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**Interstate rivals' intervention in third-party civil wars: The comparative case
of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen (2004-2018)**

Doctoral dissertation

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Budapest, 2020

Institute of International Studies

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Interstate rivals' intervention in third-party civil wars: The comparative case of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen (2004-2018)

Júlia Palik

Abstract

How does interstate rivals' intervention in third-party civil conflicts impact conflict duration and outcome? To answer this research question, I apply a qualitative case-study research design and compare Saudi Arabia and Iran's military and non-military interventions in Yemen during the Saada wars (2004-2010) and in the post-Arab Spring internationalized civil war (2014-2018). Though research has shown that there is a correlation between the presence of interstate rivalry and intervention, sufficient explanations for *how* and *why* rivals' intervention influences a civil war are unavailable. Moreover, previous research suffers from two shortcomings: it focused only on one type of intervention (military or non-military) ignoring the multiplicity of tools in rivals' disposal during intervention, and it did not take into account proxies' capacities to influence their sponsor's relations to each other. This dissertation applies a structured-focused comparative methodology and triangulates data from three sources: my own novel dataset construction (mediation and ceasefire dataset in Yemen), 14 elite interviews, and the review of primary and secondary sources. Findings show that two mechanisms contribute to protracted conflicts: rivals *conflict integration* and domestic conflict parties *instrumentalization of rivals*. These two simultaneous mechanisms create *networked interdependencies* that makes conflict settlement more difficult by influencing the commitment problem and information asymmetries between civil war belligerents. The results of the Yemeni case are applicable to a wider universe of cases, namely civil wars experiencing inter-state interventions, such as in Libya, or Syria.

Introduction

In 2012, former US president Barack Obama referred to Yemen as an example of peaceful political transition for other Arab Nations (White House 2012). Today's Yemen is anything but peaceful. In April 2019, a UNDP-commissioned study concluded that the civil war has already reversed human development by 21 years (Moyer et. al 2019). Between 2015 and 2019, approximately 100,000 fatalities were recorded (ACLED 2019). In total more than 250,000 people have been killed directly by the fighting and indirectly by the lack of access to food, medicine, and basic infrastructure. The civil war has become internationalized in 2015, when the Saudi Arabia led Coalition (SIC) intervened in support of the Government of Yemen (GoY), headed by President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, to restore its rule and to reverse Ansar Allah's (Houthis) territorial gains. The Kingdom considers Ansar Allah as an Iranian proxy. Finding a negotiated solution to the Yemeni conflict is imperative but growing more complicated as the number of external and internal actors increase.

This dissertation focuses on international intervention by strategic rivals in third-party in civil wars.¹ The dissertation asks the following research questions: How does interstate rivals' intervention in a third-party civil war impact conflict duration and outcome in that country? More specifically, (1) how do interstate rivals engage in third party civil conflicts and (2) how do conflict parties attract, utilize and sustain the external support they receive from their supporters? To answer these questions, I develop an integrative theoretical framework that focuses on inter-actor dynamics and integrates both rivalry and civil war dynamics to explain civil war duration and outcome. This dissertation applies a qualitative case study method and selects two within-case methods: structured-focused comparison and process tracing. I answer the research questions by examining Saudi Arabia and Iran's intervention (both military and non-military forms of intervention) in Yemen during the Saada wars (2004-2010) and the internationalized civil war (2014-2018).

Rivals' interventions into civil wars is not unique to Yemen. According to the latest UCDP dataset on organized violence, since 2013 more than 30% of all civil wars have experienced internationalization, which never happened previously in the post-II World War era (Pettersson et. al 2019:2-3). Third parties are important actors in civil wars: Onset, duration, and termination are influenced by external actors. Some engage for benevolent, others for more benign intentions. This creates challenges for IR scholars: How to account for the various "faces" or "levels of analysis" (Waltz 1959) when one seeks to make theoretically informed explanations of various stages of civil wars? The inclusion of external actors means that we need to move beyond the government-rebel dichotomy when building theories of civil wars and we need to acknowledge that civil wars display clear transnational characteristics.

¹ This phenomenon is called by many names: proxy wars, balancing interventions (Findley and Teo 2006) or dual-sided interventions (Hironaka 2005).

This paper is organized as follows. First, I provide a literature overview and identify gaps. The second section introduces the analytical framework. The third section overviews the research design. Section four provides the empirical analysis and the structured focused comparison of the two conflicts in Yemen. The last section concludes and provides some recommendations for future research. It is important to note that this is a summary version of the dissertation and as such some important historical accounts are excluded from the present analysis. Accordingly, this paper should be read alongside the original version.

Literature review

To understand the impact of rivals' intervention in civil wars I utilize the literature on strategic rivals, third-party intervention, diplomatic interventions, and rebel governance.² In the following section I introduce the main findings of these literatures and identify gaps.

Interstate rivals

The underlying observation of rivalry analysis is that rivals are special conflict-prone dyads, or pairs of states. As Colaresi & Thompson (2002) puts it, "rivalry processes can be understood as antecedents to interstate conflict and that conflict within the constraints of rivalry works differently than conflict outside of rivalry" (2002:263).³ The most influential contemporary approaches to defining and measuring rivalries are the dispute-density (Diehl and Goertz 2000; Goertz and Diehl 1993) and the strategic rivalry approaches (Thompson 1995, 2001; Colaresi et.al 2008). The strategic rivalry approach does not develop a measurement criterion, instead it examines who state leaders themselves identify as their enemies (Colaresi et.al 2008). The first important gap is that most studies on rivalries examine the onset of direct conflict between members of the rival dyad and do not take into account that rivalry can manifest in multiple forms and spaces, even in indirect conflict in a third-party state's territory. It is very likely that rivals are not just conflict prone dyads, but they utilize civil wars in third-party states for their own strategic advancement. Moreover, there are almost no studies addressing the competitive peace-making efforts of rivals in civil wars.

Third-party military and diplomatic intervention

According to the realist, rational bargaining theory credible commitments, issue indivisibility, and information asymmetries are the most often cited causes of conflicts (Fearon 1995, 2004; Walter 1997, 2002). Yet, all these factors are subject to external manipulation. Civil wars scholars have long recognized the transnational nature

² I complement these accounts with recent developments in Middle East Area studies. See the literature review in the dissertation.

³ What we know empirically about rivalry, however, depends on how the concept of rivalry is operationalized and which dyads are identified as rivals. Goertz & Diehl (1993), and more recently Thompson (2015) provides an extensive overview of the numerous ways scholars have operationalized and measured the concept of rivalry.

of civil wars (e.g.: Deutsch & Singer 1964; Rosenau 1964). As civil wars are characterized by power asymmetries, i.e. rebels are usually weaker both in terms of human and material capital than the government, third party intervention can be critical especially for the weaker side.⁴ The impact of these interventions is multifaceted: Research has shown that external support makes wars longer (Balch-Lindsay and Enterlien 2000; Hazen 2013, Cunningham 2006), especially when both sides receive outside support (Regan 2002; Aydin & Regan, 2012), deadlier (Lacina 2006; Heger & Salehyan, 2007), and less amenable to negotiated outcomes (Cunningham 2006, 2010). External support - regardless of the form it takes - is a foreign policy decision and it is aimed at achieving a specific outcome in the civil war, whether its peace, conflict de-escalation, or promoting the victory of the preferred side. Intervention achieves one or more of these objectives by altering the capabilities of at least one of the conflict parties, i.e.: increasing its military strength or legitimizing the non-state actor by including it into formal negotiations and eventually to the post-conflict political settlement.

Intervention has been specified as an important explanatory variable in civil war duration (Regan 2002) and outcome (DeRouen and Sobek 2004). Intervention introduces a structural change and makes civil wars internationalized. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP), an internationalized internal armed conflict occurs between the government of a state and internal opposition groups with intervention from other states in the form of troops (Pettersen & Wallensteen 2015: 549). This definition is problematic because it ignores the multiple types of intervention external states can pursue, ranging from non-violent to violent activities. I apply Regan's (2002) rather broad definition of intervention, who states that "third party intervention is the use of an actor's resources to affect the course of a civil conflict" (Regan 2002:9). Accordingly, intervention can broadly be disaggregated into the following categories: (1) diplomatic intervention, i.e. mediation, arbitration, negotiation (e.g.: Regan and Aydin 2006); (2) coercive and supportive forms of economic intervention, such as sanctions and foreign aid (McNab & Mason 2007); (3) covert or overt support like funds, safe haven, training and weapons (Salehyan 2009; Salehyan et al. 2011); (4) direct military intervention (Balch-Lindsay et al. 2008); (5) and the deployment of peacekeepers (Fortna 2004; Hegre et al. 2019).

