

## SPECIAL SECTION

# Securitisation imperatives and the exaggeration of Iranian involvement with the Houthi movement by international actors

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### Abstract

Through examination of elite-level discourse between 2014 and 2015, this paper argues that the exaggeration of Iranian involvement with the Houthis served to justify the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. Ironically, this had the effect of benefiting Iran, as Riyadh moved their attention away from Iranian priorities in Syria, undermined their own international credibility and spent billions of dollars on this unwinnable conflict. Iran, Saudi Arabia (KSA) and some Western actors pushed the narrative that the Houthis were deeply connected with the Islamic Republic. While Iranian support was negligible during this period, Iran sought to increase Saudi insecurity through rhetorical support for the Houthis. Riyadh, keen to protect their interests in Yemen, over-exaggerated this connection to justify their airstrikes and blockades, which began with Operation Decisive Storm (ODS) on March 25, 2015. Certain Western actors, sharing similar regional geopolitical priorities, adopted this narrative. This validated their support for the Saudi-led intervention. This, in turn, has had devastating consequences for the people of Yemen. With these dynamics in mind, the paper asks three research questions: Was the Saudi-led over-exaggeration of Iranian involvement successful in securitising ODS to international audiences? Was 'Iranian involvement' over-exaggerated? Who ultimately benefited from this narrative?

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper traces the development of a particular securitisation narrative, which over-exaggerated Iranian involvement with the Houthi movement between 2014 and 2015. It is important to contextualise, as, over time, this narrative has gradually become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with Iranian involvement steadily increasing (Juneau, 2016; Shaif, 2019). During the build-up to Operation Decisive Storm (ODS), a Saudi-led air and naval campaign that consisted of comprehensive bombing and blockading, Iranian involvement with the Houthi rebels was minimal (Hill, 2017). Nevertheless, key figures from the Islamic Republic, especially within the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), had raised Saudi anxiety by espousing rhetorical support

for the Houthis. There was not complete consensus across the political and military classes in Iran that this was the correct course of action, but members of both the IRGC and political elite goaded Riyadh by lending rhetorical support to the Houthis. Saudi Arabia (KSA) over-exaggerated the connection between the two, portraying the Houthis as a direct Iranian proxy, to justify its intervention to international audiences, touching on pre-existing anti-Iranian sentiment. Fearful of the growing likelihood of improved United States (US)–Iranian relations through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Riyadh took small instances of Iranian influence in Yemen and amplified them to an untruthful level (Mabon, 2018). International audiences, especially the US and the United Kingdom (UK), accepted and co-opted this narrative. This paper argues that this

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justification was significant in sanctioning ODS, contributing to the existing literature on the construction of an Iranian threat to securitise Saudi interventionism in Yemen to international audiences (Darwich, 2018; Hill, 2017; Juneau, 2016; Mabon, 2018). ODS went on to create the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Discourse during this period is examined, as ODS represents one of the highest surges in propaganda between the two countries throughout the Yemen war (Siegel, 2015). Ironically, Riyadh's attempts to strengthen its regional position through militarism in Yemen provided Tehran with the ideal opportunity to undermine the Kingdom. Although Iranian involvement has become a reality, it was minimal at this time, especially when viewed within the context of the enormity of Riyadh's military intervention. As Saudi Ambassador to the UK Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud admitted, when asked whether Riyadh was wrong about the depth of Iranian involvement during a lecture at Durham Castle on November 24, 2021, '[w]e accept we were wrong' (Al Saud, 2021). There is, of course, clear debate within the House of Saud over the truth of early Iranian involvement, as well as the merits of the conflict overall. Nevertheless, key voices, representing the Al Saud on the Bab el-Mandeb international stage, are starting to admit to failings.

The paper's innovative understanding of securitisation theory (ST) will be detailed so that it can then be used to critically analyse Iranian and Saudi propaganda around ODS. Influenced by the power-laden approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA), the methodology for conducting this analysis is LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) discourse tracing, which facilitates an understanding of the development of propaganda across time, during this period.

The paper starts by analysing heightened Iranian edicts of solidarity with the Houthi movement. These statements were made prior to ODS and were chosen as they contain themes of Iranian–Houthi alignment and Iranian expansionism. These proclamations are integrated with a wider reading of Iranian motivations, amounting to power projection and the raising of Saudi anxieties. Although the proclamations were made in Farsi, they are relatively short, making translation relatively straightforward and reliable.

