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The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status

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Abstract:

On 26 March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes on Yemen with the aim to restore the rule of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and destroy the Houthi movement. Scholars and policy analysts moved quickly to examine the Yemen war as a by-product of Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the region and a sectarian struggle. These traditional explanations fall short of unravelling the Saudi motive behind launching a large-scale operation in Yemen, a severely weakened and politically divided neighbour. This paper offers an alternative explanation of abrupt Saudi aggressiveness toward Yemen. It argues that this intervention is driven by a non-material need; Saudi leadership aims to assert the Kingdom's status as a regional power in the Middle East.

Introduction

On 26 March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes on Yemen with the aim to restore the rule of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and eliminate the Houthi movement. Located at the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the southern entrance of the Red Sea, Yemen has always constituted a cornerstone of Saudi foreign policy. Since the Kingdom's foundation in 1932, the Saud family (Al Saud) has strived to expand its control to its southern neighbor and prevent it from threatening its interests. In 1934, the first modern war broke out between the two Arabian states. The 1934 Treaty of Ta'if put an end to this military confrontation, ceded the three provinces of Asir, Najran and Jizan to the army of Ibn Saud, and established a peaceful coexistence between the two countries.[2] Since then, the Saudis have avoided confrontation and, instead, maintained precarious stability in Yemen through meddling in internal politics, backing local groups against others, using Yemeni guest workers as leverage, buying off tribal leaders, and conducting limited, occasional military operations, especially over border disputes.

Operation Decisive Storm, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen that began in March 2015 constituted a break with this decades-long peaceful coexistence. Although Saudi Arabia had spent substantial resources on military procurement and training over the last two decades—especially after the 1991 Gulf War—[3]never before had the Saudi Kingdom, or any of the Gulf states, so proactively and aggressively deployed their military forces or engage in a large, offensive mission as the operation in Yemen. The intervention in Yemen has unveiled a new era in Saudi

foreign policy and appears to overshadow Gulf politics for years to come. This paper attempts to explain this abrupt aggressiveness in Saudi policies toward Yemen while situating it in a more comprehensive understanding of the Kingdom's foreign policy in the region as an emerging regional power fighting for its status.

Saudi Arabia's motivation in the Yemen offensive arguably reflects a Kingdom that is starting to rely on its own resources in fighting for and assert its status as a leading power in the region. Scholars, commentaries in the Arab media, and government officials have often characterized the war in Yemen as part of a larger struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran over influence in the Middle East. From this perspective, the war is the reaction to the influence of Iran expanding in the Arabian Peninsula through the rebel Houthi movement.[4] A proxy war with Iran, along a Sunni-Shiite divide, became central tropes in Saudi state-owned media. Meanwhile, other scholars and commentaries focus on personalities at the expense of more structural factors. In particular, the ascendancy of King Salman al Saud in January 2015 to power, and the parallel rise of his ambitious son, Prince Mohamed bin Salman, to a minister of defense, are often considered at the origin of this intervention.[5] Many scholars explore the evolution in the decision-making process in the Saudi Kingdom that followed the passing of King Abdullah and attributed the Yemen War to centralization of the decision in the office of the crown prince.[6] Despite the importance of individual decision-makers, the preparation for the operation in Yemen has started since the Houthi take over Sana'a in September 2014, which preceded Salman's reign by several months.[7]

This paper offers an alternative explanation of the Saudi intervention in Yemen and argues that this aggression is driven by a non-material need, that is a will for status. In the post-2011 order, the Kingdom has fought for its status as a regional power at both regional and international levels. In this context, the Saudi leadership responded to regime change in Yemen with a violent intervention to confirm its status as a leading power in the region. The paper starts with an overview of the Yemen crisis while outlining the current developments in the war. The second section explores the drivers of the Saudi intervention in Yemen; it argues that this aggressive strategy can be considered as a status-seeking behavior and contextualizes this explanation within the International Relations literature. The last section presents an assessment of the overall performance of Saudi forces in the war and, furthermore, draws out the implications of the intervention on the Yemen crisis and its ramifications on the evolving role of the Saudi Kingdom in the Middle East.

