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A comparative case study of external actors' influence on the Yemeni civil war since 2014

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the Yemeni civil war by investigating how the two regional powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran have influenced the conflict, while having to deal with their own mutual rivalry. To achieve this, the paper makes use of Jakob Tolstrup's theory on Black Knights. In his paper he mainly writes on the issue of elections in authoritarian regimes and presents Russia as this black knight actor, who wishes to keep its sphere of influence in other post-soviet states. Nevertheless, this paper seeks to push the limits of his original theory and use it in a different context while still taking the same characteristics and behavioral expectations into consideration. Although some specific instruments within the different mechanisms in the theory are hard to apply in their original sense, it was therefore decided to stretch the meaning of these mechanisms and apply them in the case of the Yemeni civil war. This paper is conducted as a comparative case study, which investigates how Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively, has influence and been involved throughout the whole process of the Yemeni civil war since 2014 until today. To make sense of their influence and interests in this conflict, the paper has conducted the analysis with the help of principles from process tracing, which aims to draw causal inferences from the observable decisions and behavioral patterns that can be seen by both Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen. Due to the nature of the conflict and the two regional actors, the paper does not only present and investigate the Yemeni civil war, but dives into how the two main foreign actors in this conflict have influenced the conflict itself, but also each other's participation in this conflict. The two actors have for a large part of their own history been in conflict, in terms of their ethnic and religious backgrounds, but also in terms of grand strategy. Saudi Arabia's and Iran's involvement is therefore not a coincidence or purely based on the idea that one Muslim faction should support each other simply because they share the same ideological ideas. The involvement is a combination of multiple elements, with the main one being the fact that this war is a war of security, power and regional dominance. This paper therefore concludes that Saudi Arabia and Iran have acted according to multiple black knight behavioral mechanism and definitely can be considered as such. There is also a strong causality between their involvement and how the Yemeni civil war has developed. Without Saudi Arabia's involvement, the internationally recognized government (IRG) would likely have collapsed completely and given the Houthis the opportunity to take control of much larger parts of the country. Without Iran's involvement, the Saudi coalition and their Operation Decisive Storm would have put

too much pressure on the Houthis, which would have resulted in a collapse from their side. It can therefore be concluded that the two regional powers resulted in the conflict becoming prolonged, but also much more devastating to the civilian population. Moreover, the two powers never truly achieved their ultimate goal in the conflict, but if one winner had to be chosen, it would have to be Iran, due to how the Houthis have remained in power in the capital Sana'a and has grown much stronger. Today the conflict in Yemen has transitioned into a much less serious domestic civil war and the Houthis have now become one of the main Iranian tools to strike American and Israeli targets.

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Introduction

The Yemeni civil war is a very interesting and important case since it expresses the dynamic and multifaceted nature of civil wars. When we consider the case of the civil war in Yemen, we usually talk about the war that is occurring between the two main belligerents, namely the Houthi movement and the official Yemeni government forces. The war initially broke out towards the end of 2014 when the Houthi rebel group took control of the capital Sana'a, but as more international actors got involved in the beginning of 2015 it became a much more international matter rather than simply a domestic issue. It is a conflict that has roots that go back to the Arab spring uprising which first began in 2011 and ended in 2012 with the resignation of the first Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh and the inauguration of the next president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, who stepped down in 2022 (Coombs). If we are to go back even further it is a conflict that is a small part of a much larger conflict between the two main Islam factions, specifically Sunni and Shia. This issue has been a persistent point of tension for a very long time throughout the Muslim world and especially the middle east. The middle east is somewhat of a controversial term, nevertheless this paper chooses to use this term since it encompasses both the Arab world, which is the main area of focus of this paper, but also a country like Iran which has a very clear role in this conflict and the affairs surrounding it. The Yemeni civil war therefore is a conflict of multiple fronts. On the one hand it is a conflict that started off as a consequence of many years of unemployment and difficult economic conditions in the country as a result of corruption and poor government decisions (Day, Brehony et al. 234). These issues made the general population very unhappy which led them to protest against the government with calls to have the then President Ali Abdullah Saleh resign. As part of these protests official government forces killed tens of people which then was followed by very severe civil unrest and retaliation by armed supporters of the opposition. Saleh was injured as a result of the fighting and effectively resigned while giving over his powers to the vice president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Although Hadi didn't see the transfer of power until months later, but by the beginning of 2012 in February, Hadi officially became the president which ended Saleh's 33-year rule. In 2014 after a long period of time with protests against the Hadi government surrounding the issue of fuel among other things, the Houthis finally decided to fight the Yemeni armed forces in a very serious manner after which they took control of the capital Sana'a in September of 2014. A following federalization plan proposed by Hadi was not accepted by the Houthis.

Since it would have meant that their home region of Saada would end up being landlocked and with very few natural resources at their disposal (Al-Deen). Simultaneously, as this plan was being considered, fighting intensified and the Houthi threat grew to new heights which eventually meant that the neighboring country of Saudi Arabia got involved militarily. Iran was at this point already supporting the Houthis both politically and militarily, but this support was only going to grow deeper as the Saudi coalition started their Operation Decisive Storm and became a very serious threat to the Houthis. The Yemeni civil war is a conflict that has evolved and changed a lot throughout the years and as of today it is a conflict that has transitioned much more into an anti-American and anti-Israel issue at least from the side of the Houthis and Iran, while the PLC and the Houthis have halted much of their fighting and instead tried to work together more diplomatically.

This paper will therefore investigate and analyze how the Saudi Arabian and Iranian proxy conflict can be seen in the case of the Yemeni civil war, while taking Jakob Tolstrup's theory on Black Knights into consideration. This paper will effectively be working with the research question: **''How have external actors influenced the process of the Yemeni civil war from 2014-today?''**.

To be able to answer the selected research question, this paper will first and foremost work with the cases of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The most important aspects of the relationship between the regional powers will be presented and investigated. The historical background will quickly be covered, which aims to help understand where the roots of the antagonistic nature of their relationship come from. While the case of the Yemeni civil war is at the center, the paper is set up as a comparative case study between the Saudi Arabian influence and the Iranian influence on the civil war. The mechanisms behind their decision making and behavior will therefore be interpreted and analyzed with the help of Tolstrup's theory on black knight behavior. With this theory the behavior of the two regional powers will be easier understood. Saudi Arabia and Iran have both been chosen due to their very competitive nature and their long history of rivalry, which stem back hundreds of years and perhaps has developed into more geopolitical differences rather than more religious and cultural differences as it perhaps was in the past. At the same time, while considering how Saudi Arabia and Iran are acting according to the theory, the causal inference of the actions and events will also be investigated, since a conflict like the one in Yemen and between Saudi Arabia and Iran, is always developing and changing due to different factors emerging and disappearing. The case of Yemen was selected for this paper, since it is an extremely

interesting and important conflict, that reflects how different states can change their attitude towards their initial opponent and even can bring them closer to their original enemy. Furthermore, it is a conflict and country that has shown its influence on another very central and important conflict, that is the war in Gaza, between Israel and Hamas. This further shows how causality and the sequence of events have the opportunity to not only determine the state of the conflict itself, but also the state of other conflicts and events on an international level. Overall, it can be stated that without foreign involvement and influence, the war and conflict in Yemen would look a lot differently than it looks today.

Literature review

In this section, the main literature surrounding the main areas of interest and importance has been selected and presented. The section has been split up into three different sections that each cover one aspect, especially central and crucial for the matter at hand. Before the three sections there's also some historical and cultural background which has been deemed key for the further understanding of the issue, since it is only through the past that we can properly understand the present and in some cases even to some extent predict the future. The three sections cover the economic aspect, the ethnic and religious aspects, and the aspect surrounding the external influence on the conflict and how the conflict has an influence on international relations. It was decided that finding key literature surrounding these important aspects was a necessity for this paper to be able to answer the research question of how external actors have influenced the process of the Yemeni civil war from 2014 until today. I therefore present and investigate an article by Shin and Mahmudlu (2020) on global oil markets and the competition and different strategies implemented by Saudi Arabia and Iran. I also present and investigate an article by Cohen and Hitman (2021) on the how the factors and differences of ethnicity, culture, and religion influence the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also the nevertheless pragmatic nature of these two regional powers in their battle for dominance in the region and the promotion of their values and national interests. Lastly, I present, perhaps the most comprehensive book and piece of literature on the Yemeni civil war written by Stephen W. Day, Noel Brehony et al. (2020). This book was chosen because it dives into and analyzes close to all possible elements and actors that have had some sort of influence on the civil war and the conflict as part of the larger Saudi Arabian and Iranian proxy conflict. It is important to mention that although these pieces of literature have

been chosen since they are very central to the topic of this paper it doesn't mean that everything that is being concluded in these articles and books automatically is being seen as some objective truth. The pieces of literature all have their own area of focus which limits their ability to explain the whole Yemeni conflict or proxy conflict as a conflict that indeed is very multidimensional and as a conflict that throughout time has changed and evolved into a conflict based on new interests and different characteristics. This is why this section starts off by presenting the issue at hand and topic from a more general level by looking at the foundation of the main points of friction and interest. Afterwards, it presents the central aspects in a much more concrete way and in the end all the main points are summarized. This makes it easier for the reader to go through the paper and this section specifically since it has been done in a more systematic way to improve understanding.

When it comes to the literature within the scope of the research question chosen for this paper, it is not as simple as to just talk about the Yemeni civil war in its natural state. This conflict is not just a conflict surrounding different complicated power dynamics within Yemen it is not just a conflict about different ideologies or different ways of seeing the future that is ahead of Yemen. It is also a conflict that makes part of a larger conflict on a regional scale, since the main belligerents of the civil war are supported by external actors and the two main powers in the region. That is the regional powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran that have seen a power struggle between the two states within the Middle East or the Islamic world, which has seen a long history of conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims and Arabic and Persian peoples. Only after the independence of the Safavid dynasty in 1501 from the previous Arab Abbasid Caliphate did Iran become a Shia Muslim empire, which effectively put them in a new complex reality where the wish for dominance within the Arab world became even more prominent and significant (britannica.com). In the case of Yemen, it is indeed the Houthis who are a Shiite group, while the internationally recognized government (IRG) of Yemen and its supporters are Sunni. Iran is of course a supporter of the Houthis, and Saudi-Arabia among other countries, like the US, is a supporter of the officially recognized government.

Overall, there has been a significant amount of research surrounding the civil war in Yemen. It is of course a conflict that has persisted for over 10 years, but it is also a conflict that as mentioned doesn't only revolve around the internal affairs of the country. It is also conflict that in many ways influences and has been influenced by the external affairs of many foreign countries. The research surrounding the matter presented in this paper is therefore not

only concerned with the Yemeni war itself as a national crisis, where the focus is both on a governmental and militarian level, but also on a humanitarian level. The research is concerned with many different aspects and elements that are somehow connected to this conflict. One of the main aspects is the Saudi Arabia and Iran proxy war. Some scholars call this the Saudi Arabia-Iran Cold War or the Cold War within the Muslim world or Middle East. This is because there has been a lot of research suggesting that the historical background of the two regional powers and the cultural differences and especially the religious differences between the Sunni and Shia factions within Islam are one of the root causes for the conflict between the two nations. This conflict can also be seen portrayed by the Yemeni civil war where Sunni and Shia groups are fighting but also different ethnic groups are fighting. There's also the aspect surrounding the economic side of things where both countries seek to somewhat push the other one away and dominate the oil and natural gas sector, this can also be accomplished by using proxies in the region. Indeed, some scholars would rather suggest that this rivalry should be looked at more in geopolitical terms while keeping the ethnic and religious characteristics as supporting attributes of these two competing regional powers, which is what this paper also leans toward when seeking to understand the complicated nature of the Yemeni civil war and the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

To be able to answer the research question surrounding how external actors have influenced the process of the Yemeni civil war since 2014, it would be necessary to look at all these aspects since there is a lot of correlation and since the different elements influence each other. It is also important to remember that the situation itself is always developing and changing. In the third quarter of 2023 we also saw improvements of the tie between Saudi Arabia and Iran where a meeting took place between top diplomats of the two countries, which resulted in an improved relationship to each other in light of a deteriorating relationship with the United States, from the side of both nations. To this day, during President Donald J. Trumps second administration there can still be seen American attacks on the Houthi rebels that control the capital Sana'a in Yemen (Cursino).

Taking into consideration what many scholars see as potential causes to the problematic and very delicate relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it does seem somewhat far-fetched that the whole rift between the two regional powers simply would be about some ethnic and religious differences and disagreements. In the current globalized world and state of international relations it is much more plausible to see these large conflicts

erupt out of more than simply cultural differences. It is of course important to consider these differences nonetheless because these are also often part of the cause behind civil wars in particular. Especially in African countries where there is a number of ethnic groups who are competing for power and independence. This is why it is a very significant aspect when considering civil wars for example since there is often a case of one group being the dominant one and the other groups experiencing some kind of ethnic racism and being seen as less worthy than the dominant group. In the case of the Sunni and Shia differences, they both see themselves as having the correct religion or more specifically the correct way of interpreting the Quran. Where Shia's strongly believe that the caliph or the ruler of the Muslims should be a direct descendant of Muhammad while Sunnis believe that this is not necessary. This is also the reason why Iran doesn't perceive the Saudi Arabian dynastic rule as legitimate within Islam. These disagreements and differences are of course quite able to create a strong divide and tension, since the interpretations represent a bigger picture surrounding how the Muslim countries should live in accordance with the Quran and who is the truthful Muslim leader today.

Economic aspect

Power and the struggle for power in the international arena is more often than not the ultimate reason behind many states' actions and decision making, since this is what ultimately promotes internal prosperity and gives the state the ability to act more internationally by having a stronger economy and military which are the ultimate parameters of power dominance. This is why, as the article published by Shin and Mahmudlu (2020) called ''Global Oil-Market Strategies of Saudi Arabia and Iran'' investigates, much of the two regional powers' regional decisions are based on the fact that the energy market has a lot of weight when it comes to how states act.

In the article the authors present the issue of the complexity of the oil and gas market and how both Saudi Arabia and Iran react and adapt to these complexities and new challenges in light of also being each others main rivals in their region. The study focuses on how the two countries adapt to the developing nature of the oil and gas industry, by looking at what other industries they start to develop more and which new countries they begin to cooperate with or if they stick to their already existing partnerships solely. The study of the article is of very strong importance, since it investigates an aspect of the Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry

that is not focused on their religious and ethnic differences, instead it is nearly only focused on the fact that the oil and gas industry is experiencing and is going to further experience more transformations, which is why the two rivals have had to choose how to further act. In the medium and long term, global efforts surrounding climate change will most likely cause large changes in the oil and gas consumption and demand. The Shale revolution in the US, also put a lot of pressure on the price of oil, since the US after the 2008 recession has been using this strategy to boost its economy, but simultaneously caused trouble for the global oil prices, since they have increased their production of oil by a significant amount (strausscenter.org). The third aspect are the conflicts in the middle east and how these influence and threaten the world and the region. The different conflicts could potentially impact the oil prices and production amounts significantly, depending on the events that occur, and as was seen in 2019, the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabian Aramco oil facilities, did in fact disrupt their oil exports and created a spike in global oil prices while also making the Saudi Arabian stock market fall drastically.