Following this, the paper analyses the reasons behind Adel al-Jubeir's over-exaggeration of Iranian involvement to Western audiences. Adel al-Jubeir has been chosen as he was initially Ambassador to the United States, and was quickly promoted to Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was thus fundamental to Riyadh's international securitisation processes. Only his speeches to Western audiences are considered, as this paper focuses on Riyadh's use of the English language as a tool of international securitisation. ODS was announced in Washington D.C. on the day of its commencement on March 25, 2015, by Adel Al-Jubeir

### Policy Implications

- It is time to revise relationships with Saudi Arabia and to consider the efficacy of selling weapons to the Kingdom.
- While Iran is responsible for some of the region's insecurity, it is important not to allow this to dominate when it comes to policymaking.
- There have been mistakes made in over-exaggerating the connection between the Houthis and Iran. Implementing more thorough investigative practices before supporting and facilitating future military engagements would help avoid similar mistakes.
- Saudi Arabia appears to have been held to different standards than Iran. This may have played a role in preventing thorough investigation of war crimes in Yemen, stifling any processes of accountability. These mistakes could be avoided in future by placing more concrete conditions on arms sales, which, if broken, prevent further deals.

himself. The international audience is of paramount importance to Riyadh in Yemen, as part of their wider project of securitising Iran as an international threat (Mabon, 2018). The intended audience for their discourse was clear from the outset.

Finally, the paper demonstrates the efficacy of this narrative among Western audiences, showing its profound 'success' in justifying ODS. Ultimately, this entire process is characterised as a sophisticated instance of narrative warfare. Iran goaded KSA with rhetorical support for the Houthis, but Riyadh responded by over-exaggerating Tehran's involvement as a form of securitisation, justifying ODS to international audiences. Although it cannot be assumed that Iran wanted Riyadh to intervene in Yemen, they have certainly benefited from the diversion of Saudi resources away from Syria.

Iran's motivations for rhetorically supporting the Houthis are multifaceted. To understand the dynamic, it is fundamental to comprehend Iran's wider geopolitical ambitions, namely through the lens of the New Middle East Cold War (NMECW). This term, coined by Gregory Gause (2014), refers to the battle for regional hegemony between Riyadh and Tehran, following the Arab Spring of 2011. Through stoking Saudi fears over Yemen, Tehran has been able to divert Riyadh's attention away from Syria, and Tehran's ally President Bashar al-Assad. Assad is fundamental to Iran's security nexus (Terrill, 2014, p.431).

Furthermore, the war in Yemen has severely depleted Saudi finances. Riyadh is said to have spent more than £340 billion on the military campaign between 2015

and 2019 (Jalal, 2020). In the zero-sum game of the NMECW, Iran has calculated that inflammatory rhetoric will produce losses for the Kingdom and thus gains for Tehran. The crisis has also decreased KSA's international credibility. While they continue to receive arms from the west, most recently from President Joe Biden (Stone & Zengerle, 2021), they have lost ethical standing in the international community, and are widely condemned for their abuses of human rights. In light of this, as Kendall writes, '[t]he blockade... has given Iran the opportunity to cast itself in the role of the humanitarian and Saudi Arabia in the role of an aggressor intent on starving and bombing its southern neighbor' (Kendall, 2017, p.5).

KSA genuinely fears encirclement by Iranian-backed groups and the threat of the Houthis to their border. More importantly, the Houthis represent a threat to Saudi control of the Bab el-Mandeb strait, through which 3.8 million barrels of oil passed each day in 2015 (Bender, 2015). Riyadh is aware of embedded anti-Iranian sentiment, and its efficacy as a tool of securitisation – 'the Iranian threat, whether real or perceived, has been a powerful justification before both domestic and international audiences for Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen' (Kendall, 2017, p.5). Blinded by their fear, Riyadh successfully legitimised its intervention along anti-Iranian lines. The ensuing conflict has resulted in disastrous consequences for the Kingdom, which has now been engaged in an expensive war for 8 years, with no clear way out. The US and UK bought into the line of Iranian involvement, just as they utilised their 'weapons of mass destruction' discourse to securitise the threat of Saddam Hussein. Across both conflicts was a profound interest in ensuring the longevity of Western regional interests, predicated on the oil and natural gas industries.

## 2 | CONTEXT-SPECIFIC SECURITISATION THEORY IN THE CONTEMPORARY SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY

This paper innovates around approaches of ST in order to design an approach suitable for analysing the use of propaganda before and during ODS. This section adapts ST to fit this specific Middle Eastern case study, as securitisation is understood as a context-specific practice, which cannot be reductively applied as a unitary, top-down approach (Balzacq, 2005). ST understands security as 'a discursive construction rather than an objective reality' (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016, p.715). Through propagandised discourse, an issue is moved from one of banality to one of direct threat. Threat, in this sense, is constructed. The issue is made into one so severe that extraordinary measures must be taken against it.

