

The Saudi Saviour – Justifying Operation Decisive Storm

How did Saudi Arabia justify Operation Decisive Storm to the United States and why was this problematic?

Abstract

This paper argues that despite the success of Saudi Arabia's use of discourse to legitimise Operation Decisive Storm, their initial bombing and blockade of Yemen, to the United States, ultimately these discourses were problematic. Via analysing speeches from Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adel Al-Jubeir, and articles from Saudi news website Arab News, this paper traces Saudi propaganda, showing the way in which it was used to justify the extra-ordinary bombing of Yemen and blockade of Yemeni ports. The paper meaningfully assesses the resonance of their narratives with US audiences through informed analysis. US discourse created a nexus of reciprocal positionality, in which their discourse began to merge with Riyadh's, justifying it yet further. The US had its own reasons for lending support to KSA's war efforts, which encouraged them to adopt core Saudi narratives. This served to justify the two actors' involvement in the Saudi-led intervention. These propagandised narratives had profound humanitarian consequences for the people of Yemen.

Keywords: "Saudi Arabia", "Yemen", "Discourse Analysis", "Humanitarian Aid", "Houthis", "US Foreign Policy".

Introduction

This paper argues that despite Saudi Arabia's (KSA) state discourse working effectively to justify Operation Decisive Storm (ODS) to the United States, this framing was deeply problematic due to its propagandised nature. It was also problematic because it exacerbated this era's worst humanitarian crisis (Borger, 2015; HRW, 2017). ODS consisted of a systematic bombing campaign and the blockade of Yemeni ports. 80% of Yemen's 30 million people were dependent on humanitarian aid by June 2015, just two months after ODS began (Borger, 2015). The United Nations (UN) Development Programme put an estimate of 377,000 on the number of people who had died because of the conflict by 2021 (CAAT, 2022).

The paper focuses primarily on the legitimisation of the military intervention at its onset in March 2015. Providing a full analysis of these processes from 2015 to the present day is beyond the scope of this paper. The analysis sets out the core lines of justifications, conveyed

to Western audiences by then Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel Al-Jubeir and Saudi news website *Arab News*. As such, the inclusion of data is targeted, specific, and limited. This focus is justified, as understanding the finer detail of these early narratives is essential for conceptualising the tone of the conflict moving forwards. The paper focuses on ODS based on the consensus amongst human rights and humanitarian organisations that it had severe effects on access to food, fuel, water, and healthcare (Simpson, 2020; MSF, 2020).

Following a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led process, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi was chosen to stand in a single-candidate election in 2012. Following the extension of his rule in 2014, the Houthis, a non-state militia group from Saada Governorate, showed their discontent through violence in the northern highlands. By the 21st of September, they had seized the capital city - Sana'a. Hadi "resigned" in January 2015 and by February the Houthis had established full control over the city. Hadi fled to Aden and rescinded his resignation, but "a Houthi advance forced Hadi to flee Aden for exile in Saudi Arabia" (Global Conflict Tracker, 2021). In collaboration with Hadi, the Saudis launched ODS on the 25th of March 2015, with the aim of removing the Houthis from power and reinstating the 'internationally-recognised legitimate government'.

Through the construction of a grand narrative, KSA provided a tight, moralistic argument, enabling the US to frame its support for the operation as one of moral and strategic necessity (Gordon and Parkinson, 2018). Utilising Securitisation Theory (ST), and a unique form of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), known as Discourse Tracing (DT), this paper argues that the Saudi-led coalition constructed a hero/villain/victim narrative. The Saudi-led coalition and Hadi were the heroes; Iran and the Houthis the villains; and the people of Yemen the victims. Through this artificial, propagandised construction, ODS was justified, creating

profound consequences for Yemen. This paper understands propaganda as consisting of “systematic and deliberate attempts to sway mass public opinion in favour of the objectives of the institution sending the propaganda message” (Snow, 2010, 66). The central objective of this paper is to: *Analyse Saudi discursive and humanitarian aid efforts at justifying ODS to the US and, via contrasting these narratives with the deteriorating humanitarian situation on the ground, to provide a detailed analysis of this process and its impact.*

Structurally, the paper first conducts a literature review of work covering the Saudi-led intervention, the surrounding discourse, and the use of humanitarian aid. Secondly, the paper outlines its understanding of ST. Next, the paper outlines its methodology. Based on the ethos of CDA (Fairclough, 2003), the section outlines the method of DT (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009). This approach facilitates an informed analysis of the most prominent frames used in Riyadh’s securitisation narratives in the early days of ODS.

The results are then presented: the data consists of discourse from a series of speeches and interviews with Saudi Foreign Secretary Adel Al-Jubeir, given to American audiences, and data from Saudi state-ran news website *Arab News*. This is one of many examples that suggests at the interconnected web of state propaganda in KSA. Al-Jubeir’s speeches are considered, as this paper understands him to be the most important person in the mission to legitimise ODS to the US. The choice was made to consider *Arab News* because it is an English language site, targeting international audiences. It specifically targets diplomats, business leaders, politicians, and executives. The website contains news pieces, opinion pieces from Saudi journalists, and summaries of sermons from some Saudi clerics. Word categories, which are frequently referred to by Al-Jubeir and *Arab News* have been defined –

‘Iran’, ‘Internationally-Recognised Legitimate Government’, ‘Radical’, and ‘Protecting the People of Yemen’.