As the two largest energy distributors in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran have long been in conflict over who should be the sole dominating power within the energy sector. Simply said there is a conflict surrounding who can and should sell more oil and natural gas. The region itself is one of the most important sources of fossil fuels in the world (Shin and Mahmudlu 111). As a region it has become less of a strategic importance to the United States, for example due to the China threat and due to the fact that the US in recent years has begun to export much more oil than they have before the covid pandemic (eia.gov). As the article states geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East were expected to increase, since the beginning of 2020 there has in fact been somewhat of an increase in conflicts, this can both be seen in the full scale invasion of the Gaza strip by Israel, but also in the increase of houthi attacks, not only against the internationally recognized government of Yemen but more so in their attacks against American warships and ships in general who try to reach the Suez canal; these are ships who for the most part have something to do with Israel, either being connected economically or militarily. The United States and its allies have also conducted multiple attacks toward the Houthis in recent years (aljazeera.com). The article also states that conflicts might increase due to the fact that the importance of fossil fuels at some point is projected to decrease as a result of rapid changes within the global energy market, for example as a result of the global green transition (Shin and Mahmudlu 111). Saudi Arabia has started to cooperate with Russia, a non-OPEC oil producer, this has been categorized as quite

as successful corporation since it achieved the goal of higher oil prices and showing the global market, that Saudi Arabia is a very influential actor in the energy market. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia also started to consider cooperating with Israel, which can have serious consequences when it comes to the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia as a religious and regional leader of the Muslims and the Arabs; and this specific loss of legitimacy will not only damage its position in the hierarchy in the region, but it will also damage the legitimacy of the monarchical system in the country (Shin and Mahmudlu 111). Contrary to Saudi Arabia, Iran has instead chosen to maintain and strengthen already existing relationships and stick to their status quo strategies. Iran is well aware of the need to diversify the energy industry within the country and come up with different strategies that both take into account the continuing importance of fossil fuels on a global scale but also take into account the changing world, in terms of the green transition and the decrease of oil and gas consumption in the future. Although, Iran is conscious about the importance of industrial diversification, something Saudi Arabia was able to do, the country doesn't have the resources that are required to pursue a new strategy and establish these possible new goals (Shin and Mahmudlu 112). Saudi Arabia in comparison has been able to diversify the revenue of its industries and diversify the sectors that are the backbone of the economy. Even though the oil and gas sector will remain the number one sector in terms of revenue and in terms of absolute size within the national economy, the relative proportion of the oil and gas industry will still be smaller within the national economy due to these industry diversifications (Shin and Mahmudlu 107). Due to the ongoing conflict between the United States and Iran, it has also been difficult for Iran to establish new partners, particularly in the west, but also in general with countries who side more with the US within the global struggle for power between global superpowers. Iran is trying to expand its oil and gas industry and maintain strong relationships with regional powers and global powers. These are countries such as, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Qatar, France, Germany, China and Russia (Shin and Mahmudlu 112). The article states that the hostile relationship between Iran and the United States definitely is a huge obstacle for the Shia majority country, but when taken into account the sheer volume of energy consumption of countries like China, who in turn doesn't have a lot of oil and gas itself, perhaps a hostile relationship with the US isn't as detrimental to the economy as it is being portrayed as. This can especially be seen in light of how Russia has been surviving and even thriving to some degree through all the US and allied countries' sanctions, considering that the country as of the second quarter of 2025 was positioned at the number four spot globally in terms of GDP (PPP) (imf.org). Nevertheless, it is not an easy task for Iran to survive without doing business

with the second largest economy per GDP (PPP) and many others due to the imposed sanctions. Overall, it can be stated that Saudi Arabia chose to act in a more balanced way, choosing to prioritize both the explorative aspect but also the stability of the conventional exploitative aspect of the oil and gas industry; while Iran instead chose to improve the oil and gas industry and prioritize already existing relationships and partnerships, resulting in keeping the traditional exploitative strategy (Shin and Mahmudlu 103).

Ethnic and religious aspects

A piece of literature that predominantly investigates the issues of ethnic and religious tensions surrounding the Saudi Arabia and Iran cold war and proxy conflicts is the article by Ronen A. Cohen and Gati Hitman from 2021 with the title ''IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA CIVILIO-THEO-ZATION CLASH: REFORMULATING REGIONAL STRATEGIES''. In this article the authors dive into the deep-rooted clash between the ethnic differences and religious differences that lie behind the animosity of the Saudi Arabian monarchical regime and the Islamic republic of Iran. Both regional powers are theocratic states in their own right, with Saudi Arabia being a theocracy based on the Sunni branch of Islam and Iran being a theocracy based on the Shia branch of Islam. Both states are considering themselves as the rightful and legitimate leader of the Muslim world (Cohen and Hitman 257).

In the article the authors formulate the issue as a cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran which has been shaping the whole middle east since 2011. This is why the issue is defined as a rivalry that potentially is partially due to both sides' attempt of using the Arab spring as a tool to strengthen their proxies in the region (Cohen and Hitman 257). It is a very significant issue, since as the article states, it is an issue and rivalry that actively has been shaping the middle east for centuries. The objective of the article is to offer practical solutions that would make it possible for the two regional powers to coexist in spite of religious, ethnic and cultural differences, which would ultimately be of benefit to the whole region in general (Cohen and Hitman 257). To make this possible, the research suggest a new conceptualization of how religion and the differences between the two biggest branches in Islam represent the historical clash between these two and the question surrounding who is the rightful and legitimate leader of the Muslim world. It is furthermore also a rivalry not only in terms of religion but also ethnicity, between Arabs and Persians (Cohen and Hitman 257). Although, the authors analyze the issue from the focal point of religion and ethnicity

and for the most part consider the rivalry as a result of these differences, they still conclude that much of the decision making from both sides has more in common with realpolitik and being pragmatic than with simply cultural differences (Cohen and Hitman 270). The authors don't really offer any practical solutions either, at least not any concrete solutions, which is what a reader will expect when reading that they will present practical solutions to the coexistence of the two regional powers. The article does in fact present many different perspectives surrounding why rivalry exists and why the two sides act as they do, but I would argue that they fail to present any actual solutions for them to be able to coexist. The one element that they do in fact present which looks like some sort of actual solution, is the clear domination of either one side, which effectively would make them superior to the other and force the opposite side to accept its inferiority (Cohen and Hitman 272). It also seems like this wouldn't necessarily have to be done on the battlefield, but instead by acquiring more regional power than the other, perhaps by having a majority of countries align themselves with one side, which implicitly would imply that one of the countries is superior in terms of religion, culture and ethnicity and therefore is the rightful leader of the Muslim world (Cohen and Hitman 272). If this in fact is the solution that the article presents, it does go in accordance with the other conclusions and analyzed themes, but it does not seem as a practical solution nor a solution that any of the sides would agree with in such a simple manner. Nevertheless, the article does examine important and interesting themes, very relevant for the understanding and analysis of this particular issue.

The article itself examines the rivalry with a starting point of four decades ago and especially since 2011. It examines whether or not the hostile nature of their relationship comes as a result of the Arab spring, where both countries tried to acquire more influence and power, and strengthen their proxies within the region. The historical religious clash between Sunni and Shia is especially being investigated and the questions about who should be the legitimate leader of the Muslim world is at the forefront (Cohen and Hitman 257). The ethnic difference is also mentioned since there also have been many historical clashes between Arabs and Persians, and it is indeed the Arabs who came with their religion to the Persians first back in the 7th century, eventually after many centuries of a so-called Islamization process, which initially was rejected across the Persian territories, did Iran or the Persians become a unified Shia Islam empire, which even incorporated Azerbaijan back then. The article even quotes a Saudi analyst, who in turn states that, "Saudis see the brutal war in Yemen, where the Houthi rebels are supported by Iran, as a necessary response in a battle for

the survival for the Saudi nation and the hegemony of Arabness over Persianization" (Cohen and Hitman 268). Cohen and Hitman themselves conclude that the religious and ethnic differences both on a historical level, but also in the modern age plays a significant role, when considering how the two countries act and which decisions they make politically, but the role that national interests have for the two regional powers is undeniable. Whether it being oil and gas dominance or military prowess, the general national interests are a definite factor in the decision-making process. The analyst in turn mainly considers the ethnic aspect of the matter, viewing the Yemeni civil war as a direct challenge by Iran towards Saudi Arabia, which seemingly revolves more around ethnic dominance rather religious dominance and legitimacy. Perhaps this takes more into consideration the fact that it, historically, indeed was the Arabs who first presented Islam for the Persians and for around 4 centuries dominated the Persians while also influencing the ethnic group culturally, linguistically and religiously, between the 7th century until the creation of the Safavid Dynasty in the very beginning of the 16th century. The article states that the Arab spring in Yemen and the turbulent nature within the society was an excellent situation which was seized by Iran to be able to influence the politics in the country and create a new strong proxy in the region, which eventually happened (Cohen and Hitman 266). By doing this they were also able to challenge Saudi Arabia more directly, and even got Saudi Arabia to back off from the civil war after its Houthi allies and proxies took responsibility for attacking the oil processing facilities in the country, which cut Saudi Arabia's oil production by half, effectively giving Iran the upper hand during this time and asserting dominance in the region further, with Saudi Arabia moving away from combatting the Houthi threat further and instead seeking to find solutions through diplomatic means both directly with the Houthi group, but also with Iran. With the new power dynamic in Yemen, where the dominating group now became a Shia Muslim group, Iran now had a very obvious strategy into expanding its sphere of influence to comprise Yemen, whereas before the Houthi takeover of the capital, Yemen was more aligned with Saudi Arabia and the general Sunni side. After the Houthis came to a lot of power in the country, Iran was now in general able to threaten Saudi Arabia much more than ever before, because it had an ally at the southern border with Saudi Arabia that was willing to even attack into the territory of the monarchy. Iran has supplied the Houthis with ammunition, rockets and drones, which further increased their capabilities when it came to combatting both internal opponents but also the external threat that they faced, from the likes of Saudi Arabia and its coalition (Cohen and Hitman 267). As the conflict and war raged on, it seems like Saudi Arabia has shifted their focus and priorities. In the beginning, these priorities might

have been about securing the Saudi border, halting Iran's regional dominance ambitions and preserve the regional security, including from terrorist attacks (Cohen and Hitman 268). Later during the conflict, perhaps after the large oil infrastructure attacks that the Saudis endured, it seemed like the priorities and focus completely shifted towards more neutrality and much less direct conflict. Instead, the country now rather wanted to protect itself from cross border attacks and in general act more cautiously and pragmatically surrounding the whole issue, while taking the future security and prosperity of the country itself into consideration and less focusing on the regional power struggle with Iran (Khan). The two regional powers simultaneously started meeting and talking to each other in hopes of reconciling the relationship between the countries (aljazeera.com).

External influence

One of the biggest and most comprehensive pieces of literature written about the Yemeni civil war which in particular looks into the many different kinds of external influence that this conflict has been the subject of is the book titled ''Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis'' and is written in 2020 by Stephen W. Day, Noel Brehony et al. The book itself has investigated the external influence that the Yemeni civil war has experienced from many angles. This paper will primarily look at the Saudi Arabian and Iranian influence surrounding the conflict, but other countries' influence will still be considered since this is a conflict has had many implications on the regional and international affairs. Furthermore, it is a conflict that has influenced other conflicts in the region, for example the current war between Israel and Hamas.

Stephen Day's and Noel Brehony's motivation for this book lie in the complete history behind all the trouble and conflict that the country of Yemen has experienced. The issues that the authors are interested in investigating are how the conflict started and why, and which actor or actors were responsible for the failure of the state, the destruction of the country and the immense misery that the general population became subject to (Day, Brehony et al. 6). The scope is also very clearly defined and also of much important relevance. The conflict in Yemen is a conflict that the authors address as somewhat of a forgotten war when it started in 2014/2015. It was a war that started while the American media was busy with the American presidential campaign, and the question surrounding Brexit was heavily debated and discussed, simultaneously the rest of Europe was experiencing one of the largest influxes

of refugees ever from Syria (Day, Brehony et al. 5). Yemen was also a country a little further away from the west and a less known one for that matter as well. The reason that this country's conflict and war is important is because no country deserves to be ignored and considered irrelevant, even if it is poor and remote like Yemen is. It is a complex country with its own historical challenges and specifications, and there is therefore not one single solution to the conflict or one single formula that works on all civil wars (Day, Brehony et al. 7). The book was written to enlighten and make students and others reflect on the complex nature of the Yemeni civil war by shedding light on a conflict from many different angles, both internal, but also regional and global (Day, Brehony et al. 7). It is a conflict that partially has been the consequence of internal failures, but also a conflict that was the subject to failed external policies and influences. It is therefore a conflict that investigates all the complex forces and dynamics that both are out of the control of Yemen itself and in their control; and it is only after one has understood all these complexities and specifications surrounding why the country has failed itself and been failed by others, that we perhaps can begin to find solutions towards addressing the challenges at hand and restoring the peace and rebuilding the state (Day, Brehony et al. 7).

The book very cleverly tries to involve and take into account all aspects and areas of influence that at least one way or another are connected to the outbreak of the civil war in Yemen and the further process of the conflict. Although this is the case, this paper will mostly focus its attention on the Saudi Arabian and Iranian involvement in the conflict. It is the nature of the research methodology and design of this book and this paper that different perspectives are being presented surrounding the outbreak of the war and the future warfare. This has been done since it is a conflict of a very complex nature, where differing and competing perspectives inevitably are present. The analysis of these differing perspectives also had to be done with some sort of sympathy and understanding for that side's and actor's interests and motives, since this would be the only way of accurately portraying the decision-making of the relevant actors (Day, Brehony et al. 9).

Saudi Arabian involvement

In the very beginning of the chapter surrounding Saudi Arabia's role in the conflict in Yemen, the author makes it clear that the Saudi choice to get involved with fighting the Houthi militant group has more to do with their rivalry with Iran than their desire to essentially go to

war with their neighbor. The book also states that it was in fact the Saudis intervention in the conflict that created the situation that is seen today, where the country is in a deep humanitarian crisis and also the poorest of all Arab countries (Day, Brehony et al. 115). Before the intervention by Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni civil war there were two main situations where this very important factor of Sunni versus Shia clearly could be seen. The first situation was the Saudi Arabian decision to get involved in the Arab Spring in Bahrain where their ultimate goal was to prevent the opposition of getting into power in the country (Day, Brehony et al. 117). This was a decision based on the fact that the current government in Bahrain are Sunni Muslims, and the opposition were mainly Shia comprised by many different Shia protesters and citizens who were unhappy with how the Shias was being treated and discriminated against in the country. Although, Bahrain reportedly has a slight Shia majority population, it is in fact the Sunni faction that is in power and in government. The second situation was the protests that occurred in Saudi Arabia itself primarily in 2011 and 2012. Again, these were protests by mainly the Shia population in the eastern most province of Saudi Arabia. Simultaneously, with the protests in Saudi Arabia the Arab Spring also came to Yemen where the late president Saleh was called upon to be removed from office. After a long time of refusing to leave power, Saleh eventually was rushed to a military hospital in Saudi Arabia due to a bomb attack which injured him (Day, Brehony et al. 118). While being treated in Saudi Arabia, his vice president Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi became the acting president. A couple of months after the Saudis saved his life, he signed the transition documents which officially turned power over to Hadi and by February 2012 Hadi was now the president of Yemen and the Saudis finally achieved their main objective in Yemen which was the removal of their Shia nemesis from office and by doing so replacing him with a Sunni leader. This was a very interesting situation of great importance to the Saudi Arabian government, since Saleh in fact was a Shia Muslim, and the Saudis never truly wanted his government to be in power in Yemen (Day, Brehony et al. 118). The two countries had previously been at war back in the 1930's and the expansionist ambitions of Iran surrounding regional dominance was of great concern to the Saudi kingdom. This was also the case in Bahrain where it was mainly the greater Iranian threat that was taken into consideration above anything else. It therefore becomes clear that a big part of the Arab Spring especially in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Yemen incorporated the historic long battle and division between Sunni and Shia. The Arab Spring therefore ended to the most part with very positive results for Saudi Arabia, the government in Bahrain remained Sunni, the government in Yemen

became Sunni and the protests in Saudi Arabia were stopped mostly without any further large-scale complications for the government.