In the absence of constitutional frameworks, Middle Eastern foreign policy can be defined as extraordinary when it lacks proportionality, breaks with historical tradition and thus can be characterised as something that 'most reasonable persons would agree constitutes exceptional measures mostly in terms of the harm... or level of violence employed' (Floyd, 2015, p.2). This paper broadly agrees with the contention that 'the *main* political function of national security is to justify the use of force' (Buzan, 1991, p.89).

By using propaganda, Middle Eastern elites 'can choose aspects of their regime identity, attach new meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilise people' (Darwich, 2019, p.9). Securitisation involves forms of discourse, which are designed to construct a vivid notion of 'the other'. State elites use propaganda to 'consistently portray people abused in [by] enemy states as worthy victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be unworthy' (Hermann & Chomsky, 1988, p.37). They focus on over-exaggerating the negative aspects of the 'other' and over-emphasising the positives of 'us'.

There is a compelling body of literature on ST in the Middle East. In 2016, Darwich and Fakhoury analysed the ways in which KSA and Hezbollah used sectarian identity as a tool of securitisation in Syria. Through this, they showed that 'when political actors deliberately construct sectarian identities as securitised issues, these discourses become inextricably linked to a dichotomised demarcation between the Self and the Other' (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016, p.20). The Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation Project (SEPAD), has been central to the study of ST in the region. In 2022, Mabon and Wastnidge published 'Saudi Arabia and Iran'. The book is influenced by ideas of securitisation, advocating its ability to take 'analysis beyond examination of the structural factors shaping the rivalry to an exploration of the ways in which hostility and tensions are (re)produced' (Mabon & Wastnidge, 2022, p.5). There has been a steady move towards the study of the political use of sectarian identity as a tool of securitisation within the context of the Iranian-Saudi rivalry (Darwich, 2018; Mabon, 2018; Malmvig, 2014). However, Mabon and Wastnidge acknowledge that 'there is... a great deal of work... to be done' (Mabon & Wastnidge, 2022, p.6), with Darwich and Fakhoury specifically stating that 'this framework could also inform the analysis of other cases in the region, such as... Yemen' (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016, p.21). These scholars have provided the motivation to apply these ideas to the conflict in Yemen. Here, securitisation has its own unique form.

'Trolling' is a word produced by the social media era. It refers to a specific type of discourse, used purposefully to provoke an emotional reaction. This phenomenon is observable on Twitter, as a daily occurrence. For

example, many black, Asian and minority ethnic footballers receive racist abuse following poor results on matchday (Kilvington & Price, 2019). Ginny Hill (2017) defines the Iranian over-exaggeration of their ties to the Houthis as a grand geopolitical form of trolling. In short, it has benefited Tehran to raise Saudi anxieties over their involvement in Yemen (Kendall, 2017).

This form of propaganda is not a classic form of securitisation. In a sense, Iran is alienating its own image, to suit its own long-term security agenda. Rather than portraying themselves as neutral in Yemen, they ideationally connected themselves to the Houthis. This was done with the aim of undermining the Saudis, at the same time creating a more profound threat on their southern border (Hill, 2017). Rather than justifying their own extraordinary measures, they have encouraged action so severe from KSA that Riyadh has been drained economically and undermined in the international arena. Through this complex propaganda programme, Tehran has constructed itself as a saviour (Kendall, 2017).

It is important to remember that, in the early days of the conflict, Iran focused almost solely on *rhetorical* support for the Houthis under the banner of 'Resistance'. KSA artificially, discursively, exaggerated the support to include physical, logistical and military involvement – for which there was scant evidence. They justified ODS by over-exaggerating Iranian involvement, using the fuel provided by Tehran's rhetorical solidarity with the Houthis. Riyadh, specifically, 'have spoken to American counterparts – privately and publicly – in an effort to derail the diplomatic rapprochement, fearing the consequences of a resurgent Iran' (Mabon, 2018, p.756). This was a classic example of securitisation, turning something limited into a direct threat, against which extraordinary actions could be justified.

