conducts its securitisation process. It is central within Tehran's propaganda nexus, controlling a number of Iranian news-sites, the most popular of which is Press TV. Digital warfare has become an obsession for Iran's rulers. As Brooking and Kianpour write:

[S]tate monopoly over television and radio broadcasting is mandated by Article 44 of the Iranian Constitution. The head of Iran's state propaganda agency… is appointed by the theocratic supreme leader rather than Iran's elected president or parliament. IRIB maintains an annual budget of approximately $750 million. This is roughly equivalent to the budget of the United States Agency for Global Media. As a proportion of total government spending… Iran invests about fifty times as much in the IRIB as the United States does in the USAGM (2020, 5).

Saudi Arabia's digital nexus has been well-documented by researchers (Siegel, 2015; Jones, 2016); yet the scale of Iran's propaganda network has only recently been revealed (Stubbs and Bing, 2018; Somerville, 2020). No study to date has collected and collated the wide variety of data types and systematically traced the discourse's development. Whilst it would be difficult to consider every individual data entry point, considering a sample from across different *types of propaganda* is possible and the aim of this chapter. This will, at the very least, provide a holistic understanding of the utility of each propaganda type for Iran in realising its ambitions through Yemen. These types can be classified as: elite speeches, website-based "news" propaganda, social media propaganda, and visual propaganda (across all platforms).

Iranian manipulation of digital media spikes when Iranian policy imperatives are being threatened. The Ayatollah views the JCPOA as fundamental to his regime security, and the security of the nation on the international stage. Thus, "it is no coincidence that Iranian-attributed Twitter activity saw its most significant spikes in mid-2015 and mid-2018" (Brooking and Kianpour, 2020). In 2015, Tehran began to understand the strategic importance of propaganda, which highlighted the war crimes of Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Such discourse and imagery helped to undermine the Al-Saud's international legitimacy, and further the construction of Iran as a symbol of resistance at the regional level.

Iranian propaganda sought to emphasize the negative aspects of the Saudi-led coalition and under-emphasise the negative aspects of its own involvement in Yemen. This took a semi-conventional form – Iran positioning itself as the Islamic symbol of resistance, defending minority groups from the clutches of imperialist American allies. A Graphika Report, released in April 2020, characterised Iran's digital propaganda campaign as reflecting the Iranian government's overarching geopolitical approach: "[i]t is pro-Iran and pro-Palestinian, while taking every opportunity to criticize Saudi Arabia, the United States, Israel, and the Saudi-led war in Yemen" (Nimmo et al., 2020, 1). Focusing on alienating, undermining, and criticising Saudi Arabia was the key focus during 2015. At times, regime and media elites over-emphasized their connection to the Houthis as a way of furthering Saudi anxieties about its southern border. This gradually increased in later years, resulting in significant gains for Tehran, undermining Riyadh's status on the international stage.

This chapter characterises Iranian digital propaganda as a central tool of Tehran's outward-seeking securitisation processes. The IRGC and IRIB have keenly observed the potential impact of social media and have mobilised to spread their influence deep into cyberspace. It has used this new tool to create chaos and fear amongst its adversaries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Its core focus has been on alienating propaganda, occasionally sectarian in nature, but more frequently hyper-focusing on Saudi atrocities in Yemen. In turn, it has positioned itself in a role that dates back to the early days of the Islamic Revolution – as a defender of minority rights, the leader of anti-colonialism, anti-Americanism, and the legitimate leader of the Islamic World. Underlying this entire process is the central importance Iran placed on the JCPOA as a form of international securitisation. One of the original insights of this thesis is the idea that Iran over-emphasized and over-exaggerated its role in Yemen, so that they can use it as leverage in JCPOA and peace talks.

Tehran's involvement with the Houthis has been "low cost but high yield" (Alfoneh, 2019). Yemen is of little geostrategic importance to Iran. Nevertheless, Tehran has been able to leverage their potential "withdrawal" as a bargaining chip in JCPOA discussions (Economic Intelligence, 2019), through discursively accentuating its involvement in the conflict over many years. As Suzanne Kianpour put it – "[s]ince the JCPOA, we've seen a kind of evolution of how that… information warfare has evolved… One Iranian official told me that the JCPOA put Iran on the map… They want to stay on the map and be in more parts of the map" (Atlantic Council, 2020).

The scale of the Iranian propaganda network is vast. Twitter released two data sets of tweets believed to be instances of Islamic Republic propaganda. The first, released in October 2018, consisted of 1,222,936 tweets and retweets, from 770 accounts. The second, released in January 2019, consisted of 4,447,056 tweets and retweets from 2,320 accounts. All of these tweets were first published between 17th June 2008 and 24th October 2018. This data is of use to researchers, as it provides them with the ability to ascertain the character of Iranian propaganda in the Twittersphere and its evolution.

It is not immediately apparent why relatively small Twitter accounts are relevant for elite-level analysis. Arabic was the main language used. From 2011-2020, "[m]ore than 86% of the Arabic tweets received zero engagement points (n= 1,868,508 tweets)" (Elswah and Alimardani, 2021). In other words, these tweets were not reaching any significant Arabic audience, nor were they fostering significant pro-Iranian sentiment, despite Iran spending a vast amount of money on its propaganda programmes every year, estimated to be somewhere between $650million USD - $750 million USD (Brooking and Kianpour, 2020). Of course, only a fraction of this is spent on the Twittersphere – but these statistics give an indication of how seriously Tehran takes information warfare.

The low interaction levels on Iranian Twitter indicates failure to the untrained eye. However, the tone of information, as well as its sheer scale, has had a significant impact in generating

fear amongst Arab leaders. Elswah and Alimardani refer to Iran's Twitter campaign as Perception Information Operations:

[T]he power of the Iranian IOs stem from being perceived as [a] powerful and impactful meddler, creating a sense of incursion and influence in foreign politics… What these Iranian IOs do accomplish is to position Iran as a powerful country that could skew the public opinion of Arab audiences, sowing distrust instead of actually embedding the false narratives (2021, 164).

Arabic and English are the two primary languages used in this network that pertain to be Farsi-speaking Iranians. This is tactical, knowing the regional and international appeal of these languages, and that foreign leaders will see and understand their posts. As with so many other forms of behaviour, Iran used these accounts to generate fear, which produced regime insecurity, and in turn provoked anxiety in their core adversary - Saudi Arabia. Over the years, Tehran has increased threat perception, resulting in Riyadh doubling down on its blockade and bombing campaigns. They saw the over-exaggeration of Iranian involvement become a reality in Arabia Felix as the conflict progressed.

Although Twitter has taken the lead on banning nefarious state-backed accounts and releasing data, attribution remains a serious challenge within social media research. Due to privacy laws, and the widespread use of fake information on both real and bot accounts, it is impossible to gain cohesive proof of connection to state institutions. A spokeswoman from Twitter, also anonymous, when quizzed about the removed Iranian accounts, stated that "clear attribution is very difficult" (Stubbs and Bing, 2018).

Twitter clearly has a method of attributing such accounts to the Iranian regime, albeit opaquely. When they released the first Iranian dataset in 2018, they claimed it was done "with the goal of encouraging open research and investigation of these behaviours from researchers and academics around the world" (Gadde and Roth, 2018). Nevertheless, researchers are frustrated by the opacity of Twitter's datasets, clueless as to how they have connected these accounts to Tehran. Elswah and Alimardani call for "Twitter to document its attribution standards and methods", stating "[t]he documentation of evidence that associates these accounts to the Iranian government would help researchers understand the tactics performed by Iranian IOs [information operations]" (2021, 171). For now, researchers have to trust that Twitter, as a leader in tech, has a reliable attribution methodology.

Observing the content of the tweets, the time periods in which they are most active, and the overall amount they tweet, it appears sufficiently clear that these accounts are part of the Islamic Republic's propaganda network. They all present a noble image of Iran, and a Machiavellian image of Saudi Arabia. As Emerson Brooking noted in a 2020 interview:

"[T]he real intent of these Iranian influence operations is to put out that counter narrative. One that sees Iran as resisting the forces of neo-colonialism, one that sees Iran as an alternative religious and Islamic pole in the Middle East, and one that specifically sees Iran as the leader of the anti-US resistance" (Atlantic Council, 2020).

While this thesis is not primarily quantitative, it does collect data, showing the recurrence of certain thematic discourses. Still, it is primarily concerned with tracing the qualitative development of Saudi and Iranian discourse on Yemen over time. This is done with the aim

of fully conceptualising these states' regime-level securitisation imperatives and their international realisation through nefarious discourse.

Thankfully, previous studies by Elswah et al. (2019) and Kiebling et al. (2020) have coded the Arabic and English-language components of these datasets respectively. Despite their significant utility, the quantitative focus of these studies has negated the importance of critical, contextual, discourse analysis. No study to date has conceptualised Iranian discourse within a carefully devised theoretical framework. Instead, these studies provide the data necessary for such processes. Some have made passing reference to Yemen, but none have analysed digital propaganda specifically catered for achieving state imperatives in Arabia Felix. Nevertheless, Kiebling et al.'s (2020) study is of particular use, not only because it is English-language focused, but also because it is specifically concerned with tweets which contain the words 'Saudi' and/or 'Saudi Arabia'. Their research indicates that: "an analysis of the tweets published by the accounts which are believed to be connected to Iranian state-backed information operations has shown they have tried to establish an anti-Saudi narrative on Twitter" (Kiebling et al., 2020, 182).

The top ten English-language hashtags from 2008-2018, from these Iranian accounts are presented in Table 2. below:

| Hashtag | Number of times used |
|---|---|
| #Saudi | 6,261 |
| #Yemen | 4,592 |
| #SaudiArabia | 3,300 |
| #US | 1,038 |
| #Iran | 672 |
| #yemenpress | 624 |
| #Trump | 601 |
| #Israel | 573 |
| #SaudiMustApologize | 570 |
| #StopTheWarOnYemen | 545 |

*Table 2. Top ten English hashtags from Iranian state-backed Twitter accounts 2008-2018*
*(from Kiebling et al., 2020, 192)*

What this table shows is that the English-language section of the Iranian propaganda nexus concentrated its efforts on criticising Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen. Not only do Kiebling et al. (2020) provide similar overarching characterisations and conclusions, but they also include specific data on the most popular tweets. It is unsurprising that the vast majority of these contain mentions of Yemen. They also "strongly criticized the falsely claimed execution of the rights activist Israa al-Ghomgham, blamed the Gulf state as a sponsor of terrorism and criticized Saudi arms deals and accused Saudi Arabia of being behind all terrorist attack[s] worldwide" (Kiebling et al., 2020, 190).

This theme of alienating securitisation is recurrent throughout Islamic Republic propaganda networks. Tehran is determined to create a binary distinction between itself and Riyadh. Saudi Arabia is continuously portrayed as the aggressive human rights abuser, Iran as the champion of the oppressed. It is through this lens that scholars can understand why Syria did not feature to any discernible level throughout the sizable data set. Tehran understands accusations of war crimes are levelled against the IRGC and Assad, and so prefers to focus its attention on Saudi war crimes in Yemen. As always, omission is an under-appreciated but central part of propaganda. Through this, they can continuously present themselves as a "saviour", fighting the perceived evils of Wahhabism, Americanism, and Zionism.

When asked for examples in an Atlantic Council interview in 2020, Emerson Brooking replied: "there's a lot regarding the war in Yemen. The highlighting of real atrocity but then also the invention or recasting or mischaracterisation of events to make them seem even more horrific than the horrible events that are unfolding. There is a big Iranian focus specifically to target Saudi Arabia" (Atlantic Council, 2020).

Tehran has sought to double-down on Saudi war atrocities in the most visceral way. The most popular and retweeted (327 times) English tweet concerning Saudi Arabia was accompanied by a video and read:

"Please share it widely. Heartbreaking video of a father crying after he saw his dead child's body on the car. Imagine if you were in his shoes and #Saudi led coalition killed your son in a school bus. This is #Yemen. #YemenGenocide #YemenChildren" (Kiebling et al., 2020).

A further tactic of the Iranian 'saviour complex playbook' is to portray the Houthis as the "good-guy". As NATO researchers Kasapoglu and Fekry write, propaganda helps to realise "Iranian priorities in Yemen, namely [by]promoting the militarized political movement and portraying it in a less sectarian but more patriotic and battle-hardened fashion" (2020, 4). The third most Retweeted tweet in the Kiebling et al. dataset read simply "Good Guy!!! Bad Guy!!! #Trump #SaudiArabia #Iran" (2020). Iranian propaganda presents themselves as a moralistic defender against Saudi interventionism.

The research conducted on these vast Twitter datasets has proved influential to the following discourse analysis. It established some central themes that are recurrent across Iran's propaganda nexus. The analysis section matches the structure of the previous chapter, which found prominent discursive themes, before testing their validity. The chapter concludes that Iranian propaganda focused its efforts on drawing attention to Saudi war crimes in Yemen, connecting them to other enemies in a grand conspiracy theory.

## *7.2 Operation Decisive Storm: Iranian Securitisation Imperatives and the IRGC – Stoking the Fear*

Prior to ODS, the IRGC spoke openly of Iranian solidarity with the Houthis, purposefully over-exaggerating their connection to the group as a means of raising Saudi anxiety. During the 36th anniversary celebrations of the Islamic Revolution in early 2015, then Major General of the Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, stated Iranians "are witnessing the export of the Islamic revolution throughout the region… from Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen and North Africa"

(Badran, 2015). Soleimani amplified a Saudi fear of encirclement. The Houthis represent a direct threat on the border of the Kingdom, especially if the connection with Iran was to be believed.

Riyadh has denoted a lineage of Houthi violence spilling over their border. In 2009, Riyadh witnessed the Houthis "killing at least two border guards and apparently taking control of two or more Saudi border villages" (Terrill, 2014, 433). Riyadh responded with a military intervention in Saada. Although the encroachment was small, the willingness of the Houthis to attack the Kingdom secured their status as a legitimate security threat. This may suggest why the IRGC chose to over-emphasize its connection to the Houthis prior to ODS, as a means of provoking their key regional adversaries. During this period, however, "Tehran [had] no decisive say over Houthi decision-making, and the relationship between them [was] recent and opportunistic" (Hokayem and Roberts, 2016, p.163).

Within the context of the New Middle East Cold War, economic strength helps to characterise foreign policy. In 2014, Iran's GDP amounted to 432.7 billion USD (World Bank, 2022a). Saudi Arabia's was 756.4 billion USD (World Bank, 2022b). This disparity had grown due to the imposition of US sanctions in 2013. This meant that Iran behaved increasingly like China does in its struggle with the US. It targeted resources to areas of paramount geostrategic significance, rather than attempting to compete on all fronts. The Iraq-Syria-Lebanon axis is crucial for Iranian physical security (Samii, 2008). By drawing Saudi attention towards Yemen, Tehran was able to encourage them away from Syria.

Their prioritisation of Syria means that "[i]t therefore makes more sense for Iran to project its hand in Yemen via rhetoric rather than to divert significant resources to it" (Kendall, 2017, 4). This tactic, in part, has helped to facilitate Gulf's states movement away from the Levant and into Arabia Felix: "for Iran, Yemen represents opportunities, not threats" (Juneau, 2016, 661).

Iran is geographically distant from Yemen – the country represents little in terms of direct geostrategic importance for this Islamic Republic. Therefore, "Yemen is a secondary arena, certainly when compared to Iraq and Syria" (Guzansky and Heistein, 2018). Iran has nevertheless used soft power at various stages to stoke Saudi anxiety over Yemen and access to the Bab Al-Mandab Strait. When the Houthis captured Sana'a in 2014, IRGC leader Hojatoleslam Ali Saidi proclaimed that "The Islamic Republic's spiritual influence has arrived at the Bab al-Mandab Strait" (Solomon, 2017).

Still largely dependent on the export of oil and natural gas, the Strait is essential to Riyadh's neo-rentier economy. Overemphasising solidarity with the Houthis and their growing control of ports along the Strait has worked "to achieve Iran's national security interests in a zero-sum equation, which means undermining the security of other countries" (Al-Qadhi, 2017, p.8).

The next sections examine the 2015 trends across the speeches of Khamenei, his account's Tweets, and the IRIB's Press TV, before the final section tests their validity and impact. Although it is highly doubtful the tweets came from the Ayatollah's own fingers, they do

mirror the content of his speeches. Researchers can reliably assume that, if not controlled by Khamenei himself, the account will be trusted to some of his most loyal advisors. The continuous aim of this thesis is to show the connection between discourse and the real-world context of the conflict, seeking truth amongst a vast sea of disinformation.

*7.3 Khamenei's 2015 Speeches*

Throughout 2015, Khamenei gave 15 speeches of note, which included discussion of the conflict in Yemen. All of these were translated into English and circulated across digital media platforms. This chapter will predominantly focus on the sections that directly address Yemen. More broadly, however, certain themes appeared throughout his 2015 speeches. Across these talks, recurrent securitisation framing was observed. Khamenei regularly referred to the enemy as a single entity, consisting of the forces of "Americanism", "Westernism", "Zionism", and "Saudi Arabia". This was a profoundly effective rhetorical tool, creating a vast and pernicious "Other". Whilst over-exaggerated and conspiratorial, such ideas seem tinged with truth when viewed through the 2022 gaze. The Abraham Accords, signed between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain in September 2020, certainly went some way to tightening the bonds between the West, Israel, and the Gulf.

He also referred continuously to arrogance, as an "un-Islamic", and "inhumane", ideational enemy. Khamenei regularly accused America as being the key proponents of such an attitude, committed only to their own interests, and possessing a callous disdain for human life. Another theme during this period was his constant discussion of the JCPOA, and his

animosity towards American efforts to discuss other issues in negotiations. For him, the talks were supposed to be about one issue only – the nuclear question.

When discussing the surge in sectarian identity politics in the region, Khamenei again blamed America and the West. He claimed that they were implementing a policy of divide and rule, to further their ambitions in the region. He denotes a lineage back to the history of British colonialism in Iran. The word "takfiri" regularly appears, to refer to the government of Saudi Arabia and the likes of Al-Qaeda and Daesh in the same breath. He also accuses the West and their Gulf allies of conspiring to create sectarian violence in the region, relinquishing any accountability for Iran's role in the surge of sectarianisation, most prominently observed in their sectarian militia groups in Syria and Iraq. In a speech to some of his key propagandists, the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly and Islamic Radio and TV Union, on 17th August, Khamenei proclaimed:

This enemy's plan in the region is mainly based on two things. Of course, it has many branches, but these are the main two. One is creating discord and the second it exerting influence. This is the basis of the enemy's plan in the region. They want to create discord between governments and - after that - between nations which is more dangerous than discord between governments. They want to make peoples bear grudge against each other and establish biased groups with different names. One day, it was "pan-Iranism", "pan-Arabism", "pan-Turkism" and other such orientations and today, it is the issue of Shia and Sunni, takfirism and other such things. They create discord with anything they can. This is only item of their measures and they are working on it in a very serious way. Of course, the English were the first experts of this measure. They have expertise in creating religious discord. The Americans have learned this from them and they are working on it today with all their power (Khamenei, 2015j).

*Khamenei on Yemen*

Khamenei discussed the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen through a narrow, carefully constructed lens. For the most part, his solidarity with the people of Yemen was framed under the banner of "Resistance", stating Iran's commitment to "protecting oppressed peoples" (Khamenei, 2015k). No mention was made of direct support for the Houthis in 2015. He mocked and undermined the leadership of Saudi Arabia, referring to them as "inexperienced", "young", "irrational", and "evil" (Khamenei, 2015b). The comparison of Saudi efforts in Yemen to Israeli efforts in Gaza appeared on several occasions (Khamenei, 2015b; Khamenei, 2015c). Khamenei regularly taunted Riyadh with his certainty that they would fail in their efforts in Arabia Felix. The loss of civilian life and infrastructure were discussed throughout his speeches, with particular focus on "women and children" (Khamenei, 2015e). Terms such as "war crimes" and "genocide" were frequently used (Khamenei, 2015d). The West, and specifically America, were continuously portrayed as complicit in this crime, and blamed for causing the sectarian framing of the conflict (Khamenei, 2015m; Khamenei, 2015n). This clearly demonstrates that the vast majority of his speeches could be categorised as "alienating propaganda", seeking to focus almost entirely on the "negative aspects of them". That being said, the Supreme Leader did not refrain from glorifying the Revolution and the principles of "resistance" to stand in opposition to "the enemy". Iran was painted as the true defender of "Islam", "oppressed peoples", and "human life". Like Riyadh, Tehran was portraying itself as the regional "saviour".

This variety of frames have been condensed into five simple categories: Anti-Saudi/Anti-Hadi, War Crimes, Anti-US, Sectarian, and Pro-Iranian. As highlighted, these categories appear across a variety of different subjects, but data is here restricted to Khamenei's specific discussion of Yemen. In most of his speeches, Yemen is a partial topic.

| Category | Number of references |
| --- | --- |
| Anti-Saudi/Anti-Hadi | 20 |
| War Crimes | 21 |
| Anti-US | 17 |
| Sectarian | 7 |
| Pro-Iranian | 20 |

*Table 3. Recurring themes in Khamenei's 2015 speeches*

The first thing to note is that sectarian discourse did not feature heavily. When it did arise, it referred specifically to a conspiratorial Western plot to cause sectarian animosity as a way of controlling the Middle East. The other point of clarification is that the other categories refer to explicit mentions of specific acts and actors. As previously established, frequent mention is made of the unified "enemy" throughout Khamenei's speeches. Through this, researchers can understand the significant focus he puts on highlighting and exaggerating the worst aspects and behaviours of his core adversaries.

In 2015, Khamenei's Twitter account posted 16 original Tweets, containing the word "Yemen". This account is a fairly infrequent Tweeter, but it has a wide audience. Today, the

account has amassed just under 912,000 followers. This, the English-speaking version of the account, is by far the largest of all of Khamenei's profiles. The Farsi account has 517,900 followers and the Arabic account 267,700. The Islamic Republic is acutely aware of the power of the English language as a way of spreading securitisation narratives to international audiences. Table 4. contains a full list of Khamenei's Tweets that contained the word "Yemen" in 2015 (he did not Tweet about Yemen in March).

| Date | Tweet | Number of Likes | Number of Retweets | Number of Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 07/04/2015 | Leader at meeting w Erdogan: Solution to #Yemen crisis is to stop foreign intervention& invasion.It's on Yemenis to decide for their future. | 116 | 133 | 36 |
| 09/04/2015 | In a few minutes, important statements of Ayatollah Khamenei on #Saudi's attack on #Yemen on this account | 69 | 80 | 11 |
| 09/04/2015 | What Saudis did in #Yemen is exactly what Israel did to #Palestine.Acting agnst Yemenis is a genocide that can be prosecuted in int'l courts | 166 | 293 | 71 |
| 09/04/2015 | Israel's military is bigger than Saudi's& #Gaza is a small area,but they failed;#Yemen is a vast country w a population of tens of millions. | 138 | 185 | 44 |
| 09/04/2015 | I warn that they should refrain from any criminal move in #Yemen. The US will also fail & face loss in this issue. | 174 | 256 | 154 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 09/04/2015 | The Saudis will certainly face loss in this issue and won't emerge victorious at all. **#Yemen** | 141 | 191 | 31 |
| 19/04/2015 | #Iran's armed forces are committed to religious &ethical rules.Crimes in **#Yemen**& #Gaza are ex. of lack of commitment to religion&intl rules. | 69 | 74 | 25 |
| 19/04/2015 | The cause of insecurity in the region is the Zionist regime which is the US chained dog. #Palestine #Syria **#Yemen** | 122 | 144 | 32 |
| 19/04/2015 | We hate those who attack women & children. We believe they're ignorant abt #Islam & human consciousness. **#Yemen** | 138 | 133 | 26 |
| 19/04/2015 | Today, a heartbreaking crime against #women and #children is going on in **#Yemen** and US is supporting the oppressor. | 134 | 150 | 42 |
| 21/04/2015 | If Israel can achieve victory in Gaza,Saudis too will achieve victory in **#Yemen**.Their noses will be rubbed in dirt over **Yemen**.4/9/15 #REVIEW | 130 | 158 | 40 - |
| 21/04/2015 | Saudis established a bad tradition in region;they made a mistake.What Saudis did in **#Yemen** is exactly what Israel did to #Palestine. #REVIEW | 116 | 156 | 45 |

| 06/05/2015 | They ask why #Iran helps Yemenis. We wanted to ship medicine. #AnsarAllah doesn't need our weapons; they run all **#Yemen**'s military bases. | 109 | 116 | 24 - |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 06/05/2015 | They didn't even allow #Iran's Red Crescent's medical shipment to reach Yemenis.They want to put medicine, food & energy blockade on **#Yemen**. | 77 | 77 | 14 - |
| 06/05/2015 | US has been disgraced. Supporting those who attack #women & #children in **Yemen**& destroy **#Yemen**'s infrastructure ruin US image in the region. | 88 | 85 | 19 - |
| 13/05/2015 | Saudis logic to attack **#Yemen** is stupid;it was on pretext of plea by resigned&fleeing Yemeni Pres. Who betrayed his country at critical time | 73 | 56 | 35 - |
| 13/05/2015 | Leader at a meeting w #Iraq's President: Today the world of Islam faces truly unfortunate issues in #Palestine, North Africa, #Syria& **#Yemen** | 44 | 31 | 16 - |
| 13/05/2015 | Saudis made a major mistake in **#Yemen** & will certainly face the consequences of the #crime they committed. | 70 | 69 | 17 |
| 13/05/2015 | In a few minutes on this account: Leader's key statements on | 50 | 36 | 6 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | #Yemen & #Syria at a meeting w #Iraq's President | | | |
| 13/05/2015 | Massacre of innocent Yemenis should be stopped ASAP. It seems that an unwise & ignorant thought within Saudis is making decisions on **#Yemen**. | 77 | 88 | 26 - |
| | | | | |
| 02/07/2015 | World media dominated by Arrogants keep blatant silence over crimes in **#Yemen** & other places. What shall noble people do against such evil? | 83 | 54 | 28 - |
| 11/07/2015 | Angry at this spiritual influence, Saudis have been striking on hospitals, public buildings and the nation of **#Yemen** for 100 days now.2/3 | 105 | 75 | 20 - |
| 11/07/2015 | UNSC issued only one resolution which was one of most embarrassing resolutions which condemned the victims instead of aggressors.3/3 **#Yemen** | 70 | 51 | 6 - |
| 18/07/2015 | The #IranDeal text approved or not, we won't stop supporting the oppressed nation in Palestine, **Yemen**, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon | 146 | 206 | 40 - |
| 17/08/2015 | In **#Yemen**, they are destroying a country to foolishly pursue political goals. | 59 | 42 | 13 - |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 17/08/2015 | We are grieving for oppressed people of **#Yemen** and pray for them and help them by all means. | 65 | 45 | 24 - |
| 23/09/2015 | Heartrending regional events, in Iraq, Levant, **Yemen**, Bahrain, West Bank & Gaza are great maladies of Islamic Ummah. | 67 | 44 | 13 |
| 01/11/2015 | On **#Yemen**: Immediate end to Saudi crimes and beginning of Yemeni-Yemeni talks can end conflicts in this country. | 88 | 76 | 26 |
| 29/12/2015 | Why the Islamic world remains silent? #Syria #Bahrain **#Yemen** #Libya #Zakzaky | 141 | 71 | 21 |

*Table 4. All of Khamenei's Tweets on Yemen in 2015*

## 7.4 Press TV – Propagandising Yemen

The IRIB-controlled *Press TV* is one of the most popular Iranian news-sites. It also has a sizable influence on Twitter, with a following of 276,600 followers on its English-language profile. Elswah and Alimardani showed that Iranian trolls and sockpuppets used *Press TV* as their key reference-point: 'studies of Iranian disinformation networks also indicated countdown2040 to be a central reference for "Iranian trolls" when promoting disinformation, coming second only to Iran's English state-run media, PressTV" (2021, 167). Posts and articles published across *Press TV's* platforms were regularly tweeted throughout Iran's vast propaganda nexus.

Some 23 articles covering Yemen, from 2015, were collected to observe recurrent discursive themes. Of these, the majority were published just after the commencement of Operation Decisive Storm. Many contained images detailing the devastation of Saudi air-strikes. Notably, none spoke of the oppressive nature of the Houthi regime. Only two mentions were made of Iranian support, and this referred to support as purely rhetorical in nature, speaking of the shared goal of "resistance". In an article published on 31st March 2015, the known anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist Kevin Barrett wrote: "Or will the Resistance ultimately triumph? What happens in Yemen may be an indicator" (Barrett, 2015). Using anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists speaks to Tehran's wider tactic of connecting Wahhabism to Judaism, and Saudi Arabia to Israel, in an attempt to portray the regime as "un-Islamic". Their use of such voices speaks to Iran's attempt to appeal to a reactionary populist audience. However, it ultimately looks like desperation – failing to provide credibility to their narrative.

Table 5. details the findings from these articles. Due to the large number of sources, there is a wider multiplicity of recurrent frames. They are: "Stating Saudi Justifications", "War Crimes", "Anti-Hadi", "Anti-Al Saud (non-sectarian)", "Anti-US/Israel", "Anti-UN", "Anti-Arab Coalition", "Pro-Houthi", and "Sectarian".

| Frame | Number of Sentences |
|---|---|
| Stating Saudi Justifications | 22 |
| War Crimes | 82 |
| Anti-Hadi | 35 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Anti-Al Saud (non-sectarian) | 32 |
| Anti-US/Israel | 20 |
| Anti-UN | 5 |
| Anti-Arab Coalition | 22 |
| Pro-Houthi | 47 |
| Sectarian | 13 |

*Table 5. Press TV 2015 article frames*

## 7.5 Assessing Iran's framing - Iran Attacks Saudi Justifications for ODS

Across these cells of the Iranian propaganda nexus, continual reference was made to Saudi securitisation narratives. As discussed in the previous chapter, these amounted to "protecting the people of Yemen", "restoring the legitimate government", "exaggerating Iranian involvement", "protecting Saudi borders", and "fighting a radical/terrorist group". Tehran challenged each justification. In terms of the "protecting the people of Yemen" line, Iran preferred not to directly quote Riyadh, but instead to hyper-focus on the humanitarian impact of Saudi aggression. This will be covered in the coming section on "War Crimes". Tehran paid particular attention and addressed directly, Saudi appeals to "legitimate government" and "Iranian involvement".

*Legitimate Government*

On 26th March 2015, the day ODS began, *Press TV* ran a report that directly quoted Adel al-

Jubeir's justification:

The operation is to defend the legitimate government," Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi special
envoy to the US, told reporters in a rare news conference at the Saudi embassy in Washington
on Wednesday, referring to the administration of fugitive president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur
Hadi, whose whereabouts are unknown after reportedly fleeing the country earlier in the day
(Press TV, 2015a).

This amounted to an immediate response from the Islamic Republic, that set the precedent for

future articles on the topic. The phrase "fugitive president" was repeated throughout the

majority of the case-study sample. In total, versions of the phrase "Saudi Arabia's air

campaign in Yemen started to restore to power fugitive former Yemeni President Abd

Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, a close ally of Riyadh" was repeated 17 times, featuring in almost

every article. This was a recurrent theme across the Iranian propaganda nexus. From the

beginning of the conflict, Tehran mobilised to discredit the Saudi-led intervention and their

ally President Hadi.

