

BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

**The Saudi-Iranian Quest for Regional Hegemony,
The Case of the Yemeni War**

BACHELOR THESIS

Bratislava, 2019

Dániel Cséfalvay

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Dániel Cséfalvay

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare, that this bachelor thesis is the work of my own and has not been published in part or in whole elsewhere. All used literature is attributed and cited in references.

In Bratislava, February 15, 2020

Dániel Cséfalvay

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Abstract

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In the Middle Eastern region, the competing hegemonic interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran are often referred to as a proxy war, since they support different actors in various conflicts throughout the region, without being in open conflict. The civil war in Yemen started off as a conflict between the local actors, however, it gradually escalated and was influenced by the interests of the external actors. It is said to be the most recent addition to the “cold war” in the Middle East. Looking at the interests of the states through the lens of John Mearsheimer’s offensive realism and assessing the influence of the international actors by applying John Stedman’s *International Actors and Internal Conflicts* the thesis aims to explore whether the Yemeni conflict could be described as part of the quest for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Abstrakt

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V regióne Blízkeho východu sa konkurenčné hegemónické záujmy Saudskej Arábie a Iránu často označujú ako proxy vojna, pretože podporujú rôznych aktérov v rozdielnych konfliktoch v celom regióne bez toho, aby boli v otvorenom konflikte. Občianska vojna v Jemene začala ako konflikt medzi miestnymi povstalcami a vládou, postupne sa však stupňovala a bola ovplyvňovaná záujmami externých aktérov. Hovorí sa, že ide o posledný prírastok „studenej vojny“ na Blízkom východe. Cieľom tejto bakalárskej práce je preskúmať záujmy štátov prostredníctvom teórie ofenzívneho realizmu Johna Mearsheimera a zhodnotiť ich vplyv na účastníkov konfliktu pomocou *Medzinárodných Aktérov a Vnútorých Konfliktov* od Johna Stedmana. Práca skúma či je možné jemenský konflikt opísať ako súčasť snahy Saudskej Arábie a Iránu vytvoriť regionálnu hegemóniu.

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From exile to exile

“My country grieves
in its own boundaries
and in other people’s land
and even on its own soil
suffers the alienation
of exile.”

Abduallah al-Baradouni

Introduction

The war in Yemen, which accounts for the world's largest humanitarian crisis, is often regarded as a "forgotten conflict" due to the lack of media coverage and the complicated nature of the war. The complexities result in a poor assessment of the multi-layered conflict and fail to take into account a wider Middle Eastern perspective on the issue. The influence of the international community and the regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran is frequently marginalised, leading the discourse to focus solely on the internal drivers of the war. In order to understand the depth of the conflict, it is crucial to look at the societal division in Yemen and how the historical developments lead to it. However, the influence of international actors, their presence and interests in the conflict must be also considered to gain a holistic perspective on the situation in Yemen.

The currently ongoing conflict in Yemen started in 2015 after the incumbent president of the transitional government Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi was forced to flee the country by the northern Yemeni rebel group called the Houthis, following the failed negotiations about the future and the political structure of Yemen. The conflict, however, is far more complex than often reported. Tracing back the roots of the Yemeni war only to this instance, would constitute fairly reductionist, since it neglects decades of political developments leading up to the war and the influence of the competing interests of the two major regional actors, Saudi Arabia and Iran (Hero, 2018).

The Yemeni war that started as a regional conflict was influenced by a variety of foreign actors and eventually developed to a large multi-layered warfare. The complex nature of the conflict and the ambiguity surrounding the interests and the involvement of the two major actors often challenges the claim that the war is, in fact, a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yemen borders on the northern side with Saudi Arabia, therefore it constitutes a strategic geographical position for the Kingdom. Iran is said to be supporting the Houthi rebels in the northern part of Yemen, where they supplied weapons, intelligence and military supplies (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016). The power politics of Saudi Arabia and Iran visibly impacted the Middle Eastern region and various conflicts bear the consequences of their struggle for regional supremacy. The external influences in the Yemeni conflict further complicate any efforts for conflict resolution or reconciliation. This alone forms an interesting puzzle that requires further scrutiny.

The thesis will apply John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism in combination with Stephen John Stedman's *International Actors and Internal Conflicts*, to provide a thorough analysis of the Yemeni conflict and the internal dynamics, subsequently looking at the connections to the proxy war converting the hegemonic efforts of Saudi Arabia and Iran into the local conflict. Thus, the thesis will primarily reflect on the question whether the presence and support of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Yemeni conflict constitutes as part of a larger proxy war in the Middle East.

1. Historical developments

1.1 From the fall of the Imamate to the start of the civil war

Until 1962 Yemen was ruled by Imams and the official governing structure of Yemen was an Imamate. The Imams came from the predominantly Shi'a Zaydi tribes on the north and they mostly relied on the Sayyids, a branch of Zaydis who proclaim to be the direct descendants of the prophet Mohammed. The Sayyid's were usually officials to the Imam but they were the de facto ruling class and they oversaw the jurisdiction and the taxation in Yemen (Brown, 1963). The Sayyids developed an oligarchy that was responsible for organising the state administration, effectively resulting in the northern tribes becoming the main beneficiaries of the state, creating tensions with the south. Under the Imamate, Yemen was greatly vulnerable to systematic corruption, nepotism based on tribes and the exploitation of the justice system. The reason why the Sayyids are not said to have full control over the Yemeni state apparatus is because the military was comprised of tribal forces answering often directly to the sheiks or the Imam (Brown, 1963). The Sayyid oligarchy thus lacked the means of coercive power, albeit the military was mostly consisting of soldiers from the northern tribes. The dominant position of the Zaydi northern tribes combined with the Sayyid oligarchy exploited the regional divide across Yemen and fuelled dissatisfaction in the Sunni Shaf'i south (Brown, 1963).

The foreign influence through the students that had studied abroad and brought home new ideas of reform from other parts of the world was further intensifying the frustration across Yemen (Brown, 1963). The students possessed revolutionary ideas regarding governing which posed a challenge to the Sayyid rule that was still deeply against any form of progress. Since these students were perceived to be threatening to the Sayyid rule, they aimed to side-line them and make any efforts of reforming impossible. This caused further dissatisfaction and led to the deepening of the divide between the foreign-educated youth together with the exploited Sunni southerners, who stood in opposition to the northern ruling Shi'a Sayyids and the Imam. However, the religious aspect was only a partial influence in the conflict, the cause of the revolt was the Sayyids' state organisation and the gradually increasing northern domination. The southern city of Aden, belonging to the British Protectorate furthest from the Imam's

influence, became the place of resistance as the young intellectuals and the frustrated southerners assembled there (Orkaby, 2017).

The frustration boiled out and led to the revolution in September 1962 ending the long-standing Imamate and breaking off the Sayyids' influence to finalise the days of the oligarchy in Yemen. The state was left with a major lack of resources and facilities, the economic and social system was gradually deteriorating and the situation in Yemen was in a crisis (Brown, 1963). The high expectations of people from the revolution were eventually defeated by the Yemeni reality of limited resources and the absence of experienced people to bring about effective change. At this point, Yemen was heavily reliant on foreign assistance mostly from Saudi Arabia, which cannot be a durable solution for a state to function. It was foreseen that "from an economic standpoint Yemen has painful years ahead" (Brown, 1963, p. 359). Especially, since the revolutionary ideas and the need for reform were still present, without any prospective solution. The problem was further worsened by the fact that the tribal divisions and loyalties were still prevalent, since the revolution failed to overcome these barriers and unite Yemeni people.

