



Sociologia e Políticas Públicas

Departamento de História

“The proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia:  
the case of the Yemeni Civil War ”

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*Per i miei genitori e i loro sacrifici,  
per la mia orientatrice che mi ha guidato passo dopo passo con affettuosità e professionalità,  
per le persone che hanno sempre creduto in me,  
per mia nonna, mia insegnante di scuola e di vita.*

## **RESUMO**

O entendimento convencional do termo Guerra Proxy ou Guerra por Proxy foi definido durante o período da Guerra Fria como um confronto entre duas grandes potências usando atores substitutos para evitar um confronto direto (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1984). Com foco na região do Oriente Médio, é amplamente reconhecido que o Irã e a Arábia Saudita estão envolvidos em uma animosidade de longo prazo que causa um desequilíbrio estratégico nas políticas regionais. A Revolução Iraniana de 1979 catapultou estes dois estados em uma rivalidade amarga. Com a queda de Saddam Hussein, o estabelecimento de um Iraque xiita e as Primaveras Árabes de 2011 aumentaram as tensões entre a Arábia Saudita e o Irã. Ambos os países não têm enfrentado militarmente, mas certamente dividiram a região em dois campos armados, com base em ideologias políticas e religiosas, buscando aliados regionais e continuando a exploração dos países mais fracos da região em uma série de guerras por procuração, os conflitos no Iraque, a guerra na Síria e o recente conflito iemenita. Esta tese vai analisar a atual rivalidade Arábia-iraniana e como isso afeta a guerra civil no Iémen. A relevância em analisar esse conflito deriva da situação de esquecimento em que se encontra no debate internacional, que já pode ser considerada a pior crise humanitária da última década.

Palavras-chaves: Guerra por procuração; Irã; Arabia Saudita; Guerra civil no Iémen; MENA

## **ABSTRACT**

The conventional understanding of the term Proxy War or War by Proxy was defined during the Cold War period as a confrontation between two great powers using substitute actors to avoid a direct confrontation (Bar-Siman-Tov 1984). Focusing on the Middle East region, it is widely acknowledged that Iran and Saudi Arabia are involved in a long-term animosity that causes a strategic imbalance in regional policies. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 catapulted these two States into bitter rivalry. The fall of Saddam Hussein, the establishment of a Shiite Iraq and the Arab Springs of 2011, have increased the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both countries have not a direct military confront yet, but they have undoubtedly divided the region into two armed camps, based on political and religious ideologies, seeking regional allies and continuing the exploitation of the weakest countries in the region in a series of proxy wars, from the conflicts in Iraq to the war in Syria and the recent Yemeni conflict. This thesis will analyse the current Saudi-Iranian rivalry and how it affects the Civil War in Yemen. The relevance in analyzing this conflict derives from the situation of oblivion in which it finds itself in the international debate, which may already be considered the worst humanitarian crisis of the last decade.

Keywords: Proxy war; Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemeni civil war, MENA

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## Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region's instability is not something new in the page of world history. Since the collapse of the Ottoman empire, the region has been involved in a continuous struggle for dominance and supremacy. Western colonial powers, starting with the Sykes-Picot agreement or also called Asia Minor agreement between the United Kingdom and France, divided the region in their mutually agreed spheres of influence. Many historians and diplomats accused this agreement to have designed borders without considering internal complicate religious differences and current tribal networks. The result was the creation of irregular States, impossible to rule with stability. These two Western powers, UK and France, created the humus determining difficult relations within the Arab-Muslim world and towards the Western World as well. However, as Steven Cook argued in his publication, the Sykes-Picot agreement cannot be blamed as the only "cause of the region's dysfunction".<sup>1</sup>

Among others, two major causes are required to be analysed, as the historical schism between Sunni and Shias that has been there since the 7th century and the external interventions stimulated in the post- first world war period nationalist fervors across the MENA countries. Although many factors and forces have played a role in contemporary Middle East and North Africa, this dissertation will mostly focus on the controversial effects of the ongoing antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran since it can be considered "the best framework for understanding the regional politics of the Middle East"<sup>2</sup> in which the two countries have played preminent roles.

The control competition over the region has historic roots and goes back in time to the origin of Islam, but the contemporary hostility started 40 years ago with the Iranian revolution in 1979. At that time, Iran passed from being a Western and Saudi ally, with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's monarchy, to an Islamic Republic lead by Ayatollah Khomeini. In the Iranian Marjah point of view, Riyadh was the worst enemy of the Islamic world, an USA's agent that need to be destroyed. Iran never recognized the religious legitimacy of the Saudi Kingdom and its control over Islamic places of worship such as Mecca and Medina. In Khomeini words "Muslims should curse tyrants, including the Saudi royal family, these traitors to God's great shrine, may God's curse and that of his prophets and angels be upon them".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cook, Leheta, Traub, Walt and Zenko (2019). Don't Blame Sykes-Picot for the Middle East's Mess. [online] Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/13/sykes-picot-isnt-whats-wrong-with-the-modern-middle-east-100-years/> [Accessed 5 July 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Gause III, G. (2014). Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War. Brookings.

<sup>3</sup> Farhang, M. (2016). It's complicated: Why Iran and Saudi Arabia don't get along. [online] Middle East Eye. Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/its-complicated-why-iran-and-saudi-arabia-dont-get-along> [Accessed 5 July 2019].

In more contemporary times, following the Arab Spring outcomes, the two sectarian states have started influencing the critical scenario that blew up in the near countries. Nowadays, Tehran and Riyadh fight each other in a no-direct way by supporting or financing local realities in Syria, in Yemen, Lebanon but also in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria. In such a panorama, the use of war by proxies seems to be the only way for the Iranian Republic and the Saudi Kingdom to establish themselves as regional powers.

## **The research questions and its relevance**

Political instability and religious tensions have been relevant components of Middle East politics and history. This political weakness could concern the states' system breakup following the end of the First World War and the already mentioned Sykes-Picot arrangement but also it is an additional proof of the structural instability characterizing the regional security system, exacerbated by the artificial nature of the states and by a series of unsolved conflicts (Israel-Palestine, the Iranian hegemonic position, inter-Arab divisions, socio-economic malaise, etc.). However, during the Cold War period, regional powers seemed to maintain the status quo under US and Russian control. After a few decades and in particular following the Arab Springs, this only apparent quietness was destroyed, and new instability was fed by the Iran- Saudi polarity that translated their competition on weak and collapsing states, mainly Yemen, Syria and Libya.

This continuous dissemination of sectarianism in the desperate research of allies in the region has led to the violence that can be seen today and has contributed to the growth of extremist groups. This competition between the two most influential powers in the Middle East has seriously affected the political and economic stability of the region, in addition to very serious humanitarian issues. From this perspective, the analysis of what the experts have defined as the "New Middle East Cold War" is considered of fundamental relevance for this study. To deepen in the base of the conflict, it is also crucial to evaluate the role and the use of proxy war methods from both perspectives, of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, the study of this rivalry is instrumental to understand what is happening in the poorest country of the Persian Gulf, namely Yemen. Since its establishment, this country has been marked by continuous civil wars, but on the other hand has been one of the less studied international situations in the last decades. The little, limited and incomprehensible attention that media have given to this conflict is one of the main reasons I have decided to write this Master dissertation. By analysing the religious and political rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the use of proxy wars as a tool of geopolitical control, I will address the following research questions in order to understand the current situation in Yemen:

- a) What is the impact of this conflict in the Middle East?



- b) What is going on in Yemen is a proxy war like other current conflicts in the region?
- c) Can proxy wars be considered the new future of international conflicts?

## **Methodology**

The methodology, used to carry out the research, is the study of existing scientific literature and the analysis of open sources such as newspaper articles and interviews. The work was structured in five chapters. The first chapter aims to introduce the concept of proxy war through a literature review of the most important scholars in the field of International Relations who have treated the subject as Andrew Mumford, Geraint Hughes or Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov. The reasons why the proxies, their actors, costs and benefits and the most theoretical lines are carried out and identified. The chapter also deals with origins and applications of this concept in contemporary crises and whether this type of conflict has evolved from the Cold War until now. To conclude the first chapter, a space is necessarily dedicated to the Middle East arena, since the main purpose of the analysis refers to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and its effect on Yemeni territory.

The second chapter contextualises historically how the relationship between the two giants of the Middle East is born and has changed. The chapter is the result of a documentary analysis and historical archives necessary to frame the type of relations that exist between Tehran and Riyadh, with the objective to deepen in what is described as a simple religious and ideological opposition. It is proposed the analysis of the point of view of both parties, as well as the growing opportunities offered by the numerous conflicts within the region that have strengthened the perception of threats and regional ambitions of both countries for the control of the region. The difficulties encountered in the preparation of this section were mainly informative. In fact, it has required in-depth research and the collection of economic and military data on Iran and Saudi Arabia, given that both countries seem reluctant to provide clear and transparent information.

The third chapter analyses the Yemeni situation. The conflict, which has been destroying one of the poorest countries in the world for five years, turns out to be quite complicated in nature. It was necessary to reconstruct the various phases of Yemeni history, this being a fragile and unstable country since its foundation. For this, it began briefly with the beginning of 1900 in the colonial period, going through its unification until the current civil war. A separate point has been dedicated to this war, as central part of the dissertation. Here, the two opposing blocks, the pro Houthi and the pro Hadi, as well as the presence in the territory of the cells of AQAP and ISIS, are explored analytically to give an understanding of the parties involved and of the conflict.

Finally, in the final chapter, by comparing the data collected, the main considerations are presented in order to understand if Yemen can be considered as a proxy war. Ultimately, I'll examine if this type of conflicts can be considered the future of strategic-military policies. Also, here, the difficulties

encountered are essentially the shortage of material and research to prove such theories. The issue regarding Yemen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran seems to be little explored, given the complexity of the information needed to reach such a conclusion. I analyse both points of view and perspective. The difficulties encountered in the preparation of this section were mainly informative. In fact, it has required in-depth research and the collection of economic and military data on Iran and Saudi Arabia, given that both countries seem reluctant to provide clear and transparent information.

## **1. The Concept of War by Proxies: “The War on the Cheap”**

### **1.1 Proxy War – definitions and theories**

The term ‘proxy war’ is part of the history of contemporary conflicts. This kind of war has been used by several countries across the world in the last decades. However, it is still rather overlooked in the branch of security studies. What defines a proxy war? Why are they attractive? How are they fought?

A proxy war occurs when a powerful political actor has a prominent role supporting and managing a war in another country but only performing a small percentage of the war itself. This means the opposite of a traditional conflict, in which the most powerful countries carry the burden of the war and the smallest ones contribute proportionally.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, the most powerful forces finance different armed groups by means of money, weapons, intelligence and military equipment to perform the war. The balance between ‘proxies’ and ‘powers’ gradually changes depending on the development and needs of the conflict<sup>5</sup>. This first approach to the concept of proxy war is somehow not enough if we look at the number of conflicts that are nowadays carried in such a way and the lack of being understood and analysed. Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan or Sudan are only some recent examples. Hence, the need to deepen in the study of this subject.

Starting from a preliminary level, a proxy war represents “an indirect implication in a conflict by third parts that wish to influence the strategic outcome”<sup>6</sup>. However, theorists have not achieved an agreement to establish what characterizes a proxy war. To solve this problem, a proper definition needs to consider the unique structure of a proxy war, or in other words “A relation between a

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<sup>4</sup> Byman, D. (2018). Why States are Turning to Proxy War. [online] The National Interest. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-states-are-turning-proxy-war-29677> [Accessed 5 July 2019].

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>6</sup> Mumford, A. (2013). Proxy warfare. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

benefactor, which is an state or a non-state actor external to the dynamic of the conflict, and their elected proxies, which are the conduct for weapons, training and finance of the benefactor”.<sup>7</sup>

In his book “My Enemy’s Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Relations”, Hughes arguments that three conditions are necessary to define a proxy war: direct assistance of the sponsor to the proxy (provision of military equipment, nonphysical military aid, formation, intelligence, logistics, finance and troops), one target or common objective, and the relation between the local and external actor that remains in time. According to Hughes, the estimate of the benefactor whether collaborating or not with the proxy is based on the following motivations:

- ☐ Political link to the direct military action.
- ☐ Concern about security.
- ☐ High level of sensibility and respect to the possibility of victims.
- ☐ Ideological solidarity between the State and the proxy group.
- ☐ Direct conflict deterrence.
- ☐ Military campaign assistance.
- ☐ Intelligence collection.
- ☐ National and religious link.
- ☐ Revenge towards the target.
- ☐ Preserve or reinforce the sphere of influence.
- ☐ Greed and ambition.

The origin goes back to the Second World War. With the emergence of nuclear weapons and the balance of power between the USA and URSS, the arms race ensured the mutual destruction in case of direct conflict. In this way, both superpowers began to resort to proxy war methods to solve their indirect conflicts in strategically important areas. Using these techniques, they had the opportunity to achieve their goals without endangering either their territory or population. Theories and definitions about proxy wars began to arise during the Cold War, when both the USA and the URSS were expanding their spheres of influence through the support and use of allies around the world. Every internal conflict was an opportunity for both superpowers to extend their leadership by the provision of weapons, intelligence, money or military training. In this context, domestic conflicts started taking another dimension where wars perpetuated, and violence escalated.<sup>8</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, proxy war techniques kept being used with the development of globalization and the origin of new non-state actors in the international scenario. The information

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>8</sup> *ibidem*

revolution and the participation of these actors made possible to introduce innovative methods never seen before. This progress can be understood as an iteration of Sir Basil Liddell Hart's words in "Strategy of Indirect Approximation", where he appoints to the evolution of an "indirect approach, where intelligence superimposes rough force", hence the strategic efforts are focused on the psychological component of the opponent and the nature of surprise.

Why do proxy wars take place? Reasons are varied and depend on the specificity of each country. For the USA, usually, the reason is related to the cost: locals fight and die instead of US citizens. Moreover, as they are local fighters, they are better accepted by the communities involved and can have easier access to intelligence. However, for many other states, there are other factors that come into play: ideological, resources management or influence. For example, Iran that resorts to support the Houthis to gain influence in Yemen even though they do not have enough internal military capacity; Russia that rejects its support to armed groups in Ukraine to limit conflict escalation.<sup>9</sup>

What are the major benefits from a proxy war? A small regional power looking for influence and using resources provided by a superpower can change the dynamics within its own internal conflict. Furthermore, for the superpower, the provision of those resources means a minimum cost in comparison to a conventional war - "War on the Cheap" – and the influential benefits are very appealing. However, there are also some negative points, such as the disobedience of proxies to the superpowers and, therefore, the failure in achieving the objectives previously established.<sup>10</sup>

Another view has been pointed out by Chris Loveman and his idea that ideological reasons and concerns make a common ground in which the benefactor and the proxy agent "share a mutual desire to cope with a common enemy"<sup>11</sup>. In a parallel way, Geraint Hughes identifies three categories of strategic objectives: coercion, disruption and the achievement of transformative goals, such as "encouraging separatists' movements to achieve the separation of the State or even a regime change".<sup>12</sup>

Two others main components of proxy wars are risk and ideology. While there is a general agreement that ideology is centered on power and interest matters, there is not a common framework regarding the determination of risk. In relation to this, Bar-Simon-Tov has described the proxy intervention as "one where the proxy agent assumes the majority of risk"<sup>13</sup>, while Mumford has

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<sup>9</sup> Byman, D. (2018). Why States are Turning to Proxy War. [online] The National Interest. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-states-are-turning-proxy-war-29677> [Accessed 5 July 2019].

<sup>10</sup> Dandam, S. (2014). On Proxy War. Danish Political Science Association Annual Meeting, University of Copenhagen.

<sup>11</sup> Loveman, C. (2002). Assessing the phenomenon of proxy intervention. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 2(03), pp.29-48.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, Geraint (2012). *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*. Sussex Academic Press.

<sup>13</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, Y. (1984). The Strategy of War by Proxy. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 19(4), 263–273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001083678401900405>

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pointed out that proxies “avoid the biggest part of risk to the superpowers, but definitely not all of it”<sup>14</sup>. Such definitions open the academic debate about the most important aspects of conflict escalation with risk management.