On the 30th of March, Waqar Rizvi provided a more detailed assessment of the Saudi claim:

The oft-repeated claim is that Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi is the 'legitimate' president of Yemen,
and must be accepted as such by Yemenis. Hadi came into office after a farcical one-man
election forced down Yemenis' throats by the Saudis and the US after the ouster of the one-
time dictator-president Ali Abdullah Saleh. That many Yemenis were dissatisfied with this
process was of little consequence to its backers. Ever since the appointment of Hadi as
president, Yemenis have not backed down from the desire to see their revolution reach a
conclusion that is satisfactory for all. Even if we do accept Hadi as president, the image of him
landing in Riyadh looking well rested, relaxed, and happy as his people endure sleepless nights
of airstrikes does not do much to further his legitimacy in the eyes of Yemenis themselves. A
legitimate leader is meant to lead all his people, not just his supporters, something Hadi had
never been able to comprehend nor act upon (Rizvi, 2015).

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 2015, Khamenei tweeted: "Saudis logic to attack **#Yemen** is stupid;it was on pretext of plea by resigned&fleeing Yemeni Pres. who betrayed his country at critical time" (Khamenei, 2015xv).

Hadi was systematically portrayed as an illegitimate ruler, a Saudi-Western stooge, and a fleeing coward. The justification that Saudi Arabia provided, that they were "protecting the legitimate government", was undermined throughout speeches, Tweets, and articles. Legitimacy became anathema, they argued, as the process leading to Hadi's tenure was guided by Saudi and US interests. Furthermore, an appeal was made to Hadi's cowardice, for fleeing to Riyadh, despite the reality that he faced untold levels of personal threat if he stayed in Yemen.

On 18<sup>th</sup> July, Khamenei represented Hadi in comic fashion, viscerally undermining his credibility:

"Does the former president of Yemen - who resigned at the most sensitive time with the purpose of creating a political vacuum and who fled the country wearing women's clothes - have legitimacy? Does such a president have the right to ask another country to attack his country and kill the people?" (Khamenei, 2015h).

Iran's construction of the Houthi's violent destruction of Yemen's "elected" government as legitimate is not warranted. Many Yemenis may not have supported Hadi in 2015, but, equally, they did not support the Houthis. To undermine appeals to legitimacy based on a

lack of support, only to appeal to legitimacy for a group that similarly lacks support, highlights the moral dichotomy of Iran.

There is truth to the claim that the NDC was Saudi-backed. It was, of course, a GCC initiative that led to and framed the conference. Hadi was the Saudis preferred leader and leader he became. At the very least, the NDC failed in its goal of preventing conflict, partially through undermining and under-representing minority groups across the country and focusing too heavily on intra-elite disputes (Lackner, 2016). The fact the Houthis were excluded from any positions of note was no surprise; nor was their discontent with the outcome of the conference. However, the Houthis represent just a small part of Yemeni society, and do not speak for the majority simply because they fall into Iran's categorisation of "resistance". Through focusing solely on the problems with President Hadi, Iran has in turn legitimised the violence that led to his exile from the country. The Houthis may be Iran's preference, but, like Hadi, they do not speak for a majority of Yemenis. Attaining power through sheer violence lacks legitimacy in no less measure than obtaining power through outside interference.

The fact they focus on issues like "legitimacy" is in itself interesting. Conceptually, the idea of "omission" is again relevant. As stated in the introduction, the Iranian narrative tends to omit explicit discussions of religion, and sectarian unity. Tehran are pragmatists when it comes to securitisation - they know that focusing on Shi'a identity will have limited appeal amongst international audiences due to its minority status. They regularly prefer to focus on

state-to-state critiques, knowing that this is the best avenue for advancing their counter-narrative.

*Iranian Involvement*

There was a stark contrast between the vocal solidarity espoused by the IGRC during 2014-15 and the way in which the media and Khamenei discussed the matter. In fact, on occasion, Khamenei extended this to a negation of Iranian involvement in any country. This is immediately identifiable as deceitful, due to their significant involvement in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. On 19th April, Khamenei said:

Today, our enemies accuse the Islamic Republic of interfering in such and such countries. This is not true and we do not do so. We do not interfere in the affairs of any country. Of course, we put up a brilliant defense when we are attacked, but we do not interfere in the affairs of any country (Khamenei, 2015c).

The Islamic Republic made a concerted attempt to portray itself as a moral, defensive entity, standing alongside minority groups in countries facing foreign aggression. This set the precedent for discourse on Yemen – portraying Saudi Arabia as a malicious invading force and Iran as a humanitarian actor, although it was eventually proven that Iran was sending limited weapons shipments to the Houthis in late September 2015 (BBC, 2015a). This constructed image represented an attempt at portraying Saudi Arabia as a threat to the ontological security of the region. Through a series of short sharp sentences on 6th May 2015, Khamenei demonstrated his wilful denial of physical Iranian involvement. He also furthered the image of the "Iranian saviour":

We wanted to send pharmaceutical aid. We wanted to send drugs for the sick. We did not want to send weapons because they do not need any. All Yemeni military bases and armies

are in the hands of revolutionary people and this group "Ansarullah". They do not need our weapons… You laid a food and energy siege on them and then you say, "No one should help them (Khamenei, 2015d).

It seems, from the framing style here, that Khamenei was responding directly to the accusations of Saudi involvement espoused by Adel Al-Jubeir, who said of Iranian involvement in early April: "The Houthis are ideologically affiliated with Iran. The Iranians have provided them with weapons. The Iranians have provided them with advisors. And the Iranians have provided them with money" (CNN, 2015). Throughout 2015, Iranian discourse regularly appeared responsive to Saudi accusations, undermining their involvement, and turning the focus back on to Saudi Arabia.

It is telling that across the 23 Press TV articles there was only one mention of the Saudi accusation of Iranian involvement. For the most part, the media's approach was to focus on hyper-fixating on Saudi war crimes and undermining the legitimacy of the government and the intervening coalition. The general tactic regarding accusations of Iranian involvement was omission – they just simply ignored it. The only mention was in Waqar Rizvi's article. He ridiculed the idea that anyone who opposed regimes must be labelled as "foreign stooges" and used the accusation to undermine Riyadh and Hadi. He wrote:

In the manic effort to control the narrative, the Houthis and others, including the army, who oppose Hadi's rule, as in the case of the majority of Bahrainis who protest against the monarchy, are labeled as foreign 'stooges,' as if anyone who opposes the installed president must be serving an outside power. That Hadi himself reiterates this notion does not bode well for him as a leader of all Yemenis. He cannot serve his country, if that is his real intention, if he only wants quiet submission to him and his policies. That was Ali Abdullah Saleh's niche form of rule, and Yemenis rejected that, so contrary to what Hadi may desire, the people are not willing to go backward (Rizvi, 2015).

The truth is somewhere in the middle. A ship containing Iranian weapons, bound for Yemen, had been intercepted as early as January 2013 (Bull, 2013). The IRGC spent a lot of effort emphasising their ideological solidarity with Ansarallah following the latter's capture of Sana'a in 2014. Equally, the Houthis went against Iranian advice when they made the decision to violently seize the capital. The Houthis were not "conventional proxies" in the mould of Hezbollah in 2015 – they were a group driven by "local grievances and competition for power" (Juneau, 2016). In short, they had their own agency.

However, Tehran's propensity to frame their involvement with the Houthis as purely "rhetorical", "moralistic", and "humanitarian" was disingenuous. Involvement was modest in 2015 but had many physical manifestations – including militarily. Following the Houthi capture of Sana'a, direct flights were offered between Iran and the Yemeni capital. Furthermore, 'four days after seizing Sana'a, they released several Iranian prisoners' (Johnston et al., 2020, 60). A subsequent UN report, following conversations with an unnamed senior Yemeni official, said that three of these prisoners were IRGC members, and two were from Hezbollah (UNSC, 2015a). An Iranian weapons shipment was found to be headed to supply the Houthis in September 2015 (BBC, 2015a).

Iran was involved prior to 2014, but this support increased following the Houthis' capture of Sana'a. It became more involved following the Saudi-led intervention in 2015 as Tehran saw the geostrategic potential of amplifying its support. However, the physical scale of their involvement was exaggerated by Riyadh and the West, as a method of justifying their

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deployment of extraordinary measures in Yemen, which have led to the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The Houthis were an Iranian ally and friend by 2015, but they were not an Iranian proxy.

*Anti-Saudi/War Crimes:*

Tehran made a number of non-sectarian attempts to undermine the Al Saud. These ranged from comparing the Saudi assault on Yemen to the Israeli assaults on Palestine and Lebanon, to accusing them of preventing Iranian aid reaching the country. They also continuously referred to ODS as having been conducted "without a UN mandate". The English-language format seems to function effectively as a tool alongside an awareness of the power of quoting the positions of humanitarian organisations to convince the international community of Saudi malpractice.

"War crimes" were mentioned in 82 sentences across the 23 Press TV articles. Death tallies were regularly quoted in headlines, pictures detailing the destruction were widely included, and phrases from the lexical field of "evil-doing" were regularly deployed. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir's attempt to justify the intervention along humanitarian lines was done significant damage by this groundswell of reporting. The death of women and children formed a principle focus for Iranian state media. Upon analysing this trend across Middle Eastern propaganda, Bouvier and Machin observed that phrases and "images often depict children as part of signifying breakdown, and… resonate with Western readers" (2018, 180).

Although reporting accurate figures was difficult during the early stages of the conflict, and Iran certainly inflated them, many of their sources including leading human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch. Khamenei deployed his familiar tactic of espousing factual truths to undermine his adversaries and strengthen the image of his own regime. On 9th April he said: "[t]his issue has two aspects: one is that it is a genocidal crime. It is a crime that can be pursued by international authorities. They kill children and destroy houses, infrastructure and national sources of wealth. Well, this is a big crime. This is one aspect of the issue" (Khamenei, 2015b).

The deceit in all of this discourse is Iran ignoring the war crimes of Ansarallah altogether and omitting any acknowledgment or discussion of its own abuse of human rights in Syria and Iraq. Omission is a central tool of deception in Iran's campaign of narrative warfare. Tehran was correct in stating that the Saudi-led coalition were responsible for war crimes, but to characterise itself, by opposition, as a moral actor in the region is flatly historically inaccurate.

*Sectarian Identity*

Sectarian discourse appeared solely as a form of alienating propaganda, blaming Tehran's enemies for intentionally sectarianizing conflicts in the region. Iran accused the USA and Saudi Arabia of adopting a policy of divide-and-rule across the Middle East. Khamenei and Press TV did not express solidarity with the Houthis on religious grounds in any discernible way. This is further evidence of the self-awareness of the Iranian propaganda nexus, knowing that unifying Shi'a discourse will not have a wide-reaching appeal. To this end, pan-Islamism

featured heavily, used to deify the Islamic Republic in opposition to the West, Saudi Arabia, and "takfiri" jihadists. No accountability was taken over the use of explicitly sectarian militia-group in Iraq and Syria, which had profound effects on sectarianizing conflicts in the region. Soleimani was an archetype of Shia processes of sectarianisation as a tool of Iranian power projection, but no mention was made of his role. On 16th May, Khamenei addressed a number of ambassadors of Islamic countries. On sectarianisation, he claimed that Israel and the US:

Want to pit Iran against Arabs, such and such a tribe against another tribe, and Shia against Sunni. These are the policies of the enemies and therefore, they should be confronted. Confronting such policies is confronting jahiliyya. Today's modern jahiliyya is a violent, merciless and dark-hearted jahiliyya which is equipped with all sorts of weapons. We should confront this jahiliyya in a vigilant way. The people of Iran have done this and they will continue to do so in the future (Khamenei, 2015e).


On 17th August, he addressed his key propagandists during a speech to members of the Islamic Radio and TV Union. He claimed of the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia:

It was they who created takfiri groups. It was they who created thuggish and violent groups and set them on the Islamic Ummah. They pretend that this is a denominational war. I will tell you that the conflicts that they are trying to label as denominational conflicts in Iraq, Syria and other countries are not denominational at all. They are of a political nature. The war in Yemen is a political war, not a religious one. They falsely claim that the issue is about Shia and Sunni while this is not the case. Some of those people who are losing their children, women, infants and their hospitals and schools in Yemen under the bombardment of the Saudis are Shafi'i and some of them are Zaidi. So, the issue is not about Shia and Sunni. The conflict is a political conflict, the conflict between policies. Today, they are creating such a situation in the region. It was they who created discord (Khamenei, 2015j).

In an attempt to frame the NMECW as a fight between Zionist-backed apostates and moralistic champions of the Islamic world, the Islamic Republic again decided to employ the conspiracy theorist Kevin Barrett, who wrote:

The phony "Sunni vs. Shia" conflict. But there is no such conflict. The only meaningful "conflict is between the Zionist bankster empire and the Resistance. If the Zionists can dupe Sunnis into thinking Shia are the enemy, and vice versa, they will succeed in destroying the region and maintaining their hegemony. According to American investigative reporter Wayne Madsen, who was recently named by France's President Hollande as one of the world's five most notable "conspiracist intellectuals" (I am proud to also have been on that list), the Ibn Saud family and their Wahhabist supporters belong to the Donmeh sect of satanic "Jewish" heretics. If so, Mecca and Medina are in the hands of a family that engages in ritual orgies and is dedicated to the rise of a false messiah. Israeli investigative reporter Barry Chamish agrees with that analysis, and adds that the Rothschild family are part of the same heretical group. This hypothesis would explain the alliance between the Ibn Sauds and their Rothschild masters, who control the usury-based bankster petrodollar through their control of Saudi Arabia (Barrett, 2015).

By 6th December 2015, Press TV were falsely claiming that Saudi Arabia were using Daesh to execute Houthis. The article read:

Saudi Arabia's aggression against Yemen is strengthening terrorist groups such as the Daesh Takfiri militants, says Yemeni Ansarullah Houthi movement. According to a statement released by the movement on Saturday, Riyadh and its supporters are also responsible for the recent execution of 25 Ansarullah fighters, recently carried out by Takfiri terrorists of Daesh in southwestern Yemen. Saudi Arabia and its allies in Yemen have taken measures to sabotage attempts to release the Houthi fighters before their grisly executions, the statement further read. The terrorist group released a video on Friday, showing the brutal execution of the fighters in different ways (Press TV, 2015u).

These claims are wildly untrue and there is no evidence that can support them.

*Anti-US/Israel/UN:*

Specific criticism of the UN was limited across Iran's propaganda network. Far more time

was spent connecting the Saudi-led intervention with Iran's other key adversaries: Israel and

the US. Tehran sought to construct the Saudi-led intervention as part of the expansion of the

"New World Order bankster empire" (Barrett, 2015) – a conspiracy centred around

constructing the enemy as a capitalist, Zionist, oppressor, working to enslave and subjugate

minority groups in the region. Khamenei gave this conspiracy further airtime in July, when he said: "[t]o put it in simple Farsi, I mean America, England, powerful western forces and the Zionists. It is these people who control the promotional environments in the world. It is they who do not allow anything to happen without their approval" (Khamenei, 2015f).

America was roundly blamed for the rise of Daesh, the sponsorship of war crimes, and the spread of terrorism across the Middle East. Khamenei portrayed the Al Saud as puppets of the American-Israeli power base, stating: "[u]nfortunately, America's agents are some regional countries which call themselves "Muslims", but they have been deceived. The main supporter and architect is America. It is Americans who promote terrorism" (Khamenei, 2015e).

Perhaps Khamenei's most blatant construction of an "us vs. them", "good vs. evil", "Iranian saviour" narrative, came in an earlier speech in May. Addressing America in a rhetorically direct fashion, he proclaimed: "[y]ou did not even allow the Red Crescent to provide some services. This is while they [Americans' themselves give military information to the Saudis. They give them weapons and resources and they provide them with political encouragement" (Khamenei, 2015d).

The official narrative of the Islamic Republic mirrors findings across Iranian propaganda networks on Twitter. Instead of randomly spreading pure disinformation, Khamenei peppered his speeches with elements of truth, which he amplified, over-emphasized, and used to construct an image of Iran as the moral actor in the region. Tapping into anti-Semitic

tendencies, Press TV worked alongside the Ayatollah to project a grand conspiracy, accusing Riyadh of doing the bidding of "evil" and "destabilising" forces. Tehran spent considerable time emphasizing the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US, and the former's crucial importance to the Saudi war effort.

It is true that, on the very day ODS began, the United States Security Council pledged military and logistical support to Saudi Arabia (Meehan, 2015). President Obama's physical support for the Saudi-led coalition was undeniably crucial to ODS. Without US support, it is unlikely Saudi warplanes would have been able to sustain their air campaign. However, connecting Israel and "Zionism" to the Saudi-led intervention has no basis, nor does blaming Saudi Arabia and the US for all of the terrorism across the Middle East.

*Pro-Houthi:*

Whilst alienating propaganda formed the largest part of the collected data, unifying propaganda was nevertheless present. Pro-Houthi sentiment was espoused, especially as the war developed into the latter stages of 2015. Linguistically, *Press TV* referred to the Houthis as "Ansarullah" (Press TV, 2015o), lending credence to their self-proclaimed Islamic legitimacy. Similarly, they called them "revolutionaries" (Press TV, 2015d); later going on to refer to them simply as "Yemeni forces" (Press TV, 2015n) and "the Yemeni army" (Press TV, 2015o). Their military capabilities were continuously deified across *Press TV* articles, comparing them to the guerrilla fighters of Vietnam and Lebanon (Barrett, 2015), and glorifying their killing of Saudi military personnel. By referring to Hadi as a "fugitive" (Press

TV, 2015a; Press TV, 2015c), *Press TV* were able to facilitate the construction of the idea that Hadi had resigned due to incompetence and cowardice, claiming that the Houthis had asked him to reconsider his decision.

Saudi Arabia has portrayed the Houthis as a terrorist group. Iran has portrayed Saudi Arabia as the leading sponsor of terrorism in the region. In the NMECW, there are no shades of grey, only black and white: you are either a terrorist or fighting terrorism. In several of the articles from *Press TV*, the Houthis are portrayed as the latter. During 2015, Iran mentioned their battles with Al-Qaeda and Daesh. They did so, to construct a grand conspiracy that these "Salafist" groups were being backed by Riyadh directly and used as weapons against the Houthis. In a particularly venomous article from December 2015, *Press TV* claimed that Saudi Arabia was responsible for the beheading of 25 Houthi militiamen by Daesh (Press TV, 2015u).

As a means of stoking anxiety, one report celebrated the defence of parts of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait by Ansarallah. In October, they reported: "the Yemeni army forces and allied popular committees had foiled attacks by Saudi-backed forces launched from Lhij Province's al-Sabiha district against Bab el-Mandeb. Tens of Saudi-backed forces were reportedly killed and wounded in the confrontation" (Press TV, 2015p).

Explicit support for the Houthis remained absent. Tehran's approach in 2015 was simply to misrepresent the Houthis as a valid resistance group, standing up to imperialist oppression.

No mention of physical support appeared in any of the articles; nor did the Houthis' lack of support across Yemen.

*Conclusion*

This chapter has provided a characterisation of the Iranian propaganda nexus's Yemen discourse in 2015. In these early months of the Saudi-led intervention, Tehran mobilised its propagandists to counter Saudi narratives. Although peppered with facts, Iran spread conspiratorial disinformation as a tool of alienation. They conspired to portray Saudi Arabia as an existential threat to the ontological security and physical security of the region. In turn, they presented themselves in opposition, as the just and moralistic defenders of oppressed peoples in the Middle East. Hadi did lack legitimacy, the Saudis were committing war crimes, the US were supporting Riyadh's efforts, the Iranians were not as involved with the Houthis as Riyadh were claiming. However, to use these facts to reach a conclusion that Saudi Arabia should bear full responsibility for regional insecurity and terrorism is a cynically sophisticated form of disinformation. The theme of 'good vs. evil' was prevalent across the collected data. This was heightened by Iran's recurrent tactic of omission – choosing to largely ignore discussion of its relationship with the Houthis, and to entirely ignore discussion of Iran's own poor human rights record and Ansarallah's war crimes. Sectarianisation, in its explicit and unifying forms, was almost entirely absent. The Iranians knew that focusing on minority identities would have limited appeal, especially when targeting international audiences. The IRIB, along with the Ayatollah, used their platforms to sow discord and heighten anxiety amongst its regional rivals. This was all done with the aim

of amplifying the image of the narrative of Resistance, a discursive tool that has effectively

unsettled monarchical rulers since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Iran has contributed to the

swell of disinformation that heightened tension and exacerbated and prolonged the war in

Yemen. However, their securitisation narratives cannot be regarded as successful

internationally, as the groundswell of opinion favoured the Saudi perspective. In particular,

the US remained firmly committed to the Saudi cause, exemplified by Trump's visit to

Riyadh in 2017.

# Chapter Eight
## *2017- The Riyadh Conference - Trump as a Saudi sectarian actor*

This chapter argues that 2017-18 constituted a period of reciprocal positionality between Saudi Arabia and Trump's Administration. Discursively, their positions synergised, creating a unified grand narrative that portrayed the Saudis in an exclusively favourable light. Trump abandoned Obama's attempts at balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia and gave his full support to Riyadh. His anti-Iranian and pro-Iranian discourse brought him within the sphere of Saudi securitisation and meant that he had the effect of a Saudi sectarian actor. This chapter plays an essential role in answering several of the core research questions of the thesis, as it analyses the success of Riyadh's propaganda regarding Yemen, becoming fully reciprocated by Washington. The years 2017-18 coincided with some of the most intense shelling from the Saudi-led coalition, as well as retaliation from the Houthis. This chapter also shows the vast reach of sectarianisation, effective at providing justifications for non-Muslim international audiences. Sectarian and anti-Iranian processes of securitisation unified Riyadh and Washington, providing them both with legitimisation for their involvement in Yemen and their new, sizable, arms deals. The close relationship was best evidenced through Trump's appearance at the Riyadh Conference in 2017. The nature of legitimacy was shifting – as Saudi Arabia became convinced of the forthright support of the Trump administration. Together, they provided a united front against their core regional enemies. Iran was roundly blamed for the war in Yemen, and Saudi Arabia presented as a moral actor (Geranmayeh, 2017; Ahmadian, 2018)

Firstly, this chapter provides an account of the significant developments in the Yemen War during this period. Following this, focus shifts to analysis of Trump's visit to the Riyadh Conference in May 2017, using DT to analyse the development of discursive reciprocity across time. The chapter finishes by examining what this deepened US-Saudi relationship meant for Yemen, and how the surrounding propaganda impacted events on the ground. Trump's visit to Riyadh seemed to confirm the notion that "the two countries [had] appeared… to come to an agreement with regards to intensified military action in Yemen and the revival of a traditionally confrontational US foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran" (Al Saud and Mahlouly, 2018, 9-10).

*8.1 Key developments in 2017-2018*

Yemen experienced seismic military and humanitarian shifts in 2017. Not only were there significant Saudi airstrikes, including the Mastaba attack in March, which according to Human Rights Watch left 119 dead, but it also saw the first attempted Houthi airstrikes on Riyadh and suicide boat attacks on Saudi ships. For context, the Riyadh Conference began on the 20th of May 2017, just one day after the Houthis fired a missile towards Riyadh, breaking a ceasefire.

By 2017, the humanitarian situation was reaching a critical level. According to OCHA, 69 per cent of the population were now dependent upon humanitarian aid for survival, amounting to some 18.8 million people. The World Bank predicted that the poverty level had doubled (at least) by March 2017 and pointed to the Saudi-imposed blockade of Yemeni ports

as the catalyst for this. Furthermore, cholera was now widespread across the country, with over 22,000 cases reported (OCHA, 2017). Saudi airstrikes had destroyed key infrastructure, healthcare facilities, roads, and markets, depleting access to basic amenities.

Reports had also begun to surface of the Houthis obstructing the delivery of humanitarian aid, abusing and blackmailing aid workers, and confiscating or "taxing" aid for themselves. In September, it was reported that:

Houthi-Saleh forces… have also violated international legal obligations to facilitate humanitarian aid to civilians and significantly harmed the civilian population. They have blocked and confiscated aid, denied access to populations in need, and restricted the movement of ill civilians and aid workers (HRW, 2017).

The Houthi relationship with Iran had also steadily increased, as did the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As Bruce Riedel (2017) stated, "[w]ith their own cities under constant bombardment, the Houthis are firing missiles at Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, with Tehran's technological assistance". Several weapons shipments, filled with Iranian weapons, were seized during 2017. The most prominent of these ships was seized by the Australian warship, the Darwin in January of that year (Chivers and Schmitt, 2017). However, the US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley's "smoking gun" allegation of Iranian machinations behind the bombing of Riyadh airport on 6th November, was met with scepticism by the international community (Lynch and Gramer, 2017). The Trump administration, and those close to the President, were spending concerted time and effort attempting to securitise Saudi Arabia's war to the wider international community. What is true, is that Iranian support increased during this period. They were now providing Ansarallah with missiles and drones

that they did not previously possess. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that this remained a low cost, high yield, endeavour for the Islamic Republic – "[t]he war costs Tehran a few million dollars per month, while it costs Riyadh $6billion per month" (Riedel, 2017).

President Trump's election in January 2017 saw an end to Obama's less confrontational approach to the NMECW. During his campaign for office, Trump signalled his intention to abandon the JCPOA. Upon election, his first state visit was to Saudi Arabia, attending the Riyadh Conference on 21st May, where he announced his intention to back the Kingdom and its efforts in Yemen, signing a sizable arms deal. Trump framed the battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a "battle between good and evil" (CNN, 2017).

At the Riyadh conference, he posed holding his hand on a luminous orb of the world, alongside King Salman. Saudi legitimisation, securitisation, and propaganda were intimately connected to their alliance with Trump, and the concepts of modernity and globalisation during this period. From the American perspective, Saudi Arabia was seen as vital from an economic perspective, and in halting the expansion of Iranian influence in the Middle East. Throughout Trump's tenureship, his "heated rhetoric… indicate[d] US strategy [was] primarily focused on isolating and containing Iran" (Geranmayeh, 2017).

For their part, the Houthis demonstrated significant agency, determinacy, and brutality when they murdered Ali Abdullah Saleh on 4th December 2017. Previously an essential part of the Houthis' military success and territorial gains, he was now accused of treachery and treason.

Only two days prior to his death, Saleh announced his abandonment of the Houthi alliance, and his willingness to enter into discussions with the Saudi-led coalition. Ansarallah now only grew in power following Saleh's death, gaining supporters, and capturing and holding territory. By January 2018, the Houthis had established control over the entirety of north-eastern Yemen, including Hudaydah, Sana'a, and Taiz. The map below demonstrates this dominance of key regions by Ansarallah, most notably along the Red Sea coast, deemed crucial to Riyadh and Washington's economic and energy-based interests.



*Image 2. Map of regional control in Yemen - 7th January 2018 (Djukic and Centanni, 2018)*

*8.2 Conceptualising Trump's utilisation of propaganda to construct a united front against Iran*

Conventionally, the literature on Middle Eastern state legitimacy has focused on domestic state-society relations (Eisenstadt and Rokkan, 1973; Beblawi and Luciani, 1987; Rubin, 2020). Whilst ideas such as "patrimonialism", "the rentier state", and "Islam" are useful in characterising the foundations of authority in the region, an increasingly complex, digitised, and globalised world mean that new research is required to create an updated body of literature suitable for the contemporary era. This section uses Hoskins and O'Loughlin's (2015) theory of mediatisation to analyse Riyadh's highly sophisticated, authoritarian use of the digital media. Saudi Arabia used these platforms not only to suppress dissenting voices domestically, but also as a tool of securitisation internationally, to justify its extraordinary human rights violations to regional and international audiences. It is fundamental to the maintenance of state legitimacy in the Kingdom. Symbolic forms of solidarity and strength, spread across the Internet, were crucial Saudi weapons during this period.

Using the literature on sectarianisation (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016; Mabon, 2020; Haddad, 2020), this chapter argues that a similar process of fearmongering and othering occurs when the US is the target audience. Rather than focusing on the sectarian nature of the "Shi'a threat", Riyadh amplified pre-existing anti-Iranian sentiment in Washington to create a united front against the Houthis in Yemen.

This is not to say that the Trump administration was simply listening to the Saudis and accepting the anti-Iranian line passively. They were actively engaged in meaning-making, understanding the utility of singularly blaming Iran for the region's problems. It enabled

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Washington to deepen its ties with the Gulf, establish credibility amongst the Sunni majority, and most importantly to protect its economic and security interests in the region. The anti-Iranian, pro-Saudi line, equated to a grand metanarrative of good vs. evil. This chapter refers to this profound discursive alignment, which was fuelled by clear geopolitical intentions, as reciprocal positionality.

To understand the effects of unification through alienation, it is useful to understand Serge Moscovici's (1987) theory of "Conspiracy Mentality", understood most commonly as "the psychology of resentment" (Graumann and Moscovici, 1987, 2). This chapter argues that Trump saw the efficacy of this kind of populist propaganda during his election campaign and took this through into his Middle Eastern foreign policy. He adopted the anti-Iranian line to unite the US and the Sunni World against a singular Iranian threat; effectively turning him into a sectarian actor (Ahmadian, 2018). Whilst the anti-Iranian line is not a *pure* conspiracy (as the Iranian threat is real), its amplification as the primary source of regional instability, to the exclusion of any discussion of other actors' involvement, amounts to a conspiratorial over-exaggeration. Furthermore, a conspiracy mentality was fostered, projecting fear of Iranian expansionism and inflating threat-perception. Understood through Moscovici's lens, Al Saud and Mahlouly write that Trump's discourse at the Riyadh Conference amounted to an instance of ethnocentric and dogmatic identity politics. The resultant effects of this form of propaganda, they write, are that:

[R]esentment often manifests itself as a fear of the other and the foreigner, who potentially represent a threat to social cohesion. This perceived external threat endorses all sorts of phantasmagoric representations meant to emphasize the supposedly inexorable incompatibility between the in-group and the outsider (Al Saud and Mahlouly, 2017, 2-3).

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Mohammed bin Salman is a young man, which some have characterised as a weakness – making him brash, inexperienced, and reactionary (Al-Rasheed, 2017). However, what his youth gives him is an understanding of the globalised world and the importance of digital media. In many ways, the Al Saud have learnt from, and co-opted, the tools of the Arab Spring. The ability to gather cross-regional and international support through social media was something the House of Saud feared during the Arab Spring. They viewed calls for human rights and democracy as deeply threatening to the security of their regime. Rather than dwelling on this fear, they turned the fear back on to the people and to the world, increasing fears of the Shi'a Axis of Resistance, as well as crushing dissenters.

Mohammed bin Salman also understands the importance of appearing as a decisive, populist, militaristic leader in the contemporary Middle East, presenting himself as a Sunni Arab strongman, prepared to stand up to the Persian Shi'a aggressor. Whilst the Saudis had legitimate security and economic concerns about Houthi control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the aggressiveness of their military assault on Yemen can only be explained by a non-material need, that "Saudi leadership aims to assert the Kingdom's status as a regional power in the Middle East" (Darwich, 2018, 125).

The key way in which they justified the intervention, as outlined in the previous chapters, was through claiming the Houthis to be a conventional Iranian proxy. Adel Al-Jubeir spent considerable time speaking to American and British audiences in English to convey the exaggerated message that Iranian support was physical, military, logistical, and ideological.