In traditional ST, securitisation is seen as an isolated speech act, with an elite uttering, and an audience hearing and providing their support (Buzan et al., 1998, p.32). In the contemporary Middle East, things are more complicated. Securitisation theorists have primarily focused on *elite* actors speaking to convince *non-elite* audiences of the justifiability of their extraordinary measures (Balzacq, 2005; Wæver, 1989). This means that elite–elite processes of securitisation are under-researched phenomena. In the speeches covered in this article, Al-Jubeir focuses on the US and the UK as his primary target audiences. This can be easily ascertained from the western platforms he appeared on, and his use of the English language. Through the carefully curated, continuously repeated, narrative of anti-Iranianism, Riyadh managed to convince the west of the justifiability of their intervention (Gordon & Parkinson, 2018). Innovatively, this paper extends the parameters of ST, tracing the development of discursive securitisation between elite state actors. In this breath, the US and UK cannot be understood

as passive audiences, as here securitisation is understood as, 'a strategic (pragmatic) practice that occurs within, and as part of, a configuration of circumstances, including the context, the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both speaker and listener bring to the interaction' (Balzacq, 2005, p.72).

To broaden the paper's understanding of securitisation, this paper adopts a central understanding of neorealist theory. Iran and KSA 'think about conquest themselves, and they work to check aggressor states from gaining power at their expense' (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.35). In this sense, securitisation can be understood not only as a defensive security policy but also as a positivistic approach to 'rhetorical empire building', especially in the case of Iran. As Kendall writes 'Iran's regional clout is naturally increased if it is deemed to have some influence over the outcome of the Yemen conflict and hence also over the security of economically vital Red Sea shipping routes' (Kendall, 2017, p.4).

Riyadh is also forward thinking. In 2015, the newly-appointed, 29-year-old, Minister of Defence Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) saw intervention in Yemen as a way to assert his control over regional affairs. King Abdullah, who preceded his father King Salman, had shown restraint when it came to Yemen and the pursuit of military action. MBS saw ODS as a means of asserting Riyadh's role as a decisive military actor in the region. Through fear, exaggerating Iranian involvement provided MBS with an internationally salient justification for his intervention, which he viewed as an opportunity 'to assert the Kingdom's status as a regional power in the Middle East' (Darwich, 2018, p.125).

While neorealism can help to explain the pursuit of power, the deeper dynamics of securitisation, here expressed in discourse, involve constructivism, as it 'is a discursive construction rather than an objective reality' (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016, p.715). Many aspects of anti-Iranian sentiment, and fear of their involvement in Yemen, are not inherent to western or Saudi identity but instead have been carefully constructed by state actors. This has been done cynically, to legitimise their pursuit of power in the region.

Nevertheless, scholars might ask how ST can aid in understanding how the over-exaggeration of Iranian involvement became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Giddens' (1991) notion of ontological security helps here, defined as the 'confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments' (1991, p.92). Over time, the NMECW has meant that anti-Saudi sentiment has become an entrenched part of the identity of Iranian foreign policy. A key part of societal identity is its 'distinctiveness vis-à-vis other societies' (Mitzen, 2006, p.352). Thus, when rhetorical support was given to the Houthis, Tehran was profoundly aware of its impact on Saudi

anxiety. In the zero-sum game of Cold War geopolitics, it was thus rational for Iran to increase their support. They sought to provide physical support by supplying small amounts of weapons and supplies (BBC, 2015). In this way, Iranian involvement has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, ultimately benefiting Tehran and undermining Riyadh.

Ontological security also answers the question as to why, in Yemen, KSA has pursued 'security-producing programs that ultimately perpetuate their own insecurity' (Kamrava, 2018, p.13). As behavioural psychology teaches us, many people stay with their abusive partners for a long while after the abuse begins (Eckstein, 2011). States, like people, become deeply affected and conditioned by their developed identities. Anti-Iranianism has entrenched itself as a key characteristic of elite Saudi identity. Viewing Tehran as a threat to the legitimacy of their power since 1979, the Al Saud have come to view actions that could combat Iranian regional influence as essential. This paper argues that anti-Iranianism is similarly entrenched within US foreign policy, but to a lesser extent.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

CDA and ST are aligned, in that they share an ontological view of language – the powerful imbue language with power-laden meaning, for political purposes. They agree that there is no inherent nature to language. CDA provides a framework for revealing the hidden meaning that ST signposts. It encompasses four key themes: audience, context, power and ideology. Bouvier and Machin claim that the goal of CDA is 'to reveal discourses buried in language used to maintain power and sustain existing power relations' (Bouvier & Machin, 2018, p.178).