Iranian involvement

The relation and connection that the Houthis have with Iran today was never a given situation. The Houthis were never part of Iran's regional proxy ally group, like Hezbollah in Lebanon are and different Shia groups in Iraq are. As we know, the Houthis started off as a group as a consequence of the very sectarian state that Yemen and its society was in (Day, Brehony et al. 149). Furthermore, it was the power distribution that was of concern to them and the fact that these political and regional divisions made many parts of their lives unfair and difficult. This is of course the case anytime there is a country which has an undoubtedly very complex and multilayered society, but that doesn't necessarily mean that certain groups in the country should be worse off simply because they are part of that group (Day, Brehony et al. 149). The Iranian side knew that these societal and political complexities within Yemen existed, and after the competition for power truly started after the toppling of the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his regime, Iran saw no other option than to be the one supporting actor and stand by the Houthis who were short on allies. When the Houthis overthrew Saleh's regime it was never inspired or facilitated by Iran, neither was Iran part of the cause of the civil war (Day, Brehony et al. 149). Iran never had the ability to end the conflict either. What the regional power instead had the ability to do was to exploit this conflict for its own benefit. This was done and is still to some extent done by supporting the Houthis both militarily, but also rhetorically with the overall aim of acquiring more regional power, especially when it comes to its broader competition with Saudi Arabia (Day, Brehony et al. 149). Today this competition and power dynamic also entails a country like Israel. This is a completely different kind of conflict, which is much more about military dominance rather than also economic and cultural, like with the Saudis.

The interesting part between the Iranian and Houthi relationship lies in the fact that the Houthis, although a Shia group, are part of the Shia branch called Zaydism who ideologically are closer to Sunnis than Twelver Shias, the largest and most dominant Shia branch, which is seen in Iran (Day, Brehony et al. 150). This was a known fact for Iran before the conflict started and before the Arab spring. This could potentially also be a reason for why Iran was hesitant to expand their relationship to Yemen, since this group ideologically and theologically should be closer to Saudi Arabia than Iran. But suddenly in 2013 hardline

Iranian revolutionary guards began referring to the Houthis as simply a Shia group, and Iranian state media started to speak about the group as a Shia rebel group who were struggling and fighting against Saudi sponsored Sunni extremism. As time went on, Iran began to become more and more unconcerned about whether the international community knew about their attempts to become closer with the Houthis and them becoming allies. For Iran, the Houthis represented a new Shia ally in the Arab world that could enforce and strengthen the axis of resistance, which is an informal Iranian created organization, that has the aim of supporting different allied militant and political groups in the region against the threat from the United States, Israel and their regional allies, like Saudi Arabia (Day, Brehony et al. 162). For the Houthis, this support and acknowledgement from Iran, meant a strong ally in the region who could support them militarily and politically, and it made them become part of something much bigger than simply a rebel group in Yemen, namely the axis of resistance, which holds significant power in the region, although this power was severely hurt after the fall of Syrian president Bashar Al-Assads government towards the end of 2024, where the previous Syrian president was overthrown and replaced with a Syrian Sunni Muslim politician and former rebel commander from Saudi Arabia called Ahmed al-Sharaa. Although, the Houthis might have been the least significant and close group to Iran before the fall of its Syrian ally, today it would seem like this ally is of much greater importance than ever before, where the Houthis might have been a somewhat expendable proxy in the region (Day, Brehony et al. 162). The Houthis were always much more distant to Iran than their proxies in Lebanon and Iraq. It was also a group that was much more reluctant in becoming a fully-fledged proxy like the others although their relationship was undeniable. On a religious and ideological level Iran never exercised the same amount of power and influence over the Houthis as they have done over their other proxy groups, and this perhaps wasn't a goal nor a problem to them (Day, Brehony et al. 162). They saw the Houthis much more as simply a tool to that could be used to sabotage Saudi Arabia's regional ambitions and confront their regional agenda with a very low risk to Iran, but with a potentially very high reward. The Houthis were able to make the UAE withdraw forces and eventually Saudi Arabia withdraw forces, due to their rise in power and capabilities, which politically did put Iran on the winning side of things in Yemen to some extent (Day, Brehony et al. 162). Especially, since the Saudi Arabian and allied military campaign had failed with their ultimate goal of eliminating the Houthi threat and preventing them from becoming an Iranian proxy, although missile strikes still occur, but as of the first and second quarter of 2025, these mainly come from the US' side.

As a conclusion, it can be stated that the Yemeni civil war wasn't a conflict that started off as a result of some massive Iranian or Saudi Arabian influence. It was a conflict that mainly started due to different grievances experienced by the Houthi group, and it was also a conflict that started as a result of an opportunity that this Shia group saw and took advantage of. Only after the Houthi group took the Yemeni capital of Sanaa was it when the two regional powers started to consider this conflict very seriously and both saw opportunities and threats as a consequence of it. Iran saw a new Shia ally which could help them reinforce their axis of resistance and an ally who could threaten the Middle Eastern Kingdom militarily and economically. Saudi Arabia saw a new government that de facto was in power right on their southern border who now could threaten the balance of power in the region and their oil production facilities in the south of the country. It is therefore a conflict where the economic aspect plays a vital role in how the foreign states act, but it is the cultural and religious aspects who mainly determine which group is supported by which regional power.

Methodology

This section will present the methodological choices that have been decided to be the most optimal and relevant for this specific topic and paper. The paper is set up as a comparative case study, where the focus lies in two similar, but nevertheless still different cases. On the one hand, the paper is focused on looking at the similarities and differences between the Saudi Arabian and Iranian involvement in the Yemeni conflict. On the other hand, the paper is focused on finding and investigating the causal mechanisms that are at play, through the use of process tracing. Both academic articles and newspaper articles will be used for the analysis in a qualitative way.

Research design, strategy and data

This paper uses a comparative case study with the qualitative approach of process tracing. The selected issue will be looked at by using qualitative data from mainly secondary sources. These secondary sources consist of different academic articles and books who analyze the Yemeni civil war while focusing on the two regional powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran and how these influence the conflict itself and each other. Different newspaper articles and mass media information will also be used for the main goal of acquiring the necessary knowledge

on the most recent events and actions revolving around the civil war and the proxy conflict, since this information has yet to be taken into account and analyzed by other researchers. It was decided to work qualitatively rather than quantitively, since this paper wants to understand what happened and why it happened. It is also especially interested in understanding if the sequence of events has influenced the civil war and the proxy conflict further, which is why a qualitative approach made much more sense, especially since numbers can't explain certain behaviors as well as language-based data can, like in this case. Since the paper will be investigating causal inference, it will also be working deductively. The goal is to come to some sort of conclusion based on inference, by looking at causal mechanisms and using the selected theory of Black Knights (2015) by Jakob Tolstrup.

The research in this paper has been written while taking many important criteria into consideration that all helps with creating research of higher quality. A very important criteria is 'transparency'. It is a known fact that in qualitative research it is sometimes difficult to establish what a researcher actually did and how they arrived at their conclusions (Bryman 406, 2016). Therefore, it is important to be very clear and precise when explaining what, how and why a researcher did what they did. This not only improves the quality of the paper and the research by explaining the whole process very systematically, but it also improves the reader's comprehension and understanding of the whole paper. Oftentimes there are problems with understanding what the researcher actually was doing with the data and how it was analyzed and therefore it can be difficult to clearly understand where the conclusions are coming from and why the conclusions are as they are. This is why this paper has sought to strengthen its transparency by being mindful about how the data has been collected. It was also important for this paper to be clear about what exactly was being done throughout the whole process to achieve some sort of conclusion on the selected research question surrounding how external actors have influenced the process of the Yemeni civil war since 2014 until today. That is why, throughout the chapters, it is being explained what, how and why the steps that are taken have been taken (Bryman 406, 2016).

Another criteria called 'generalization' is also one that is important to consider. In general, there is a consensus surrounding generalization that it is an aspect of research which is relatively important to have. Nevertheless, generalization is something that is more common in quantitative rather than qualitative research. In qualitative research there are indeed problems with generalization and even though in many cases it is difficult to make very broad generalizations it doesn't necessarily mean that the performed research is poor in

nature. In the case of this paper specifically what is important to do or attempt, is to generalize the findings to the theory rather than the case itself (Bryman 406, 2016). This means that we don't generalize on the specific population, actor or location, but on how the theory itself sees and analyzes these issues. This is why it is in fact the quality of the theoretical inferences that have been analyzed on the basis of the qualitative data which is being used and is important to the formation of generalizations. There's also an understanding within qualitative research which suggests that researchers often do in fact make generalizations, even though generalizations in their primary form are nearly impossible to make. Instead, what many researchers do without sometimes even acknowledging it, is they create these 'moderatum' generalizations (Bryman 406, 2016). These are generalizations that have been based on instances of a broader set of recognizable features. This means that instead of trying to generalize 1 to 1, we find certain trends and characteristics that appear often or in many cases and on the basis of that we create certain generalizations on a particular actor or phenomenon (Bryman 406, 2016). Although, it is important to remember that these generalizations or created with more hesitation and uncertainty surrounding them in contrast to statistical generalizations which are more precise and confident (Bryman 406, 2016). The specific issue in this paper does in fact have difficulties with generalization since it analyzes two actors with their own very specific history culture ethnic background and national interests who all influence one another, and since both Saudi Arabia and Iran are rational actors it means that although these elements can influence how they act surrounding the Yemeni civil war and their own proxy conflict, they won't do something simply on the basis of one of these elements without thinking things through. This is why it can be concluded that it is very difficult to make certain generalizations on the basis of these two actors and the case itself due to the very complicated and multifaceted matter at hand, and therefore it is easier to make generalizations on the basis of the selected theory on the issue surrounding black knights, which can explain why actors act as they do in many different cases and locations.

Another thing that is important to take into account is the point surrounding the 'transferability' of the research or case. Transferability is also known as external validity in quantitative analysis and revolves around the issue of whether the findings can be transferred or understood in another context or case. This means that it is necessary to provide the research and the paper with enough depth and not breadth, to be able to create a situation where the question of transferability is on the table (Bryman 392, 2016). This is an important

issue to keep in mind since, transferability can help other researchers use this specific case on the Yemeni civil war and the Saudi Arabian and Iranian proxy conflict as a good foundation to understand other conflicts or matters surrounding civil war, regional dominance or the battle between ethnicities and religions (Cohen and Hitman). With a deep enough understanding of this particular issue, others can use the ideas and findings on issues that perhaps are similar in nature or even different, but with some overlapping characteristics. This paper specifically seeks to present and use various key areas for its analysis that all have an influence on the conflict within Yemen and the regional power struggle. This is being done to both consider the broader implications and consequences of the civil war, but it is also being done, since it is impossible to understand the issues at play without understanding the many mechanisms at play, since there is more than simply one root cause for the civil war and the broader conflict in the region.

The concept of 'credibility' or 'internal validity' has also been considered when writing this paper. This concept revolves around the feasibility or credibility of the researcher's account of a certain phenomenon or issue. Since there are a large number of different accounts, perspectives and understandings of certain phenomena, it means that it is more difficult to state that one of them is completely objectively true (Bryman 390, 2016). It is therefore not always possible to fully conclude whether one perspective in fact is true or not, or whether only one part of the particular conclusion is true. It is therefore important to ensure good credibility when doing research to provide the field and the world with quality research that has been carried out systematically and according to the canons of good practice, which makes the reader able to correctly understand the findings and how they came to existence (Bryman 390, 2016). This is why this paper, goes through the major and most important actions and situations that have occurred surrounding the civil war in Yemen and the reactions from both sides of the table, namely from Saudi Arabia and Iran. Thereafter, the theoretical perspective of black knight activities is being used to analyze these reactions and understand the interests behind Saudi Arabia and Iran in the conflict. It is with the use of process tracing that these understandings can be found in the best way possible and that the credibility can be ensured as well as possible, since they not only show the interest in the conflict from both sides, but they also depict the dynamic nature of the conflict and the proxy war; and in the general the dynamic and complicated nature of nation states when it comes to dealing with very multifaceted international processes and challenges.

Comparative case study

Choosing to work with the topic as a comparative case study means that this paper seeks to study and analyze two separate cases on one single conflict. In this paper specifically it means that what is being studied is one case surrounding Saudi Arabia's influence in Yemen and the second case is about Iran's influence in Yemen. This influence revolves around elements from different sources in areas like military, political, economic and ideological support. Utilizing the comparative case study means that it enables the paper to be more structured and systematical in its approach. It also creates a much more focused comparison and embodies the logic of comparison, which implies that social phenomena are better understood when they are being compared rather than looked at as a single entity. In a comparative case study, it is possible to select and compare cases in a different way and with different backgrounds. It is possible to compare two very different cases, who perhaps have a similar result, but it is also possible to compare two cases that are similar and look at how the cases despite of this similarity have different results or methods in dealing with the situation (Bryman 72, 2016). It is by using this approach that it becomes possible to analyze and understand why one actor or the other has been more or less successful with their goals and interests, even though both actors intervened. This can of course be due to different reasons, if it is the case, with the reasons potentially lying in very different areas of influence, which is what will be analyzed. Comparing cases also enables the researcher to investigate causal inference by assessing certain regularities or patterns and by dismissing other plausible explanations on the matter at hand (Comparative Case Study 1). The point where the comparative case study and process tracing come into contact is exactly when talking about causality and the fact that the comparative case study might be playing a crucial role in the understanding of causality (Bryman 74, 2016). Comparative case studies excel in identifying and explaining differences between two cases or two different actors. It is used to not only identify differences, but also similarities. These differences and similarities can both be surrounding the grand scheme of things or in more concrete phenomena or characteristics, who act more as a foundation for the overall grand strategy. There is some debate about whether the comparative case study is good at or in general able to establish causal inference. What researchers appear to agree upon is the fact, that this specific case study is able to identify causal mechanisms, but that it might perhaps have challenges with establishing causal inference. Due to this challenge, it is therefore important to use the comparative case

study as a tool for the identification of the causal mechanisms and thereafter it is beneficial to use process tracing to establish causal inference, which makes the analysis more systematical in nature and improves the internal validity or credibility, by testing the causal relationships very specifically.