The following days after the revolution in the northern regions the Yemeni Arab Republic (YAR) was established, which consequently started a Civil War between the young military officials together with the progressive youth, against the former supporters of the Imam. The conflict escalated to a wide-ranging war after the Egyptians joined on the side of the revolutionaries. Fearing that the conflict might overspill due to its close proximity the Saudis became involved by financially supporting the Imam's royalists and prolonged the war until 1970 (Witty, 2001). The revolutionaries wanted to end the strong North-South divide in Yemen and supported the idea of the Qahtani sect of Zaydi, which was proclaimed to be the original identity of the Yemeni people, being the descendants of the pre-Islamic population (Orkaby, 2017). These new nationalist narratives in Yemen also fuelled the independence movements in the South starting a war against the British in Aden in 1963. The conflict lasted until 1967 and led to an agreement establishing the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the south. Even though Yemen was divided into two states, the idea of a unified nation through the notions of Qahtani nationalism was meant to eventually overcome the initial tribal divisions, which at this point were still very significant.

The period after the civil war resembled a failed state with the serious absence of infrastructure, state services and no room for political progress since tribalism became the major organising structure again. The original efforts of unification fell short on the tribal sheiks who became more involved in the state politics, which paradoxically strengthened the divisions and made any efforts of centralisation unlikely (Burrowes, 1992). The advancements under the rule of al-Irayni and later al-Hamdi during the 1970s had to tackle the rising domestic tensions with the influential sheiks. The achievements were very limited, but they managed to build up sufficient infrastructure for Yemen to increase its ability to manage the incoming foreign aid. This was crucial for establishing basic state services, starting development plans and various projects.

After a series of assassinations in the late 1970s it was Ali Abdullah Saleh to hold office in Yemen, which was predicted to be a short period of commanding similarly to the predecessors. The 30-year period that followed under his sole leadership came as a surprise to many. When Saleh got to power in 1978 he started reforming the bureaucratic system of Yemen, reviving the civil services and brought crucial changes to the military system (Burrowes, 1992). The initial reforms also focused on the regions that were mostly neglected before on the territory of YAR. The question of the unification remained difficult to resolve as the tensions with the PDRY lead to disputes in the bordering regions. Despite the many agreements after the conflicts that promised unification, the occasional revolts challenged these efforts. The major shift in the unification process occurred when in 1984 the bordering regions between YAR and the PDRY were discovered to be oil fields (Burrowes, 1992). By the 1990s the tension between the south and the north was gradually alleviating with the oil revenues being a major influence on that. The process of the unification started after months of negotiations and eventually lead to the establishment of the unified Republic of Yemen.

The unification in 1990 was welcomed in both the north and the south albeit with different expectations since the state organisation and economic structure varied in both the countries. The former YAR was resembling a capitalist state with traditional conservative Islamic values and relatively increasing economic capital. This was supported by the influx of financial aid from Saudi Arabia to fight the unification, in order to weaken the prospects of a unified Yemen (Salisbury, 2015). The major threat in the YAR was corruption and the developing elitist network of Saleh, which was

expected to be less dominant after the two states agreed to unite. The PDRY was during the cold-war period under the influence of the USSR which supported a more secular social sphere and a socialist economic system, thus the expectations from the unification were to find a solution for the economic decline and bring foreign investments and jobs for the southerners (Burrowes, 1992). After the unification, Saleh enjoyed great support even from the south as the new socio-political developments and the hopes attached to them were promising a brighter future for the Yemeni economics, infrastructure, and labour market. The initial agreement also included power-sharing arrangements between the south and the north that would ensure equal and fair share in the development progress for both the regions as well as a fair distribution of the political offices.

During the transition period following the unification, the two states aimed to merge their economies, political offices and create a functioning governing structure. The divide between the north and the south was imminent and influenced the entire transition since the economic situation differed among the regions. Because of the northern influence on the economically disadvantaged south, the unemployment rose, and the government was unable to provide sufficient services (Nonneman, 1997). The tensions mounted with the southern political leaders voicing concerns over the neglect of the southern perspective in the state transition and development. Saleh was accused to be disproportionately benefitting from the power that the oil resources provided to him. The southern response was to invade the oilfields with their military, which started a civil war in 1994. The northern troops were far more advanced due to the reforms and managed to overrun the south. Saudi Arabia recognized this as potentially disruptive to the region and issued a warning through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) cautioning the northern troops of Saleh to an immediate ceasefire (Nonneman, 1997). The United Nation's Security Council similarly called for an end to the northern aggression. However, Saleh managed to get to Aden and violently oppress the southern insurgency.

The following years could be characterised very similarly to the Imam's rule with president Saleh building a close network of loyal politicians, high position officials and ministers who acted as the main beneficiaries of the state. As the oil export rose and accounted for the vast majority of Yemen's government's revenue, large-scale corruption, nepotism, and the tribal divisions had returned (Hill, 2017). During these

years of the Saleh lead oligarchy, the government services deteriorated and the much-needed state building after the civil war slowed down. The second decade of the Saleh era created a patronage system that essentially replaced the state institutions and led to massive corruption. As Ginny Hill wrote “corruption was simultaneously acting as the glue that kept everything in place while robbing the country of longer term choices” (2017, p. 54). The patronage system weakened the central government as it was undermined by Saleh’s personal network. Due to this, the tribal divisions became more apparent and the youth started to feel hopeless and alienated since everything worked through connections. The dissatisfaction and the alienation empowered the tribal militias that felt that the patronage system is extorting Yemen and the secular rule of Saleh was criticised for failing to adhere to the Islamic traditions.

In the northern Zaydi tribes Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, a Shi’a cleric educated in Iran, became a vocal critique of Saleh’s regime and an advocate for Yemen’s return to its Shi’a Zaydi roots (Salisbury, 2015). His followers, a political movement of the youth started in mid-90s, later became known as the Houthis adhering to the Quranic path of life establishing a religious insurgency group (Albloshi, 2016). In the early 2000s after the United States started the War on Terror as a consequence of 9/11, the Houthis were protesting against the US military presence in the Middle East. Saleh feared that the carefully balanced elite network was under threat and used excessive force to oppress the Houthi protesters. However, the years of the patronage system caused that many Yemenis supported the Houthis as an insurgent group irrespective of its religious doctrine expressing their indignation. Al-Houthi built this grassroots movement from the regions that were the most neglected gradually managing to gain support and founded various channels of communication to undermine the state government’s propaganda against them. The newspapers and radio channels run by the Houthis propagated the notions of the Shi’a Islam supremacy and supported the Islamic Republic of Iran as the stronghold of the Shi’as. The slogan of the Houthis was similar to that of Iran, as both contained anti-US and anti-Israel messages while preaching the ultimate victory of the true believers of Islam (Albloshi, 2016). Al-Houthi openly supported and praised the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini a number of times, which started the suspicion that the Houthi movement is connected to Iran (Albloshi, 2016). The fear that the insurgent rebel group might overthrow the government lead to the conflicts

between the Houthi militias and the government forces in the most neglected region of Sa'ada.

The following period could be described by constant guerrilla warfare and clashes between the government's forces and the Houthi insurgents. Despite the early advancements of Saleh's troops which managed to conduct a targeted operation killing the leader of the Houthis in 2004, the conflict was prolonged since the efforts to broker peace were usually shattered by the reoccurring violent encounters. The protracted struggle in the northern region meant that the crisis drew into the conflict many of the tribes that initially wanted to avoid entering. Since the Houthi insurgency started from the northern region belonging to the Zaydis, some of the tribal sheiks were inclined to support Saleh to stop the possible return of the Sayyids through the Houthis, even though al-Houthi stated that the revival of the Imamate is not the movement's intention (Albloshi, 2016). Involving the tribal militias in the conflict helped the Saleh government since the sheiks were divided and albeit the central government remained weak, it was unlikely that the Houthis could topple it without an alliance.