## **1.2 Causes, effects and new applications in contemporary crisis**

From 2011 onwards, a wave of uprisings and protests has spread rapidly within the MENA region, harboring the illusion of a new era of democracy in the major countries involved: Egypt, Syria, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and Iraq, and to a lesser extent, Bahrain, Algeria, Morocco and Jordan. Eight years later, rather opening a new era of freedom, most of these countries are experiencing a situation in which the islamization process has been reinforced and the region is involved in several cases of proxy wars. The major players of these wars are the biggest international and regional powers, each one with its own strategic objectives and protecting the positions previously reached.<sup>15</sup>

The other main actors of proxy wars are non-state players, a “product” of the Arab Springs whose role and influence in the region has increased, something that was generally limited to Hamas, Hezbollah and Al Qaeda till 2011. By the weakening of regimes and the collapse of some governments overwhelmed by the revolutions, these movements united by ideology, and sectarianism, have gained relevance and political power. These “non-state actors” are social movements, political parties or armed militias, or as in the case of Hezbollah and Hamas they include all these characteristics.<sup>16</sup>

These militias and armed groups have been mainly established for the self-defence of their communities or for independence reasons. Their action is legitimized by the diverse political forces, that are forced to trust these armed groups due to the weakness of the state and the inefficacy of national armies. This situation implies more political recognitions for the leaders of these no-state movement. In other words, the crisis of several governments in the MENA region, the instability induced by the Arab Springs and the unbalance of power between regional leading countries have facilitated the establishment of multiple non-state actors; among them, many are armed and they are used by countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to achieve their goals in diverse domestic conflicts, transforming them into international wars. The main difference with the proxy wars

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<sup>14</sup> Mumford, A. (2013). Proxy warfare. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

<sup>15</sup> Alterman, J. B. (2013). The Age of Proxy Wars. Centre for Strategic & International Studies. Available at: [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/0513\\_MENC.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/0513_MENC.pdf). [Accessed 5 July 2019].

<sup>16</sup> Parigi, G. (2019). Siria, Libia, Iraq e i gruppi armati di governo. [online] Fondazione Internazionale Oasis. Available at: <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/it/siria-libia-iraq-e-i-gruppi-armati-di-governo> [Accessed 5 July 2019].

occurred during the Cold War, and thus the exponential rise of proxy wars in current times, is the number of countries involved.<sup>17</sup>

The different ways in which states interact with non-state actors depend on their objectives and the roles to be assigned. Furthermore, a non-state actor can incorporate itself into the objectives of a state providing security, welfare or charity, or acting as the representative of a community within the state. However, it can also be the other way around: the non-state actor compromises the current political regime legitimizing its existence due to the sovereign incapacity of the state. Al-Qaeda and their attempts of destabilization, ISIS actions to revoke governments, and other groups that seek internal control of the state, as the Houthis in Yemen, Libyan militias or Hezbollah in Lebanon are just a few examples.<sup>18</sup>

The actual trend is based on the rising multilateralism in the proxy wars fight. During the Cold War, the two superpowers unilaterally provided their proxies with weapons, training and money. In the XXI century, proxy wars are carried out in coalitions. These can be formal, like NATO attacks to armed groups in Libya during the Arab Springs, or informal, where alliances come up from the selection of the same proxy, as between Iran and Syria throughout the support to Hezbollah in their fight against Israel.<sup>19</sup>

Multilateralism has a direct effect in how collective security is perceived in international relations, namely the fact that is no longer necessary to establish formal alliances to take joint action. The informal approach prevails in the form of help and assistance to proxy groups. This informality becomes even more attractive in situations in which “diplomacy is impotent, but direct military confrontation would imply unnecessary risks. These ‘grey zones’ are precisely where covert methods become crucial if we want to achieve any influence perspective in certain events of potential global importance”.<sup>20</sup>

### **1.3 The rise of proxies in the MENA region**

As above mentioned, proxy wars in the MENA region are carried out by non-state actors, which can be terrorist organizations, militias or freedom fighters. Looking at the interconnection between domestic, regional and global conflicts, great powers such as Russia, USA, Iran or Saudi Arabia

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<sup>17</sup> Kamel, L. (2017). *The frailty of authority*. Roma: Nuova cultura.

<sup>18</sup> Gaub, F. (2017). *State Vacuums and Non-State Actors in the Middle East and North Africa*, in *The Frailty of Authority*. Roma: Nuova cultura.

<sup>19</sup> Mumford, A. (2013) *Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict*, *The RUSI Journal*, 158:2, 40-46, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2013.787733

<sup>20</sup> Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, personal communication. 29 January 1976. Washington.

oppose each other in battlefields far from their territories and are supported by non-state local forces. In some cases, like with Hezbollah and ISIS, state and no-state features are strictly connected.<sup>21</sup>

The extended fragility among the MENA region has put into question the concept of state legitimacy. Many countries in the Arab World have territory, fiscal systems and hold elections – basic characteristics of state's governance – but they lack of the main attributes of resilient states as popular sovereignty or national cohesion. In this way, local groups have arisen with different notions of identity, ethnical and sectarian affiliations that have challenged the established order. On the other hand, these groups have domestic roots, connections and knowledge but lack of financial and military resources<sup>22</sup>. At this point is when superpowers come into play, looking for a beneficial alliance where the attribution of power and resources to local groups as proxies is interchanged with influence in the conflict.

The continuous support of Iran made Hezbollah able to establish itself in Lebanon at the beginning of the 1980s. During more than three decades, Teheran has used Hezbollah both as a threat and deterrence against USA and Israel. Given the opaque nature of the Iranian support to local proxies, it is impossible to determine the nature and scope of the backing<sup>23</sup>. According to the US Secretary of State which has classified Iran as a sponsor state of terrorism since 1984, Teheran directly supports non-state groups in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Iraq.<sup>24</sup>

Iran has provided continuous support to non-state proxies in the region for decades to achieve its own goals in the region. In the post Arab Springs context, Khamenei declared that there were two solutions in order to solve the problems of the Islamic World: “unity among Islamic States and the weakening of the USA to secure a safe future to the *Umma* or global Islamic nation”. In this sense, Khamenei's support to Iranian use of proxies in conflict areas like Syria or Yemen to gain influence against the USA and their allies in the region like Saudi Arabia is a logical extension of its judgment and strategy for the Iranian triumph.<sup>25</sup>

Namely, to understand the current Iranian perspective regarding the proxy model, it is necessary to deepen in the objectives of the Iranian elite and their aspirations of ideological and religious expansion in the MENA region. The increase of proxies is also a way to create political influence in specific countries like Syria or Iraq at the centre of the Iranian agenda and the consequences of these political links have visibly clear. The progressive path of Hezbollah as an interstate agent or the

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<sup>21</sup> Valensi, C. (2015). Non-State Actors: A Theoretical Limitation in a Changing Middle East. Military and Strategic Affairs. Vol 7, N° 1.

<sup>22</sup> Gause III, G. (2014). Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War. Brookings.

<sup>23</sup> Sadjadpour, K. and Taleblu, B. (2015). Iran, Leveraging Chaos, in Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East FRIDE.

<sup>24</sup> US Department of State (2015). State Sponsors of Terrorism, Country Reports on Terrorism, p. 300-301. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/country-reports-on-terrorism-2/>. [Accessed 5 July 2019].

<sup>25</sup> Vatanka, A. (2018). Iran's use of Shi'i militant proxies. Middle East Institute. p.15.

Iranian lobby in Baghdad to enable Iraqi militias to enter in the legislative bodies are further examples.<sup>26</sup>

The continuous support of Iran to Arab proxies<sup>27</sup> has to be understood in this context. Teheran does not see the relations with these small militias as an end itself. Instead, they are included in a mechanism to further develop Iranian international agenda in a zero-sum competition where Iran faces numerous neighbours that are in the American orbit and are inherently perceived as hostile<sup>28</sup>. In Khamenei's vision, the Iranian ideological and financial investments to its Arab proxies cannot be separated from their long-standing conflict with the US. To reach an agreement with the Americans would be very difficult since the intrinsic objective of Washington is to overthrow the Iranian political system. Thus, Khamenei has continued to bet for Teheran to remain a "revolutionary" state and to challenge US supremacy in the region.<sup>29</sup>

From the Saudi side, the Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has consolidated its mandate and centralized political decisions under its influence, thus excluding other aspirant princes. The anti-Iranian rhetoric and its promises to struggle against its influence in the Middle East have led the prince to involve himself in proxy conflicts in Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, creating a situation of permanent war and muting internal dissents. Amplifying the Iranian threat and magnifying his "Arab" mission to save the region from the Persians and Shia's, Bin Salman blames Iran of the dissent going on in these countries.<sup>30</sup>

The rivalry with Iran and the related danger are considered as fundamental requisites for the internal ideological change that Bin Salman has been carrying out since 2015. The Saudi leader has adopted a populist military nationalism whose principal objective is Iran. For this reason, the Saudi war in Yemen is perceived as a necessary response to an existential threat and a battle for the survival of the Saudi nation, reinforcing the abstract sense of national Saudi solidarity. Continuing the proxy conflicts with Iran in the region, even without a decisive victory in Yemen or Syria, remains a key issue for domestic reasons.<sup>31</sup>

## **2. Focus on the historical rivalry between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia**

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<sup>26</sup> Dubin, Traub, Walt and Zenko (2018). Iraq's Militias Set Their Sights on Political Power. [online] Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/30/iraqs-militias-are-setting-their-sights-on-power/> [Accessed 5 July 2019].

<sup>27</sup> The term "Arab proxies" is used by specialists in the literature to indicate proxy wars inside the MENA region.

<sup>28</sup> Vatanka, A. (2018). Iran's use of Shi'i militant proxies. Middle East Institute. p.15.

<sup>29</sup> Khamenei.ir. (2017). 'Officials Should Not Set Themselves the Goal of Satisfying Arrogant Powers, They Should Satisfy the People'. [online] Available at: <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4901/Officials-Should-Not-Set-Themselves-the-Goal-of-Satisfying-Arrogant> [Accessed 5 July 2019].

<sup>30</sup> Al-Rasheed, M (2018). 'The view from Riyadh' in Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle to Shape the Middle East. The Foreign Policy Centre. P. 6

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p.7.



Is the enmity between Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Iran the key to understand the situation in the Middle East? During 40 years, these two super powers have competed for the power and influence in the region, getting involved in various regional dynamics from the conflict in Iraq to the present Civil War in Yemen.

As a matter of fact, the ideological opposition between Riyadh and Teheran is the strongest and most obvious in the Middle East. In the West, the situation is often identified as a simple opposition between Sunni and Shias, offering only one side of the reality to the public opinion. A *sic et simpliciter* rivalry, effective for the newspapers, but one that “does not make justice to the complexities of the new Cold War in the Middle East”, Gause argues. Before analyzing in detail why the war carried out by Iran and Saudi Arabia cannot be reduced only to a sectarian conflict, it is necessary to historically rebuild the relations between these two countries and a more specific approach about the beliefs and perspectives towards each other.

Iran is the name that the antique Persia assumed in 1935. From 1926 on, until the Iranian Revolution, the country was led by the Pahlavi dynasty with the support of Western powers, in this way taking advantage of the petrol resources. In this historical period, the kingdoms of Iran and Saudi Arabia, even though ideologically distanced in some issues and untrusted, maintained a work relation, being both allies of the USA. They even signed a “friendship treaty” and established formal diplomatic relations in 1929.<sup>32</sup> The problem with the Iranian pilgrims vetoed in Saudis sacred places, the acknowledgment of Israel and the independence of Bahrain caused the progressive poisoning of the relations.<sup>33</sup>

During the Pahlavi dynasty, the monarchy established more solid alliances with Western governments, and at the social level, increased the use of European and American fashions/life styles. In 1953, due to the coup d'état with the support of British and American intelligence services against the Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, Sha Mohammad Reza Pahlavi recovered the control of Iran. The Iranian monarch followed a hard line of repression against any type of dissidence, the government became a purely formal body, the political veto was applied in all forms of communication and banished any form of plurality. This change in the political and socio-economic path is better known as the White Revolution<sup>34</sup>, immediately challenged by the Shia religious

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<sup>32</sup> Moya Mena, S. (2018). Irán y Arabia Saudí, rivalidades geopolíticas y escenarios de confrontación. OASIS, (27), 47-66. <https://doi.org/10.18601/16577558.n27.04>

<sup>33</sup> Florence, G. (2015). War of words: Saudi Arabia v Iran | European Union Institute for Security Studies. [online] Institute for Security Studies. Available at: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/war-words-saudi-arabia-v-iran> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>34</sup> Rouhollah, R. (2012). Iran's White Revolution: A Critique of Modernisation Theory. [online] Intelligence Consultancy Namibia. Available at: <https://intelliconn.wordpress.com/2012/11/14/irans-white-revolution-a-critique-of-modernisation-theory/> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

oppositions and its Ayatollahs (Ayat Allah, sign of God), who were contrary to the favoring of foreign big powers.

Therefore, in response to the introduction of new cultural patterns favorable to a forced secularization process, a part of the clergy emerged in defense of the Islamic tradition and heavily attacked the elections of the Pahlavi dynasty. Among these men of faith, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini a hieratic figure with revolutionary socialist tone and distinguished by its charisma and irreverence, headed the oppositions to the monarchy. The dissidence to the monarchy spread as a wildfire even among students and the poorest segments of the population, who did not see any advantage in the Western economical interference, specifically in the national petrol company.<sup>35</sup> In 1978, millions of people met at the Teheran Square, following the call of Khomeini and the King, terminally-ill, could not control the situation. The monarch left the country with his family. With the neutral declaration of the national army, the end of the Sha government was outright, and Khomeini took power declaring a national referendum that led to the proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>36</sup>

The 1979 Revolution provoked the final rupture in the relations with Saudi Arabia. The first reaction of the Saudi King Khalid Bin 'Abs Al-Aziz Al Saud was to acknowledge and positively support the creation of the Republic, stating his will to strength their relations and create a new alliance between the two countries based on a mutual Islamic solidarity.<sup>37</sup> Khomeini rapidly disappointed the King's expectations, declaring his explicit will to dominate the Islamic World with the following words: "...the Islamic World must appeal to the Iranian leadership to gain its freedom and independence".<sup>38</sup> The determination of the Iranian leader to extend the revolution beyond its national border, on behalf the liberation from the unfaithful, broke the hope to renew the relations with Saudi Arabia.

For the Saudi King, the disposition showed by Iran to export the revolution to other countries in the Gulf was understood as an attempt to replace his hegemonic role in the region and caused revolts in the oriental community of Al-Sharghiya and an insurgence and occupation of radical Salafist groups in the Great Mosque of Masjid Al Haram.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Khomeini denied the legitimacy of the Saudi Government, considering the monarchy an inadequate form of rule and the Al-Saud a dynasty of corrupt people that did not deserve to be the guardians of the sacred places of Islam. Even in his testament upon his death, Khomeini did not forgive the Saudi dynasty, considering

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<sup>35</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. (2019). Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi | shah of Iran. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohammad-Reza-Shah-Pahlavi#ref279698> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>36</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>37</sup> Florence, G. (2015). War of words: Saudi Arabia v Iran | European Union Institute for Security Studies. [online] Institute for Security Studies. Available at: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/war-words-saudi-arabia-v-iran> [Accessed 8 Jul. 2019].

<sup>38</sup> Amiri, R. and Soltani, F. (2011). Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait as Turning Point in Iran-Saudi Relationship. *Journal of Politics and Law*, 4(1).

<sup>39</sup> *ibidem*

them “traitors of God and the Islamic people”<sup>40</sup>, expressing “if we would have wanted to show the world that the Saudi government, these vile and impious Saudis, who are like knives passing through Muslims’ hearts, we could not have done it as good as their inept and thorny leaders of their government” (Khomeini, 1987).<sup>41</sup>

The Iranian anti-Saudi rhetoric, apart from the ideological and governmental components, fuelled with the relations between the Saudi monarchy and the West, particularly with the USA. Khomeini always saw the Saudi kingdom as a peon in hands of Western powers trying to control Islamic countries. In his cited testament, he defines Saudi Arabia as a puppet of the USA, discrediting the religious bases of the country: “an anti-koranic superstitious religion without base that is Wahhabis”.<sup>42</sup> In this situation, the Saudi dynasty carried out political and religious internal reforms to prepare itself for the Revolution. All of those potential dissidents against the kingdom were arrested or deported, and the Shias’ minorities privileged with economical and sociocultural benefits to contain the potential revolts.<sup>43</sup> During the war between Iraq and Iran (1980-1983), the Saudis supported, together with the USA, Saddam Hussein’s regime, financing Iraq with great sums of money to contain the Iranian threat and created the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to gather together against the Iranian activities with Bahrain, EUA, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman.