To follow the actor-centric approach to the study of civil wars (Theo & Findley 2006), it is important to emphasize that external support does not evolve in a vacuum. Intervention has a demand and supply side, i.e.: external actors (both state and non-state actors) have to be *willing* and *capable* of providing external support (supply side) and civil conflict parties (both states and non-state actors) have to *accept* and *utilize* the external support they receive (demand side) (Siverson & Starr 1990; Salehyan et al. 2011). States also need incentives or willingness to intervene. Humanitarian reasons can be important, but often there are strategic motivations behind the decision to provide support. External support can serve as a low-cost foreign policy tool to weaken an

⁴ External support for rebel groups is hypothesized to move parties closer to a 'balance of power' situation in which neither party is able of bringing the conflict to a decisive end. Because external resources are plentiful, the parties can continuously rearm and thus reaching a mutually hurting stalemate is protocrated (Zartman 2001).

adversary and in some cases it can act as a form of conflict delegation (Salehyan 2010). Some interventions - such as peacekeeping and negotiations - act in order to resolve civil wars, while others seek to deliberately lengthen conflict for economic purposes or to influence the balance of power between the primary conflict parties for their own strategic purposes (Balch-Lindsay et. al 2008; Balch-Lindsay & Enterline 2000). In addition, the onset, level, and type of external support is not constant during the conflict. The literature on civil war intervention by rivals usually takes a binary approach and codes whether an intervention has taken place or not, but it fails to record the quality of and changes across intervention types. Another significant lacuna is that while the relationship between the domestic conflict actor and its external supporter is analyzed, in cases of opposing interventions the relationship between the external actors remains a black box. Furthermore, the literature on intervention often focuses only on one type of intervention, yet in reality most interventions manifest in multiple forms. Lastly, we still lack a more detailed understanding of domestic conflict actors' capacity in influencing their sponsors.

Rebel governance

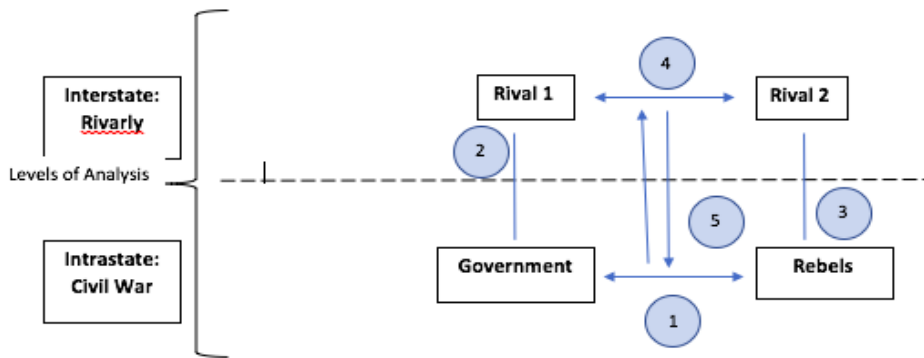
The discussion on both military and non-military support to domestic conflict parties means that it is not enough to only look at the *provision* of support, but one has to examine conflict parties' *ways of using that support*. The study of rebel governance (Olson 1993; Metelits 2009; Kasfir 2005; Mampilly 2011; Weinstein 2006; Huang 2012) provides crucial insights into how insurgents acquire legitimacy, how civilian life unfolds under insurgents' rule, and how rebels renegotiate power structures in the areas they hold. This literature however so far failed to integrate external sources of rebel governance into its theoretical framework.

All in all, there are four main gaps in the literature: (1) We do not know enough about interstate rivals propensity to intervene in third-party civil wars, (2) the interaction of multiple forms of intervention and their impact on civil war dynamics, (3) there is a lack of understanding on the external sources of rebel governance, (4) and we know little about supported groups (both state and non-state actors) capacity to influence their sponsors. This paper addresses these gaps through the case study of interstate rivals intervention in Yemen.

Theoretical and analytical framework

In this section I advance a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the international and the civil war level through examining inter-state rivals' interventions in third party civil conflicts and conflict parties' ability to influence rivalry dynamics. Figure 1 depicts the levels of analysis and the relations this section addresses.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework



Rivals who intervene in third party civil wars face a unique strategic dilemma resulting from their primary objectives and the means to achieve those objectives. Rivals primary strategic aim in this framework is to impose costs on their rivals, but as Vasquez (1996) and Salehyan (2009) also argued, rivals are also aimed at avoiding direct military confrontation. If one party observes that its rival have intervened in a third-party civil conflict by providing support for one domestic actor (e.g.: Rival 1 supports Government), then the other rival has incentives to intervene in the same conflict by providing support to the other side(s) of the conflict (rival 2 supports rebels). This situation mirrors a stimuli-response, or action-reaction situation (Toukan 2019). Rivals primary aim is still to impose costs on their counterpart, but they do so by affecting the length, costs, and the outcome of the civil war. States are aware of the potential loss of autonomy when deciding to use proxies, but they are also aware that delegation is a cost-saving device (Salehyan 2011: 495). Sustaining support can stem from the motivation to induce the other actor to stay engaged in the fight and to spend more financial resources than it would have done otherwise, or because of psychological dynamics. As Thompson (2015) showed, one strong characteristic of enduring rivalry is that over time, rivals have the tendency to frame non-rivalry related events as part of their rivalry. This means that even if in the early stages of the intervention, the primary aim was to impose costs on the rival, rivals are locked in certain psychological dynamics and they start reframing the ongoing war as part and parcel of their own rivalry. This gives rise to the rivals' *conflict integration* mechanism.

But exactly how can interventions lengthen conflict? Understanding how civil war belligerents can shape their sponsors' perception of each other provides one plausible explanation for this question. I start by the same observation that I have made in case of interstate rivals. Civil war combatants have strategic aims and preferences for achieving those aims: The government is aimed at preserving the status quo, while the rebels are aimed at challenging it (either by seeking to replace the government or by gaining territorial independence). Conflict parties are primarily interested in their domestic environment, less so in regional dynamics. The second well established observation is that civil wars are asymmetric by nature, meaning that rebels' material capabilities

usually are below that of the government (e.g.: Blattman & Miguel 2010). What unites the two parties is that both the government and the rebels prefer to rely on domestic resources both in terms of manpower, training, and financial resources. At the same time, external resources are desired because they “liberate combatants from domestic resource constraints” (Anders 2019:526).

Conflict actors, especially rebels, are interested in obtaining the most possible support, but they are also aimed at fighting and negotiating from a position of strength and in most instances, admitting the exact amount of support would de-legitimize conflict parties’ cause. As such, there is a need to secure as much support as possible, but to disclose as little as possible to hide potential sponsor dependence. Yet, note that under certain circumstances and especially for rebels, openly acknowledging support is an important tool for legitimization. I expect that these two types (denial and acknowledgement of support) are not exclusive options, but rather they are functions of battlefield developments and the type of support rebels are receiving at a given point in the conflict. In the bargaining literature this means that actors have an incentive to misrepresent private information about their capabilities and resolve (Thyne 2009) which in turn enhances the information asymmetries between the civil war belligerent, thus making wars longer. The same is expected from civil war conflict actors, who by being the local agents, are able to shape rivals’ perceptions both about conflict dynamics (and the need for continued support) and of the rivalry itself (by misrepresenting the level and/or type of support provided by the rival). Conflict actors look for external support and they are aware of the potential pool of supporters (both states and non-state actors). In cases when both the government and rebels receive external support, combatant capabilities move closer to parity. Parity - even the perception of it - generates uncertainty which in turn results in divergent expectations regarding the relative strength and resolve, encouraging parties to continue fighting. Accordingly, the manipulation of external security dilemmas across rivals and the prospects of receiving support are expected to be part of domestic conflict actors’ calculus, a mechanism I term as *rivalry instrumentalization*. The simultaneous presence of these external and internal dynamics results in *networked interdependencies* (Dorussen et. al 2016) through the joint mechanisms of conflict integration and rivalry instrumentalization.