In the discussion, these frames’ legitimisation processes will be traced, detailing Saudi narratives, US reciprocity, and demonstrating the securitisation process that led to this. Saudi lines of discourse will be discussed within the context of the realities on the ground in Yemen. Within the discussion, the specific sub-section ‘Protecting the People of Yemen’ deviates slightly from the focus on 2015, using humanitarian data up until 2022 as a point of contrast to the Saudi claim that their intervention was to “protect the people of Yemen”. Quotes from a 2017 Saudi Report from their Washington Embassy are included to demonstrate the recurrence of this narrative, encapsulated in the discourse surrounding the actions of The King Salman Humanitarian and Relief Centre (KSRelief).

The paper argues that KSA used these prominent discourses to justify ODS to the US. KSA managed to present itself as a ‘saviour’ or ‘hero’. However, many of their narratives can meaningfully be contested through reflecting on the empirical nature of ODS. Furthermore, their measures and narratives lacked proportionality and were explicitly political. They led to the justification of extraordinary measures, having profound consequences for the people of Yemen.

Literature Review – The Saudi-Led Intervention, Discursive Strategies, and Aid

There is a strong consensus within the literature that Riyadh saw the intervention in Yemen as an opportunity to reassert their regional status, in the face of an ongoing struggle for supremacy with Iran (Darwich, 2018; Dogan-Akkas, 2020; Walsh, 2023). Following the Arab Spring, protests in the Saudi Eastern Provinces, losses in Syria, and a change in leadership,

“the ascendant branch of the Saudi ruling family appear[ed]... to be willing to compensate for what they conceive as Abdullah’s failure in acquiring the Kingdom’s status” (Darwich, 2018, 135). King Salman ascended the throne on the 23rd of January 2015, and immediately appointed his 30-year-old son, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), as his Minister of Defence. Within three months, MBS would be named Crown Prince, following his ‘success’ in ODS. Central to MBS’ foreign policy was a militarism that sought to “portray its intervention in Yemen as being at the center of a Sunni regional effort to counter the threat of Iran and the expansion of Shiism in the Gulf” (Darwich, 2018, 129). Whilst this paper agrees with this point, it argues that Saudi framing went beyond this sectarian, anti-Iranian lens. It also focuses primarily on Saudi attempts to justify ODS to the US, not to a wider plethora of regional Sunni actors.

Nevertheless, framing ODS as an existential battle against a radical Iranian proxy on KSA’s southern border did feature heavily in Saudi international discourse. Walsh (2023) wrote an entire paper on this specific point, arguing that the Saudi’s ‘the Houthis are an Iranian proxy’ narrative equated to a “securitisation process”, which “proved successful, convincing their western allies of profound Iranian involvement in Yemen... As it became 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” (Walsh, 2023, 8). This paper contends with Walsh’s point, arguing, as other scholars (Juneau, 2016; Hill, 2017), that this narrative engendered a wide and varied base of international support for ODS. As an international pariah, Iran is a very popular enemy. KSA’s justification of the conflict in Yemen was part of a wider anti-Iranian regional strategy, in which Riyadh was speaking to “American counterparts... in an effort to derail the diplomatic rapprochement, fearing the consequences of a resurgent Iran” (Mabon, 2018, 756). This is even though, in 2015, “Tehran

[had] no decisive say over Houthi decision-making, and the relationship between them [was] recent and opportunistic” (Hokayem and Roberts, 2016, 163). Contrary to the broader focuses of other scholars, this paper is solely focused on Riyadh’s efforts to justify its intervention to the US, which involved a multiplicity of other narratives.

Key to their justification attempts was framing their intervention in the language of ‘international law’ and ‘humanitarianism’. This often came in the form of commitments to ‘protecting the people of Yemen’. From March 2015 onwards, KSA consistently invoked these narratives, as well as establishing KSRelief. Bordon and Alrefai (2023) understand “Saudi Arabia’s use of foreign aid as an instrument of political ordering and control” (1), arguing that “KSRelief can perform as a tool that at least balances and at most supersedes the possible detrimental effects of the military intervention for KSA’s legitimacy and reputation” (10). This paper extends this argument, claiming that KSRelief worked alongside very early securitisation narratives pertaining to the stated humanitarian motivation of ODS to ‘protect the people of Yemen’, as part of a grand securitising narrative.

It does so in response to Bordon and Alrefai’s (2023, 14) claim that their “analysis has paid attitudes to the rationales underpinning Saudi foreign aid, rather than centring on the effects on attitudes and behaviour. Future research could provide new insights following this line of enquiry”. Riyadh’s moralistic framing of their use of humanitarian aid under the guise of ‘protecting the people of Yemen’ had the effect of shaping American attitudes and behaviours, to encourage a deep level of support from the Obama Administration. In terms of KSRelief’s efforts in Yemen, this paper contends with Fenton-Harvey’s (2019) point that “[w]hile Riyadh conveys this as a benevolent gesture that reflects a desire to help Yemen’s humanitarian crisis, critics note that it mainly enables Saudi Arabia to expand its networks of

patronage” – both within Yemen and internationally. This paper argues that the various discourses surrounding ODS, including ‘protecting the people of Yemen’, worked as parts of a grand securitisation narrative, used to justify the intervention to the US.

Theoretical Framework - Securitisation Theory

ST (Buzan et al., 1998; Balzacq, 2005) focuses on the concepts of discourse and narrative.

Language is imbued with meaning by state actors to construct a threat, and, in turn, to justify extraordinary measures against it. As Buzan puts it “by saying the words, something is done, like betting, giving a promise, naming a ship” (Buzan et al., 1998, 26). The theory focuses on the idea of threat, claiming that there is nothing which is, by its very nature, threatening (Wæver, 1989). They believe that discourse is used by the powerful to artificially construct certain realities as threats.