After the violent conflicts between the Shia pilgrims and the Saudi security forces in Mecca in 1987 that caused more than 400 deaths, Khomeini heavily criticized the government stating that “Muslims must whip out and fight against the tyrants, specially the Saudi real family, these traitors of the God’s great sanctuary, may the curse of God and its prophets and angels fall upon them. The Fahd King spreads a great portion of the anti-Koranic faith, completely baseless and superstitious of Wahhabis. They abuse of Islam and the cherished Quran. Curse this traitor of God”.<sup>44</sup> This incident caused numerous protests in Teheran that ended up in the attack to the Saudi embassy in Iran, breaking definitely the diplomatic relations between the two countries.<sup>45</sup>

The end of the war between Iraq and Iran and the death of the Shia leader Khomeini gave space to the Saudi-Iranian opposition. The Ayatollah Khomeini took his position and a new and pragmatic president was elected, Hashemi Rafsanjani.<sup>46</sup> The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the change of sovereignty in the Saudi monarchy, with the King Prince Abdullah, were also crucial for the

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<sup>40</sup> Moya Mena, S. (2018). Irán y Arabia Saudí, rivalidades geopolíticas y escenarios de confrontación. OASIS, (27), 47-66. <https://doi.org/10.18601/16577558.n27.04>

<sup>41</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>42</sup> Shihabi, A. (2018). The Iranian Threat: The Saudi Perspective. [online] Middle East Centre. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/06/15/the-iranian-threat-the-saudi-perspective/> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>43</sup> Walt, S.M (1996). Revolution and War. Cornell University Press.

<sup>44</sup> Florence, G. (2015). War of words: Saudi Arabia v Iran | European Union Institute for Security Studies. [online] Institute for Security Studies. Available at: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/war-words-saudi-arabia-v-iran> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>45</sup> Keynoush, B. (2016). Saudi Arabia and Iran. Palgrave Macmill US.

<sup>46</sup> Keddie, N., Richard, Y. and Keddie, N. (2006). Modern Iran. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press.

rapprochement that ended up with a security treaty in 2001.<sup>47</sup> The neutral behavior of Iran in the Second Gulf War and the invasion of neighboring Kuwait improved its international position, temporarily leaving its isolation, but above all improving the relations with the other pillar of the Muslim World and its die-hard opponent.

This brief period of pacific relations between the two countries was interrupted by the 11/09 attacks and the US invasion of Iraq, which profoundly changed the regional dynamics. Saudi Arabia, who had been protected by the USA since the end of the Second World War, became, after the twin towers' terrorist attack, an inconvenient ally, as the majority of attackers were Saudis.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, the fall of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban created a governmental vacuum in Iraq, where Iran by taking advantage of the state's fragility entered the internal politics and supported the Shia majority against the Sunni minority who had governed the country until then. The fall of Hussein's regime, enemy of Iran, was a decisive event that allowed Iran to expand its sphere of influence and rise up as the main actor in the Middle East together with Saudi Arabia. Historically, Saudis always considered Iraq and Syria important countries in the geopolitical influence game, so the "lost" of Iraq as a Sunni political power reference in the region generated a higher distancing with the Saudi monarchy.<sup>49</sup>

After the stagnation due to the war of Saddam Hussein against Iran, the conflict between Teheran and Riyadh never became direct but the battle continued in the ideological field and throughout proxy wars. This confrontation has not stopped since then and it has increased with the beginning of the Arab Springs, a source of instability for the countries in the region. These uprisings established a new playing field for Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudis and other countries with geopolitical ambitions - like Qatar - have tried to replace the revolutionary processes and to obstacle the proliferation of allies with Iran.<sup>50</sup> During the first weeks of 2011, Iran was the only one that benefited from the convulsions in the Arab World. The Republic positively welcomed the popular revolts, considering them a continuation of the Islamic Revolution and an opportunity to create a more favorable regional order towards Iran's interests. This historical moment constituted a new play field for Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Saudi kingdom, with the support of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, tried to stop the revolutionary processes with the aim to maintain the status quo in the region and prevent the proliferation, as the case of Bahrain and its intervention to safeguard the monarchy.<sup>51</sup> For its part, Iran welcomed the protests, considering them an opportunity to destroy Saudi's status quo. In the words of

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<sup>47</sup>Masegosa, J. (2018). Claves del conflicto entre Arabia Saudí e Irán | GESI. [online] Seguridadinternacional.es. Available at: <http://www.seguridadinternacional.es/?q=es/content/claves-del-conflicto-entre-arabia-saud%C3%AD-e-ir%C3%A1n> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>48</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>49</sup> Moya Mena, S. (2018). Irán y Arabia Saudí, rivalidades geopolíticas y escenarios de confrontación. OASIS, (27), 47-66. <https://doi.org/10.18601/16577558.n27.04>

<sup>50</sup> Colombo, S. (2012). The GCC Countries and the Arab Spring. Between Outreach, Patronage and Repression. Istituto Affari Internazionali.

<sup>51</sup> *ibidem*

Khamenei, “the events in the North of Africa, Egypt, Tunisia and other countries have a special meaning for the Iranian nation. This is the same as the “Islamic awakening”, the result of the victory of the Iranian nation great revolution”.<sup>52</sup>

While in Bahrain the monarchy resisted the revolts, in Syria and Yemen the conflict evolved in civil wars, provoking humanitarian emergencies and total instability, in which any of these governments has indirectly supported the opposite factions involved. Nowadays, Iran can be considered the only one benefiting from the regional instability, as the instability of the Arab League countries has left political vacuums exploited by non-state actors like Hezbollah. These vacuums are exploited by both powers, which have indirectly influenced the internal political issues of these weak countries by financing these groups. In this way, it is necessary to analyse the aforementioned relation between the benefactors or sponsors and the proxies.<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, to understand the key roles of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the region, it is required to historically reconstruct the evolution of the relations between these two strongholds in the Middle East, as mentioning the growing opportunities offered by the numerous conflicts in the region and the power vacuum generated by the no-intervention policy of Obama/US presidency. All these elements have strengthened the threat perception and the regional ambitions of Teheran and Riyadh, that nowadays are opposed for the control of the area. At present, the instrumentalization of the sectarian topic is often used by both countries to justify their interventions, but, to what extent is it right to limit the historical rivalry of the two states to a clash between Shias and Sunnis? In the next paragraphs, the analysis goes on in order to delineate the roles and the perspectives of both countries and to understand if it is possible to talk only about a sectarian conflict, or about their main purpose to increase individual regional powers shielding themselves in religious and ideological arguments.

## **2.1 From the Iranian point of view**

Iran, with 1,745,150 km of land and 80 million of population, is the only Islamic Republic in the Persian Gulf peninsula. After the 1979 Revolution, Iran stopped being a monarchy under US influence and began an institutional experiment aimed to join the Islamic component – the establishment of God’s government in the earth – and the republican – needed to remove the new Iran from the old monarchy regime. In this way, the Islamic Republic was born, imitating the institutional model of the Fifth French Republic, but incorporating the dictates from the Islamic Law and assigning

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<sup>52</sup> Kurzman, C. (2012). The Arab Spring: Ideals of the Iranian Green Movement, Methods of the Iranian Revolution. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44(1), 162-165. doi:10.1017/S0020743811001346

<sup>53</sup> Masegosa, J. (2018). Claves del conflicto entre Arabia Saudí e Irán | GESI. [online] Seguridadinternacional.es. Available at: <http://www.seguridadinternacional.es/?q=es/content/claves-del-conflicto-entre-arabia-saud%C3%AD-e-ir%C3%A1n> [Accessed 8 Jul. 2019].

a key role to the clergy that had led the revolution.<sup>54</sup> This experiment was an evident religious legitimacy challenge to other countries in the region, especially Saudi Arabia.

According to the Constitution, the political order is based on the distinction between the executive and legislative or Majilis. The executive is composed of the President of the Republic and the diverse ministers that are in charge of the administration of the country, and the legislative in charge of passing the laws and naming all of these ministers. Despite of this republican structure, in the apex of the whole system there is the clergy, and in particular, the figure of the Supreme Leader or Guide of the Revolution (*Rahbar-e Enghelab*), according to the established in the Article 57 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic.<sup>55</sup> Until now, only two persons have occupied this charge: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei.

This complex structure can be resumed in the principle of “*Velayat-e Faqih*”, that foresees, in the wait of the comeback of the last of the Twelve Imams of Shia, that the political leadership of the community of believers is tasked to a just and virtuous expert of Islamic Law. The powers of these members are mentioned and regulated in the Art. X of the Constitution, stating the direction of the Iranian political system, the armed forces, the control of the state security apparatus and the main religious foundations.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the “Guide” designs the most important positions for the State as the Chief of the Judicial System, the Police and the President of National Radio and TV.

The system designed by Khomeini and the principle “*Velayat-e faqih*”, despite of what could be assumed, established a revolutionary concept in the philosophy of the Shia Church. In fact, it has not been accepted by the oldest, but by the majority of revolutionary youth in the religious centers called Quom. According to Afshin Molavi, an Iranian-American author expert in the issue, the Iranian political system is theoretically democratic insofar the members of the parliament are chosen by the population every four years, but in practice the power is concentrated in the hands of the religious class and those who do not share the Khomeini’s theory are forbidden to present as candidates.<sup>57</sup>

With the 1979 revolution, the Iranian national identity inevitably joined the religious one. As reported by Shokrollah Kamari Majin, the most identifiable characteristic of the Iranian state is being Shia, as, after the revolution, the main goal has always been to eliminate non-Muslims and particularly those who do not identify themselves as Shias.<sup>58</sup> Education has always played a crucial role in the indoctrination of norms, values and standards that reflect the religious identity and match

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<sup>54</sup> ARJOMAND, S. (1992). Constitutions and the struggle for political order: A study in the modernization of political traditions. *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes De Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie*, 33(1), 39-82.

<sup>55</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979).

<sup>56</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>57</sup> Bruno, G. (2008). Religion and Politics in Iran. [online] Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/religion-and-politics-iran> [Accessed 8 Jul. 2019].

<sup>58</sup> Majin, S. (2017). Iranian and Saudi Cultural and Religious Identities: Constructivist Perspective. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 07(01), pp.65-81.

the cultural one. It is obvious that with the current Iranian religious and cultural dimension, there is no space for the Western culture, considered a dangerous threat to the religious legitimacy of the State.

A reference to the ideology is needed to understand the role of the Iranian regional policy. As it is not correct to say that Iran acts as a purely ideological actor, it cannot be neglected the importance that some ideological cornerstones have in the Iranian political action. The first one is the opposition against the US, that constituted the pillar of the revolutionary ideology and later has become an integral part of the political discourse of the Islamic Republic. The Ayatollah Khomeini raised his strong Iranian nationalism in opposition to the political interference that the USA had exercised during the Pahlavi dynasty.<sup>59</sup> The opposition to the US, named the “Great Satan”, is especially based on the US role in the region and their modernist culture. Iran, as a Persian, Shia and non-Arab country, has always tried to portrait itself as the savior of Islam to be integrated in the Arab scenario and to improve its reputation in the Middle East.<sup>60</sup>

In relation to regional and external policy, the main objectives guiding Iran are two: to guarantee the survival of the Islamic Republic and to assure that Teheran plays a crucial role in the management of the regional order.<sup>61</sup> Since its foundation, the Islamic Republic has certainly not attracted the sympathy of its neighbors. This fact was demonstrated when, in 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran declaring the war, and all the Gulf countries supported the Iraqi side. Especially after that traumatic experience, Teheran developed a sense of “strategic lines”<sup>62</sup>, that still determines its security policy nowadays: it is a sense of siege, a perception of closure that derives from the common alignment against them from the majority of the countries in the region.

The sense of strategic solitude and regional siege, as the closure imposed to the country by the long international embargo on weapons, have founded the main Iranian options tools to promote its regional policy. Firstly, the difficulty to enter the international weapons market, due to the embargo imposed by the US since 1979 and the EU and UN since 2007 – has led Iran to produce its own weapons often showed in military parades organized to promote the national pride. In 2018, Iran invested 14085,76 million of dollars in military policies, highly overcoming last years’ numbers.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Bazoobandi, S. (2014). Iran’s Regional Policy: Interests, Challenges and Ambitions. [online] Ispionline.it. Available at: [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis\\_275\\_\\_2014\\_0.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_275__2014_0.pdf) [Accessed 8 Jul. 2019].

<sup>60</sup> Van der Heiden, P. and Krijger, A. (n.d.). The Saudi-Iranian rivalry: An ominous zero-sum game for supremacy. [online] Atlcom.nl. Available at: [https://www.atlcom.nl/upload/trans-atlantisch-nieuws/AP\\_2\\_2018\\_Van\\_der\\_Heiden\\_and\\_Krijger.pdf](https://www.atlcom.nl/upload/trans-atlantisch-nieuws/AP_2_2018_Van_der_Heiden_and_Krijger.pdf) [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>61</sup> Unidentified. (2019). Iran’s Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East. [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>62</sup> Tabatabai, A. (2019). Iran in the Middle East: The Notion of "Strategic Loneliness". [online] ISPI. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/iran-middle-east-notion-strategic-loneliness-22246> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>63</sup> Unidentified. (2019). TRADING ECONOMICS | 300.00 INDICATORS | 196 COUNTRIES. [online] Available at:

According to new data published in 2018 by SIPRI – Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which examines the military expenditure over the world – the military expenditure in the Middle East has risen around 6.2% since 2017. Also Saudi Arabia, Israel or Turkey increased their military disbursements which rising to 19% in comparison with last decades.<sup>64</sup> This represents a remarkable fact that allows us to better understand how armed conflicts and rivalries in the region have been fueling the military expenditure in both sides of the coin, endangering global peace. Furthermore, conscious of its limits in terms of war material, as mentioned in the first chapter, Teheran has tried to improve its strategic depth and achieve military auto sufficiency creating a network of partners in the region, with the goal of maintaining threats in the far distance.

