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Title: The Iranian *Panjagan* (crossbow) against the Saudi *Scimitar* (sword): *The Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry in Yemen.*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the determinants, of Iranian foreign policy towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia within, the regional sub-system, of the Middle East. Iranian foreign policy approach during two regional crises- the- Bahraini and the Yemeni one- varies greatly and raises questions about the rationale of Iranian foreign policy towards Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This research tries to explain why Islamic Republic of Iran chose a militant approach in the Yemeni crisis whilst it opted for a passive approach in the Bahraini crisis. Furthermore, it seeks to discover what is the nature and the causality of Iran's militant option in Yemen. This work is a qualitative research which use the case study of Yemeni Civil War, as a pattern of analysis. Through the lens of structural realism this research argues that the Iranian foreign policy posture towards Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is defensive in nature, and is aimed at the Iranian state's survival and security maximization.

Key words: Iran, KSA, Yemen, Bahrain, foreign policy, deterrence, structural realism.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2004, less than two years after the collapse of the Iraqi Baathist regime by the U.S. led coalition forces, the Jordanian King Abdullah (b. 1962) stated the danger of the destabilization of the Sunni Arab regimes and the potential regional domination of Islamic Republic of Iran (henceforth IRI). According to King Abdullah, IRI pursued an expansionist policy through an alliance of pro-Iranian state and non-state actors aiming to revise the regional *status quo*. King Abdullah designated that alliance as the *Shia Crescent*,¹ a network of client militant and political actors which extended from IRI to Lebanon. Two years later, the leader of Egypt, the most influential and powerful Sunni-Arab state, Hosni Mubarak (1928-2020) in a public speech stressed his concern that the Arab Shiite populations in the region are more loyal to Tehran than to their national leaderships.² The close ties with Hezbollah, a Lebanese military and political organization, the support of Shiite militancy in Iraq since 2003 and the Iranian active military involvement in the Syrian Civil War considered by IRI's opponents, as an indication of the increasing Iranian expansionism in the region. IRI rejects these claims and justifies its military involvement in those regions as defensive against its rivals, U.S.A, Israel and especially Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (henceforth KSA), which threaten its national security. Nevertheless, the Iranian attitude on the case of the Bahraini Uprising in 2011 and Yemeni Civil War in 2015 seems controversial and not as a result of a comprehensive foreign policy strategy. Both conflicts share some similarities but also have their differences. Both countries host large Shiite populations which revolted against their pro-KSA ruling elites. Both countries are located on strategic positions and are vital for KSA interests. KSA is bordering both countries and has interfered militarily to them, alongside with other Gulf states. The difference between Yemeni and Bahraini case is that IRI kept a passive stance on the bordering Bahrain while being involved militarily, in the more distant Yemen. Thus, these two differentiated approaches puzzle us with why IRI chose a militant approach in Yemeni conflict, whilst it opted for a passive approach in the Bahraini crisis. The hypothesis of this research is that the IRI chose a militant approach in Yemen in order to counter the KSA anti-Iranian policy in Syria and Iraq which consist key components of IRI's defensive,

¹ Atilla Sandıklı and Emin Salihi, "Iran, the Shia Crescent, and the Arab Spring," *Bilgesam Publications*, Report no. 35 (August 2011): 5.

² *Ibid*, 5.

security strategy and threaten its survival and state preservation, while in the case of Bahraini Uprising IRI's vital security interests were not under threat by KSA military involvement. Since there was a military conflict in Yemen and not in Bahrain, the case study in this research will be solely based on the Yemeni case, while the comparisons with Bahrain will occupy relatively minor parts throughout the thesis.

Literature Review

The expansion of the Iranian influence through a network of non-state and state actors, especially after the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime has occupied the security, defense and foreign policy academic scholarship. Thus, the literature review of this study will be traced, mainly, from those fields of study and will be divided into three groups.