This is despite evidence to the contrary. Whilst Iranian support had grown to physically tangible levels by 2017, they still had "little direct control over Houthi behavior and decisionmaking" (Johnston et al., 2020, 64). Nevertheless, Iran and the Houthis had established firm relations by 2017, with Iran officially recognising the Houthi government.

The Sunni aspect of the coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia in Yemen is an example of unification through "othering". Sectarianisation was a hybrid of alienating and unifying propaganda, that was presented by the Kingdom as an attempt to "portray its intervention in Yemen as being at the center of a Sunni regional effort to counter the threat of Iran and the expansion of Shiism in the Gulf" (Darwich, 2018, 129*).* This was furthered by America's adoption of this simplistic, polarising, narrative. The following analysis of Trump's symbolic visuality, and divisive populist rhetoric, synergised his discourse so closely with that of the Kingdom, that he constituted a new part of this wide web of unified sectarian propaganda. Appeals were made to Washington's long-standing relationship with Riyadh, a lineage was denoted of American grievances with Iran dating back to the Iranian hostage crisis, and Iran was blamed for the spread of terrorism. The fight against the Houthis was securitised effectively, with the Trump Administration referring to them as terrorists, and a classic Iranian proxy in the mould of Hezbollah.

Yet, Mohammed bin Salman was able to perpetuate this narrative so widely and so persistently that it became an accepted truth within the international arena. He effectively harnessed the notion of the "Houthis are an Iranian proxy" to justify Riyadh's brutal tactics in

Yemen. Mohammed bin Salman was held aloft as the strong defender of the Islamic World against Iranian terrorism. Alongside this, his Vision 2030, was used to help foster the international foundations of Saudi state legitimacy. As Kinninmont wrote, Vision 2030, "has helped to brand Mohammed bin Salman as a figure of considerable influence both within Saudi Arabia and internationally" (2017, 2).

## 8.4 Trump: Performativity, Security, and Status

Whilst Obama's regime did lend support for the Saudi intervention in Yemen, it was careful to posture as a balancer in the region, through its attempts to negotiate with Iran through the JCPOA. Trump eventually scrapped this deal on 8th May 2018 and put his full weight behind the Al Saud. He signalled his intentions much sooner, choosing Riyadh as his first international visit as President, where he posed holding his hand on a luminous orb of the world, alongside King Salman. Saudi statehood and security were intimately connected to American alliance value during this period. Their legitimacy domestically, regionally, and internationally depended on a multi-faceted process of active ontological security, harnessing the fear of the "Other".

Saudi Arabia was seen as vital in halting the expansion of Iranian influence in the Middle East, which appealed to a multitude of state actors and supra-state organisations. This, of course, is specific to a relative time period. The idea that regimes and leaders matter is of profound resonance, as the Saudi-American relationship begins to shift under President Joe Biden's tenure. However, the Trump administration's "heated rhetoric… indicate[d] US strategy [was] primarily focused on isolating and containing Iran" (Geranmayeh, 2017).

Trump's discourse during his speech at the Riyadh Conference presented him as a self-professed saviour and unifier - "Trump enacts the identity of a stereotype fighter and defender of American citizens and the world's safety and security" (Alenizi and AbuSa'aleek, 2022, 148). This artifice shares similarities with Mohammed bin Salman' self-professed role. In reality, Trump was no idealist, and simply sought to cut US losses in the region. Rather like President Nixon before him (Newton et al., 2009, 1), he used surrogacy to secure US interests (Rauta et al., 2019, 14). This is why he pushed greater arms sales with Riyadh, whilst continuously talking about a reduced military role for the US in the region. Like Mohammed bin Salman, he argued that the region needed saving from one primary evil – Iran. This was about image and status-projection, but also, as always with the US-Saudi relationship, about shared economic interests.

*Trump's Visit to Riyadh, The Riyadh Conference, and US-Saudi Alignment*

In an interview with the Saudi news conglomerate MBC on 3rd May (17 days prior to Trump's visit to Riyadh), Mohammed bin Salman set out the way he was framing the war: "[t]here is no doubt that the war that started was not a choice for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It was a duty we had to fulfil, and the other scenario would've been much worse. A coup on the lawfulness by militia and we categorize it as a terrorist group" (MBC GROUP, 2017).

Trump's visit seemed to signal a shift in Saudi propaganda, into a new, refined, social-media savvy form. The President espoused rhetoric that worked directly as a tool of Saudi

securitisation of the Iranian and Houthi threats. Whilst possessing his own, realist, rationale for such polarising rhetoric, the discursive content equally served to legitimise Saudi actions in Yemen, and in the region more broadly. Mohammed bin Salman and Trump share a brashness in foreign policy; an egoistic approach that is status driven. They are also "modern" in their understanding of social media. On 19th May, the day before his visit to Riyadh, Trump tweeted:

"Getting ready for my big foreign trip. Will be strongly protecting American interests – that's what I like to do!" (Trump, 2017a).

On arriving, he tweeted:

"Great to be in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Looking forward to the afternoon and evening ahead. #POTUSAbroad" (Trump, 2017b).

On 20th May, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stood with Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir in Riyadh, to outline the outcomes of President Trump and King Salman's discussions. In his opening statement, Al Jubeir was keen to repeat the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" three times, to describe the King. The contextual understanding, that this was prior to the American-Arab-Islamic Summit, is key for understanding why Al-Jubeir was so keen to emphasise Riyadh's Islamic legitimacy. Iran and Yemen both featured heavily in the news conference. Describing Trump and King Salman's talks, Al-Jubeir recounted that: "[t]hey discussed the nefarious activities of Iran and the fact that action has to be taken in order to ensure that Iran does not continue with its aggressive policies in the region… and cease its human rights violations" (Al Arabiya English, 2017).

In his opening statement, when referring, in part, to the $109 billion arms sales to Saudi Arabia, Tillerson said: "all of these new initiatives will bolster our joint efforts to deter regional threats from Iran in Syria, Iran in Yemen, and on Saudi Arabia's borders" (Al Arabiya English, 2017).

Many of the questions concerned Yemen. Asked, "[o]n Yemen, how does pouring in more weapons via Saudi Arabia actually hasten an end to the brutal war?" (Al Arabiya English, 2017), Rex Tillerson replied: "I think the rebels in Yemen and those that have taken over the government in Yemen… have to know they cannot sustain their fight. They have to know that they… will never prevail militarily. But they're only gonna feel that, when they feel pressure militarily" (Al Arabiya English, 2017).

The two of them stood aligned on the legitimacy and necessity of the continued military intervention in Yemen, which was framed as fundamental in the fight against Iran. Together, they portrayed Iran as an existential threat to the physical and ontological security of the region. Iran was continually held responsible for the region's turmoil and for Yemen's problems. Only one reference was made to Riyadh's role, with Al-Jubeir simply stating "we made mistakes and we have acknowledged those and we have investigated those. But we have been charged with things that we didn't do" (Al Arabiya English, 2017). The Al Saud only mentioned their mistakes briefly, with no detail of the specifics, to frame itself as honest and transparent, before deflecting the blame entirely onto the Houthis and Iran

The clearest example of a united front against Iran came at the Arab-Islamic-American World Summit, one part of the Riyadh Conference. Donald Trump gave his speech to a room filled with Sunni leaders from across the Muslim World. The members of the wider Axis of Resistance, and Turkey, were not in attendance. Iran and Turkey boycotted the event; Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the Syrian regime were, unsurprisingly, not invited. He constructed the speech as a polemic against the "forces of evil", and "terrorism", of a "battle of good against evil". The "good guys" were his audience, the Sunni representatives of various Muslim countries. The "bad guys" were terrorist organisations like ISIS, Iran, and its proxies. Introducing this binary opposition, Trump declared:

"no discussion of stamping out this threat would be complete without mentioning the government that gives terrorists… safe harbour, financial backing, and the social standing needed for recruitment. It is a regime responsible for so much instability in the region. I am speaking of course of Iran" (CNN, 2017).

This marked an end to a balanced American approach to the sensitive security dilemma in the region. Symbolically, for Trump to stand in front of an entirely Sunni audience of Muslim World leaders, condemn Iran and refer to them as 'evil' and avoid any criticism of Sunni state actors, amounted to a novel form of sectarianisation. Iran was portrayed as the primary threat to the ontological security of the region. Put simply – "[w]hile Obama's balancing policy distanced the US from sectarian rhetoric and its effects on the ground, Trump's anti-Iran policy risk[ed] making Washington a sectarian actor" (Ahmadian, 2018, 143). Criticism of state actors was restricted to members of Iran's Axis of Resistance. No critique was levelled against Saudi Arabia or the Sunni Coalition in Yemen. In fact, they were actively praised: "[t]he first task in this joint effort is for your nations to deny all territory to the foot

soldiers of evil… Many are already making significant contributions to regional security… Saudi Arabia and a regional coalition have taken strong action against Houthi militants in Yemen" (CNN, 2017).

Securing the arms deal with Saudi Arabia was a success for Trump, in his own language of money and jobs. Oil and natural gas imports were also a priority, so solidifying this relationship, and helping in the efforts to secure Red Sea ports, was paramount to his neoliberal concerns. As seen in Image 3., Trump's pride at the weapons deal was demonstrated visually at a later date, holding aloft some cardboard signs detailing the specifics of the sales. Mohammed bin Salman visited Washington in a three-week tour in March 2018. The image below shows Trump visually detailing the weapons systems to be delivered to the Kingdom.



*Image 3. Mohammed bin Salman visits the White House (Associated Press, 2018)*

Some of the Saudi establishment were far from pleased with Trump's brashness, which detailed the extent and nature of Saudi arms purchases - potentially posing a security threat. Nevertheless, it showed the depths of his commitment to the Saudi deal, and its ability to work for him politically and his country economically. The title of Mark Landler's New York Times article summarises this perfectly: "Saudi Prince's White House Visit Reinforces Trump's Commitment to Heir Apparent" (Landler, 2018).

This meeting can best be described as a "follow-up" to the Riyadh Conference, of which Trump made explicit mention. He spoke extensively of "weapons", "opportunities", "security", and "jobs". Speaking of the closeness of Washington and Riyadh, increasing investment from and in Saudi Arabia, and reflecting on his "success" where Obama had "failed", he said: "[w]e really have a great friendship, a great relationship. I would say the relationship was, to put it mildly, very strained during the Obama administration and the relationship now is probably as good as it has ever been" (PBS NewsHour, 2018).

This meeting showed that Trump's words at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit were not mere rhetorical devices, but active policy commitments that he went on to execute. The anti-Iranian stance was further underscored by his decision to scrap the JCPOA agreement in May of 2018. Effectively, this amounted to an overarching policy of isolating Iran and deepening sanctions – which sat extremely well with the leadership of the Al-Saud.

This internationalised period saw the anti-Iranian securitisation process adopt an international face. Through "othering" and "fear", Saudi Arabia and the US were able to turn this alienating process of sectarianisation into a unifying moment for vast swathes of the Muslim World. The US and Saudi Arabia's language became synchronised, to the point where they each became amplifiers of the other's agenda in the region. Consciously or otherwise, the Trump administration essentially became a sectarian actor. Whilst Obama's administration had antagonistic feelings towards Iran, Trump exaggerated this to a campaign of "maximum pressure". Iran has played a significant role in regional instability. However, it is the complete omission of any critique of Gulf states that remained telling.

*The importance of the visual during Trump's Visit*

The importance of the visual cannot be understated on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Riyadh used the visual as a tool of securitisation, understanding the reality that social media posts received far more attention when they contain an image (Somerfield et al, 2018; Li and Xie, 2020). The scenes below were carefully orchestrated to depict: Saudi power, Saudi-American solidarity, and Islamic legitimacy. The photograph of King Salman, President Trump, and Egyptian President Abdel Fateh al-Sisi posing with their hands on a luminous orb of the world is perhaps the most telling, symbolic, and totemic image of this period.

*Image 4. President Sisi, King Salman, and President Trump hold Orb (Saudi Press Agency, 2017)*

Muslim leaders are seen in the background, but Trump, Sisi, and King Salman are chosen to hold the orb, signalling a new "glowing" period of renewal and peace. It is unsurprising, however, that many people reacted to the image nervously. There is something sinister about the photograph: Trump's pomposity, King Salman's slightly confused and wizened gaze, Sisi's portly and cheery smile stands in stark contrast to his oppressive human rights record.

Commentators compared the picture to everything from the evil wizard Saruman from Lord of the Rings (Klaas, 2017) to Shakespeare's three witches from the play Macbeth (Kristol,

2017). This picture was taken to mark the opening of the Global Centre for Combating

Extremist Ideology in Riyadh. The centre was heralded as representing "a clear declaration

that Muslim-majority countries must take the lead in combatting radicalization" in "this

central part of the Islamic World" (CNN, 2017). This is another example of Trump's

underscoring of Saudi Arabia's religious legitimacy, and their rightful position as Custodian

of the Two Holy Mosques and leader of the Islamic World. Melania Trump, the First Lady, is

in the picture – her inclusion perhaps due to Mohammed bin Salman's commitment to

"modernising the image" of Saudi Arabia, as a further tool of international legitimation.


Researchers can add this to a list of examples from 2017 and 2018 that equate to Trump

acting as a sectarian actor, deepening animosity with Tehran and the wider Axis of

Resistance. Trump began his speech at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit with a statement

that solidified his commitment to Saudi Arabia as "their guys" in the Middle East, in the goal

of fighting "evil" and "terrorism" emanating from the Islamic Republic. He proclaimed:

"I stand before you as a representative of the American People, to deliver a message of
friendship and hope. That is why I chose to make my first foreign visit a trip to the heart of
the Muslim world, to the nation that serves as custodian of the two holiest sites in the Islamic
Faith" (CNN, 2017).

Trump began to use the anti-Iranian stance as a rallying cry, leaning to a preference on

unifying imagery and discourse. Visually, the President standing in front of 50 flags

representing Muslim majority countries, whose leaders sat watching in the audience,

represented a bulwark of American-Sunni unity against the "pernicious figures" of Iran,

Hezbollah, Assad, and the Houthis. Images 4, 5, and 6 portray this new united front against

the Axis of Resistance. In his speech, Trump spoke of his desire for "peace, security, and

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prosperity" in the region. The main way of achieving this was to combat terrorism and for all

nations present "to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the

Iranian people have the just and righteous government they deserve" (CNN, 2017). Speaking

directly to those Muslim leaders in attendance, Trump opined:

"And so this historic and unprecedented gathering of leaders—unique in the history of
nations—is a symbol to the world of our shared resolve and our mutual respect. To the
leaders and citizens of every country assembled here today, I want you to know that the
United States is eager to form closer bonds of friendship, security, culture and commerce"
(CNN, 2017).



*Image 5. President Trump sits in front of 50 Muslim flags (Ernst, 2017a)*

*Image 6. Trump speaks at Riyadh Conference (Associated Press, 2017)*



*Image 7. Muslim leaders watch Trump's speech (Egyptian President Office, 2017)*
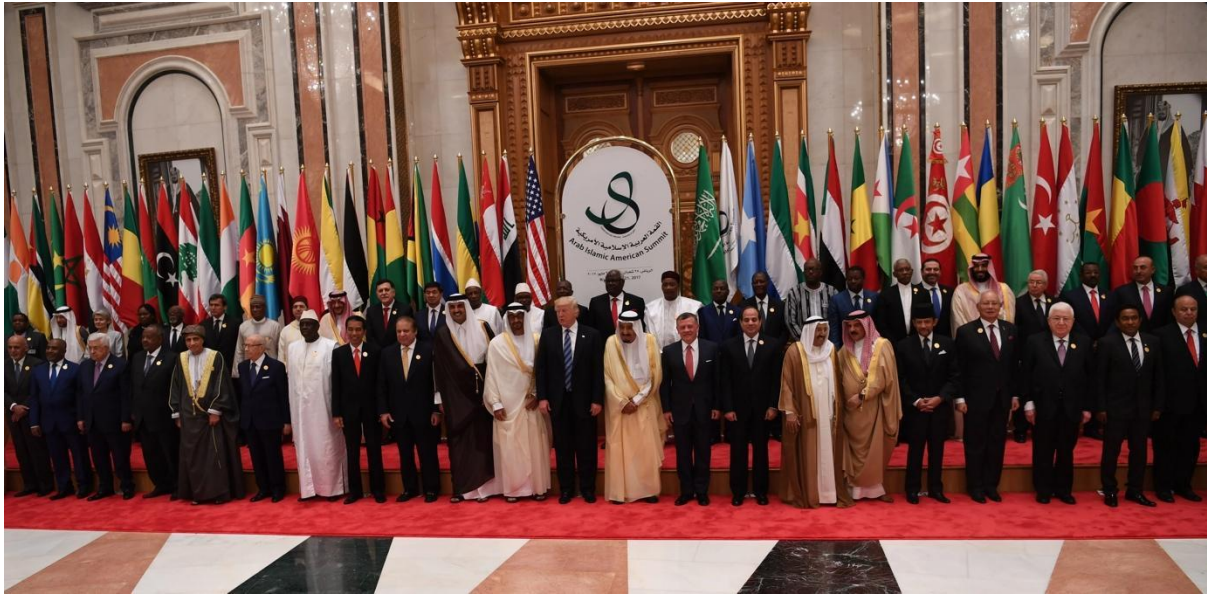
*Image 8. Trump stands with Muslim World Leaders (Ghanaim, 2017)*

Iranian President Rouhani responded by referring to the conference as "just a show with no practical or political value of any kind" (VOA News, 2017). Referring to the centre, and Saudi efforts to combat terrorism, he said "you can't just solve terrorism by giving your people's money to a superpower" (VOA News, 2017).

Image 9. shows Trump posing with Saudi leaders in traditional *thawbs,* carrying swords, and participating in a traditional *ardah*. Understanding the power of ethno-religious populism, the efficacy of Trump's involvement here was understood by both Washington and Riyadh. It was an attempt to ingratiate him with the people of the Gulf, and soften the resentment felt by many Gulf leaders towards the Obama administration. After conducting a discourse analysis of news reports from three major Arab news sources (Al Ahram, Al Arabiya, and Al Jazeera), Al Saud and Al Mahlouly concluded that, "there is… reason to believe that Donald Trump's

approach to national identity and political communication impacted on some of the

politically–driven ethnic and sectarian conflicts that occur in… the Middle East" (2018, 1).



*Image 9. Trump performs in an ardah (Ernst, 2017b)*

Mahasneh and Bashayreh's study of visual data refers to a meme, which captioned Image 9.

with the statement, "When your white friend smokes dokha for the [first] time thinks he is

arab" (Mahasneh and Bashayreh, 2021, 40). The implication behind this is that Trump sought

to adopt cultural norms, to artificially ingratiate himself to the Saudis. Mahasneh and

Bashayreh argue that "Trump behaves like Saudis and gets what he wants easily" (2021, 40).

Through etiquette and custom, Trump attempted to endear himself to the Arab World, and

legitimise his deepening relationship with Riyadh. This relationship was deemed essential for Washington's foreign policy, as well as their economic and energy concerns in the region.

Contrary to the popular view that Trump was simply attending this conference to realise self-interested realist ambitions, this chapter understands his visit as deeply beneficial to the Saudis. It had been a convention of many Middle East scholars to see the US as the prime mover in the region. In this case, the picture is more complicated, as Saudi Arabia demonstrated significant agency and manipulation to achieve legitimisation for its own geostrategic ambitions and military activities in Arabia Felix. The two worked together, with their own specific yet aligned ambitions, facilitated and legitimised through performative visuality and propaganda.

One picture that encapsulates the idea that Riyadh is itself a prime mover, using the US to realise its own geopolitical ambitions, is Image 10. The image shows President Trump bending down, to receive a medal from King Salman. The subservient figure cut by Trump tells viewers something important about Riyadh's careful co-optation of the President, to ensure he provides full support for their efforts. It is important to remember that the $400billion deal with Washington was crucial to Saudi Arabia's war effort, but also to Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030, to enhance infrastructure and diversify the economy away from a heavy reliance on hydrocarbons.

*Image 10. King Salman gives Trump a medal (Vucci, 2017)*

## *Conclusion - What this meant for Yemen*

A renewed vigour for American commitment to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen meant that the humanitarian crisis would see no immediate end. Weapons systems were renewed and improved, and Saudi utilised them to devastating effect over the subsequent years. Support for the blockade was also revitalised, meaning fuel, food, and aid imports faced many years of more disruption. Perhaps most significantly, this period amounted to the cultivation of a conspiracy mindset that blamed Iran entirely for Yemen's problems, thus legitimising Saudi efforts, and severely undermining the alleged war crimes committed by the Kingdom. This grand narrative can be described as alienating sectarianisation, adopted by both Riyadh and Washington. Their intervention was framed as a necessary defensive response to a pernicious Iranian-backed terrorist group, said to be threatening not only the ontological security and

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territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia, but also the region at large. This benefited Trump, as it enabled him to continue his arms deals with Riyadh, which he deemed essential for his economic and security policies in the region. The fact that the conference, and Trump's behaviour and discourse, were ridiculed by a wide Arab audience (Mahasneh and Bashayreh, 2021), mattered little. The main intention of this conference was to renew strong ties between the Kingdom and Washington, facilitate further mutual investment, and to gain physical and material support for Riyadh's efforts in Yemen. On all these fronts, the conference achieved its aims.

Trump's discourse from his speech at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit confirmed that Riyadh had been successful in its attempt to securitise the Houthi threat and implant this framing into Trump's psyche. Speaking to the "absolute duty to ensure that terrorists find no sanctuary on their soil", Trump praised the Saudi-led coalition, stating: "Saudi Arabia and a regional coalition have taken strong action against Houthi militants in Yemen" (CNN, 2017). Through digital media, the Al Saud had continuously repeated the same lines of justification for over two years. The Riyadh Conference confirmed their complete integration within the Trumpean mindset. In turn, digital media was used to spread this message to the world. All of this speaks to this thesis' central research question, aiming to show the ways in which Riyadh (and Tehran) legitimised their role in Yemen through the Internet, digital media, and social media.

# Chapter Nine
## *2017-2018 – IUVM – Visual Propaganda through Iranian Memes*

This chapter analyses Iranian visual propaganda, focusing on images that were created between 2017-2018. The focus on this time period is intentional. Firstly, it represented a peak in Iranian propaganda surrounding the war in Yemen, capitalising on notable atrocities such as the Saudi bombing of a school bus on 9th August 2018. Secondly, it constituted an era of increased Iranian anxiety, due to Trump's threats to withdraw from the JCPOA and his final withdrawal on 8th May 2018. Thirdly, the time period was chosen because the analysis focuses specifically on the IUVM platform. IUVM was uncovered in 2018. The DFRLab indicated that, "[a] cluster of websites known as IUVM (International Union of Virtual Media) appears to have been laundering Iranian state messaging by claiming it as their own and passing it on to other users, who reproduce it without showing its ultimate origin" (Nimmo, 2018). The chapter analyses the key frames present within IUVM propaganda, detailing the visceral character of Iranian securitisation processes in Yemen. It goes on to argue that whilst IUVM contributed to Saudi anxiety and heightened tension, ultimately the images were unsuccessful in reaching and affecting any significant international audience.

Nevertheless, due to its specifically visual nature, the study of the IUVM platform has a crucial role in answering this thesis' central research question. Not only is it visually elaborate, but the use of websites shows Tehran's awareness of Internet policy. The existence of these now largely defunct websites signals Tehran's intention to target specific audiences and attempt to avoid punishment and removal by Internet regulation. As Stubbs and Bing

(2018) write: "the Iranian campaign's backbone of websites makes it harder to dismantle than social media, because taking down a website often requires the cooperation of law enforcement, Internet service providers and web infrastructure companies".

This chapter analyses 52 pictures drawn from the "copycat" Twitter page "IUVM Pixel EN". These are detailed in Table 6. below. The original sources of these images range from original IUVM websites to IRIB-controlled *Fars TV* and *Press TV*, to American left-wing platforms, to more difficult to identify supposed "lone-ranger" pro-Iranian Facebook and Twitter pages. Articles and pictures were regularly posted within hours of appearing on Iranian state media websites, or on the Ayatollah's websites and social media accounts. Others, many of which appeared in 2018, were recycled from original 2017 articles across the IRIB nexus. IUVM "laundered content from Iranian state media, lending it an air of credibility by stripping the affiliation, thereby enabling it to be passed to less discerning readers as (ostensibly) credible" (Brookie and Robertson, 2020).

Unlike linguistic discourse, often in long article format, instances of visual propaganda are best analysed in their entirety. The subsequent sections analyse a number of images shared by this pro-Iranian Twitter account. As well as estimating their origination date, the analysis will demonstrate and explore the key frames, and situate them within the specific temporal context of the Yemen conflict. Below is Table 6, containing the most prominent frames, and how often they appeared across the 52 images collected. Most of the images contained more than one frame. Following the table, are several examples from the 4 most popular tropes. For

ease, some of the frames have been amalgamated. The four categories have been simplified

to: Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, and King Salman; United States and Weapons

Sales; Israel; and War Crimes and Dead and Dying Children. Step 2 analyses the production,

distribution, and consumption of this content. Step 3 analyses these four key categories in

turn, detailing the events on the ground to which they refer, and analysing the validity of their

claims. Together, the frames attempted to construct Saudi Arabia as posing an acute threat to

the people of Yemen and to the ontological security of minority groups across the region.

Step 4 discusses the most significant omissions across this dataset, concluding that Iran used

this propaganda to disguise its own nefarious role in Yemen and the region more broadly.


A majority of this content contained "caricatured", "cartoonish", pictures. Across the Iranian

propaganda nexus, anti-Saudi, anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli, and anti-Western tropes were

consistently utilised. Solely considering images specifically speaking to the war in Yemen,

the focus on alienating propaganda was particularly acute. Across the 52 images considered,

only one offers explicit support to the Houthis. It is significant that as Iranian physical

support for the Houthis increased, rhetorical support decreased in many areas. Iran's tactic

was to focus most of its time highlighting and hyper-focusing on Saudi war crimes, and

alleged US, UK, and Israeli complicity, as well as perceived incompetence from the UN.

Many of the images contain caricatured images of the leaders of these states, from

representing King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman as cannibalistic baby eaters, to

representing Donald Trump as a missile-riding war criminal. There is no mention of shared

Shi'a identity across this dataset. Solidarity-based religious discourse, as a tool of unifying sectarianisation, is significant due to its absence.

This chapter will follow the visual methodology outlined earlier in the thesis. There are four steps to this thesis' process of VDT: visual design (the image's actualities), visual explanation (production, distribution, consumption), visual explanation (context, themes, and social practices), and visual omission (what is missing and why?).

For the purposes of tracing the "securitisation" process, it is important to consider the audience. The images considered all appeared in an English-language format, and so had an international reach. As stated in the *Atlantic Council* report reference in the earlier chapter on Iranian propaganda (Brooking and Kianpour, 2020), the Iranian nexus aims to continually spread and reinforce an anti-Western narrative, that posits the Islamic Republic as the moral leader of the Middle East and Islamic World. The most prominent target audiences are oppressed groups and Shi'a groups within the region. However, there are reports suggesting that Tehran targets left-leaning groups throughout the world, further evidenced by their attempts to co-opt Black Lives Matter pages on Facebook in 2019 (Brooking and Kianpour, 2020, 20). The *Atlantic Council* report found from a study nefarious Iranian activity on Facebook in 2018, that: "many of the pages involved posted content regarding the 2018 US midterm elections, mostly targeting left or left-leaning audiences that would be predisposed to agree with some narratives of the United States as an imperial power" (Brooking and Kianpour, 2020, 25).

The Iranian ambition is to use the war in Yemen to portray itself as the antithesis of Saudi brutality and divert the gaze of human rights activists and progressive groups away from its own human rights abuses. In this sense, it securitises the threat of the Saudi-led coalition within the mindsets of these groups, focusing their attention on condemnation of Riyadh, in turn benefiting Tehran.

The International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM) was a vast network of nefarious websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts, which were connected to a central primary website - "iuvm.org". On this site, several principles and objectives were listed in broken English, including: "confronting with remarkable arrogance, western governments and Zionism front activities to correct the deflection of people movements in the world", "encouraging resistance activists around the world for acting and networking in cyberspace", and "explaining the importance of Palestine and Quds issue to Internet audience" (IUVM.org, 2018). The use of "arrogance" here is telling, considering it is a central trope of Ayatollah Khamenei, made famous in a 2009 essay on "global arrogance" (Khamenei, 2009). Whilst clear attribution is difficult, "the Tehran location and the geopolitical stance point to this as an Iranian pro-regime operation. The reproduction of Khamenei's rhetoric, including the key catchphrase "global arrogance," suggest it is regime-linked, not merely sympathetic" (Nimmo, 2018).

Visuality is central to IUVM. They had an entire website dedicated to images and cartoons – IUVMPixel. These images can still be found in many dark corners of the Internet. They have been backdated to establish when they first appeared. The Iranian propaganda nexus clearly has realised that images of death and destruction serve as powerful tools in establishing opposition, leveraging criticism, and engendering outrage. A high percentage of the images in this chapter contained such imagery.

The platform appeared as early as 2012, but it took until 2018, when FireEye and Twitter published their reports on Iranian internet propaganda, for it to be detected. In August 2018, Twitter removed "more than 1 million IUVM-associated posts" (Somerville, 2020). Tehran labelled its connection to IUVM, and reports of an Iranian digital influence campaign moreover, as "ridiculous" (Haaretz, 2018). The location, employees, and funders of the websites are intentionally opaque, so as to make attribution difficult for Iran's enemies.

Some 71 websites were uncovered by Jack Stubbs and Chris Bing (2018), that shared pro-Iranian propaganda, and either contained "stories, videos and cartoons supplied by… IUVM", or "have shared online registration details with IUVM, such as addresses and phone numbers". A total of 21 of the websites do both. Ten of the websites specifically targeted Yemeni readers, such as the misspelt, self-styled "Yemen Press Agecny". Unfortunately for this thesis, these websites have now been entirely removed from the Internet by the FBI. Nevertheless, the fact of their previous existence tells researchers that Tehran was nefariously targeting specific countries, audiences, and minority groups in the region.

When Stubbs and Bing attempted to contact the websites themselves, emails bounced back, and telephone numbers proved bogus. As ever, clear attribution to Tehran is difficult, so researchers have to rely largely on the content of the discourse. Without exception, IUVM and its wider nexus of connected websites, spoke to IUVM's central objectives. These directly mirror those of the IRGC and the Islamic Republic. As the Graphika report "Iran's IUVM Turns to Coronavirus" stated: "its geopolitical approach has consistently reflected that of the Iranian government: it is pro-Iranian and pro-Palestinian, while taking every opportunity to criticize Saudi Arabia, the United States, Israel and the Saudi-led war in Yemen" (Nimmo et al., 2020).

Attribution is also difficult when attempting to analyse IUVM's connected social media accounts, found most prominently on Twitter. As many of the websites that produced this kind of imagery have now been deleted by the FBI, definitive time placement has proved challenging. However, due to the contextually satirical nature of many of the images, it has been possible to ascertain the year of each picture. Largely, the findings correspond with Kiebling et al.'s findings on Iran's Twitter-based propaganda activities: "[t]he data shows the highest activity in a time interval between May and August 2017" (2020, 188). The year 2017 was crucial not only within the Yemen conflict, but within the NMECW more broadly. Speaking to both of these dynamics, it is telling that this spike occurred as an Iranian response to "President Trump conduct[ing] his first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia" (Kiebling

et al., 2020, 188). Whilst the earliest remaining examples of many of the images are dated as 2018, they can be readily understood as responding to the events spanning 2017-2018.