CDA benefits from a complex understanding of discourse, viewing the audience as vital in meaning construction (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.4). As this paper is concerned with the reciprocal process of discursive meaning making, this idea has merit over traditional ST, which affords the audience far less importance. Fairclough (2003) established three key areas for discursive analysis: production, the actualities of text and reception. Reception here, unlike ST, is not reduced to the mere 'acceptance' of a transactional speech act (Buzan et al., 1998). Instead, the audience is fundamental in the process of framing discourse's impact and character.

CDA's focus on context is a key strength, suiting it well to understanding the complexities of conflict justification; 'we can attribute causal affects to linguistic forms but only through a careful account of meaning and context' (Fairclough, 2003, p.13).

When it comes to spotting propaganda, van Dijk's (2001) model is of particular use. Propaganda

will do one or more of the following: under-emphasise positive things or over-emphasise negative things about 'the other'; or under-emphasise negative things or over-emphasise positive things about 'us'. Hermann and Chomsky (1988) showed that elites use discourse in this way to justify extraordinary measures to various audiences. Propaganda is thus ideological in nature.

A compelling critique of CDA is that 'the systematic ways in which the methods unfold are left implicit' (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009, p.20). To resolve this issue, this paper uses LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) 'Discourse Tracing'. This approach provides a systematic model for conducting complex analysis of discourse, tracing its development temporally. Previously thought logically impossible, this approach has married together the best parts of discourse analysis and process tracing (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009, p.1).

The process:

1. Choose the time period and specific case study.
2. Collect microdata (social media posts, speeches and news), mesodata (e.g. government documents), and macrodata (contextual information). Order the data chronically, with the aim of finding recurring themes and ideas.
3. Establish research questions, structured around the observed themes and ideas. The case study should then be written in answer to these questions.
4. Arrive at a conclusion.

### 4 | METHOD AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A series of speeches from leading figures within the Saudi, Iranian, American and British establishments were considered from 2014 and 2015. The discourse analysis of the Islamic Republic focuses on the months leading up to ODS to demonstrate the ways in which they exacerbated Saudi anxieties. KSA set out to justify its intervention to the international community upon the commencement of ODS in March 2015. Adel al-Jubeir was initially Saudi Ambassador to the US but was quickly promoted to Foreign Secretary due to his success in charming Western audiences. One of his speeches on May 8, 2015, shows the function of the speech act in practice, with his proclamations of Iranian involvement, and John Kerry's reciprocity (U.S. Department of State, 2015). This process is explored further in a final section, characterising the unified UK–US response as evidence of two things:

1. Shared economic and security interests, tied to their alliance with KSA.
2. The success of Riyadh's securitisation process.

The data were ordered chronologically to trace the development of these themes. However, for narrative purposes, not every instance of discourse is in chronological order in the following sections. This fluidity allows for the appropriate exploration of themes, remembering the central importance of context to critical approaches of discourse analysis.

Research questions:

1. Was the Saudi-led over-exaggeration of Iranian involvement successful in securitising ODS to international audiences?
2. Was 'Iranian involvement' over-exaggerated?
3. Who ultimately benefited from this narrative?

It is crucial to briefly explain how securitisation played out across this chain of events to properly answer the research questions. Iran was aware that drawing the Saudis into Yemen would draw their attention away from Iranian priorities in Syria, drain their resources and undermine their reputation. As such, many leading figures sought to raise Saudi anxiety. In this sense, they aimed to amplify the Houthi threat to the Saudi audience, drawing them deeper into the conflict. They viewed this securitisation process as a useful tactic for gaining leverage in the regional balance of power. Houthi control of Sanaa and ports along the Red Sea posed a geostrategic and economic threat to both Riyadh and Washington. As such, both actors found ways to justify their support for ODS through Saudi-led processes of securitisation.

## 5 | IRAN MOTIVATIONS – STOKING SAUDI ANXIETY

In the months leading up to ODS, Iranian officials made a concerted effort to raise Saudi anxiety over Yemen. This is not to say that they were trying to elicit a military response from Riyadh; merely that they were aware of and seeking to amplify Saudi anxiety over Houthi control of northern Yemen. On the 36th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, former Major General of Iran's Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, claimed that Iranians 'are witnessing the export of the Islamic revolution throughout the region... from Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen and North Africa' (Badran, 2015). Contained within this statement was Soleimani's hidden awareness of the political utility of exacerbating the Saudi fear of encirclement. This image of an extended Axis of Resistance portrays a strong and resurgent Iran. Yemen represents an acute threat to the Kingdom, as the two countries share a border.