This construction, however, has traditionally been viewed as transactional, with an elite speaking, and an audience accepting. Securitisation is thus a self-contained process, analysable through examination of the speech act alone. Balzacq critiqued this understanding, suggesting that “the assumption of a speech act approach ultimately reduces security to a conventional procedure such as marriage or betting” (2005, 72). Due to the contemporary nature of the exchange of information, this understanding is now unsatisfactory. The narrow focus of traditional ST has meant that the audience has long been under-researched, both empirically and theoretically (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016, 725). This paper argues that the audience is no longer passive, but an active and contributing part of securitisation.

Balzacq (2005) correctly identified this issue, before the Internet and social media became the

primary vehicles of propaganda. Later, Gaufman (2014) observed this new reality on Twitter, showing that the audience actively participated in the legitimisation of policies, through commenting and sharing. These scholars were correct to take the audience seriously. Yet, whilst viewing the securitisation process as more interactive, their work is nevertheless guilty of focusing on the discourse of *elites* on the one hand, and *non-elite* audiences on the other. However, in the case of ODS, Saudi discourse often took a transnational form (Darwich, 2019). Innovatively, understanding foreign national elites as the intended audience of Saudi discourse across the data considered, this article recalibrates former biases. Saudi propaganda was actualised in the responses and contributions of Riyadh's most powerful international ally – the United States. This reciprocity will form the methodological backbone of this paper. Reciprocal positionality is used throughout the paper to refer to the merging of discourses between distinct actors, in this case KSA and the US. It can be used to indicate or evidence a successful attempt at securitisation, as the target audience's narratives begin to mirror those of the initial securitising agent. This concept is one of the paper's primary original contributions to the theoretical and methodological literature.

Whilst the audience has been theorised by critical securitisation theorists as powerful, complex, and active (Roe, 2008; Léonard and Kaunert, 2011), an often-assumed reality is the role of 'functional actors'. Within traditional ST, these actors, such as the media and the religious elite, are seen as parties exhibiting only a partial influence on securitisation processes. Conversely, this paper views these actors as inseparable from the securitising actors themselves. Especially in an autocratic context, there is a specific level of truth to the claim that 'the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them' (Herrmann and Chomsky, 1998, xi). In Saudi Arabia, rather than separate actors that exert some small influence on securitisation, the mass media are best

characterised as intertwined with the state. Thus, a nexus of securitisation is the most prudent way to visualise the Saudi propaganda machine. In this case, Al-Jubeir and *Arab News* used discourse to justify Riyadh's extraordinary behaviour in Yemen via constructing KSA as the hero, Iran and the Houthis as the villain, and the people of Yemen as the victims.

Methodology: *Discourse Tracing – A tool for tracing Riyadh's securitisation narratives*

DT (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009) is highly influenced by the ethos of CDA, which in turn is highly compatible with ST. The ethos of CDA underpins this paper's analysis, with the goal of analysing language surrounding ODS, to uncover the hidden power-laden meanings behind elite discourse and to challenge its key assumptions. CDA can be broken down into four key areas: power, audience, context, and ideology. Bouvier and Machin write that the aim of CDA is "to reveal discourses buried in language used to maintain power and sustain existing power relations" (2018, 178). Connecting CDA and ST together is a shared linguistic ontology – that language does not have inherent meaning but is instead imbued with meaning by the powerful.

Unlike ST, CDA cannot be accused of ignoring the active role of the audience. Far from seeing them as passive, CDA views the audience as a fundamental part of the construction of meaning in discourse (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, 4). Fairclough (2003) broke discourse down into three key areas: production of text, the text itself, and the reception of text. Reception here does not mean the 'signing off' of a speech act, as is the case in traditional ST (Buzan et al, 1998). Rather, the audience is understood to attribute significant meaning to discourse, framing its character and impact. Furthermore, CDA focuses heavily on context – suiting it well to an analysis of the Yemeni conflict. Here, Fairclough's edict runs true, that "we can

attribute causal affects to linguistic forms but only through a careful account of meaning and context” (2003, 13).

Usefully, van Dijk (1993) provides researchers with a shortcut for identifying propaganda. It will over-emphasize negative things or under-emphasize positive things about “the other”; or over-emphasize positive things or under-emphasize negative things, about “us”. The data shows that when there are military and political incentives to propagandise in this way, the elite will often do so (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Therefore, propaganda is imbued with ideological commitments. The issue with CDA is that “the systematic ways in which the methods unfold are left implicit” (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009, 20). For something as sensitive and complex as the case study at hand, a degree of methodological rigidity is preferable. Influenced by the primary goals of CDA, LeGreco and Tracy’s (2009) model of DT provides a systematic way of conducting discourse analysis across time.

DT provides a step-by-step guide for analysing discourse at the micro, macro, and meso levels. It does this without forgetting the central purpose of critical theory, to uncover the power dynamics in discourse as a form of liberation. DT “not only follows the theoretical process of constituting discursive practices, it does so in a way that also prioritizes transparency” (LeGreco and Tracy, 2009, 38). Rather than rigidly sticking to the paradigms of one approach, they have borrowed ideas from discourse analysis, process tracing, and content analysis. This has resulted in a framework that is theoretically grounded, tightly structured, and that encourages a detailed reading of data. For these reasons, it is well-suited for understanding the development of Saudi discourse surrounding ODS.

The process is as follows:

- 1) Clearly establish the case study and time period.
- 2) Put together the micro data (news, speeches, social media posts), meso data (e.g., policy documents), and macro (context/historical information). Then, chronically order the data, and find recurrent ideas or themes.
- 3) Devise a research question around these ideas or themes. Write up the case study in line with the answers to this question.
- 4) Establish a conclusion.