The only account that still exists is a small (41 followers), likely "copycat", account entitled IUVM pixel EN (handle – ENIUVMPIXLE), which was active between May and October 2018. The Twitter account posted hundreds of images during this short period, many of which were recycled from official IUVM websites. Using the Reverse Image Search engine "TinEye.com", it has been possible to establish an idea of when these images first appeared. This process is important, in order to place the visual propaganda within the particular context of the Yemen conflict. It also shows their presence across the wider IUVM network, proving their audiences were wider than this lone ranger account suggests. Whilst larger, the reach was still limited to specific, niche audiences. However, the presence of the Iranian counter-narrative, prevalent across digital media, may well have contributed to Saudi unease in Yemen.

*9.1 Step 1: Visual Design*

| Frame | Number of appearances |
|---|---|
| Saudi Arabia | 44 |
| United States | 18 |
| United Kingdom | 6 |
| Israel | 10 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Anti-Semitism | 3 |
| War Crimes | 39 |
| Weapons Sales | 11 |
| Dead/dying children | 30 |
| United Nations/International Community | 12 |
| Sunni Coalition | 2 |
| Mohammed bin Salman/King Salman/King Abdullah | 20 |
| Oil | 4 |
| Saudi funds terrorists | 2 |
| Iranian solidarity with Houthis | 2 |

*Table 6. IUVM - key frames regarding Yemen 2017-2018*

*Image 11. IUVM – Mohammed bin Salman drops bombs (IUVM pixel EN, 2018A)*

Posted by IUVM pixel EN on 30th June 2018:

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1013108947404951552 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018A).

Caption: "The only good Wahhabi is a dead Wahhabi. #yemen #YemenWarCup #YemenGenocide #saveyemen" (IUVM pixel EN, 2018A).

(Picture tag suggests 2017 origin date).
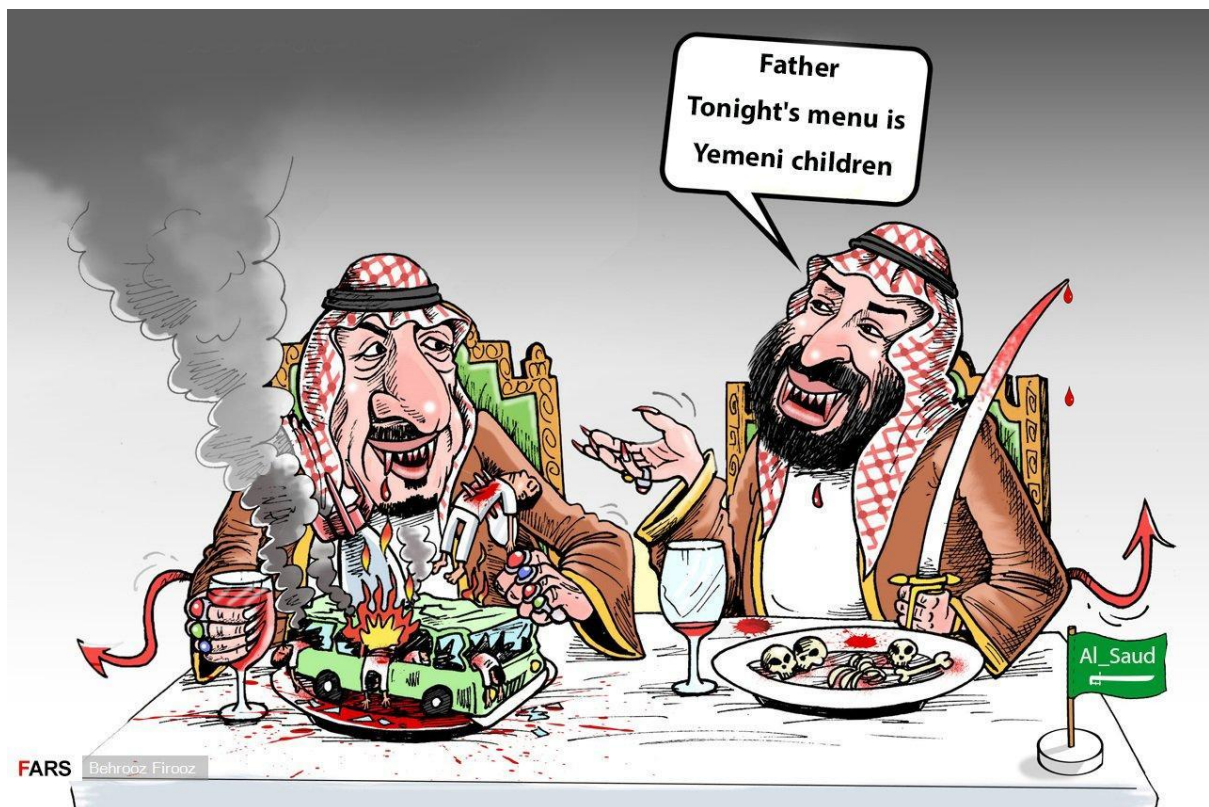
*Image 12. IUVM – King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman as Devils (IUVM pixel EN, 2018B)*

Origin: circa 13th August 2018 (Posted by IUVM pixel EN on this date).

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1028917389549875200 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018B).

*United States and Weapons Sales*

*Image 13. IUVM – Trump announces Arms Deal (IUVM pixel EN, 2018C)*

16<sup>th</sup> July 2018:

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1018816180348506114 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018C).

(Picture Stamp indicates 2017 origin date).

*Image 14. IUVM - Trump rides a Missile (IUVM pixel EN, 2018D)*

Origin: August 2017 (Stubbs and Bing, 2018).

IUVM pixel EN posted on 16th August 2018:

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1029971483026710529 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018D).

*Image 15. IUVM – Trump steps over Bombed School Bus (IUVM pixel EN, 2018E)*

Origin: 26th August 2018 (Nimmo, 2018):

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1033678258288713728 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018E).

*Image 16. IUVM – Trump and King Salman watch 9/11 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018F)*

Origin: 15th September 2018.

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1040876285864697856 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018F).

Caption: "Less than two decades after the attacks of September 11, the U.S. government has now effectively allied with the Al Qaeda terrorist group it has long blamed for planning and executing those attacks" (IUVM pixel EN, 2018F).

*Image 17. IUVM - American Eagle snatches Yemeni child (IUVM pixel EN, 2018G)*

Origin: 6<sup>th</sup> October 2018.

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1048521609408143360 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018G).

*Image 18. IUVM - King Salman cooks Yemeni children for Western Actors (IUVM pixel EN, 2018H)*

Origin: 5<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

Although access is blocked to the website, this date was attributed on www.mashpedia.com, under the "Al Alam News Network" banner. This was established via the Tin Eye reverse-image search function (Tin Eye, 2022a).

Posted on IUVM: 16<sup>th</sup> July 2018.

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1018814157762826240 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018H).
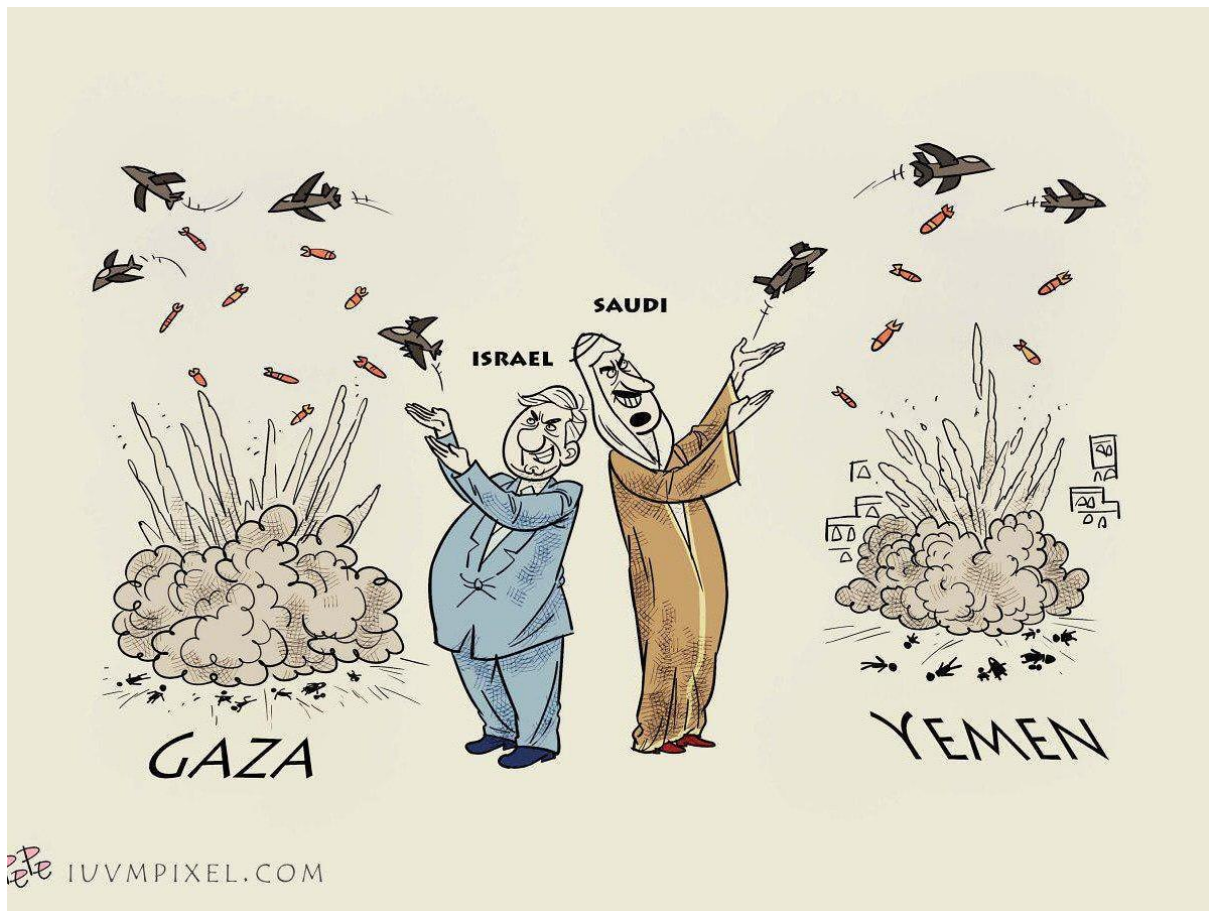
*Image 19. IUVM - Palestine and Yemen bombed by Israel and Saudi Arabia (IUVM pixel EN, 2018I)*

Origin: 22nd July 2018.

*Image 20. IUVM - Netanyahu and Mohammed bin Salman bomb civilians (IUVM pixel EN, 2018J)*

Origin: 14th August 2018.

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1029281818535763969 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018J).

*Image 21. IUVM - Representation of alleged hypocrisy of Saudi Aid to Yemen (IUVM pixel EN, 2018K)*

Origin: 4<sup>th</sup> August 2018.

Although access to the website is banned, the picture has been backdated to the Al Quds Network. This was done using Tin Eye (Tin Eye, 2022b).

Posted by IUVM pixel EN on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2018:

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1029958959145345024 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018K).

Caption: "The war on #Yemen and #UN claimed humanitarian supporting in a picture!" (IUVM pixel EN, 2018K).

*Image 22. IUVM – The School Bus (IUVM pixel EN, 2018L)*

Origin: 26th August 2018.

https://twitter.com/ENIUVMPixle/status/1033679881731756034 (IUVM pixel EN, 2018L).

*Image 23. IUVM – US, UK, and France fuel Saudi War Machine (IUVM pixel EN, 2018M)*

Origin: 26th September 2018.

Tin Eye recorded its first appearance on 26/09/2018 (Tin Eye, 2022c).

Posted by IUVM pixel EN on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2018:

(IUVM pixel EN, 2018M).

*9.2 Step 2: Visual Interpretation*

*Production – the Origins of IUVM*

It cannot be proved to the highest level of certainty that IUVM is run by the Islamic Republic, the IRIB, or the IRGC. This is because Iran has been sophisticated in its endeavours to avoid detection. As noted, it is almost impossible to speak to anybody connected to the platform. Many of the "employees" simply do not exist, and email addresses and phone numbers are bogus. A journalist from Iran Watch did manage to have a conversation with an unnamed source, who worked for IUVM. This source, who was seeking to remove themselves from the grip of the Islamic Republic, claimed that IUVM was a state propaganda apparatus.

Even without concrete proof, or the existence of anyone who is willing to go on record, it is clear that many of the images shared by IUVM websites and social media accounts help further the Iranian cause, and copy many of Khamenei's key tropes. When it comes to attribution across digital media, Marc Owen Jones's method is of primary utility. As he put it, by observing who these platforms target,

[W]hat they talk about, and when they take action, we might be able to determine who is behind them' – '[t]o do this we must first document and uncover deception operations, and then determine who is responsible, how they work, and on what scale they operate. We can do this by examining the discursive, tactical and strategic qualities of deceptive content (Jones, 2022, 11).

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Evidently, this particular Twitter account is an apparently small and now inactive offshoot of IUVM. Nevertheless, this page contains the earliest remaining instances of many of the pictures included in the examples section above. If the original IUVM websites had not been taken down by the FBI, and could still be accessed, it is highly likely that the date of posting would be around the same date of IUVM Pixle ENG's posts. This is the way the platform worked across the board, aiming to spread propaganda as widely as possible. This makes it likely that this account was a part of the wider IUVM nexus. Thus, while "the identity of their operators is not clear… given their content, use of language and emphasis on Iranian state messaging, they should definitely be regarded as a pro-regime network and may well be regime-linked" (Nimmo, 2018).

Helpfully, many of the images are "tagged" with the name of various different news platforms. These include *Fars TV* and *Mint Press News*. The former is an IRIB-controlled, Iranian state media channel. *Mint Press News* is generally regarded as a nefarious and conspiratorial platform. Rudolph and Morley describe it as a leftist "Minnesota-based website… that either criticizes the foreign policies of Israel, Saudi Arabia, or the United States or sympathizes with the ruling regimes of Iran or Syria" (Rudolph and Morley, 2020, 42)

Other pictures are tagged with "IUVM" or "IUVM Pixel". All sources amount to pro-Tehran sentiment. Whilst individuals responsible for IUVM cannot be named, nor can it be proven that Iranian officials actually produced these cartoons, the images can nevertheless be

understood as instances of Iranian state propaganda. IUVM played a key role in spreading the IRIB's message more broadly, whilst protecting the content from easy attribution and removal. In the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) 2020 affidavit calling for the removal of Iranian propaganda networks, the Bureau wrote that: "IUVM regularly tweaked and republished official Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting ("IRIB") stories, only to have its articles republished, in turn, by other Iranian propaganda mills" (FBI, 2020). Although the evidence has not been transparently provided, it is worth noting that the FBI's final reason for sanctioning IUVM was due to it allegedly "being controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps" (Swanbeck, 2021).

The US Office of Foreign Assets Control statement, that finally blocked IUVM content, read: "INTERNATIONAL UNION OF VIRTUAL MEDIA (a.k.a. IUVM), Iran; Additional Sanctions Information - Subject to Secondary Sanctions [ELECTION-EO13848] (Linked To: ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS (IRGC)-QODS FORCE)" (OFAC, 2020).

*Distribution – who was IUVM targeting?*
The lack of existing IUVM accounts makes it difficult to ascertain how, and to whom, this content was distributed. Thankfully, previous researchers have pointed to the fact that IUVM and IUVM-affiliated websites appeared in a variety of different languages. English-language sites, Twitter accounts, and Facebook pages were by far the most visited platforms. Arabic, Farsi, and French language versions also featured prominently across the IUVM platform. In an interview with the *Atlantic Council*, Suzanne Kianpour said that "Iran's ultimate goal is to

spread its influence as far and wide as possible" (Atlantic Council, 2020). The fact that Reuters uncovered a vast network of websites, specifically targeting audiences in particular countries, compounded this point (Stubbs and Bing, 2018).

The IUVM nexus worked as something of a "clearing house for pro-regime content" (Nimmo, 2018). Distinguishing it entirely from other IRIB platforms is difficult, as much of its content is taken from IRIB sites such as *Press TV* and *Fars TV*. IUVM worked as an integral part of a wider Iranian propaganda nexus that sought to sow discord, undermine Saudi Arabia on the regional and international stage, and undermine the legitimacy of Western actors. Spikes in propaganda output happened opportunistically, seizing on Saudi atrocities in Yemen and other instances perceived as tarnishing Saudi legitimacy. This is why researchers observe the most significant spikes to have been in the summer of 2015, the summer of 2017, and 2018 (Atlantic Council, 2020). Respectively, these coincide with the beginning of the Yemen conflict, the Riyadh Conference involving the visit of Donald Trump, and a period of intense Saudi shelling (destroying a school bus and a wedding) that narrowly preceded the murder of Jamal Khashoggi on 2nd October 2018. This is supported by Kiebling et al.'s (2020, 182) contention that "[t]he propaganda activity on Saudi Arabia was especially distinctive during specific time intervals, correlating with political events".

*Consumption – which audiences responded to IUVM content?*

This specific copycat Twitter account (ENIUVMPixle) currently has a tiny, 42 "followers". Most of the images discussed have no comments or likes, and no more than a handful. The actual dynamics of this specific account are not important, however. What is crucial is that they contain images that were once circulated by a whole array of IUVM accounts. It is one of the only remaining fingerprints of the platform from this period, that contains the "IUVM" handle. Previous IUVM and other IRIB Twitter accounts had larger followings, but nothing in comparison to some of the Saudi networks. The most popular English-language Tweet from an Iranian account removed by Twitter in 2018 due to its "affiliation with the Iranian state" received 327 retweets (Kiebling et al., 2020). Whilst not insignificant, this equates to minor popularity in the Twittersphere. Whilst various research on IRIB efforts on Twitter, Facebook, and IUVM-websites, concurs that Iranian propaganda has not had a significant impact on international discourse, this was never Tehran's aim to begin with. As a minority, anti-American, regional voice, their intention was more modest. Defined as a Perception Information Operation, the IUVM network fits into the broader conceptualization of Iranian digital warfare. Iranian platforms such as IUVM gained their power and effect "from being perceived as efficient and dangerous operations that could pollute the public sphere of overseas nations, rather than through actual infiltration through engagement" (Elswah and Alimardani, 2021, 163).

The fact that IUVM put so much effort into its English-language platforms is worth noting. The Islamic Republic has been aware of the potential sympathy of international leftist figures

from the build-up to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Utilising the learnt utility of anti-American, anti-Saudi, anti-Israeli, and anti-colonial visual narratives, IUVM "utilized far-left grievances… to appeal to a wide global audience and foment anti-Western sentiment" (Citrinowicz and Ben-Am, 2022, 14).

*Mint Press News'* status as an American far-left organisation, and its continual production of IUVM-style content, which in turn was shared by IUVM during 2017-2018, suggests that this process was working. However, this is a niche audience. In terms of international securitisation, achieving alignment with conspiratorial far-left organisations in the US counts as a poor return on a sizable investment. The fact they had to pander to such groups evidences the limited effectiveness of Iranian securitisation.

However, anti-war, and humanitarian organisations have focused their attention on criticising Saudi Arabia for the war in Yemen. Although this cannot reliably be connected to the success of Iranian propaganda, such an outcome was a key intention of the Iranian regime. They wanted to push their own human rights abuses in Syria to the back of these institutions' minds and bring full attention and chastisement upon their core regional adversary in Riyadh. In turn, this brought criticism to international Western actors supplying the Saudis with weapons. Emmerson Brooking summed up this process: "the real intent of these Iranian influence operations is to put out that counter narrative. One that sees Iran as resisting the forces of neocolonialism, one that sees Iran as an alternative religious and Islamic pole in the

Middle East, and one that specifically sees Iran as the leader of the anti-US resistance"
(Atlantic Council, 2020).

## *9.3 Step 3: Visual Explanation*

This chapter situates each prominent frame from IUVM within the context of the Yemeni

conflict in 2017-18. The chapter also analyses the use of each frame through the lenses of

Iranian rational interest and securitisation imperatives. It analyses the particular impact of

each image type within the context of the NMECW. The validity, or "truth", of each frame is

also assessed. It is the contention of this chapter that IUVM worked as an arm of Tehran's

propaganda nexus, attempting to discredit, alienate, and undermine Riyadh in the

international arena of social media. Many of the images touched on small aspects of truth, but

greatly accentuated and satirised Saudi violence, tying it to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

*Image 11. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018A)*



*Image 12. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018B)*

Image 11. does not refer explicitly to any particular instance of Saudi violence, but instead refers more generally to the Yemeni children killed by Saudi airstrikes. The main point of the picture is to challenge Mohammed bin Salman's vision of a "reformed", "modern" Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030 best encapsulates Mohammed bin Salman's attempt to modernise the Kingdom. His reform of social norms is a significant part of this, including allowing women to drive, opening cinemas and hosting concerts, and his continuous process of sportswashing. Sportswashing here is defined as "the way attention is routed away from… moral violation… through sport" (Fruh et al., 2022, 3). Image 11. points to the irony that this campaign has coincided with the military campaign in Yemen, which has left so many children starving, malnourished, and dead.

The fact that Mohammed bin Salman' face, tagged with the word "REFORMA", is on a mask, held in front of King Salman's face is key. It constructs the idea that the Saudi efforts to "reform" amount to a face-value propaganda exercise to distract from its humanitarian abuses in Yemen. There is some validity to this claim. Vision 2030 is not entirely a propaganda exercise – Riyadh needs to diversify its economy away from an overdependence on fossil fuels, a finite resource that cannot sustain Saudi Arabia long term.

More broadly, however, social reforms and sportswashing have been key to achieving further legitimisation with international Western audiences (Jones, 2022, 199). This has been effective, ensuring that Western governments can focus on these "progressive" steps to detract from the war in Yemen. A pertinent example here is the UK, who had previously criticised Saudi Arabia following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The UK government's reported involvement in the sanctioning of the Saudi Public Investment Fund's purchase of Newcastle United Football Club can be seen as an attempt to smooth over previous misdemeanours (Uddin, 2023), as the Kingdom became increasingly important to the UK economy. The UK Deputy Ambassador to Riyadh, Richard Oppenheim stated "[t]he purchase of Newcastle United by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund would be a valuable boost to the relationship and signal of intent for further Saudi investment in the north east [of England]" (Uddin, 2023). Such measures undermine Saudi actions in Yemen, presenting a more palatable image of the Kingdom to a western audience. This is a particularly novel part of their securitisation process.

The bombs being dropped on a Yemeni child in the background of the picture stand in stark contrast to the speech bubbles containing the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament sign (now commonly understood as a global sign for peace), and the love heart emoji. This picture creates a sophisticated binary opposition between Saudi international discourse, and Saudi regional action. They say they are modernising and opening up; they say they are providing high levels of humanitarian aid to Yemen; but as well as this they are actively destroying civilians and civilian infrastructure in Arabia Felix.

The caption of the picture: "the only good Wahhabi is a dead Wahhabi", injects an explicitly sectarian tone to the image. It counts as an instance of alienating sectarianisation as it attributes these war crimes to the Wahhabi sect of Islam itself, in turn explicitly inciting violence against them. In previous chapters, this thesis has argued that this is a fabricated and untruthful point. Saudi efforts in Yemen can much more convincingly be attributed to realist and neorealist considerations of power, status, economics, and threat perception.

On the 9th of August 2018, a Saudi airstrike destroyed a school bus. At least 40 children were killed, all of whom were under 15 years old, and some under the age of 10 (Borger and Dehghan, 2018). Image 12. appeared at almost exactly the same time (the earliest instance found was on 13th August). The image's visceral content depicts the Al-Saud as devils, feasting on dead children. King Salman in particular is shown eating the school bus itself, filled with children.

The creation and wide distribution of this image equates to an instance of Iranian opportunism. Throughout the Yemen conflict, Tehran has been quick to react to Saudi war crimes. This is evident from their continuous reporting of civilian deaths on *Press TV*, as discussed in the previous chapter. Essentially, these war crimes served to develop a picture of Riyadh as a demonic force in the Middle East. Although not explicitly depicted in the pictures, by opposition, Iran is heralded as the true and just leader of the Islamic World. This is a tactic the Islamic Republic has carefully developed over time, learning from the popular appeal of their efforts supporting Hezbollah in the 2006 war against Israel, as well as their continuous support for Hamas in Palestine.

The Al-Saud are referred to as a capitalistic, materialistic, totalitarian, anti-Islamic, pro-Western, illegitimate regime. Small parts of this particular picture point to this. The bloody fingernails resemble the talons of an eagle, suggesting bloody avarice. Furthermore, the fact that King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman have bejewelled rings on most of their fingers is a symbol of Western decadence. It stands in stark contrast to the modest, dull, outfits of the Ayatollahs. Together, these visual cues infer the supposedly anti-Islamic credentials of the Al-Saud and represent them as posing a bloodthirsty threat to the people of the Middle East.

By far the most significant part of this image is the school bus, as it represents an important visual example of Iran's central propaganda policy regarding the Yemen conflict – to seize upon, and amplify, Saudi misdemeanours as a method of undermining Riyadh's legitimacy. It

points to the factual reality that a Saudi missile destroyed a Yemeni school bus, killing multiple children. But it also twists this in an artificial and alienating way, to represent the Al-Saud as evil, demonic figures.

In summary, these images fit perfectly within the broader conceptualisation of Iran's Yemen propaganda campaign. They took small aspects of truth and twisted them into caricatured and over-exaggerated depictions, portraying Riyadh as bloodthirsty, hypocritical, butchers. These particular images do not contain depictions of Iran itself, nor of the Houthis. Instead, they focus explicitly on alienating sectarianisation to undermine Saudi Arabia. Despite these images refraining from portraying Iran and its leaders, they nevertheless create the understanding that Iran stands in opposition to the amplified negative characteristics of the Al-Saud. Iran stands as a symbol of anti-colonialism, anti-Westernism, minority rights, and resistance; against the construction of the evil "other".

*The United States and Weapons Sales*



Image 13.  (IUVM pixel EN, 2018C)



Image 14. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018D)

Image 15. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018E)



Image 16. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018F)



Image 17. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018G)

The five example images presented run from May-October 2018. This period of the conflict was marked by one of the most intense periods of Saudi shelling, resulting in noted war crimes as described. This period also followed President Trump's visit to Riyadh in May 2017, symbolic of a strengthened relationship that remained between Washington and Riyadh. Significant amounts of content emerged from Tehran condemning this. Trump's

decision to scrap the JCPOA agreement sparked fury in Tehran's, and the IRIB set about propagandising against him.

Image 13. is stamped with "2017", suggesting the image was produced during or shortly after Trump's appearance at the Riyadh Conference in May of that year. The image shows Trump stating "this 'arms' deal will ensure 'peace' in the Middle East". Emphasising the words 'arms' and 'peace' works to create a caricatured sense of flawed American logic. The two ideas stand in contrast, encouraging the viewer to immediately observe their seeming incompatibility. Senior members of the Saudi regime, wearing traditional robes, are seen watching Trump from the front row, below him in the picture. Levels here are important. It shows the prominent, highly raised Trump, towering over the Saudis. This suggests a theme of subservience - an impression that Riyadh is controlled by the US. In doing so, the artist attempts to undermine both the idea of Riyadh as a rational agent, and the idea of Riyadh as the Islamic Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. Here, Saudi Arabia is merely a Western puppet.

Image 14. was fortunately picked up by Reuters in their 2018 article and dated August 2017. They attributed it to one of the 71 websites they connected to the IUVM platform. The specific website was "Sudan Today". Describing the picture, the authors said:

One cartoon published by IUVM… by Sudan Today in August 2017 showed Donald Trump astride a military jet with an overflowing bag of dollar bills tucked under one arm. The jet is draped with traditional Saudi dress and shown dropping bombs on a bloodstained map of Yemen. The map is littered with children's toys and shoes (Stubbs and Bing, 2018).

Here, the trope of Saudi subservience is more visceral. The missile is dressed in Saudi robes, suggesting that war and destruction literally *is* the personality of the Al-Saud. Trump sitting on top denotes high status. He is sitting astride the missile with the "face" of the Saudi war machine face-down in an Uncle Sam hat. This suggests the idea of Saudi blindness to the humanitarian abuses in Yemen. American dollars spill over the Saudis from Trump's bag. The image looks something like a contorted, malicious, rethinking of Father Christmas on his sleigh, dropping bombs on children as opposed to presents, destroying Yemeni children's toys and shoes rather than gifting them to them. Together, Washington and Riyadh are represented as an unruly alliance, pursuing their own self-interests at the expense of the ontological security of the region and the people of Yemen.

Also speaking to this dynamic, the Yemeni school bus appears again, in Image 15. It shows a large missile wedged inside the burning bus, painted with the Saudi flag. Again, Trump appears positioned above the images of the Al-Saud and the human rights abuses in Yemen. He is depicted as a giant, blindly stepping over the burning bus. The earliest source for this image was 26th August 2018, only a few weeks after the school bus was destroyed on 9th August.

This picture is primarily about perceived US-hypocrisy over human rights. Trump's speech bubbles read "sanctions against Russia, Turkey, Iran…" – "except Saudi Arabia!". The stamp shows that the image was originally produced by the American-based left-wing organisation *Mint Press News*. Viewed in total, the spread of this image across the IUVM platform

demonstrates Tehran's focus on amplifying Saudi human rights abuses, as well as perceived American complicity. The tone of the image, showing Trump as a giant, looming, imperialistic presence, suggests that Iran was attempting to appeal to left-wing and human rights organisations to undermine the legitimacy of the Al-Saud in the international arena.

Similarly adorned with a *Mint Press News* stamp, Image 16. shows Trump and the Al-Saud arm-in-arm, watching a plane crash into the Twin Towers, 17 years after the event. The image refers to the idea that the USA is partially responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attack, due to its relationship with Riyadh. This is a particularly venomous attack on an especially sensitive part of the American psyche.

In the image, the Saudi figure (presumably Mohammed bin Salman or King Salman), holds a check-list reading "Libya, Yemen, Syria". A speech bubble reads "show must go on". A central trope across the IUVM and broader IRIB nexus is blaming Riyadh and Washington for all regional, and most international, terrorism. Whilst valid points can be made about America's historical support for the mujahideen in Afghanistan, levelling all of the blame at the doors of the Americans and the Saudis is intentionally misguided. It speaks to an active and intentional campaign of propagandised anti-Westernism and sectarianisation. The West is portrayed as an evil, money-obsessed, enemy of the region. Riyadh is portrayed as theologically and ideologically identical to Al Qaeda. The caption of Image 16. refers to a grand conspiracy theory – that the US and Saudi Arabia are active allies of the terrorist group. It reads:

"Less than two decades after the attacks of September 11, the U.S. government has now effectively allied with the Al Qaeda terrorist group it has long blamed for planning and executing those attacks" (IUVM pixel EN, 2018F).

IUVM seized on this image, and dispersed it widely, to contribute to this conspiratorial narrative. In doing so, Tehran artificially and incorrectly positions itself as a champion of the oppressed, a symbol of left-wing resistance, and as the true face of Islam in the face of Wahhabi terrorism.