The sixth and most profound of the conflicts drew international attention as the region of Sa'ada was targeted by the government's airstrikes directly next to the Saudi Arabian borders (Clausen, 2018). The previous five wars in the Sa'ada region were mostly underreported by the media and even official casualty reports were ambiguous about the actual numbers. The increased media coverage of the last conflict meant that the narratives of the leaders also shaped the conflict. Since president Saleh wanted to present the Houthis as a greater threat, he proclaimed that the movement is part of the Iranian expansionist strategy in the region. The fear from the Iranian presence at the Saudi border and the rising support for Islamist militancy through the Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula in southern Yemen alarmed both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi (Hill, 2017). Due to fears that the conflict might overspill and that Yemen might become a safe haven for terrorists, the Saudis launched a military intervention in 2009 (Winter, 2011). The Houthi insurgents managed to engage in balanced combat with the superior military of the Saudi Kingdom. Accusations have emerged that Iran provides weapons for the Houthis insurgents in the wake of a conflict with Saudi Arabia, indicating that the resistance capabilities of the Houthis might be supported by the Islamic Republic (Juneau, 2016). The slow progression of the Saudis highlighted problems in the military and the setbacks were perceived as a humiliation. The Houthis despite their constantly

weakening positions managed to move the combat zone to the outskirts of Saan'a, causing distress to the government's forces by their advancements. The conflict ended with a negotiated truce agreement between the involved actors, resulting in steadily growing support for the Houthi movement. The brutal actions of the state military meant that Saleh's carefully balanced network of loyal supporters was declining and his position as the president was threatened. Furthermore, Saleh's inability to condemn the actions of AQAP and challenge them militarily caused that the relations of the Yemeni government with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates significantly worsened (Hill, 2017).

The revolutionary atmosphere throughout the Middle Eastern region during the Arab Spring also reached Yemen and in 2011 the Yemenis started peaceful protests in Saan'a demanding a regime change. The developments in Tunisia and Egypt put pressure on Saleh who was already in a highly unfavourable position. He translated the fears of losing power into violent retaliation against the protesters which resulted in defections even among the closest allies. As the oil revenues ran scarce and maintaining the elite network seemed gradually more challenging, Ali Mohsen, one of the closest people of Saleh and the leader of the First Armoured Division of Yemen went on to publicly support the protesters giving impetus to the demonstrations (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016). It soon became apparent that Saleh cannot remain the president of Yemen as some of the tribes also turned against him. The separatist movement of al-Hirak called for independence for the southern region capitalising on the weak position of Saleh (Alley, 2013). The public trust towards the government was extremely low and when Saleh tried to appease the crowds by offering to deliver changes that would ensure a peaceful transition of the power it did not affect the protesters. Even prominent figures from his close elite network recognized that there is a need for change.

As the internal pressure mounted and the Arab Spring swept over the Middle Eastern region the GCC countries, fearing the destabilising effects of a massive conflict in Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula, called for the resignation of Saleh. The Saudi King Abdullah realised that Saleh is unable to establish political stability in Yemen, which indirectly benefits the recruiting and expanding efforts of AQAP in the south (Feierstein, 2019). Saleh became a menace to Yemen and after the GCC pressure, he agreed to step down. The agreement meant that the power was transferred to his vice president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi a southerner and a long-time supporter of Saleh.

The main objective of the transitional government in the following two years was to address the socio-economic injustices and to reinstate political stability in Yemen.

Hadi's transitional government initiated the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) as a consequence of the GCC agreement and the mounting international pressure. The idea was to create a platform to explore possibilities of governing and transforming and eventually translate these to a new Yemeni constitution. Hadi realised that the prospects of delivering durable solutions to the situation without including the Yemeni people were bleak. For this reason, the NDC served as a forum to involve people from various sectors and regions of Yemen to address the ineffective economic policies, discriminatory rule of law and the missing aspects of governance (Schmitz, 2014). The initiative was divided into committees discussing a wide range of issues involving an equal number of representatives from the north and the south. When the committees started operating, the issues mostly attributed to Saleh's government, such as the large-scale corruption and poor development plans were promptly resolved. The differences between the delegations became more apparent when the highly sensitive question of the Yemeni state organisation was on the table (Day, 2019). The southern separatist movement of al-Hirak questioned the legitimacy of the NDC as the southern grievances were not addressed appropriately and they accused the initiative of being another form of northern oppression (Alley, 2013). The initial promising nature of the NDC quickly vanished as the delegations failed to reach agreements regarding the fundamental issues, further discouraging the delegations from serious involvement. The southerners felt their voice is underrepresented and after years of negligence by the Saleh government reconciliation seemed unrealistic. As Charles Schmitz described it, the NDC was "a poor solution for the wrong problems" (2014, p. 2). The NDC concluded with hundreds of recommendations that were aiming to improve the functioning of Yemen, however, the implementation was unfeasible as many of the suggestions were conflicting and would cause further escalation of the tensions (Brehony, 2015).

After the failure of the NDC negotiations Yemen remained divided across regional but also religious lines. The weak government meant that many of the contesting forces tried to use the opportunity and attempted to gain control over Yemen. The remaining loyal forces of Saleh aimed to remove Hadi, subsequently the Houthis realised that the Hadi government is incapable of achieving stability and launched an

offensive from the north against the transitional government in Saan'a (Feierstein, 2019). The southerners after the NDC remained more divided and some fractions of the al-Hirak movement also resorted to violence in order to achieve southern independence. The AQAP in the south joined the conflict since they perceived the Houthi's attack as the return of the oppressive tendencies of the Zaydi Shi'as against the Sunnis.

The Houthis were well experienced in combat after the six Sa'ada wars and managed to occupy large parts of the north-western regions resulting in a military take-over of the capital city Saan'a, putting pressure on Hadi to resign. At this point the Houthis allied with former president Saleh gaining serious military advantage and equipment, making evident their superiority among the various armed forces and insurgent groups in Yemen (Clausen, 2018). After Hadi managed to flee to the southern city of Aden, the Houthis continued their military operations sending a clear signal to the previous government. The southern expansion of the Houthis was perceived as a threat by al-Hirak (Brehony, 2015). The conflicts that followed in the south eventually lead Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia establishing a government in exile. Hadi's presence in Saudi Arabia meant that the fearmongering of the Iranian presence directly at the southern borders increased. In 2015 the Saudi military forces in cooperation with some of the GCC states started the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis in the north of Yemen under the domain of reinstating the official Yemeni government and Hadi as the president. The operation referred to as the "Operation Decisive Storm" included airstrikes targeting the Houthi regions causing massive disruption to the civilian infrastructure and leading to the early conclusion that the Houthis will not be able to continue any efforts of state-building (Clausen, 2018). As Saleh allied with the Houthis, the international community remained supportive of Hadi maintaining his status as the only solution for unifying Yemen, despite earlier indications that his transitional government was incapable of controlling the tribal militias and restoring peace. Even though the Houthi's state organisation lacked expertise in governing and building infrastructure, causing dissatisfaction within Yemen, their capabilities to engage in a war with Saudi Arabia gained support for the movement (Clausen, 2018). During the Yemeni conflict, Iran was accused multiple times with providing military equipment and training for the Houthis, which was documented by vague evidence of unorderly shipping channels. A sized Iranian ship bound for Yemen was found to contain weapons and ammunition assumed to be for the Houthis. Iranian government officials deny

involvement in the conflict, even though they supported the Houthi cause in Yemen publicly (Juneau, 2016).