The core “ideas and themes” are ‘Iran’, ‘legitimate internationally-recognised government’, ‘the Houthis are a radical extremist group’, and ‘protecting the people of Yemen’. As such, the case study has been written up in a way that unpacks these discursive frames, tracing their development and contrasting them with some of the empirical realities of the period.

Results – Frames of Propaganda

This section presents discourse from Al-Jubeir and *Arab News*, between March-May 2015. Five key speeches from Al-Jubeir have been considered, all of which present a version of KSA’s motivations for the intervention to US audiences. These have been broken down into four key areas – ‘Iran’, ‘Internationally-Recognised Legitimate government’, ‘Radical’, and “Protecting the People of Yemen”. They have been separated into three separate tables. Table 1.0 considers three appearances of Al-Jubeir on US news. Table 2.0 considers two of his official governmental speeches, both of which were around forty minutes; the second of which also hosted John Kerry, whose discourse has been recorded to show reciprocity. An interview conducted with Obama on MSNBC on 22nd of April, has also been included in Table 2.0. These speeches were picked due to their proximity and relevance to the beginning

of ODS. Consideration of US reciprocity during this period is limited, due to the Obama administration’s focus on “quiet support”, purposefully limiting discussions of the conflict for fear of chastisement by the international community (Mazzetti and Schmitt, 2016). Table 3.0 contains data from 10 *Arab News* articles, a Saudi state-ran news platform. These articles come from the first month of the Saudi-led intervention, dating between 28th of March and 30th of April. Using DT, these have been ordered chronologically. The case study has been written around the question above, to test the impact of the discourse.

<i>Type of Word</i>	29th March	2nd April	6th April
<i>Iran</i>	5	2	2
<i>Internationally-Recognised Legitimate government</i>	3	2	2
<i>Radical</i>	4	1	2
<i>Protecting the People of Yemen</i>	2	1	2

Table 1.0 3 Al-Jubeir TV Interviews

<i>Type of Word</i>	15th April Al-Jubeir	22nd April Obama	8th May Al-Jubeir	8th May Kerry
<i>Iran</i>	14	3	2	4
<i>Internationally-Recognised Legitimate government</i>	10			
<i>Radical</i>	5	1	1	1
<i>Protecting the People of Yemen</i>	10	1	4	1

Table 2.0 2 Speeches from Al-Jubeir and 1 from Obama

<i>Type of Word</i>	Number of Appearances
<i>Iran</i>	6 (4 not direct mentions but clear allusions)

<i>Internationally-Recognised Legitimate government</i>	12
<i>Radical</i>	12
<i>Protecting the People of Yemen</i>	30

Table 3.0 10 Arab News Articles

Discussion – Analysing Saudi Frames

Iran

On 12th February 2015, the US Department of State said in a daily press briefing, ‘we are aware of reports of a variety of support provided by Iran to the Houthis, but we have not seen evidence that Iran is exerting command and control over the Houthis activities in Yemen’ (US Department of State a, 2015). However, as KSA began to over-exaggerate Iranian involvement, the US began to reciprocate. They spent concerted effort creating the Iranian-Houthi villain. Al-Jubeir announced ODS in Washington on March 25th. US National Security Council Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan signalled US support on the same day:

“The United States strongly condemns ongoing military actions taken by the Houthis against the elected government of Yemen... The United States coordinates closely with Saudi Arabia and our GCC partners on issues related to their security and our shared interests. In support of GCC actions to defend against Houthi violence, President Obama has authorized the provision of logical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations” (Meehan, 2015).

On 26th of March, KSA, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain sent a joint letter addressed to the UN Security Council, outlining their justification for ODS. Here, explicit reference was made to external support for the Houthis, suggesting that they were “supported by regional powers that are seeking to impose their control over the country and turn it into a tool by which they can extend their influence in the region” (Saudi Embassy, 2015). The

involvement of Iran quickly became central, as “the alleged foreign-backed ‘aggression’ emerge[d] as the main justification for the intervention” (Ruys and Ferro, 2016, 71).

Although Iran was not named, the word ‘puppet’ was used to describe the Houthi and ‘it is clear from... the continued labelling of the Yemeni crisis as a ‘proxy war’, that references to a ‘foreign’, ‘regional’, or ‘outside’ force allegedly behind the Houthi uprising alluded to... Iran’ (Ruys and Ferro, 2016, 73-74). In this way, the Saudi grand narrative created its villain.

Researchers are justified in questioning this sudden change of perspective. The change is especially puzzling because the US had raised their doubts of comprehensive Iranian involvement as recently to ODS as February 2015 (US Department of State a, 2015). The United States were feeling the “need to placate the Saudis as the administration completed a nuclear deal with Iran” (Mazzetti and Schmitt, 2016). Addressing Al-Jubeir on the topic of Yemen, Kerry said that they “will discuss, obviously, the challenge of Iranian support in some of those particular conflict”, adding:

So let me be clear. Our effort to find a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue with... Iran does not stem from any lessening of our concerns about all of these other destabilizing events within the region (US Department of State b, 2015).

Words directly connected to the Islamic Republic, including “Iran”, “Iranians”, “Tehran”, and “International Revolutionary Guard Corps” were mentioned by Adel Al-Jubeir 25 times across his five appearances. Repetition extends to specific phraseologies, which are consistent throughout Al-Jubeir’s appearances. *Arab News* also made reference to this narrative, writing that “the Houthi militants are hand-in-glove with the Iranian government which is definitely using it for their purpose” (Hassan, 2015). However, Iran denied material involvement throughout 2015. On 31st March 2015, Marzieh Afkham, from the Iranian

Foreign Ministry stated: “the claims about the dispatch of weapons from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Yemen are completely fabricated and sheer lies” (Taghrib News, 2015).