The Road to Yemen

Yemeni politics is complex and often plagued with shifting alliances at domestic and regional levels. Saudi Arabia has historically seen Yemen as a source of threat, and its stability is inextricably connected to the security of the Arabian Peninsula. Whether the threat is real or imagined, the Saudi Kingdom employed several measures to control politics in Yemen. Mainly, it has relied on Ali Abdallah Saleh, president of North Yemen from 1978 and later of a unified Yemen from 1990 until 2012, to maintain stability. Fears of Yemen's instability peaked with the appearance

of *Ansar Allah* (Partisans of God), a movement headed by the Houthi family, in the mid-2000s. The movement emerged as a result of economic and social grievances in northern Yemen, especially in the governorate of Saada.[8] The movement has challenged the authority of the central government in Yemen since the mid-2000s and started an active rebellion in northern Yemen against the government of Ali Abdallah Saleh.[9] In 2009, Saudi Arabia openly entered the fighting against the Houthi movement and launched a military operation on its southern border — the first Saudi unilateral operation in decades.[10] This operation was far from successful. The Saudi armed forces failed to incur a defeat on or even weaken the Houthi rebels, which questioned the military effectiveness of the Saudi armed forces despite its vast technological superiority.[11]

The current crisis began during the 2011 Arab uprisings. The story of the uprisings in Yemen was not different from that in Tunisia or Egypt. The diffusion of protests against authoritarian regimes across the Arab world reinvigorated Yemen's marginalized social movements and united different geographical and political factions in Yemen, such as the northern Houthi movement and the southern secessionist movement Hiraak.[12] In 2011, the mass-based revolutionary movements demonstrated against the regime of then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh and demanded both political and economic reforms. The Houthis and their main party-militia found in the uprisings a new outlet for their discontent against the central government.[13] They dropped their weapons and joined the peaceful protests.[14]

The Yemeni uprisings, like most other uprisings in the Arab region, did not succeed in consolidating a genuine democratic transition due to the lacks of reforms

and the interference of regional actors.[15] The Saudi Kingdom, along with other Gulf monarchies, swiftly designed a transitional plan for the country to ensure that Saleh is replaced with a friendly government. The Saudis negotiated the ousting of Ali Abdullah Saleh and supported the vice-President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, in a one-man election. Following this flawed political transition, Yemen has descended into a conflict between different groups, pushing the country to the edge of a civil war.[16] Four years after the uprisings, in September 2014, the Houthis took military control of the capital Sana'a and the state collapsed into power centers. Yemeni security forces became divided between two camps. The first is loyal to Hadi, who still finds support in the south. The second is loyal to Saleh, who allied with the Houthis from the north. The picture is further complicated by the presence of other groups who benefited from this divide to expand their influence in Yemen, namely al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as well as a Yemeni affiliate of the Islamic State.[17]

In January 2015, President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi resigned. The collapse of the government led to the outbreak of violence between the two opposing camps. At the end of February, Hadi fled Sanaa to Aden and announced it as his new capital. On 22 March 2015, the Houthis marched to Aden, seized the international airport, and bombed Hadi's headquarters. When the Houthis started their assault on Aden, Hadi fled the country to exile and called for external intervention. Within days, the Houthis expanded to the South, took Taiz—the country's third-largest city—and seized al-Anad, where the US military base was located. On 25 March 2015, Saudi Arabia unilaterally launched an attack on Yemen under the name "Operation

Decisive Storm," with the announced aim to restore the legitimate government of Hadi and to prevent the Houthis and their allies from taking control of the country. Hours later, eight Arab states—Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Sudan, and Morocco—announced their backing to the Saudi intervention, what can be conceived as the largest coalition of autocrats. The United States, the United Kingdom, and France have also backed the coalition providing diplomatic and logistic support.

The Kingdom officially announced that the goal of its intervention was "defending the legitimate government in Yemen" and "saving Yemeni people from the Houthi aggression." During the 26th Arab League Summit in Sharm al-Sheikh (28-29 March 2015), King Salman vowed: "the campaign will continue until it achieves its goals for the Yemeni people to enjoy security."[18] Another narrative evolved quickly as the primary rationale behind the Saudi decision—that of a war between the Kingdom and the so-described Iran-backed Houthis, who belong to a Shiite sect. In this context, Saudi-owned media and religious authorities quickly portrayed Yemen as a battlefield for the Saudis to fight the Shiites, perceived as a threat not only to Yemen but the entire region.[19] King Salman accused the Houthis of being backed by Iran and of causing sectarian division in Yemen.[20] In other words, the Kingdom attempted to portray its interventions in Yemen at the center of a Sunni regional effort to counter the threat of Iran and the expansion of Shiism in the Gulf. Scholars and analysts quickly picked this line of argument to portray the conflict in Yemen as a struggle between the Saudi Kingdom and Iran, where divisions within Islam mark the fault lines of conflict.[21]