Research design

This paper rests on a post-positivist approach and applies a qualitative case-study methodology in the form of structured-focused comparison (Seawright & Gerring 2006; George & Bennett 2005).⁵ The universe of cases where this case study belongs is civil wars experiencing intervention by strategic rivals. This study results in contingent generalizations.⁶ As the goal is to uncover causal mechanisms, I apply process tracing as a within-

⁵ Qualitative methods take an *effects-of-causes* logic and often rely on backward logic. This means that first I look at the outcome/dependent variable of interest (civil war duration, intensity, conflict management) and then examine certain causes and/or causal pathways that led to the outcome of interest.

⁶ Some researchers (Geddes 1990; Collier & Mahoney 1996) warn against selecting cases on the dependent variable. They argue that this type of case selection results in biased conclusions and thus findings are only relevant for the

case methodology, which is defined as “attempts to identify the intervening causal process - the causal chain and causal mechanism - between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome or the dependent variable” (George & Bennett 2005:206). Process tracing is a mechanism-based explanation and mechanisms can be measured by accounting for their observable implications. To ensure the validity of my causal inferences I triangulate data from three sources the development of a novel mediation and ceasefire dataset (1)⁷, 14 semi-structured in-depth elite-interviews (2)⁸, and document reviews (3).

Empirical analysis

Rivals propensity to intervene

To explain rivals’ motives and propensity to intervene in third party civil conflicts, I examined the Saudi-Iranian rivalry between 1979 and 2018 (see Chapter 6 of the dissertation). I found that Saudi Arabia and Iran have avoided direct military confrontation, yet they frequently intervened in third-party conflicts. Second, the goal of preserving regime security (through pro-status quo versus revolutionary means) encourages intervention in each other’s and third parties’ domestic affairs. Third, the sectarian lens provides an important transnational identity-marker that helps to mobilize conflict actors in third states. Importantly, this lens is also utilized by domestic conflict actors when they are seeking external support. Lastly, non-violent means of power projection, such as religious education, are frequently deployed soft power resources of both countries.

Backgrounder on Yemen and Ansar Allah

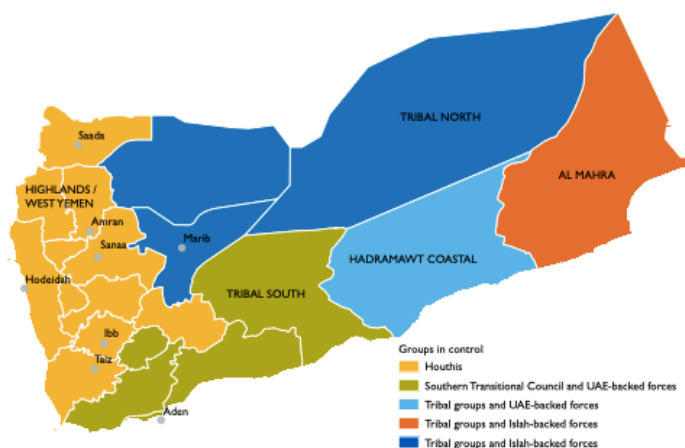
Which factors enabled the onset of the two conflicts and third-party intervention in Yemen? Certain structural features have important consequences on a rebel group’s ability to organize. Yemen is located at the strategic southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula and the country’s mountainous areas “have always favored the rebels” by providing safe havens (Clark 2010:250). Yemen has also been the “poorest country in the Arabian

analyzed case. To mitigate the potential problems arising from selecting on the dependent variable I compare two civil wars within the same country. The within-case comparison allows me to hold most independent variables constant except for the dependent variable of interest, i.e.: intervention by interstate rivals (Collier and Mahoney 1996:89-90).⁷ The ceasefire dataset is part of the Global Ceasefire Dataset developed by PRIO and ETH Zurich. The project receives funding from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. This dataset is compatible with other UCDP conflict data. Coding is based on using local and international news sources in English language via Factiva. The Yemen ceasefire dataset coding took place between December 2018 and June 2019 and included more than 13.200 articles to code. The coded unit of observation was a directed ceasefire declaration, i.e.: each actor declaring a ceasefire towards one addressee constitutes one observation. 26 variables have been coded for each ceasefire.

⁸ I also conducted 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews between August 2017 and March 2019 with individuals identified as key actors with insights about the various manifestations (e.g.: negotiations and humanitarian aid provision) of the impact of interstate rivalry on civil war processes. Interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours and were conducted either via Skype or in person. Interviews were based on a 12 point interview guide (see the Appendix of the dissertation). The interview guide focused on eliciting participants’ perception of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, its impact - or the lack thereof - on peace negotiations, agreement implementation, and humanitarian aid provision.

Peninsula” (Lackner 2014, World Bank 2019) well before the current conflict broke out and it’s development indicators have significantly worsened since the outbreak of the conflict.⁹ Economic underdevelopment is further enhanced by the demographic pressure: Before the conflict Yemen had one of the fastest growing population in the region (Day 2012). The population of Yemen is approximately 28 million people with the majority belonging to the Sunni branch of Islam, while approximately 34-45 % are Zaydi Shia Muslims, and less than 1% of the population belong to other religious minorities (Brandt 2018:22). Weapons are also widespread in Yemen, another factor which increases the propensity of civil war onset (Collier & Hoeffler 2003). Yemen has been identified as the second most heavily armed nation (Small Arms Survey 2007). Rebel armament costs are therefore low, since the availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is high, government control over SALW is virtually non-existent. Lastly, Yemen is characterized by a unique dual-governance structure. Historically, the central government possessed only a limited degree of control over the country’s peripheral provinces. Water scarcity, the lack of employment opportunities and harsh weather conditions are all factors that contributed to the semi-autonomous nature of the northern region where Ansar Allah originates from. Here, the dominant social value system is qabyala (tribalism). In practice, tribal confederations and their powerful leaders are responsible for providing conflict mediation, public services and other basic state functions. Therefore, the local population’s loyalty is based on these socio-cultural microstructures and as such territory and power is organized differently from the Westphalian state model.

Map 1: Yemen: areas and groups in control (2019)



Source: Palik & Rustad (2019)

⁹ Since the internationalization and escalation of the conflict in March 2015, the economy has deteriorated sharply. In its 2019 report, the World Bank notes that “while official statistics remain unavailable, anecdotal evidence suggests that GDP contracted by an accumulated 39 % since the end of 2014.” (World Bank 2019:2).

Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), or more widely known as the Houthi movement, originates from the Zaydi Shia minority from the northern governorates of Yemen. The Zaydi Imamate was established in northern Yemen in 893 and lasted until the 1962 revolution.¹⁰ Although Zaydi Shi'ism (or the so-called "Fivers") is a sub-sect of Shia Islam, it is doctrinally different from the dominant "Twelver Shiism" which is practiced in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. In fact, Zaydi religious practices are closer to Sunni Islam (Bonney 2009:1). Ansar Allah was established and led by members of the *sadah* (sing. *sayyid*) social stratum.^[2]

The post-revolution era resulted in an elite transformation in which the sayyid hegemony was substituted by shaykhly hegemony. Brandt (2017:50-57) characterizes the patronage based post-imamate era as a "big-man game" in which tribal shayks were co-opted by the government through integrating them into important government and military positions.¹¹ These developments triggered a resistance movement led by the al-Houthi family. The first institutionalized manifestation of this resistance movement was the establishment of the Believing Youth (BY or *Shabab al-Moumineen*) organization in 1990. The BY started as a network of educational centers for the marginalized northern Yemeni youth. When the BY began to open their summer camps to gradually regain their local influence, they simultaneously began to politicize the Zaydi cause (Freeman 2009: 1008). This grassroots level institution was aimed at re-engaging the Zaydi tribal youth and to counter the Wahhabi/Salafi influence in the Zaydi heartland. The BY have rapidly gained ground and by 1994 it had at least 15,000 members (Brandt 2017:117; Granzow 2015:163).