In his interviews, Al-Jubeir is consistently asked about the level of influence Iran has on the Houthis. Every response sounds similar, emphatically claiming Iran to have a profound, wide-reaching relationship with the Yemeni rebels. In the March Face the Nation Interview, Al-Jubeir was asked: “How much did Iran have to do with the Houthis?”. To which, he responded:

A lot. The Houthis are ideologically affiliated with Iran. The Iranians have provided them with weapons. The Iranians have provided them with advisors. And the Iranians have provided them with money (Face the Nation, 2015).

In response to virtually the same question in the other four discussions, Al-Jubeir again emphasises this connection between Iran and the Houthis, focusing on ‘weapons’, ‘advisors’, and ‘money’. On April 6th, in an interview with CNN’s Wolf Blitzer, Al-Jubeir was asked: “What is the role of Iran in Yemen right now? I’m getting conflicting information about how significant their role might be – your analysis?”. Al-Jubeir responded by over-exaggerating the Iranian role:

As far as their support from Iran is concerned, we know that Iran has operatives who are working with the Houthis, they have provided them with financial assistance, they’ve provided them with weapons. Sometime not too long ago a ship was interdicted that was carrying weapons from the Iranians to the Houthis (CNN, 2015).

Similarly exaggerating threat perception around Iran, coalition spokesman Ahmad Asiri stated in April that, “if the ships seek to aid the Houthis, the coalition has the right to choose the proper answer” (Kirkpatrick, 2015). In *Arab News* Wahhabi cleric Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais spoke conspiratorially of Iranian adventurism, stating “Yemen has been ravaged by the Houthi militias supported by foreign agencies striving to undermine the Muslim world” (Arab News, 2015a). Soon, the Houthis began to see the advantages of emphasizing a

connection to Iran. They could see that it was increasing Saudi and US anxiety. On the 20th of April, Abdel Malik Al-Houthi called Iran "a great Islamic country" (BBC a, 2015). Despite this, there is a scholarly consensus that Iranian involvement in Yemen was minimal in 2015 (Juneau, 2016; Hokayem and Roberts, 2016; Hill, 2017).

Nevertheless, the Saudis and the Americans were spending concerted time and effort raising fear around Iranian weapons' shipments to the Houthis. In Obama's MSNBC interview on April 22nd, Obama raised anxiety around Iranian influence, stating:

[W]hat we've said to them [the Iranians] is if there are weapons delivered to factions within Yemen... that's a problem (MSNBC, 2015).

It took until September of 2015 for the Saudi blockade to provide evidence of Iranian weapons entering Yemen, *following* ODS, when they intercepted a fishing boat 150 miles south of Oman (BBC b, 2015). The Saudi-led coalition reported in September 2015 that the fishing boat contained "18 anti-armour Concourse shells, 54 anti-tank BGM17 shells, 15 shell battery kits, four firing guidance systems, five binocular batteries, three launchers, one launcher holder and three batteries" (BBC, 2015). They managed to convincingly connect the boat to Tehran.

Between 2015-2019, KSA spent more than \$265 billion on the military intervention in Yemen (Jalal, 2020). Allen and Riedel (2020) argue that Iran have paid a "pittance" compared to this, funnelling in only small amounts of support to raise Saudi-US anxiety. Just over a year after the beginning of ODS, when Iranian support was more tangible, Obama appeared in Riyadh. Speaking of the apparent successes of his administration's Middle East policy, Obama said:

What we've also seen, what the GCC has seen, is our continued cooperation in... interdicting Iranian efforts to arm the Houthi militias inside of Yemen (Obama White House, 2016).

Saudi Ambassador to the UK Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud does not speak for the entire Saudi establishment. However, his response to a question posed by the author of this paper in 2021 was telling. When asked about whether KSA over-exaggerated Iranian involvement during ODS, he replied: “We may have got it wrong” (Al-Saud, 2021).

Internationally Recognised Legitimate Government

Al-Jubeir repeated the exact term “legitimate government” 17 times. When asked about Saudi motivations for the intervention, he answers with words such as “we are determined to... restore the legitimate government of Yemen” (AP Archive, 2015). In the 10 *Arab News* articles considered, there were 12 mentions of the legitimate government. Quoting a Saudi banker, one article writes, “[w]ith the restoration of peace and order, the legitimate government could continue to function and deliver basic needs and services” (Estimo Jr., 2015). Although Kerry did not make specific reference to the concept in the May 8th speech, official government announcements, including those on May 25th, refer to the idea of “legitimate government” (Meehan, 2015). This justification was continuously repeated, even though support for Hadi’s government was tentative at best. Hadi was previously Saleh’s second in command and was chosen by a GCC-backed initiative to stand in a one-candidate election.

The Saudi-led coalition claimed that they were simply coming to the aid of an ally in President Hadi, answering his call to “protect Yemen and its people from the aggression of Houthi militias” (Coalition Statement, 2015). In this sense, ODS was securitised as a defensive, responsive, measure. This invoked the concept of “intervention by invitation”, appealing to the notion that as Hadi is the legitimate government, he “enjoys the rights inherent in full sovereignty” (UNGA Res 2625, 1970). Thus, in international law, he had the

right to invite allies to come to his aid, meaning ODS was justified. There are important debates surrounding legitimacy and its sources in the Middle East, and it is important to avoid orientalist and essentialist assumptions about this. However, focusing solely on the ‘internationally-recognised’ part of this is essential for understanding how ODS was legitimised to the Western-led international community.