The main events occurred in the last 15 years in the Middle East have favored, in a more or less direct way, the consolidation of the Islamic Republic in the chessboard of the region. The Iranian power has developed a key geopolitical role in many important issues. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the partial failure of the Arab Springs and finally the origin of ISIS have conferred more legitimacy and political strength to Teheran. Iran, taking advantage in high scale of the Shia ideology and the display of military forces and intelligence, has gained important political weight in the region. Various examples are Iraq, Syria, Lebanon – particularly the south – and Yemen, places where Iran exerts considerable influence.<sup>65</sup>

At present, Iran seems to feel stronger than ever. This perception of strength has been also evidenced in the international scenario during the talks about nuclear energy, where the Iranian diplomacy adopted a very positive attitude towards the 5+1 group, putting on the negotiation table its capacity to favor and guarantee stability in the Middle East and to stop the advancement of ISIS, at least until May 2018 when Trump decided to withdraw from the Nuclear Treaty (JCPOA). Iran has followed a gradual process of strengthening its military structure and has focused its strategy on three main points: to maintain the internal security by marginalize religious minorities, to limit the access of the US and other countries into the Persian Gulf and, lastly, to establish new strategic alliances. The Arab Springs in the Middle East have brought strategic opportunities for Teheran to expand its influence. Declaring itself as the savior of the Muslim World, Iran has always helped the marginalised Shias minorities with substantial funds.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Iran, as analyzed in the first chapter, has always being accused by the West and other Arab countries of delivering weapons to violent non-state actors

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[https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/militaryexpenditure?fbclid=IwAR208kbnwJIHWz0PYzjcVy8FPLWyZn8xY\\_\\_Qg3EkEILeEFXDk00UqeILZsE](https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/militaryexpenditure?fbclid=IwAR208kbnwJIHWz0PYzjcVy8FPLWyZn8xY__Qg3EkEILeEFXDk00UqeILZsE) [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>64</sup> Wezeman, P. (2018). Saudi Arabia, armaments and conflict in the Middle East | SIPRI. [online] Sipri.org. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2018/saudi-arabia-armaments-and-conflict-middle-east> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>65</sup> Unidentified. (2019). Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East. [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>66</sup> Van der Heiden, P. and Krijger, A. (n.d.). The Saudi-Iranian rivalry: An ominous zero-sum game for supremacy. [online] Atlcom.nl. Available at: [https://www.atlcom.nl/upload/trans-atlantisch-nieuws/AP\\_2\\_2018\\_Van\\_der\\_Heiden\\_and\\_Krijger.pdf](https://www.atlcom.nl/upload/trans-atlantisch-nieuws/AP_2_2018_Van_der_Heiden_and_Krijger.pdf) [Accessed 8 July 2019].



and all the militant forces, like Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Houthis in Yemen. Its participation in the regional dynamics defined by Van der Helden and Kriger is essential for Teheran, as it considers them an intrinsic part of their own security.<sup>67</sup>

The role of the Iranian support to the Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War and the flux of weapons from Iran to Syria to reach different rebel groups is not less important. Iran has few allies in the Arab World and its close relation with Syria is based on a strong convergence of interests. Both countries have been affected by US's influence in the region; both have supported the Palestine resistance against Israel and had a common enemy, Saddam Hussein. Furthermore, the Assad regime has always declared itself as a republic and, sometimes, revolutionary, two words very related to the Iranian philosophy. Teheran has become an important support to Assad regime, as well as a source of different types of aid for Syria. This aid has included technological support to monitor communications, intelligence support, arms and combat troops transfer to strengthen the national army and training of Shias militias pro-Assad. So far, Iran has become a main player in the war in Syria, a crucial element to maintain Assad in power; it is the only Arab ally in the peninsula. The aspiration of exporting the Iranian state model is certainly a basic element of the political discourse of Teheran, even if after all these years does not seem to be a possible reality as no other nation has completely adopted its model.<sup>68</sup>

The revolutionary attitude was one of the main factors that led the Gulf countries, directed by Saudi Arabia, to meet in a regional organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with the objective of increasing the level of political, diplomatic and economic integration in the area and a common front against shared threats, as it was the revolutionary Iran. Despite of this, the CCG has never achieved the objective of becoming a fully integrated regional organization.<sup>69</sup> Even the relationships of Iran with the different members of the CCG have been characterized and still are by a strong heterogeneity. The true rivalry that constitutes the real problem in the Middle East is basically the rivalry with Saudi Arabia, antagonistic model for Iran.

## **2.2 From Saudi Arabia point of view**

Saudi Arabia is an authoritarian monarchy, with a political-institutional system based on the Islamic Law (Sharia) and an interpretation of Islam based on the Wahhabis tradition. The actual ruler, the king Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, took position in January 2015. The legislative body and the judicial activity are based on the Sharia. The formation of political parties is prohibited, as any form

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<sup>67</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>68</sup> Unidentified. (2019). Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East. [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>69</sup> Colombo, S. (2012). The GCC Countries and the Arab Spring. Between Outreach, Patronage and Repression. Istituto Affari Internazionali.

of dissidence, manifestation or union and political association. After the reforms introduced by the king Fahd, the sovereign, assisted by a first and second vice minister, counts with the assistance of a Minister Council, formed by 21 ministers.

The legislative power is led by the executive, even though lately the resolutions pass through voting, however only with advisory ends. The Majilis Ash-Shoura is composed of the president and 150 members, with real nomination, representatives of the different categories of the Saudi society (religious, businessmen, professionals and academics) that stay in charge during 4 renewable years. The country is divided in 13 districts administered by governors assisted by district councils. The only elective processes take place in the local level and involve the election of half of Municipal Councils (the other half is elected by the central power). Around 20.000 members of the royal family dominate the political life, sharing powers with the main tribal groups and religious leaders.<sup>70</sup> The internal political stability is rebalanced in assets through the reorganization of charges among members of the royal family.

The administrative structure includes, in general, everything that can incur the structure of a modern state, even if it does not appear in the Islamic principles nor has its theoretical foundation in the three basic laws of 1992. These define Saudi Arabia as monarchy personified in the Saudi monarch and the descendants of Abdulaziz bin Saud, where the Koran and the Sunna are the source of law. The first basic law, and the most important one, is the law that defines the general principles of the state such as the governance system, the social and economic structure, and the crown succession. The political power is concentrated in the royal family and some privileged families as Qassim and Hail. This promotion system is one of the four reasons, according to F. Gregory Gause III, that justifies its stability in the Middle East.<sup>71</sup> After the rising provoking the Arab Springs, Riyadh was the least affected regime, despite of some revolts in Shia majority zones. The group of people that make part of the royal family control the majority of the main institutions, forms of communication and businesses of the Saudi state.

On the other hand, the most important network for the royal family has always been the religious one. In every crisis the regime has confronted since its foundation, the Wahhabi clergy has always helped to move out from it. From its side, the royal family has always assumed the task of protecting the Wahhabi religious doctrine, at the same time needed to foster the monarchy political power due to the tribal division inside the country.<sup>72</sup> In Saudi Arabia, the majority of the population belongs to the Sunni religious branch; the most followed one in Islam. A small part of Shia Muslims is located in the east of the country, in the Qatif and Al Ahsha oasis. This religious minority

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<sup>70</sup> Oficina Información Diplomática. (2018). Arabia Saudi. [online] Available at: [http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Documents/FichasPais/ARABIASAUDI\\_FICHA%20PAIS.pdf](http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Documents/FichasPais/ARABIASAUDI_FICHA%20PAIS.pdf) [Accessed 9 July 2019].

<sup>71</sup> Gause III F., G. (2011). Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East. [online] Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/report/saudi-arabia-new-middle-east> [Accessed 9 July 2019].

<sup>72</sup> Halliday, F. (1997). Arabia without Sultans Revisited. Middle East Report, (204), 27-29. doi:10.2307/3013140

represents around 5% of the total Saudi population and belongs to the same Shia branch as Iran and Bahrain.<sup>73</sup>

The protection of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam is also a crucial element in the Saudi regional policy that has led to the creation of numerous international organizations with the aim of spreading the Wahhabis philosophy, better known as the Salafi Pan Islamism.<sup>74</sup> The most known organization is clearly the Arab League, founded in 1962 in Mecca.<sup>75</sup> The Saudis represented the only cultural-religious center until the establishment of Republic of Iran. Because of this reason, they reacted to the Iranian ideological expansion in the first post-revolutionary period, developing and exporting their conservatory brand of Sunni Islam, identifying Iran as the only possible rival for their hegemony in the Islamic World. During decades, Riyadh has financed cultural centers, mosques and movements that have become carriers of a strict and apolitical Islam. This propaganda was the starting point to the Jihadist formations that escaped the Saudi control and became the main actors of the longest international terrorism wave.

Gause identifies the second and third reasons of the relative Saudi stability, again, in “political reliability and deployment of its security services”<sup>76</sup> and the low cohesion between grassroots movements that exert pressure against the Saudi government. The last reason, and certainly not less important, focuses on the economic possibilities. The Saudi kingdom, unlike other similar political regimes like Egypt, has national banks with enough wealth to buy citizens. In fact, according to Gause, after the revolts in 2011, Riyadh deployed 130 billion of dollars, investing them in credits for middle class families, public workers and unemployed, without forgetting the Shia minorities. Money and ideology are the basic elements of the great Saudi influence in the region.<sup>77</sup>

In fact, also from the foreign point of view, Riyadh has more or less secretly operated financing governments and non-state actors, taking advantage of the fragile situation in the Middle East, to generate proxy wars, using the sectarian argument to guarantee its stability and influence. Saudi Arabia spent the tremendous figure of 69.4 billion of dollars in arms – 30% of its public expenditure (SIPRI, 2017). This high budget has allowed Riyadh to obtain cutting edge technological weapons, though diverse analysts have pointed the lack of knowledge in military management, as the military experience in Yemen shows, where the Saudis are in danger of getting trapped. The lack of experience in conflicts is one of the main differences with Iran, that has many generals that have fought in the main battlefields in the Middle East and have achieved important results despite a low

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<sup>73</sup> Unknown. (n.d.). Saudi Arabia - Shia. [online] Available at: <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/loc/sa/shia.htm> [Accessed 9 July 2019].

<sup>74</sup> Gause III F., G. (2011). Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East. [online] Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/report/saudi-arabia-new-middle-east> [Accessed 9 July 2019].

<sup>75</sup> Stanley, T. (2005). Understanding the Origins of Wahhabism and Salafism. The Jamestown Foundation.

<sup>76</sup> Gause III F., G. (2011). Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East. [online] Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/report/saudi-arabia-new-middle-east> [Accessed 9 July 2019].

<sup>77</sup> *ibidem*

military budget and obsolete arms. As Gause mentions in his article “The Saudi Arabia in the Middle East”, it is very difficult to detect, in some historical circumstances, evidences and registers of these financial aids, especially in the case of non-state actors. Some examples are the opposition groups to the Assad regime in Syria, the Libyan revolutionary forces that wanted to expel Gaddafi or the Egyptian political groups influencing the 2011 elections.<sup>78</sup>

According to David Hernandez, the objectives of the Saudi external policy are inevitably linked to the interests of the governing family, being the monarch the one who makes decisions in last instance.<sup>79</sup> The author reveals there are four pillars on which the Saudi national interest is based, and those pillars direct their regional and international actions. The first one is based on the defense of the sovereignty and territorial unity, the second one is to guarantee the internal political stability followed by the interest to achieve international acknowledgment as representative of the Muslim World and reference in the region. Finally, to protect Islamic values, the Wahhabi philosophy and the untouchable figure of the Sovereign.<sup>80</sup> Unlike many other states of the peninsula, Riyadh’s role in the local scene has been homogeneous during the years, always maintaining the same constant principles that have guided their action. According to Hernandez, the goals of the Saudi regional policy can be understood in the framework of their external policy: “achieve and preserve Saudi national interests beyond its borders”.<sup>81</sup>

This is how, in the last fifteen years, Riyadh and its allies have spent thousands of millions to support the strongest men in the region, from Mubarak and Al-Sisi in Egypt, to Haftar in Libya and Saleh and then Hadi in Yemen. For the Saudis, Yemen represents the worst of the two stories: dismantled national institutions and an armed force linked to Teheran able to control the neighboring country deeply connected with the Kingdom. This is the reason why Yemen is the main priority, and a serious compromise with the Houthis would be a strategic defeat. Despite all the setbacks, the huge critics of an expensive and exhaustive war, the Saudi leadership in Yemen feels that it is involved in a potentially existential game. A similar logic to the one in Yemen can be used to explain why the Saudis have systematically rejected the idea, especially from the EU, of a regional dialogue with Iran. For them, it would mean to sit with a predatory force and in an obvious disadvantage position. Riyadh considers a priority to rebalance the geopolitical order, limiting the Iranian influence at least in the ethnic Arab states. While, as mentioned, the Saudis are not willing to sacrifice their control over Yemen, Riyadh is now more inclined to accept big compromises in Syria or resign towards the political framework in Lebanon.

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<sup>78</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>79</sup> Hernandez, D. (2008). The foreign policy of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. Regional objectives and strategies, PHD thesis, Madrid, Universidade Complutense de Madrid.

<sup>80</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>81</sup> *ibidem*

In 2015, the Saudi external policy experimented an important change in the coronation of the King Salman and the rise of his son Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), reaching an extraordinary importance inside the government and becoming vice president and minister of defense. Albeit Riyadh has always highlighted its no direct participation in any conflict, the new King and MBS have taken another path. The intervention in Yemen, called “Operation Decisive Storm”, shows the intentions of the new leader to grant a more interventionist and aggressive character to the Saudi action, being ready to do whatever is necessary to protect its national interests.<sup>82</sup>

The monarchy does not seem to want to renounce any of the objectives of its regional policy, as it would mean to renounce its domestic interests as well. The regional hegemony seems to be an unquestionable principle for the Saudi political class, as they see in this capacity the future of the country. In an interview with Turki, Al Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, the Royal Majesty, has affirmed that Saudi Arabia, with its stability and influence, has the duty to re-establish the peace in the Middle East and Iran is the first problem to solve, as “Iran presents itself as the leader of the Shia minority world, but also of all the revolutionary Muslims interested of opposing the West. Saudi Arabia has two other worries about Iran. First, it is in our interest that the Iranian leadership does not develop nuclear arms, as this would cause the proliferation of nuclear arms in the region. The other worry that we must address in the next decade is the intervention and destabilization of the Iranian leadership in countries with Shia majorities, Iraq and Bahrain, as well as those countries with significant Shia minorities like Kuwait, Lebanon or Yemen”.<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, since the origin of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the main goal for the safeguard of Saudi’s interests continues to be the Iranian contention. Iran, from the Prince Mohammed point of view, is becoming a dominant power in Iraq and Lebanon. Teheran, even though without total control of Bagdad, Damascus and Beirut, can establish its political scenario – and in the case of Syria, military – thanks to its proxies and allies. The Iranians themselves were clear about their views in the region: “Is it possible to take relevant decisions regarding Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the North of Africa or the Persian Gulf without Iran?” questioned Hassan Rouhani, President of Iran, some months ago. The Saudi intervention in Yemen has been expensive and inconclusive after three years. The situation could evolve towards what Riyadh was trying to avoid: the transformation of the Houthi movement in something very similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

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<sup>82</sup> Van der Heiden, P. and Krijger, A. (n.d.). The Saudi-Iranian rivalry: An ominous zero-sum game for supremacy. [online] Atlcom.nl. Available at: [https://www.atlcom.nl/upload/trans-atlantisch-nieuws/AP\\_2\\_2018\\_Van\\_der\\_Heiden\\_and\\_Krijger.pdf](https://www.atlcom.nl/upload/trans-atlantisch-nieuws/AP_2_2018_Van_der_Heiden_and_Krijger.pdf) [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>83</sup> Al Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, T. (2013). Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy. Middle East Policy, 20(4), pp.37-44.

With Trump's administration, the Prince knows that he can rely on the US in escalation actions against Teheran.<sup>84</sup> Unlike the time of Obama's government when Riyadh pointed out the US abandonment, at present both US and Saudi Arabia share the same perception on Iran, namely representing the main threat in the region and, therefore, the necessity of establishing a new front for its contention. Saudi Arabia has tried to maintain a certain order in its regional and international relations, with the intention of avoiding the reintegration of Iran in the international community.<sup>85</sup> Riyadh's inclination is clear and obvious: it is not willing to share the hegemony with its neighbor and certainly not the political agenda of the Middle East.

### **3. The specific case of Yemen civil war**

#### **3.1 Conflict overview: a shuttering war**

The history of Yemen is marked by instability, fragile institutions, a crucial geographical situation in the Middle East and a fragile national identity, which have increased internal problems and encouraged the international presence in parallel with the escalation of conflicts. The Yemeni War can be described as a game board where both the non-state local forces and the great powers seek to balance their strategic interests. The Yemeni population is almost entirely Muslim, divided between the Shiite Zaydis, who mostly live in the North, and the Sunni Shafiites in the South. The border between North and South Yemen was set by the Ottoman Empire and the British in 1905, and formally established in 1914 on the well-known Violet Line. This line divided the country during most of the twentieth century, with separate decolonization and subsequent training processes.<sup>86</sup>

The northern area was controlled by the Ottoman Empire since the sixteenth century with the help of the Zaydi, until after the WWI in 1918 the Empire was dissolved. Thus, Imam Yahya, leader of the Zaydi community, took power in what would later become the Arab Republic of Yemen. From the beginning of his term until his assassination in 1948, several opposition groups and a large part of the population fought to overthrow the imposed feudal system. With his death, his son Ahmad, who ruled until 1962, ascended to power. His term in office was characterized by constant repression, growing tensions with the British presence in the South, and constant pressure to support the Arab nationalist

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<sup>84</sup> Althunayyan, H. (2017). The US-Saudi relations in the Trump era. [online] Aljazeera.com. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/05/saudi-relations-trump-era-170518084540044.html> [Accessed 9 July 2019].