Process tracing

Process tracing is indeed a qualitative method which specializes in uncovering causal mechanisms between an actor and the case. This method is an analytical tool used to draw descriptions and causal inferences. It is used for understanding phenomena and why these phenomena happen when they do and as they do. Process tracing can make important contributions to various research objectives. The first objective that this tool is used for is to identify new and interesting social and political phenomena while systematically describing them (Collier 824, 2011). The second objective that the method can be used for is to evaluate explanatory hypotheses that have been presented prior in the field or on the topic. It can also be used for discovering new hypotheses and evaluating these new causal hypotheses (Collier 824, 2011). This goes hand in hand with the third objective, which revolves around the creation and investigating of new causal mechanisms. Process tracing can also be used for addressing many challenges and problems around the creation and identification of hypotheses who often can be presented as some definitive or objective truth (Collier 824, 2011). This of course is not always or necessarily the case, which is why process tracing can be used very beneficially to test these hypotheses which can help with denying other hypotheses or at least create and paint a much more believable and objective picture around the hypotheses. In international relations it is in general very difficult to definitively state that one version of a certain situation is one hundred percent truthful, but the reality is that phenomena oftentimes have a very large amount of elements that influence them and act as a foundation for why they happened. This is also why it is difficult to state that one phenomenon just comes as a result of one other phenomenon. Perhaps sometimes this might be the case, but the world is a complex place where actors, decisions and realities all influence each other all the time, which is why knowing all the mechanisms behind some phenomenon can be difficult, but as long as one works systematically and looks at the situation while taking multiple aspects into account it becomes possible to create a better hypothesis around it. To be able to effectively use process tracing in achieving a strong analysis where the focus is set on understanding and explaining causal inference, it is

important to first present and develop a careful and precise description of the events and phenomena (Collier 824, 2011). It is only after this description that it will be possible to investigate causal inference and establish whether certain situations and phenomena are causal or not. Therefore, we first have to take good snapshots of all the events that have happened that have been deemed relevant, and only afterwards will it be possible to observe changes and sequences surrounding these events (Collier 824, 2011). A good analysis is based on a detailed and clear description of the events and the following analysis of change and sequence.

Tests on causal inference

Within process tracing one might also choose to apply the method with the help of four different empirical tests. These tests are presented as: straw-in-the-wind, hoop, smoking-gun and double decisive. Each tests have their strengths and play different roles when it comes to affirming causal inference. Some are necessary for the affirmation of causal inference while some might simply be sufficient for the affirmation of this issue (Collier 825, 2011). Although, these tests and process tracing specifically can be useful and beneficial for one's analysis, it is important to mention that the method has its challenges. These challenges revolve around which causal inference test is appropriate for the selected event or case, and some variables might be missing or have been left out, which can influence the outcome of the test. Since it can be difficult to apply this method, it can be best to start of by clearly presenting the main events that have led to a certain outcome or phenomenon and afterwards figure out how these events are connected and influence the outcome at hand (Collier 828, 2011). This paper makes use of all four varieties of process tracing tests both when it comes to the Saudi Arabian actions and Iranian actions. The tests will be based on the concrete phenomena and events, while taking into consideration Tolstrup's theory on black knight behavior, which helps to explain and understand the case further.

Use of AI

For this paper, AI has not been used in any way whatsoever in terms of research or idea generation. AI is a very powerful tool if used correctly and it can provide a researcher with a lot of help. This can be in the form of idea generation surrounding the topic, providing useful literature and in the form of a sparring partner, with whom one can exchange ideas and

directions for which to follow with the paper. The problem or challenge of AI is the fact that it easily can not only make the writer confused about the origins of the data or literature it provides but also about the authenticity of these elements. Without having to state the obvious, using the output that the AI presents you with is against university regulations, which is also why it is a very dangerous and difficult line to follow if one chooses to use it, even on a level that is allowed. This paper has therefore not deemed the use of AI necessary, not in terms of providing literature nor in any form of idea generation. What this paper has used AI for is helping to create the bibliography in MLA style 9th edition, since it is a tool that can make this process faster. Since Ai can make mistakes and in fact has done so in some areas of the bibliography, this has been double checked and adjusted. Conclusively, this paper has been written with the idea that any use of AI on a research and text level would have the possibility to go against university regulations and risk using data provided by the generative ai tool that has a lot of uncertainty around it. Ai also poses the risk of using information from one side or the other, where objectivity is a very distant concept. This would be a very poor decision since this can negatively influence the internal validity or credibility of the research and create doubt surrounding how credible the findings in fact are. It was therefore decided to only use handpicked academic literature, newspaper articles and other data which creates security around the information and data that has been found and selected.

Theory

The chosen theoretical perspective for this paper, is Jakob Tolstrup's (2014) theory of Black Knights. The theory presents and investigates different factors for interference of a larger and more dominant state on a smaller and less powerful state. Different instruments within the main challenges are presented and discussed, such as the need to signal invincibility, preventing elite defection, undermining the opposition, dealing with protests and uprisings, and countering foreign democracy promoters. Such challenges have their own unique instruments around them that can help a black knight achieve its desired goal of keeping or getting their ally into power. Nevertheless, influencing another state can always also have the opposite effect, and instead it can backfire and give the victory to the opposition.

Terminology

To begin with some core terms that are used in this section and in the analysis will be presented and explained. One of the main and very important terms that are used in Tolstrup's article and in this paper, are the terms of democracy and authoritarianism. These terms come in different forms and connected to other elements, but the overall ideas are the same. One of the main ways to understand the concept of democracy is as a term that has been created out of two Greek terms. The first part of the word comes from the Greek word of ''demos'', which means people, and the second part of the word comes from the Greek word of ''kratos'' which means power. The term of democracy therefore essentially means 'power of the people'. It is a concept that explains a way of thinking or an ideology on who should have the power in a state or country. Since the concept revolves around giving people power and having people be able to decide over their own fate it also considers practices or principles of social equality as well and a certain freedom of expression (Froomkin and Shapiro). On the other hand, authoritarianism is a concept that explains a specific political system which is characterized by nonexistent political opponents, a very strong consolidation of power to the central government and as a result the preservation of the status quo in the political sector of the country. It is effectively a concept that in many ways is the complete opposite of democracy since these freedoms that are seen under democratic leadership are often not seen under an authoritarian leadership and the rule of law is also often very flawed or once again nonexistent (Lindstaedt). Another concept that is very important in this paper and within international relations in general, especially in today's world, is the concept surrounding the term 'proxy'. A proxy is an actor in a foreign location that is being heavily influenced and controlled by another more dominant actor for their own interests and strategic goals (Baugh). Finally, the concept that the theory itself is named after, called 'Black Knights' is a concept that isn't as obvious right away. A black knight is an actor that has an interest of influencing and meddling in another country's domestic political affairs, by employing various tactics to either overthrow one actor or to get to power another actor. The actor that the black knight wants to achieve power in the foreign country is an authoritarian regime or group or at least an actor with authoritarian tendencies. This is also why the strategies that are being employed can be considered as rather controversial and in some cases as illegitimate and unacceptable. The black knight itself though, doesn't have to be an authoritarian regime necessarily, since the theory itself initially revolved around elections within authoritarian

regimes and how these regimes are being managed and supported by the foreign actor or the black knight for their own interests.

Origins behind Tolstrup's ideas

Before getting to Tolstrup's article itself, which indeed is the theory that is being used for this paper, it is important to consider that many of Tolstrup's ideas have origins from other places and other pieces of literature. Many of Tolstrup's ideas can, for example, be seen in Milan W. Svolik's (2012) ''The Politics of Authoritarian Rule''. Both Tolstrup and Svolik argue mostly on the threats that authoritarian regimes might face and need to address to remain in power. Nevertheless, it is possible to use many of the same concepts and ideas on a more international scope, where the focus mostly lies in the threat that comes from the outside. In his book, Svolik has arguments on two main areas of conflict that authoritarian regimes have to deal with. The first fundamental conflict is surrounding the threat from the general population, who are a threat to the regime since they easily can mobilize in very large quantities and protest against the regime and create severe civil unrest, which creates a problem and threatens the authoritarian control. His second point revolves around the elites who are on the same side as the regime, but who easily can turn against it. This explains a challenge that dictators and authoritarian regimes can experience when it comes to sharing power with other powerful internal allies. Svolik wants to investigate how dictators control politics and how they share their power with their ruling coalition. Although, this paper is more interested in the specifics behind the black knight theory, it is important to take a look at and acknowledge that some of the ideas and concepts that Tolstrup uses in his paper also come from other literature, like Svolik's book on authoritarian rule. An interesting point that Svolik brings up is the fact that dictators who are well established and with good control over the population and their allies, usually die peacefully in their bed while remaining the dictator, while dictators who have the same characteristics, but see their regime fall, usually suffer an unusually unpleasant fate (Wright 578, 2015). This is something which perhaps could be seen in the case of the former president of Yemen, Saleh, who was the country's leader for 22 years and later got hunted down by the same group who he pledged his allegiance to when the civil war broke out, namely the Houthis.

Black knights and authoritarian regimes

To understand the very complicated nature of the Yemeni civil war, this paper will make use of Jakob Tolstrup's theory on black knights and elections in authoritarian regimes. Originally, Tolstrup wrote about why and how Russia supports authoritarian incumbents in post-soviet states, but the theory can nevertheless be applied to other state actors and regions around the world. In this case it will be applied on the conflict in Yemen and how the proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their respective interests have influenced the conflict in Yemen, specifically since the start of the war in 2014. Tolstrup originally conceptualized his theory on black knights in a different context, namely in the context of elections within authoritarian regimes or with politicians with authoritarian ambitions; and while this might be the case, the core logic of the theory surrounding how external authoritarian or even democratic actors support and influence internal authoritarian actors and groups for their own strategic goals and interests, is still relevant. This is especially the case when it comes to a country that is in deep political turmoil and disorder, where not only the sovereignty of the state is contested, but also where external actors influence and to some extent decide the outcome of this conflict, surrounding who should be in power or not be in power. To answer the problem formulation of this paper of how external actors have influenced the process of the Yemeni civil war from 2014 until today, the chosen theory on black knights will be implemented. This theory is chosen because it makes it possible to deliver and propose a different type of conclusion to the matter which hasn't been seen before, since it both explains how the Yemeni civil war affects the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and how this same rivalry affects the Yemeni civil war as well. This paper therefore makes use of the five main points and mechanisms of the black knights theory which revolves around signaling invincibility, deterring elite defection, undermining opposition activities, dealing with popular protests and countervailing pressure from foreign democracy promoters (Tolstrup 673, 2015). The second aspect of Tolstrup's theory will also be considered. This is the aspect that argues that external actors are much more likely to offer election bolstering and begin to influence the country's internal politics when this country is particularly compliant and open towards this influence (Tolstrup 673, 2015). The external actor is also much more likely to offer this influence and its own involvement on the internal political arena when electoral defeat or in this case the defeat of one political and military entity over the other is perceived to lead to

regime change that is considered radical and undesired from the side of the external power (Tolstrup 673, 2015).

To be able to effectively achieve their interests, authoritarian regimes and authoritarian actors need to be aware of five different elements that need to be considered and followed so that the authoritarian rule doesn't have any chance to be undermined in any way. The first element is a very important element which is not only about sending a strong signal to the population, but also to the political opposition that the authoritarian incumbent or actor has a secure victory or inevitably will win the battle for power (Tolstrup 675, 2015). It is important to keep in mind that when it is written in this paper that the authoritarian actor wants the population to believe in an inevitable victory it does not mean that it also acknowledges towards the population and the world that it is in fact an authoritarian actor, this is simply being done to make it clear which actor is which, for the sake of the reader and their comprehension of this paper. If it comes to an election the election must be won with a comfortable margin, while the victory also has to be perceived as legitimate, to some extent, or at least as a victory that is irreversible or that the population or other actors have no possibility in changing (Tolstrup 675, 2015). Therefore, the election or position in the war must signal invincibility and the internal actor must be perceived as the legitimate winner or the actor that deserves the victory. If one internal actor or the other is either very clearly expecting a dominant victory or has already won very dominantly it is much more likely that its opponents will become disillusioned and even sometimes this circumstance can create trouble in the opponent's camp which can even end up with the opponent splitting up into different factions who also begin to perceive each other as opponents (Tolstrup 675, 2015). In the case of this paper, it would be expected if both Iran and Saudi Arabia each would have attempted to influence their proxies' image in Yemen and helped them in their battle for power in the country, by presenting them as either more dominant or the inevitable and rightful victors of the conflict. Although, in this conflict it is much more important to present this type of confidence and dominance towards the opponent rather than the population since there isn't any electoral aspect to the conflict as of today, due to the humanitarian crisis and the political instability in Yemen, therefore the only thing that the general population can do, is simply consider with which side they want to align themselves and support mostly mentally.

The second element is about the fact that elite insiders or the elites in the respective groups in Yemen, need to be discouraged from switching allegiance or defecting. All

authoritarian leaders must have a strong backing from a powerful group of elites or other powerful supporters. No autocrat can survive without such backing and therefore needs not only the political support, but in the case of the Yemeni civil war also military support (Tolstrup 676, 2015). To make sure that no dissatisfied elite switches sides or turns to elections to change who the ruling group is in the country, the autocrat or authoritarian group needs to make sure that its supporters within the regime or group are satisfied with the economic and political benefits attributed to them when they support the authoritarian group in question. It is also important to create the impression that there is no other better alternative to lead the state within the country or even on an external level (Tolstrup 676, 2015). In the case of the Yemeni civil war, it would be a natural desire for Saudi Arabia to provide more political legitimacy to the internationally recognized government of Yemen, while also protecting exiled elites. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia would naturally also be supporting of the internationally recognized government through militarily and economic means to help with the fight against the Houthis. Today, the kingdom doesn't seem to no longer be active militarily in Yemen and instead appears to focus much more on diplomacy with both the Houthis and Iran respectively. Iran seems like they are providing the Houthis and the Houthi cause with mainly two types of support. It would be expected of them to support the Houthis with military equipment and material backing, with the aim to bolster the Houthis' military and defensive capabilities. Secondly, it would be expected for them to support the Houthis politically and diplomatically to further elevate their cause and their fight for inequality and discrimination and to be able to fight against the internationally recognized government for political legitimacy. The support that appears to have been seen by Iran for the Houthis has made it possible to maintain strong internal elite cohesion and prevented the group from breaking down and elites defecting as the war escalated due to the launch of Saudi Arabia's and its allies' intervention called Operation Decisive Storm and its following operation called Operation Restoring Hope. In 2022, Saudi Arabia ceased all its hostilities and instead opened the door towards diplomatic talks and peacekeeping efforts.

The third element is about undermining the opposition. Tolstrup, throughout his theory he mainly talks about these elements in the context of internal elections and external influence, but elements like undermining one's opposition don't necessarily have to have something to do with elections and voters. Nevertheless, as he states in his paper, elections have the power to act as a great tool for the opposition since they can offer an opportunity for all the different groups to put their differences aside momentarily and join each other in their

battle against the already existing regime, that they all want removed (Tolstrup 676, 2015). The possibility of the different groups joining forces and supporting each other against the authoritarian group or regime means that this group needs to keep its opposition fragmented and weak. For the authoritarian group this can be done by offering the more moderate and neutral groups some socioeconomic or political benefits in return for their support (Tolstrup 676, 2015). It is also important to present the others in a bad light or as 'bad guys', simply said, who in turn also have bad ideas for the country's future. By focusing on all the negative aspects of its opponents it is possible that they won't be able to overlook these differences and aspects on which they disagree and therefore a collective front won't be possible to exist against the authoritarian group. Simultaneously, the general public or the voters will think twice before supporting the other groups since a lot of negative light is being shed on them (Tolstrup 676, 2015). In the case of the Yemeni civil war, it would be expected for Iran to be making it possible for the Houthis to target rivals through the means of Iranian military training and weaponry which is being transported to Houthi controlled Yemeni territories. These factors have the ability to weaken Saudi Arabian forces and their capabilities as their intervention into Yemen didn't achieve its desired goals. The official Yemeni army has also been put in a very difficult position where their capabilities have been severely weakened to a point where any major or serious counterattack or change in power is extremely difficult to achieve by themselves. The Saudi Arabian an allied attacks have also weakened and damaged the Houthis' infrastructure, and it has made it more difficult for the Houthis to operate at their full capacity due to their positions being destroyed or partially damaged, although many civilians also have been killed in these allied attacks, which has caused the humanitarian crisis to unfold even further.