The Saudis have been able to denote a lineage of Houthi aggression across this border. During the Saada Wars, in 2009, KSA responded to the Houthis 'killing at least two border guards and apparently taking control of

two or more Saudi border villages' (Terrill, 2014, p.433), with direct military intervention. Playing on this enduring anxiety, Iran later emphasised its solidarity with the Houthis to win capital in the regional balance of power. This was even though 'Tehran [had] no decisive say over Houthi decision-making, and the relationship between them [was] recent and opportunistic' (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016, p.163).

Iran's GDP in 2014 was 432.7 billion USD, compared to KSA's 756.4 billion USD (World Bank, 2022a, 2022b). This disparity is caused by Iran's comparatively limited material resources but was exacerbated by tough sanctions imposed by the US in 2013. Due to these limitations, Iran had to behave like China does on the global scale, targeting resources towards areas of primary geostrategic significance, rather than adopting a scatter-gun approach. The Lebanon–Syria–Iraq axis is fundamental to Iranian security (Samii, 2008). With Saudi attention focused on Yemen, Tehran has been able to divert Riyadh's gaze away from the war in Syria.

Syria geographically connects Iran to its most important and successful proxy, in Lebanon – Hezbollah. Based on their foreign policy logic, '[i]t therefore makes more sense for Iran to project its hand in Yemen via rhetoric rather than to divert significant resources to it' (Kendall, 2017, p.4). This process has worked, as the Gulf has gradually withdrawn from the Levant and moved into Arabia Felix. As Juneau (2016) writes: 'for Iran, Yemen represents opportunities, not threats' (p. 661).

Geographically, Iran is far removed from Yemen. Thus, the country does not pose a prominent security concern, even if ruled by an enemy. Thus, 'Yemen is a secondary arena, certainly when compared to Iraq and Syria' (Guzansky & Heistein, 2018). Yet, by providing rhetorical support for the Houthis, Tehran used soft power to increase Saudi insecurity, which contributed to Riyadh's rashness in responding to the Houthi threat.

Following the Houthi's successful capture of Sanaa in 2014, Hojatoleslam Ali Saidi of the IRGC claimed that 'The Islamic Republic's spiritual influence has arrived at the Bab al-Mandab Strait' (Solomon, 2017). Iran's rhetorical over-exaggeration of their connection to the Houthi movement is characterised by its framing, which touches on the most tender of Saudi nerves. Contained within Saidi's statement are two attacks on Riyadh's key bases of legitimacy and power – oil and religion.

Control of Bab al-Mandeb is crucial for the continuation of Riyadh's neorentier economy, allowing for the safe passage of its oil and natural gas. KSA depends on this sector for sustenance. This type of Iranian discourse has worked 'to achieve Iran's national security interests in a zero-sum equation, which means undermining the security of other countries' (Al-Qadhi, 2017, p.8). Iran was sophisticated in its successful Machiavellian game of power politics, using its experience to outplay KSA.

In September 2014, Alireza Zakani, an Iranian parliamentarian, claimed victory, stating that Iran had gained control of its 'fourth Arab capital, after Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus' (Juneau, 2016, p.655). This image is particularly troublesome for the Saudi establishment, who pin most of their legitimacy on their rightfulness as Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques. This gives them Islamic legitimacy but also standing within the Arab World. Since the early days of the Islamic Revolution, Iran has posed a serious threat to this basis of the Al Saud's legitimacy. For the majority of the 21st Century, but since 2011 in particular, 'any losses for the Saudis represent gains for the Iranians' (Milani, 2015). The narrative of resistance espoused by the Islamic Republic has found profound popularity among many Arabs, both Shia and Sunni (Aarabi, 2019; Ghattas, 2020). Knowing this Saudi insecurity, and its rootedness, means that this form of Iranian rhetorical over-exaggeration over Yemen is tantamount to 'Iran... trolling the Saudis, for apparently minimal capital investment' (Hill, 2017, p.285).

## 6 | SAUDI MOTIVATIONS – SECURITISING IRAN, JUSTIFYING ODS

Ibn Saud's dying order was to 'keep Yemen weak' (Black, 2011). In 2014, Houthi control of north Yemen represented a threat to Saudi interests in three key areas: economy, security and geopolitics. Ports close to the Bab el-Mandeb strait were now in the hands of a Saudi enemy, presenting direct and immediate risks to the foundation of the Kingdom's neorentier economy: oil and natural gas. The strait is of geostrategic significance to both the global economy, and the fight against global terrorism. However, upon analysing five key speeches from al-Jubeir, the issues of oil and Bab el-Mandeb did not appear once.