<sup>85</sup> Unknown. (2018). Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle to Shape the Middle East - The Foreign Policy Centre. [online] Available at: <https://fpc.org.uk/events/saudi-arabia-and-iran-the-struggle-to-shape-the-middle-east/> [Accessed 16 August 2019].

<sup>86</sup> Serr, M. (2017). Understanding the War in Yemen', Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2017.1419405>

goals of Egyptian President Abdul Nasser. Before Ahmad's death, the northern area was federated with Egypt and Syria in the United Arab States from 1958 to 1961. After his death, the rejection of this union caused the rise of the military to the government in the person of Colonel Sallal and the creation of the Arab Republic of Yemen. The officers created the Revolutionary Command Council with eight members to fight against the royal forces supported by Saudi Arabia and Jordan. In 1968, after the abandonment of the royal troops, the opponents and Saudi Arabia officially recognized the Arab Republic of Yemen.<sup>87</sup>

The southern area was controlled by the British, mainly interested in the port of Aden, constituting in 1937 the Colony of Aden and the rest of the southern part remained as a Protectorate. The southern area became the Federation of South Arabia in 1963, in which the Colony of Aden was integrated. During the following years, two rival factions fought for power, the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Occupied South Yemen Liberation Front (OSYLF). By mid-1967, the NLF had control of most of the territory, and by the end of the summer the Federation officially dissolved. Thus, on November 30, 1967, the People's Republic of Yemen was proclaimed. A radical faction of the NLF seized power in 1969, again changing the name of the country to the Democratic People's Republic of Yemen.<sup>88</sup>

While the North decided to establish a market economy and establish ties with the West and Saudi Arabia, the South was guided under a socialist direction. In 1972 both Republics were in conflict. The two independent Yemeni states inherited the Violet Line border, but it was not respected by either party. The result was increasing tension and incidents in the late 1960s that led to the border wars of 1972 and 1979, the rebellion of the National Democratic Front supported by the PRY on the ARY frontiers in the early 1980s and the military confrontations in the disputed borders between Marib and Shabwa in 1985 and 1987-1988. The 1972 war, which lost the ARY, was promoted mainly by its prime minister al-Aini, with the support of Saudi Arabia. In contrast, the 1979 war was promoted by ideological motivations of the PRY and closely related to the rebellion of the NLF. The border problems and the conflicts between the two republics would be the driving forces of the process that would end in the unification of Yemen in 1990.<sup>89</sup>

At the same time, there were significant internal fissures in the PRY with the Socialist Party, the party that emerged from the NLF. Fattah Ismail was one of the pioneers and ideologists of the party and one of the main forces that led South Yemen to align with the USSR in the early 1970s. His dogmatic and rigid policies led to his deposition in 1980 in favor of Ali Nasir Muhammad, who promoted more open policies. In 1986, ideological and personal differences provoked clashes and

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<sup>87</sup> S. Etheredge, L. (2018). Saudi Arabia and Yemen - Encyclopedia Britannica. [online] Available at: <http://eb.pdn.ipublishcentral.com/product/saudi-arabia-yemen> [Accessed 16 August 2019].

<sup>88</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>89</sup> Schmitz, C. and Burrowes, R. (2009). Historical Dictionary of Yemen. Rowman & Littlefield. p. 94

civil unrest that ended with the death of Ismail and the exile of Ali Nasir Muhammad, and brought to power a group of moderate politicians and technocrats led by Ali Salim al-Bayd and Haydar Abu Bakr al-Attas. It was this section of the party that opened the negotiations for a future union of the two republics.<sup>90</sup>

Two factors made the union possible in 1990. The first was the discovery of oil and natural gas in both republics and in border areas (from Marib to Shabwa). Even though there was the possibility of confrontation over the control of these zones, it was not in the interest of any of the parties to enter into an expensive conflict; it made more sense to join and spread the benefits with a rational exploitation of resources. The second was the fall of the USSR and Gorbachev's decision to abandon funding policies to allied countries, including the People's Republic of Yemen. Thus, and anticipating the events, the PRU agreed to enter into talks with the ARY for a possible union before losing bargaining power.<sup>91</sup>

The unification took place in 1990 with an amazing speed, which surprised both the international observers of the area and the Yemeni population itself. However, the tensions did not decrease. From the North, in addition to the structural political corruption that prevailed, a persecution was carried out against the Southern Socialist Party, which progressively lost influence and power in the new state. In this way, the southern faction once again reconsidered the union, which led to a civil war in 1994. The resistance movements of the South and its former army quickly surrendered to the northern forces, being supported by Saudi Arabia, who were fearful of the growing Shia power in the North. After the failed secessionist attempt, Ali Abdullah Saleh became the leader of the country. Saleh had already been president of the ARY before the union, and the civil war and the victory of the North reinforced his mandate.

As expected, different revolutionary groups emerged to counter this mandate. The most prominent was Ansar Allah or the also known Houthi movement. The movement was born with the leadership of Hussein al Houthi, from whom its name comes. Its formation began in the 90s in the northern zone of Saada as a young movement in defense of the religious traditions of Shiite Zaydism. Later, its insurgency was involved in tribal policies and defense against the military power of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. He was mainly accused of autocracy and of stealing most of the country's wealth for his own family.<sup>92</sup> The invasion of the United States in Iraq radicalized this movement like many others in the Middle East. The Houthis took the motto of "Allah is great, death to the USA, death to

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<sup>90</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>91</sup> S. Etheredge, L. 'Middle East Region in Transition. Saudi Arabia and Yemen', Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at: <http://eb.pdn.ipublishcentral.com/product/middle-east-region-in-transition> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

<sup>92</sup> Riedel, B. (2017). Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them?, Brookings. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/18/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/> [Accessed 15 June 2019].



Israel, curse for the Jews and victory of Islam" as the central axis of their ideology. Hezbollah and its fight against Israeli forces in Lebanon were the role model for the Houthis, as well as Iranian support against a common enemy, Saudi Arabia.<sup>93</sup>

From 2004 until the beginning of the Arab Springs, the Houthis fought in six wars against the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh after the death of Hussein al-Houthi at the hands of the government troops. Saleh sought the support of the United States and Saudi Arabia to put an end to the movement in the face of a future terrorist radicalization and the power they could achieve. It was during these six wars that the Houthis formalized their organization and learned to fight against conventional forces.<sup>94</sup> In the sixth and last war against the Yemeni government between 2009 and 2010, they fought against the best government troops formed by the Republican Guard and special forces trained and equipped by the United States. In addition, they were attacked by Saudi air forces and special troops that entered Yemeni territory. Even so, they managed to emerge victorious and forced the government troops to abandon the fortified bases in the preliminary context of the Arab Springs.<sup>95</sup> Many are the reasons for the success of the Houthis as an armed movement, as first of all their detailed knowledge of the territory in which they fight. The Houthis use the mountains as a defense, knowing that all who tried to invade Yemen by crossing the northern borders met their death. The second element behind their success is the set of connections and networks that the leadership has created among the clans and tribes, favoring, unlike the national army, the meritocracy between its lines.<sup>96</sup>

With the spread of uprisings in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, the Arab Spring also reached Sana and spread rapidly throughout the country. The high level of unemployment, poverty and malnutrition led the population to take to the streets demanding more rights, economic reforms against poverty and corruption and the end of the presidency of Ali Abdullah Saleh to the power of unification.<sup>97</sup> The Houthis of the North joined the protests, as well as the Southern Movement, a federation of tribes and clans that invokes the autonomy and secession

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<sup>93</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>94</sup> Horton, M. (2016). Michael, H. (2019). An Unwinnable War: The Houthis, Saudi Arabia and the Future of Yemen - Jamestown. [online] Jamestown. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/unwinnable-war-houthis-saudi-arabia-future-yemen/> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

<sup>95</sup> Horton, M. (2010) 'Borderline Crisis', An Unwinnable War: The Houthis, Saudi Arabia and the Future of Yemen - Jamestown. [online] Jamestown. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/unwinnable-war-houthis-saudi-arabia-future-yemen/> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

<sup>96</sup> Horton, M. (2016). An Unwinnable War: The Houthis, Saudi Arabia and the Future of Yemen, An Unwinnable War: The Houthis, Saudi Arabia and the Future of Yemen - Jamestown. [online] Jamestown. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/unwinnable-war-houthis-saudi-arabia-future-yemen/> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

<sup>97</sup> Clausen, M. (2015) 'Understanding the crisis in Yemen: Evaluating competing narratives', International Spectator, 50(3), 16-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2015.1053707>

from the central government. At the same time, Ansar al-Sharia allied with local tribes in the south of the country to acquire more territorial power.

This uprising, together with a long series of conflicts already discussed, compromised the unstable government of President Saleh until his dismissal in the same year. The institutionalized political opposition, along with prominent figures of the regime, soon supported the citizens to forming an opposition movement that was harshly neutralized through repression in the first place and later with promises of reforms. The situation in the country foreshadowed an armed conflict, such as that in Libya or Syria. The international pressures promoted to a large extent by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with the absence of the United States and the European Union, established a plan to modify the political regime through constitutional change. Being Yemen a republic, this helps to explain, according to Silvia Colombo, why the GCC was so open to allowing President Saleh to abdicate, contrary to what it had shown when safeguarding the monarchies of the Gulf.<sup>98</sup>

The political transition began with the resignation of President Saleh in November 2011 to be confirmed in February 2012 with the presidential elections that elected then Vice President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi with 99.8%.<sup>99</sup> The popular lack of knowledge and disregard for the work of the National Dialogue Conference (in which the bases for the new Constitution were proposed) constituted a strong obstacle to a real regime change under optimal conditions of viability. The institutional weakness was a key factor that made possible the fracture of a young republic looking for a political change. The new administration seemed unable to solve the country's problems, immediately losing popular support. The interim president decreed the dissolution of the Republican Guard, the elite force still led by Ahmed Ali Saleh, son of the former president, and the dismantling of the First Division. Hadi replaced the military leaders with his loyalists, originally from the Abyan region. However, the majority of ordinary soldiers remained loyal to Saleh. In 2014, Hadi appointed a commission that presided over the federal reform of the country: the draft called for the creation of six macro regions, four in the North and two in the South. This proposal was rejected immediately by the Houthis, who complained about the regrouping of territories (Sa'da, Amran, Sana'a, Dhamar) into a densely populated administrative entity (Azal), without natural resources or maritime outlets.<sup>100</sup>

Therefore, the tactical, and not ideological, alliance between the Houthi and Saleh movements came together in reaction to military and federal reforms. In the spring of 2014, the Houthis paradoxically extended militarily to the Amran region, consolidating its territorial expansion and reaching the capital. Here, in 2014, instrumentalizing the protest against the cut of the subsidies to the

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<sup>98</sup> Colombo, S. (2012). The GCC countries and the Arab Spring: Between outreach, patronage and repression. Istituto Affari Internazionali.

<sup>99</sup> Brehony, N. (2015). Yemen and the Houthis: genesis of the 2015 crisis. *Asian Affairs*, 46(2), pp.232-250.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group. (2019). Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict? [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-s-military-security-reform-seeds-new-conflict> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

fuel imposed by Hadi in exchange for the aid of the IMF and the World Bank, the Houthis began a series of manifestations against the government.<sup>101</sup> The political crisis in Yemen was open/deeply started. On September 21, the Houthis took control of Sana. The protests were marked by clashes between the Houthis and the government, as well as clashes between the former and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Hadi took refuge in Aden, proclaimed it since then "temporary capital" and the conflict intensified. The Houthis officially declared war on Hadi and Al-Qaeda.

On March 26, 2015, Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saùd initiated a trade blockade and an aerial bombing campaign called "Operation Decisive Storm", supported by ten other states of the Gulf Cooperation Council with the exception of Oman. The main objective of the operation, according to the pro Hadi coalition, was to regain control of the capital in the hands of the Houthis, "pawns in Iranian hands."<sup>102</sup> In the next paragraph, after analyzing the genesis of the Yemeni conflict, from its origins to the outbreak of the civil war, we will discuss the position and interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the conflict.

Undoubtedly, the civil war has exasperated the already miserable Yemeni conditions and led the country to a total collapse. Yemen has always been one of the poorest countries in the world, given that most of its territory is desert, and agricultural production in the western area cannot feed the entire population. This means that the country survives thanks to the importation of raw materials, which with the war have been running out. According to UN estimates, more than 50,000 people have died during these years of war due to conflict disease and hunger, of which half are civilians. More than 25 million people, 75% of the population, are under malnutrition with the risk of famine. Millions of people are without work, since most industries have been bombed and more than 3 million people have been displaced.<sup>103</sup> Human Rights Watch denounces both coalitions for violating human rights, claiming that the Houthis continue to recruit child soldiers and indiscriminately use weapons against civilians. The Houthi forces, the affiliates to the government, the UAE and the rebel Yemeni forces supported by the UAE have arbitrarily detained and have made hundreds of people disappear.<sup>104</sup> In December 2018, the UN, after several dialogue initiatives, proclaimed a ceasefire to allow humanitarian aid to enter the country. However, the situation does not seem to improve, given that both parties continue to violate the so-called Stockholm Agreement by attacking each other. As stated by the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, we are facing the "worst humanitarian crisis in

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<sup>101</sup> Ardemagni, E. (2017). Yemen: regionalizzazione di una crisi interna. ISPI.

<sup>102</sup> Esfandiary, D & Tabatabai, A. (2016). Yemen: an Opportunity for Iran-Saudi Dialogue, *The Washington Quarterly*, 39(2), p.155-174.

<sup>103</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. (2019). The Top Conflicts to Watch in 2019: Yemen. [online] Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/top-conflicts-watch-2019-yemen> [Accessed 14 June. 2019].

<sup>104</sup> Lederer, E. (2019). Heavy fighting on Yemen's west coast kills hundreds. [online] AP NEWS. Available at: <https://apnews.com/3bf53ffdfc754a25a4be13b857dfd87b> [Accessed 14 June. 2019].

the world"<sup>105</sup>, in which the only possible solution seems to be "a political agreement negotiated through an inclusive Yemeni dialogue".<sup>106</sup>

### 3.2 The opposed coalitions

Before focusing the analysis on the Saudi and Iranian participation in the conflict, it is necessary to present the confronted parties to better understand the dynamics within the civil conflict. Today's war is a stratification of old and new conflicts. The actors involved are many and often have changed field: the fluidity of the alliances is favored by the social structure of Yemen, a strongly tribal country. The two factions identified by media to facilitate the understanding of the conflict are not at all cohesive and homogeneous fronts and within each one there are continuous confrontations. The so-called "pro-government", supported by the Arab military coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries, brings together brigades of the army of loyalists and different armed formations, in competition with each other (pro-Hadi popular committees, Muslim Brotherhoods, Salafis, southern separatists, autonomous tribal militias, jihadists) and are realistically defined as "anti-Houthi". Most fight against the insurgents, but oppose the institutions led by Hadi, who pursue their own political agendas. The rebels, supported by Iran, are a more recognizable faction: the core is represented by the Houthis and until 2017 by the power network of former President Saleh. This particular and strange alliance has been intensified from 2012, when Saleh and his supporters realized that his dismissal would be irremediable, given that the CCG and the Western powers clearly supported the new government of Hadi, and especially by the common resentment against Saudi Arabia.<sup>107</sup>

The Ansarullah fighters have been at war with the government since 2004. Initially, the revolt was born with the aim of defending Zaydism, a current of Shia Islam that concentrates in the north of Yemen and to which it belongs around 35% of the population, against the proselytism of the Sunni currents and the Saudi oppression to convert the region to Salafism.<sup>108</sup> It is essential to emphasize the tribal conformation of the Yemeni territory, which more than a state can be defined as a set of clans and tribes. Among these tribes, the Houthis are themselves composed of an agglomeration of tribes, without representing a particular one, but bringing together several under the same religious bond. Furthermore, the Houthis do not represent the entire Shia Yemeni community, but they are certainly identifiable as the most important Zaydis community since there are no other relevant communities in

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<sup>105</sup>Unog.ch. (2019). Where global solutions are shaped for you | News & Media | Remarks by the Secretary-General to the Pledging Conference on Yemen. [online] Available at: [https://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news\\_media.nsf/\(httpNewsByYear\\_en\)/27F6CCAD7178F3E9C1258264003311FA?OpenDocument](https://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/(httpNewsByYear_en)/27F6CCAD7178F3E9C1258264003311FA?OpenDocument) [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>106</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>107</sup> Ardemagni, E. (2017). Yemen: regionalizzazione di una crisi interna. ISPI. n° 78.