President Ali Abdullah Saleh headed Yemen from mid-1978 until his November 2011 resignation. Although the post-1990 unified Yemen¹² was nominally a multiparty system, Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) party dominated the political landscape (Schmitz & Burrowes 2018:414), the only opposition being al-Islah party. Yemen has traditionally been governed by a small number of elites, most of whom originated from the northern highlands and had close tribal ties to Saleh's own Sanhan tribe. Internally, the GoY maintained power through co-optation, coercion, and opportunistic alliances. The patronage system has extended to the political, security, and economic realm and enhanced corruption (Phillips 2011; Alley 2010; Clark 2015). The post-unification multiparty system translated into a window of opportunity for the political representation of Zaydis. The al-Haqq party was established in 1990 by al-Houthi and other families as a competitor against the Salafist-supported Islah party. Badr al-Din al-Houthi served as vice president of the party (Brandt 2017:119). Hussein al-Houthi, the

¹⁰ The Yemeni *sadah* trace their descent to the first Zaydi imam, Yahya b. al-Husayn (d.911) who was invited to Yemen by tribal leaders to mediate an inter-tribal violent conflict according to Sharia (Dresch 2001:8). Upon successfully resolving the inter-tribal conflict, Yahya remained in Saada and established the Zaydi state under the Zaydi Hadawi school of law (Brandt 2017:21).

¹¹ From the government's perspective, this system served two purposes: to ensure shaykhly loyalty and to expand the state's influence into otherwise remote and hard-to-govern areas. This model constituted the foundations of Saleh's and the northern Hashid tribe monopoly.

¹² The present Republic of Yemen was established in 1990 when South Yemen, previously known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDR) and North Yemen, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) was unified under the leadership of Ali Abdullah Saleh and his General People's Congress (GPC) party.

eldest son of Badr al-Din have won the 1993 election but lost the 1997 one. Afterwards he turned away from politics and spent the period between 1999 and 2000 in Iran and Sudan and then returned to Saada and focused on contributing to the work of the BY (Brandt 2017:131). In 2001 the BY was split between the Houthi family and the faction led by Muhammad Izzan and al-Din al-Muayyadi (Brandt 2017:132). The group led by Hussein al-Houthi, known as Ashab al-shiar (Followers of the Slogan) constituted the original group of Ansar Allah (ibid). Ansar Allah thus began as a theological movement to protest the dilution of Zaydi identity, and later transformed into a military resistance movement and as of today it evolved to the de facto government of Yemen.

Backgrounder on the two cases (Saada wars 2004-2010 and the internationalized civil war 2014-2018)

The Saada wars (2004-2010) and the internationalized civil war (2014-2018) are appropriate cases for comparison because both conflicts were fought between Ansarallah and the GoY in the same country. At the same time, as of 2020, the internationalized civil war entails more conflict parties. This dissertation however does not focus on the conflict between the GoY and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) or the conflict between the Houthis and the STC and other Salafi militant groups.¹³ I also do not focus on Yemen's "third war" which is the US-led counterterrorism campaign in Yemen.

The Saada wars (2004-2010) entailed six rounds of fights in northern Yemen between the Houthis and the GoY headed at that time by President Saleh. In early 2003, Hussein al-Houthi began to raise his opposition against the Yemen-US alliance in the War on Terror campaign and capitalized on the culmination of decades of economic, socio-political marginalization of the northern region. His widely visited Friday sermons have attracted authorities' attention and they began to consider Hussein's political activism as a threat to state security (Salmoni et al. 2010:7). The government claimed that the Houthis are funded and supported by Iran and were aimed at re-establishing the Imamate (Salmoni et al. 2010; Boucek 2010:6). That time president Saleh was able to portray the fight against the group as part of the government's counterterrorism efforts (Hammond 2012). Ansarallah stated that the movement was fighting the government over socio-economic and political grievances but made no references to replacing it.¹⁴ In 2007, Saleh invited the Qatari Emir to mediate the conflict. Qatari

¹³ By 2015 the army became fragmented between Hadi loyalists and others, loyal to former president Saleh began to support the Houthis. The current heterogenous anti-Houthi coalition consists of the Yemeni army, the Salafi Al-Abbas Brigade, more than 90,000 militias in Southern Yemen including the Security Belt Forces and Local Elite Forces trained and equipped by the UAE, and a number of non-allied armed local tribal groups (S/2018/68). Ardemagni (2018) notes that extensive foreign assistance to the Yemeni security forces resulted in the increasing militarization of Salafist groups in Yemen, who are considered as being one of the most prevalent challenges for post-war Yemen. The further instability caused by external backing was vividly illustrated by the large-scale fighting between the Southern Transitional Council and the Hadi government and the subsequent integration of STC in the government by the Saudi-brokered Riyadh Agreement (International Crisis Group 2019).

¹⁴ UCDP has not included data on the conflict between the GoY and Ansarallah before 2015 due to the lack of a stated incompatibility. According to UCDP, "the conflict between the government and Ansarallah was for several years not included in UCDP data due to the lack of a stated incompatibility. The UCDP definitions states that incompatibility,

mediation saw two short-lived ceasefires before it was terminated in 2009 due to disagreements over the disbursement of reconstruction funds to Saada (Palik & Rustad 2019). In 2009, the conflict became regionalized with the direct military intervention of Saudi Arabia and the fighting continued until the 13th of July 2010. More than 250,000 people were displaced, several thousand have died, and the governorate suffered further infrastructural and economic setback (Salmoni et. al 2010; Boucek 2010:2). The Saada wars although ended in 2010, but without addressing or providing any remedy for the underlying grievances of the Houthis.

Internationalized civil war (2014-2018)

The 2011 Arab Uprisings reached Yemen and ended the 33-year long presidency of Saleh. Saleh was forced to step down due to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the UN supported *Agreement on the Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen in Accordance with the Initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council* (Implementation Mechanism). The subsequent section on third-party peace attempts details the impact of mediation activities during this period. All in all, the implementation mechanism and its accompanying measures (e.g.: National Dialogue Conference) failed to prevent the civil war. In 2014, the Houthis joined their forces with President Saleh and replaced the Hadi government. On 25th March 2015 Saudi Arabia began its intervention in the Yemeni civil war upon the request of President Hadi when the Houthi rebels reached the temporary capital of Aden. The Saudi and UAE-led ten-member coalition launched “Operation Decisive Storm” with the stated goal of restoring the legitimate government of Hadi and reversing the territorial gains of the Houthis, whom they accused of being an Iranian-funded military force. The coalition is fighting with air and ground forces and receives intelligence, logistical and military support from countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, or Germany. Between 2015 and 2018 battlefronts became frozen and Yemen evolved to the worlds’ worst humanitarian crisis.

Structured-focused comparison

When comparing the Saada Wars (2004-2010) to the internationalized civil war (2015-2018), I took George & Bennett’s (2005) approach to conducting a structured focused comparison by “asking a set of standardized, general questions of each case, even in single case studies (...) which is necessary to ensure the acquisition of comparable data” (George & Bennett 2005:69).

or the conflict issue, can be either concerning government (the type of the political system, the replacement of the central government) or territory (secession or autonomy for intrastate conflicts). Ansarallah has persistently claimed that they don’t want to overthrow the sitting government. Instead, the group has stated that it want the government to end what they perceive as socioeconomic injustices and the governments political discrimination of the group and the Huthi tribe. On 9 March 2014, however, the leader of the group, Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi, called on the government to step down. The leader cited what the group perceived as the government's failure to improve living standards in the country as well as corruption as reasons for its call for resignation.” UCDP: Ansarallah, downloaded from: <https://ucdp.uu.se/#/actor/1091> 03.06.2019

Table 1.: Structured-focused comparison, list of questions

Mechanism	Question
<i>Conflict integration</i>	Was Saudi Arabia providing support for any sides?
	What kind of support was Saudi Arabia providing?
	Was Iran providing support for any sides?
	What kind of support was Iran providing?
	Was Saudi Arabia referring to Iran when providing support for the GoY?
	Was Iran referring to Saudi Arabia when providing support for the rebels?
<i>Rivalry integration</i>	Do the Houthis acknowledge Iranian support?
	Does the GoY acknowledge Saudi support?
	Do the Houthis refer to the enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran?
	Does the GoY refer to the enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran?
	Do the Houthis frame Iranian support by referring to Saudi Arabia?
	Does the GoY frame Saudi support by referring to Iran?