Describing the Yemen war as a proxy conflict along sectarian lines is erroneous and misleading. First, the Iranian role in Yemen has been exaggerated and even deliberately distorted by the Saudis to legitimize their military intervention. No evidence points to any Iranian involvement in Yemen before 2014, and the Houthis has evolved as a genuinely rebellious movement that cuts across sectarian lines. The Houthi movement is a tribal group that is rooted in Yemeni political context, and the group's decisions and political goals are rooted in its local Yemeni leadership.[22] In fact, Iran does not enjoy any command over their decisions or actions. US intelligence officers disclosed information that further casts doubt on the claims that the Houthis are a proxy group fighting the Kingdom on behalf of Iran.[23] For example, Iranian representatives warned the Houthi rebels from taking the capital Sana'a, but the Houthis ignored this advice and took over the city in September 2014. [24]

In contrast, some evidence suggests that Iran's links to the Houthis might have increased at the end of 2014.[25] Yet, this evidence remains suggestive at best. The UN Panel of experts on Yemen have stated in January 2017 that there was "no sufficient evidence to confirm any direct large-scale supply of arms from the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran".[26] Also, it important to note that the Houthis have received military support from their most important ally, the former President Saleh, whose army was equipped with US weapons. The UN Panel also reported that almost 68 percent of stockpile of the Yemeni military was lost during the war, some of which was destroyed but significant weapons remain under the control of the Houthis.[27] Hence, the alliance with Ali Abdullah Saleh was far more significant for

the Houthis than the alliance with Iran. In other words, the crisis in Yemen is more complex than a mere proxy struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Instead, the crisis is rooted in domestic political grievances and social inequalities. As Kendall succinctly states, "with or without Iran's involvement, the underlying structure of the conflict would likely be the same".[28]

The political struggle in Yemen is more complex than a mere sectarian binary. It is true that many members of the Houthi movement belong to the Zaydi sect, a branch of Shiism. Nevertheless, it is wrong to assume that the Yemen crisis is driven by primordial identities.[29] Zaydism is distinct from the "Twelver Shiism" found in Iran both in doctrine and practice. In fact, the theological difference between both Zaydi and Twelver Shiism leaves the Zaydis closer to Sunni Islam. The Zaydis present themselves as a separate sect distinct from both Shiism and Sunnism. It is also worth noting that Saleh's supporters from the Yemeni army fighting with the Houthis are Sunnis.

Paradoxically, the Houthis were previously Saudi Arabia's ally. In the context of the Arab Cold War, which dominated the region in the 1950s and 1960s, the struggle in Yemen became a truly proxy war between Egypt supporting the Republic and the Saudi Kingdom supporting the monarchy.[30] In 1962, a group of Yemeni officers staged a coup d'état in Sanaa and overthrew the monarchy to establish a republic. The ousted monarch Imam Muhammad al-Badr retreated to the north of Yemen where he became supported by the Zaydi tribes—the same tribes from which the Houthi movement emerged in the 1990s. Following the Egyptian intervention in Yemen to support the coup d'état, the Saudi Kingdom provided the

Zaydi forces, which were allied with al-Badr, with weapons and support. After the war, the Saudis marginalized the Houthis. Since the 1980s, the Saudis launched campaigns to spread Wahhabism in Yemen. Against this marginalization and the despotism of Saleh, the Houthi movement evolved into an insurgency against the regime in Sana'a.

It is in this context that the recent crisis in Yemen can be viewed as a civil war between groups in a political struggle, and the image of a Sunni-Shiite proxy war in Yemen is only a distorted narrative presented by the Saudi Kingdom to legitimize its aggression on Yemen. Furthermore, this sectarian narrative fails to account for decades of oppressive patrimonial rule in Yemen, persistent inequalities, and economic dependence. Similarly, the notion that the Houthis are Iranian pawns ignores the groups' marginalization and its participation in the uprisings. This narrative further downplays the role of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Saudi Arabia in particular, in hindering the transition, which led to the outbreak of the civil war. Finally, these narrative ignores the crucial step in the outburst of this violent conflict that is the destructive, full-scale military operation led by the Saudi Kingdom. The following section aims to transcend these sectarian accounts and offers an alternative explanations of the war as a struggle for status.