<sup>108</sup> *ibidem*

the rest of the territory.<sup>109</sup> For many years they fought for state subsidies and greater political, social and cultural recognition before becoming an anti-state militia. With the turmoil against the Hadi regime, the Houthis took the opportunity to advance from Sa'da's home province, conquering the Yemeni capital.<sup>110</sup> To date, the Shiite insurgents still occupy the North (Sana'a, Sa'da) and part of the west coast bordering the Red Sea (Hodeida) and in Sana'a, where the rebels lead a parallel government.

From the military point of view, they can count on a trained militia of between 20,000 and 30,000 combatants, as well as several voluntary affiliates from the local branches that joined the Houthi cause after its post-2011 expansion.<sup>111</sup> Until November 4 2017, the Zaydi rebel group had the support of former Yemeni president Saleh and the state militias still loyal, that had allowed them to withstand the coup d'état. This alliance, from its fragile and discordant origin, collapsed when Saleh saw the opportunity to recover his power. The friction between Saleh and the Houthis began on August 23, 2017, when the rebels accused Saleh of treason for having called them "militia." More recently, on October 18 2017, the General People's Congress, the political party to which the Saleh militias belong, accused the Houthis of "orchestrating a campaign" against Saleh and not wanting to continue their association.

For their part, the rebels have accused the deposed president of breaking the pact with them by accepting funds from Hadi's government and Saudi Arabia. When, on December 4, 2017, Ali Abdullah Saleh announced the definitive rupture of the alliance with the rebels and, on the other hand, the willingness to cooperate with the Arab coalition led by the Saudis, the Houthis decided to attack.<sup>112</sup> Two days later, the convoy where the former president was travelling was attacked by the Houthi militias and murdered Saleh. In a written statement on a Houthi television, the interior minister of the parallel government announced the death of Saleh and his supporters by stating "this is after he and his men blocked roads and killed civilians in clear collaboration with the enemy countries of the coalition."<sup>113</sup> The death of Saleh and the rupture of the alliance with the rebels do not necessarily suggest an improvement in the Yemeni scenario, much less a victory for Saudi Arabia. In fact, the role of the GPC could have served as an intermediary to reach an agreement, taking

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<sup>109</sup> Igualada, C (2017). Guerra Civil en Yemen: actores y crisis humanitaria. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos.

<sup>110</sup> Byman, D. (2018). Yemen's Disastrous War. *Survival*: Vol 60, n° 5, p. 141-158.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group. (2019). Yemen: Is Peace Possible?. [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-peace-possible-podcast> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>112</sup> Edroos, F. (2019). How did Yemen's Houthi-Saleh alliance collapse? [online] Aljazeera.com. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/yemen-houthi-saleh-alliance-collapse-171204070831956.html> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>113</sup> Aljazeera.com. (2019). Yemen: Ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh killed. [online] Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/houthi-media-ali-abdullah-saleh-killed-sanaa-171204123328290.html> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

advantage of the desire of Saleh and his party to become part of Yemen's political power. This undoubtedly would have put pressure on the anti-state coalition that today, without the GPC, it is labelled by its enemies as a sectarian group and in particular an armed body of Iranian power.<sup>114</sup>

On the other hand, the opposite front, which combats the presence of the Houthis, is a heterogeneous front composed of several factions with different visions about the political future of Yemen and different interests, united only by common enemies. In the chaotic scene of the factions in games, there are at least three identifiable main groups that oppose the invasion of the Zaydi rebels: the southern separatists, the Sunni Islamists and other tribal and regional combatants.

Most of the anti-Houthi fighters, in what is identifiable as the former south of Yemen, belong to the separatist movement or better known as Hirak al Yanubi or, more recently, transformed into the Southern Resistance Movement. On January 30, 2018, this movement led by Aidarous Al Zubaidi conquered Aden, a port city with strategic access to the sea in the southwest of the country, distancing its former ally, President Hadi. The main objective of the movement is to create its own state with capital in Aden.<sup>115</sup> Behind Al Zubaidi and the military leaders of the Southern Resistance Movement seems to be the UAE, whose strategy in Yemen is now clearly marked by divergent interests to those of Casa Saud. The objective of the crown prince Mohammed Bin Zayed is to favour the push of the southern secessionists and help them establish an autonomous republic in the southern part of the country. By having its own protectorate in this area, Abu Dhabi would guarantee control of the Bab el-Mandeb strait where container and petroleum ships travel from the Asian seas to the Suez Canal to enter the Mediterranean. To give substance to his ambitious plan, Prince Bin Zayed has been financing for years a network of local militias in the area, led by the Southern Resistance Movement, and has created a "parallel" security system that responds to Hadi and Saudi Arabia, capable of disposing of prisoners, warriors and vehicles as reported by Human Rights Watch. Most of the separatist groups are hostile to the Hadi government, since the latter rejects the idea of division. At the same time, there are strong hostilities between the resistance of the South and AQAP, which are also concentrated in the Aden region, although there is no shortage of criminal collaborations and arms exchanges between them.<sup>116</sup>

The others within the network of opposition to the rebels of the North are the so-called Sunni Islamists, a definition that includes a wide range of groups that are different from each other in terms of school of thought and political objectives, but they are united by the same religious rivalry against

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<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group. (2019). Collapse of the Houthi-Saleh Alliance and the Future of Yemen's War. [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/collapse-houthi-saleh-alliance-and-future-yemens-war> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>115</sup> *Ivi*, p. 12-14

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group. (2019). Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base. [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

the Houthis. Among them, one of the most important is ISLAH (the Yemeni Association for the Reformation), which is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and fights politically against the Houthis and contests their religious base.<sup>117</sup> The political party, born in 1990, was the protagonist of the coup against Saleh, becoming the second most important political party in Yemen. However, with the outbreak of the civil war, it was marginalized due to the expansion of the Houthis, so the party decided to join the Pro-Hadi block. This led to a forced rapprochement between Al Islah, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, whose relations until then had been anything but idyllic, given that the latter had labeled the Yemeni party as a terrorist group, especially after the discovery of the participation of two-party members in the September 11 attacks.<sup>118</sup> The rapprochement, especially of the UAE, is due to the distancing of ISLAH from the Muslim Brotherhood, in order to create new allies against the Houthis, wanting to support the Hadi government, the only internationally recognized one.<sup>119</sup>

One of the terms used by the media and scholarship to describe the most extreme part of the armed groups that operate in the Middle East is "salafi". This word has now become synonymous with a conservative and fundamentalist Muslim who shares or is ideologically close to the positions expressed by the most radical terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda. However, a high percentage of Muslims who call themselves Salafists are believers who reject any political commitment and, therefore, are far from the most extreme positions expressed by the political groups that justify the armed struggle and terrorism. The Salafis differ politically. The element that distinguishes the main interpretations is the strategy to create the "Islamic State". The largest group is that of the "quietists" who are inspired by the teachings of Nasir al-Din al-Albani and avoid active engagement. This, according to Laurent Bonnefoy in his article "Deconstructing Salafism in Yemen", is the case of Yemen, where the movement created by Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi in the early 80s has always stood out for its no-political involvement, compared to other Salafi groups.<sup>120</sup>

The main characteristic of the Yemeni version of Salafism is to separate the movement from the disputes, rejecting any type of political participation. In spite of their self-proclamation of being apolitical, the Arab Spring of 2011, the fall of the regime and the popularity of the Islamist movements, the Salafists began to question their positions, becoming more involved in the situation of the country.<sup>121</sup> In 2012 a Yemeni Salafi party was founded: the Al-Rashad Union, which allied immediately with President Hadi, claiming a state based on Sharia. In another article by Bonnefoy,

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<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group. (2019). Yemen: Is Peace Possible?. [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-peace-possible-podcast> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>118</sup> Bonnefoy, L. (2018). Politics, Governance and Reconstruction in Yemen. Institute for Middle East Studies.

<sup>119</sup> Leaf, B. & De Lozier, E. (2018). The UAE and Yemen's Islah: A Coalition of Coalesces. The Washington Institute.

<sup>120</sup> Bonnefoy, L. and Kuschmitzki, J. (2019). Salafis and the 'Arab Spring' in Yemen: Progressive Politicization and Resilient Quietism. [online] Journals.openedition.org. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/cy/2811> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>121</sup> *ibidem*

written with Judit Kuschnitzk, an interview is included where Al-Humayqani, leader of the new party, explains the reasons that led to the birth of Al-Rashad. The leader refers to the need to create a non-violent alternative and to give a real voice to Islam in Yemen.<sup>122</sup>

Lastly, inside the pro-Hadi division, it can be included Al-Qaeda and AQAP. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was born in January 2009 from the fusion of two factions of Al-Qaeda, the Yemeni and the Saudi.<sup>123</sup> The AQAP is currently considered one of the most effective and violent branches of Al-Qaeda, since, according to the article "Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question" of the International Crisis Group, it seems that AQAP is responsible for the attacks on Charlie Hebdo magazine and the attack on Northern Airlines.<sup>124</sup> The riots that followed the Arab Springs and the outbreak of the war in Yemen were exploited by AQAP to take ground. In fact, since 2015, due to the political vacuum, the terrorist organization has tried to find its own pseudo state in southern Yemen. The guilt of the expansion of these groups is attributed by the Hadi block to the Houthis and vice versa. According to the position of the International Crisis Group, both factions tend to be accused. The article reports that, in the first place, the expansion of the Houthis in predominantly Sunni areas has tensed the minds of AQAP and ISIS, which facilitate the recruitment of volunteers for the armed conflict.

On the other hand, the Saudi and pro-Hadi coalition that has underestimated the terrorist threat of these groups to defeat the Houthis has accelerated its expansion.<sup>125</sup> Both groups are strongly against the Houthis, being enemies of Shiism, but at the same time not even part of the government of Hadi.<sup>126</sup> The areas where the terrorist organization is strongest are in the west, in the province of Seiyun and in the southwest between Abyha and Azzan, although the organization is active in almost all the territories of Yemen, with the exception of the northeast, controlled by the Houthis.<sup>127</sup> Here, AQAP governs its territories by applying Sharia and controlling the villages militarily.<sup>128</sup> The main objective of this organization is "to expel the Jews and the Christians from the Arabian Peninsula" and "to establish the Islamic Caliphate and the law of Sharia that the apostate governments have suspended". From the logistical point of view, the organization, according to the US Department of

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<sup>122</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group. (2019). Yemen: Is Peace Possible? [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-peace-possible-podcast> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group. (2019). Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question. [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/breaking-point-yemen-s-southern-question> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group. (2019). Yemen: Is Peace Possible? [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-peace-possible-podcast> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>126</sup> ECFR.EU (2019). Mapping the Yemen conflict (2015) | European Council on Foreign Relations. [online] Available at: [https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen\\_mapping\\_2015](https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen_mapping_2015) [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>127</sup> Salisbury, Peter (2018). "Yemen's Southern Powder Keg", Chatham House.

<sup>128</sup> Counter Extremism Project. (2019). Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). [online] Available at: <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap> [Accessed 14 June 2019].



State, is financed mainly by plundering cities and banks, confiscations and donations. In addition, AQAP has controlled for more than a year the third largest port in Yemen, Mukalla, which has generated sufficient income for the group.<sup>129</sup> As for the ISY (Islamic State in Yemen), the differences with Al-Qaeda are obvious. In fact, if the latter is well established within Yemeni territory at least since 2011, ISY is a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, they claimed their presence in Yemen with a terrorist attack on a Zaydi mosque in Saana. The tensions between the two groups are high, given that both wants to be leaders of the jihadist movement and with the same objective of recruitment.

As demonstrated, it is possible to identify several levels of interlinear conflict within Yemen, where promoting an effective political commitment seems very complicated given the plurality of local and regional actors, as well as the interests at stake. The first and most important is the clash between the old and new regime, with the party of Saleh trying to recover the lost power and Hadi, along with the Islah party, which tries to preserve the acquired positions. The clash between the center and the suburbs is the second fundamental level of the war, which goes beyond the simplistic contrast between the North and the South. Rather, there are numerous reconstructed regional and tribal identities that fight for political autonomy, natural and financial resources. The Houthis and the Southern Movement are the expression of these suburbs traditionally marginalized by the central power. The competition for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the third level of the shock, being a consequence and not the origin. The rivalry between Saudis and Iranians and the rhetoric of jihadists groups have contributed to change the characteristics of the war, exacerbating the sectarian connotation of the conflict.<sup>130</sup>

### **3.3 Iranian and Saudis involvement in Yemen**

The Middle East is one of the most significant cases to describe the process of challenge to the unipolar order that takes place on a regional scale. If, historically, the balance of power system was supported by several actors such as Iraq, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, etc; as of the XXI century, the situation has changed, transforming the power war between Iran and Saudi Arabia into the main geopolitical challenge of the region. From the point of view of the mainstream IR theories, the Middle East has always been conceptualized using Waltz's most famous theory: "the balance of power". According to this realistic theorist, both internationally and regionally, the balance of a system "in the strict and simple sense can be described as a condition and structure without hegemonic power and

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>130</sup> Ardemagni, E. (2019). From Insurgents to Hybrid Security Actors? Deconstructing Yemen's Huthi Movement. ISPI. [online] Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/insurgents-hybrid-security-actors-deconstructing-yemens-huthi-movement-16546> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

states with relatively equal or similar powers".<sup>131</sup> In order to maintain this regional stability, the various powers seek to improve internal security, repressing what is considered an external threat. Precisely in this perspective, the conceptual interpretation of the balance of power applied to the situation in the Middle East conceives the Islamic Republic of Iran as a destabilizing factor of regional balance, giving a possible explanation to the concerns of the Gulf countries and, in particular, Saudi Arabia.<sup>132</sup>

Another important theory that can be taken into consideration is the systematic change by Robert Gilpin, who argues in his book "War and Changes" that changes in international systems occur only through "major wars" and that it would be "differentiated or unequal growth of power between the states of a system"<sup>133</sup> to promote the increase of power to modify the current system and the status quo: the more benefits are expected from a change in the system in the face of an increase in costs, the more advantageous the power will consider to modify the order settled down.<sup>134</sup> According to Muharrem Eksi and his work "Regional Hegemony Quests in the Middle East from the Balance of Power System to the Balance of Proxy Wars: Turkey as Balancing Power for the Iran-Saudi Rivalry", Iran, defined from Gilpin's perspective, as a growing power, took advantage of the Arab Springs to reverse the established order and assert its hegemony in the region.

Thus, Saudi Arabia, defined as a declining power<sup>135</sup>, acted to maintain its role. According to Hertz, power is inherently relative: as the power of one state increases, the loss of another is subsequently found. A state, by increasing its potential, generates the uncertainty of the other actor in the system, which in turn will produce different forces and behaviors to counteract the challenger and defend its position.<sup>136</sup> This, in other words, generates the so-called "security dilemma", a key concept in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the idea of Muharrem Eksi. In this way, when a power perceives an external threat, it will tend to improve its internal security, especially through armament, and in turn the other power will do the same as well, thus feeding the mutual conflict, based on the use of proxies, so that "the system of regional balance of power in the Middle East was replaced by the balance of proxy wars."<sup>137</sup>

As for the other protagonist of the geopolitical game, Iran, it is possible to affirm that his participation in Yemen is certainly less documented than that of Saudi Arabia, but no less relevant in

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<sup>131</sup> T.V, Paul & J Wirtz J. & Fortmann, M. (2004). Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century. Stanford University.

<sup>132</sup> Barzegar, K. (2019). Balance of Power in the Persian Gulf: An Iranian View.