KSA possesses a real fear of Iranian encirclement. In the struggle for regional power, Riyadh were consistently pushed back by Tehran since 2011. Bashar al-Assad remains in charge of Syria, Hezbollah remains influential and the Iraqi government is still widely regarded to be under the control of the Islamic Republic. The fact that KSA over-exaggerated Iranian involvement with the Houthis does not undermine the genuine nature of their anxiety.

The IRGC were crucial in constructing this impression of the Houthis as close to Iran, which successfully produced regime insecurity among the Al Saud (Vatanka, 2021, p.19). MBS could not protect his new found power while an Iranian-backed militia was in control of a country on his southern border. For Yemen to be in the hands of an ally of Riyadh's main enemy posed a direct security risk and a compulsion to pursue whatever measures necessary to counter it.

Al-Jubeir, in a joint conference with US Secretary of State John Kerry on May 8, 2015, stated: 'The last thing we need on our border is a militia armed with missiles, in control of an air force, that is loyal to Iran and Hizballah' (U.S. Department of State, 2015). Artificially, Al-Jubeir was creating an image of Yemen as a classic Iranian Shi'a proxy, in the mould of Hizballah. This is even though the Houthi decision to take Sanaa went against Iranian wishes. Furthermore, the Houthis are Zaydi. While technically 'Shi'a', they do not accept Khamenei as their leader and have intermarried with Sunnis for generations. Rather than a Shi'a proxy, they are in fact 'a strategic actor with clear interests. At their core the Houthis are focused on domestic issues and historic grievances' (Johnston et al., 2020, 7). Riyadh was determined to over-exaggerate Iranian involvement with the Houthis, to undermine the possibility of Iranian diplomatic rapprochement with the US and to gain support for ODS. The west seeing Iran as a malign threat was deemed paramount to Riyadh's securitisation processes.

The JCPOA was seen as a potential signal of Iranian–Western rapprochement (Black, 2013), something Riyadh saw as immediately threatening to their regional power and international legitimacy. It is telling that the final negotiations over the initial deal were being concluded at the same time as ODS. Anxiety of rapprochement stretched across the Gulf. As one UAE commentator, Sultan al-Qassemi, said: 'This deal is the grand bargain Kerry is denying it is. It is giving Iran carte blanche in exchange for empty promises. Iran is on the ascendant. Iran has the winning hand in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen' (Nakhoul, 2015).

Anti-Iranian sentiment then somewhat mellowed in Abu Dhabi (Coates Ulrichsen, 2017). By contrast, it is so deeply embedded within Saudi foreign policy that it has become part of their ideational framework. It is in this sense that one can understand the Kingdom's persistence in an ultimately unwinnable war. Their ontological security, or their very understanding of 'self', was put at risk by the rhetoric of Iran over the Houthis (Kamrava, 2018). With Iranian presence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, Riyadh felt compelled to act – as they could not risk the success of deeper Iranian influence this time on their doorstep. The Al Saud were on the back foot in the NMECW. When elites feel threatened, actions become increasingly desperate, as was seen in the later days of the Soviet Union (Wallander, 2003). Thus, al-Jubeir and the Saudi propaganda machine emphatically over-exaggerated the threat of the Houthis and their connection to Iran to western audiences. A key goal here was to convince the US to classify the Houthis as a terrorist organisation, against which more severe actions could be taken.

In an interview with the Associated Press on April 2, 2015, al-Jubeir was asked: 'Does it matter at all if the United States lists the Houthis as a terrorist group?'

Al-Jubeir: 'The Iranians have been shipping weapons to the Houthis long before this conflict began. Those weapons include even shoulder-launch surface to air missiles'; 'They are providing them with financial support'; 'The evidence is very clear to us and we have no doubt about it' (AP Archive, 2021).

Hidden behind this is a construction of Iran as the true source of insecurity and terrorism in the region, portraying the Houthis as an extremist group armed by and loyal to Tehran. The luxury of hindsight has allowed some senior Saudi diplomats, such as Prince Khalid Bandar bin Al-Saud, to admit that Riyadh was wrong about the extent of Iranian involvement, but not to admit that Riyadh necessarily over-exaggerated this on purpose. It is important to note that this view is not necessarily representative of the entire Saudi regime. On 24 November, at a lecture in Durham Castle, I asked Prince Khalid: 'In 2015, Saudi Arabia stated a series of justifications for Operation Decisive Storm, including substantial Iranian involvement – do you admit this was a mistake?'