The conflict that started out as a civil war in Yemen later evolved into a massive military conflict involving multiple state actors. The regional proxy wars between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran combined with the alleged Iranian support for the Houthis in the northern Yemeni conflict led to the claims that the war in Yemen is also a part of a regional war for dominance through proxies. The conflict is currently ongoing (2020) and accounts for the largest humanitarian crisis in the world with approximately 2.4 million people displaced and at least 80% of the people in need of humanitarian assistance and facing severe water shortages (UNICEF, 2019).

2. Research Design

2.1 The question of proxy war

The complexity of the Yemeni war often made various authors and academics believe that narrowing the conflict to a mere regional proxy war between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran is reductionist and neglecting the historical build-ups to the conflict, as well as the regional fragmentation and tribal conflicts on the national level. It has been argued that the war resulted primarily from local political disputes and unjust historical developments with rather limited external influence (Feierstein, 2019) (Juneau, 2016). However, currently it has escalated, and the influential regional actors are likely to be engaged in the conflict indirectly. The ongoing proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran has shaped various conflicts throughout the region with the involvement of the two competing superpowers. The Iranian interests in the Yemeni conflict are often questioned, since their involvement is mostly focused on the support of the Houthi rebels in the north of Yemen, which is only a part of the conflict (Juneau, 2016). By supporting the rebels, that stand in opposition to the Saudis, the Yemeni war intensified, and the resolution of the conflict seems unlikely to end with a unified Yemen under one central government (Clausen, 2018). The fear from a destabilised Yemen and the occurring consequences of a failing state, such as massive waves of immigrants, lead the Saudis to focus on the developments in Yemen, resulting in a relative power gain for Iran, with a limited investment. In the frame of the larger proxy war, it is often questioned whether the Iranian investment towards the Houthis is strategically even significant, supposing that the Yemeni war is not part of the Iranian-Saudi regional hegemonic efforts. After the initial claims of the Yemeni war being a proxy war and the countering reactions claiming that it is primarily a conflict between the Houthis and the Saudis, this thesis aims to introduce a third wave of arguments returning to the initial proxy war, since the escalation of the conflict over time proved a more serious Iranian involvement. From the offensive realist perspective, the relative gains of power that are executed through proxy with providing support for the actors, as the Iranian presence in the Yemeni conflict indicates, the war in Yemen would constitute part of the power politics of the two major superpowers in their efforts towards regional hegemony.

2.2 Methodology

The methodology for the case of the Yemeni war and the influence of the Iranian-Saudi efforts for regional hegemony will be assessed through a case study based on observing and analysing the political developments and the subsequent events of the conflict. The reason for the single-case study in this particular issue is due to the unique position of the Yemeni conflict that started off as a regional violent confrontation, however later on, it indicated strong external influence that steered the outcomes of the conflict, the resolution of the conflict or any reconciliatory efforts. Furthermore, the nature of the case study offers the possibility to examine a chain of events and examine the process and the developments (Evera, 1997). The conflict is officially ongoing since 2015, but the evidence of the external influence predates the start of the war, thus a single case-study provides for an examination of a chain of events. As described by Sharon Crasnow the causal process observations (CPOs) enable an assessment of the evidence in each step throughout a process by singling out cases while observing and evaluating them individually (2012, p. 658). The focus of the analysis is the proxy war of Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the implications in the Yemeni conflict. Because of the multi-layered nature of the conflict, two theories were chosen to grant sufficient grounds for analysis.

The first theory is the neorealist approach, specifically the offensive realism, that contextualizes the political interests and power moves of countries, essentially positioning the Yemeni conflict into the larger proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This theory offers the underlying assumptions that are to describe the power acquiring intentions of the two major players, while during the observation the theory is tested on the strength of its assumptions. It aims to find the answer to the rationale behind the states' power politics and pursuing their interests. The offensive realists expect major powers to be constantly preoccupied with accumulating power and eventually strive to achieve hegemony, which in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran can be observed through their intentions of becoming a regional hegemon (Mearsheimer, 2001). The strategical importance of the Yemeni conflict is due to its different prioritisation for the two competing actors, while it can prove the neorealist assumption of states calculating with relative power gains.

The second part uses the arguments of the *International actors and internal conflicts*, that is employed to supplement the neorealist analysis to enhance the

assumptions of power politics while translating it to the local actors in Yemen. It aims to provide an understanding and prove the influence of ‘bad neighbours’ on a conflict (Stedman, 1999). The expositions that this theory provides explain the support of the two major actors, Saudi Arabia and Iran, through their proxies in the case of the Yemeni conflict. The article also provides an analysis of the external components of internal wars and offers an evaluation of the frequent methods used to intervene or to prevent violent clashes while also assessing their intended and unintended consequences (Stedman, 1999). Since the state actors interfere with the local actors while pursuing their hegemonic efforts, it is necessary to use these evaluations on the case study to observe and recognize the assumptions of the neorealist theory in the complex multi-layered conflict ongoing in Yemen.

The single-case study is crucial since the conflict is a process with several influential historical developments and to study the chain of events it is most fitting to be applied to the Yemeni conflict (Evera, 1997). Furthermore, since the example of Yemen provides for a unique case study, it is important to account for the complexity in its entirety, considering the influence from the major regional superpowers subsequently looking at their impact on the local levels, while remaining in the neorealist frame of power politics. The combination of the neorealist theory with the arguments of the *International actors and internal conflicts* provide for a holistic assessment of the Yemeni conflict and the actions of Saudi Arabia and Iran, in order to determine whether it constitutes a proxy war.

2.3 Neorealism

In the understanding of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Relations* and John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, the relations between international actors are similarly as the realist theory describes, based on power politics, however, with different underlying assumptions (Waltz, 1979) (Mearsheimer, 2001). The states that are recognized as the main actors in the international system operate under an anarchic arrangement lacking any supranational central authority that would hold the states accountable for their actions, and that holds the monopoly of the use of force. The anarchic structure of the international system creates the uncertainty that leads the states to focus on their primary objective of survival. Since all the states are assumed to be rational and aim for self-preservation it further enhances the uncertainty, because all the actors have the same intention and are capable of delivering harm to the others. As a reaction to this everlasting threat, the states want to secure their survival by gaining more power. The assumption is, that increasing the power of a state will decrease the threats to its survival (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The divide between Waltz's defensive realism and Mearsheimer's offensive realism begins at the question of extending power. Waltz argues that states can achieve a point where they possess enough power to ensure their security and they move to power balancing between the other actors, in order to maintain their position (Waltz, 1979). The argument of defensive realists further states that at a certain point a state can gain an excessive amount of power that will be threatening for the other actors and results in an alliance against the most powerful state (Snyder, 2002). Mearsheimer's theory states that there is no limit to gaining power, or at least the yearning cannot be satisfied (2001). He disagrees with the statement that after achieving a certain amount of power the security is ensured and states will aim to balance the status quo. The anarchical structure of the international system does not allow for this, as it makes the states want continuously more power until achieving hegemony. The states want to maximise their power to survive any threat in the situation of uncertainty. This makes the states to be aggressive since the only assurance for the survival is through overpowering any possible menace. The continuous strive for power thus results from the fact that states aim to prepare for the worst possible situation in the future. Increasing power might eliminate future threats, thus any possible deficit of power is annihilated (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The idea of hegemony is a further divide between Waltz and Mearsheimer since according to the defensive realist theory, enough power can be achieved even without a country becoming a hegemon. This leads again to the idea of power balancing being more benefitting than increasing power. While in the offensive realist theory the most advantageous way of survival is establishing absolute dominance in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001). However, global hegemony is highly unlikely to be achieved, since a state would have to possess military capabilities that would eliminate any chance of retaliation overcoming the idea of mutually assured destruction, therefore countries aim to achieve hegemony regionally. A potential regional hegemony would mean possessing enough power to prevent the rise of any other contender in the specific region (Snyder, 2002). The states are assumed to be rational actors, thus efforts for expanding their power will only occur if the benefits of such opportunity outweigh the risks included. For this reason, if a state becomes gradually more powerful, the behaviour is assumed to become more hostile since ensuring the security is best done through maximizing its offensive capabilities endeavouring an eventual hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The neorealist theory measures the notion of power in military strength and the share in global wealth because these can determine a state's offensive capabilities and protective possibilities. Expanding the control over a territory is assumed to be a power move since it extends the power of a state (Snyder, 2002). Another divide between the defensive and the offensive realist theories occurs when considering relative power gains that are not violent military actions but for instance strategical steps in order to weaken a potential hegemonic contender in a region. For instance, establishing alliances are also important in the expansionist efforts since they constitute a relative power gain for a state. The two theories, however, offer different reasoning for the relative power gains. In Waltz's defensive realism the relative power gains constitute part of the power balancing between the states, while in Mearsheimer's offensive realism the relative gains are more temporary power moves. The states only act on the opportunities of increasing power when its cost-effective meaning that some actors might wait until favourable circumstances occur and focus on relative power gains meanwhile (Snyder, 2002).