Varieties of external support

The empirical analysis that follows represents the form, function, and utilization of intervention in Yemen by drawing on an extensive set of primary resources - elite interviews and the ceasefire dataset construction - and secondary resources. It is important to keep in mind that Saudi Arabia and Iran has different historical ties to Yemen. Saudi Arabia, a direct neighbor to Yemen, has been the most actively involved actor in Yemeni internal affairs (Phillips 2011:75). Saudi Arabia has been pursuing a pro-stability policy towards Yemen, sustaining the rule it perceives necessary to keep Yemen from posing a security threat and to ensure access to the Bab el-Mandeb strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and is Saudi Arabia's main gateway for exporting oil (Salisbury 2017). The Kingdom engaged in opportunistic alliances throughout Yemen's history and¹⁵ provided extensive economic support for the GoY and has been the primary source of remittances. Iran, on the other hand, has less direct relations with Yemen: Tehran maintained friendly relations with the communist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) (Salisbury 2015: 4), whereas the 1990s have been characterized by cordial relations. Interviewee 4 and 5 note that "Yemeni student in Iran were numerous during the 1990s and in the early 2000s" (02.08.2019, Oslo). This is the period when Hussein-al Houthi also travelled to Iran to receive education. In the mid-2000s Yemen and Iran did not develop significant economic relations (Zweiri 2016:11). In what follows, I delve into the different types of support (military, peace attempts, ceasefires,

¹⁵ In the 1960's, it supported the Zaydi imamate in its fight against the Republicans - backed by Egypt; in 1994 it backed the Southern separatist movement in a brief civil war. In post-unification Yemen, as Saleh's rule has cemented, the neighbors have gradually developed close working relations.

humanitarian aid, religious soft power promotion) the GoY and the Houthis have received from Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Table 2. Varieties of external support to AnsarAllah and the GoY

	Saudi Arabia - GoY		Iran - Ansarallah	
	<i>Military support</i>	<i>non-military support</i>	<i>Military support</i>	<i>non-military support</i>
2004-2010	cross-border attacks	export of Wahhabism	2009: anti-tank, anti-helicopter rockets	provision of education for Houthi-family members
2014-2018	Air and ground force provision, local security force training	GCC Initiative, largest humanitarian aid provider,	UAV, fuel, ballistic missiles, military training provision	4-point peace proposal; media support; training on "rebel governance"

Military support

For six years the Houthis waged a sporadic guerilla war in their mountainous strongholds, but for today they are capable of sustaining a sophisticated military campaign in urban areas across multiple fronts. This transformation is attributable to Ansar Allah’s access to better military equipment which has been gained both from external and internal sources (S/2015/125:22). From 2011 onwards, Ansar Allah has looted and gained access to tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft weapons, and short-range ballistic missiles, and to the institutional founding blocks of security, i.e. defense ministry, intelligence services (Knights 2018:17). The crucial military development of the Houthis took place when they allied with former-President Saleh in 2014. Externally, albeit to a limited degree, Iranian support facilitated the expansion of Ansar Allah. More sophisticated weapon systems, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) were manufactured in Iran and smuggled to the Houthis (CAR 2017:3).¹⁶ Empirical evidence regarding Iranian support is in fact scarce: There is no evidence that Iran provided the Houthis with any support prior to the outbreak of war in 2004 (Zweiri 2016:31). According to the 2016 UN Panel of Experts Report, Iran has been shipping weapons and fuel to the Houthi rebels since at least 2009 (S/2016/73: 22-25). The report details various cases in which Iranian fishing vessels attempted to secretly ship hundreds of anti-tank and anti-helicopter rockets to the rebels.

Non-military support

Peace processes and ceasefires

In line with the theory’s expectations of inter-state rivals’ aim to impact conflict outcomes, rivals can facilitate particular outcomes through military and non-military means, such as leading peace negotiations. Table 3

¹⁶ Since the 2015 Saudi intervention, the Houthis have frequently used ballistic missiles both within and outside Yemen. In November 2017, the Houthis launched a short-range ballistic missile from Amran which exploded near King Khalid International Airport. As a response, Saudi Arabia closed all Yemen’s air, sea and land ports, and thereby effectively locking out international aid from the country (HRW 2017; Reuters 2017).

provides an overview of external peace attempts. The following section analyses trends in third-party peace attempts and ceasefires in Yemen to assess the relative degree of involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran over time. Ceasefires are important to account for since they can be strategic tools for conflict parties (Clayton et al. 2019). For example, as this section demonstrates, the initial territorial expansion of the Houthis was possible by joining their forces with that of Saleh and because of a series of ceasefires negotiated with local tribes. This is important, since it debunks the myths according to which Iran enabled the Houthis to conquer the capital (Reuters 2014).

Table 3. Mediation between the Houthis and the Government of Yemen (2007-2018)

Year	Mediator	Outcome
2007	Qatar	Ceasefire
2008		Doha Agreement
2011	GCC	GCC Initiative
2014	Jamal Benomar (UN)	NDC concluded
2015	Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmad (UN), John Kerry (US)	Geneva Peace Talks
2016		Kuwait Peace Talks
2018	Martin Griffiths (UN)	Stockholm Agreement

Between 2004 and 2018, Qatar, the UN, EU, US, and the Gulf Cooperation Council have tried to mediate the conflict between the GoY and the Houthis. Mediation efforts have been complicated by the duality of roles: some mediators have been directly involved as a conflict party, and others indirectly involved, providing support to those engaged in the war. In the Saada Wars, only Qatar provided mediation services, whereas the internationalized civil war (2015-2018) involved three mediators: the GCC, the UN, and the EU. In June 2007, Qatari mediation efforts resulted in a joint ceasefire agreement between the GoY and the Houthis, which broke down after only a few months. The February 2008 Doha Agreement envisioned a more comprehensive solution to the conflict and included provisions for the GoY to release prisoners, grant amnesties, and reconstruct war-torn areas. The Houthis were expected to disarm as part of this agreement, and, to sweeten the deal, Qatar offered political asylum to rebel leaders and a \$500 million reconstruction assistance for Saada Province (Barakat 2014:15). This agreement fell through in May 2009 when Saleh declared Qatari mediation to be a failure due to disagreements over the disbursement of reconstruction funds.¹⁷

In 2011, as international pressure mounted over Saleh, he was forced to sign the GCC brokered peace deal on 23 November 2011. The government and the opposition parties signed the UN-led *Agreement on the Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen in Accordance with the Initiative of the Gulf*

¹⁷ Qatar then withdrew its promised investments. Fighting quickly resumed after this action and Qatar withdrew its mediation activities.

Cooperation Council (Implementation Mechanism) which placed former Vice President Hadi in power of the GoY, as an interim president, and included measures on security-sector reform, transitional justice, and created the National Dialogue Conference (NDC).¹⁸ Saleh's November 2011 resignation left a power vacuum, which allowed the rebels to seize Saada, al-Jawf, and Hajjah provinces by May 2012. The GCC agreement failed to address the core grievances of Yemeni protesters and it rather re-established the status quo ante. One of the most important recommendations of the NDC was to reform the federal structure of Yemen by establishing six regions instead of twenty-six. This new system however would have limited Houthis reach to the Azal region, isolating them from strategic port and oil reserves. This proposal was rejected by both the Houthis and the Southern Movement (Bellal 2018:148). After the conclusion of the NDC, the security situation deteriorated rapidly and by the end of 2014 the Houthis and Saleh joined their forces, dissolved the parliament, and established the Supreme Revolutionary Committee (SRC), headed by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi. President Hadi was ousted from Sanaa and subsequently from Aden (Schmitz 2014). Later he relocated to Riyadh, where he established a government in exile and denounced the Houthi take-over as a coup (Gaub 2015:3). The GCC agreement failed to address the core grievances of Yemeni protesters and it re-established the status quo ante.