**Prince Khalid:** 'I agree with you' (Al Saud, 2021).

Whether they purposefully over-exaggerated the Iranian connection, or they simply believed the trolling of the Iranians, KSA acted in a way that did nothing for their own regional position and everything for Tehran's. In this sense, Iran's unconventional process of securitisation can now be said to have been successful, tying Riyadh into a costly and arguably unwinnable war. As Prince Khalid said in an interview with BBC journalist Frank Gardner in 2019: 'the thing about war is it's your decision to get involved, but it's never your decision to get out' (RUSI, 2019).

Riyadh was acutely aware of the capital of anti-Iranian sentiment among different audiences. The most important to understand, for the purposes of this paper, is the international Western audience – particularly the US and the UK.

## 7 | THE US AND THE UK

America's animosity towards the Islamic Republic began with the hostage crisis of 1979, when 52 Americans were held for 444 days by radicalised Iranian students. This crisis proved Tehran's credentials, as they were able to deeply affect politics in the US. Many believe that President Jimmy Carter's inability to resolve the calamity resulted in his loss to Ronald Reagan in the presidential election of 1981 (Kamarck, 2019). The 'special relationship' between the US and the UK, their previous cooperation to remove Mossadegh in 1953 and their shared economic ties to KSA ensure that they are united in most regional

foreign policymaking, especially when it is perceived to help counter Iranian influence and protect shared economic interests.

During a joint conference on Yemen and the wider region with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir on May 8, 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry took a great time emphasising the tripartite alliance.

'As everybody knows, we have a very special relationship with Great Britain. We have deeply shared interests and values. We work together on almost every issue that there is, and now there will obviously be continuity in the relationships built and in the work that we have invested on a number of different priorities and initiatives' (U.S. Department of State, 2015).

Their similar responses to Saudi rhetoric further evidenced that, in the Middle East, the US and the UK were unified on 'almost every issue that there is'. During the same conference, Kerry discussed the purpose of the upcoming GCC summit at the time:

'It's going to discuss the threat of regional terrorism, the metastasizing of various terrorist organizations that has become prevalent. It will discuss, obviously, the challenge of Iranian support in some of those particular conflicts. It will discuss the threat of terrorism broadly' (U.S. Department of State, 2015).

He also stated:

I mean, those are the concerns: the destabilization of the region by a number of different entities, and obviously we all know that Iran has supported Hizballah and has supported Houthis (U.S. Department of State, 2015).

On March 27, 2015, 2 days after the commencement of ODS, Philip Hammond said in Washington that:

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

Riyadh's securitisation process proved successful, convincing their western allies of profound Iranian involvement in Yemen. This narrative suited the west. As it became further entrenched, discussion of the economic considerations related to the continuation of arms sales to KSA, and the oil and natural gas industries became increasingly scarce. The Iranian threat was constructed as a legitimate justification for the severe measures of ODS, which played a significant role in the destruction



of Yemen, and the subsequent death of up to 377,000 people (CAAT, 2022).

## 8 | CONCLUSIONS

Anti-Iranian sentiment has become a part of western and Saudi identity. Nevertheless, the US, UK and KSA all have highly sophisticated intelligence services. While this paper cannot prove that the west was complicit in artificially and knowingly over-exaggerating the role of Iran with the Houthis, it can conclude that they were mistaken in accepting Riyadh's justification for ODS. This is based on the consensus within the academic literature (Hill, 2017; Juneau, 2016; Kendall, 2017). This paper has traced a process of discursive securitisation that started with Tehran raising Saudi anxiety over their connection with the Houthi movement. Riyadh artificially over-exaggerated Iran's influence in Yemen and fixated on re-securitising Iran as an international threat. Ironically, this paper can conclude that this discourse significantly benefited Iran in its zero-sum game with KSA. Riyadh was locked into a war that depleted its resources, its security and its international credibility. Making a strong connection between the Houthis and Iran was successful in legitimising ODS, but it ultimately led to severe losses for Riyadh. This paper argues that this was a remarkably efficient and cost-effective instance of Iranian narrative warfare. So cost-effective, it would be reasonable to refer to it as 'guerrilla geopolitics'. Furthermore, Iran now has a key bargaining chip in regional diplomacy, which holds little resonance within its own interests but holds intense meaning to its enemies – its involvement with the Houthis (Kendall, 2017). This has already come into play in negotiations for peace between Riyadh and Tehran, and renewed talks over the JCPOA (Ramani, 2021). Ultimately, this narrative can be characterised as a successful instance of Iranian securitisation, whether they predicted its effects or not.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in [repository name e.g "figshare"] at <http://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13204>, reference number: GPOL\_EV\_GPOL13204.

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