The fourth element in Tolstrup's theory is about popular protests and how to manage these or avoid them. Naturally, an authoritarian election is a type of election that is known for triggering the sense of grievance within the general population, but also for political opponents, which is a definite prerequisite for popular protests to occur (Tolstrup 676, 2015). If voters were to take it to the streets to protest and fight against the injustice or perhaps simply against the government or group that they do not support themselves, it would be necessary for the authoritarian group or the incumbent to be ready to either deter further mobilization or in the best case simply try to prevent them from starting in the first place (Tolstrup 676, 2015). If it becomes necessary it is also important that the authoritarian actor is ready to use coercive force to stop any prolonged or escalating unrest, which has the potential

to create doubt and uncertainty within the inner ranks of the group or the regime, or even its allies (Tolstrup 676, 2015). In the case of the Yemeni civil war, there have indeed been protests both from the side of the Houthis and its supporters, but there have also been protests and demonstrations from the opposition and their supporters. In cases like this it would then be expected that both Saudi Arabia and Iran, as the black knights that they both are in their own right, would have in some ways helped their proxies or allies by supporting them surrounding the question of protests and civil unrest. The Houthis and its supporters have protested and shown their discontent with the Saudi Arabian offensives in the country and as of the second quarter of 2025, Houthi supporters and militants have also protested against American attacks calling for the death and destruction of the US and Israel. Houthi opponents and the general population that are against the de facto Houthi rule of Yemen, have also protested multiple times, for example in 2015 where the Houthis didn't hesitate to fire against these protesters and killing three in the city of Taizz (aa.com.tr). It is therefore clear that in a country with so many humanitarian problems and other grievances, that eventually some protests would occur, but there haven't been any protests that have led to large scale changes or influenced the conflict in any significant way. The only protests that truly had a very strong impact on the country were the protests during the Arab spring, which arguably in some ways effectively were the foundation for the Yemeni civil war.

The fifth and last element surrounding what the authoritarian actor needs to consider in order to be successful with elections, or in this case the war and the battle for power, is about countering the influence that foreign democracy promoters might have on the country and the regime. Elections or a civil war is a time where the authoritarian regime or actor is much more vulnerable than normally, since it is a time where it is the people who, at least de jure, should have the power and be able to have an impact on the outcome of the elections. It is a time where moving towards a more democratic future should be at the highest point of probability. The methods of pressure that these foreign promoters of democracy might choose include political and financial support for the pro-democratic groups in the country, or at least for the more pro-democratic groups (Tolstrup 675, 2015). The methods of pressure also include the criticism of faulty voting procedures and the repression of the regime, by calling the regime illegitimate and not officially recognizing it. The democracy promoters can also choose to impose sanctions on the incumbent and its allies, but also on the country itself, to influence people and their perception of the regime and leader, which also could influence the chance of protests happening (Tolstrup 675, 2015). Since, as mentioned, Yemen is not in a

phase of its history where elections are to happen as of right now during the civil war, western governments and the UN have still pressured the different parties in the country to engage in peace talks and diplomacy. The way that black knight behavior comes out in this case, would be in the form of political and materialistic support from Saudi Arabia and Iran with the intent to protect its allies and proxies in the country from diplomatic isolation. Iran has for example time and time again dismissed western statements about the Houthis being illegitimate and Saudi Arabia has supported the internationally recognized Yemeni government with political and financial support, as its allies also have done in support of their regional ally. One caveat that needs to be mentioned is the fact that when it comes to democracy promoters, this paper doesn't use this concept in its original form. Instead, this paper will consider the concept in a very similar way, but instead of looking at the case of Saudi Arabia and their actions surrounding the conflict as a result of the wish to promote democracy, it will instead be looked at as a wish that seems to lie much closer to regional power and security, rather than the mere fact that they are the obvious 'good guys' with the best morals who simply want to promote democracy everywhere they go, something like the US historically has been depicted as.

All the mentioned elements of the black knights theory are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. There is a larger risk of political defection when there is an opponent or opposition who also is very powerful and when the sense of invincibility surrounding the regime or the authoritarian group appears weak (Tolstrup 676, 2015). This is why autocrats when it comes to elections or other conflicts, like a civil war, need to be able to address all the multifaceted challenges that appear in such a complicated conflict which also contains many sides to it (Tolstrup 676, 2015). These challenges can both appear on an internal, but also an external level and if the group fails in dealing with the occurring challenges, the elections or war which was introduced to ensure regime stability, or the power of the group is likely to backfire and perhaps put them in a much worse position than ever (Tolstrup 676, 2015).

When it comes to the specific instruments that black knights use to bolster elections and their allies, there are a variety of different tools and means to do so. In relation to signalling invincibility, the respective ally or black knight can assist with the campaign by giving advice on how to manage a successful political campaign or how to be successful and come out on top in a civil war and a battle for power (Tolstrup 677, 2015). The black knight can also offer financial resources which can give the authoritarian group the ability to

implement more populist policies which effectively would result in them gaining more supporters and they could even resort to vote buying by paying people to support their cause (Tolstrup 677, 2015). The black knight can also give technical assistance on how to effectively engage with election fraud, and furthermore the country can endorse the elections and the election process even if it is considered flawed by the opposition and the international community (Tolstrup 678, 2015). Iran is for example able to endorse and support the Houthis' cause which gives the group more legitimacy even though many western countries identify the Houthis as a terrorist organization which has come to power in the capital of Sana'a in a flawed way.

In relation to elite defection, there are two main instruments. Although, black knights naturally can't prevent elite defection completely, they're still able to help their ally or proxy to make it less attractive for someone to break ranks and switch allegiance. Usually, when a supporter renounces their allegiance, it comes as a result of prolonged grievances that have built up over a long period of time or it is due to a sudden crisis (Tolstrup 678, 2015). The first strategy to prevent elite defection is by providing financial benefits to the supporters or autocrats which can be necessary for the cooptation of certain actors. Another strategy is to very clearly signal to others that it is only this specific incumbent or group that will be accepted as a legitimate leader of the country in question, this policy is also known as a 'no alternative to the incumbent' policy (Tolstrup 678, 2015). External support also reduces the likelihood of fear for regime supporters and makes it seem like the incumbent in fact will be able to withstand the pressure that is being put upon him. If this external support is connected to threats surrounding sanctions and the withdrawal of certain agreements if the incumbent won't get to power or remain in power, it can also make it harder for challengers of the authoritarian group to win support of others (Tolstrup 678, 2015).

When it comes to keeping the opposition at bay and preventing them from acquiring more supporters and influence, black knights can use multiple different strategies. These strategies can be of diplomatic and media-based nature, with the aim of influencing the voters' or general population's perception surrounding the allied proxy and the respective opponent or opponents (Tolstrup 678, 2015). The population and other actors can be influenced by delegitimizing the opposition painting them in an especially negative light. Once again it is possible to formulate a 'no alternative to the incumbent' policy, which is important since the general population and other groups can realize that perhaps changing leadership or going back to the old leadership can be costly for the country, both in terms of

the economy but also in terms of political rights (Tolstrup 678, 2015). In this case, it is important for the black knight to present the opposition as a very unattractive actor and candidate for being in power. Apart from negatively branding the opposition, black knights can support their ally by providing technical assistance surrounding the question of anti-regime activities and how to effectively deal with these by setting up legal barriers against them. They can also provide support through the means of certain technology, material or personnel which also can be used by the allied group to effectively repress opposition activities, which can range from smaller protests to large scale armed conflicts (Tolstrup 678, 2015).

The instruments that a black knight can use in the case of large popular protests, mainly revolve around financial strategies, coercive strategies and propaganda. Black knights can help their proxy or allied group, by providing them with additional financial resources, which the group doesn't have in their own disposal, with the aim of addressing and reducing certain socioeconomic grievances (Tolstrup 678, 2015). Boosting social spending can effectively give people and other actors the incentive to stop their protests or overall actions against the group. This strategy might not help with alleviating the discontent that exists surrounding flawed elections, but even in this case it might have some effect on protesters, since economic grievances often are the root cause of many protests and uprisings (Tolstrup 678, 2015). In international relations it is also the economic aspect of things that very often is the main cause for decision making. Furthermore, black knights can help with stopping protests and demonstrators, by providing the necessary security related personnel and equipment that makes it possible for violent crackdowns to take place (Tolstrup 678, 2015). They can also help by framing the events in a different light or by supporting the point of view of the group at hand, this can for example be done by discrediting and stopping the disruptive actions and nature of demonstrators and showing their support for the rule of law and the group that disperse the crowds to restore a certain peace and balance (Tolstrup 678, 2015).

The final point and area where black knights need to use certain instruments to influence the politics and the situation within the country of their proxy or allied group is on the point of question surrounding external democracy promotion pressure, which is a process that usually occurs around elections, but also around states that have a non-democratic regime our group in power (Tolstrup 678, 2015). With this issue, black knights can help their ally by taking some of the criticism and pressure off of them. This can be done by disagreeing with

the opposition or the democracy promoters and by trying to cancel out and discredit the evaluations that have been made surrounding the elections and their illegitimacy (Tolstrup 678, 2015). If democracy promoters decide to implement sanctions, as is a very popular strategy in today's political landscape, the black knight can help its ally by not only criticizing or even perhaps vetoing these sanctions, but also by once again providing financial compensation and political cooperation, which in turn potentially can promote regime legitimacy and provide the allied group with the very much needed economic and political support that is being taken away from it in the international arena (Tolstrup 678, 2015).

It is important to keep in mind that although the black knight has multiple different ways and instruments at their disposal to influence the political landscape in a certain country of interest, it is never a given fact that these actions will result in success (Tolstrup 678, 2015). Both when it comes to promoting democracy and promoting autocracy there are always the unintended consequences of it actually doing the opposite of what was intended. Some of these attempts and actions might not be strong enough to significantly influence the situation and some actions might even have the reverse effect of triggering anger and defiance among the general population, the opposition or even among their own ranks (Tolstrup 678, 2015). There are also a lot of different factors that influence how much the black knight activities work. Moreover, there are times when other domestic or international drivers overshadow these black knight activities. Therefore, these activities might achieve their desired goal, but other drivers might actually be the ones who created the change and influenced the situation (Tolstrup 679, 2015).

Analysis

In this section of the paper, Saudi Arabia's and Iran's influence, actions and black knight activities will be analyzed. First this will be done by getting an overview surrounding the main situations and actions that have taken place and the timeline of when they took place, since this is an important factor for the overall analysis. Afterwards, it will be the objective of this section to draw causal inferences from the black knight actions and the overall decisions and reactions that both regional powers have deemed necessary in the case of the Yemeni civil war.

As it has been mentioned in this paper earlier, specifically in the literature review, there is a lot of history behind the Yemeni civil war and the two biggest regional actors. Since, the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has so many facets within it and depicts areas of tension from multiple sources, it is difficult to pinpoint one reason for this regional cold conflict, which of course has seen some improvements, but nevertheless has seen many years of conflict and animosity. This paper focuses on the period of time, from when the conflict officially started back in 2014 and until the time of writing of this paper. While this is the case, it is important to remember that many actions and events who influence the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the conflict in Yemen itself, took place before 2014 and some of course have roots dating back many hundreds of years. This is why it is impossible to fully understand what is happening today, without understanding what came before.

The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been taking place for many hundreds of years. As mentioned, it was the Arabs who Islamised the Persians, and the two ethnicities and empires have also fought many wars throughout history (Afary and Mostofi). Due to the differences in ethnicity and religion, the two regional powers have been struggling to find a common area on which to agree on or feel connected on. Both states have the desire to be the leader of the Islamic world and to be the one dominant force in the region. The foundation for the animosity therefore does perhaps lie in the ethnic and religious differences, but the real rivalry remains embedded in the geopolitical tensions and economic power struggles (Cohen and Hitman). The Yemeni civil war is part of this hard power struggle and stand-off between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is being used as a tool for them to navigate through their rivalry and animosity. The struggle for supremacy is very clear in the region, and the Yemeni civil war is part of this struggle for supremacy and power without a doubt. In 2014 when the Yemeni civil war erupted this might not have been the case, as much as it has become later on in the conflict. Nevertheless, it is a conflict that clearly depicts the proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and today it seems to even be part of the conflict between Israel, the United States and Iran. It is therefore a conflict that has seen a lot of change and has been dynamic in its nature, since there are multiple actors who are involved, and their interests always change simultaneously as the conflict changes.