Saudi Struggle for Status in Yemen

Scholarship on interventions has tended to focus on structural, material explanations. Most realist theories share the assumption that states seek survival in an anarchic international system that produces external threats, such as shifts in the

relative power distribution, alignments, and the balance of power. From this perspective, the decision to intervene or not is based on a rational cost-benefit analysis.[31] Other strands in the scholarship on interventions focus on domestic characteristics and leaders' causal beliefs.[32]

In contrast to predominant realist explanations of war, some scholars argue that symbolic, non-material motives—status in particular—are crucial in explaining states' recourse to armed strategies, including military interventions. Lebow provides one of the strongest arguments in this vein, "honor and prestige were even more important than wealth and security".[33] He further argues that symbolic dimensions have been the driving motives for 62 percent of wars since 1648.[34] These symbolic factors can better explain momentous shifts in foreign policy decision than conventional readings that emphasize strategic calculations. Max Weber argues that states accumulate military power to acquire power prestige (*Machtprestige*), defined as "the glory of power over other communities."[35] As Morgenthau defines prestige as "the reputation for power," he claims that states can go to war to "impress other nations with the power one's own nation actually possesses, or with the power it believes, or wants the other nations to believe, it possesses."[36]

Along these lines, this paper argues that the Al Saud's decision to go to war in Yemen in 2015 finds its origins in a struggle to assert the Kingdom's status as a regional power in the Middle East. Status in international relations is a standing or rank in a community. Status has several meanings—position, perceptual, and social.[37] Status also denotes identity, such as "status a major power" or "status as a

regional power."[38] Actors, operating in a social system, acquire an identity that includes a definition of who they are and where they stand in relations to others. Status has an intersubjective nature; as actors develop a narrative of their self and their rank within the community, they expect others to share a similar belief about their status. In this sense, actors are in constant negotiation with their surrounding social structure.

Status concerns often emerge when states develop a certain expectation about how much status they deserve, and they are accorded a lower status than their expectation. As status usually confers influence, actors can perceive such mismatch as a threat to their material ambitions. When status concerns are triggered, states attempt to shift their position in a hierarchy. In the case of a failure to change the current hierarchy, states resort to conflict and violence.[39] This initiation of a violence military conflict is usually considered to be a 'status-altering' event to compel the international community to change their beliefs about the actor's standing in the hierarchy.

For decades, the Saudi Kingdom has relied on its religious status as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and on its oil wealth to promote its pan-Islamic identity narrative and its regional status as the leader of the Sunni and Muslim worlds.[40] The post-2011 order has provided the Kingdom with the opportunity to actively assert its status as a regional power able to shape outcomes in its neighborhood. No Arab country is capable of achieving the status of a dominant or sole regional leadership; Egypt became focused on its domestic problems and Syria fell into a civil war. The Saudi intervention in Yemen followed a gradual escalation in

the use of armed forces.[41] The Saudi military intervention in March 2011 in Bahrain to help suppress the demonstrations as well as the indirect support for the coup against the Muslim Brotherhood and the restoration of a military regime in Egypt gave the Saudis confidence in asserting their status as a regional power.[42] Nevertheless, regional and international actors did not support the claimed Saudi status. As the Saudis became status conscious, they felt treated far below their "appropriate" status from both regional and international actors. I argue that this status mismatch is at the origin of what many observers qualify as a shift from a traditionally cautious foreign policy towards a more assertive, aggressive behavior.[43]

The Saudis have attempted to assert their status as a leader in the GCC. This attempt has taken several forms. The Saudis sent troops to support its Bahraini ally, King Hamad Al Khalifa, against internal protests, which signaled Saudi determination to take the lead in protecting the Gulf from the effects of the Arab uprisings. Along these lines, Saudi Arabia proposed that the GCC be expanded to include Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt, an idea that was not welcomed by all GCC members. The Saudi Kingdom has constantly insisted on the institutionalization of an expanded, tighter, and greater union of the GCC under their command. King Abdullah's proposals for greater political integration in the Gulf collapsed with Oman's opposition and Kuwait's reluctance. In December 2013, Oman opposed Saudi plans for a unified command structure for the armed forces of the six states. Kuwait refused to sign a GCC internal security pact, as it will compromise its political liberalism and its exceptional constitutional principles within the Gulf. The

emergence of Qatari-Emirati animosity over Libya and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt made Saudi ambitions further unattainable. The most important challenge to the Saudi attempt of acquiring the recognition of Saudi regional status in the Gulf is Qatar's foreign policy that explicitly opposed Saudi policies in Egypt and Syria, which led to the outbreak of the recent crisis with Qatar in 2017.[44]