<sup>133</sup> Gilpin, R. (1984). War and Change in World Politics. Cambridge University Press, p. 148

<sup>134</sup> *Ivi* p.15

<sup>135</sup> Eksi, M. (2017). Regional Hegemony Quests in the Middle East from the Balance of Power System to the Balance of Proxy Wars: Turkey as Balancing Power for the Iran-Saudi Rivalry.

<sup>136</sup> Hertz, J.H (1951). Political Realism and Political Idealism. Chicago University Press.

<sup>137</sup> Eksi, M. (2017). Regional Hegemony Quests in the Middle East from the Balance of Power System to the Balance of Proxy Wars: Turkey as Balancing Power for the Iran-Saudi Rivalry".

the geopolitical chessboard of the Middle East. The origins of the contact between the two countries go back to the Hermieri dynasty, when Yemen was a disputed land between Romans and Persians.<sup>138</sup> From the XX to the XXI centuries, initially Iran's pre-revolutionary relations with Yemen were limited exclusively to northern Yemen, given that the Iranian monarchy supported Zadi in the war against the southern republicans.<sup>139</sup> After the revolutions in North and South of Yemen and the 1979 Revolution in Iran, the Arab Republic of Yemen maintained good relations with Saudi Arabia and with Iraq under Saddam Hussein and, therefore, assumed a position against Iran. On the contrary, the socialist state formed in southern Yemen became an ally of Tehran, which strongly supported the "hardline Marxist faction"<sup>140</sup>, both being strong opponents of Western colonialism and of Gulf monarchies.<sup>141</sup> As for the Zaydis, a small group, which includes the current leader of the Houthis Abdul Malik Al-Houthis and his brother, is sure that they travelled to Iran to study Shia Islam in Qom. However, there is no trace of any Iranian aid to the rebel group in northern Yemen at least until 2005.<sup>142</sup>

In fact, Tehran maintained a friendly relationship during the 1990s, once President Saleh came to power in unified Yemen. The relations between Iran and Yemen, therefore, were cordial under the Saleh government, at a historical moment in which the latter was generally open to all those ties that were useful to maintain power, thus obtaining a key role on the regional geopolitical board, in order to consolidate his position during and after the Cold War. Saleh's foreign policy, according to Middle East political expert Fred Halliday, materialized in the mobilization of external support against the opposition forces to his regime inside the country.<sup>143</sup>

With the beginning of the Arab Springs and chaos generated in the country, Iran took the opportunity to strengthen its ties with the Houthis, but at the same time to establish important links with political personalities of southern Yemen. Nevertheless, in 2015, when the Houthis ousted President Saleh, the Iranians refocused on the movement that was most successful in the national scene.<sup>144</sup> The Iranian role in the Yemeni civil war has always generated controversy due to the lack of detailed sources on the real nature of the Iranian action. However, Western powers, especially the US,

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<sup>138</sup> Al-Qadhi, H. (2019). The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security [online] Available at: <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/12/The-Iranian-Role-in-Yemen-and-its-Implications-on-the-Regional-Security-.pdf> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>139</sup> *Ivi*, p.25

<sup>140</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>141</sup> Salisbury, P. (2015). Yemen and The Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War', Chatham House.

<sup>142</sup> Juneau, T. (2016). Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen. A Limited Return on a Modest Investment. International Affairs.

<sup>143</sup> Halliday, F. (2001). The Foreign Policy of Yemen, in The Foreign Policies of the Middle East, Lynne Rienner. p. 272

<sup>144</sup> Al-Qadhi, H. (2019). The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security" [online] Available at: <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/12/The-Iranian-Role-in-Yemen-and-its-Implications-on-the-Regional-Security-.pdf> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

and government forces have always pointed to Iran and Hezbollah as guilty of covering the backs of the rebels through the donation of large quantities of weapons.<sup>145</sup> The testimonies that seem to infer Tehran's logistical support to the Houthis are diverse, among them a *New York Times* report that already in 2013 found the presence of ships containing weapons and explosives of Iranian origin<sup>146</sup>, not to mention the strong propaganda implemented since the Iranian television stations against the Saudi forces.<sup>147</sup>

For their part, the Houthis have never denied receiving any aid from Tehran that was not of a strategic or ideological type, but certainly not of a military nature, without hiding their strong admiration for the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah. Undoubtedly, Iran, within the regional scene, represents the only actor with the same positions as the Zaydi rebels, whose slogans and rhetoric have always been used, as a result of the instruction that the leaders of the movement received precisely in Iranian territory. The self-proclaimed government of the Houthis in Sa'da strictly respects the Islamic revolutionary principles stipulated by Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, who in turn drew them from the Iranian revolutionary principles. The political communication of Al-Houthi has been characterized by a clear anti-establishment and anti-Western position, a characteristic that has caused friction with more moderate and liberal leaders. Al-Houthi coined the song Sarkha, taken from the "Death to America" of the Islamic revolution in Iran: "Death to America, death to Israel, Jews are condemned, the victory of Islam."<sup>148</sup> In addition, important members of the group have joined schism and visited Iran to receive religious education, confirming, in this way, the existence of a faction that makes direct reference to Tehran within the movement. However, as Christopher Stille<sup>149</sup> points out, the original objectives of the Houthis were limited to the local level, and only recently has it been transformed, perhaps thanks to external influences, into a "broad national political movement".<sup>150</sup>

In the period from 2011 to 2014, just before the outbreak of the civil war, the Financial Times and the United Nations Security Council reported evidence that both Hezbollah and Houthi forces had been trained militarily by hundreds of bodies of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) that had

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<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group. (2019). Yemen: Is Peace Possible? [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-peace-possible-podcast> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>146</sup> Worth, Robert F. (2013). Yemen Seizes Sailboat Filled with Weapons and U.S Points to Iran. *New York Times*. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/29/world/middleeast/29military.html> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>147</sup> Juneau, T. (2016). Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen. A Limited Return on a Modest Investment. *International Affairs*.

<sup>148</sup> Salisbury, P. (2015). Yemen and The Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'. Chatham House. p 5.

<sup>149</sup> Stille, C. (2017). Iran's Role in Yemen's Civil War. *The Pardee Periodical Journal of Global Affairs*, Volume II, Issue I.

<sup>150</sup> Unknown (2019). Who Are the Houthis of Yemen? [online] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/21/world/middleeast/who-are-the-houthis-of-yemen.html> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

moved to Yemeni territory.<sup>151</sup> Undoubtedly, however, it is from 2015, with the conquest of the Yemeni capital, when relations between Tehran and the Zaydist faction have intensified, and the Iranian government itself has begun to be more explicit about its positions, declaring that as a result of the coup there was a "brilliant and resounding victory", an official Iranian comment that would have been unlikely in the past.<sup>152</sup> Even in the following months, mutual support was never lacking even though Iran had always denied supplying arms to the rebels, declaring in the words of the foreign minister that "accusations about the supply of weapons from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Yemen are completely invented and pure lies."<sup>153</sup>

Based on this, what are the main motivations leading Tehran to get involved in the Yemeni context? Iran's goal in Yemen does not differ much from other regional conflicts in which it was involved such as Iraq, Lebanon or Syria. The intervention of the Islamic Republic is in fact part of the action plan to gain regional influence and international recognition. The mobilization and support for groups or sects closest to their ideology are perceived in the Iranian political idea as a kind of self-defense and preservation of their vital sphere against the rest of the most hegemonic powers of the region, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia that have always acted with the purpose of isolating Iran.<sup>154</sup> The scholar Mohammed Hassan Al-Qadhi believes that this strategy emerges from the statements of some Iranian officials, such as Ali Akbar Velayati, who declared: "Iran's presence in Syria and Iraq is self-defense"<sup>155</sup> or a Commander of the Quds Division of the IRGC, Qassem Suleimani: "the objective of the Iranian intervention in Syria is to defend Islam and Iran".<sup>156</sup>

Al-Qadhi also claims that the Iranian history of foreign hegemony has enforced resentments to its neighbors in the Middle East.<sup>157</sup> Thus, in the first place, one of the reasons to be indirectly involved in the Yemeni conflict is to limit Saudi Arabia hegemonic role in the region. Although Yemen is not Iran's main front in the area, at least not as much as Lebanon or Syria, the influence exerted on the

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<sup>151</sup> Carl N. & Saidi M. (2019). Iran News Round Up, Critical Threats, September 24, 2018. [online] Available at: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/iran-news-round-up> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>152</sup> En.farsnews.com. (2015). Iran reiterates support for restoration of political tranquility to Yemen" Farsnews. [online] Available at: <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13931208000476> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>153</sup> Unknown (2019). Press TV-Iran rejects claims of arms aid to Yemen. [online] Available at: <http://217.218.67.231/Detail/2015/03/31/404064/Iran-rejects-claims-of-arms-flow-to-Yemen> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

<sup>154</sup> Al-Qadhi, H. (2017). The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security. Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies.

<sup>155</sup> Islamic Revolution: "Vilayati Hodor Iran Dr Suriah wa Iraq ra (Difa' Iz Khod) Khwand", 16 Ardebisht 1396

<sup>156</sup> Yolcu F. (2016), Iran's Involvement with Syrian Civil War: Background, Reasons and Alternatives. University Middle East Institute.

<sup>157</sup> Al-Qadhi, H. (2017). The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security. Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies, p. 28.

territory by the Saudi monarchy and “the proliferation of Wahhabism”<sup>158</sup> are of great concern to the Shiite Republic. Iran “perceives itself as a regional hegemony and the leader of the Muslim world”<sup>159</sup> and in the wake of this argument it is sensible to use a non-state actor, in this case the Houthis, as a representative in the war against the United States and Saudi Arabia.<sup>160</sup> At the same time, the republic also established itself as a leader and protector of the Shiite movement in the Middle East called “Growing schism,”<sup>161</sup> although it should be emphasized to avoid confusion that the Shia current of the Houthis has some substantial differences with the Twelver Shiism of Iran.<sup>162</sup> According to the writer Thomas Juneau, it is limited and wrong to associate the union between the Houthis and Iran only on the religious basis, in fact, it would be “the interests against the status quo that are uniting the Houthis and Iran, not a shared Shia faith.”<sup>163</sup>

The consolidation of rebel power in Yemen and its victory would be a significant result in the Iranian perspective, given the strategic situation of the Gulf country, which constitutes an international corridor for oil trafficking. Salisbury cites the words of a Houthi activist, who in this regard affirms the will of the movement, once in power, to follow in the footsteps of Iranian foreign policy and thus turn to “a stronger focus on the eradication of Sunni, extremists movements”, as AQAP and ISIS, and a more aggressive pressure for a solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine”<sup>164</sup>, thus leaving Iran as a great beneficiary of the situation and thus transforming the backyard of Riyadh into a pro-Iranian government.<sup>165</sup>

Another important issue to consider in the analysis of Iran's role in Yemen or, more generally, in the conflicts in the Middle East is its internal socioeconomic situation. The disagreement with the regime is quite evident, given the severe poverty in which the country is plunged and the failure of the regime's promises to resolve political and economic situations that affect Iran, such as “the fall in development rates, the increase in poverty, unemployment, inflation and the worsening of the

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<sup>158</sup> Stille, C. (2017). Iran’s Role in Yemen’s Civil War”, *The Pardee Periodical Journal of Global Affairs*, Volume II, p. 123.

<sup>159</sup> Bucala et al (2016). “USS Mason”.

<sup>160</sup> Stille, C. (2017). Iran’s Role in Yemen’s Civil War. *The Pardee Periodical Journal of Global Affairs*. Volume II, Issue I, p.123.

<sup>161</sup> Trofimov, Y. (2016). After Islamic State, Fears of a “Shiite Crescent” in Mideast. *The Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>162</sup> Stille, C. (2017). Iran’s Role in Yemen’s Civil War”, *The Pardee Periodical Journal of Global Affairs*. Volume II, Issue I, p. 121

<sup>163</sup> Juneau, T. (2016). Iran’s Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen. *A Limited Return on a Modest Investment*. *International Affairs*. 659.

<sup>164</sup> Salisbury, P. (2015). Yemen and The Saudi-Iranian ‘Cold War’. Chatham House. p. 11-12

<sup>165</sup> Black, I. (2019). Saudi Arabia sees Yemen intervention as defense of 'backyard'. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/27/saudi-arabia-sees-yemen-intervention-as-defence-of-backyard> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

standard of living <sup>166</sup>. This reality was relatively made worse by the international sanctions imposed on the export of oil that caused the collapse of prices, as reported by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, "Iranian oil exports have fallen from a maximum of 2.7 million of barrels per day in June to 1.7-1.9 million in September 2018".<sup>167</sup> The situation shows no signs of improvement for Iran with the decree of US President Trump in his relentless fight against Iran declaring that not a drop of oil can leave the Iranian territory, under the penalty of heavy sanctions against the importing country.<sup>168</sup> Although Iran can now count on the help of China and India, its "crumbling"<sup>169</sup> economy and its presence in the Persian Gulf conflicts are inevitably related to its safeguard for the reasons explained above. For Iran, Yemen represents opportunities. Thus, the 1979 Revolution resonated in the Yemeni capital that with the emergence of the Zaydi rebels became the fourth Arab capital along with Baghdad and its Shiite organizations, Beirut with Hezbollah, and Damascus, to join the "regional axis" of Iran.

As for the relationship between Riyadh and Yemen, it has distant and complex roots. The giant of the Middle East has always followed a policy of attention and caution towards neighboring Yemen, trying to maintain the situation in a balance between functionality and dysfunctionality. This statement is interpreted in the perspective that a Yemen independent of Saudi aid could constitute an internal threat to Riyadh's security and, especially, a loss because of the economic value that Yemen represents. At the same time, a too weak country would have meant unchecked assistance and emigration within its borders. For these reasons, the regional policy of Riyadh towards Yemen has always been to support the ruling regimes of Sa'ana in favor of their own interests, with enough help to ensure that the state does not collapse, but at the same time continues to be dependent on Saudi aid. The reasons behind Riyadh's intervention are based on strategic objectives at the regional and national levels. Regarding the first level, Saudi Arabia has stated from the beginning of its participation in the conflict that its aid is justified "to get President Hadi, the legitimate government, who has been forcibly expelled by the Houthis, to return to power in Yemen."<sup>170</sup> In fact, at a time when President Hadi, a Yemeni Sunni, went to Riyadh to seek help to repel the Houthi forces, the then Foreign Minister, Prince MBS, did not think twice about intervening in the country to expel the

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<sup>166</sup> Al-Qadhi, H. (2017). The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security- Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies. p. 28.

<sup>167</sup> Segal, S. (2019). The Economic Impact of Iran Sanctions. [online] Csis.org. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/economic-impact-iran-sanctions> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

<sup>168</sup> Johnson, G. (2019). Trump's Big Iran Oil Gamble. [online] Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/22/trumps-big-iran-oil-gamble-sanctions-waivers-end-pompeo-trump-iranian-oil-exports-imports-what-impact-political-economic-diplomacy/> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

<sup>169</sup> Johson, K. & Grammer, R. (2019). Iran's Economy is Crumbling, but Collapse is a Long Way Off [online] Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/13/irans-economy-is-crumbling-but-collapse-is-a-long-way-off-jcpoa-waivers-sanctions/> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

<sup>170</sup> Mongáin, C. (2019). Yemen: The civil war and how it came about. [online] RTE.ie. Available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2018/1019/1005376-yemen-conflict-explainer/> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

rebel group seized proxy of Iran.<sup>171</sup> Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Yemen to liberate the territories occupied by the insurgents, including the capital Sa'ana, relocating (in Aden) the interim government of Hadi. Riyadh used all the possible tools: war and military political cooptation of the main anti-Houthis tribal actors.