Image 17. shows the American bald eagle clutching a bloodied Yemeni child and lifting him out of Yemen. Iran does not simply accuse the USA of complicity, but of active and significant participation in human rights abuses.

Overall, this chapter has demonstrated that Iran used tropes of anti-Westernism, sectarianisation, terrorism, and human rights, to construct a grand narrative of good vs. evil. Whilst IUVM does not refer explicitly to Iranian righteousness across this dataset, it can be inferred by opposition. The period 2017-2018 was key for the Yemen Conflict, for the JCPOA, and for Trump's growing relationship with Riyadh. Understanding anti-Saudi and anti-Western sentiment amongst left-wing audiences, regional minority groups, and humanitarian organisations, IUVM used a series of images to create a vehement chastisement of the two actors. As is commonplace across the IRIB's propaganda nexus, the images take partial truths, and contort them into amplified exaggerations as a means of constructing alienating conspiracy theories. In turn, this securitises the purported threat posed to the people of Yemen by Saudi Arabia and the US to audiences including Shi'a minorities in the

Middle East, left-leaning Western academics, and humanitarian organisations. Their aim was to create a counter-narrative, portraying the Saudi-led coalition as bloodthirsty war criminals; and, in turn, deflect attention away from their own human rights abuses both at home and in regional conflicts.

*Israel and Anti-Semitism*



*Image 18. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018H)*



*Image 19. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018I)*



*Image 20. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018J)*

This chapter argues that IUVM constructed an anti-Semitic, conspiratorial narrative, which connected Israel to Saudi Arabia, and grouped war-crimes in Yemen and Palestine together. Researchers can observe the appeal this would have to domestic, regional, Arab, and certain left-wing international audiences. More than perhaps any other frame, this conspiratorial narrative can be regarded as an Iranian attempt to exaggerate the ontological threat posed by Saudi Arabia to the region at large.

First, is important to clarify the distinction between critique of Israel and anti-Semitism. Image 19. equates to a comparative critique of Israeli and Saudi militarism, showing the two leaders sending planes to bomb Gaza and Yemen respectively. It equates to a critique of human rights abuses by both actors and does not contain anything *explicitly* anti-Semitic. Image 18, on the other hand, depicts Israel with classically anti-Semitic tropes. The character has a sharp, crooked nose, and is portrayed as an anti-Semitic stereotype of a Jewish person. Sitting alongside the UN and US characters, Israel is shown waiting for Saudi Arabia to cook Yemeni children so they can be eaten. Image 20. also implies anti-Semitism, by showing the UN dropping money into a bag behind Israel. It refers to the common anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that Jews control the world's finances and are "money obsessed". As Mell put it, "the assumption of an association between Jews and money remains a dangerous trope, a stereotype disconnected from economic realities" (2022, 213). All three images across this dataset imply that Saudi Arabia and Israel are not only comparable, but in active cooperation to pursue their regime interests through extraordinary measures.

In 2017 and 2018, Israel's involvement in the war in Yemen was negligible, and its relationship with Riyadh minimal. Anti-Semitism in this form is particularly venomous and portrays Jews and Wahhabis as evil in the most extreme of ways. It goes without saying that this is untrue. Anti-Semitism here is added to a broader process of sectarianisation, suggesting that it is Jewish and Wahhabi beliefs that lead to Israel and Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses. It is also meant to delegitimize Wahhabism by associating it with Judaism; suggesting that it is not an authentic expression of Islam. These frames are filled with alienating sectarianisation and anti-Semitism.

Image 20. is particularly interesting as it attacks a key line of the Saudi securitisation process – legitimate action. As mentioned in previous chapters, versions of this phrase dominated Saudi discourse throughout its propaganda at the beginning of the war. This picture compares it directly to the Israeli securitisation narrative of "self-defence". Below these speech bubbles, bombs are seen destroying a Yemeni school-bus and a Palestinian family home respectively. This image is a sophisticated instance of Iranian propaganda, as it is actively responding to, and in turn undermining, a Saudi line of propaganda.

Image 21.   (IUVM pixel EN, 2018K)          Image 22. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018L)



Image 23. (IUVM pixel EN, 2018M)

This frame contains some particularly sophisticated instances of Iranian propaganda, which again attack Saudi lines of securitisation, focus on particular instances of humanitarian rights abuses, and appeal to left-wing and regional sympathies for the idea of anti-Westernism. Furthermore, IUVM understood the specific effectiveness of images of dead and dying children, which produce an immediate emotional response (Seo, 2014). Furthermore, such

imagery works as an effective tool in that it illuminates and heightens the idea of a Saudi-led destruction of Yemen, as, "it has been observed that conflict images often depict children as part of signifying breakdown" (Bouvier and Machin, 2018, 180). All three example images contain visual content denoting the humanitarian costs felt by Yemeni children. Image 21. accuses the UN of being responsible for bombing Yemen; Image 22. refers to the Yemeni school-bus; and Image 23. depicts a Western pipeline supplying a Saudi hydra with weapons to drop on Yemeni children.

Image 22. shows drawn stick-figures of Yemeni children, lying dead within their school-bus. However, it is the writing here that is most significant. It reads,

"look at this bus precisely. There is nothing in it to be considered a threat for Al Saud. Are your school busses dangerous? So why the Saudi regime attacked a buss full of innocent children and murdered 51 of them" (IUVM Pixel EN, 2018I).

This attacks the Saudi's securitisation narrative of "threat". The image shows the children as angels, flying up to heaven. Contrasted with the idea of "threat", it encourages readers to develop a feeling of absurdity about the idea that this term could be applied to innocent children. Riyadh responded to the destruction of the school-bus with terms amounting to "collateral damage", claiming this as a misfire, and that their actual target was legitimate. The image of children, encapsulated by a school-bus, is a universal symbol of innocence. Across the dataset, IUVM continually referred to this war-crime, and used it to amplify the inhumane aspects of the Saudi-led intervention.

Image 21. and Image 23. both refer to Western support for Saudi Arabia. Image 21., in incorrectly blaming the UN for the actual bombing of Yemeni civilians, tries to create an aura of absurdity around its donation of £930million in aid to the country. This critique could more readily and passably applied to Saudi Arabia itself, and the King Salman Centre for Humanitarian Relief; as shown in previous chapters. Whilst the UN can certainly be criticised for the speed and efficacy of its response to the humanitarian disaster, to blame them for the actual bombing is entirely fallacious.

Image 23. shows an oil pipeline adorned with the flags of the US, UK, and France. The pipeline is seemingly pumping weapons one way towards the Saudi headscarf (depicted as a tentacled hydra), and supposedly oil in the other direction. The malnourished child onto which the weapons are being dropped shows the desperate state of the humanitarian situation in Yemen. There is validity to this image – all three of these Western countries are both supplying weapons and receiving oil from the Kingdom, and have provided support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen.

### *9.4 Step 4: Omission*

A key part of VDT is the analysis of what is missing (Abdulmajid, 2019, 29; Walsh, 2022, 14). Through an understanding of what has been omitted, it is possible to better characterise Iranian propaganda. The first step is to simply think about which factors are absent that may shine a negative light on Tehran. These are fairly straightforward: human rights abuses in Syria, human rights abuses at home, covert support for the Houthis, the creation of sectarian

militia in Iraq, and ties with Russia. The absence of unifying sectarianisation is also noted for its absence. Tehran again constructed itself as a pan-Islamic, minority-rights supporting, champion of the oppressed. As mentioned in Chapter Four, this ideational construction has been used to great effect throughout the history of the Islamic Republic. By presenting itself as pan-Islamic, Tehran has been able to present itself as the innocent "saviour", against the "pernicious evils" of Wahhabism.

Another, more sophisticated, tactic is known as "the commutation test", as described by Hansen, "by substituting various elements in your mind's eye… it is possible to build a more nuanced understanding of each to the overall meaning the image and its dependence upon wider cultural codes and myths" (Hansen et al., 1998, 213).

Take for instance the final image discussed above, Image 23. Replace the French, UK, and US flags with a Russian and Iranian flag, change the Saudi hydra to a Syrian hydra, and the Yemeni child to a Syrian child, and you have precisely the same type of factually based and tonally similar critique of Iranian foreign policy.

Crucially, these tools show researchers the hypocrisy at the heart of Iranian propaganda – most of its criticisms of Saudi Arabia in 2017-2018 as regards Yemen, could aptly be applied to Iran in regard to Syria in particular. Via focusing all of its efforts on critiquing Riyadh, the IUVM and the IRIB networks attempted to divert the attention of domestic, regional, and international audiences away from Iran's war-crimes, and onto Saudi war-crimes. It did not

do this by explicitly signalling the virtues of the Iranian regime, nor of the Houthi militia in any discernible way. It did so by focusing on Riyadh, Israel, and the West – all common enemies of many minority and Shi'a groups in the region, as well as left-wing anti-colonial thinkers.

*Conclusion*

Aided by previous research (Stubbs and Bing, 2018; Somerville, 2020; Nimmo et al., 2020), this chapter has argued that IUVM constitutes an instance of regime-backed Iranian propaganda. The platform amounted to a nefarious web of news-sites, Twitter accounts, and Facebook pages that were used as part of an attempt to securitise against Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen, portraying it as unjust to domestic, regional, and international audiences. The fact that Iran seemed to focus so much of its effort on alienating sectarianisation perhaps tells researchers something about the inability to unify its increasingly disillusioned domestic audience behind nationalism and vilayat-e faqih. Instead, they focused on the Saudi 'other', in an attempt to exaggerate the level of threat felt by regional and international audiences. They attempted to securitise against Saudi Arabia, suggesting that they represented a threat to the ontological security of the region, the people of Yemen, and regional minorities.

However, Tehran's primary target audience, from the data consulted, appeared to be on international audiences, through the use of the English language. Their success here was limited to small, niche audiences. As suggested by Brooking and Kianpour (2020), their

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"international audiences" amount to left-leaning academics, progressives, and human rights groups. Seizing upon the opportunity to provide a counter-narrative, Tehran responded to Trump's appearance at the Riyadh Conference, the totemic Saudi destruction of a Yemeni school-bus, and the increasing number of civilian casualties, to undermine the legitimacy of the Al-Saud and the West. In doing so, IUVM attempted to create the conditions for increasing condemnation of Saudi Arabia, via the medium of visceral imagery. Typical of Iran's digital warfare, IUVM took elements of truth and amplified them, contorting them into conspiratorial, demeaning, sectarianised, and anti-Semitic narratives. IUVM was not entirely unsuccessful. Their influence was considered sufficiently impactful for the FBI to remove most of their platforms from the Internet in 2020. At a time of increasing Saudi desperation, US alignment, and Trump's decision to scrap the JCPOA, these approaches were effective in increasing anxiety in the American and Saudi corridors of power. Focusing almost entirely on alienating propaganda and sectarianisation, the emphasis was on diminishing the legitimacy of the Saudi-led intervention. Omitting discussion of Iran and the Houthi's own roles in human rights abuses and terrorism was done tactically to divert the gaze away from the Axis of Resistance and onto Riyadh. The Houthis repaid this favour in 2019, when they claimed responsibility for the attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities in Saudi Arabia.

# Chapter Ten
## *2019 – The Houthis and Iran - Operation Victory from God*

This chapter analyses the Houthi offensive, 'Operation Victory from God'. It characterises it as a period of both physical and discursive aggression. Using DT and VDT, the chapter chronologically traces the development of Houthi discourse throughout 2019. The Houthis broke the mould of tentatively supporting Iran, and largely sharing factual (but artificially applied) information across their media platforms. Between August and September 2019, disinformation formed a core part of their agenda, as they sought to increase Saudi threat perception and feelings of ontological security through generating a fear over military capacity, and connection to Iran. The Houthis realised that the "Iran-backed" prefix to their name in international media, had the effect of advancing their geopolitical ambitions (Porter, 2022). As well as this, they claimed responsibility for the attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais ARAMCO oil facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia, to deepen Saudi anxiety and increase their own bargaining hand in any future peace deal. Riyadh feared Iranian involvement with the rebel group on its border, yet purposefully over-exaggerated their connection to gain support for its intervention. The former consideration explains why "a dynamic of self-fulfilling prophecy can be included as one of the factors explaining the evolving relationship between Iran and the Houthis" (Juneau, 2016, 660). The Houthis were also happy to pay Iran a favour, as the international community rushed to condemn Tehran, following the Islamic Republic formally recognising a Houthi Ambassador.

Ansarallah also learnt from Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm, apparently co-opting the Saudi approach of providing video reports of successful attacks, in official news conferences. Even the structure of the name 'Operation Victory from God' reads like a pastiche of ODS. Ultimately, this period constituted a month of humiliation for Riyadh, which Iran and the Houthis exacerbated by their collaboration. In doing so, the Houthis became partially integrated within the wider Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus, and served to further Iran's securitisation process, even if it was a secondary consideration. In order to examine this phenomenon, this chapter focuses on two key events from Operation Victory from God – the Abqaiq-Khurais Attacks, and the Houthi defeat of coalition forces on 28th September 2019. The chapter uses data from the Houthi-controlled *Al-Masirah*, which also posted articles from the IRIB's *Press TV*, as well as Hezbollah's *Al-Manar*, to support its position. It also conducts a discursive and visual analysis of the Houthi video that showcased their military success over coalition forces on 28th September 2019.

## 10.1 Contextualising Operation Victory from God

Operation Victory from God was a Houthi operation, attacking areas stretching across the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. It is important to note that the Abqaiq-Khurais attack fell within this period. Operation Victory from God ran from 25th August – late September 2019, with the attack on Abqaiq-Khurais falling on 14th September. The fact they claimed the attack on Abqaiq-Khurais as their own, means that they regarded it as part of Operation Victory from God. As regards the ground offensive, Ansarallah focused most of their efforts on the area between Najran and the Jabarra Valley. Taken in its totality, the

operation constituted a period of Houthi aggression and military success. It resulted in significant losses for Riyadh's al-Fatah Brigade and eventual humiliation when hundreds of coalition forces were killed, and thousands captured near the Najran border on 28th September.

## 10.2 The Attack on the Abqaiq and Khurais Oil Facilities

The culprit of the strikes on Abqaiq-Khurais on 14th September 2019 remains contested. Officially, the Houthis claimed responsibility. On the other hand, the US and Saudi Arabia blamed Iran. The publicly available evidence is scant, and researchers are left with more questions than answers. However, the UN published a confidential report on 27th January, which proved that the strikes could not have originated from Yemen. A former U.S. Military Academy professor, Frederick W. Kagan, blamed Iran, advocating for a retaliatory strike from the US on Iran. In October 2019 he wrote that: "The al Houthi's claim to have conducted the attack was part of a skilful information operation intended to divert the Western discussion away from Iran's role and focus it instead on the war in Yemen and on Saudi Arabia's misdeeds" (Kagan, 2019, 2).

The only thing researchers can be entirely certain of is that the weapons-devices used were of Iranian origin and were not fired from Yemen. So, in this sense, Tehran played some role in this attack. The level of involvement is open to question – ranging from accusations of an Iranian launch to Iran advising a proxy to launch, to a simple weapons sale. A UN report,

published on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2019, stated that "it is not clear that Tehran orchestrated an attack on Saudi oil facilities". Reuters released a report on 25<sup>th</sup> November which claimed, based on knowledge provided from confidential inside sources, that "Khamenei approved the operation, but with strict conditions: Iranian forces must avoid hitting any civilians or Americans" (Georgy, 2019). The picture remains opaque. What is clear however is that:

 

a) The weapons were of Iranian origin.

b) The strikes did not originate from Yemen.

c) The strikes came from north of Saudi Arabia.

 

This chapter analyses the Iranian-Houthi narrative around the Abqaiq-Khurais attacks, which consisted of several overlapping narratives. Most significantly was the Houthis' willingness to immediately claim responsibility for the attacks and to protect Iran. This is significant because it shows the Houthis behaving like a loyal "proxy". At the very least, it is demonstrative of deepened ties between the two actors. Secondly, Iranian denial and deflection were crucial within Tehran's securitisation agenda. The overarching frame from the Iranian side here reads something like "We Iranians are not responsible for violent attacks, nor causing regional instability, nor causing any of the problems in Yemen. Why are you (the international community) focusing on us and not Saudi Arabia, who have committed so many human rights abuses in Yemen?". Data from the Houthi news-site *Al-Masirah* shows not only how these two ideas were knit together, but also these two actors. This period

demonstrably proved that Ansarallah had been integrated within the Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus.

Data collected from the Houthis' Al Masirah news platform helps to trace the development of this narrative. Some 31 articles, all falling within a month of the attacks, have been analysed. They were selected due to their explicit mention of the Abqaiq-Khurais assaults, with many repeating, verbatim, previous articles' sentences. Due to the basic nature of the Al Masirah website, it has been impossible to gain exact dates for all of the articles. However, it has been easy to deduce that all of them fell within this 4-week/5-week period due to the content of the articles (the world events they are referring to). Table 7.0 shows the most popular, and some less popular but highly relevant, frames across these articles. Of these 31 articles, 20 were directly sourced from the IRIB-controlled *Press TV* platform. There is one article sourced from the pro-Iranian network *Mehr News*, and one other from Hezbollah's *Al-Manar*. This means that only 9 of the 31 articles were generated by the *Al Masirah* platform itself. Crucially, this shows that the Houthis were working as securitising agents of the Islamic Republic, sharing and supporting their narratives throughout the digital arena.

| Frame | Number of Appearances (*Al-Masirah* 'original') | Number of Appearances (*Al-Manar* TV) | Number of Appearances (*Press TV* Source) | Number of Appearances (*Mehr News* Source) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Houthis claim responsibility | 23 | 0 | 33 | 2 | **58** |
| Deny Iranian involvement | 4 | 1 | 45 | 1 | **51** |
| "Balance of deterrence"/ strikes were | 12 | 0 | 19 | 1 | **32** |

| justified retaliation | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Impact on oil markets | 12 | 0 | 24 | 0 | **36** |
| Threaten West and Saudi Arabia | 3 | 0 | 18 | 2 | **23** |
| Impact on Saudi economy | 6 | 0 | 13 | 0 | **19** |
| Anti-US | 4 | 0 | 23 | 0 | **27** |
| Saudi Arabia is vulnerable /on the backfoot | 2 | 0 | 11 | 0 | **13** |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Replace ARAMCO oil with Iranian oil | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | **3** |
| Hezbollah lend support | 0 | 0 | 8 | 0 | **8** |
| IRGC confirms support | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | **3** |
| "Axis of Resistance " | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | **5** |
| Anti-Mohamme d bin Salman/an ti-Vision 2030 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 | **7** |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Calls to revive JCPOA in pre-Trump format | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | **4** |
| Deaths, War Crimes, and Humanitarian Crisis | 12 | 0 | 6 | 0 | **18** |
| Saudi informants leaking information to Houthis | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | **2** |

*Table 7. Al Masirah reports on the Abqaiq-Khurais Attacks*

On the day of the attacks, Houthi spokesman Yahya Saree appeared on the rebel group's Al Masirah TV to claim responsibility. He said: "[t]hese attacks are our right and we warn the Saudis that our targets will keep expanding… We have the right to strike back in retaliation to the air strikes and targeting of our civilians for the last five years" (Al Jazeera, 2019). A few days later, an *Al-Masirah* article quoted the head of the Houthi air force, Brigadier General Abdullah Al-Jefri, who stated, "[w]e confirm that these operations were carried out from Yemeni territories and by the Yemeni Army and Popular Committees" (Al-Masirah, 2019viii).

The US were quick to blame Iran for the attacks, but the Houthis doubled down. Within the 31 *Al-Masirah* articles in Table 7.0, there were 58 sentences claiming Houthi responsibility for the attack – the most prominent frame across the entire dataset. Not only did they say that they themselves conducted the attacks, but they also denied any Iranian involvement in them. If, as widely evidenced, this was false, then it breaks with Ansarallah's general approach to propaganda. As Hannah Porter wrote: "the majority of stories that one encounters on Houthi platforms, especially in major outlets like *Al-Masirah*, are factual, but are selected and framed to reflect a specific worldview" (2022, 145). The media campaign around the Abqaiq-Khurais attack, by contrast, appears to be a concerted effort to spread pure disinformation, in collaboration with their allies in Tehran.

Yahya Saree's proclamations are repeated across the *Al-Masirah* articles. The speech appears frequently in original articles, and in those copied from *Press TV*. This legitimisation process is markedly similar to that of Adel Al-Jubeir at the time of ODS. The attacks were justified as a necessary, balanced, defensive response. Yahya Saree named the attacks "Balance of Deterrence-2" (Al-Masirah, 2019iii). Classically, the Houthi propaganda style remained focused on discourses that emphasise "the failure or corruption of entities that oppose them and [highlight] their own successes or virtues, or those of their allies" (Porter, 2022, 145). These attacks were framed as a legitimate action of self-defence. One of the original *Al-Masirah* articles contains a sentence stating: "[i]t is noteworthy that the 2$^{nd}$ operation of balanced deterrence came in response to the continuation of the coalition of aggression, which has been bombing Yemen, and a siege for four years" (Al-Masirah, 2019vi).

Iranian establishment figures were quoted in articles praising the restraint of the Abqaiq-Khurais attacks. Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, is quoted as saying:

"[T]he Yemeni resistance attacked a refinery instead of retaliating for Saudi attacks on Saudi civilians, and no one was killed", adding, "Yemeni[s] are defending themselves, the least they can be praised for [is] attacking a refinery instead of retaliating by attacking a city or a hospital or a school, just like the Saudis do in Yemen" (Al-Masirah, 2019xx).

Tehran and Ansarallah were unified behind the narrative of Houthi responsibility. They were also united in their attempts to frame this as a balanced, humane, response to Saudi war crimes in Yemen. Here, accountability for this attack, which temporarily affected the world economy in a profound way, was put at the door of the House of Saud. According to this logic, the Houthis conducted the attack, but they could not be truly condemned for it, as they

were simply realising that they, "the people of Yemen "have to respond" to the foreign aggression and the influx of US and European weapons into Saudi Arabia" (Al-Masirah, 2019xvi).

The Houthis were keen to claim responsibility to exaggerate the level of threat they pose to their Saudi and Emirati neighbours. Ansarallah deemed it advantageous for Riyadh to believe that they possessed the ability to wipe out whole sections of ARAMCO. ARAMCO is the centripetal force, around which the whole of Saudi Arabia's economy revolves. One suggestion is that the Houthis may have hoped that if the Saudis believed that Ansarallah could really hit them strategically, then they might reconsider their aggressive policies in Yemen.

A further, related, part of the Houthi narrative was to attack the Saudi lines of justification for their intervention. This is straight from the Iranian playbook, as observed in the analysis of *Press TV*'s attack on the Saudi narrative of "protecting the legitimate government". Mohammed Al-Bukhaiti, a member of Yemen's Supreme Political Council, is quoted by *Al-Masirah* as saying, "Saudi Arabia declared war against Yemen on the grounds that our missile inventory posed a threat to its security… Today, we are surprised to see that when we hit Saudi oil wells, they exonerate Yemen from conducting these strikes and accuse others of doing them" (Al-Masirah, 2019viii).

This appears to run in the face of any discussion of Ansarallah as unsophisticated. This is a complex form of securitisation, which uses Riyadh's own logic against them in an attempt to disprove accusations of Iranian involvement. Like Iranian discourse, the Houthis attempted to focus on its enemy's proclamations, to twist a web of disinformation. Here, Al-Bukhaiti is expressing his incredulity that Riyadh could doubt the attack originated from Yemen when Riyadh was so keen to emphasise Houthi weapons capacity as a justification for their initial intervention. The Houthis were seeking to heighten Saudi anxieties and increase their sense of ontological insecurity, through suggesting that they had developed significant drone and missile capabilities, which would essentially create a two-front war for the Saudis. Without effective air defence systems, this would pose significant risks to Saudi ARAMCO, pushing Riyadh to exit the conflict. Regardless, the attacks embarrassed the Saudis, as they were not able to defend their own infrastructure or counter Iranian aggression. The Houthis took this opportunity to further contribute to their humiliation.

From the data considered across the *Al-Masirah* platform, it appears that the Houthis were doing the Iranians a favour. Following Khamenei's recognition of a Houthi Ambassador to Iran on 18th August 2019, Iranian support for the Houthis had become formalised. Ansarallah were determined to establish themselves within international forums – "The Huthis have few international (state) allies [and]… has sought international recognition and presented the diplomatic links to Iran as a step in that direction" (Clausen, 2022, 276). The willingness to claim responsibility for the Abqaiq-Khurais attack can be understood as an attempt to

establish the Houthis within the international consciousness, to increase Saudi threat perception, and as a favour to their newly formalised ally in Tehran.

This partly explains why they were happy to obfuscate Iranian involvement in the Abqaiq-Khurais attacks. Some suggest that this willingness counts as clear evidence that the Houthis were now a pure Iranian proxy (Alasrar, 2019). However, the most important part of this picture pertains to simple considerations of Houthi priorities. By claiming responsibility, they sought to advance their own agenda. As Clausen wrote: "[t]he Houthis have little fear of retribution from Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, when the Houthis argue that the strikes were in retaliation to the air strikes carried out in Yemen, it appeals to their core audience in Yemen" (2022, 165).

It also worked to increase Saudi threat perception. The more damage the Houthis are perceived to be capable of, the more chance they will have a commanding hand in any potential peace negotiations. The rush to characterise this process of Houthi disinformation as a clear indication of their status as an Iranian proxy, speaks to a wider theme throughout the conflict. From the very beginning, researchers and policymakers alike have refused to acknowledge Ansarallah as, first and foremost, a domestic Yemeni group with its own specific grievances and agenda (Johnston et al., 2020, 7).

Conversely, Iran was increasingly frustrated by the JCPOA situation, and its declining status on the regional stage. Iranian involvement in the strike against Saudi Arabia could be

interpreted as Tehran sending Riyadh a message over the JCPOA. However, they knew that

being directly implicated in an attack on Saudi infrastructure could have devastating

consequences. It could even have constituted an act of war – something neither Iran nor Saudi

Arabia desired. Whilst they have supported opposing factions in conflicts like Syria and

Yemen, they have never directly confronted each other, as this would produce a state of total

war in the region.

There were some attempts at sectarianisation within the discourse claiming Houthi

responsibility. Interestingly, this came in its "unifying" form. *Al-Masirah* shared articles from

*Press TV* that quoted officials from the Iraqi government, Iran, and Hezbollah. Within these

articles, reference was made to "resistance". Although not explicitly pro-Shia, this idea

certainly played into Saudi fears of growing Iranian influence. Speaking to the Abqaiq-

Khurais attack, deputy chairman of Hezbollah's Executive Council, Sheikh Nabil Qaoug, is

quoted as saying:

"The US axis in the region is retreating now as it admits its defeats in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, the
besieged Gaza Strip, and Lebanon, and also against Iran", adding that the US axis, "receive
new defeats every day, while the axis of resistance continues to add to its achievements and
victories" (Al-Masirah, 2019xxi).

Ansarallah's *Al-Masirah* platform was keen to emphasise their status within the axis of

resistance during 2019. Previously, Iran and the Houthis used such proclamations only very

occasionally. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA, the fallout from Operation Victory from

God, and the subsequent formalisation of ties between Tehran and Sana'a, resulted in the

assimilation of Houthi discourse within the wider narrative of the Axis of Resistance. The

Houthis realised that it would heighten Saudi and Western anxiety over their capacity and give them a stronger bargaining hand in any future negotiations.

Finally, through adopting the narrative of resistance, they posited themselves as champions of the oppressed. They do so in opposition, pitting themselves as the antithesis of the Saudi-US war machine, which they blame for the humanitarian crisis. *Al-Masirah* is filled with images of dead and dying children, on side panels, and often as main article pictures. Taken in total, "such content… boosts the group's portrayal of themselves as humble defenders of the homeland and the sole resistance to some of the world's most well-equipped militaries" (Porter, 2022, 143). To push this framing yet further, *Al-Masirah* included a Tweet from Javad Zarif, which stated:

"Just imagine: The US isn't upset when its allies mercilessly BOMB babies in Yemen for over 4 years – with its arms and its military assistance", adding, "[b]ut it is terribly upset when the victims react the only way they can – against the aggressor's OIL refineries" (Al-Masirah, 2019xvi)

The Iranian-Houthi alliance conspired together to construct a narrative of the Abqaiq-Khurais attack centred on the notion of "balance of deterrence". This was framed as a defensive measure, against Saudi infrastructure, making it more morally justifiable than Saudi attacks which have killed many civilians. The reality that these attacks had a profound effect on the world's oil and gas markets, and the impact this could have on the world's most vulnerable, was entirely ignored. Noted for its exceptionality, the narrative of the Houthis claiming responsibility constituted an example of pure, united, Iranian and Houthi disinformation, as

most researchers agree that this attack could not and did not originate from Yemen (Kagan, 2019; Narbone and Divsallar, 2021).

## 10.4 Denying Iranian Involvement

Connected closely to the "Houthis claim responsibility" narrative, the denial of Iranian involvement was widespread across the dataset. *Al-Masirah* shared multiple articles from *Press TV*, containing quotes to this effect from Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, Turkey, and even Japan. Any slight scepticism towards the notion of Iranian involvement was seized upon and spread widely across this newly merging element of the Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus. Several references are made to the Iranian Foreign Minister referring to the US policy towards Iran as moving from "maximum pressure" to "maximum lying" and "deceit" (Al-Masirah, 2019xxiv).

Iran did not want to be implicated in these attacks. They wanted to divert attention away from themselves and onto Saudi war crimes in Yemen. When Mike Pompeo referred to the Abqaiq-Khurais attack as an "Iranian act of war", Tehran doubled down. Whilst continuing to deny its involvement, it warned the US and its allies that any strike on the Islamic Republic would lead to "all-out-war". Quoted in full, *Al-Masirah*'s inclusion of Zarif shows the full complexity of the Iranian narrative:

"I make a very serious statement about defending our country. I am making a very serious statement that we don't want to engage in a military confrontation" Zarif said, adding that a military response based on "deception" about the weekend attacks on Saudi oil installations would cause "a lot of casualties". "… We won't blink to defend our territory" (Al-Masirah, 2019xvii).

Tehran blames the American-Saudi axis for any potential escalation through denial of their role in the Abqaiq-Khurais attack. An attack on Iran would not be "retaliatory", but unprovoked, based on this framing. As mentioned, Iran wanted to avoid any direct conflict with America and Saudi Arabia. They realised that there would be no way for them to win such a war. However, they also wanted to be able to attack, or sponsor attacks, on infrastructure crucial to the economy of these two countries, without reprisal. This Iranian line of disinformation focused on alienating its enemies and maintaining its own innocence. Ansarallah adopted a similar approach. Across both groups, focus was maintained on the US and Saudi bringing these strikes upon themselves. Through this understanding, it is possible to observe the interconnectivity between these lines of securitisation. Iranian and Houthi press aligned, to purvey a grand narrative, consisting of several interconnected parts. One particular quote appears in various different forms across the dataset, which demonstrates this dynamic most clearly: "Iran has rejected the accusation and said the attacks were a legitimate act of self-defense by Yemen, which has been under incessant strikes by the Saudi-led coalition since 2015. The US is a member of that invading coalition" (Al-Masirah, 2019xiv).

