

Saudi Arabia's national interests in military intervention policy in Yemen against Iranian involvement

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ABSTRACT

The Yemeni Civil War, which has been ongoing since 2015, has attracted significant international attention due to its complex dynamics and severe humanitarian consequences. Among the main actors involved, Saudi Arabia's intervention played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of the conflict. This study analyzes Saudi Arabia's intervention's motivation, nature, and impact, especially in its geopolitical rivalry with Iran and broader national interests. This study uses a qualitative approach. Data was collected through various scholarly sources and empirical data. The study evaluates the military, political, and humanitarian dimensions of Saudi Arabia's involvement as well as its regional and global implications. The findings of this study reveal that Saudi Arabia's intervention was primarily driven by security concerns, economic interests, and the pursuit of regional dominance rather than solely in response to Iranian influence. However, the protracted nature of the conflict and its humanitarian consequences highlight the challenges Saudi Arabia faces in achieving its objectives. By contextualizing these results within a broader socio-political framework, this study provides a deeper understanding of the Yemeni crisis and the role of external actors, particularly Saudi Arabia, in shaping its development.

Keywords: Humanitarian Crisis, Intervention, Regional Dynamics, Saudi Arabia, Yemeni Civil War



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INTRODUCTION

The civil conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebel group has given rise to external parties getting involved in it, one of which is Iran. Iran began its involvement in the Yemeni conflict when the Houthis and the Yemeni government confronted each other in 2009 or what was known at that time as the Sa'da war. At that time, Iran sent military training assistance to Houthi militants, weapons, and funds for war (Terrill, 2014). Iran's assistance is covert. When Houthi militants controlled the capital, Sana'a, this could not be separated from Iran's covert assistance to the Houthi militants.

With Iran's involvement in Yemen, it gave rise to a response from neighboring countries, namely Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia promulgated its military involvement policy in Yemen in March 2015. The operation sought to reinstate Hadi as president and to quell the Houthi insurrection, which received support from Iran. Since 2015, the Saudi military and its coalition partners have executed an aerial campaign against the Houthis and their affiliates. Most recently, on 1 September 2019, the Saudi-led coalition carried out airstrikes against Houthi-run detention centers, causing casualties of more than 100 people (Sharp, 2021).

The Yemeni Civil War, which erupted in 2015, has developed into one of the most protracted and devastating conflicts of the 21st century, with major implications for regional stability and global security. At the heart of the conflict is Saudi Arabia's intervention, backed by a coalition of regional allies, to support the internationally recognized government against Houthi rebels.

However, as Darwich (2018) argues, Saudi Arabia's intervention was not solely based on security concerns or sectarian rivalries but was essentially to assert its status as a regional power. The shift from a traditionally cautious foreign policy to a more aggressive interventionist stance marks a significant transformation in Saudi Arabia's geopolitical strategy. As Sharp (2021) notes, the conflict in Yemen has become a battleground for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, with both countries vying for dominance in the region. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's leadership under Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has sought to cement its image as a decisive regional power, so the outcome of the Yemen conflict is critical to its long-term strategic vision.

This study aims to explore the underlying motivations for Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen by analyzing its defense, economic, world order, and ideological interests. By understanding these factors, we can gain deeper insight into the wider geopolitical consequences of the conflict.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze Saudi Arabia's intervention in the Yemen conflict, focusing on its military, political, and humanitarian dimensions. The qualitative method was selected to provide a deeper understanding of the conflict's dynamics, the motivations behind Saudi Arabia's involvement, and the implications of its actions within the broader socio-political context. Data for the study was collected from various scholarly sources and empirical evidence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Background: Origins of the Yemeni Civil War

The Yemeni Civil War originated with the Arab Spring events of 2011, resulting in the ousting of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the succession of his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. However, the transition proved turbulent, marked by political instability, economic collapse, and widespread discontent. The Houthi movement, which represents the Zaidi Shia minority in Yemen, exploited these grievances to expand its influence and eventually took control of the capital, Sana'a, in 2014. This sparked a series of events that culminated in a full-scale civil war in 2015, with many actors competing for power and influence.

The involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Yemen conflict cannot be separated from their conflict. If we draw from history, relations between the two countries have heated up since the beginning of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which was brought about by Khomeini, who was Shia, while Saudi Arabia itself is a country with a Sunni religion and majority (Zein, 2015). At that time, Shah Reza Pahlavi, an Iranian revolutionary, was considered politically arrogant in the Gulf countries. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia considers Shah Reza Pahlavi a source of stability and balance in several Middle Eastern countries (Rich, 2012).