Legal scholar Doswald-Beck claimed that in order to exercise such power and be recognised on the international stage, the state must (1) maintain full control over state territory, and (2) have international recognition (1985, 199-200). The second part of this was certainly the case for Hadi. However, his “territorial control” was open to doubt:

Given that President Hadi and his government were engaged in a non-international armed conflict with the Houthi rebels and lacked effective control over significant parts of the territory at the moment the letter was sent, it can be questioned whether they still had that authority” (Ruys and Ferro, 2016, 72).

Nevertheless, his status as the “internationally recognised government” helped to encourage UNSC Resolution 2216, which re-emphasised support for Hadi, criticised the Houthis, and helped to justify actions taken against them (UNSC, 2015).

Hadi was KSA’s preferred choice, having been selected by the GCC-led National Dialogue Conference to run in an election in which he was the only candidate in 2012. By 2014, when his rule was extended, “Hadi was deeply unpopular and seen as a Saudi stooge” (Riedel, 2017). This stands in stark contrast to the framing of the Saudi propaganda network. In one article *Arab News* quotes Al-Sudais, who asserted “[w]e call on this transgressing group [the Houthis] to return to its senses and understand the welfare of the people can be secured by... accepting the legitimate choices of the Yemeni nation [Hadi]” (Arab News, 2015a). There is no choice to be made in a single-candidate election. The wider Hadi family was also accused of deep corruption. His son Jal was allegedly the “man to contact and essentially pay off in

order to obtain... fuel import permits”; “Jalal reportedly not only demanded commission for fuel imports, but for all imports entering Hudaydah” (Sana’a Centre, 2018, 35). Deeply corrupt, the Hadis were making money from the Saudi-led blockade of Yemen’s harbours, through selective granting of important licenses to commercial enterprises. Nevertheless, the tentative notion of “internationally-recognised government” stood firm. For Riyadh, “Hadi’s value as president [was] solely in the cover he provide[d] for the continued implementation of Security Council Resolution 2216” (Al-Deen, 2022). His status allowed them to continually justify their intervention to the international community.

However, “international recognition is a fickle barometer and inevitably introduces an element of subjectivity in the application of the legal framework” (Ruys and Ferro, 2016, 97). Furthermore, focusing on international recognition severely undermines domestic factors, and ignores Yemeni voices. It opens up the US to the allegation of choosing to recognise governments that are pliant to their interests, no matter their domestic support or their democratic credentials. However, this narrative worked very effectively as a tool of international securitisation for the Saudis.

Radical

Words within the semantic field of ‘radical’ were used 13 times by Al-Jubeir, once by Obama, and once by Kerry. They were used 12 time by *Arab News*. These words included: ‘extremist’, ‘terrorist’, ‘militia’, and ‘militant’. Furthermore, Al-Jubeir connected the Houthis to Lebanese Shia ally Hezbollah. *Arab News* extended this fear, using sectarian language to discredit the Houthis, paraphrasing Wahhabi cleric Sheikh Abdul Bari Al-Thobaity:

The sheikh also lauded the decisiveness displayed by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman in launching Decisive Storm to support Islam... and to establish the rights of Muslims in Yemen when a group of people started spreading bidaa (prohibited innovations in

religious matters) and undertaking misleading acts by rebelling against their ruler and killing people, and destroying mosques and homes under false slogans (Arab News, 2015b).

Such representations were used to construct the Houthis as a ‘villain’, in turn justifying the actions of ODS. Words such as ‘radical’ and ‘extreme’ have two meanings within the context they are used here. The first is an association with so-called Islamic terrorism, “as the term ‘radical Islam’ becomes equivalently used and understood with terrorism” (Hoewe and Bowe, 2018, 15). KSA is connecting them specifically to the network of Iranian proxies, regarded by many as terrorist organisations. The second denotes extremities in suppression of human rights and the use of violence. According to both of these definitions, Riyadh’s line of justification here has some merit, with the important caveat that the Houthis are not a classic Iranian proxy.

The Houthis have indeed engaged in several damaging and extreme behaviours since the start of the conflict. Whilst human rights organisations are right to point to the Saudi-led coalition as the primary obstructers of aid, they are equally prudent in observing the damage the Houthis have caused (Simpson, 2020). Organisations are doing their best, but they are being forced to tread “that blurry, but very real line, beyond which assistance for victims imperceptibly turns into support for their tormenters” (Brauman, 1987). In Yemen, humanitarian aid has been obstructed by the Houthis. Based on a series of interviews with humanitarian workers, HRW concluded that the Houthis have fallen foul of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Simpson, 2020). One aid worker demonstrated the negative impact of the Houthis, stating that their obstructions have meant that “we can’t reach communities where people are dying” (Simpson, 2020). Not only this, but the Houthis can reliably be regarded as “radical” due to their use of child soldiers (Becker, 2022) and the way in which they suppress freedom of speech.