This particular quote comes from a repurposed *Press TV* article on the *Al-Masirah* platform. Such examples show the way in which the Houthis were now operating as part of the Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus. They were not simply a "functional actor", but an active part of the Iranian securitisation process. As Trump had begun to do with Riyadh, Ansarallah and

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Iran now adopted a position of reciprocal positionality, conveying precisely the same stance on the Abqaiq-Khurais attacks.

## 10.5 The West, Saudi Arabia, and The World Economy

This section combines six of the frames from Table 7.0, pertaining to narratives intended to heighten anxiety over the impact of the strikes on the Saudi and Western economies, to raise their anxiety and insecurity, and to further contribute to anti-Saudi and anti-Western sentiment. These six frames are "Impact on oil markets", "Threaten West and Saudi Arabia", "Impact on Saudi economy", "Anti-US", "Saudi Arabia is vulnerable/on the backfoot", and "Anti-Mohammed bin Salman/Anti-Vision 2030". Taken as a total, they were mentioned 125 times across 31 articles. Thus, focusing on the "Other" remained the central tactic of the Axis of Resistance playbook.

Connecting anti-US and anti-Saudi discourse has not been done for ease, but to mirror Houthi propaganda. Dating back to the early seminars of Ansarallah's founder, Hussein al-Houthi, the movement has continually focused on the narrative of Washington as a puppet-master. One interesting suggestion is that:

[T]he depiction of the Saud-American-Zionist aggression in Yemen, as the Houthis often label it, leaves the door open for future negotiations, with the understanding that the Huthis' animosity toward Saudi Arabia lies on its dependence on the 'US', and not with the Kingdom itself (Porter, 2022, 145-46).

Even the group's slogan has not been updated to include anti-Saudi sentiment, following years of Saudi-led aggression. It still says, "Allah is Greater, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews". Discussion of Israel was limited across this particular dataset, due to the specific focus on Abqaiq-Khurais, but it is important to note that Ansarallah regularly propagates similar anti-Semitic conspiracy theories to those emanating from the Islamic Republic.

There are those, however, who would baulk at Porter's suggestion that the Houthis focus their contempt on the American connection to leave the door open to negotiations. There is a general feeling amongst American policymakers that the Houthis have obstinately refused negotiations and set unrealistic demands throughout the war (Ghantous and El Yaakoubi, 2022). Riyadh suggests that the Houthis have purposefully sought to prolong the conflict, arguing that it serves their ambitions to eventually rule the country (Al-Batati, 2022). Whatever the reason for doing so, it is certainly true that the focus, from the evidence above, is primarily on the US and their connection to Riyadh, rather than Riyadh alone. The "world economy" was also connected to these frames, positing Ansarallah and Iran as pariahs, left unaffected by downturns in Saudi oil markets.

The most repeated sentence across the dataset reads (in various different forms):
"The unprecedented attack knocked out more than half of Saudi crude output, or five percent of global supply, prompting Saudi and US officials to claim without any evidence that it probably originated from Iraq or Iran" (Al-Masirah, 2019xxvi).

Here, the propaganda network connects America, Saudi Arabia, and the global economy together. Whilst denying Iranian involvement, the nexus nevertheless celebrates the negative impact the attacks had on their enemies. Several articles quote World Bank statistics, suggesting the impact on the Saudi economy in particular was far worse than Riyadh was publicly stating. A regularly repeated phrase was "[t]he Yemeni attacks cut Saudi Arabia's oil production in half" (Al-Masirah, 2019xxxi). This worked as an attempt to heighten anxiety around Houthi capacity, exacerbating Saudi fears of insecurity on their southern border.

Unlike nefarious platforms such as IUVM, *Al-Masirah* generally restrained itself from ridiculing Mohammed bin Salman or Trump. Visual propaganda in other, darker, corners of the Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus has portrayed Mohammed bin Salman as a cannibalistic war criminal, and Trump as a capitalistic baby killer. Within the *Al-Masirah* dataset, the response was far more measured. Only one article mentioned Mohammed bin Salman specifically, copied from *Press TV*. With a decidedly celebratory tone, they reported that: "MbS… has suffered a major blow to his wishful plans for building a modern and economically vibrant country after attacks on state-run Aramco's oil installations earlier this month as investors is no longer interested in buying the shares of the company" (Al-Masirah, 2019xxii).

Elsewhere, *Al-Masirah* posted or reposted articles that undermined American intelligence capacities, suggesting that any attempts to blame Iran spoke to Washington's unsatisfactory detection systems. Speaking to the accusation against Iran, Al-Bukhaiti is said to have, "mocked the proposition, saying Washington resorted to such rhetoric to hide the fact that their radars were simply incapable of tracking Yemeni drones… "America and Saudi Arabia's radars cannot intercept Yemeni aircraft. If they could intercept them, they would have shot them down" (Al-Masirah, 2019viii).

The articles focused on undermining the military capacity of the US-Saudi alliance and their chances of victory in Yemen, celebrating the negative impact on the Saudi and world economy, and emphasising the Saudi-led coalition's role in the humanitarian crisis. Sectarianisation was largely absent, especially in its alienating form. There were no mentions of "Wahhabism" or "Takfiris", as is the custom across social media and nefarious websites connected to the IUVM platform, for example.

10.6 *Deaths, War Crimes, and the Humanitarian Crisis*

Interestingly, discussion of Saudi war crimes did not feature as heavily in this dataset as expected. Across the majority of the data considered in other chapters, focusing on the impact of the Saudi blockade on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has been the key focus of the Iranian propaganda nexus. The relative lack of column inches on this topic may speak to the

Houthi preference to direct its ire on the US. That being said, 18 sentences make reference to these themes across the 31 articles, meaning that they constitute a frame worth examining.

This frame was used to construct a reliable motive, connecting the attacks to Ansarallah. It was also deployed to justify the strikes, which were fictionally connected to the Yemeni group. Zarif speaks to this on several occasions across the data-set – as Foreign Minister he was right at the centre of the Iranian propaganda nexus. *Al-Masirah* quotes him as stating:

"Now they [Ansarallah] hit a refinery and not a single person was killed… Is this disaster greater than killing many civilians in the last four and a half years?!... But the Saudis believed that with the help of the United States, they could win the war in four weeks… For the past four and a half years, there have been 100,000 dead and they are still trapped in this self-made swamp" (Al-Masirah, 2019xx).

This is a familiar binary, typical of the Iranian propaganda nexus: the moral Axis of Resistance vs. the evil US-Saudi alliance. Tehran and the Houthis underplay their own role in exacerbating the conflict and over-accentuate Saudi war crimes and Washington's role in them. Both Tehran and the Houthis do so cynically, to advance their own status within the regional balance of power. Many human rights groups condemn Saudi war crimes, and find their quotes repurposed and shared on *Press TV* and *Al-Masirah*. One article quotes the head of Amnesty International, Kumi Naidoo: "[s]adly, it appears that some governments, if they are allied with the United States, like Saudi Arabia, they can get away with murder – literally murder" (Al-Masirah, 2019vii). The hope was that by focusing on Saudi war crimes, the Iranian propaganda nexus will encourage the international community and human rights groups to look the other way when it comes to Iranian and Houthi abuses. Whilst the latter

certainly focus more heavily on Saudi atrocities, it would be difficult to prove this has anything to do with Iranian or Houthi propaganda. As for the international community, their focus remains on the threat of Iran and the US continues to support Saudi Arabia.

The following three quotes come from Houthi spokesman Brigadier General Yahya Saree, then Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif Khansari, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan respectively. They legitimise the "Houthi" Abqaiq-Khurais attack as a justified defensive response against Saudi aggression, besiegement, and war crimes:

"Our upcoming operations will expand and would be more painful as long as the Saudi regime continues its aggression and blockade" (Al-Masirah, 2019iii).

"The US "is in denial if it thinks that Yemeni victims of 4.5 yrs of the worst war crimes wouldn't [conduct]… a strike back"" (Al-Masirah, 2019xvi).

"Let us remember who was the first to bomb Yemen? We will see where the disaster began" (Al-Masirah, 2019vi).

As ever, omission is a key part of propaganda. What is not discussed is often as enlightening as what is. Across the dataset, no mention is made of the Houthi-obstruction of aid, of the impact of the fallout from the strikes on the world's poorest, nor of supporting the argument that Iran supplies heavy weapons to Ansarallah. Instead, *Al-Masirah* quotes IRGC Major

General Hossein Bagheri, who uses the frame of Saudi war crimes to counter accusations against Iran. He is quoted as saying: "Yemen has been besieged completely for years… So how is it possible to send large missiles to Yemen while even medicines cannot enter the country?" (Al-Masirah, 2019xxviii). Even at this late stage of conflict, when many Iranian weapons shipments had been intercepted heading for Arabia Felix, the IRGC were denying arming the Houthis. The IRGC instead claimed that they only "offer our advisory and intellectual support to Yemen's national army… We will stand by the Yemeni people until they completely ward off the aggressions" (Al-Masirah, 2019xxviii).

The Axis of Resistance is once again portrayed as the moral defender of the oppressed, who, according to their own propagandised narrative, can do no wrong.

### 10.7 The Houthis defeat Saudi Arabia near Najran

On the 28th of September, Houthi rebels claimed to have killed hundreds of coalition soldiers and taken a further 2,000 as prisoners in a single attack near the border with Najran (Wintour, 2019). Later the same day, Yahya Saree appeared on Houthi-ran television, talking through video footage of this assault. He claimed "[t]he preliminary reports are that the overall human casualties are over 500 killed or wounded", and celebrated, "capturing more than 2000 prisoners" (Press TV, 2019). This figure was confirmed as more accurate than might be expected, by a Yemeni government source. The unnamed source put the figure at 200 dead, 1300 captured, and 280 wounded (Asia Times, 2019). The video sent out a message to regional and international audiences that the Houthis were an effective military force, not to

be undermined. However, their most crucial target audience was Saudi Arabia, who they sought to undermine, increasing their sense of ontological insecurity, felt across their southern border.

The video footage of Saree's press conference is a particularly ripe example for both discursive and visual analysis, showing the inner workings of Houthi propaganda. The best way to describe the footage is as a "video within a video". It is a press conference, with Saree taking the audience through what is happening on the screen next to him. It is fascinating how this directly mirrors the daily press conferences Riyadh conducted during Operation Decisive Storm (Fadel, 2015). It is difficult not to think that this was done intentionally, to mock the Saudis further.

It is also notable for the fact it was widely shared across Iranian news media and social media. The longest version of the video, at 24 minutes and 25 seconds, can be found on the IRIB's *Press TV*, which they also overdubbed with an English translation (Press TV, 2019). How reliable the translation is may be open to question. What is reliable is that whatever the translator said is what the Axis of Resistance wanted to be heard. As always, it is their version of events, framed to suit their interests. If the translation did not do this, it would not have been published. The video itself was carefully curated by the Houthi high command, telling a story that humiliates the Saudi-led coalition and extols the virtues of the Houthi attack force.

As the following analysis focuses on a singular video, visual and linguistic analysis has been simplified through integration. The overarching frame of the video was "Saudi humiliation", and so this is the predominant focus of its interpretation. A whole chapter could be dedicated to this instance of Houthi propaganda, but the following examination is purposefully limited, to keep it relevant to the argument of this chapter.

## 10.8 Yahya Saree's Battle Video

*Video Design*

First, Yahya Saree is seen behind a podium, with a television screen behind him showing images of the operation.



*Image 24. Press TV – Yahya Saree at the podium (Press TV, 2019)*

Houthi commanders are then seen planning the attack.



*Image 25. Press TV - Houthi commanders plan attack (Press TV, 2019)*

Then it shows the Houthi artillery strikes. The video shows these vehicles being hit by

Ansarallah's artillery, and Saudi forces returning to attempt retaliatory shelling.



*Image 26. Pres TV - Aerial shot of Saudi vehicles (Press TV, 2019)*

*Image 27. Press TV – Saudi vehicles destroyed by Houthi strike (Press TV, 2019)*

This is followed by a squadron of Saudi armoured vehicles fleeing.



*Image 28.. Press TV – Saudi vehicles flee (Press TV, 2019)*

The coalition vehicles and weapons are subsequently seized. Coalition troops are captured,

and the dead are displayed.

*Image 29. Press TV - Coalition troops surrender to the Houthis (Press TV, 2019)*



*Image 30. Press TV - Coalition troops throw down arms (Press TV, 2019)*

Next, the real humiliation. Long queues of coalition prisoners are seen marching in formation, with others abandoning their vehicles and running on foot.



*Image 31. Press TV - Long line of Coalition Captives await their fate (Press TV, 2019)*

*Image 32. Press TV – Coalition troops flee over mountain (Press TV, 2019)*

Houthi soldiers are then filmed discussing the events on the ground, accusing the Saudis of striking "their own mercenaries and their own troops". Footage is shown that supposedly shows this Saudi "friendly fire", but, as far as the video shows, these strikes could have come from anywhere.

*Image 33. Press TV - Yahya Saree watches successful militiamen (Press TV, 2019)*



*Image 34. Press TV – Large explosion hits Houthi's target (Press TV, 2019)*

Prisoners are displayed, apparently receiving first aid and "humane" treatment by the Houthi militiamen.

*Image 35. Press TV – Coalition troops wait to be processed (Press TV, 2019)*



*Image 36. Press TV - Coalition troops apparently tended to by Houthi medics (Press TV, 2019)*

Then there is intermittent footage of captured and burning vehicles.

*Image 37. Press TV – Abandoned Coalition vehicles displayed (Press TV, 2019)*



*Image 38. Press TV – Coalition vehicle burning (Press TV, 2019)*

In one of the closing scenes, Houthis are shown riding aloft a captured armoured vehicle chanting their slogan, "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews".

*Image 39. Press TV – Houthis stand aloft captured Coalition vehicle (Press TV, 2019)*

*Video Interpretation and Explanation - Humiliating the Saudi-led coalition*

The most important target audience for this video is the Saudi-led coalition. The way the imagery has been presented, combined with the phraseology of Saree, suggests that this footage was intended to humiliate the coalition. Towards the end of the video, Houthi militiamen are quoted as stating "the entire unit surrendered to the heroes of the Yemeni army and the popular forces", adding, "these traitors and deceived people have found no choice but to surrender" (Press TV, 2019). Saree, more bluntly, states "they were humiliated" (Press TV, 2019). The Saudi-backed forces, which mainly consisted of Yemeni "traitors", were contrasted with the "heroes of the popular forces" (Press TV, 2019). The video shows soldiers claiming they were paid to fight for the Saudis as mercenaries. Using this as fuel for the binary construction of good vs. evil, Saree stated:

"This shows that the Saudis are using them as human shields in their aggression; but the Yemenis choose to defend their land and fight and face this aggression" (Press TV, 2019).

Senior Yemeni sources informed the Sana'a Centre that the majority of the "captured fighters were from a brigade led by Radad al-Hashimi, a Salafi leader who received weapons and millions of dollars from Riyadh to recruit thousands of fighters from across Yemen" (Abdullah et al., 2019, 12). Once again, the Houthis deployed the framing of good vs. evil.

Saree argued that "the Saudis are forcing children to take part and fight alongside the aggressive forces" (Press TV, 2019). Whilst the footage displayed cannot prove that there were child soldiers in this particular unit's employ, the generic claim can be broadly corroborated from numerous reports by Human Rights groups and investigative journalists (HRW, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2018). It is certainly reasonable to think that this claim may be truthful, due to the evidence proving Riyadh's sponsorship of actors using child soldiers.

The response to this attack, unlike the disinformation surrounding Abqaiq-Khurais, fits into Hannah Porter's (2022) wider understanding of the Houthi propaganda nexus, which argues that the versions of events it publishes are largely factual. However, this does not mean that the framing of the operation was not heavily propagandised and framed for specific political effect.

The very name of the operation, Operation *Nasr Min Allah* (Operation Victory from God), hints at sectarianisation. Although no explicit mention is made of either Shi'ism or Sunnism, framing the assault in religious terms hints at a theme of unifying sectarianisation. The Houthis here frame themselves as the valiant defender, standing up for the oppressed and crushing the "aggressors". Labelling the assault in such terms evokes a notion of Shi'a resistance against foreign aggressors, in the mould of Hussein. Increasingly, Houthi framing began to converge with the wider approach of the Axis of Resistance.

Due to its capacity to humiliate Saudi Arabia, the Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus spent a lot of time lauding it over Riyadh. *Al-Masirah* posted 28 articles that directly spoke to the attack in the month following the assault. The enmeshment of Houthi propaganda within the broader Axis of Resistance nexus was less immediately apparent, however. Of the 28 articles, only 4 came from Iran's *Press TV* and 1 from Hezbollah's *Al-Manar*. The majority were Houthi generated, as Ansarallah mobilised to celebrate this notable victory. This does not mean that the Islamic Republic did not celebrate the attacks, nor that the Houthi discourse did not mirror some of Tehran's framing, but simply that Houthi media mobilised to self-generate their own content for a feat of which they were evidently proud. Comparing it to *Al-Masirah*'s coverage of Abqaiq-Khurais may tell researchers something further about the likelihood of the Houthis having any significant role in those attacks. When they have conducted a successful attack, they generate their own content on a vast scale. When they do not, they simply repurpose Iranian content. Discourse surrounding the Abqaiq-Khurais attacks was geared towards achieving both Iranian and Houthi interests. The discourse

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surrounding the assault of the 28th of September amounted to a Houthi celebration, coupled with video evidence.

*Conclusion*

This chapter has argued that Operation Victory from God demonstrated a growing discursive reciprocity between Iran and Ansarallah. Both actors saw the appeal of synergising their propaganda to increase the threat perception of international audiences; in this sense, it speaks to the thesis' central research question. It also emphasises that this should not be taken to mean that the Houthis had become a firm Iranian proxy. They maintained their status as an autonomous actor. The main driver of taking accountability of Abqaiq-Khurais was predominantly to appeal to its domestic audience, undermine Riyadh, and gain power in any future peace negotiations. Despite this, discursive alignment between Tehran and Sana'a was significantly higher during this period than at any other during the conflict. Ansarallah had also fully adopted some of the key lines of Iranian propaganda, along the lines of Resistance, human rights, and Anti-Westernism. Whilst they were still capable of autonomous propaganda, as evidenced by the 28th of September attack, they were willing to become integrated within the wider Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus when it suited them. With Tehran welcoming a Houthi Ambassador in the previous months, it became clear that Ansarallah saw the geostrategic benefits in publicly aligning with Iran. In short, it increased Saudi anxiety and ontological insecurity. As Clausen put it, the discourse surrounding Operation Victory from God, was demonstrative of the notion that "the Saudi focus on the

link between the Houthis and Iran seems to have had the unintended effect of pushing the Houthis closer to Iran" (2022, 165). This dynamic was counter-intuitive, undermining the Saudi war effort and making the chances of success more unlikely. Riyadh faced other challenges as time developed, especially concerning the fallout from the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. This incident increased condemnation of Saudi human rights abuses in Yemen, tainting Saudi Arabia's processes of international securitisation.

# Chapter Eleven
## *2018-2021 - Khashoggi, Aid Cuts and the Houthis as an FTO*

The period from 2018-2021 was a particularly difficult time for promoting the Saudi regime

and securitising their intervention in Yemen. However, Trump was determined to further

develop an explicitly pro-Saudi discourse and policy agenda. Furthermore, his "abandonment

of the… JCPOA… spawned a wealth of deception operations that have created 'deception

synergies' between the US right and those in the Gulf wishing to contain Iran" (Jones, 2022,

123). Trump made clear his intentions at the Riyadh Conference in 2017; the following years

saw him double down on his commitments. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi

consulate in Turkey on 2nd October 2018 was perhaps the greatest challenge to Trump's

loyalty. The other branches of the US political system were unified in their condemnation.

Gregory D. Johnsen provided a succinct narration of the chain of events that followed the

assassination:

In November 2018, just a month after Saudi Arabia's brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the
US announced that it would no longer be providing mid-air refuelling to Saudi jets on
bombing runs over Yemen. In the aftermath of the… murder, Congress passed a resolution
calling for the end of US involvement in the war and another blocking an arms sale to Saudi
Arabia. Trump vetoed both measures (Johnsen, 2022, 4).

Using DT, this chapter traces and assesses the notion that Trump solidified his role as a Saudi

sectarian actor, through examination of three key events between 2018-2021. Considering the

data chronologically, his support for the war in Yemen remained an ever-present, as

international condemnation grew. This had profound effects on Yemeni civilians,

compounded by his decision to cut $73million from the United States Agency for

International Development (USAID) in early 2020. This aid was destined for the most vulnerable people in northern Yemen. Climactically, Trump's commitment to the Saudi narrative resulted in him labelling the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) in 2021 – a policy Trump had been trying to implement for several years.

Trump's indefatigable commitment to 'maximum pressure' on Iran and his economic partnership with Saudi Arabia were deemed so important, that his administration sought every avenue to dehumanise, other, and alienate Riyadh's enemies. He decided to scrap the JCPOA, condemn the Houthis as a terrorist organisation, and support the Saudi war in Yemen. These decisions appeared to represent a narrow set of state interests. Trump's tenure saw an end to any discussion of Washington as a status quo power in the region. He firmly tethered himself to the Saudi pole of the NMECW. The acceleration in digital disinformation during this period was due to the potential unpopularity of many of these policy-commitments. As Marc Owen Jones put it, "[w]hen such policies reflect a limited set of interest groups, such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel, it is perhaps no surprise that the struggle to rationalise such policy positions requires significant deception" (Jones, 2022, 139).

Structurally, this chapter will focus on Saudi and American discourse surrounding three key events: the murder of Jamal Khashoggi (2018), Houthi gains and Trump's decision to cut aid to the north-east of Yemen (2019-2020), and the designation of the Houthis as an FTO (2021). Together, these three events define Trump as a Saudi sectarian actor, who doubled

down on his support for their war effort, despite international condemnation over human rights. America and Saudi Arabia were so aligned during this period that they constituted a nexus of reciprocal positionality – legitimising involvement in the Yemen war through undermining Saudi human rights abuses and exaggerating the crimes of Iran and the Houthis. In doing so, they contributed to the securitisation of Iran and the wider Axis of Resistance as the primary ontological threat to stability in the region.

*11.1 Crushing Dissent – The Murder of Jamal Khashoggi*

When Jamal Khashoggi walked into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2$^{nd}$ October 2018, his only goal was to acquire documents to annul his marriage. Although he had been critical of his native government, the Saudi-American journalist did not expect violence. Khashoggi was murdered in the most brutal fashion; an audio recording of which can be found online and features in the 2021 feature film about the murder "The Dissident". His death mobilised anti-Saudi sentiment throughout the world and was significant for the war in Yemen for the following reasons:

A) It showed the lengths to which Riyadh would go to punish dissent, and crush counter-narratives.

B) It demonstrated Trump's loyalty to Riyadh and the Saudi war effort.

C) It raised the international profile of other Saudi human rights abuses, particularly in Yemen.

D) It demonstrated a problem within Western reporting – that it was the death of one Westernised journalist that wrought condemnation on Saudi Arabia, not the thousands of civilians killed in Yemen.

E) The fallout from the Khashoggi murder was a key factor in reducing Saudi airstrikes and invoking a ceasefire, albeit briefly (Sheline, 2022).

Khashoggi had been one of the few Saudi voices to be critical of Riyadh's war in Yemen. What is interesting, though, is that he did not condemn the Saudi effort in total. He supported the war in 2015, due to concern about "Iran's sectarian expansionist policies, as its influence has extended across the entire region" (Khashoggi, 2017). By 2017, he had grown disillusioned, warning of the economic and reputational consequences for Riyadh. On 22nd November, he wrote in the *Washington Post*:

Saudi Arabia, more than any other country, is seen as responsible for the dire situation in Yemen. My country's reputation has been badly damaged and our credibility weakened. Images of starving children should overwhelm even the most stalwart defender of the Saudi security interests that led us to destroy the poorest, most illiterate country in the Arab World (Khashoggi, 2017).

He called for an end to the war, and a negotiated peace settlement that involved the Houthis and Iran. Nevertheless, Khashoggi continued to envision a key role for Saudi Arabia and a favourable outcome to the Yemen war, considering the circumstances: "Saudi Arabia announced it will lift the blockade on the port of Hodeida for U.N. humanitarian aid to come through. But ultimately, the only way out is to stop the war in Yemen… Only Saudi Arabia can initiate a complete reboot of peace talks" (Khashoggi, 2017).

Khashoggi was also critical of Mohammed bin Salman as a leader, of plans to modernise the economy through Vision 2030, and of Riyadh's role in the Gulf Crisis (Khashoggi, 2018). He was also associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which upset the al-Saud (Cofman Wittes, 2018). His relationship with the Brotherhood likely played a role in Riyadh's decision to have him assassinated, as the group poses a doctrinal threat to dynastic monarchy. Mohammed bin Salman could not tolerate dissent from a former establishment figure, who had previously run Saudi newspaper *Al Watan* and advised the Saudi government. Furthermore, the war in Yemen was not over, as Riyadh pushed for victory.

Khashoggi was an American resident at the time of his murder, leading to calls from journalists at the *Washington Post* for the US to freeze ties with Riyadh (Hurd, 2018). Instead, Trump vetoed legislation to that effect, repeated the rapidly changing Saudi lines around Khashoggi's disappearance/death, and reinforced his commitment to the Kingdom. As Christopher Davidson put it, "the White House… appeared willing to endorse the shifting Saudi narrative, which quickly moved from complete denial to descriptions of a spontaneous 'fistfight' that had got out of control" (2021, 110). Chapter Eight analysed Trump's gradual intertwining with the Saudi establishment and the co-optation of their lines of securitisation. By 2018, Trump was taking their word as sufficient evidence. On October 15th, he Tweeted:

> "Just spoke to the King of Saudi Arabia who denies any knowledge of whatever may have happened "to our Saudi Arabian citizen." He said they are working closely with Turkey to find answer. I am immediately sending our Secretary of State to meet with the King!" (Trump, 2018a).

Trump tweeted about the Khashoggi affair just 4 more times, all of which came in October 2018, coverage that amounts to a quick mention of an insignificant event. Between July 2018 and January 2019, Trump tweeted 2146 times, averaging 11.7 tweets per week (Trump Twitter Archive, 2023). The tone of his tweets suggested that he mentioned it only to distance his Saudi friends from any accusations, using the gesture of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visiting Riyadh to dispel murmurs of foul play. Again, the importance of omission is demonstrated as a crucial feature of propaganda and securitisation. His relative lack of tweeting on the issue spoke to his desire to underplay the incident.

Trump's efforts did not silence the American media. A vehemently anti-Saudi article, accompanied with a photo of a starving Yemeni child, appeared in The *New York Times* on 31st October (Worth, 2018). Condemnation was coming from a variety of sources and nations, and there was a reduction in Saudi airstrikes in Yemen (YDP, 2022). With growing condemnation, this is unlikely to have been a pure coincidence. As Annelle Sheline put it: "the fact that the frequency of coalition air raids correlates so clearly with American actions and media attention demonstrates the obvious influence of the U.S. over Saudi… conduct" (2022, 10). It was only Trump's veto that prevented Congress from halting American arms sales to the Kingdom.

American and international opinion mattered greatly to the international-facing regime of Mohammed bin Salman. The problem was existential for the Saudi establishment. Vision 2030 depended on Riyadh's ability to present themselves as a modernising entity. It is for this

reason that they lied, and perhaps to continue to lie, about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

Marc Owen Jones explained this conundrum:

In a very real sense, the murder of Khashoggi, and the direct implication of Mohammed bin Salman, has posed one of the most serious challenges to Mohammed bin Salman's desire to rebrand himself and Saudi Arabia. Its sheer newsworthiness, and the long shadow it has cast politically, is only exceeded by the need to censor and shape a discourse exonerating Mohammed bin Salman (Jones, 2022, 226).

The discourse emanating from the Saudi Twittersphere during this period was overwhelmingly pro-regime. Jones dedicates an entire chapter of his book to examining the social media campaign following the death of Khashoggi. He found that, of the 179 most popular Saudi tweets using the hashtag #Jamal_Kahshoggi, "145 reflected the Saudi narrative about the events" (Jones, 2022, 235). As discussed in previous chapters, the Al-Saud are masters of Twitter manipulation, using bots and spreading false narratives at times of political significance for the regime. The murder of Khashoggi, and the ensuing accusations against Mohammed bin Salman, posed an existential threat to Riyadh's self-constructed international image of a moderate reformer. As such, the regime's denialism equated to a project of ontological securitisation.


By proxy, this egregious murder of an American resident on Saudi government property in Istanbul, brought the gaze of the Western world onto Riyadh's other human rights abuses, most notably in Yemen. It was Jamal Khashoggi's murder that brought Saudi war crimes in Yemen into the international media consciousness. As Emad Mekay put it, "the relentless media coverage of his death may have inadvertently highlighted a greater human tragedy: the Saudi war in Yemen" (Mekay, 2018). Signalling dismay at the disparity between widespread

coverage of the murder of one westernised Washington Post journalist, and the almost

entirely absent coverage of dead children in Yemen, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial,

summary, or arbitrary executions, Agnes S Callamard said:

"I've worked for the last two years in Yemen as a special rapporteur and I can assure you I have documented a range of attacks against civilians by Saudi coalition forces. None of them has generated any kind of interest or very little reaction. So that's the reality of the world we live in. I am very saddened by it" (Mekay, 2018).

This called for extraordinary measures, to provide counter-narratives to the idea that

Mohammed bin Salman ordered Khashoggi's death. The killing opened the window for

Trump to rethink his relationship with Riyadh and his funding of the Saudi war effort in

Yemen. However, support and arms sales continued, as if this opportunity was recognised

and the opposite direction was forcefully taken. A ceasefire was facilitated with US support

in late 2018, but this did not end the war, nor did it signal an end to American arms sales to

the Kingdom. The Saudi regime faced condemnation from the majority of American

policymakers, and the international community, including the EU and the UN. Typical of his

belligerent approach to geopolitics, Trump remained loyal to the Al-Saud.

The following section provides a table to trace the development of reciprocal positionality

between Saudi Arabia and the US on the murder of Khashoggi. It is through this, that the

final part of this chapter can conduct its analysis into the impact this had for the conflict in

Yemen, and its implications for counter-narratives in the media. The table focuses solely on

the tumultuous month of October 2018, detailing the trajectory, scope, and nature of Saudi

attempts to divert attention and relinquish accountability, and Trump's reciprocal

positionality with Riyadh, despite the growing dissatisfaction surrounding the relationship. It also focuses upon October to establish the web of disinformation that was created, prior to Turkey releasing the audio of Khashoggi's murder in early November. This was a genuine "smoking gun" moment, proving, without doubt, the involvement of the Saudi Tiger Squad. Focusing on October allows for a detailed observation of the true absurdity of the post-truth era. As Jones writes: "for researchers of media and fake news, digital or otherwise, this is a rare opportunity to be given a dataset where one can definitely class certain narratives as 'false'" (Jones, 2022, 231). Without question, the audio tapes of Khashoggi's murder disprove a whole variety of Saudi conspiracy theories.

Saudi-owned news websites were awash with articles regarding, at first, the disappearance, and then the confirmed death of Khashoggi throughout the month of October 2018. As discussed throughout this thesis, these sites constitute a key arm of the Saudi propaganda nexus. They are key to securitising external threats and justifying Saudi actions. All of these articles attempted to spread disinformation, in line with the government position of the time. It was reasonably hard for them to keep up with the constant backtracking and changing narrative of the Al Saud, as more and more evidence came to light connecting members of the Saudi royal family to the murder.