Recently, the conflict became warmer when Saudi Arabia executed the Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr-Al Nimr because he was deemed to have wanted to commit acts of terrorism. Iran immediately responded to this by attacking the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran because of their sympathy with fellow Shiites. Then this angered the Saudi Arabian government by cutting off Saudi Arabia's diplomatic relations with Iran, which resulted in the latest crisis in the Middle East (Muhamad, 2016).

After these conflicts occurred, the Arab Spring hit Middle Eastern countries, especially Yemen, which gave rise to internal conflicts within them. Iran is present in Yemen, helping the Houthi rebel group against the Yemeni government. This resulted in President Hadi going to Saudi Arabia to ask for help. In response to President Hadi's request, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition of mostly Arab countries, including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, began launching air strikes and a naval blockade against Houthi forces under the Operation Decisive Storm campaign (Broder, 2017). In July 2015, a Saudi-led coalition was able to retake Aden, Yemen. In an effort to reduce the Houthi alliance's supplies, the Saudi-led coalition launched Operation Golden Arrow in January 2016 to take control of the west coast (Karakır, 2018).

Saudi Intervention: Motivations and Interests

This study identifies four primary motivations behind Saudi Arabia's military intervention policy in Yemen: defense interests, economic interests, world order interests, and ideological interests. The findings suggest that Saudi Arabia perceives Yemen as a strategic battleground to counter Iran's influence and secure its regional leadership. The intervention is not only driven by security concerns but also by economic, geopolitical, and ideological factors that shape Saudi Arabia's broader foreign policy strategy.

1. Defense Interest

According to Saudi Arabia's national defense interests, there are four basic reasons behind its willingness to stabilize Yemen under President Hadi's government, namely securing Saudi Arabia's borders, containing Iran's regional expansionist ambitions, and fighting terrorist threats and maintaining regional security (Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). In this regard, the war

against the Houthi bloc, which Iran claims to support, is the Kingdom's top priority. Saudi Arabia has been the target of attacks by the Houthis. According to the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, between May 2015 and 27 January 2017 there were more than 40 missile attacks by Houthi separatists targeting Saudi Arabia, of which nine missiles hit Saudi territory (Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). This has resulted in increased migration flows from Yemen to Saudi Arabia which is another component of Saudi attention to the security of its borders. As a result of the ongoing crisis in Yemen, more than one million refugees have sought refuge in their northern neighbor (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016).

Saudi Arabian authorities regularly consider Iran complicit in Yemen's long-running conflict. This is demonstrated by Iran's broad support for the Houthis (Sharp, 2021). The Saudi Arabia-led coalition also condemned Iran for violating the United Nations (UN) arms embargo against the Houthis, but Iran has consistently denied these accusations (Broder, 2017). Following the November 4, 2017 missile attack on Saudi Arabia's King Khalid International Airport by the Houthis, Saudi claims of missiles in the attack being supplied by Iran reached a crescendo (Broder, 2017).

Saudi Arabia also emphasized that intervention was necessary to maintain its own security. Saudi Arabia sees Yemen as its "backyard" and blames Iran for supporting Houthi rebels, from the country's Zaydi minority, who fought alongside Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Moreover, it is the weakest link in the security chain of the Arabian Peninsula and becomes easy prey for Tehran to penetrate and manipulate (Fattah cited in Black, 2016). For Saudi Arabia, the Houthis embody what Iran wants to achieve throughout the Arab world, namely the development of non-state and non-Sunni armed actors who can pressure Iran's enemies both politically and militarily resulting in threats to Saudi Arabia's defense (Sharp, 2021). This could explain Saudi Arabia's interest in launching a military campaign there.

2. Economic Interest

Saudi Arabia engaged in military intervention in Yemen, collaborating with numerous other Arab nations. This action aims to thwart the Houthis' efforts to extend their dominion over Yemeni territory by military means and to eradicate Iranian influence in Yemen. This is accomplished by conveying a definitive message to Iran that Saudi Arabia is resolute in maintaining the current political equilibrium in Yemen, as it regards Yemen as a crucial region and a component of its strategic depth. Riyadh also wants to convey a message to Iran that it is determined to maintain its influence and interests in this vital area by using different means, including its hard power, which has severely restricted Iran's movements in Yemen (Al-Qadhi, 2017).