A good portion of the Houthi establishment follow a form of Zaydism, believing that Hussein al-Houthi had, and his descendants now have, a religious right to rule Yemen. They are members of a noble class called *Sada*. Some Houthis want an “Imamate with the political form of a republic, in similarity to the Iranian sample” (Alziady, 2021, 812). This greatly worries both Hadi and the Saudis as “a group who believe that non-sada are illegitimate rulers is a challenge to the al-Saud rulers’ claim to legitimacy” (Lackner, 2017, 148). Whilst this may look similar to the Iranian model, it actually distinguishes them from Iran in a significant way. Unlike classic Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah, they do not believe in the Iranian notion of Vilayat-e Faqih [Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist]. Thus, Ayatollah Khamenei is neither their political nor spiritual leader. However, there is a strong Zaydi fundamentalism present within the Houthi leadership, desiring their own form of Islamic state. They also have strong anti-Saudi, anti-Western, and anti-Israeli views. Thus, Riyadh’s securitisation of the Houthis as a radical group certainly appealed to Western actors, with John Kerry grouping them together with other “terrorist” concerns in the region when he met with Adel al-Jubeir in April 2015. He stated:

We have a broad array of concerns, which we will be expressing in the context of Camp David, which relate to destabilizing efforts by anybody in the region, which relate to terrorist organizations that are spreading in the region. You have, obviously, al-Shabaab in Somalia; you’ve had Boko Haram in Mali; you have Daesh in Libya; you have al-Nusra and al-Qaida and ISIL and others all through. 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 Hezbollah and has supported Houthis and other efforts (US Department of State b, 2015).

Protecting the People of Yemen

This section includes both analysis of Al-Jubeir and *Arab News*’ claims of ‘protecting the people of Yemen’ in 2015, as well as Saudi and US claims about the humanitarian achievements of KSRelief in 2017. The frame of ‘protecting the people of Yemen’ was essential for portraying the Yemeni people as the ‘victims’, which the Saudi-led coalition of

‘heroes’ was helping to protect. This may suggest why Al-Jubeir referred to it 19 times across the five speeches considered and *Arab News* 30 times across just 10 articles. To fully account for the impact of the Saudi-led intervention, this section considers humanitarian data up to 2022. A series of quotes from Saudi, US, and UN actors show that KSRelief’s efforts encapsulated the four key framings, present within Al-Jubeir’s discourse upon the commencement of ODS. It shows how these four frames were mutually reinforcing, within a grand narrative. The frames worked in tandem.

There is a constant line from KSA about its prominent role in financial contributions to the humanitarian relief effort. However, their appeals to ‘protecting the people of Yemen’ are undermined by the fact that the alleged \$18 billion spent on humanitarian aid is significantly outweighed by the death toll and that, by 2020, KSA had spent at least \$265 billion on the military campaign (Jalal, 2020). The puzzle, then, is understanding how KSA managed to reconcile causing such harm and spending so much money. KSA stated that they were protecting the legitimate government, the people of Yemen, and its own borders from an Iran-backed radical militia group. Following their logic, this notion of a ‘moral’, ‘defensive’, and ‘necessary’ mission meant that ‘collateral damage’ and heavy expenditure were unfortunate but justifiable. The narrative continues that, whilst there may be some Yemeni suffering in the process, the Saudis are trying their best to alleviate this through KSRelief.

In 2015, KSA’s attempts to justify ODS centred, partially, around “protecting the people of Yemen”. Across the five discussions, Al-Jubeir referred to this 19 times. Speaking of the virtues of ODS, Al-Sudais was quoted by *Arab News* wrote “[t]he Kingdom has embarked on an initiative that will be written in history as a move to champion the cause of the oppressed in Yemen” (Arab News, 2015c). This declaration stands in stark contradiction to the

humanitarian impact of ODS, making it problematic. The blockade had a significant impact, in that it “severely restricted the flow of food, fuel, and medicine that the vast majority of the civilian population depended on, in violation of the laws of war” (Simpson, 2020). This is in line with the wording of the San Remo Manual’s stance on proportionality, an international legal document surrounding humanitarian aid and humanitarian law, as “the damage to the civilian population is... excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated from the blockade” (Doswald-Beck, 1995).

Based on statistics from the UN, The Guardian reported that by June 2015 80% of Yemen’s nearly 30 million people were in direct need of urgent humanitarian aid (Borger, 2015). HRW and MSF agree with the UN in stating that the Saudi blockade was the primary catalyst for this (Simpson, 2020; MSF, 2020). This is not to say that the Saudi blockade created a new humanitarian crisis. In 2013, the OCHA reported that up to 58% of the Yemeni population were dependent upon humanitarian aid (ReliefWeb, 2013). Nevertheless, the blockade exacerbated pre-existing issues. Prior to the conflict “[a]bout 90 percent of Yemen’s basic food intake... came from imports, with only 15 percent of prewar imports reaching the country as of June 2015” (Borger, 2015). By 2020, The OCHA claimed that 131,000 civilians had died from “indirect causes such as lack of food, health services and infrastructure” (News.UN, 2020).

The people of Yemen were not a priority for the Saudi-US alliance, with Al-Jubeir referring to casualties as “collateral damage” during his interview on April 2nd (AP Archive, 2015). In the April 15th address, Al-Jubeir said:

We are working with international humanitarian assistance in order to... bring badly needed humanitarian assistance to the people of Yemen (Saudiembassyusa, 2015).

Data from OCHA (News.UN, 2020), HRW (Simpson, 2020), and MSF (2020) tells the opposite story. They argue that the blockades, and the fact that they have been responsible for the starvation of civilians, means that not only have KSA been uncooperative with human rights organisations, but also that the blockades were “disproportionate in that the expected harm to the civilian population exceeded any apparent military benefit” (HRW, 2017).

Many of KSRelief’s aid plans, “effectively choked the supply of aid to populations in the Houthi-controlled areas, in particular the Hajjah, Hudaydah, Sa’ada and Ta’izz governorates, which today host the people facing the greatest threat of starvation” (Armed Conflict Survey, 2019, 16). The blockade was established to choke the Houthis. However, it has had severe implications. By 2020, Ann Marie Kimball and Aisha Jumaan (2021) put the death toll of the Yemeni war at around 250,000. By 2022, The Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) reported UN estimations of 377,000 (CAAT, 2022). They agree with the notion that the Saudi-led blockade was a key contributor to this. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the US has been a collaborative part of this process (Simpson, 2020). These realities undermine all four OCHA principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Bagshaw, 2012), as well as proportionality. The securitisation narratives surrounding KSRelief’s aid to Yemen were an attempt to undermine these issues.