Saudi Arabian point of view

The Yemeni civil war is also a conflict that erupted as part of the much larger Arab spring, where massive protests were happening throughout the Arab world and governments were changing at a rapid pace. Although, the civil war itself started around two years after the Yemeni revolution ended, those two years were still an unstable and tumultuous period of time within Yemen, which ended up building up to the point where the grievances that initially drove the Houthis to violence in the past and the opportunity to gain popularity among the youth eventually led them to take drastic actions surrounding the future of their country (Day, Brehony et al. 237). This was during the third quarter of 2014 and when the capital of Yemen, Sana'a, fell to the hands of the Houthis and when the official government and army lost control of the most important city in the country (Day, Brehony et al. 238). Towards the end of 2014 Saudi Arabia increased their diplomatic warnings about Iranian influence in Yemen becoming more concerned about the possibility and the already supposed influence by Iran on the Houthis which made Saudi Arabia view the developments in Yemen as a serious regional security threat (Day, Brehony et al. 122). In the beginning of 2015 due to strong Houthi pressure, President Hadi officially signs a decree on his resignation from office, after a month he flees to the city of Aden on the southern coast, and states that he still is the legitimate president of the country and that Aden now is the temporary capital of the country (Day, Brehony et al. 121). After one more month Hadi fled to Riyadh as Houthi forces were closing in on the city after having captured many other areas, including Taiz, the third largest city in the country and the areas surrounding the Bab al-Mandab strait (Day, Brehony et al. 121). As the Houthis were closing in on the southern city, Saudi Arabia grew more and more anxious surrounding the fact that a strong military group on its southern border could grow Iran's influence and power in the region even more, since Iran already was in control in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Gaza (Day, Brehony et al. 122). The Houthis eventually started encircling the city of Aden and ended up attempting to take full control of the city. One day after this battle started, the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm started on March 26, 2025 (Day, Brehony et al. 123). This was an operation comprised of a coalition of nine other Arab states that had the objective of dealing a decisive blow to the Houthi capabilities and military power by mainly conducting airstrikes and creating a full blockade of the country (Day, Brehony et al. 127). This was done with the aim of restoring Hadi's government and pushing back the Houthis significantly. After one month, this operation

transitioned into Operation Restoring Hope in April 2015, which was an operation that combined military action, but also focused on addressing humanitarian issues and seeking to eventually resolve the conflict by more political and diplomatic means (Day, Brehony et al. 125). In July, Saudi backed forces are successful in recapturing Aden from a partial Houthi takeover. Later on, that same year, the Saudi led coalition was receiving international backlash and public opinion in the United States and in Europe turned against them, blaming them for the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen and considering Saudi Arabia as a reckless actor, based on their extensive bombing campaigns on both military targets and civilian areas (Day, Brehony et al. 128). In 2016, Saudi Arabia and its coalition led major offensives on the Taiz and Marib directions. The peace talks in Kuwait brokered by the UN end up failing and Saudi air strikes and attacks effectively continue (Day, Brehony et al. 242). As the Saudi blockade of Houthi controlled port cities continue, the humanitarian crisis in the country keeps on worsening and getting more serious, which also increases the criticism towards Saudi Arabia by the public in various countries and the international community. In 2017 the Saudi Arabian and UAE relationship worsened as there were tensions surrounding the control around the southern city of Aden and the surrounding areas (Day, Brehony et al. 140). Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia increased, with multiple ballistic missiles hitting their targets on Saudi territory, this caused the kingdom to blame Iran for their involvement in the war and the fact that Iran is facilitating these actions to happen. After a missile was launched by the Houthis towards the international airport in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia responds by tightening the blockade on Houthi controlled ports (hrw.org). In 2018, Saudi Arabia is still trying to manage the tension between them and the UAE and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a UAE backed group. At the same time, Saudi Arabia is supporting anti Houthi advances led by the UAE on the port city of Al-Hudaydah, which also is the fourth largest city in the country (Day, Brehony et al. 141). The same year the parties involved signed the Stockholm agreement, which is a UN mediated truce about the de-escalation of any military actions on the city of Al-Hudaydah (Day, Brehony et al. 142). In 2019, the fragmentation of the anti-Houthi coalition continues, with the STC taking control of Aden, which creates a conflict with the Hadi government, both of whom are Saudi allies and anti-Houthi groups (Day, Brehony et al. 254). In November 2019, Saudi Arabia helps facilitate an agreement between the Hadi government and the STC called the Riyadh Agreement, with the aim to prevent any further escalation and a war between anti-Houthi factions (Radman). The goal of the Riyadh agreement was to create a stable and united front between anti Houthi groups and refocus their issues from the clashes and disagreements in Aden onto the bigger problem at hand

which was the Houthis. All in all, the agreement didn't achieve any large success with most deadlines and agreements being disregarded and ignored (Radman). Although the agreement failed to create one united force, the country simply ended up being partitioned between the STC and the Hadi government. And although the two groups still are allies when it comes to the bigger national threat in the Houthis, there are still problems between the two groups resulting in a turbulent cooperative relationship. One of the main events, which truly shook Saudi Arabia was the drone and missile attacks by the Houthis on the Saudi Arabian Aramco oil facilities (Tuerk). It was the Houthis who took responsibility for this attack, but both Saudi Arabia, United States and UN investigators accused Iran of executing the attack, although this was denied by Iran. This attack disrupted the oil production and exports in Saudi Arabia immensely. This resulted in the Saudi stock market crashing and spiking global oil prices for at least a couple of weeks, while also resulting in extensive repairs being needed (Tuerk). In 2020, after this attack, Saudi Arabia began to reassess their goals and interests in this conflict and whether these goals were worth the problems that the Houthis had the opportunity to cause to Saudi territory and the country itself. This is the year where Saudi Arabia begins to try to find an exit route out of the conflict and begin to shift more towards political and diplomatic engagements (Riedel). Saudi Arabia continues its airstrikes against the Houthis but also continues its strong commitment to providing humanitarian aid to the country, where they have been one of the main reasons for the emergence of such a serious humanitarian catastrophe (hrw.org). However, the kingdom did shift towards a more defensive focus rather than offensive. After a Saudi peace plan about the reopening of Sana'a airport and the port in Al-Hudaydah gets rejected by the Houthis, who demand that Saudi Arabia lift their blockade completely, it becomes clear that diplomacy is as important as ever. The Biden administration decides to end their support for the Saudi cause in the Yemeni civil war, which effectively forces Saudi Arabia to shift its mentality even more toward diplomacy (aljazeera.com). In 2022, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) is created with the backing of Saudi Arabia. This organization effectively replaces Hadi, with Hadi resigning this same year, and creates a much more unified anti-Houthi front. The current president of Yemen, Rashad Al-Alimi gets appointed to office, being the former adviser to Hadi (Coombs). Throughout the year Saudi Arabia reduces their airstrikes and even facilitated aid into Houthi controlled areas. Simultaneously, with the help of the UN, Saudi Arabia and the Houthis begin having negotiations on some kind of truce or peace proposal. In 2023, with help from China, Saudi Arabia and Iran restore their diplomatic relations, which effectively reduces regional tensions (aljazeera.com). Furthermore, a Houthi delegation visits Riyadh for further talks. The agreed

upon truce from the year before is largely still upheld, which builds confidence in some sort of progress towards peace. At the same time, Saudi Arabia clearly signals their intent and wish to exit the war militarily and instead only focus on the political aspect and diplomacy. In the last couple of years Saudi strategy has largely been refocused on diplomacy and security of its own borders, while still engaging in some financial and diplomatic support for the anti-Houthi faction. What is clear today is the fact that the Saudi interests in the Yemeni civil war no longer entail some sort of military victory but instead depicts a stronger desire for national security and regional stability (france24.com).

In terms of Tolstrup's theory on black knights, it seems like Saudi Arabia manages to fit into four of the five characteristics. With the creation of the PLC, Saudi Arabia finally achieved, to a large extent, their ambition and goal of creating a system and faction where all the anti-Houthi actors and coalition members could work together and which would provide the anti-Houthi bloc with less disagreements and tension. The creation of the PLC therefore effectively helps with preventing elite defection from one's own ranks and allied ranks. By initiating operation decisive storm, Saudi Arabia wished to show the Houthis and Iran, that its coalition was ready and willing to fight against the Houthis and destroy them, thereby signaling a strong sense of invincibility surrounding themselves and the IRG in Yemen. Furthermore, this operation, the airstrikes that followed and the general anti-Houthi diplomacy and rhetoric was a large part of the attempt to weaken the opposition, both in terms of actual military capabilities, but also in perception by the general public and the international community. The last mechanism on countering western democracy promoters doesn't fit into the context of Saudi Arabia and their behavior in its natural state, but the fact that Saudi Arabia for a long time was trying to get the US more involved in the Yemeni civil war, does seem like Saudi Arabia was trying to pressure the western democracy promoters to counter Iranian influence in Yemen. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was trying to counter western pressure, by their framing and rhetoric on the Houthi threat and Iranian threat on the region. Saudi Arabia was therefore trying to push its western allies and other democracy promoters to get more involved in this conflict and difficult case (yemenmonitor.com).

Iranian point of view

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been a very different actor in the Yemeni civil war when comparing the country to how Saudi Arabia has been involved. Overall, Iran has from the

start of the civil war been much more focused on supporting the Houthis in a more symbolic way. They have supported the Houthis politically and, in some ways, also logistically. Nevertheless, after a couple of years of fighting, Iran became of much more prominent actor in the conflict, transitioning much more into a covert ally. Iran started sending weapons, drones and missiles in serious numbers, while also sharing intelligence with the Houthis, this made it possible for the Houthis to fight back against the Saudi coalition much more comfortably. As the years went on, more advanced technology and weapons were being transferred to the Houthis making it possible for them to attack deep into the Saudi territory, seriously threatening the kingdom (cfr.org). These new circumstances did in fact escalate the already very tense relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. After 2022, a push for more diplomacy and political solutions have been made by Iran, while still continuing the covert military and financial assistance by Iran.

After the Houthis took control of Sana'a in September 2014, Iran very predictably welcomed these developments framing the situation as a 'popular revolution' similar to as they framed the events in 2011 during the Arab spring, which they also welcomed completely, while also considering these events as a challenge and thorn in the side of western and Saudi influence in the region (Day, Brehony et al. 152). The media and officials in Iran, including the former president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, openly praised and celebrated the victories of the Houthis on the battleground and the rise to power in the capital (Day, Brehony et al. 154). Iran did indeed begin to support the Houthis politically, but more on a symbolic level, while reports of military assistance have been very conflicted, some sources stated that they started their military assistance already in 2009, while some sources state that their military support was extremely limited still in 2014 during the fall of Sana'a (Day, Brehony et al. 151). Iran also denied any direct involvement in the conflict in the first year of the war. One branch of the Iranian armed forces called the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or Quds Force did start to quietly act as an advisor for the Houthi leadership (lansinginstitute.org). Iran immediately condemns Operation Decisive Storm after it was launched by the Houthi coalition in March 2015 and calls for a ceasefire and for diplomatic dialogue between the parties involved (Day, Brehony et al. 159). Iran beings supplying the Houthis with different weapons and components with some of these ships carrying this military equipment being intercepted by US and allied naval forces, while some of them still arriving at their destination in Yemen through smuggling routes from both Oman and Somalia (Day, Brehony et al. 170). The Houthis, although not officially from the Iranian side, begin to

be portrayed as the newest member of the axis of resistance, alongside Iran's allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Gaza (Day, Brehony et al. 154). In 2016, the military assistance to the Houthis keeps on expanding. Iran is believed to be training Houthi fighters abroad, but also on their own territory and Iran is believed, by the UN and the US, to be sharing missile technology and other systems with the Houthis (wilsoncenter.org). In 2017, the Houthis launch a series of missile attacks on Saudi territory, including their attack with a long-range missile on the international airport in Riyadh. This missile is believed to be a variation of an Iranian missile and evidence surrounding Iranian support and involvement keeps on showing up, although Iran still was denying it, but this wasn't the case for long (hrw.org). Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei stated in the beginning of 2017 that the war that is being waged on the Houthis in Yemen by the Saudi coalition is a political war and not a religious war. According to him it was Saudi Arabia that created this lack of harmony and problems in the region and in Yemen, and although he once considered Saudi Arabia as an actor who acted tactfully and with a certain seriousness to challenging issues, this wasn't the case anymore with the new de facto leader of the country Mohammed Bin Salman or as he is also known 'MBS' (Day, Brehony et al. 161). As a result of these worsening ties between the two regional powers and with the discourse coming out of Iran of Saudi Arabia committing criminal actions in Yemen, the advisory role and the assistance provided by Iran for the Houthis expanded even further. In 2018, Iran helped the Houthis with establishing even more modern and advanced missile systems and capabilities, while also improving the drone arsenal that the Houthis had at their disposal. The UN confirms that some parts of the missiles that have been deployed by the Houthis are of Iranian origin, although Iran still denied these claims by the UN (Day, Brehony et al. 161). However, as time went on, Iran became more and more uninterested in keeping their covert facade of their involvement in Yemen in check, instead starting to gradually stop hiding their relationship and their cooperation with the Houthis. In September 2018, a Houthi delegation meets with a Hezbollah delegation and later also visits Iran and Iraq. This diplomatic tour did give the impression that the supposed new Houthi membership into the axis of resistance now was confirmed and complete (Day, Brehony et al. 162). In 2019, one of the biggest events of the conflict happened, when the Houthis attacked the Aramco oil facilities, and although they claim responsibility some sources state that that the attack was coordinated and perhaps even launched from outside of Yemen (Tuerk). In 2020, Iran boosts the Houthi leadership's legitimacy even further by appointing an ambassador to the capital Sana'a, while also promoting the political positions of the Houthis as legitimate (home.treasury.gov). In 2021, the Houthis keeps on intensifying their attacks on

Saudi Arabia through the help and assistance of Iran, by sending drones and missiles to hit military infrastructure. Although, Iran still denies their military involvement in Yemen, nationalist media channels still celebrate the victories of the Houthis. In 2022, Iran supports the idea of a truce in Yemen, brokered by the UN, but doesn't stop their military, financial and political support for the Houthis in spite of UN embargoes on the Houthi leadership (press.un.org). In 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia restore their diplomatic ties with the help of China, where the issue of Yemen was being discussed at a meeting (aljazeera.com). Although Iran officially supports peace in Yemen, it continues their support for the Houthis, while being cautious surrounding the intentions and possible actions by Saudi Arabia (Welle). In the last couple of years, the Houthis have been growing into a stronger and clearer ally of Iran and within the axis of resistance, who very easily and without many resources can be used against Saudi Arabia in terms of threatening them and creating pressure when it comes to political agreements. The support by Iran never stopped for the Houthis, not in terms of military assistance, not in terms of political support.

In terms of Tolstrup's theory on black knights there are multiple mechanisms that seem like can be seen in the case of Iran. Through political support, military support and ideological support, Iran has attempted to signal invincibility surrounding the Houthis, their capabilities and the fact that they are supported by one of the strongest actors in the region, perhaps even in the world. Through the heavy support that Iran has given the Houthis, it has effectively also undermined the activities of the opposition. This has been achieved by mainly military support, both in terms of equipment and technology, but also in terms of training and intelligence sharing. However, Iran has also helped the Houthis with undermining Saudi Arabia's activities, by painting them in a bad light and using events in the war as a tool to support the discourse on Saudi Arabia. The case of Al-Hudaydah is especially relevant, since it was Saudi Arabia and its coalition who was under a lot of pressure from the UN and the international community and not the Houthis. Both parties had to make changes and accept the conditions of the Stockholm agreement, but in reality, it was Saudi Arabia and the allied coalition who had to back off. Perhaps because the humanitarian crisis in Al-Hudaydah wasn't as prominent as when the Saudi coalition began its offensive on the city and effectively risked the lives of many innocent children and people in general, who weren't nearly as much at risk before. The last main mechanism that Iran also seem to be meeting is by countering democracy promoters. By legitimizing the Houthis, receiving a Houthi delegation for diplomatic talks and the appointment of an ambassador to Sana'a all support

this behavior by Iran, who seeks to push the influence of western and democracy promoters away from Yemen and its proxy ally. As of the first and second quarter of 2025 this is especially visible, since the support and assistance from Iran has made it possible to fight back against American warships and positions. The US being one of the most famous or perhaps notorious democracy promoters in the world, being one of Uncle Sam's main and official reasons for influencing the domestic politics in a various and large number of countries worldwide. Although dealing with popular protests is less of a concern to the Houthis due to the civil war that has been taking place since 2014, there have been some small protests against their government, who all have been squashed very quickly and easily. The mobilization for protests is in general hard to achieve in a country and territory where the Houthis are in control and where the general public are under strict control and suppressed, while also being in a deep humanitarian crisis in many parts of the country, which means that people are more preoccupied with surviving rather than going to the street to protest and risking losing their life that way. Some protesters have lost their life when protesting against the Houthis, with the Houthis opting to deal with the situation by cracking down on the protesters with hard power and lethal force (hrw.org).