Saudi Arabia's military intervention was also based on the assistance Iran provided to the Houthi rebels. When Iran's economic assistance helped the Houthi movement against Hadi's government, this had an impact on Iran's influence in Yemen. Saudi Arabia, as a country that has close economic relations with Yemen, has carried out military intervention to secure its economic influence from the cooperation it has built so far with Yemen. This is proven by the cooperation built by Tehran with the Houthis. Tehran also welcomes people from the Houthis and other Yemeni groups for religious education (Salisbury, 2015). Recently, this type of activity has increased as Houthi officials travel to Iran to discuss economic and political ties.

The result was a series of Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) on strengthening aid, modernizing Al-Hudaydah port, and cooperating on maritime transport (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016). This followed another MOU in February 2015 then increasing the number of flights between the two countries.

3. World Order Interest

The Saudis believe that the Houthis pose a significant threat to regional security because of their apparent ties to Iran. In Saudi logic, taking a military stance against the group is a way to check Iran's unwanted expansion across the peninsula (Clausen, 2015). The Saudi Foreign Ministry asserted that the issue stemmed directly from Iran's overt interference in Yemen's domestic matters. Tehran seeks to destabilize Yemen's security, exacerbate sectarian differences, and obstruct international initiatives aimed at attaining a peaceful end to the Yemeni crisis.

Saudi Arabia's choice to articulate its military intervention policy against Iranian influence in Yemen underscores its position as a regional force in the Middle East. The Kingdom's aspirations for regional leadership encountered challenges due to its inability to establish a coalition against Iran. Iran's dominance in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon underscores the Kingdom's inability to function as a regional power capable of shaping developments in its vicinity. Relying on its Islamic identity, the Kingdom sought to place itself at the center of a regional coalition (or in sectarian terms a "Sunni" coalition) to fight its long-standing Shia enemy, (Darwich, 2018). To face Iran's influence which is disrupting Saudi as a regional power in the Middle East, by using its accumulated military capabilities in the war in Yemen, the Kingdom has the aim of asserting its position as a regional power more effectively (Darwich, 2018).

4. Ideological Interests

Saudi Arabia perceived the conflict with the Houthis as an ideological confrontation with Iran, declaring that only total victory would be deemed acceptable. Saudi Arabia uses sectarian discourse to justify the need for intervention. Riyadh projects itself as a protector of the Sunni religion that must combat sources of regional instability. It is interesting to note that the Saudi narrative of framing the Houthis as Shiites allied with Iran has been effective (Cerioli, 2018).

Saudi Arabia's action aimed to curtail Iran's expanding influence in Yemen. Saudi policymakers think that the Shiite Houthis serve as proxy for Iran, collaborating to encircle Saudi Arabia. The country possesses a Shiite minority, prompting the Saudi ruling elite to be apprehensive about Iranian influence on Saudi Shiite people. This battle is a response to Iran's increasing influence in the Arabian Peninsula via the Houthi rebel movement. In dealing with Iran, the Saudi Arabian government uses the media to build a narrative facing Shia Iran which threatens Saudi Arabia (Darwich, 2018).

Implication

These findings suggest that Saudi Arabia's military intervention has had major consequences for both Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The prolonged conflict has strained Saudi Arabia's military resources and international reputation, raising concerns about the effectiveness of its intervention strategy. Meanwhile, Yemen has suffered a severe humanitarian crisis, with widespread loss of life, famine, and infrastructure damage.

The conflict has intensified regional polarization, with Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in the broader proxy war. This study underscores the growing influence of non-state actors in Middle East conflicts, complicating traditional state-centered diplomacy. Internationally, the war has drawn criticism, particularly regarding human rights violations and civilian casualties, further challenging Saudi Arabia's global standing.

This study aligns with Darwich (2018) and Sharp (2021) studies, emphasizing Saudi Arabia's intervention's sectarian and geopolitical dimensions. However, this study extends those findings by highlighting the economic motivations behind Saudi Arabia's actions, showing how Iran's economic engagement with the Houthis has influenced Saudi Arabia's intervention policy. In addition, this study provides a more detailed analysis of the narrative strategies used by Saudi Arabia to justify its military actions, which contributes to a broader discussion on the geopolitics of the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen was driven by a combination of defense, economic, geopolitical and ideological factors. Although Saudi Arabia seeks to counter Iranian influence, maintain regional security and protect its economic interests, the conflict has exposed the limitations of its military strategy and regional leadership ambitions. These findings suggest that Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen is not merely a defensive measure but also a strategic maneuver to assert its regional dominance. However, the protracted nature of the conflict and its humanitarian consequences highlight the challenges Saudi Arabia faces in achieving its objectives. Future research could explore alternative diplomatic approaches that could lead to conflict resolution, as well as the long-term implications of Saudi Arabia's intervention on regional stability.

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