Lastly, the offensive realists proclaim that security dilemmas are rare since the states aim to achieve more power rather than balancing it. The main contribution of

Mearsheimer to neorealism is also the notion of revisionist states that are attempting to transform the status quo or the established power allocation (Snyder, 2002). Due to this fact, there is a constant power struggle between the states since gains on one side equal loss on the other. The offensive realist theory thus provides more adequate grounds for the occurrence of war. The defensive realists rely on the power balancing intentions of the states which makes it significantly more difficult to account for violent confrontations between the actors. The constantly increasing power hunger and the hegemonic efforts of states are more likely to lead to a violent confrontation since the dominance of one state threatens the survival of the others (Snyder, 2002). The existential threats the state pose to each other are perceived as more imminent danger especially if all the actors assume the others to be equally focused on power gains through expansion.

2.4 International actors and internal conflicts

The core assumption of the neorealist theory establishes that states are the main actors in the international relations. The states are not divided into any smaller subcategories but dealt with as a whole. In order to address conflicts that initiated as intrastate struggles, it is necessary to cover also the developments inside the state. The analysis of the international actors in internal conflicts by Stephen Stedman is utilised in order to expand upon the concept of civil wars and the new trends in warfare that are influenced by different international actors while contextualising it in the frame of the neorealist power struggle. The evaluation of the external actors in internal struggles affirms that it is most crucial to recognize that wars that are started internally usually have multiple layers and influencing factors from the outside as well (Stedman, 1999).

The conflicts that start inside the state are assumed to be following from the domestic disputes between local actors, however, Stedman points out that the case is often that the quarrels are exacerbated by the international actors (1999). The influence of the foreign actors is divided into intended actions such as specific support for certain groups or unintended actions that might be the escalation of conflict by a wrong decision made due to inadequate evaluation of the situation. The purposive actions that fall into the first category range from support and aid provided to specific groups to interventions in order to prevent a conflict. The reason why the influence of the international actors is so crucial to consider is due to the increasing occurrence of civil wars since 1990, which brings new dynamics to conflicts meaning that intrastate wars are more likely to occur (Stedman, 1999).

The effects of the civil wars in a country, largely contribute towards the actions of the neighbouring states. The internal conflicts are likely to have destructive regional influence that requires counter-reactions from the bordering states (Stedman, 1999). For this reason, the states that are near to these conflicts aim to influence the outcomes to either prevent a spillover or to achieve strategical gains from the likely outcome. Stedman also argues that in the internal conflicts the danger of misinterpreting the situation of the outside actors can give impetus to further escalation. The interventions often lack ground assessment of the conflict in specific regions and it is assumed that all the people belong to the rebel groups or are connected to them, which makes the civilians also possible targets. The lack of differentiation between the enemy combatants and the non-military personnel often results in tragic accidents with severe

consequences. The devastating impact of the civil wars produces refugees that forced to leave their homes and as a reaction, they often seek safety in the countries that are in close proximity to the conflict. These flows are often burdening for the states and similarly, the prevention requires action from the states. Stedman also states that the rebel groups that might be involved in these regional conflicts are often connected to international actors through military aid or financial support that is also a contributing factor to the conflict escalation (1999). The important takeaway from these different connections between the international actors and internal conflicts is that the modern wars are rarely solely intrastate. Thus, accounting for all the possible actions is crucial in order to comprehend the efforts of the international actors, especially while translating these intentions into the framework of neorealism.

Stedman also maintains that the countries that are bordering the conflict areas are often more influential in escalating the conflict than preventing it. These “bad neighbours” use their support for certain rebel groups to gain benefits from the internal struggle (Stedman, 1999, p. 7). The effect of such influence often tips the regional balance and cause severe casualties in conflicts. The article brings up the example of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which argued for intervention in the Liberian war due to fears that it might overspill to the neighbouring countries and threaten the regional balance (Stedman, 1999, p. 10). The results were disastrous since the intervention failed to achieve its objectives and intensified the conflict. Similarly, the danger of these neighbours is stemming from the misinterpretation of the situation. For instance, their contributions to the negotiation process of the peace agreements often account with a different reality and fail to address potential destabilising issues. These actions must be covered in order to see the power moves of the states that aim to benefit from the conflict and use it to increase their influence or power. The analysis of these purposive actions in civil wars then offers to fill the gaps created by the constantly developing nature of the modern warfare in the neorealist theory and enhance the assumptions of maximizing their powers and becoming a regional hegemon through a more detailed understanding of their actions.

3. The Middle East and the case of Yemen

3.1 Regional hegemonic efforts

The theory of offensive realism, introduced as the ultimate ambition of every state, that is powerful enough to pursue dominance over other states, the assertion of hegemony, in order to ensure its survival. Since global hegemony is practically impossible and the necessary power acquisition is highly unlikely, the states focus on their more imminent regional position, in order to achieve regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001). The Middle Eastern region has been marked by the continuous efforts of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran towards achieving hegemony. The two states are not engaged in open conflict with each other, however, their indirect support for various governments and rebel groups indicates a struggle for supremacy. Their historical engagement in conflicts throughout the Middle East showed a strong divide between their strategical intentions and by the start of the Arab Spring, their contest determined the stability of the region. Based on the assumptions of Mearsheimer in order to reach hegemonic power a state has to be able to prevent the rise of another potential hegemon (2001). Since 1979 when the Iranian revolution changed the Islamic Republic, the Saudis were constantly afraid of the revolutionary atmosphere being exported elsewhere around the region. During the Iraqi War in 2003 and the Lebanese war in 2006 the two countries already engaged in attempts of relative power gains supporting different sides of the conflict, essentially trying to curb the circles of influence for the other state. Their presence in these wars was arguably in order to secure possible allies and strengthen their position as a dominant power in the region (Wehrey, et al., 2009). For a long period, tensions remained overshadowing the relation and when the Iranian nuclear efforts became obvious the Saudi concerns over the safety of the Arabian Peninsula and the GCC became more evident (Keynoush, 2016). In Mearsheimer's theory acquiring nuclear weapons would mean that a state becomes more likely to achieve hegemony since it has immense power to cause destruction (2001). The Saudi fears were given impetus when the Iranian nuclear efforts seemed gradually more threatening especially after rejecting the demands of the International Atomic Energy Agency. As a reaction, Iran was pressured through economic sanctions to negotiate a nuclear deal. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was meant to delay any nuclear missile

production for at least 15 years, was bound to be agreed in exchange for lifting the imposed severe economic sanctions on Iran (Samore, et al., 2015). The rising Iranian influence and their predicted economic growth that was expected as a result of withdrawing sanctions meant that it had a great opportunity to increase its regional dominance further (Keynoush, 2016). The Saudis initially welcomed the initiative as it would reduce the threat from the nuclear weapons of Iran, however eventually reducing the sanctions became more intimidating due to the possibility of Iran continuing the assertion of its authority in the region (Karim, 2017).