In the month of October 2018, *Al-Arabiya News* posted 142 articles containing mention of Jamal Khashoggi; *Arab News* posted 93; and the *Saudi Gazette* posted 63. What was contained amounted to a series of conspiracy theories, attempting to cover up the truth of

what happened inside the Saudi consulate. These ranged from simply denying Saudi involvement, to alleging Qatari involvement, to creating a rumour around Iranian foul-play, to the extremity of accusing Khashoggi's fiancé. All attempted to protect the image and ontological security of the Saudi establishment amongst international audiences. *Arab News* has been chosen for the focus of this study as it is an English-language website. Its target audiences are businessmen, diplomats, and executives in "local and foreign… institutions" (Arab News, 2023). It has a range of articles, consisting of short-form news pieces, transcriptions of speeches by senior Saudi princes, opinion pieces from Saudi propagandists, and articles quoting Donald Trump and members of his administration. The latter proves that the Saudi propaganda nexus actively used the tool of Trump's discourse as a method of securitisation. Some 30 articles have been selected to provide a representative case size. These articles have been chosen across the full range of October and were picked due to their explicit focus on Khashoggi.

The first thing one observes from Table 8. is the sheer number of different lines of propaganda. This was a frantic and insecure period for the Al-Saud, and it seems that the component parts of its propaganda nexus were frantically trying to keep up with "official lines of discourse". Whilst the section following Table 8. only focuses on the frames that are particularly relevant to explaining what the Saudi-American response to the Khashoggi affair meant for Yemen, a full range of frames has been included in the table itself. This is to provide an indication of the various different ways *Arab News* was used by the Al-Saud to attempt to cover up their involvement in the killing.

This was a part of Riyadh's process of international securitisation, in which they tried to convince western audiences of their innocence. They faced widespread condemnation from the very beginning, and their web of lies quickly unravelled. Whilst Trump stood by them, international opinion shifted against the al-Saud. Overall, their securitisation process was profoundly unsuccessful. They did not convince the international community, the press, or many western elites.

| Frame | Number of Sentences |
|---|---|
| Yemen | 7 |
| Anti-Iranian Discourse | 20 |
| Accusations are smear campaign by media, Qatar, and US Congress | 64 |
| Support from Muslim Allies | 50 |
| Support from Trump Administration | 53 |
| Mentions of Legal Case, Arrests, Sackings, and Reform of Security Services | 31 |
| Mention of Saudi "Investigations" | 36 |
| Referring to Khashoggi as a friend, citizen, establishment figure, or lending praise | 23 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Mention of Apple Watch or other recordings of death | 20 |
| Saudi reference of "rogue operation" responsible for Khashoggi death | 15 |
| Accusing Khashoggi's Fiancée of foul-play | 16 |
| Accusing Khashoggi of connection to Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar | 7 |
| Accusing Khashoggi of connection to Al-Qaeda and Daesh | 4 |
| References to supporting Khashoggi's family | 8 |
| Outright denial of kidnapping | 3 |
| Outright denial of Khashoggi being killed | 8 |
| Claiming Khashoggi went missing outside the consulate | 2 |
| Saying the Saudi establishment gave the wrong story as they were fed false information by officials | 3 |
| Claiming Khashoggi died in a fistfight in the consulate | 3 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Saying Khashoggi's murder was pre-meditated | 1 |

*Table 8. Arab News on Khashoggi's death October 2018*

*11.2 Saudi Arabia's Arab News – Lines of Securitisation*

*Accusations are a smear campaign by the media, Qatar, and the US Congress*

By far the most popular approach to defending the Kingdom's image during the Khashoggi affair was to accuse the media of conspiracy. Foreign influences, emanating from Qatar and unfavourable voices within US Congress, were roundly accused of malign intent, artificially using Khashoggi's disappearance to undermine the Kingdom. Various terms were used: "double standards", "media feeding frenzy", "false accusations". Abdulrahman Al-Rashed (2018) wrote a pointed polemic on 11th October, entitled "The media has already killed Khashoggi". Written before Khashoggi's death had been confirmed, Al-Rashed stated, "our fellow journalist Jamal Khashoggi has been "murdered", even if he reappears alive. This is simply because he has been used as a bullet in the media battle" (Al-Rashed, 2018a). As in Yemen, nothing in the Saudi media ever suggested that any accountability for wrongdoing lay with the Al-Saud.

In a 14th October article, in which Khalaf Ahmad Al-Habtoor accused Khashoggi of having a "relationship with Osama bin Laden" and his fiancée of having "an anti-Saudi, pro-Qatari and Muslim Brotherhood agenda", the world's media are accused of conspiring against the

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Kingdom (Al-Habtoor, 2018). Al-Habtoor wrote: "It is shameful that the name of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been unfairly sullied when he is making courageous and unprecedented economic and social changes to better the lives of Saudi youth and women" (Al-Habtoor, 2018). Across *Arab News'* coverage of the Khashoggi affair is a tone of incredulity, that anybody could accuse the modern reformer Mohammed bin Salman of crimes or malintent. Here, *Arab News* works as one of the primary vehicles for Riyadh's process of securitisation, signalling the virtue of the regime and alienating their enemies to an English audience.

Researchers can here observe the way in which Vision 2030 and the extension of women's rights have been mobilised as weapons of propaganda. Its evocation here served to undermine accusations of foul-play in the murder of Khashoggi. It has been used elsewhere to legitimise the war in Yemen and focus attention yet further on the "archaic" Islamic Republic. To borrow Madawi Al-Rasheed's terms, these "hollow reforms" have been used to justify "brute force" (Al-Rasheed, 2020). It was only the murder of Khashoggi, and subsequent humiliation of Riyadh's lying, once it had been exposed, that began to raise the profile of their war crimes in Yemen. More importantly, this awakened critics to the fabricated nature of Saudi securitisation narratives.

 Just 22 days after Khashoggi's disappearance, The *New York Times* featured an article entitled "The Tragedy of Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen". Written by Declan Walsh, it included a picture of a malnourished seven-year-old Yemeni child named Amal Hussein. The

twisted irony of her name's meaning (hope) is a poignant reminder of the devastating impact of the Saudi blockade on Yemeni children, for whom all hope seemed lost in 2018. The article was significant for two reasons:

1) It connects Jamal Khashoggi's death to Yemen, suggesting that: "One hope for Yemenis is that the international fallout from the death of the Saudi dissident, Jamal Khashoggi, which has damaged Prince Mohammed's international standing, might force him to relent in his unyielding prosecution of the war" (Walsh, 2018).

2) It exposes Saudi's instrumental use of modernising, moralistic, humanitarian discourse as a method of deflection:

The embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington did not respond to questions about the country's policies in Yemen. But Saudi officials have defended their actions, citing rockets fired across their border by the Houthis, an armed group professing Zaidi Islam, an offshoot of Shiism, that Saudi Arabia, a Sunni monarchy, views as a proxy for its regional rival, Iran.

The Saudis point out that they, along with the United Arab Emirates, are among the most generous donors to Yemen's humanitarian relief effort. Last spring, the two allies pledged $1 billion in aid to Yemen. In January, Saudi Arabia deposited $2 billion in Yemen's central bank to prop up its currency.

But those efforts have been overshadowed by the coalition's attacks on Yemen's economy, including the denial of salaries to civil servants, a partial blockade that has driven up food prices, and the printing of vast amounts of bank notes, which caused the currency to plunge.

And the offensive to capture Hudaydah, which started in June, has endangered the main lifeline for imports to northern Yemen, displaced 570,000 people and edged many more closer to starvation (Walsh, 2018).

Coverage of the conflict prior to 2018 was minimal throughout the Western world. Instead, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and the tracking of Saudi propaganda, raised the profile of the Yemen War and gave reporters an understanding of the tactics the Saudis had successfully used to avoid accountability. For this reason, this incident represented a remarkable change in international attitudes towards Riyadh regarding their war in Yemen.

*Yemen and Iran*

Analysis of these two frames has been condensed into this small section. This is because discussion of Yemen rarely appeared, except through discussion of Iran. On 20th October, Abdulrahman Al-Rashed warned the international community against weakening Saudi Arabia, evoking, once again, anti-Iranian fearmongering. He wrote: "On a regional level, weakening Saudi Arabia would weaken its allies in the region; and strengthen Iran, Hezbollah, the Houthi militia, Al-Qaeda and Daesh" (Al-Rashed, 2018b). The tool of alienating sectarianisation has been used throughout the Yemen war to justify the intervention, as well as American support. Its success was obviously not lost on Riyadh's top propagandists, as they attempted to raise these fears once again to avoid condemnation over Khashoggi.

This theme was repeated in Al-Rashed's article on 22nd October, in which he argued that international condemnation of Riyadh would embolden Iran. He wrote: "if Iran is looking for a desirable solution in Yemen, this may well be the right time… The solution may involve some political participation for the Houthis, Iran's allies" (Al-Rashed, 2018c). This particular

article was bold enough to entitle itself "Iran's gains in the Khashoggi crisis". This particular

aspect of the propaganda campaign sought to construct a conspiratorial narrative, claiming

that America's core regional enemy, Iran, was benefiting from the media's chastisement of

Riyadh.

Al-Rashed wrote:

Tehran has been wishing for three things: That the US retracts its sanctions; that Riyadh stops supporting the Trump administration's project against Iran…; and that the Khashoggi crisis weakens Saudi Arabia and thus changes the regional balance of power, allowing Tehran to continue its hegemony in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen (Al-Rashed, 2018c).

The following section shows how this narrative, surreptitiously spread by Saudi elites, was

co-opted and recited by Donald Trump as a means of maintaining his own realist priorities in

maintaining the US-Saudi relationship.

*Appeals to the Trump Administration*

The most relevant aspect of *Arab News'* discourse from this period, for explaining the

relevance of Khashoggi's murder to the war in Yemen, was the support from the Trump

Administration. A great many column inches were dedicated to Trump's

speeches/declarations on the Khashoggi affair. On Middle Eastern issues, the Trump

Administration effectively worked as Riyadh's mouthpiece on the world stage. Through

dismissing the Al-Saud's involvement in the murder of Khashoggi and dismissing the murder

as a significant issue in their relationship, Trump facilitated a continuation of arms sales to

the Kingdom. He also used his Presidential veto to stop any attempts by Congress to halt these arms shipments. The claims made by Donald Trump, cited in *Arab News*, contained many of the prominent frames detailed in Table 7. For ease of classification, however, his references to these ideas have only been included under "Trump Administration".

This chapter argues that Donald Trump towed the oscillating line of Saudi discursive propaganda through October 2018. Effectively, he worked as an agent of the Saudi securitisation process to undermine their involvement in the killing of Khashoggi. This sought to protect Saudi reputation through a process of ontological securitisation. The chapter argues that, understanding the importance of protecting their international image, the Al-Saud used *Arab News* to emphasise the American President's support throughout the Khashoggi affair. This "seal of approval" was seen as a core part of legitimisation within Riyadh's attempt at securitisation. *Arab News* worked as a primary, active, securitising agent during this insecure period for the Saudi establishment. Trump's support, coupled with the support of Muslim allies and world leaders, served as a method of protecting the Al-Saud domestically, regionally, and internationally. Yet, ultimately, this did not stop international condemnation.

On 16th October, *Arab News* reported that following a phone call with King Salman, Trump had said of the Khashoggi affair: "It sounded to me, maybe these could have been rogue killers" (Arab News, 2018, vi). Meanwhile, Adel Al-Jubeir appeared was appearing on Western news channels, claiming that the killing of Khashoggi was a "rogue operation"

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(BBC, 2018). Here, researchers can observe the echo-effect of Riyadh and Washington's reciprocal positionality. The following day, the world observed Mike Pompeo's tokenistic appearance in Riyadh. *Arab News* was able to quote him saying: "We are strong and old allies. We face our challenges together" (Arab News, 2018, viii). It was evident that the Saudis were prioritising this relationship, knowing it was being put under threat by the US Congress. Their success in Yemen especially depended upon the continuation of US support.

As with most Saudi lines of propaganda, discussion ultimately reverts to sectarian, anti-Iranian narratives. The Saudi securitisation tactic of instrumentalising US sectarian reciprocal positionality on Iran was evident again, when Donald Trump was quoted on 17th October, diverting attention away from Riyadh and back on to Tehran. *Arab News* quotes him as stating: "[y]ou know, we need Saudi Arabia in terms of our fight against all of the terrorism, everything that's happening in Iran" (Arab News, 2018, ix)

Two weeks later, on 30th October, Saudi GCC Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs & Negotiation Dr Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg wrote an article entitled "Why greater Saudi-US engagement is needed now, more than ever". In it, he reports on US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis's speech, stating "Mattis' response was very close to that expressed by Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir" (Aluwaisheg, 2018). The importance of Trump to Riyadh in this period was most clearly demonstrated when he wrote: "By closely engaging with Riyadh, the US could help persuade Congress and the American public, as well as the rest of the world, of the results of the investigation". Speaking of the instrumental

value of the Saudi-US alliance, Aluwaisheg (2018) wrote: "[i]t is necessary to ensure the region's stability and prosperity and to address regional crises, from confronting terrorism and Iran's revolutionary guards to Syria, Yemen, the reconstruction of Iraq, and now the Khashoggi affair".

By November 2018, the world had heard the audio recordings of Khashoggi's murder. Trump's speech on the 20th of that month represents the clearest demonstration of his indefatigable commitment to Saudi sectarian discourse – that Iran is responsible for all the region's evils, and so Saudi misdemeanours should be indulged. His defence of Riyadh cites the Saudi's supposed "$450billion" investment in the US economy. PolitiFact rates Trump's reference to this figure, which he also made in October, as a lie – in their scaling system it falls under the "pants on fire" categorisation (Greenberg, 2018).

The speech is worth quoting in its entirety:

America First!

The world is a very dangerous place! The country of Iran, as an example, is responsible for a bloody proxy war against Saudi Arabia in Yemen, trying to destabilize Iraq's fragile attempt at democracy, supporting the terror group Hezbollah in Lebanon, propping up dictator Bashar Assad in Syria (who has killed millions of his own citizens), and much more. Likewise, the Iranians have killed many Americans and other innocent people throughout the Middle East. Iran states openly, and with great force, "Death to America!" and "Death to Israel!" Iran is considered "the world's leading sponsor of terror."

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia would gladly withdraw from Yemen if the Iranians would agree to leave. They would immediately provide desperately needed humanitarian assistance. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has agreed to spend billions of dollars in leading the fight against Radical Islamic Terrorism.

After my heavily negotiated trip to Saudi Arabia last year, the Kingdom agreed to spend and invest $450 billion in the United States. This is a record amount of money. It will create hundreds of thousands of jobs, tremendous economic development, and much additional wealth for the United States. Of the $450 billion, $110 billion will be spent on the purchase of military equipment from Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and many other great US defense contractors. If we foolishly cancel these contracts, Russia and China would be the enormous beneficiaries - and very happy to acquire all of this newfound business. It would be a wonderful gift to them directly from the United States!

The crime against Jamal Khashoggi was a terrible one, and one that our country does not condone. Indeed, we have taken strong action against those already known to have participated in the murder. After great independent research, we now know many details of this horrible crime. We have already sanctioned 17 Saudis known to have been involved in the murder of Mr. Khashoggi, and the disposal of his body.

Representatives of Saudi Arabia say that Jamal Khashoggi was an "enemy of the state" and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but my decision is in no way based on that – this is an unacceptable and horrible crime. King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman vigorously deny any knowledge of the planning or execution of the murder of Mr Khashoggi. Our intelligence agencies continue to assess all information, but it could very well be that the Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event – maybe he did and maybe he didn't!

That being said, we may never know all of the facts surrounding the murder of Mr Jamal Khashoggi. In any case, our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They have been a great ally in our very important fight against Iran. The United States intends to remain a steadfast partner of Saudi Arabia to ensure the interests of our country, Israel and all other partners in the region. It is our paramount goal to fully eliminate the threat of terrorism throughout the world!

I understand there are members of Congress who, for political or other reasons, would like to go in a different direction - and they are free to do so. I will consider whatever ideas are presented to me, but only if they are consistent with the absolute security and safety of America. After the United States, Saudi Arabia is the largest oil producing nation in the world. They have worked closely with us and have been very responsive to my requests to keeping oil prices at reasonable levels – so important for the world. As President of the United States I intend to ensure that, in a very dangerous world, America is pursuing its national interests and vigorously contesting countries that wish to do us harm. Very simply it is called America First! (Trump, 2018b).

This statement demonstrates the intertwining of several of Riyadh's key lines of discourse

into one complex, but loyal, narrative. Trump justifies his support for the Kingdom along the

lines of anti-Iranianism, anti-terrorism, and anti-Houthi sentiment. He prioritised the continuation of the relationship for security, energy, and economic reasons. Fundamentally, this relationship was viewed as economically beneficial, and therefore beneficial to Trump's chances of re-election. Even the murder of an American resident Washington Post journalist, and an anti-Saudi US Congress, could not stop his commitment to that end.

In December, US Congress voted 56-41 in favour of ending arms sales to Saudi Arabia due to human rights abuses in Yemen. Donald Trump vetoed these moves three times, cementing his commitment to the Saudi cause.

*11.3 Trump Cuts Aid*

2020 was a year of intense fighting in Yemen. Also, the Trump administration doubled down on support for the Saudi war effort. He treated the Houthis as if they were a terrorist organisation, even without the official designation, cutting $73million of aid headed for the north-west of Yemen. Explaining the cuts, one spokesman from the U.S. Agency for International Development, claimed that the administration had grown concerned about "long-standing Houthi interference in humanitarian operations" (Raghavan, 2020). The analysis of this is brief, merely highlighting this policy as the beginning of Trump *acting* as a Saudi sectarian actor, rather than merely speaking as one. There is scant news coverage from the Saudi side during this time, so the focus of this section is primarily on the policy itself and what it meant for Saudi securitisation and Yemen.

This decision came at the worst time possible. In April 2020, just a month after the COVID-19 pandemic began to take hold across Yemen. Whilst international human rights organisations agree that Ansarallah was obstructing the delivery of humanitarian aid, the American-backed Saudi-led coalition had the most significant impact on aid obstruction. Trump's sole focus on the Houthis as the source of harm in Yemen demonstrates the indefatigability of his commitment to Riyadh and their war effort. So deep and pervasive was this view, that it spread to policy restricting the promised delivery of humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable civilians in Yemen.

Trump's decision to cut humanitarian aid support for northern Yemen counts as one of the most prominent examples of the President "behaving like a Saudi sectarian actor". The narrative that the "Houthis are an Iranian proxy" had become securitised to such a profound level that it was put above the priority to protect innocent civilian life. On 27th March 2020, Donald Trump announced that he would cut $73million worth of aid to non-UN groups. Citing "interference from the Iran-backed Houthis", the Trump Administration cut off aid from 750,000 of the most vulnerable people in northern Yemen (Simpson, 2020). This thesis has previously noted that the Houthis have, indeed, obstructed aid in Yemen. However, it has also argued that the primary obstructor of aid is the US-backed Saudi-led blockade. When justifying the cut in aid, the Whitehouse spokesperson focused on the Houthis: "[w]e are extremely concerned that the Houthis have already caused millions of people to lose access to lifesaving humanitarian assistance and worsened the effects of Yemen's humanitarian crisis" (LaForgia, 2020). No mention was made of the impact of the Saudi blockade.

A spokesperson from USAID told Al-Monitor a similar story, arguing that "interference in aid operations is not acceptable anywhere, but the Houthis' actions are particularly egregious" (Harris, 2020). Washington faced heavy criticism from human rights groups. In response, Mike Pompeo announced a \$225million aid package on 6th May – however this was focused on southern Yemen. Further adding to the theoretical understanding of the Trump Administration as a Saudi sectarian actor, Pompeo carefully framed this U-turn, stating,

"This assistance will provide the UN World Food Program's emergency food operation in southern Yemen, as well as a reduced operation in northern Yemen, which the WFP was forced to scale down earlier this month because of the ongoing interference of Iran-backed Houthis" (Reuters, 2020).

In August, six international aid groups wrote to USAID, detailing the impact of their aid cuts to northern Yemen. They stated that, "without a lifting of the suspension, some NGOs in Yemen will be forced to close life-saving programs and field offices or even end their presence in the North" (Miliband et al., 2020). They went on to opine: "While NGOs still contend with constraints on humanitarian access and the risk of aid diversion, the most significant challenge to sustained life-saving humanitarian action today is the severe shortfall in funding, which had been exacerbated by the U.S. suspension" (Miliband et al., 2020).

The reasons this policy was significant are threefold:

1) It represented an American-generated policy, which would actively exacerbate the worsening humanitarian situation in Yemen.
2) It confirmed that the Saudi-generated narrative of the "Houthis are an Iranian proxy" was not only securitised but was now resulting in significant American policy within Yemen.

3) It alleviated pressure on Saudi Arabia over its role in creating the humanitarian disaster, moving the blame firmly onto Iran and the Houthis.

*11.4 Trump Designates the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation*

One of Trump's final actions as president was to label the Houthis as an FTO. The International Rescue Committee regarded the act as "pure diplomatic vandalism" (Rescue, 2021). The Hague's International Centre for Countering Terrorism said of the matter, that "the designation reflected a last attempt by the Trump administration to lash out at its arch foe Iran, who it accused of using the Houthis as a proxy" (van der Kroft, 2021, 2). Mike Pompeo signalled the administration's intention to move forward with this policy on 10th January 2021. In a Press Statement, released through the American Embassy in Egypt, Pompeo mentioned Iran six times. Referring to Ansarallah as an "Iran-backed militia group", he justified the decision to label them as a terrorist organisation, stating that "the designations are also intended to advance efforts to achieve a peaceful, sovereign, and united Yemen that is free from Iranian influence and at peace with its neighbors" (Pompeo, 2021). Throughout the statement, he speaks of the efficacy of this policy in halting Iranian influence in the region.

The timing of this decision reinforces the idea that Trump had become fixated on "the Houthis are an Iranian proxy" narrative, coming just a few hours before he left office. The policy was finally confirmed on 19th January. Justifying the move, Mike Pompeo stated that the designation was made to "deter further malign activity by the Iranian regime" (Chappell and Dwyer, 2021). This decision marked a continuation in using this narrative to justify

measures that could have catastrophic impacts on the humanitarian situation in Yemen. Anti-Iranianism had now clouded humanitarian considerations almost entirely within the Trump Administration's foreign policy agenda. As van der Kroft put it: "Trump was prepared to endanger Yemeni civilians for the sake of a symbolic gesture towards Iran and to place obstacles in his successor's path, using US counter-terrorism policy as a tool against his domestic political opponents" (2021, 8).

Aside from priorities around counterterrorism, the Trump administration viewed Yemen primarily through the lens of Iran. For them, measures against the Houthis were *literal* actions contributing to their commitment to 'maximum pressure' on Iran. Saudi sectarian discourse had become deeply entrenched within the psyche of the key decision-makers within Trump's White House.

It is important to note prominent counter-narratives. Several think tanks welcomed the designation, viewing increased condemnation of Ansarallah as a necessary response to their obstruction of humanitarian aid and their refusal to come to the negotiating table. Director of the Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative at the *Atlantic Council,* Kirsten Fontenrose (2021) said:

"The Houthis should be held accountable for the impact their intransigence has had on the humanitarian situation in Yemen. The United States and Saudi Arabia have made sustained and sincere attempts to work with the UN to create conditions for political progress. Ansar Allah's refusal to advance a settlement has been enabled by the fact that they have the international humanitarian-aid community in a stranglehold
If the international community once again treats Ansar Allah like a victim instead of a responsible actor, then the Houthis will get the message that they can continue for four more

years to manipulate humanitarian aid as a method for controlling a population that does not support them" (Atlantic Council, 2021).

Whilst the Atlantic Council's Carmiel Arbit voiced their concerns about the impact the FTO designation could have on the delivery of humanitarian aid, they nevertheless stated that "the designation further tightens the screws on Iran in the anticipation of handing the reins to a more diplomatically inclined Biden administration" (Atlantic Council, 2021).

Nevertheless, these analyses failed to notice that the FTO designation would do little to quell the limited Iranian support the Houthis do receive. FTO status prohibits anyone under US jurisdiction from providing material support to the group, prevents members entering the US, and means that US financial institutions are forced to freeze funds in which the group has interests. In reality, this means that this act would have little impact on Iran at all, especially as "Iranian support for the Houthis does not flow through the international financial system" (van der Kroft, 2021, 8). Trump hoped that this policy would thwart Biden's predicted attempts at reviving JCPOA talks with Iran, hoping to leave a legacy of a 'maximum pressure' approach on Iran.

Pompeo announced the intention of labelling the Houthis an FTO on 10th January. From that point until 19th February, *Arab News* posted 9 articles that contained the words "Houthi" OR "Houthis", and "Foreign Terrorist Organisation" or "FTO". It is important to note that the policy went into effect on 19th January. Table 6.1 details the key framings found within these articles. All of the "number of appearances" refer to the number of sentences that mention the

relevant theme, apart from "terrorist/terrorism/terror/FTO", which refers to the number of times the specific phrases were used in total.

| Frame | Number of Appearances |
|---|---|
| Legitimate government of Yemen | 42 |
| Houthi/Iranian Strikes on Saudi Arabia | 57 |
| Terrorist | 46 |
| Iran | 39 |
| Ansarallah caused humanitarian crisis | 30 |
| The people of Yemen are harmed by and do not support the Houthis | 19 |
| Houthi attack on Aden Airport | 14 |
| External Praise for Saudi Arabia | 5 |
| Alienating sectarianisation (other than mention of Iran) | 5 |
| Reference to Trump's 'maximum pressure' | 4 |
| Comparing Ansarallah to Al-Qaeda and Daesh | 1 |

*Table 9. Arab News reacts to Houthis being designated a Foreign Terrorist Organisation*

Table 9. demonstrates a circularity in Saudi methods of securitisation. Six years after the Saudi-led intervention began, Riyadh's securitisation agents were using the same narratives that were set by Adel Al-Jubeir in 2015. Chapter Six detailed the justifying discourse surrounding ODS. Addressing American audiences, the then Saudi Ambassador to the US stated, "the objective is to protect the people of Yemen from a radical organisation that is

allied with Iran and Hezbollah", all the while repeating the phrase "legitimate government of Yemen" (Face the Nation, 2015). There were five core frames – "Iran", "protect the people of Yemen", "Houthis are radicals", "legitimate government", "defend Saudi borders". All reappeared in the response to the FTO designation. The passage of time, and the prolonged repetition of these ideas, meant that the five had now become mutually dependent and intertwined. Thus, unlike other sections in this thesis, they are discussed as a unified narrative rather than separate entities.

The decision to label the Houthis as an FTO was made by Washington; however, the narrative that led to this was created in Riyadh. Framed almost entirely as an attempt to curb Iranian influence, this designation went a step beyond discursive reciprocity. It represented Washington taking up the role of primary actor in opposing Ansarallah, cementing Trump's administration as a Saudi sectarian actor. So embedded was the narrative of "the Houthis are an Iranian proxy" that it encouraged Trump to designate them as an FTO. Table 9. shows Saudi news *responding* to this favourably, turning them into the audience.

Responding to the initial announcement by Mike Pompeo on 10th January, *Arab News* published an article the following day detailing the "legitimate government's" approval. This article blamed the Houthis entirely for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, making no mention whatsoever of the role of the Saudi and government-backed blockade or bombing campaign. The Ministry of Foreign and Expatriate Affairs were quoted as stating that: "[t]he Houthis deserve to be classified as a foreign terrorist organization not only for their terrorist acts, but

also for their permanent efforts to prolong the conflict and cause the worst humanitarian disaster in the world" (Arab News, 2021, i).

Not only were the coalition eagerly using this opportunity to portray the Houthis as a threat; they were using it to absolve themselves of responsibility in the humanitarian crisis. They viewed the American designation of the Houthis as an FTO as the actualisation of their securitisation narratives over the previous 6 years. In another article, on 12th January, former Yemeni prime minister and senior adviser to Hadi, Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr, was quoted as describing the US designation as an "accurate and realistic description", adding, "with this historic decision, the Americans have expressed their desire to achieve peace, sovereignty, and unity in Yemen and to save Yemen from Iranian interference" (Al-Batati, 2021a).

There was a lot of discussion of Iran, parroting its continual reference by Trump and Pompeo. In an article published on 30th January, Iran is blamed for causing both the conflict and the humanitarian crisis, representing a classic example of Riyadh's use of alienating sectarianisation. As they put it: "Iran's support for the Houthis has been an open secret since long before the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2015. It has caused the brutal war to rage on unabated and one of the world's worst humanitarian crises to fester" (Edwards, 2021). This thesis' contextual chapters dispelled the idea that Iran had a significant relationship with Ansarallah prior to 2015. Tehran's role was similarly exaggerated across the dataset detailed in Table 9. In another article, an editor of Saudi newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* is quoted as saying: "when Washington takes positive steps towards the Houthis, even if the Houthis wish

to reply positively, they can't, because they don't have a say in making decisions" (Arab News, 2021, ii). The designation of Ansarallah as an FTO accelerated confidence within the Saudi propaganda nexus to use the idea that the "Houthis are an Iranian proxy" to undermine any notion of a political settlement and hint at a preference for their total destruction. Any understanding of the Houthis as a domestic group with its own ambitions had now been removed from the conversation. The FTO designation effectively confirmed the Houthis as just another arm of the IRGC.

*Conclusion*

This chapter has used DT to show the final stages of the Saudi securitisation process in Yemen. It directly speaks to the central research question, examining the ways in which Riyadh justified its extraordinary behaviour to an international audience. Through sectarianisation and fearmongering, Riyadh encouraged Trump to adopt anti-Iranianism as his central regional policy. Trump gave carte blanche to Riyadh over its behaviour, ignoring and suppressing their human rights abuses. The Khashoggi affair demonstrated discursive reciprocal positionality – essentially, whatever Riyadh said, Trump accepted and spread to his followers. The significance of the murder was not lost, however, as the world suddenly became aware of the scale of human rights abuses in Yemen. Biden's relationship with Riyadh is testament to the impact of this moment. Furthermore, the incident highlighted limitations to the success of Riyadh's process of international securitisation, as they faced condemnation from a wide variety of western state actors and multinational institutions.

For Trump, the cutting of humanitarian aid, and designation of Ansarallah as an FTO went beyond discourse. Both policies represented the final stage of Saudi sectarianisation, as Trump's White House devised and implemented pro-Saudi policies in Yemen that were guided and justified by the idea that the "Houthis are an Iranian proxy". The response from the Saudi media establishment shows them using these opportunities to obfuscate any discussion of their own role in the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen. Whilst these policies were partially about Trump's own domestic political agenda, the fact that they were bracketed within his wider policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran, demonstrates that the Saudi-generated narrative of exaggerated influence in Yemen had been effectively securitised by its target audience. Not only was Trump accepting what they were saying but generating his own policy to achieve the same stated goals. The reality that these policies "would have… a devastating impact on civilians living under Houthi control appeared of little concern to him" (van der Kroft, 2021, 8). However, Trump represented a fairly unique case in supporting Saudi Arabia through the Khashoggi affair, as they received widespread condemnation from the wider international community. It also served to highlight Saudi war crimes in Yemen, undermining their international reputation. This showed that there were limitations to the international success of Riyadh's securitisation narratives.