KSRelief’s involvement was primarily about the preservation of the image of KSA on the world stage. KSRelief is “under the direct influence of the Saudi government and operate[s] as the humanitarian and social arm... of the executive, limiting their capacity to provide neutral and impartial assistance to all the parties and regions affected” (Coppi, 2018, 22). A report from the Saudi Embassy in Washington in 2017, quoting Saudi, American and international actors, provides key insight into their international propaganda network. For

them to post this in English, from their Washington embassy, demonstrates the internationalised focus of justifying the Saudi war effort. It also shows that reciprocal positionality remained a key part of the securitisation process. The following are quotes from that report.

UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien said in October 2017:

Its [KSRelief's] generosity has made a real impact in Yemen and elsewhere (Saudi Embassy, 2017).

US Secretary of Defence James Mattis spoke of the Houthis as an Iranian proxy, stating:

We'll have to overcome Iran's efforts to destabilize yet another country [Yemen] and create another militia in their image of Lebanese Hezbollah. But the bottom line is we're on the right path forward (Saudi Embassy, 2017).

The most telling quotes, evidencing the continuation and triangulation of overlapping discourses from the onset of the conflict, came from Supervisor General of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, Abdullah Al Rabeeah, who stated:

The conflict is evidence that the militias did not want to see the will of the Yemeni people. They violated their decision by going against the government democratically elected by the Yemeni people. They also violated international law and the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative. Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries are trying to provide food, development and safety to Yemen (Saudi Embassy, 2017).

The most controversial quote, which stands in stark contrast to the counter-narratives of humanitarian organisations in Yemen, came on April 27th, when Al Rabeeah said:

Our programs have been reaching all regions of Yemen, I want to emphasize all regions, irrespective of who controls it... If you look at what we do as a humanitarian agency, I think it's way beyond any damage that is caused by any attacks (Saudi Embassy, 2017).

The idea of aid “reaching all regions” has been proven to be inaccurate (Armed Conflict Survey, 2019). Furthermore, these arguments stand in stark contradiction with the realities of the bombing campaign, started under ODS. According to the Yemen Data Project, Saudi “attacks” eventually amounted to 25,054 airstrikes, only 32.4% of which hit military targets (YDP, 2022). Saudi airstrikes have destroyed 430 educational facilities, 94 healthcare buildings, killed 8,983 and injured 10,243 civilians (YDP, 2022). The peaks of this destruction were between 2015 and 2017, the period to which Al Rabeeah refers.

The Saudis continue to portray themselves as heroes and saviours. This paper’s researcher was able to put concerns about the accuracy of this framing to Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud in 2021. He defended KSA, stating “Not everyone died from bombings. They died from other things”, adding, “we give more food aid than the Yemeni people can eat” (Al-Saud, 2021). These narratives are propagandised and problematic. They have been used as a tool to securitise the Saudi war effort as moral, humanitarian, and balanced to the United States – when the evidence suggests otherwise.

Conclusion

This paper has identified the core ways in which KSA justified ODS to the US, through narratives pertaining to ‘Iran’, ‘the legitimate internationally-recognised government’, ‘the Houthis as a radical, extremist, group’, and ‘protecting the people of Yemen’. Their discourse surrounding the contributions of KSRelief acted as a part of the latter securitisation narrative, to offset the negative consequences of their blockade and bombing campaign. This point extends Bordon and Alrefai’s (2023, 2) contention that “the case of Saudi foreign aid in Yemen is perhaps the most representative instance of how aid in the Middle East is dictated

by political objectives and concerns that revolve around control and influence”. Through discourse, KSA worked to securitise ODS to the US, framing itself as the hero, Iran and the Houthis as the villains, and the people of Yemen as the victims.

Despite the Houthis having a somewhat ‘radical’ nature, their connection to Iran was greatly over-exaggerated by KSA to facilitate greater support from their American allies (Juneau, 2016; Hill, 2017; Walsh, 2023). Whilst they were correct that Hadi’s government was the ‘internationally recognised’ one, there were meaningful doubts about its ‘legitimacy’ (Ruys and Ferro, 2016). In this sense, Riyadh obscured the troubling complexity of Hadi’s leadership in exchange for a technical legal justification. Humanitarian data from 2015 to 2022 (HRW, 2017; YDP, 2022) shows that KSA and their allies’ claims to have been ‘protecting the people of Yemen’ were highly questionable. Overall, their justifications were problematic due to their propagandised nature and their role in exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

Through these narratives, Riyadh was able to present a clean, legally framed, moralistic, set of justifications to the US. Through this framing, they sought to provide a succinct moralistic narrative for the intervention. This paper concludes that these problematic narratives played a role in facilitating ODS and engendering support from the US. Whilst this paper cannot conclusively state that this was entirely effective, US reciprocal positionality suggests that elements of the Saudi securitisation narrative were adopted by US policymakers. It makes a lasting contribution to the literature in that it shows the way in which these four narratives worked to create a grand securitising narrative, justifying ODS to the US. Whilst beyond the scope of this paper, future research should investigate the other, unstated, reasons behind the Saud-led, US-backed, intervention. Research should also conduct analyses of the Houthis’

use of propaganda, which is becoming increasingly important due to their attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea, as the war in Gaza escalates.

Declaration of Interest: I hereby declare that the disclosed information is correct and that no other situation of real, potential or apparent conflict of interest is known to me.

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