In 2014, when the Houthis and Saleh joined their forces, as a last attempt to reverse the developments on the ground, the UN (led by Special Envoy Jamal Benomar) brokered the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA) between Hadi and the Houthis. The new agreement was never implemented. In April 2015, the UN appointed Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed to replace Benomar. Ahmed took a leading role and facilitated the conclusion of UN Resolution 2216 in April 2015, which required the conflict parties to resume the political process, called for the Houthis to unconditionally withdraw from government and security institutions, recognized the Hadi government as the legitimate government, and established an arms embargo on the Houthis and Saleh loyalists (S/RES/2216:2015). This resolution, however, placed substantial restrictions on the mediator's room for maneuver, since the UN Special Envoy's main task has been to convince the conflict parties to resume the political process in accordance with the GCC Initiative and the NDC outcomes. Recall that those political processes had already been rejected by the Houthis in 2014. Four separate rounds of talks in 2015–2016 did not produce any tangible results. After the final set of talks in Kuwait in August 2016, then-US Secretary of State John Kerry stepped in to find a political solution to the conflict. In November 2016, the Hadi government refused to sign the Kerry plan for fears Hadi would be politically sidelined. After this meeting, the Houthis refused to engage in any subsequent mediation efforts for two years. In September 2018, peace talks in Switzerland collapsed because the Houthi delegation refused to attend. They claimed the Saudi coalition prevented the delegations from traveling to the talks (Reuters 2018). Then in December 2018, after a two-year

¹⁸ By February 2012, former Vice-President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, as the only candidate, was elected as interim President for a two-year period. The NDC (2013–2014) was tasked with reaching national consensus on a new political system for Yemen by including all previously marginalized groups, such as the Houthis, the Southern Movement, women, youth, and civil society.

deadlock, a third UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, initiated a new round of peace talks in Sweden, still based on UN Resolution 2216. The GoY and the Houthis signed the Stockholm agreement which consists of agreements on the exchange of prisoners, a ceasefire in the port city of Hodeidah, the establishment of humanitarian corridors in Taiz, and a handover of the three Red Sea ports (Hodeidah, Al-Salif, and Ras Isa) to the United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (OESGY 2018). As of 2019, frontlines have been frozen, and no significant development took place in the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement.

Ceasefires

Figure 2. shows all ceasefires between the government of Yemen and Ansarallah. Figure 3. shows all ceasefires between Ansarallah and other non-state actors.

Figure 2: Ceasefires between the Government of Yemen and Non-state actors (1989-2018)

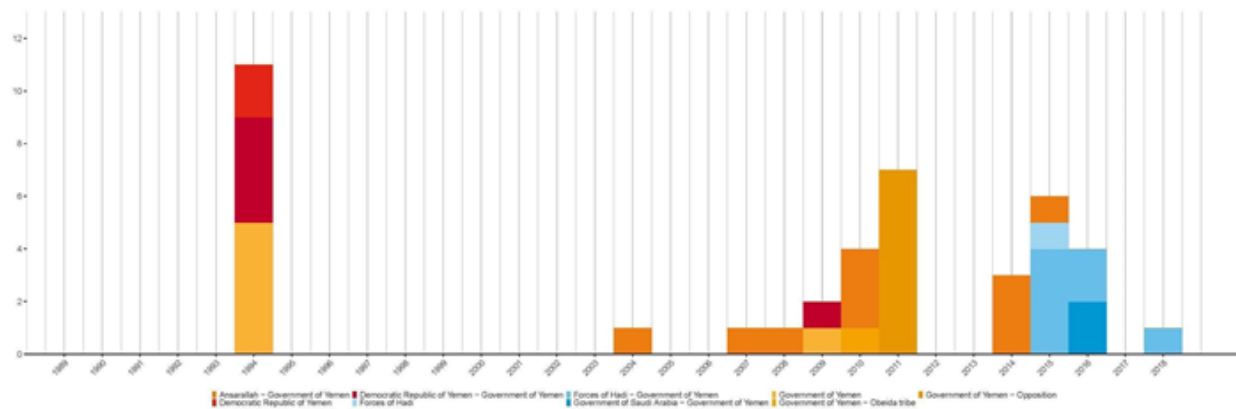
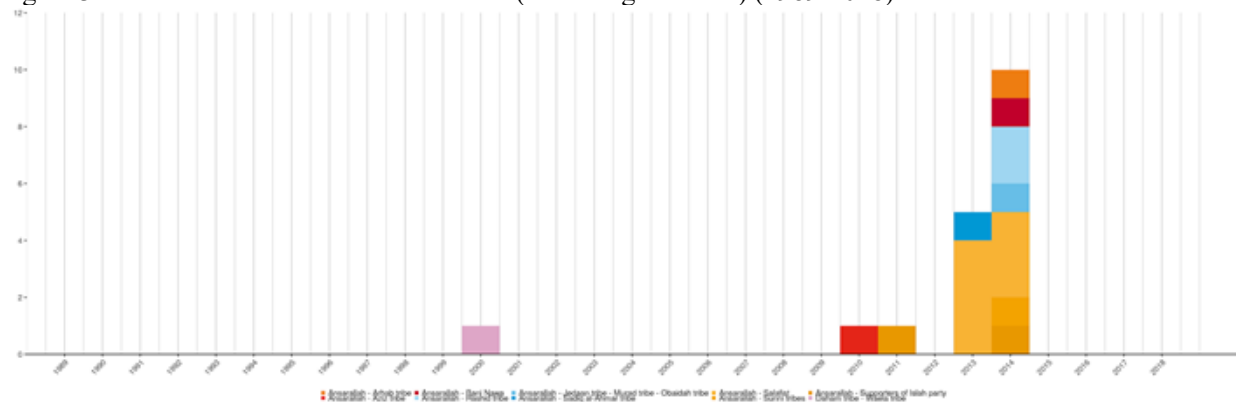


Figure 3: Ceasefires between non-state actors (excluding the GoY) (1989-2018)



Between 1989 and 2018 Yemen saw 59 ceasefires, clustered in three distinct peace-process related time periods (Palik et al. 2019). The first period corresponds to the Saada wars, the second being the 2011 transition process under the aegis of the GCC, UN, EU, and US. The third phase concentrated around the UN-led peace process

from 2015 onwards. In total 42 ceasefires involved mediators, the most frequent being Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the GCC, and the UN. In 2016, fighting between Ansarallah and Saudi Arabia reached the Saudi border area. The Saudis and Ansarallah negotiated a ceasefire for prisoner-exchange purposes. When asked about ceasefires, interviewees were cynical, as interviewee 1 stated, “ceasefire here and there. Parties say they stop fighting, maybe they have a good sleep and then on the next day they attack each other. Then the other party bombs them by saying that the other side was the first one who violated the ceasefires. It is a blame-game, I don't take ceasefires seriously at all” (02.06.2018, Oslo). Conflict parties also utilized ceasefires as periods to rearm and to conduct surprise attacks, or to shift the location of violence. Furthermore, virtually no ceasefire agreement entailed a monitoring or an enforcement mission. This means that parties knew that they would not be held accountable or be punished in case of violations. The 2011 –2015 period saw 16 non-state ceasefires (cf. Figure 3). These ceasefires have been concluded between Ansarallah the Salafists, the Sadiq al-Ahmar tribe, and multiple smaller loosely organized tribes. Notably, these ceasefires and their location overlapped with Ansarallah’s territorial expansion (Palik et al. 2019). The Yemeni experience regarding ceasefires shows that in countries where the state does not have monopoly over violence, ceasefires between non-state actors are significant strategic tools in the hands of conflict belligerents (Palik et al. 2019)

When comparing Saudi and Iranian peace-making attempts (both mediation and ceasefires) it becomes clear that Saudi Arabia exerted considerably more impact than Iran. Iran has never officially been part of any peace negotiation or never brokered a ceasefire. Tehran has been advocating a four-point Yemen peace plan since 2015 (Reuters 2015). The plan calls for an immediate ceasefire and end of all foreign military attacks, humanitarian assistance, a resumption of broad national dialogue and the “establishment of an inclusive national unity government” (Zarif 2017). Iran wants to ensure that any post-conflict political settlement will include the Houthis as official members of the governing coalition. This also means that Tehran seeks to preserve the unity of Yemen. Despite Iranian efforts to engage in peace talks, it is unlikely that either members of the UN Security Council or the SIC would grant any role to Tehran whom they view as a destabilizing force. Mediators on the other hand failed to recognize that UN Resolution 2216 does not correspond to political realities on the ground anymore. Since 2015, the Houthis have not only occupied territories, but also consolidated their gains, and, as such, any peace initiative based on UN SCR 2216 would be considered as a setback from a Houthi perspective.