# Conclusion

Overall, this thesis has shown that Saudi and Iranian securitisation narratives had a profound role in justifying extraordinary measures, heightening tension, and exacerbating conflict in Yemen. The period 2015-2021 represented great regional turmoil within the NMECW. Iranian and Saudi foreign policy were dictated by hatred, fear, and opportunism. Both actors spread disinformation nefariously across digital media platforms. In Yemen, this had the effect of deepening animosities between internal and external actors and prolonging a catastrophic conflict.

By the end of 2021, the UN estimated the death toll to be 377,000, "nearly 60 per cent of which are indirect and caused by issues associated with conflict like lack of access to food, water, and healthcare" (Hanna et al., 2021). There have been no angels in this war - all parties are guilty of human rights abuses. It is, however, true to say that the Saudi-led blockade and bombing campaigns have had the most profound impact on the humanitarian crisis and in the loss of civilian life (HRW, 2017; Simpson, 2020; MSF, 2020). As stated at the beginning of this thesis, this is not a polemical point, but one based on careful consideration of the facts. The data shows that justifying the intervention along the lines of "protecting the people of Yemen" constitutes an example of clear Saudi disinformation and propaganda.

In 2015, Saudi securitisation narratives worked to justify a blockade of Yemeni ports and a devastating air campaign. The deceptive nature of these narratives set the precedent for the conflict. Over the next seven years, the Saudi-led coalition would go on to conduct 25,054 air

raids, killing 8,983 and injuring 10,243 (Yemen Data Project, 2022). Only 32 per cent of these would be proven to have hit military targets (Yemen Data Project, 2022).

It is important to focus on a specific example, to demonstrate both the physical and psychological consequences the airstrikes had on the people of Yemen. Between 6th April and 11th May 2015, at least 59 civilians were killed by coalition bombs in Saada City alone (Wille, 2015). On 6th May, a cultural centre and the residential Al-Ibbi house were struck, killing 28. Of these victims, 27 were from the same extended family. The nearest Houthi military base was 2 km away (Wille, 2015). Riyadh has tried to claim that the cultural centre was a meeting point for Houthi militia, however only one resident mentioned that they had heard a rumour about this (Wille, 2015). Justifying this devastation based on suspicion that the building next door may have been a Houthi meeting point, is hardly a proportionate use of force or "putting people first".

The 27 victims of the Al-Ibbi bombing included 17 children. HRW interviewed local resident Ayed Ayed Kamil on 15th May 2015:

"As the strikes hit, I ran outside and saw four members of the [al-Ibbi] family lying on the road… The rest of the bodies were in the house including a one-month-old baby and a pregnant woman" (Wille, 2015).

Twenty-seven members of the same family lie dead side-by-side in the streets of Saada.

As well as directly killing innocent civilians, Saudi bombs destroyed 395 educational facilities, 92 healthcare facilities, and 67 food storage facilities (Yemen Data Project, 2022). These figures alone do not do due justice to the impact of the infrastructural devastation

caused by these airstrikes, and its subsequent negative impact on the successful delivery of humanitarian aid. For example, the airstrike on the Haydan district hospital in Saada in October 2015 did not result in any immediate casualties, but left 200,000 people without healthcare (BBC, 2015b). Many of these bombs were supplied by the US (Motaparthy, 2016).

One of the most sinister things about the blockade came in the spread of cholera and diphtheria during the first two years of the war. Matthew Ponsford (2017), of Reuters, found that "the majority of deaths from Yemen's cholera outbreak have occurred in rebel-controlled areas cut off from supplies due to… blockades by a Saud-led coalition". Widely regarded as an easily treatable Victorian-era disease, its spread across Yemen shows the true humanitarian impact of the Saudi blockade. Yemen is a country that relies heavily on imported machinery for access to clean drinkable water, and cholera is a waterborne disease. From April to August 2017 alone, 436,625 cases of cholera were reported, and 7,000 new cases daily (Kennedy, 2017). These diseases continue to exist in the world of Covid-19, resulting in multi-layered levels of risk for the people of Yemen.

As well as obstructing water, the Saudi blockade of Hudaydah port reduced the total amount of aid entering Yemen. Prior to the blockade, around 80% of Yemen's aid passed through the port (Wintour, 2017). Riyadh's strict maritime control greatly reduced this. By June 2015, just over two months after the blockade began, 80% of Yemen was dependent on humanitarian aid – aid that they could not access (Borger, 2015). James Ross, of Human Rights Watch, claimed that "[t]he Saudi-led coalition's military strategy in Yemen has been

increasingly built around preventing desperately needed aid and essential goods from

reaching civilians, risking millions of lives" (HRW, 2017).

Although limitations to Saudi international securitisation processes were seen during the

Khashoggi affair, American support remained an ever-present, peaking just before Donald

Trump left office. The thesis shows that Riyadh's decision to exaggerate Iranian involvement

had the counterintuitive effect of drawing Iran closer to the Houthis. Tehran seized the

opportunity to increase Saudi anxiety, giving little consideration to the impact their

involvement may have on civilian life in Yemen.

The Houthis obstructed the delivery of humanitarian aid (Simpson, 2020), and launched

numerous strikes into Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They recruited child soldiers, and crushed

dissenting voices (OHCHR, 2020). Ansarallah regularly tortured prisoners (Euro-Med

Human Rights Monitor, 2021), and conducted public executions (Sana'a Center, 2021). They

too, are guilty of killing civilians within the conflict (OHCHR, 2020). As with Saudi war

crimes, an example helps to make sense of Houthi atrocities. In October 2021, the Houthis

conducted strikes on Marib, resulting in the death of two children and injuring a further 33

people. A 14-year-old-boy told Human Rights Watch:

"My brother was playing with others in the neighborhood, at the heart of Marib city when the
missile hit and destroyed at least 10 houses that were in a residential area far away from the
fighting front lines" (HRW, 2021).

The real stories of Yemeni experience are essential for understanding the impact of war

crimes on both sides. The Houthi assault on the southern Marib governorate began in 2020

and forced "93,000 civilians to flee their homes and seek safety in Marib city… which [was] already hosting two million displaced people"; they then "fired artillery indiscriminately into Al-Abdiyah and al-Jubah districts and fired ballistic missiles into Marib city" (HRW, 2021). They were using heavy weaponry that they may not have had without Iranian support.

Throughout the conflict Iran created a grand narrative, utilising an expansive propaganda nexus in an attempt to focus international attention on Saudi war crimes. They used the increased threat perception regarding the Houthis, in an attempt to divert attention from its own acts of aggression (such as Abqaiq-Khurais), and its own human rights abuses. Their success here was limited, as the international community continued to view Iran as a pariah state. Most of their propaganda networks reached narrow and marginal audiences, relying mostly on conspiracy theorists for support. However, Tehran saw that 'the Houthis are an Iranian proxy' narrative engendered genuine fear amongst Gulf and western audiences, and over time, they ensured that this came close to becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, providing the Houthis with all manner of weapons, including ballistic missiles. They effectively harnessed and exaggerated the threat posed by the Houthis to deepen Saudi Arabia's commitment to the conflict, depleting their resources, and in some quarters, their international credibility.

As the support increased, the Houthis regularly integrated themselves within the Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus. They began to understand the effectiveness of representing themselves as 'Iranian allies' for increasing threat perception and gaining a stronger hand in

any future negotiations. However, the Houthis retained their own agency, and never became a classic Iranian proxy in the mould of Hezbollah.

This thesis has developed an answer to the central research question:

*How have Saudi Arabia and Iran used digital propaganda to legitimise and artificially frame their involvement in Yemen?*

The answers to this question are explored in more detail within the following *Key Findings* and *Theoretical Implications* sections. These sections also provide answers to the thesis' three sub-questions:

*What effect have Saudi and Iranian propaganda narratives had on the Yemen conflict?*

*How has sectarianisation been used as a tool of securitisation by Iranian and Saudi elites?*

*How do digital images, distributed via social media, contribute to the securitisation process?*

In order to do so, the thesis has collated data from across the Saudi, American, Iranian, and Houthi propaganda networks. Through DT, it has shown the evolution of tentative early narratives, into unified, powerful, identities and stories. All of the questions speak to this thesis' novel understanding of the audience within securitisation processes. Securitisation is

not a simple speech act, with an elite speaking and a domestic audience accepting, but a complex, context-specific, process, in which the audience plays an active role. Previously, there had been very little work on securitisation narratives that focus on processes that operate between and amongst heads of state. This thesis has provided the notion of reciprocal positionality, to explain the ways in which elite discourses integrate due to shared interests in foreign policy outcomes. The processes were not about state elite audiences being "convinced", as is often the case with domestic audiences. Instead, they were about elites artificially adopting parts of their ally's grand narratives, to justify their own behaviour and further their own ambitions. This is a novel conceptualisation of securitisation, and in this way the thesis makes a unique contribution to knowledge.

By the beginning of 2021, the Houthi propaganda network functioned, in part, as a cell of the wider Axis of Resistance propaganda nexus. As regards the Middle East, Iran, and Yemen, Trump behaved like a Saudi sectarian actor.

The two narratives looked like this:

*Saudi-American: The Houthis are a radical Iranian proxy, and are responsible for drawing us into a conflict, necessary for the security of the region and world. We, as moral actors, are determined to protect the legitimate government and the people of Yemen.*

*Iranian-Houthi: The Western-backed, Saudi-led coalition has starved and murdered innocent Yemeni people. We, as moral actors, stand for the oppressed people of Yemen, and*

*are supporting a defensive war against foreign invaders. The Houthis are the rightful and*

*legitimate government of Yemen.*

The polarising effect of these narratives cannot be underestimated. Both are based on

exaggerations, conflation, and deception - and neither are conducive to peace negotiations.

Neither side is willing to make the concessions necessary for bringing the conflict to an end.

The digital arena has cemented these antagonistic worldviews against each other. The

Americans and Saudis view the Houthis as extremist Iranian proxies; left wing Western

intellectuals, many Yemenis, and regional minorities, view the Saudi-led coalition as the

epitome of evil. External actors have exploited Yemen for their own economic and

geopolitical ambitions. The surrounding discourses have created a system,

[I]n which regional and global actors seek opportunistic partnerships to further their parochial objectives… [This] has perpetuated the conflict and made reconciliation more difficult at both the local and the national level. From Saudi competition for influence in eastern Yemen… to Iranian machinations in Houthi-controlled areas of northern Yemen, no actor is without blame (Egel et al., 2021, 38)

This conclusion outlines the thesis' central findings, their theoretical implications, potential

limitations, and areas for future research.

*Key Findings*

Much of this thesis has examined the claim that 'the Houthis are an Iranian proxy'. Whilst the

Houthis have gradually grown closer to Tehran throughout the conflict, they remain, first and

foremost, an independent group with their own agency. Both Iran and Ansarallah have played

up to the Saudi-led coalition's accusations of deep connections between the two. This has

strengthened their hand in regional peace negotiations, and further increased the anxiety of the coalition.

Riyadh was certain that ODS would end the Houthi threat and restore the legitimate government within a matter of weeks. However, the conflict dragged into eight years. As Saudi Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Prince Khalid bin Bandar al-Saud, noted in an interview with Frank Gardner in 2019: "the thing about war is it's your decision to get involved, but it's never your decision to get out" (RUSI, 2019). Counter-intuitively, the war has increased Iranian interference on their southern border, drained $340billion in the first four years of the conflict (Jalal, 2020), and heaped international humanitarian condemnation on Mohammed bin Salman and his conduct of the war.

From the six wars, to the NDC, to their intervention in Yemen, Saudi determination to "keep Yemen weak" has only served to radicalise, anger, and embolden the Houthis. With increased Iranian support, a tight hold over north-western Yemen, and successful airstrikes on Saudi and UAE oil facilities, Ansarallah are proving more successful than previously thought. Iranian interference has played a significant role in strengthening the Houthi claim to legitimacy and stifling balanced and equitable peace negotiations. The strong grip of the Houthis has meant that they are quite happy to continue fighting, knowing that in the mountains of north Yemen, they remain in the ascendancy. This stalemate has created a bleak outlook for the future of Yemen's society, providing the Houthis with a powerful hand. This is deeply concerning for the prospect of social harmony across the region.

Iran and Ansarallah have, singularly and collectively, portrayed themselves as 'champions of the oppressed'. Their aim was to create a powerful counter-narrative to that of the Saudi-led coalition, centred on notions of anti-Westernism, anti-Semitism, alienating sectarianisation (against Wahhabism), and resistance. The Houthis and Iran presented themselves as innocent protectors of the people of Yemen, clouding their true interests, which were more to do with their own regime security and geopolitical ambitions. In doing so, they aimed to generate anxiety within the Saudi corridors of power and encourage the international community to turn its eye away from Iranian and Houthi human rights abuses. It is difficult to analyse whether this last goal was entirely successful. From the human rights reports and academic papers considered, the focus does seem to be on Saudi war crimes in Yemen; with only partial reference being made to Ansarallah "taxing" and "obstructing" humanitarian aid (Simpson, 2020). Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Iranian propaganda had any role in this, as it reached such a narrow, limited audience.

Another related finding of this thesis relates to its analysis of the IUVM platform. It speaks to one of this thesis' sub-questions: *How do digital images, distributed via social media, contribute to the securitisation process?* The analysis clearly details the way in which Iran attempted to create a visual counter-narrative, heightening the focus on Saudi war crimes, with no critical discussion of its own misdemeanours. The nefarious, covert, IRIB-backed, network of websites and social media accounts was previously under-researched and under-theorised. This thesis makes a unique contribution to the study of the Iranian propaganda

nexus by properly contextualising the key aims, objectives, and frames of IUVM. Visuality was central to portraying the Saudi establishment as blood-thirsty demons, and, by opposition, Iran and the Houthis as moral defenders of the oppressed.

Analysis of IUVM is also important because it shows Iran's attempt at influencing an international audience. Through creating a counter-narrative, they sought to undermine Saudi Arabia, drawing attention away from the humanitarian abuses of the Islamic Republic. Through their use of the English language, these platforms detail the outward-facing international face of Iranian securitisation, seeking to appeal to regional and international audiences. Whilst this may have created a counter-narrative that made leaders in Riyadh uneasy, Iran was ultimately unsuccessful in appealing to a wide international audience. Western state actors remained unified against Tehran, and the few westerners who accepted and adopted their propaganda were mere conspiracy theorists. Humanitarian organisations did spend a lot of time reporting on Saudi war crimes in Yemen, but they did not stop reporting on Iranian abuses elsewhere in the region. Regardless, IUVM cannot be credited with any significant role in influencing international attitudes, due to its relatively low popularity in terms of followers, clicks, and subscribers.

Conversely, the Saudi-led coalition presented their intervention in Yemen as "protecting the legitimate government of Yemen", "attacking an Iranian proxy", "defensive", "necessary", "protecting the people of Yemen", "protecting Saudi Arabia's border", and "combatting a radical group". Many of these narratives relied on an assertion of truth centred around a

spurious, subjective, and disputed version of facts. The Iranian proxy narrative, as discussed, has provided coalition members and external backers with a justification for their continued role in exacerbating the world's worst humanitarian crisis. It constituted an example of 'alienating sectarianisation'. It has also had the antithesis of drawing Iran deeper into the conflict.

Insistence over "the legitimate government" did not appeal to Yemenis, many of whom rejected President Hadi as a Saudi stooge. Their assertion that they were "protecting the people of Yemen" now seems the most difficult claim to evidence, considering the humanitarian impact of the blockade and bombing campaigns.

For their part, the US has contributed to this polarised situation through their continued support for the Saudi war effort. They were not alone amongst international actors: with the UK, Canada, France, and Germany all providing weapons to the Al Saud since 2015. However, it was Washington that gave the greatest strategic, military, political, and financial assistance to the Kingdom. Obama's administration legitimised the conflict, immediately accepting Saudi justifications in 2015. However, Obama's role attempted to balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Donald Trump changed this, professing his total support for the Al Saud through both the Khashoggi affair and the war in Yemen. His response to the Khashoggi murder, boycotting sanctions against the Kingdom, spoke volumes about his loyalty to the Al Saud and his

fixation on Saudi arms deals. The murder of Khashoggi was also telling over the effect of the Saudi-American ability to control the narrative, as it was only this that raised Western awareness of the conflict in Yemen. Prior to 2018, there was little to no knowledge of the humanitarian crisis in Arabia Felix.

By the end of his presidency, Trump was acting upon Saudi lines of securitisation that he had internalised. As Alhmadian put it, "[w]hile Obama's balancing policy distanced the US from sectarian rhetoric and its effects on the ground, Trump's anti-Iran policy risk[ed] making Washington a sectarian actor" (Ahmadian, 2018, 143). Labelling the Houthis an FTO was the best example of this - an action that had devastating consequences for the most vulnerable people in Yemen. This shows the depths of American-Saudi reciprocal positionality during this period.

Reciprocal positionality was also prominent, on occasion, between the Houthis and Iran. It was especially strong during the aftermath of the attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities in Saudi Arabia - as both actors maintained an interest in claiming Ansarallah was responsible. The high levels of integration of media sources shows this point clearly.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that things have not always been this way. Tehran and Riyadh have not been in an eternal, permanent rivalry. Prior to the 1979 revolution, there were prolonged periods of civility and cooperation between the two countries. They even supported the same side (although the Shah's support was minimal) in the Yemen Civil War

of the 1960s, supporting what was essentially a Zaydi Imamate. Khomeinism and the creation

of the Islamic Republic created a direct challenge to the Saudi style of dynastic monarchy,

and a challenge to their leadership of the Muslim World as Custodians of the Two Holy

Mosques. Two worldviews and alliance systems developed from this point onwards, pitting

the Western-backed Saudis against the Axis of Resistance of Iran. From the early 1980s,

sectarian identity was used by both to alienate and undermine the opposition. The Arab

Spring exacerbated weak and failing states like Yemen, hastening fragmentation still further.

This posed threats to and opportunities for Saudi Arabia and Iran. Learnt behaviours of

sectarianisation served as tools to justify foreign policy and further geopolitical ambition.

Across the Internet, they reached levels of impact never previously reached, having profound

impacts. They prolonged and perpetuated conflict in Yemen though sowing discord and

spreading disinformation. This has had devastating consequences for the people of Yemen.


*Theoretical Implications*

*Sectarianisation, Securitisation, and Propaganda*

This thesis innovated around sectarianisation, to understand the multiplicity of Iranian and

Saudi propaganda. Found in both its alienating and unifying, and explicit and implicit, forms,

sectarianisation helps to explain securitisation processes targeted at both regional and

international audiences. Ontological security underpins these processes, speaking to the

security of "us" against the insecurity of "them". Fundamentally, the over-exaggeration of the

wrongdoing of "them" has legitimised a wide variety of ethically and legally questionable

activities in Yemen. Through contrasting discourse with historical events on the ground, this

thesis offers a unique contribution to the fields of discourse analysis and conflict studies. The thesis argues that words and images have a profound impact on justifying extraordinary foreign policy; in this case, resulting in the exacerbation of the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The thesis was heavily inspired by the tentative work of Siegel, who observed spikes in sectarian animosity on Twitter during ODS in 2015 (Siegel, 2015). Her observation provided the motivation for unravelling this story across a greater span of time, and across digital media sources, observing the ways in which the Iranian-Saudi propaganda war had a profound impact on the real war in Yemen. Linguistic and visual discourse increased tension, glorified or undermined violence, and justified human rights abuses. It encouraged Iran to get more deeply involved in the conflict, increased the stubbornness of Ansarallah, and dragged the Saudi-led coalition deep into an unwinnable war.

From a theoretical perspective, as the Copenhagen School was developed in a pre-Internet world, many of its central concepts were outdated. Also, due to its Eurocentric focus, some of its ideas about identity, functional actors, and extraordinary measures were unsuited to analysis of authoritarian states. It is hardly groundbreaking to argue that the media serves the interests of the ruling elite in Tehran and Riyadh. However, by integrating this observation into the theoretical paradigm of securitisation studies, the thesis has been able to temporally trace and conceptualise the development of sectarian narratives regarding Yemen. State-ran

media, and international allies, are not functional actors, but active participants in the meaning-making securitisation process.

Innovatively, this thesis has addressed the vastly under-theorised role of the audience (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016, 725). As stated, it has focused on international audiences, state elite-state/non-state actor elite securitisation, and reciprocal positionality. It has constructed a model through which researchers can understand the audience as an active part of the process. The audience is not simply "convinced" in these cases but often artificially adopts narratives to suit their own rational state interests. Trump and Saudi Arabia both benefited from their enduring relationship, and over time their discourse around Yemen synchronised. The same can be said for Tehran and the Houthis. This understanding changes the structure of securitisation theory, suiting it to more nuanced examinations of discourse between actors from different states.

Another significant gap, within both MENA studies and securitisation studies, was the lack of research into digital propaganda, the Internet, and social media (Gaufman, 2014). When research for this thesis began in 2019, there were only a handful of papers on the topic (e.g., Siegel, 2015; Jones, 2016; Jones 2019). Through analysing data from across social media, YouTube, and state-ran news websites, this thesis has provided a diverse range of examples of how to conduct digital discourse analysis. Along with the thesis's approach of VDT, the thesis has demonstrated the applicability of LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) model of DT to the study of digital propaganda. The structure of the method facilitates chronological analysis,

leaving room for context, audience, and reciprocity. In this sense - it mirrors the way in which Internet propaganda is spread and consumed. Innovatively, this thesis has contributed to knowledge by going one step further, and showing how these developed narratives reflect and impact events on the ground.

This thesis was heavily influenced by the post-structuralist ethos developed in the theoretical framework and methodology. Post-structuralism encouraged the thesis to look first at context and case study, and then adapt theoretical approaches to fit them. It has facilitated a pragmatic and flexible approach to research, adapting theories from a number of disciplines, including psychology and media studies. The concept of mediatisation was particularly useful in challenging utopian accounts of social media and the Internet. Through applying Hoskins and O'Loughlin's notion of "the arrested period" to the Middle East, the thesis was able to explain the authoritarian domination of digital media. Influenced by the work of Marc Owen Jones (2022), this thesis contributes to a burgeoning body of literature that views digital media as the ultimate tool of authoritarian surveillance, control, and manipulation in the region.

Jones' (2019) idea of "automatography" also provided significant motivation. Although mentioned only in passing in his 2019 paper, this phrase provided the push to conduct something close to a digital ethnography - tracing the development of shared narratives over time. Whilst the thesis did not argue that sectarian identities became more deeply entrenched amongst actors, it did argue that various types of sectarian discourse became more popular at

periods of turmoil, as a tool for justifying extraordinary measures. Disinformation, "othering", and alienation, brought Iran and the Houthis closer together, unified against the US and Saudi Arabia. The same can be said for the Riyadh-Washington axis. The specificity of digital media meant that these narratives, and subsequent identities, were particularly antagonistic, violent, polarised, and visual.

Upon conducting the research, it became increasingly clear how sizable the gap in the literature was around visual propaganda. VDT was developed within this thesis, providing a unique contribution to the discourse analysis and visual studies literature. Adapting Wang's (2014) model to suit the contemporary Middle East, this method has a wide range of potential applications, spanning the breadth of MENA security studies. The key innovations for future research are that:

i) The principles of DT and CDA can be applied, with adjustments, to analysis of the visual.
ii) Consideration of what is not shown, can be as important as what is. Step 4 of this thesis' model of VDT encourages researchers to use a process known as "the commutation test" to consider how the meaning may change if an image contained different figures, characters, or context. It also encourages researchers to consider the relevance of what is missing.
iii) Consideration of overarching narratives and frames is important before analysing the content of visual propaganda.
iv) The specificity of relevant identities should be properly considered before conducting visual explanation.

Yemen is a vastly under-researched country, and so is the conflict. This project has built on valuable work by the likes of Ginny Hill (2017), Helen Lackner (2017), Elisabeth Kendall (2017), Mohammad Hassan Al-Qadhi (2017), Maria-Louise Clausen (2022) and others, to further understand the importance of the Iranian-Saudi rivalry to the conflict. Whilst these studies all offer unique contributions, no study to date had analysed the impact of the Saudi and Iranian game of digital warfare across the entirety of the Internet on the conflict, across a large set of case studies. Through focusing on key events in the conflict, this thesis has shown the impact of visual and linguistic discourse on the prolongation and exacerbation of the Yemen conflict and the humanitarian crisis. In doing so, it makes an original contribution not only to the study of Yemen, but also provides a model to approach the study of conflict, and humanitarian crisis more broadly.

*Limitations*

The overarching limitation was a lack of funding. This thesis was conducted entirely on a self-funded basis, with zero finances provided by sources external to the researcher. This had a multitude of impacts. Social media analysis really benefits from expensive software programmes such as Scraawl and other, more sophisticated, platforms. These devices are essential for grouping, codifying, and analysing large amounts of Twitter data, but cost thousands of pounds per month. Earlier in the thesis, there is some brief data from Scraawl, collected by the researcher in 2020. This was during a 7-day free trial provided by the

platform. If access to these kinds of tools was a financial possibility, the thesis could have gone deeper into social media analysis specifically. It also would have provided a clearer indication of the impact of specific narratives on everyday mindsets, and non-elite attitudes. However, it is important to say that this thesis was primarily concerned with international processes of state elite-state/non-state elite securitisation and in characterising particular elite level narratives. It was successful in these endeavours, despite the lack of funding.

This thesis uses simple data as a tool for qualitative analysis. The lack of coding, and deep quantitative analysis, is one of the strengths and limitations of the thesis. Other studies have conducted research using vast datasets of millions of Tweets; but scholars with these resources and skill sets continue to signal the virtues of qualitative analysis. Marc Owen Jones states that "qualitative methods… detail a richer and more comprehensive analysis of deception operations" (2022, 19). However, he also states that "quantitative methods… help us identify patterns of behaviour across large datasets that provide evidence for the presence of manipulation" (Jones, 2022, 19). This thesis could have benefited from some further training, understanding, and access to software that could have made sense of large amounts of Twitter data and in order to be able to conduct research using the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API). Nevertheless, the thesis has done well to characterise the key frames of the Saudi and Iranian propaganda nexuses through analysis of smaller datasets from social media and news websites.

Research for this thesis began in earnest in early 2020. The 2-year time period in which "in

person" fieldwork, interviews, training, and workshops could have been conducted was largely dominated by the COVID-19 lockdown. All researchers had to adapt their methodological approaches and establish innovative solutions to a truly unique set of problems. The researcher could really have benefited from getting out to the Middle East during the thesis, but this was something that both COVID and self-funding did not allow. Even without COVID, travelling to Yemen in particular would have been difficult to get past the university ethics board - due to the high level of insecurity in the country. The researcher did present papers at six conferences, but all of them, bar one in the summer of 2022, were entirely online.

To compensate, the thesis spent a lot of time developing innovative theoretical approaches, as a means of ensuring the PhD makes a relevant, contextual, and unique contribution to knowledge.

Throughout the thesis, continuous mention has been made to the "problem of attribution". It is very difficult to definitively connect social media accounts and nefarious websites to state elites - the example of IUVM being case in point. This is an existential problem facing the entirety of research into digital propaganda, to which there is no quick fix. It is easy for websites to create fake contact information, and Twitter accounts do not require any verification process. Despite these challenges, through detailed qualitative analysis, it has been possible to show that these networks hugely benefit one actor, and so can reliably be assumed to be connected to them, most likely in a direct way, but at the very least, indirectly.

This thesis' approaches to DT and VDT can help future researchers in the difficult endeavour of social media attribution.

A further weakness of the study is that it does not consider the voices of Yemeni people on the ground. The researcher hopes to interview refugee communities in the near future, and test some of the findings of this thesis. Elite-level, top-down analysis is but one part of international relations, and the thesis could have benefited from understanding the impact these dynamics have had on the mindsets of the people of Yemen through testimonies, lived-experience narratives, and interviews. In turn, this could have helped prove or disprove some of the thesis' arguments and assumptions.

Finally, this thesis was initially meant to conduct a comparative case study between Yemen and Syria, to show the differing ways in which sectarian narratives, and other forms of propaganda, are used in different conflicts. The hypothesis here was that different levels of actual threat change the nature of sectarianisation. For example, Iran was more transparent about its use of sectarian militia in Syria due to the country's importance to the Islamic Republic. When conducting the research, it became clear that Yemen was the most under-researched and misunderstood conflict - motivating the researcher to narrow the focus. A cross-comparative case study of Syria and Yemen would have made its own unique contribution to knowledge, however.

*Avenues for future research*

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It is important to conclude this thesis by detailing avenues opened for future research. The thesis has shown that propaganda has had a profound impact on justifying extraordinary behaviour in the Yemen conflict. Methodologically and ontologically, this approach can be used to help explain state securitisation processes in other contemporary conflicts. For example, this could be applied to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin has used a vast propaganda network and a whole series of conspiracy theories in an attempt to legitimise its illegal war - something that could be further understood through the application of some of this thesis' methodological approaches.

As regards Yemen, understanding the impact of disinformation and propaganda from external actors is essential for creating a stable future for the country. Many researchers studying Yemen are quite rightly interested in the peace process. This thesis can provide both researchers and policymakers with insights into the intentions of external actors, the impact of their visual and linguistic discourse, and their negative role in exploiting the country for their own ends. An enduring peace must be a Yemeni peace - not one engineered by external regional actors.

As stated in "limitations", there would be a real richness to contrasting the findings of this thesis with another contemporary conflict. For the purposes of understanding Iranian and Saudi securitisation behaviour and sectarianisation patterns, a comparison with Syria or even potentially Libya would work well.

A potential avenue considered by the researcher himself is comparing the fairly facile way in which Riyadh gained Western support for its intervention in Yemen, which has undeniably resulted in human rights abuses on a grand scale, with the widespread and immediate Western condemnation of Russian human rights abuses in Ukraine. This could make a unique contribution to knowledge, showing the selective application of ethical standards to conflicts. This research would fit more neatly within the fields of humanitarian studies, law, and political theory.

The approach of this thesis could also be applied to understanding the way in which state actors justify, or divert attention away from, their own human rights abuses at home. Two potential avenues for this are the Islamic Republic's response to the protests following the murder of Mahsa Amini, and the widespread practice of sports-washing by Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

As previously mentioned, there is a need for deeper quantitative analysis of social media data surrounding the war in Yemen. This thesis did consider social media but focused most prominently on data collected from news websites. Siegel's (2015) study focused only on sectarian discourse on Twitter surrounding ODS. A more holistic quantitative picture is required to understand the entirety of the conflict - a Yemen propaganda database. This would create room for a profound body of literature, developing a greater level of qualitative understanding of the impact of social media propaganda on the war in Yemen. As signalled in

the 'limitations' section, this would require a specifically trained academic with the support of a generous financial backing.

Whilst this thesis made reference to the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, more explicit work needs to be done on accountability. The findings of this thesis help to make sense of how certain atrocities were legitimised but does not aim to actively hold actors to account.

Theoretically and methodologically, the most innovative and novel avenue for future research is visuality. This thesis, along with the 2022 publication (Walsh, 2022), provide researchers with a model for the study of visual propaganda. In the world of Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, this model could be applied to help understand state media control across social media platforms, as well as grassroots protest movements. Visual analysis is essential for understanding the way in which digital media is used to advance a vast array of political goals in the contemporary Middle East. It is the future of propaganda, but maybe too, the path to progress and wider regional cooperation.

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