John Mearsheimer claimed about the balancing of power, that it only occurs due to the great powers waiting for opportunities when the benefits of expanding and increasing their relative power would outweigh the cost of these actions (Snyder, 2002). The Syrian civil war in 2014 and the Iranian support for Bashar al-Assad was perceived by the Saudi Kingdom as an alarming expansion of the Iranian influence, since Saudis aimed to remove Assad and weaken the Iranian grapple over Syria. The Iranians recognized the conflict as an opportunity and supported the government, later also deploying their special Quds forces lead by Qasem Soleimani the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which emphasized the strategical importance of Syria (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016). Similarly, after the Iraqi war in 2003, the Iranians had its direct neighbours weakened and easy to influence which significantly reduced the threat they pose (Keynoush, 2016). The Iranian influence over its proxy forces constituted a relative power gain in its ambitions.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy clearly defines that expanding the external influence of the regime is its core ambition (Karim, 2017). However, for a long time, it was a very adaptive policy since it always reacted to the regional power moves. During the negotiations of the Iranian JCPOA, it became clear that balancing in the Middle East will be affected and probably tilt the odds of becoming the dominant power towards the Islamic Republic. The Saudis were already the most powerful and wealthiest state in the Gulf, which was formally recognized through their leading position in the GCC. Therefore, the Saudis aimed to steer their actions in a strategical manner that would establish a similar presence through the whole Middle Eastern region, prepared to counter any threat to the survival of the regime (Karim, 2017). After the Iraqi war, the Iranian presence started to be more detectable also in the Gulf states, since the Saudi alliance with the US affected the neighbouring Arab states' perception.

Thus, the Iranian strategical but also economical advancements meant that the Kingdom's respected position became more exposed (Karim, 2017). The Saudis realised that the Iranian military actions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and their support for Hezbollah were a new method of expanding. Power gains according to Mearsheimer would constitute territorial expansions, however establishing alliances and offering military support and training indicates future offensive intentions, constituting in a relative power gain (Snyder, 2002). The seemingly predatory conduct of the Islamic Republic resulted in indirect warfare with the Saudi Kingdom. The Saudis identified the Iranian presence as a potential threat through its proxy forces, that are coordinated by the Iranian regime.

According to Mearsheimer, the states act in an anarchic world order, where there is no supra-national structure with a monopoly over violence, thus the relation between the states is influenced by the unpredictability of the ordering structure (2001). The uncertainty about the intentions of Saudi Arabia and Iran is further enhanced by the termination of diplomatic ties and a lack of communication (Karim, 2017). Therefore, the assumptions dictate that the other potential hegemon, corresponding to their force, would be aggressive and aim to maximize their power (Snyder, 2002). The actions of the states are then observed through a lens of insecurity and calculations about the imminence of the threat. For this reason, the proximity of the power gains to the state's territory constitutes an important element in determining how alarming it is. The reaction towards these threats is often exaggerated by the uncertainty and leads to disastrous military hostilities against the adversaries.

A major shift in the Saudi foreign policy orientation came during the developing Iranian proxy threats. When in a series of unprecedented power transition arrangements by King Salman the current crown prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) gradually became the *de facto* decision-maker in Saudi Arabia by 2017 (Quilliam, 2019). The young crown prince managed to implement important reforms that centralised the power and essentially made decision making swifter. The change was imminent in the Kingdoms external actions when it became more assertive and demanding corresponding to its power and influence in the Gulf region. The central role of Saudi Arabia in leading the GCC countries was a crucial step in becoming a more dominant power regionally. In his Vision 2030 MbS laid out the future ambitions for Saudi Arabia aiming to establish and get global recognition for its position as the prominent power

in the Middle Eastern region (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The transition to a more hawkish foreign policy meant that the threats to the Saudi influence, especially in the Gulf area had to be eliminated. This became visible in the reactions to the tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia that originated during the Arab Spring in 2011 and by 2017 the assertiveness resulted in pressuring Qatar through an air-space blockade to subdue to the Saudi Arabian position (Quilliam, 2019). The similar aggressive military approach was applied in the Yemeni intervention in 2015 with the Saudi-led GCC coalition reacting to the advancements of the Houthi rebels that were seen to be acting as Iranian proxies (Karim, 2017). The Kingdom aims to pursue major military operations through the GCC with the regional allies, since it enhances its position and ascertains its area of influence. For this reason, the Saudis had lasting intentions of involving its southern neighbour Yemen in the GCC initiative (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016). Historically, they have tried to gain further influence in the southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula, but an institutionalised symbol of their strategical commitment would mean that the Yemeni government also joins the GCC, eliminating any possible threats from the southern border and making it a relative power gain to the Saudis (Byman, 2018) (Karim, 2017).

The geographical position of Yemen made it historically a strategical priority for Saudi Arabia. During various encounters, the Kingdom aimed to gain influence in the southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula in order to ensure that it does not pose a threat to its regime. Due to its close proximity to Saudi Arabia, any political instability or conflict in Yemen caused the Saudi military was on high alert on the borders (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016). The situation in Yemen was rarely peaceful and since the fall of the Imamate in 1962, the constant conflicts constituted a major setback for any future prospects of a functioning Yemen. Since the economic situation in Yemen was equal to a failed state and the massive corruption and distortion of the oil revenues by the elite just further enhanced the poverty and the shortages, the country became a safe haven for terrorist organisations and ruling tribal militias. The major lack of state infrastructure and services meant that the central government had little influence over the tribes. Due to this uncertainty, it always posed a security issue for the Saudis, since any conflict spillover or a massive flow of refugees would have caused major destabilisation and threat for the country (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016). These fears became more imminent during the six Sa'ada wars from 2004 to 2010 in the northern

bordering region and the revolutions of the 2011 Arab Spring that inspired the Yemeni youth demanding a regime change on the streets of Saan'a. The Saudi intervention in 2009 during the Sa'ada wars was a massive military operation aimed against the northern rebel group of the Houthis. The Saudi engagement in the conflict resulted in baffling outcomes since the insurgent Houthis managed to wage a balanced war against the militarily superior Saudis. The unexpected resistance of the Houthi rebels contributed to the fears that the insurgent group is supported by Iran. This narrative was given impetus previously by Saleh and later on also by Hadi, thus the Saudi reaction was also influenced by the fears of the Iranian expansionism through the Houthis (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016). The Houthi-Iranian relation essentially meant that the largest regional contender of the Saudis had an indirect presence in the Gulf region. Albeit initial denials and insufficient evidence, the Iranian influence over the Houthis seems to be gradually more relevant.

In the frame of a larger proxy war, the dangers posed by the presence of another state with assertive hegemonic efforts directly at the borders would mean an existential threat to the state. A conflict in Yemen brings uncertainty to the Saudi strategical plans, since it has to steer its military powers also towards containing and countering the southern perils. Similarly, during the Iraqi war in 2003 the Iranian efforts of engaging in the conflict were intensified by the threats from the uncertainty brought by the direct proximity of the conflict. Furthermore, a conflict allows for pursuing hegemonic state interests, since the Iranians also used the war-torn Iraq as an opportunity to assert their influence and eliminate any future existential threats (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016). The danger posed by an Iranian proxy just outside of the border of Saudi Arabia in northern Yemen would constitute existential threats to the Kingdom, resulting in a major power gain for the Islamic Republic.