Humanitarian aid

The provision of aid is the second key non-military dimension through which the discrepancies between Iranian and Saudi involvement become clear. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have traditionally been the top humanitarian donors to Yemen (Salisbury 2018).¹⁹ Iranian aid, whether humanitarian or development, is

¹⁹ Furthermore, besides Gulf governments, a number of Saudi private donors and semi-public organizations provide biased support to areas under the nominal control of the Hadi government.

negligible to that of the Gulf states. This section uses data from the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) for humanitarian aid, data from the Aid data website for development aid, and interviews with humanitarian organizations working inside Yemen. Figure 4 and 5 provides data on Saudi humanitarian funding to Yemen during the Saada wars and the internationalized civil war.²⁰

Figure 4. Saudi Arabia’s humanitarian aid to Yemen during the Saada wars (2004-2010)

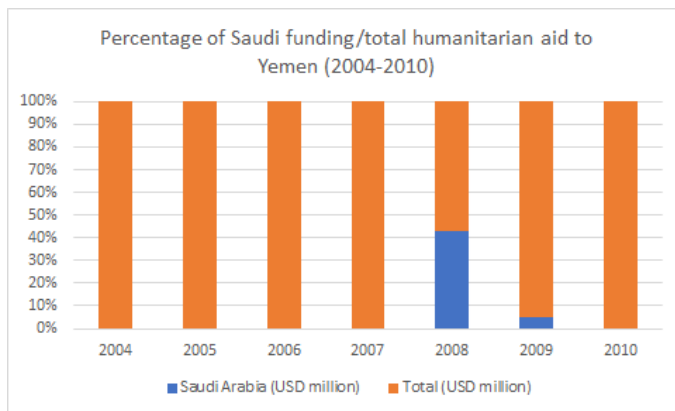


Figure 5. Saudi Arabia’s humanitarian aid to Yemen (2015-2018)

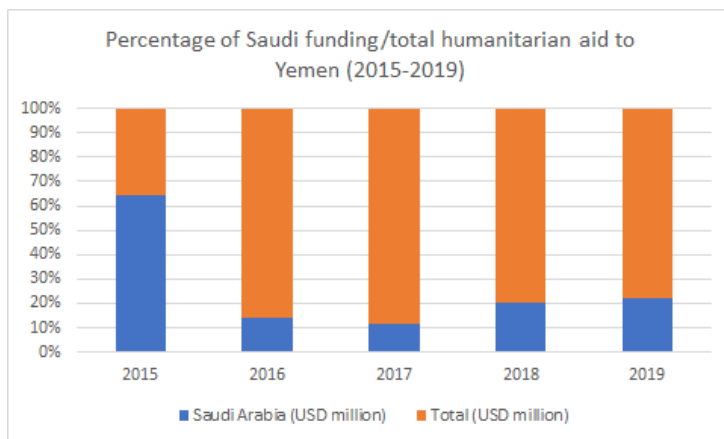


Figure 4 and 5 shows that there is a correlation between the level of military involvement of the Kingdom and the aid it provides. At the same time, non-western donors are rarely transparent about their aid, thus these numbers most likely only cover a fraction of Saudi aid to Yemen. No such detailed humanitarian funding data from Iran is available. In fact, FTS dataset does not have any data on Iranian humanitarian aid to Yemen, except for the year 2015 when Iran has provided 3,959,451 USD to Yemen (FTS Donor Profiles: Iran). The same year, Saudi Arabia provided 316, 772, 023USD. The Iranian Red Crescent reports that Tehran has “delivered pharmaceutical aid, food aid and trained man-power to the countries with their attention particularly directed

²⁰ Due to word limits I excluded tables with numbers. To access the actual numbers, see p.107 of the dissertation.

towards the Yemeni civilians who are on the brink of famine following the Saudi-led coalition blockade” (Reliefweb 2018). Iran is also unlikely and economically unable to invest in post-war reconstruction in Yemen which then hinders its ability to exert influence in Yemen beyond the Houthis controlled territories.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are not just active conflict parties, but the two most important humanitarian actors. This complicates adherence to the basic humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality. Furthermore, both sides to the conflict have instrumentalized and weaponized humanitarian aid to support their war aims. The Houthis have repeatedly blocked and confiscated food and medical supplies and interfered with aid delivery (HRW 2018, UN S/2018/594:53). On the other hand, the SIC have introduced restrictions on imports by closing critical ports, the airport in Sanaa, diverting fuel tankers, and frequently threatening to block aid (UN S/2018/594:53). When aid becomes part of the war-economy or it is provided to the supported side then it is likely to exacerbate existing social cleavages, create new fault lines, and as such can significantly prolong the conflict. Matters are further complicated by the alleged and wide-spread corruption of UN agencies (AFP 2019).

Influencing identity

Mandaville and Hamid (2018) describe the “geopolitics of religious soft power” as governments foreign policy strategy to deploy Islam both to state and non-state actors and as “efforts by the state to harness the power of religious symbols and authority in the service of geopolitical objectives”(Madaville & Hamid 2018:5-7). Saudi Arabia’s export of Wahhabism and Iran’s export of pan-Shia revolutionary ideology can be considered as both states’ specific transnational projection of religion. In the early 1980s, Muqbil Hadi al-Wada’i, who was a Salafi cleric trained in Saudi Arabia, instructed the youth of Sa’da and other northwestern provinces to abandon Zaydism and follow the religion of the early followers of Islam, or the “ancestors” during the early times of the Prophet Muhammad (Zweiri 2016:12). This period saw the expansion of Wahhabi/Salafi religious establishments in north Yemen.²¹ The Iranian revolution, and the Saudi response to the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini “produced a defensive reaffirmation of Zaydi identity among many Yemenis in Saada governorate” (Salmoni et. al 2010: 84). The conversion of many Zaydis to Wahhabism posed an existential threat to the Zaydi community (King 2012: 406). Externally, Saudi Arabia sponsored the Wahhabi infiltration which was aimed at the gradual transformation of the socio-cultural and religious landscape of northern Yemen. Internally the “Sunnization” of northern-Yemen was spearheaded by returning Yemeni guest workers from Saudi Arabia (Bonney 2010:16). From the 1980s into the 1990s Yemenis who converted to Salafism returned to Saada, and established study circles and schools. They also began to infiltrate previously Zaydi-dominated mosques and attained teaching posts in government schools. In both locations, they propagated ideas about Islam and the social order explicitly at odds with Zaydism, shifting the values of some students and worshipers and attracting

²¹ The 1980s saw Islamic revivalism across multiple countries in the Middle East, such as the Muslim Brotherhood’s activism in Syria, Egypt, and the communal organization of Lebanese Shia factions.

Wahhabi adherents (ibid). Over time, remittances, religious exposure, and economic aid collectively generated a distortion to local culture through the export of foreign religious practices. Funds for mosque building does not only entail an infrastructural investment, but the acceptance of Saudi-trained imams and specific texts in religious books, resulting in a complex process of adaptation including the mediation of local context (Madaville & Hamid 2018).