The Saudi claim to regional leadership received another hit as the Kingdom failed to build a coalition against Iran. The Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon exposed the Kingdom's failure in acting as a regional power able to influence the outcome in its neighborhood. Relying on its Islamic identity, the Kingdom attempted to place itself at the center of a regional coalition (or in sectarian terms a "Sunni" coalition) to counter its long-lived Shiite enemy, Iran. All the GCC states except Saudi Arabia and Bahrain approved the interim nuclear agreement between the US and Iran in November 2013 and received Iran's foreign minister. Furthermore, Oman secretly hosted the initial preliminarily deals between Iran and the United States, which led the nuclear talks. Turkey, which seemed a natural member of a "Sunni" coalition against Iran, challenged the Saudi Kingdom's policies towards the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In this context, the Saudis felt that regional actors did not "appropriately" recognize their claim to regional leadership. As the Saudis have accumulated significant military capabilities over the decades, they felt that they were treated below their "appropriate" status.[45] As Khalid al-Dakhil, a prominent Saudi sociologist and commentator, stated, "During King Abdullah, we did not have a foreign policy, and just watched events unfold in front of our eyes."[46]

Furthermore, the Arab uprisings challenged not only the Kingdom's regional status as the leader of Sunni Islam but also the credibility of its identity narrative. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt in 2013 constituted an important challenge to the Kingdom's narrative as the leader of Sunni Islam. The Kingdom tried to build a regional coalition against the Brotherhood by announcing the group as a terrorist organization and pressuring others to follow suit. However, many states—Qatar, Kuwait, Morocco, Jordan—explicitly refused.[47] Similarly, the Kingdom's quest to place itself at the center of a regional coalition to counter the Islamic State (IS) did not resonate in the region.

At the international level, the Kingdom felt that its regional interests and ambitions were met with "disrespect," especially from the United States. Since its foundation, the Kingdom has relied on external powers, first the British, then the United States, to ensure its security. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Kingdom supported Iraq in its war against the Islamic Republic in Iran. In 1990, the Kingdom called the United States to protect them from Saddam Hussein who invaded and annexed Kuwait. During the 2000s, the Saudis have pursued their interests in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon through proxies. Following the 2011 uprisings, the Saudis became convinced that the divergence between Riyadh and Washington has hindered the Kingdom's regional interests. Following the US reluctance to intervene in Syria after accusations of chemical weapon use in 2013, the Saudi Kingdom has discarded its traditional defense doctrine and attempted to rely on its own resources for security. The Saudis perceived Obama's policies in the region not only as abandoning the US historical responsibilities towards preserving the

Kingdom's security but also as a clear disrespect to the Kingdom's interests.[48] As the United States concluded the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, the Saudis felt betrayed by the administration's lack of transparency during the negotiations and that the Saudi needed to pursue their own interests assertively.[49] In this context, the Kingdom urgently needed a strong reaction to assert its status in the region, and Yemen seemed to be the perfect target.

The accession of King Salman to the thrown after King Abdullah's death in January 2015 has been followed by significant changes in both domestic and foreign policymaking. King Salman appointed Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef as crown prince and his son Mohammed bin Salman as defense minister and deputy crown minister. This ascendant branch of the Saudi ruling family appears to be willing to compensate for what they conceive as Abdullah's failure in acquiring the Kingdom's status.[50] By using its accumulated military capabilities in a war in Yemen, the Kingdom aims to assert its position as a regional power more effectively. Yemen—a weak failed state—seemed a perfect target to implement the Saudi status policy. In fact, the Saudi regime is now asserting a claim that any change in a friendly government will no longer be tolerated, thereby following the classical strategy of attacking the weaker to teach their opponents a lesson.

Assessment and Implications

Assessing the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen is a challenging task due to the lack of independent sources in Yemen and the opacity of the operation. That being said, a critical mass of sporadic information has been published in UN reports, interviews

of Gulf policy makers, experts reports and analyses. After a couple of years of incessant shelling by air, land, and sea the Saudis are learning the limits of their military power in Yemen. No fundamental victory can be observed as the advances of the Houthis, and their supporters did not cease. Until now, the intervention did not change the balance of power between different forces on the ground.