3.2 Proxy War

As the historical developments outlined, Yemen had experienced various violent conflicts on its territory which resulted in a devastated state, lacking basic infrastructure, heavily divided along tribal lines even nearly 60 years after the fall of the Imamate. The thirty years of Saleh government left Yemen in poor conditions and led to the insurgence of various rebel groups such as the southern secessionist movement of al-Hirak or the northern Houthi rebels, but also it gave impetus to the rise of terrorist groups such as the AQAP or the ascending Yemeni branch of the Islamic State (IS). It is crucial to highlight that the neglected state of Yemen was extraordinarily vulnerable to any external influence and regional power contests, since it was frequently occupied by internal conflicts with virtually no efforts of state-building. The geographical position of Yemen on the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula means that it is a direct neighbour of Saudi Arabia, a potential regional hegemon. The uncertainty caused by the constant conflicts in Yemen meant that it posed a high priority security issue to Saudi Arabia, since it had the potential to threaten its survival due to the proximity to the Kingdom. For this reason, Saudi Arabia has historically aimed to establish influence over Yemen through financial assistance, political support or even military interventions. According to Stephen Stedman many countries suffer from the presence of “bad neighbours” that aim to support their own interests in other states’ internal disputes often even through violent means (1999, p. 7). Indisputably Yemen has been impacted by the presence of the Saudis and suffered from the Kingdom’s assertive actions. Similarly, during the advancements of the Houthis rebels, the Islamic Republic of Iran provided financial support and military equipment in order to reinforce their regional interests. The involvement of the two states resulted in the conflict being referred to as the proxy war between the regional contenders, however, this is presently disputed since the conflict is said to have no major connections to Iran (Juneau, 2016) (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016).

The Saudi efforts to establish more influence over Yemen were historically more visible since from the fall of the Imamate in 1962 the Kingdom aimed to restore order and lessen any possible threat from the south. The financial aid coming from Riyadh aimed to prevent the collapse of the state that would mean a massive flow of refugees and baleful rise of terrorist organizations. The Saudi fears can be explained by Stedman’s argument stating that the destructive regional influence of the internal

conflicts draws the attention of the neighbouring states since they are aware that the developments of the warfare will impact them as well (1999). This makes the Yemeni conflict a high-ranking priority of Saudi Arabia. The Iranian efforts on the other hand are far less obvious and with the rise of the Houthi rebels, their influence only gradually developed. Yemen does not pose any significant danger to the Islamic Republic, which accounts for the historical neglect, however, the opportunity with the Houthis was convenient in pursuing a relative power gain by supporting the rebels and essentially turning them into an Iranian proxy asset. Hussein al-Houthi was a vocal supporter of Teheran and personally the Ayatollah, which indicated a willingness to cooperate with Iran (Albloshi, 2016). Initially, the support from Teheran was not significant since they only provided religious training for the Houthi followers, but it already established grounds for future cooperation. The Houthi-Iranian ties became more ominous after the Sa'ada wars, which ended in a tentative truce, highlighting the weaknesses of the Saudi military after their prolonged intervention in 2009. According to Stedman, it is crucial to note that even though these conflicts originated from internal disputes the international influence is crucial, especially in cases of insurgent groups that will require supplies in order to continuously engage in combat (1999).

When the Arab Spring broke out in 2011, the atmosphere in Yemen was still heavily influenced by the grievances that were left unresolved under Saleh. The mounting pressure and the developments in Tunisia and Egypt led Riyadh to pressure Saleh to step down through a GCC negotiated power transition agreement (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016). When the former vice-president Hadi became the incumbent president for the transitional period the priority was to initiate the platform where the historical injustices would be addressed. During the NDC negotiations, various groups were sceptical of the possibility to effectively resolve the conflict, since the issue of the state organisation was highly divisive, which made the probability of a durable agreement eluding (Day, 2019). Subsequently, the Houthis were gaining on popularity and achieved significant territorial advancements especially towards the southern region, which influenced their negotiating position and resulted in their later formidable position. The Houthis eventually managed to take control of the Hodeida port which enhanced the Iranian IRGC's support through increased deliveries of military equipment (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020). Since Saleh already referred to the Houthis as an Iranian proxy in order to receive help from the Saudis in the military campaign, Hadi

used the same strategy of fearmongering in order to curb their influence. However, when in 2013 the Iranian Jihan I vessel was seized by the Yemeni authorities and concluded to be delivering offensive military equipment to the Houthis, the Iranian proxy presence narrative received a fresh impetus (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020). In 2014 the NDC was bound to end after multiple extensions and initiate the implementation phase, however, the Houthis realised that the outcomes of the NDC would deliver only cosmetic changes to the corrupt elite network. In 2014 the rebels proceeded to take over the capital city of Sana'a which was perceived as a major threat for the Saudis, since Hadi was ousted and there was no central government in control. Qasem Soleimani proclaimed that the Houthi takeover was a "golden opportunity", while an Iranian member of the parliament also stated that the takeover meant that "Iran was now in control of 'four capitals,' Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus, and Sana" prompting the Saudi fears (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020, p. 223). The danger of the Houthi expansion was simultaneously growing due to the negotiated JCPOA which meant that the nuclear threat Iran potentially posed was reduced, however, the financial support for the insurgency would increase under the lifted sanctions (Karim, 2017). The imminence of the threat in combination with the more assertive Saudi foreign policy resulted in the destructive Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen. The 2015 military intervention was an aerial bombing on the Houthi territories, in order to restore the previous order and reinstate Hadi. The indiscriminatory targeting of the bombings and the later blockade of the Houthi ports, resulted in a near-complete destruction of the civil infrastructure of northern Yemen and the protracted conflict created the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. The conflict was exacerbated by the international actors, thus proving the argument of Stedman who proclaimed: "to label these conflicts 'internal' misses key dynamics in how they start, rage, fizzle, and end. Almost every internal conflict has an external component" (1999, p. 5).

The Houthis were supplied military equipment and missiles in order to be able to engage in combat with the Saudi-led coalition, which meant that they are gradually more reliant on the Iranian support. After various naval attacks on the Saudi ships, the Iranians admitted to ordering the Houthis to carry out the strikes, which already implies a great influence over the Houthis (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020). Another significant evidence of Iranian involvement was after the 2018 Houthi missile attack on the Saudis, where from the remainders of the rockets a United Nations report concluded

that “The missile remnants, related military equipment, and military unmanned aerial vehicles that are of Iranian origin and were brought into Yemen” (United Nations Security Council, 2018, p. 2). After supplying and commanding the Houthi rebels, the Saudi fears of an Iranian proxy directly at their borders were confirmed. The conflict only further escalated when the president of the United States Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA and the Iranians were hit with severe sanctions again. Currently, the Iranians are struggling for regional supremacy while the Saudis engage in these similar efforts. The attempts for conflict de-escalation were until now largely unsuccessful, and high-ranking Iranian officials praised the Houthis for remaining a loyal proxy force (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020). The most recent evidence of the Houthi-Iranian connection occurred after the revelations of the killing of Qasem Soleimani by the US when the plans revealed another targeted attack on an Iranian military official in Yemen (Stewart, 2020). These developments shed a light on the Iranian involvement and supported continuous evidence of the connection, proving that the Houthis act in accordance with the Iranian regional strategy.