Process tracing tests

For this paper to be able to answer the research question of how external actors have influenced the process of the Yemeni civil war from 2014 until today it is necessary to first conduct some tests on the issue whether or not the selected actors, Saudi Arabia and Iran, even have influenced the conflict in any major way. The main hypothesis is of course that the two regional powers have been acting as some sort of black knight in this case and been heavily involved in the whole process of the Yemeni civil war. They have of course been involved in different ways, they have employed different strategies and their involvement has of course changed, but what seems to be the case is the fact that they have used the Yemeni civil war and their proxies in this country as a tool to achieve their national interests, which is how a black knight is expected to act.

Types of tests

Process tracing is a qualitative tool used to describe political social phenomena and evaluate causal mechanisms, something quantitative cannot do in the same way. It is therefore very

important to describe the phenomena very concretely and give close attention to the sequence of events. Within process tracing there exist four different tests who all can be used to help with affirming or denying causal inference. These tests are: straw-in-the-wind, smoking-gun, hoop and double decisive tests. In this paper all four tests will be attempted to be implemented and used to investigate causal inference between the phenomena and in relation to the theory of black knights. The tests themselves are set up almost identically by having a hypothesis, one or multiple clues and thereafter an inference.

The straw-in-the-wind test is not necessary to affirm causal inference, but also not sufficient to affirm causal inference. This test is useful to either confirm the relevance of the hypothesis a little bit more or to weaken the hypothesis a little bit. It is a more suggestive type of evidence on causal inference rather than being decisive, which some of the other tests are much better at (Collier 825). In this analysis, the straw-in-the-wind test will mainly be used for investigating ideological, rhetorical, discourse and soft power strategies and decisions.

The hoop test is necessary to affirm causal inference, but not sufficient to affirm causal inference by itself. If a hoop test is passed the hypothesis becomes confirmed as viable but doesn't confirm it decisively. If it fails, the hypothesis is completely eliminated. It is therefore used to get rid of unviable hypotheses and decisively confirms that a hypothesis still can be viable (Collier 825). In this analysis, the hoop test will mainly be used for confirming that both Saudi Arabia and Iran even meet the basic characteristics that a black knight need to have, since it is impossible to move further with the analysis and other tests without knowing these facts.

The smoking-gun test is sufficient to affirm causal inference, but not necessary to affirm causal inference. If it is passed, the hypothesis can definitively be confirmed and accepted, but if it fails it is actually not eliminated, but simply becomes weakened. It is therefore best for confirming strong supporting evidence in contrast to hoop tests which are better at denying hypotheses (Collier 825). In this analysis, the smoking-gun test will be used to find evidence and events that clearly changed the course of the war or influenced it in a very serious way.

The double decisive test is both necessary and sufficient to affirm causal inference. If this test is passed, which in general is a difficult task to achieve, the hypothesis will be definitively confirmed while the other hypotheses will be completely eliminated. If it fails,

the hypothesis is of course eliminated. It is therefore the ultimate tool for figuring out and establishing decisive proof on a phenomenon (Collier 825). In this analysis, the double-decisive test will be used to prove that Saudi Arabia's and Iran's actions both were necessary and sufficient to prevent the victory of the other side of the conflict and to prevent the collapse of their proxy allies in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia tests

First, the case of Saudi Arabia will be investigated and how this actor in particular has acted, especially surrounding the concept of causal inference. Therefore, the main thing that needs to be understood is whether Saudi Arabia was engaged in direct military operations in the Yemeni civil war and whether the kingdom engaged in direct actions with the aim to support the internationally recognized government. This will be done through a hoop test. The reason this needs to be clearly stated is because without this acknowledgment, it would be more difficult to understand if and how the country has been an influencing factor in the conflict. It is also crucial to consider Tolstrup's theory and how Saudi Arabia has been acting in light of the five concepts surrounding black knight behavior. These concepts were surrounding the need to signal strength to the opposition, preventing defection from one's own ranks, weakening the opposition, suppressing protests and uprisings and countering western democracy promoters or in general pressure from western powers and countries. As a result, it can be definitively concluded that Saudi Arabia has been actively engaged in the civil war, based on their operation that they launched together with a large coalition of Arab states back in the beginning of 2015, called Operation Decisive Storm and its following Operation Restoring Hope (Day, Brehony et al. 123). These operations included ground combat, the use of drones and missile strikes on the Houthis. Saudi Arabia also welcomed the former president Hadi in Riyadh and effectively allowed him to reign over Yemen from Riyadh, which became the de facto base of the president of the country (Day, Brehony et al. 13). Saudi support towards the IRG did not only include the arrival and military support of coalition forces in 2015, but still to this day, Saudi Arabia supports the IRG to some extent, although not as heavily as they did in 2015 and the years where the Saudi army itself was active in Yemen. While this test is necessary to affirm causal inference, which it does, it does not conclusively affirm the hypotheses of whether these actions have been decisive enough to influence the conflict in any major way. What it does confirm though, is the fact that Saudi Arabia can be considered a black knight in accordance to Tolstrup's theoretical framework

based on their actions and decisions. It is especially interesting to ask the question why Saudi Arabia did join the war against the Houthis with multiple other allied states. One of Tolstrup's ideas from his theory does seem to support the decision to get involved directly in the war further. This is the idea surrounding the fact that a black knight, in this case Saudi Arabia, only is willing to provide election bolstering, or in this case military and political support for the internationally recognized government of Yemen, when the threat to the regime and its complete destruction is extremely high. Which is what the Houthi threat was perceived as, especially considering that Iran already was supporting the Houthis, although of course not as intensely yet as they would do in the following years.

The second test is a smoking gun test which will find out whether Saudi Arabia in fact did prevent elite defection or the collapse of the IRG of Yemen, which is what black knights as well are expected to do. It is important to understand this aspect, since it is something that influences the conflict in a major way, if Saudi Arabia doesn't end up preventing the collapse of the regime, then Yemen and perhaps the region as a whole would look much different than it looks today. Saudi Arabia has throughout the conflict always tried to manage internal conflicts as well, between the IRG and Southern Transitional Council (STC), sometimes they were more successful in managing these conflicts and sometimes results were less than optimal. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia helped former president Hadi by welcoming him in Riyadh and supporting him and the IRG financially and politically. It was through the kingdoms help that the government in Yemen de facto partially stayed in power and de jure remained the legitimate government in the international arena. In 2022, Saudi Arabia was also a very central actor in the creation of the Presidential Leadership Council, which was created to maintain order and be used as some sort of conflict management tool by replacing president Hadi with a new president and creating additional government posts which high standing members of the STC are positioned in, like the president of the STC, Aidarus al-Zoubaidi (Coombs). It can therefore be concluded that Saudi Arabia also passes this test, since they in fact did prevent the collapse of the regime by maintaining regime legitimacy and even actively facilitating the matter of elite succession, which when taking it all into account helps with stabilizing the political situation in the country and creating more order in a country where a civil war is raging and always able to influence the situation in many new ways.

The third test is a straw-in-the-wind test, surrounding Saudi Arabia's influence is about if and how the country used diplomacy, soft power and hard power to signal regime

strength while simultaneously undermining the opposition and its activities, which are also very important elements for a black knight to take into account. Since the beginning of the Yemeni civil war, and even to some extent before it started, Saudi Arabia has been actively lobbying the international community against the Houthis and portraying the Houthis as an Iranian puppet with whom Iran had complete authority over and could use to destabilize the region and threaten Saudi Arabia. Lobbying has also been used by Saudi Arabia to prevent too many investigations to be conducted on the territory of Yemen surrounding the issue of human rights violations (Kirchgaessner). At the same time, Saudi Arabia of course portrayed the IRG as the sole and completely legitimate government of Yemen which also was the one government in Yemen which was supported and recognized by the majority of the international community. This was done to undermine the Houthis and portray them as an illegitimate government, while also promoting the legitimacy of the IRG. Throughout the civil war, Saudi Arabia has also been very active in terms of humanitarian aid and since 2019 especially has been much more focused on creating and facilitating options for dialogue and peace initiatives (unocha.org). This has as well been done to create an image surrounding the IRG and its allies as the ''good' side of the conflict, the actors who want the best for the local people in Yemen, but also the people in the surrounding countries and the region as a whole. Being a proponent of peace is also never a negative thing, especially when it comes to the general public and their view on a particular actor. While these aspects have been beneficial into creating a better image on Saudi Arabia and the IRG, the relatively large amounts of civilian casualties as a result of the Saudi coalition's bombing campaigns has damaged the reputation of the coalition heavily and also undermined the legitimacy of the IRG, by damaging its reputation as well and it being considered an accomplice to the death of around 19.000 civilians per data from the first quarter of 2019 (Raghavan). As a conclusion, black knight activities can be seen and while some of these activities have worked to some extent, others have done the opposite, but since a black knight according to Tolstrup is not predetermined to be successful in its influence over another country's political situation, it can still be considered black knight behavior.

The fourth test is a double decisive test about whether the Saudi support was as crucial as to singlehandedly being able to stop the internationally recognized government of Yemen from collapsing completely without the help of other allied states. If Saudi Arabia indeed was necessary but also enough in itself to stop the government from collapsing without the help from other states, then the test is passed, and it supports Tolstrup's theory on

how black knights should be able to have enough influence over another regime and country to be able to change the regime or maintain the current one. In the end of 2014, the IRG lost the capital of the country to the Houthis which dealt a massive blow to the IRG. Due to the weak military at their disposal on the side of the IRG, they were not able to stop the Houthi advances. After the fall of the capital, Aden effectively became the new capital in the country for the IRG and a pivotal location for the course of the civil war. It was in this city and surrounding areas that the Houthis and forces from the official army loyal to the former president Saleh led a battle to gain control of the city, and if this were to happen the most important city for the IRG would have been lost and this would have created a lot of chaos in the governmental and military ranks. This reality of course didn't happen. Most likely without Saudi intervention in particular the Houthis would have taken Aden and started to focus on gaining control in the whole country more rapidly due to the problems that would occur in management and logistics within the IRG and its army. The UAE would also have lost their ability to provide aid and bolster the STC in the following years of the civil war, since it was founded in 2017. Saudi Arabia also appeared to be quite alone in their fight to keep the IRG alive, not the UAE nor the US as state actors, were willing to spend their resources as seriously as the Saudis on fighting a battle which was mainly in the Saudis interest anyway, considering their proxy conflict with Iran, which never disappeared as a serious and actual reason for intervening in Yemen (Day, Brehony et al. 67). In 2018, Aden did in fact see another battle, this time it was the Saudis and the IRG who fought against the UAE and the STC. Although such serious tensions emerged between two supposed allies in this conflict it didn't stop the Saudis from supporting the IRG (Radman). This was also an important factor, since there could have been a strong chance of elite defection from the IRG to the STC if the Saudis didn't continue their support, since a strong STC with UAE support could have been an enticing place to go, if one realized that the IRG didn't receive as serious backing anymore as it did earlier in the civil war. As a conclusion, it can be stated that although the test doesn't necessarily pass completely, due to the fact that Saudi Arabia wasn't alone in their battle against the Houthis, it can still be considered a pass, since they were the country who provided the largest amount of troops and military power to the operations and it was the sole country who actually was willing and cared enough to keep the IRG alive as well as possible, and more importantly even made the IRG stronger in the years that followed after the creation of the PLC, which in some ways changed the situation drastically, since the STC and the IRG now finally were under the same new executive body of the government and this new executive body prevented elite defection much better than the reality the

different actors were in before. What is definitely clear is that without the Saudi involvement in Yemen, it wouldn't have taken the Houthis too long to take control of the majority of the country if not the whole country, especially since Iran was supporting them militarily and financially either way already, although this support from the side of Iran grew substantially when the Saudi threat presented itself and grew stronger as well. This also clearly confirms the fact that Saudi Arabia was acting according to Tolstrup's black knight activity characteristics and was partially successful in their activity, despite the fact that they were not able to regain control of the capital or eliminate the Houthi threat.

Iran tests

To find a conclusion on how Iran has influenced the process of the Yemeni civil war from 2014 until today, Iran will be investigated by asking similar questions to the questions asked about Saudi Arabia with the aim to find out if and what type of black knight behavior goes in line with Iran's actions and how causal inference has influenced their relationship with the Houthis and with Saudi Arabia.

The first test is a hoop test, which seeks to find out if Iran in fact has provided political, ideological, financial and military support to the Houthis. Although, this test seems to want to find out something that is quite obvious already, it is important to very clearly state these facts to have a clear understanding about Iran's actions and their chronology. This is also the case since Iran can't be considered a black knight at all, if these criteria aren't met. Since 2014, when the Houthis took control of Sana'a, Iran finally saw a very strong potential in the Houthis to become a serious threat to Saudi Arabia and a serious player in their axis of resistance project, which aims to create the strongest bloc of actors in the region. It is important to mention that Iran already had their eyes on the Houthis after Saleh's fall in 2011 during the Arab spring, but during this time the relationship was still quite weak, and the support was symbolic (Day, Brehony et al. 162). After 2014, Iran began a very consistent and although covert relationship, also a very obvious and direct cooperation with the Houthis. They began providing mainly political and ideological support for the Houthis, with military and financial support increasing with the months and years to come, especially after the entrance of the Saudi coalition in the war. Iran also armed the Houthis and still smuggles weapons and components to missiles and drones to them and even trained them in both Yemen and abroad by the Quds Force (Robinson). In 2020, Iran even appointed an

ambassador to the embassy in Sana'a which of course is in Houthi control and not in cooperation with the PLC or the IRG in any way (reuters.com). These facts mean that Iran indeed did and still meets the requirements to be considered a black knight, since they themselves are a foreign country involved in regime bolstering activities, by delivering and smuggling weapons and components while also defending the Houthis politically and ideologically.

The second test is a smoking gun test, surrounding the question whether Iran influenced the civil war in such a dramatic way as to make the Houthis able to shift the war by increasing their military capabilities. This is important, since knowing if there exist some concrete evidence on Iran's influence on the civil war and Houthi capabilities would support the characteristics and behavior of a black knight. Reports from different sources, including the UN, has suggested that the Houthis have received components for drones and missiles from Iran through smuggle routes across Oman and from Somalia (Sharawi and Toomey). These components have afterwards been used to create the weaponry required to strike Saudi Arabian positions in Yemen and in the kingdom itself. With the help of Iranian technology and assistance the Houthis were able to send one of the strongest signals of power to Saudi Arabia in 2019, when they launched multiple attacks on the Aramco oil facilities which resulted in a massive oil production disruption, creating many different economic problems for the kingdom for weeks to come (Tuerk). Although, the UN, Saudi Arabia and the US accused Iran of conducting the attack, the Houthis did take accountability of it and since there is a lack of consensus on the matter this attack is being considered a Houthi attack with Iranian assistance in this paper. Saudi Arabia is of course the largest oil producer in the region with Iran being the fourth largest, but due to sanctions it has been difficult for Iran to really exploit its oil production capabilities, and it has made it difficult for the country to compete with Saudi Arabia on this point. Saudi Arabia has also expanded their oil and gas industries while finding new strategies to diversify their industries, while Iran is more or less forced to stay on the status quo path of mainly focusing on their main industries, like the oil industry (Shin and Mahmudlu 111). The attack on the Saudi Arabian oil production facilities by the Houthis perhaps explain this industrial struggle and battle between the two powers. While Saudi Arabia can thrive by doing what they have been doing until today and even find new strategies that focus on future challenges. Iran on the other hand doesn't have these privileges and instead used their proxy to try to hinder Saudi Arabia's oil production and exporting capabilities, which also briefly paused their efforts to secure a powerful industrial sector in

the future (Shin and Mahmudlu 112). As Iran began supporting the Houthis with more advanced technology and larger quantities of military assistance, the Houthis also began to escalate their attacks on Saudi Arabian positions and infrastructure. As a conclusion, it can be argued that Iran indeed did influence the civil war dramatically, since it made it possible for the Houthis to not only survive the Saudi coalition's operation but also made it possible for them to fight back effectively and even push the members of the coalition out of the war. This was especially seen after 2019 when Saudi Arabia gradually began to change its strategy into a more open minded and diplomatic attitude, with trying to find a way to exit the war, due to the increased threat from the Houthis on critical infrastructure. Although these tendencies were mostly seen after 2020, due to Saudi Arabia having to mediate the tensions between the IRG and the STC (Jalal). Iran was therefore successful in weakening the opposition, signalling strength and even countervailing pressure from foreign actors and in some sense, democracy promoters; although the promotion of democracy of course wasn't Saudi Arabia's main goal, but in a sense was a goal, since they wanted to kick the Houthis out of power, a group which is very clearly authoritarian based on their internal structure.