The first phase of the intervention included tight air and naval blockade to prevent weapon supply from reaching the Houthis. This phase also included airstrikes to destroy Yemen's air and costal defense and ballistic-missile capabilities. After destroying the initial military targets, the coalition widened its scope to destroy the infrastructure to hinder the Houthis' mobility. [51] Yet, this air war had high costs. The collateral damage, including civilian casualties and the humanitarian crises, has been acute, which led to the condemnation of the intervention in international forums. Despite these coercive attacks against the Houthis, the movement showed resilience through constant ballistic missiles fired over Saudi borders. More recently, the Houthis have fired ballistic missiles toward Riyadh.[52] Furthermore, the ground operation in Yemen led to the exposure of the coalitions' forces to attacks by the Houthis and their allies, which led to substantial losses in Saudi armed forces.[53]

In Saudi calculations, the potential costs of the intervention are overshadowed by the Saudi will to gain the status of a regional power. This motive is manifest in daily press conferences since the beginning of the intervention held by the Saudi Ministry of Defense with briefings on developments in the battlefield. These events have become an opportunity to diffuse the image of a regional power

that decided to protect its interests aggressively while adding their own sense of status. In the first few months of the intervention, Brigadier General Ahmad Asseri highlights the Saudi assumedly successful strikes by photos, videos, and other images. These briefs have particularly focused on spreading out Saudi Arabia's military capabilities—including warplanes, attack helicopters, tanks, and armored personnel carriers. The Kingdom has imposed a tight control over the media to avoid any revelation that the operation has so far failed to defeat the Houthis. Furthermore, the Kingdom has used a heavy hand in prohibiting any challenge to the official narrative of a "just" and "necessary" war. Any Saudi national who criticizes the war is risking significant fines and a perennial prison sentence.

The intervention has dangerous implications for both Yemen and the Kingdom. The war between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi rebels is bringing Yemen to the brink. Although the Saudi intervention aimed to destroy the capabilities of the Houthis, it seems stirring the group's antagonism and enmity towards the Kingdom rather than deterring it. The Houthis do not show any signs of weakening nor are they likely to give up on their resistance. Furthermore, the longer the war continues, the more likely the Houthis become increasingly vulnerable to Iranian influence out of necessity.

Another presumably unintended implication of the war in Yemen has been the expansion of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) offshoots, especially in eastern Yemen. Amid the chaos created by the collapse of the government and the fights between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis, these groups found a fertile ground for expansion; they acquired territory and increased their influence.[54] As these

groups have their own agenda and fight both the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis, the resolution of this conflict became even more complicated. This war has further fragmented the country, created long-term instability, and allowed even extremists to thrive.

Whereas analysts consider the expansion of these groups as the most dangerous development of the Saudi war in Yemen, the greatest danger to the Kingdom comes from the humanitarian crisis caused by the war. Since March 2015, the sea, air, and naval blockade over the country imposed by the coalition sparked a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. The airstrikes have targeted the infrastructure—airports, roads, factories, and power stations—in a country that was already unable to maintain a basic infrastructure without foreign aid. The attacks also targeted civilians, refugee camps, schools, places of worship and residential buildings, which highly increased the war casualties and atrocities. Despite the announced cease in military actions and change of tracks toward a political process under "Operation Restoration Hope" on 21 April 2015, the military campaign has continued. What the Saudis have estimated to be a short-lived campaign seems to turn into a long war of attrition. According to the United Nations, from 26 March 2015 through 26 March 2017, the war has caused more than 13,045 civilians dead, two million displaced, 18 million in need of some humanitarian assistance.[55]

The prolongation of the war and the increasing humanitarian cost risk undermining the Kingdom's claim for status at the regional level. The Saudi identity narrative officially embraces the ideals of Islam, which prescribe solidarity and fraternity among Muslims and prohibit fighting or causing harm to brotherly

Muslim people. Although the Kingdom portrays the Houthis as Shiite Others, the humanitarian crisis is affecting all Yemeni population, which is constituted of a Sunni majority.

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Ultimately, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen is an example of pursuing a risky military intervention to attain status in the region. The intervention proved to be flawed. The cost of the operation continue to mount for the Saudi Kingdom, and there is still no appearing agenda to minimize the costs. Despite mounting political, economic, and military costs, the Saudi elite persists in this failing intervention. The perseverance in this catastrophic war reflects the Saudi elites' aversion to perceived losses, especially in terms of status, and any attempt to solve the conflict without conveying the image of a Saudi victory is unlikely to succeed.

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