Conclusion

The historical developments highlighted Yemen as a country that experienced numerous violent conflicts and since the fall of the Imamate in 1962, it has rarely been in a peaceful period. The initial strong tribal and religious divide which were influential in politics remained and exacerbated the socio-economic struggles. The thirty-year rule of Saleh and the period after unification lead to grievances which were never sufficiently addressed. The lacking infrastructure, weak central government, and massive corruption fuelled dissatisfaction among tribal militias and enabled various insurgent groups to prevail. The long period of violent conflicts and power struggles meant that Yemen was on the verge of becoming a failed state. The threat posed by the total collapse of the state alarmed Riyadh resulting in the Saudis becoming more engaged in the Yemeni state affairs. The initial financial aid from Saudi Arabia that was meant to support initiatives aiming to stabilise Yemen only enhanced the corrupt regime of Saleh. Due to this, the Saudis diverted to a more hostile presence through the intervention against the Houthi insurgency in northern Yemen during the last Sa'ada war. The Houthis gradually developed into an Iranian proxy, which meant that the regional contender of the Saudis managed to establish a threatening presence near their border. The Houthi connection to Iran and the Saudi fears of their state survival, lead to the second military intervention in Yemen that started the currently ongoing conflict accounting for the largest humanitarian crisis.

The theory of offensive realism introduced by John Mearsheimer offered a framework which explained the Saudi-Iranian competing efforts for regional hegemony. Since both countries are in pursuit of hegemony, they seek opportunities to increase their relative power in the region. The two countries are engaged in various conflicts by supporting governments or rebel groups, however, they avoid entering an open conflict. The Yemeni war, which is the latest addition to the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran showcased how the countries are more assertive if the threat posed to their survival is imminent explaining the Saudi shift in their foreign policy towards a more aggressive one. The Iranian connection to the Houthis seems to be gradually becoming clearer and from a strategical standpoint, Teheran could pose an existential threat to their greatest competitor in the region. John Stedman's *International Actors and Internal Conflicts* enabled to translate the hegemonic efforts into the internal dynamics of the conflict in Yemen providing an explanation for the

strategical decisions of the two countries. The war that started as an internal conflict gradually developed into a part of the larger proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The latest developments of the conflict highlighted that the Houthis are in fact functioning as an Iranian proxy and that any efforts of conflict resolution must take into account the presence and the interests of the two countries in the war.

Resumé

Vojna v Jemene, ktorá je príčinou najväčšej humanitárnej krízy na svete, sa často považuje za „zabudnutý konflikt“ z dôvodu nedostatočného mediálneho pokrytia a komplikovanej povahy vojny. Zložitosť situácie vedie k zlému hodnoteniu komplexného konfliktu a nezohľadňuje širšiu perspektívu Blízkeho východu v tejto otázke. Vplyv medzinárodného spoločenstva a regionálnych aktérov, ako sú Saudská Arábia a Irán, je často marginalizovaný. To vedie k diškurzu, ktorý sa zameriava výlučne na vnútorné hnacie sily vojny. K pochopeniu hĺbky konfliktu, je dôležité pozrieť sa na spoločenskú priepasť v Jemene a na to, ako k nej viedol historický vývoj. Je potrebné zvážiť aj vplyv medzinárodných aktérov, ich prítomnosť a záujmy v konflikte, aby sa získal holistický pohľad na situáciu v Jemene.

Prvá kapitola skúma, ako sa historicky formoval Jemen po páde Imamátu v roku 1962. Vysvetľuje, ako tribalizmus a náboženstvo vytvorili priepasť medzi severom a juhom krajiny, ktorá ostáva viditeľná dodnes. Kapitola tiež vysvetľuje, ako sa po období menších lokálnych konfliktov a občianskej vojny podarilo zvíťaziť Ali Abdulah Salehmu, a tak vytvoriť elitnú klientelistickú záujmovú sieť, ktorá fungovala v Jemene tridsať rokov. Dejiny tiež ukázali, ako je frustrácia ľudí spojená s korupciou, nepotizmom a chýbajúcimi štátnymi službami, čo malo za následok zlyhanie rozvoja štátu. Z dôvodu spoločenského rozdelenia a tragickej hospodárskej situácie sa Jemen nachádzal na pokraji zlyhania. Silné kmeňové rozdelenie v kombinácii s vlastnosťami zlyhávajúceho štátu viedlo Jemen k vzniku rôznych povstaleckých skupín a teroristických organizácií. Hlboká nespokojnosť nakoniec viedla severných povstalcov Houthi, nazývaných po ich lídrovi Hussein Badr al-Din Houthi, k tomu, aby postupne prevzali kontrolu nad severnými oblasťami Jemenu. To bol dôvod, kvôli čomu sa stali hrozbou pre Saudskú Arábiu. Počiatočné obvinenia ukázali, že Houthi povstalci dostávajú určitú podporu od Iráncov, čo viedlo k pochybnostiam poukazujúcim na fakt, že konflikt v Jemene je pravdepodobne súčasťou proxy vojny medzi dvoma regionálnymi veľmocami.

Druhá kapitola práce rozoberá hypotézu, že vojna je skutočne zástupnou vojnou, a predstavuje dve teórie, ktoré by dokázali túto hypotézu potvrdiť a vysvetliť konflikt. Prvá, teória ofenzívneho realizmu, ktorú vypracoval John Mearsheimer, bola vysvetlená ako kontextová koncepcia správania sa štátov v anarchickej štruktúre medzinárodných vzťahov. Teória vysvetľuje, ako je základným dôvodom správania sa

štátov boj o prežitie a ako to súvisí s bezpečnostnými opatreniami. Teória poskytuje teoretický rámec pre regionálne hegemonické snahy Saudskej Arábie a Iránu. Zatiaľ čo teória *Medzinárodných Aktérov a Vnútorých Konfliktov* Johna Stedmana sa uplatnila s cieľom previesť mocenské opatrenia štátov do lokálnejšieho rámca jemenského konfliktu. Obe teórie skúmali, ako sa tieto dva štáty angažujú v Jemene a ako ich záujmy a pôsobenie robia konflikt proxy vojnou.

Tretia kapitola sumarizuje historický kontext zapájania sa Iránu a Saudskej Arábie do rôznych konfliktov na podporu vlád a povstaleckých skupín, s cieľom dosiahnuť vlastné záujmy v regióne Blízkeho východu. V tejto kapitole sa tiež poukazuje na hrozbu, že niektorá z krajín má potenciál sa stať jadrovou veľmocou a zvráti rovnováhu síl v regióne. Prvá časť nakoniec dokázala, ako prebieha „studená vojna“ medzi dvoma veľmocami. Druhá časť sa zamerala na vývoj v Jemene a ukázala, ako sa postupne stal tento konflikt súčasťou proxy vojny, kvôli čoraz väčšej angažovanosti Iránu a Saudskej Arábie. Saudská intervencia v Jemene v roku 2015 bola výsledkom asertívnejšej zahraničnej politiky, ktorá je reakciou na tesnú blízkosť Iráncov, ktorí ohrozujú existenciu krajiny. Iránska angažovanosť a spojenie s Houthi rebelmi sú zjavnejšie po mnohých strategických vojenských operáciách, ktoré upozornili na iránsku podporu a vojenskú pomoc povstalcov.

Táto bakalárska práca skúma jemenský konflikt a vplyv medzinárodných aktérov na udalosti. V závere práce sú uvádzané dôkazy o zapojení sa Saudskej Arábie a Iránu do vojny v Jemene kvôli presadzovaniu vlastných záujmov oboch krajín, aby sa stali regionálnym hegemónom na Blízkom východe.

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