For Riyadh, the Houthis represent "what Iran seeks to achieve throughout the Arab world: that is, the cultivation of a non-state and non-Sunni armed actor who can put pressure on Iran's adversaries both politically and militarily."<sup>172</sup> Justifying itself with Hadi's request, Saudi Arabia has complied with the international consensus and the intervention of the UN. Saudi Arabia cannot allow a hostile actor to settle in the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Riyadh perceives this space as its exclusive sphere of influence, having led wars in the 1930s and 1960s to conquer or eliminate it from the ambitions of Nasser's Egypt, its deadly enemy at that time.<sup>173</sup> In addition, the launching of missiles by the Houthis exposes the national territory to a direct threat. The Saudi house has always considered Yemen as a subordinate province, seeking to expand its influence.<sup>174</sup> From Yemen, it is possible to control trade flows along the sea route from Gibraltar to Malacca, on which part of the Kingdom's exports, especially oil, depends. Around 5 million barrels of black gold go through the Bab el Mandeb's every day. It is no coincidence that the neighboring port of Aden was one of the most important positions of the British Empire. In general terms, it is evident that the economic and strategic interests are enormous, although, for its part, the Wahabi monarchy in a report published in 2017 has stood as a protector of the Yemeni people and has motivated the storm operation "to achieve peace and stability in Yemen in line with the priorities of the region. In particular, with respect to the fight against terrorism, containing the Iranian threat and promoting cooperation and stability in the region"<sup>175</sup>, accusing Iran of being "the greatest global sponsor of terrorism".<sup>176</sup>

With regard to the repercussions at the domestic level, scholar David Hernández Martínez identifies three main reasons why the Saudi monarchy is particularly concerned about the fragile Arab nation. First, any kind of chaos within Yemen can spread to its territory. Second, an unrelated government would present a similar problem for the stability of the monarchy by limiting it to Yemen. Third, the

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<sup>171</sup> Fozia, J. & Shazia, M. (2017). Yemen Crises and The Role of Saudi Arabia, IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol. 22(8).

<sup>172</sup> Riedel, B. (2019). Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them? [online] Brookings. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/18/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/> [Accessed 15 June 2019].

<sup>173</sup> Hernández Martínez, D. (2018). The foreign policy of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. Regional objectives and strategies, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, p. 236

<sup>174</sup> Fozia, J. & Shazia, M. (2017). Yemen Crises and The Role of Saudi Arabia, IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol. 22(8).

<sup>175</sup> Unknown (2019). Declaration Saudi Embassy [online] Available at: [https://www.saudiembassy.net/sites/default/files/WhitePaper\\_Yemen\\_April2017\\_0.pdf](https://www.saudiembassy.net/sites/default/files/WhitePaper_Yemen_April2017_0.pdf) [Accessed 15 June 2019].

<sup>176</sup> *ibidem*



Yemeni position could be used against Saudi Arabia itself. Moreover, according to Stenslie (2013), the Saudi royal house fears that the proliferation of the war will turn Yemen into a fertile ground for radicals and terrorists under Iranian influence, which to date seems to be the worst nightmare on the Saudi scene.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this dissertation I have tried to disengage those that in our eyes are the dynamics that fuel the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia (sectarian conflict), the relevance and the context of Yemen in its struggle in the region (geopolitics and strategy) and the elements that make the war in Yemen a struggle in terms of proxy war (analyzed in the first chapter). At this point, I would like to understand whether proxy wars can be considered the future of international conflicts because of their economic, social and strategic advantages for both financiers and groups financed in conflicts.

So, what is the impact of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the region and more specifically in Yemen? One of the main objectives of this dissertation has been to understand the true nature of the civil war in Yemen. To answer this question, chapters three and four were crucial to reconstruct, throughout history and ongoing crises, the conflictual relations between the two countries. The conclusion that has been reached is that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is very complex to explain and, undoubtedly, it is destabilizing for the Middle East. The conflict is superficially described by media as a product of the different confessional backgrounds when the core of this rivalry lies in the competition for influence, power in the region and also leadership in the Islamic world.

If it is undeniable the sectarian element, on the other hand, as stated in "Sectarianism and Ideology in the Saudi-Iranian Relationship," it models but does not define completely their relations.<sup>177</sup> For both countries, ideology and religion are clearly the point of support for internal and external politics, but at the same time they are instrumental, as demonstrated by a politicization of Sunni and Shia identities that has contributed to fuel a conflict that emerges as something essentially political. The crises of recent years in Iraq, Syria and Yemen have increased and extracted energy from this sectarian poison, which makes the prospects for a peaceful reconstruction of the Middle East political space uncertain.

More in detail, Saudi Arabia, a power that is based on the regional status quo, has strong links with Western countries, while Iran has often sought a revolutionary change in the entire Gulf region,

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<sup>177</sup> Wehrey, F. (2009). Saudi-Iranian relations since the fall of Saddam. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

seeing in the United States its bitterest enemy. Therefore, Saudi Arabia considers Iran a threat, for the regional order necessary to ensure Saudi interests. At the same time, the Iranians believe that the Saudis are actively trying to keep Iran more vulnerable by surrounding it with hostile regimes and US military bases.<sup>178</sup> Thus, trapped in the dilemma of security, Iran and Saudi Arabia see competition for regional leadership in terms of zero sum: the more powerful Iran is, the more vulnerable Saudi Arabia feels and vice versa.

As far as Yemen is concerned, here the struggle that the Houthi rebels fight against the central power has been depicted as sectarian with the Houthis being a Shiite minority, specifically Zaydite. Nevertheless, in spite of professing a type of Shia deeply different from the one practiced by the majority of Iranians, the Houthis have essentially demanded political instances. The same Iranian participation - recently tested by the United Nations<sup>179</sup> - is involved in uncertainty and seems more linked to the desire to "keep Saudi Arabia occupied" in its backyard than in the ambition of regional hegemony. Tehran, being able to participate in Yemen, can demonstrate its regional strength and the extent of its military influence, despite the fact that shipments of Iranian weapons destined for the Houthis are not very significant compared to the weapons that arrive in Yemen.<sup>180</sup> For the Saudis, the porous southern border of 1,170 km shared with Yemen makes the bets very high. The geopolitical concerns of Saudi Arabia relate mainly to the control of the Yemeni coast and the maritime corridor (Bab al-Mandab Strait) that gives access to the Red Sea. In fact, 4% of the global oil, largely from Saudi Arabia, passes through there, so the ports along this strait are of great strategic importance to the Saudis.

Although not as important as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab is vital to Saudi Arabia's ability to reach the world's energy markets. For Riyadh, capturing the Houthis off the west coast of Yemen means giving Iran free access to the Red Sea, a fact that could help them continue to supply weapons to its local allies, maintaining an adjoining presence near Bab al-Mandeb and obtaining access to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean. The massive Saudi bombing of Yemen is proof that Saudi Arabia will do anything to control the city that faces the strait. Following these reasons, the Saudis have provided significant financial and military assistance to the central government of Yemen and carried out land and air attacks against the Houthis. What happened and could happen in the south of the Saudi border is a matter of extreme gravity for national security, especially now that the future of Yemen is in doubt. Yemeni instability would mean giving Iran a solid foothold on the peninsula, an eventuality that the Saudis cannot afford. In fact, the possible victory of the Houthis in the creation of a pro-Iranian Shia state would mean an Iranian siege on Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>178</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>179</sup> Kareem, F. (2018). UN probe details fallout of proxy war in Yemen between Saudi coalition and Iran. [online] Stars and Stripes. Available at: <https://www.stripes.com/un-probe-details-fallout-of-proxy-war-in-yemen-between-saudi-coalition-and-iran-1.506391> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>180</sup> Juneau, T. (2016). Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen. A Limited Return on a Modest Investment. International Affairs.

Among the few certainties within the unstable Middle Eastern scenario, there is the fact that the future of the region is linked to the policies of external powers, mainly those of the United States: in the last 10 years there has been a systemic change in the governments of the region, with the Iranian rise to the detriment of the Saudi counterpart, without having gone through a direct conflict, but by means of several conflicts across the region like in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, fighting with proxies and from the ideological and economic perspective. Everything suggests that this condition will not change in the short term, and the two powers will continue to confront each other to defend their position in the hierarchy of regional powers. Saudi Arabia has always taken advantage of international support to isolate Iran, and what remains to be doubted today is whether Saudi Arabia intends to "exaggerate" the Iranian role in Yemen, in order to perpetuate international hostility towards Tehran and prolong the isolation from which it began to emerge after the signing of the Nuclear Agreement.<sup>181</sup> To conclude, the rivalry between Saudis and Iranians in Yemen has certainly become entangled in an internal conflict in which, in addition to the motivations of the meddling parties in the civil war, more and more external interests have come together to add more powder to the already ardent fight.

Often, the media refer to this conflict as a "proxy war", but when analyzing if it can be described as such, it is difficult to arrive at a clear and unique definition. The issue of proxy warfare is a complicated issue that not all authors seem willing to address. In the first chapter, a large space was devoted to the analysis of the term, which together with the historical and political circumstances presented, has been used to understand if the Yemeni conflict falls within what is theoretically understood as proxy war. As has been discussed throughout the dissertation, in the last fifteen years the related scholarship has been varied and often divergent on the issue, so it continues to be complex to define what is included in the term and what is not. The point on which the authors agree is mainly the purpose for which they are carried out. The most controversial aspects are undoubtedly related to the relationship between the benefactor and the proxies, and the nature of the representation of the proxies. Many authors refer to the definition of Karl W. Deutsch of proxy war in terms of "an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought in the territory of a third country, disguised as an internal conflict of the third country and using its human resources, resources and territory as a means to achieve predominantly foreign objectives and strategies".<sup>182</sup>

Andrew Mumford, together with Geraint Hughes, are the authors in the field of International Relations who have most treated the subject in depth, inspired by Deutsch, and have defined a proxy war conflict as "the indirect participation in a conflict by third parties with the desire to influence their

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<sup>181</sup> Salisbury, P. (2015). Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'. [online] Chatham House. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/yemen-and-saudi-iranian-cold-war> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>182</sup> Deutsch, K. W. (1969). External Involvement in Internal War. Free Press of Glencoe.

strategic result”.<sup>183</sup> Hughes, who remains in line with Mumford, adds that there are three conditions for a proxy to be carried out: the direct assistance of the benefactor to the proxy, a common goal and the relationship between the local actor and the external actor that lasts time. The Yemeni civil war seems to fit in these definitions, given that the conflict is fought in the territory of a third country and has never affected the territory of either Iran or Saudi Arabia, as well as other powers involved in the conflict such as the US and UAE. In addition, the economic influence and military support have always been glaring. From the point of view of the goal and common objective, the objectives of the superpowers and of the proxies groups overlap because they are linked to the same ideology and political interests. The Houthis and Iran certainly have a common enemy, Saudi Arabia, although the Houthis' goal is more political than ideological. The same applies to Hadi with the Wahhabi monarchy.

In order to understand if the definition of proxy coincides with the war in Yemen, it is also important to effectively establish who the main actors and proxies are. The war is inserted within the power game between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which are therefore the main actors that move the pawns of the coalitions in conflict. But the answer does not seem so simple if, according to Marc Lynch, the growing role of the United States is taken into account.<sup>184</sup> In fact, Lynch believes that in addition to the Iranian-Saudi opposition, the war in Yemen is part of the struggle between Washington and Tehran over the nuclear pact. Since the beginning of the war, the US has allied with the pro-Saudi coalitions by sending weapons, jet fuel and intelligence. President Donald Trump does not seem willing to change his strategy, even though Congress appeals to the federal War Power Resolution, voting in favor of ending the US commitment to the Yemeni civil war alongside the Saudi coalition that bombs the Houthis.<sup>185</sup> This highlights the complexity that exists in the current reality in the Middle East and in the specific case analyzed, which cannot be seen only from the point of view of two actors. As Lynch says, "the politics of power in the Middle East is now dominated by proxy wars and interventions. The collapse of governments in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen has transformed these countries into open spaces so that regional powers can confront their political conflicts." <sup>186</sup>

What does not fit into the various studies on the subject is whether the direct intervention of an external power, in this case Saudi Arabia with its bombings on the territory, falls within the

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<sup>183</sup> Mumford, A (2013) Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict, The RUSI Journal.

<sup>184</sup> Lynch, M. (2015). Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role. [online] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/10/09/obama-and-middle-east-rightsizing-u.s.-role-pub-61582> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>185</sup> Landrer, M. and Baker, P. (2019). Trump Vetoes Measure to Force End to U.S. Involvement in Yemen War. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/us/politics/trump-veto-yemen.html> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>186</sup> Lynch, M. (2015). Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role. [online] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/10/09/obama-and-middle-east-rightsizing-u.s.-role-pub-61582> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

theoretical definition of proxy war. According to scholar Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, the term proxy war can be understood from two perspectives: the first, that appears in the definition of Deutsch, does not exclude the possibility that, at a certain moment, external power may intervene directly in the conflict between two regional powers. This could happen in case the local state, in spite of the support provided by the armaments, is loser, or when it is desired to reach objectives that are beyond those of the local actor. The other perspective indicates, however, a war between states at the regional level, of which one or all of the actors are indirectly supported by a superpower whose forces are never involved in the conflict. According to this definition, any local war without direct intervention of the super powers is a proxy war if there is any relationship between local adversaries and the powers. According to Madgalena El Ghamari, who shares the idea of Flynt Leverett, the Saudi intervention, being direct, cannot be considered a proxy war but an external military aggression, criminally penalized at the international level.<sup>187</sup> Mumford also shares this view, asserting that conflicts with direct intervention by a third party cannot be considered proxy wars, even though he specifies that in a conflict is not necessary that both parts have to conduct a proxy war. Within a conflict there can be direct and indirect interventions, implying that despite Saudi's interventions being identified as direct intervention, Iran's one, which is indirect, would assume the characteristics of a proxy.<sup>188</sup>

As the changing nature of current conflicts, there is also no consensus on the concept of proxy war. Some authors, like Bar-Simon-Tov, accept the cases of minimal direct intervention in the situation in which the external superpower wants to reach objectives beyond those of the local actor, while Mumford and El Ghamari reject any type of direct intervention. The different ideas and approaches on the definition of proxy suppose that the final consideration on whether the Yemeni conflict can be assumed as a proxy war is left to the readers' consideration and their approach to the presented ideas. Even so, leaving aside the direct Saudi intervention, the rest of the conditions necessary for a proxy war to exist, from the point of view of the analyzed authors, are fulfilled to consider the Yemeni war as such.

Even though proxy wars are one of the main ways to intervene in modern conflicts, they have not been thoroughly investigated yet, and, although there are specific analyses that touch on some aspects, there are only two attempts to analyze it as if it was a unitary discipline in International Relations, those of the often-cited Andrew Mumford and Geraint Hughes. At present, according to Mumford, this type of conflict is very different from the time of the Cold War, since they have acquired a multilateral and coalition dimension. In multilateral proxy wars there are groups of states that intervene, by proxy, in a conflict and manifest their unity of intention not necessarily through a treaty

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<sup>187</sup> Reverett, F. (2015). Saudi Arabia's Yemen Offensive, Iran's "Proxy" Strategy, and the Middle East's New "Cold War" | The World Financial Review | Empowering communication globally. [online] Worldfinancialreview.com. Available at: <https://www.worldfinancialreview.com/saudi-arabias-yemen-offensive-irans-proxy-strategy-and-the-middle-east-new-cold-war/> [Accessed 8 July 2019].

<sup>188</sup> Mumford, A (2013) Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict, The RUSI Journal.

or an alliance, but informally, helping and assisting the proxies in the distance. In this transformed framework, where collective security tools have also changed, conflict resolution has become much more complex. In fact, if it is true that an advantage of proxy wars remains the fact that they are always "deniable" and that they carry less risk for the sponsoring state, it is also true that the inflow of arms, money and men can be intensified, and therefore prolong the conflicts even more.

While the objective of states to defend their strategic interests has not changed over time, the propensity of Western countries to send troops abroad has diminished, as the financial capacity of states to support extended international missions in other countries. For these reasons, it is foreseeable that in the coming years proxy wars will be an increasingly used tool through which a state can project its power internationally and minimize, at the same time, the weight of factors such as low levels of recruitment, the reduction of budgets for the defence, the criticism of public opinion to the sending of soldiers to other countries and the possible consequences in terms of human lives.

As for Yemen today, its future remains in the abyss and the aforementioned research with an open end, given that every day the fate of the country is at stake and a concrete solution has not yet been identified. Both the United Nations and the European Union consider that the conflict is at a point of no return with three million refugees and twenty-two million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Four years after its beginning, the long-forgotten war in Yemen continues to leave devastating signs, so much that is nowadays considered the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

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