The Wahhabization process is important not only to understand the internal evolution of Ansar Allah, but also provides a historical explanation for Iran's ability to establish ties with the Houthis. As it was indicated, the Wahhabization process gave rise to a strong resistance identity. It was precisely this identity that Iran was able to capitalize on and much less the Shia identity of Ansar Allah (Interviewee number 5. 12.13.2018, Skype from Yemen). Iran's impact on Yemeni identity groups have been distinct from that of the Saudis. The most often cited (Salisbury 2015; Brandt 2018) early connection between Ansar Allah and Iran started in 1997, when the movement's leader Al-Houthi traveled to Iran and Syria, and Sudan to expand his religious education. Ansar Allah's official slogan 'Death to America, Death to Israel, Damn the Jews, Victory to Islam' borrows heavily from Iran's radical revolutionary rhetoric. Salisbury (2015) also notes that despite the differences between Twelver and Fiver Shiism, "a number of prominent Houthi supporters have converted to Twelver Shia over the past two decades and have visited Iran for religious instruction, prompting speculation that there is fact a Twelver faction within the wider Houthi movement" (Salisbury 2015:6). Some researchers argue that Iranian support for the Houthis, although increased since 2014, remained limited, more reactive than proactive (Juneau 2016:656, Zweiri 2016:32; Transfeld 2017). Yet, Hussein al-Houthi have repeatedly referred to Iran and Hezbollah in his lecture, agreeing with Khomeini in describing the US as the "Great Satan" and viewing Iran as an example of strength, unlike Saudi Arabia. At the same time, while he makes references to Tehran several times, he does that from a resistance perspective and less from sectarian solidarity (Salmoni et. al 2010:120-121).

When asking about local's perception of Iranian involvement in Yemen, interviewees point to the fact that Tehran is supporting the Houthis internal capacity to govern, rather than their external capacity to fight. This is a less costly, more sustainable method of intervention. As interviewee 10 put it, "Back in 2011 the Houthis occupied mosques, but they didn't know how to manage those affairs. If you can't govern a mosque, how do you want to govern a country? For today the Houthis established multiple Popular Committees and new ministries. Someone had to tell them how to run these institutions effectively" (03.08.2019. Skype). In fact, Ansar Allah has recently released an 82-page long document, entitled "National Vision to Build the Modern Yemeni State." (Government of Yemen website 2019) that details their governance plan for the upcoming five years.²² This in part reflects Iran's mobilization force in creating strong civil-militia bonds, or to aid rebel governance efforts.

²² Another vivid illustration of the governance capacity development of the Houthis is the recent (November 2019) establishment of the Supreme Council for the Administration and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation as an alternative to the National Commission for The Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (NAMCHA) (Almasdar online 2019).

This process has been documented elsewhere, most notably by Salisbury who notes that “the Houthis are notable in Yemen for cohesive internal management of security and administration, which ‘can only’ have come about through some form of external support” (Salisbury 2015:7).

Although Iran has initially built on the resistance identity of the Houthis, attempts to establish closer religious ties have been also documented: As of today, the Houthis encompasses a wide range of actors united by their opposition to the Saudi-led intervention. The so-called “Saada core” of the Houthis became more closely aligned to the to the Iranian Twelver Shi’ism practices, like the commemoration of Ashura or the observation of the Shiite religious celebration of Eid al-Ghadir, something that is alien to Yemen (Al-Hamdani 2019). Iran has been the only country that recognized Ansarallah as the government of Yemen, providing an important source of legitimization for the group. Alizera Zakani, a former member of the Iranian parliament claimed that the 2014 Houthi takeover of Sana’a constituted a victory for the regime in Tehran and that Iran is now controlling four capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sana’a (Middle East Monitor 2014). Yet, it has been repeatedly asserted that Iranians were unaware of and not supportive of the Houthis 2014 takeover of Sanaa (Transfeld 2017). Iran has also facilitated the Houthis external outreach and control of information: From 2014 onwards, Ansar Allah has developed a public relations strategy and an extensive media presence.²³

Rivalry instrumentalization

How do domestic actors utilize the Saudi-Iranian rivalry for their own strategic purposes? Domestic conflict parties do utilize the rivalry framework, albeit in an asymmetric fashion. The GoY have framed both the Saada Wars and the current war in the rivalry framework, while the Houthis have denied Iranian support in both cases. As the previous section showed, the Houthis have received both military and non-military support from Iran. Yet, Iranian support developed only when the Houthis have evolved to a sufficiently strong challenger to the GoY. While Iranian leaders have expressed solidarity with Ansar Allah and IRCG commanders have openly acknowledged their support for the group, the Houthis have been denying Iranian support (Salisbury 2017). This is not at odds with the theory's expectation if one looks at the core narrative of the Houthis. Since 2003, the

²³ In 2007, the movement established an FM radio, Station26 and in 2008 it began issuing a newspaper, Al-Haqiqa (The Truth) (Albloshi 2016:146). Parallel to developing its own media apparatus, Ansar Allah has also eliminated opposition media outlets in areas under its control (Saana Center for Strategic Studies 2018:23). The current media structure involves a TV Channel Almasirah TV, operating from southern Beirut (Transfeld 2017) and a website AlMasirah.net which has both English and Arabic versions and features daily updates of (both news, videos, and photographs) Ansar Allah’s battlefield successes and the coalitions’ human rights violations. Prominent Houthi people also maintain their own social media accounts, including Twitter and Facebook. Observers agree that Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah have aided the Houthis with advice, training, and arms shipments, but the extent of support is debated. More recently, Ansarallah conducted a fundraising campaign for Hezbollah after the US imposed new sanctions on the group, they have also met Hezbollah leadership in Beirut (Weiss 2019).

Houthis have been strong opponents of any foreign interference in Yemen. As such, it is expected that they are going to deny the sponsorship they receive externally.

On the other hand, the GoY have repeatedly framed its conflict with the Houthis in the framework of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, both during the Saada wars and to a greater extent in the current internationalized civil war. The reason for utilizing the rivalry framework is the GoY's need for economic and political support. The continued flow of external support helps Yemeni government officials to sustain their power (by co-option local actors) and to legitimize their fights (against multitude of armed non-state actors). During the last, 2019 address to the UN General Assembly, Yemen's foreign minister thanked the Kingdom for continued support against the Houthis, stating that Iran "has created, trained, armed and financed Houthi militias, who brandish the slogan of the Iranian revolution," and that for today Ansarallah "have transformed the region into a stronghold to launch rockets, in order to threaten the security of neighboring states and navigation in the Red Sea (UN News 2019)"

Conclusion

This paper examined the impact of interstate rivals' intervention in a third-party civil war through the comparative case study of Saudi and Iranian intervention in Yemen during the Saada wars (2004-2010) and the internationalized civil war (2014-2018). I applied a qualitative case study method to uncover the impact of military and non-military external support on civil war duration and outcomes. I complemented this perspective with a focus on local actors (GoY and the Houthis) and their ability to attract sustained support from external actors (Saudi Arabia and Iran). Three conclusions emerge from this study: First, I confirm previous findings by showing that opposing intervention lengthen conflict. Second, I provide novel empirical evidence and show that Saudi Arabia and Iran are asymmetrically involved in the Yemeni civil war. Quantitatively, Saudi Arabia provides more military and non-military support to the GoY than Iran to the Houthis, yet there remain some important qualitative differences in the support they provide. Rivals keep providing support to their preferred side due to rivals' conflict integration mechanism. Third, I move beyond conventional accounts of the proxy war literature and show that supported groups (both state and non-state actors) instrumentalize their supporters and keep them engaged in their conflict through the mechanism of rivalry instrumentalization. When the mechanisms of conflict integration and rivalry instrumentalization are simultaneously present, conflicts become protracted.

This paper contributes to three distinct strands of literature. First, it directly speaks to the pericentral literature of Cold War (Smith 2000) by showing that how "weak" actors can contribute the acceleration and lengthening of regional rivalries. Second, this dissertation complements existing accounts on micro-dynamics of third-party intervention by providing a detailed historical overview of the various domains in which third party intervention introduced new and exacerbated existing local grievances. Third, by focusing on networked interdependencies between interveners and supported groups, I speak directly to the new proxy-war literature. Despite these important findings, the dissertation has a number of limits. First, I only focused on two actors and did not address

conflicts within the broad anti-Houthi coalition or the impact of the US-led counterterrorism efforts in Yemen. Second, I did not focus on sub-regional variation in terms of support provision. Future research can further refine the analytical framework presented here by applying different research designs, such as network analysis. Future work is also encouraged to integrate a gender lens in the analysis.

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