The third test is a straw-in-the-wind test, which aims to find out how Iran, as a black knight actor, has helped the Houthis when it comes to gaining political legitimacy and undermining the narratives that come from the west and Saudi Arabia. Towards the end of 2018 after the Houthis' delegation goes on a diplomatic tour where they meet with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shia militias in Iraq and meets with Iranian officials it becomes clear that the Yemeni group effectively has become part of the Iranian axis of resistance which is also what they are being portrayed as by Iran and western sources (Day, Brehony et al 162). It also becomes clear that the fact that the Houthis as a Shiite is an Iranian ally is not a coincidence, it is of course very difficult to state that this is the only reason that they are allies, but it is definitely an aspect that makes it easier for Iran to see them as potential allies and potential members within the axis of resistance. Iran has also consistently put the blame onto Saudi Arabia and their coalition, including the west, since the US as well is an ally and sells arms and weaponry to Saudi Arabia. According to Iran, the war only got as serious as it became due to Saudi Arabia's involvement and the attack from their coalition. Furthermore, the consequences of the war, like the severe and very serious humanitarian crisis, only became a reality due to Saudi Arabian involvement. This can partially be seen in the results of the Stockholm agreement, which was a UN brokered deal which came in the wake of the battle for Al-Hudaydah, which is a port city on the western side of Yemen from where around 80

percent of humanitarian aid comes through (unmha.unmissions.org). The UN warned that continuing and escalating the fighting around the port city and in the city itself could threaten the lives of hundreds of thousands of children and people in general, who already are suffering due to the civil war. The deal was made in 2018 and through many challenges, with both sides accusing each other of continuing the hostilities, the pro government forces in the city and surrounding areas officially withdrew from the city in 2021, which meant that the Houthis were again were in complete control of the city. This essentially put the pressure on the Saudi coalition and forced them to back away due to international pressure and the fact that they would be portrayed in a very negative light, if they were to continue their attacks on the city. In 2020, after Iran appointed an ambassador to Sana'a, it also meant that Iran now officially saw the Houthis as the legitimate government in power in Yemen, which was an important symbolic move for the Houthis (home.treasury.gov). As a conclusion, it can be stated, that although recognition of Houthi rule in Yemen is very limited and not recognized by most of the international community, the group has still been supported and defended diplomatically and ideologically. These actions by the Iranian side, support the thesis surrounding them acting and having the behavior of a black knight according to Tolstrup's theory, by undermining opposition activities throughout the war and by countering democracy promoters.

The fourth test is a double decisive test on the question whether Iran, through military and strategic assistance, in fact did enable the Houthis to retain control in the capital and even expand their power on more territory in the country, and if any other country as well helped to facilitate these opportunities for the Houthis just as Iran did. When the Houthis took control of Sanaa in 2014, it was due to their own military strength and the help of Saleh and the soldiers who were loyal to him. At that moment Iran was involved very limitedly, but the support that Iran provided afterwards, especially after 2015 and the Saudi coalition's operation was extremely crucial for the survival of the Houthis and their ability to remain in control of the territory that they had captured, although this support wasn't enough for the complete dominance against the IRG and its allies. The support that Iran provided was especially important when it comes to drone and missile warfare, this is the case since modern warfare has changed dramatically to warfare for even 20 years ago, with the use of drones increasing to drastic new heights, which is what also is being seen in the war in Ukraine since 2022. It is also important to consider that the Houthis only are receiving military and political support from Iran and no other sovereign state. There have been some

reports surrounding some kind of intelligence support from Russia, China and North Korea, but these reports are not only about very limited support but also do not have enough evidence to support them yet. Furthermore, these reports mostly come from the side of the US, which makes it even more important to interpret them with a grain of salt and consider whether this supposed support even is actual support or simply trade (Gering and Brodsky). Hezbollah is an actor that has been giving military advice and some kind of support to the Houthis, but as Iran's number one proxy, it is very likely that this support also is being given by Iran, but by the hands of Hezbollah. This stands in great contrast to the IRG which received support from a large coalition of states and in a very direct way. In the case of the Yemni civil war, Iran has very successfully provided the Houthis with a type of asymmetric support, in the sense that their support has been dynamic and in constant change, with sometimes simply supporting the Houthis politically and sometimes focusing on military support while also creating new diplomatic circumstances and initiatives. Iran's involvement has as well always been deniable and covert, while Saudi Arabia has been very vocal and overt, when it comes to their war against the Houthis and their cold war with Iran. As a conclusion, it can be stated that the Houthis most likely could have been able to thwart the IRG and perhaps even the Saudi coalition early on, but with time their military capabilities and manpower wouldn't have been enough which would have ended in their collapse and the return of the IRG to Sana'a. Iran's support was therefore a necessary and decisive factor which increased the Houthis power significantly and created a circumstance where the Houthis could fight against the Saudi coalition on the long term and deter the coalition from fighting for even more years to come.

Using the theory of black knights on the case of Iran it shows a foreign actor, who very decisively so, fit into many of the black knight behavioral categories while still acting covertly. Although Iran didn't initiate the uprising of the Houthis and their rise to power in Sana'a, Iran definitely did make it possible for the Houthis to remain in power and gain even more power to then be able to endure the long war with the Saudi coalition and further remain a relevant factor and power in the region. Iran effectively fulfills three out of the five black knight mechanisms that Tolstrup presents. The first mechanism is on signalling strength and invincibility, by including the Houthis in the axis of resistance and providing them with advanced military technology. The second mechanism is on weakening the opposition, this is as well achieved by how Iran provides the Houthis with advanced weapon systems and components for drones and missiles. Moreover, it is about portraying Saudi Arabia and its

allies in bad light and force them to back off with the help of pressure from the UN, as in the situation in Al-Hudaydah. The third mechanism is on countering democracy promoters, which as well is being done through changing the discourse on the conflict and legitimizing the Houthis as a government and a group that has overcome discrimination and a lack of inclusion in the country before 2014. The two remaining mechanisms are less important in this case, since the risk of elite defection is much smaller due to the Houthis not being created as a democratic entity and the fact that protest suppression also is less important when it comes to the bigger picture, especially since people are less willing to protest when a serious civil war is raging across the country.

Overall, it can be concluded that black knight behavior can be seen very clearly from both sides and that there is a clear causality between some of the behavior and events that have been taken place throughout the war. On the one hand it seems like Saudi Arabia never would have gotten itself and other Arab nations as involved as they did, if Iran never got involved either, on the other hand it also seems like it is the joint involvement of the two regional powers that prolonged this conflict to completely new lengths and in the end it is the involvement of Iran that forced Saudi Arabia and its coalition to give up on the war in Yemen and settle with what had been achieved until now, like the creation of the PLC. The black knight behavior that was clearly seen from both sides was signalling invincibility, weakening the opposition and dealing with western pressure or democracy promoters. Nevertheless, having to deal with mass protests have been something that the Houthis in particular have needed to do, and the support from Iran, might not have been necessary, but it still helped. Instead of having to deal with protests, Saudi Arabia has had to deal with deterring elite defection, which is where the PLC comes into play especially. Conclusively, causal inference can be clearly seen in the way both regional powers have acted and their desire to be in control within Yemen and surrounding the issue of the civil war by behaving according to the mechanisms within the theory on black knights has only exacerbated the humanitarian situation in the country and prolonged a war, that perhaps didn't have to be that long. But, as the theory states, if there is a real danger that the incumbent will lose power then the black knight is much more likely to engage in black knight activities, which is what has been seen from both sides.

Discussion

In this section, Tolstrup's theory on black knights will be discussed by pondering on the mechanisms and how they work in the case of this paper and whether it is indeed regime change that is important or instead regime stability for example.

It is true that the selected theory perhaps isn't the most obvious choice of theory when considering the cases surrounding Saudi Arabian and Iranian influence on the Yemeni civil war. Although it is important to acknowledge that the choice of theory perhaps is somewhat unexpected, I would argue that it also is the exact opposite. The nature of the theory revolves around the understanding of the behavior that can be seen in strong powers who try to influence smaller states. These stronger and bigger powers are the black knights, and the smaller states are effectively the states that they wish to become their proxies or simply allies, who can serve as a tool to achieve the interests of the black knights. The difference between the theory and this paper comes down to the way the theory is applied. In Tolstrup's article he writes about the case of Russian black knight activities in post-soviet countries, which Russia is trying to keep in their sphere of influence. This is being done by heavily focusing on elections in authoritarian regimes and surrounding how to get an authoritarian regime into office as well. This paper doesn't have the same focus. Elections are not an actual aspect that is important to consider, just yet at least. Nevertheless, I still decided to look through the lense of the theory on the selected cases, but instead of looking at elections I look at the cases of two regional actors, who first of all have a lot of similarities with an authoritarian regime themselves, but also seek to support an actor who has a lot of similar characteristics with authoritarianism. One of the main being, that there are no elections whatsoever. Not in Yemen and not really in Saudi Arabia nor Iran. Furthermore, it was quite clear from the beginning that these two actors, due to their tense relationship, take quite drastic measures when it comes to dealing with the threat of the other. Therefore, black knight activities in the sense of their ultimate goal would still be expected to be seen to some extent, although the element of elections weren't in the picture. Many of the instruments that are proposed in the theory might as well not be relevant in this case, but the idea behind is still relevant. Sure, it might not be relevant for the black knights to endorse their flawed elections to signal invincibility, but instead it is still important for them to endorse the local actor or ally and stand behind them in the international arena to signal invincibility. The theory also talks about the desire of black knights to change regime to a friendly authoritarian one, which they can control and

have act as a proxy, in this case it is more about the case of regime stability and survival rather than change, but if we consider the PLC to the legitimate government in Yemen, then it can still mean that Iran and the Houthis are wishing for a fully fledged regime change. Overall, there are many instruments in the theory that needed to be looked at little bit differently, but since it was my perception that the theory was able to be stretched, it has simply created a new dimension for the theory where it is not only limited to the idea surrounding elections, but instead it can be considered in a broader understanding on power and proxy relations. Due to the case being about a civil war, it also changes the situation a bit, since elections rarely can take place in a case like Yemen, but many of the ideas and goals behind black knight behavior that Tolstrup writes about in his article are still important, relevant and fitting, even when the question of elections isn't in the picture.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the two cases surrounding Saudi Arabian influence and Iranian influence differ from each other quite a bit. What can be concluded with certainty is the fact that both actors have been acting according with the behavior expected from black knights. It is when it comes to strategy that the behavior differs to some extent, although the interests and goals are somewhat similar. Saudi Arabia has provided overt military, political, diplomatic and financial support to the IRG. In contrast, Iran has provided the Houthis with covert ideological, political, diplomatic and military support. While Iran's support has come in a more asymmetric way, due to their covert nature and shifting decisions and strategies for supporting the Houthis, Saudi Arabia has been much clearer and to some extent predictable. Both regional powers had it in their goals to support their proxy or ally from losing and collapsing. Nevertheless, for Saudi Arabia it has been more about preserving the regime in Yemen, that was there when the civil war broke out, while for Iran it is more about empowering the new regime to make them more comfortable with ruling the country in the capital Sana'a. The goals from both sides has of course also been in relation to their animosity towards each other, while Saudi Arabia was preoccupied with too strong Iranian influence in Yemen, on its southern border, Iran saw this conflict as an opportunity to become a threat to Saudi Arabia even further and be able to do damage to the oil industry of one of the world's largest oil producing country's. One of the key mechanisms within Tolstrup's theory that is seen in both cases, is surrounding the weakening the opposition. This

mechanism explains black knights' behavior both in terms of political rhetoric and in terms of military empowerment. Saudi Arabia made a giant impact on the civil war when they launched their Operation Decisive Storm and the following Operation Restoring Hope, since these operations made it impossible for the Houthis to decisively gain control in the whole country, or at least in all the major populated areas. Although these operations didn't achieve the ultimate result that Saudi Arabia and its coalition was hoping for, the destruction of the Houthis entirely and the elimination of a new regional threat, it did provide the necessary means to preserve the regime and push back the Houthis to some extent. Iran also made a giant impact on the war, since they made it possible for the Houthis to persist on fighting a coalition of a large number of Arab nations. Furthermore, although the involvement of Iran perhaps forced Saudi Arabia to enter the war to begin with, it was also the support from Iran to the Houthis in all forms that contributed to the exit of Saudi Arabia and its coalition from the war, at least in term of direct warfare. If there is one regional power who has to look at themselves as the winner in the Yemeni civil war, although the civil war still persists, but in a less active form, it would have to be Iran. Of course it is hard to state that one actor or the other is the winner, but Iran is the black knight who lost the least resources on supporting their ally in Yemen, the Houthis are still in power in Sana'a and in many important areas, like Al-Hudaydah, Iran has been able to target Saudi Arabia through the Houthis and even send missiles on US ships and ships going to support the Israel cause in Gaza. Simultaneously, Iran has been able to improve their relationship with Saudi Arabia, although more progress is needed, while still being able to do and control all the above-mentioned points. The Yemeni civil war has therefore transformed itself from strictly a civil war into a much more international conflict, with implications being observed on both regional affairs, international wars and on global maritime trade. If we want to answer on how external actors have influences the process of the Yemeni in the civil war since 2014 until today, it becomes quite clear. Without the external involvement in the war and the consequences of it, the country and the region would most likely look completely different today. The humanitarian crisis would not have become as serious, and life would have probably returned to some sort of normality faster for the general population. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran would perhaps remain in some sort of status quo, whereas it has seen improvements in recent years. Iran's axis of resistance would perhaps not have been as strong as today, especially since they lost Syria after the fall of Assad. All these speculations are of course only on a hypothetical level. What can be confirmed is that the asymmetric strategy on support that Iran used enabled the Houthis to become much more endurable and powerful, effectively transforming

them from a local insurgency into a powerful, modern and effective force that can threaten Saudi and American interests in the region. Saudi Arabia on the other hand prevented the total collapse of the regime, through the work of maintaining a large anti-Houthi faction and the later creation of the PLC, in more recent years they have tried to rebrand themselves into a peacemaker and humanitarian supporter while seeking to exit the war to focus on its own security and prosperity of its own country. As of today, black knight behavior can still be seen in the conflict on some level by both regional powers and the causal relationship between the activities of Saudi Arabia and Iran is undeniable.

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