The firsts group will be focused on the scholarship which supports the argument that Iran is a revisionist state with hegemonic goals. The work of Mark G Viens, *U.S. Policy Towards an Emerging Iranian-Shia Hegemon*,³ concludes that Iran is an emerging regional hegemon which acts rationally, though its religious leadership and proposes that a less hostile U.S.A-IRI relationship is in Washington's interest. Hauda Raouf on her research, *Iranian Quest for Regional Hegemony: Motivations, Strategies and Constraints*,⁴ by applying the theoretical framework of the regional hegemony theory admits the revisionist strategy of Iran, though concludes that its hegemonic goals in the region will fail due to the animosity of the Arab states, the tensions with U.S.A and the sectarian base model it exports. Afson Ostovar in his work, *Iran, its clients, and the future of the Middle East: the limits of religion*,⁵ considers that Iran seeks for regional hegemony through a network of client state and non-state actors. Cornerstone of this proxy network is the mutual Shiite doctrine of Tehran and the alienated Shiite communities from their Sunni Arab, Gulf leaderships. Ilan Zolayot's study, *Realpolitik and Jihad: The Iranian Use of Shiite Militias in*

³ Mark G Viens, *U.S. Policy Towards an Emerging Iranian-Shia Hegemon* (U.S.A: School of Advanced Military Studies , 2006): 1-53.

⁴ Hauda Raouf, "Iranian Quest for Regional Hegemony: Motivations, Strategies and Constraints," *Review of Economics and Political Science* 4, no. 3 (July 2019): 242-256.

⁵ Afson Ostovar, "Iran, its clients, and the future of the Middle East: the limits of religion," *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 2018): 1237-1255.

Syria,⁶ analyses the activity of Shiite pro-Iranian militias in Syrian Civil War and argues that Iran follows a power maximizing, hegemonic strategy. He supports that Iran mobilizes Shiite's militias by using ideological incentives and tools in order to export the Iranian Revolution paradigm and establish an Iranian dominated Islamic order. Saman Ayesha Kidwai, *The Rise of Iran as a Regional Power*,⁷ supports the argument that Iran is a regional power with long-term, hegemonic foreign policy designs. The author claims that Iran through the axis of resistance, a network of proxies, attempts to be established as the regional hegemon. Marcel Serr also, in his work, *Understanding the War in Yemen*,⁸ considers that the conflict is part of a broader struggle for regional domination between Iran and KSA.

The second group of the scholarship defends the argument that Iran act as a defensive factor which seeks for security maximization. Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan's research, *Islamic Realpolitik: Two Level Iranian Foreign Policy*,⁹ argues that religious rhetoric is offered merely for domestic consumption and that pragmatism and state survival are the main drivers of Tehran's foreign policy orientation. Her work is a critic of the western perceptions of a religious driven Iranian foreign policy and the author attempts to explain the role and functionality of the religious rhetoric in the Iranian politics. Kayan Barzegar on his study, *Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities*,¹⁰ points to the defensive rather than expansionist nature of Iranian foreign policy and he tries to analyze the issue from an Iranian perspective supporting that Iranian foreign policy is established on rationality. The author, although does not deny Iran's policy to establish good relations with the Shiites states and population, he rejects the arguments about Tehran's socio-ideological hegemonism. According to Barzegar, Iran has neither the socio-cultural influence to establish a Shiite Crescent nor it is on its own national interest. The work of Masoud Rezaei and

⁶ Ilan Zolayot, "Realpolitik and Jihad: The Iranian Use of Shiite Militias in Syria," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): 296-328.

⁷ Saman Ayesha Kidwai, "The Rise of Iran as a Regional Power," *Indian Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2020): 313-328.

⁸ Marcel Serr, "Understanding the War in Yemen," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 11, no. 3 (January 2018): 1-13.

⁹ Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan, "Islamic Realpolitik: Two Level Iranian Foreign Policy," *International Journal on World Peace* 28, no. 4 (2009): 7-35.

¹⁰ Kayan Barzegar, "Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 18, Issue. 1 (Fall 2008): 87-99.

Kayhan Barzegar, *Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Thinking*,¹¹ analyses the role of Khamenei on the decision-making process of the Iranian foreign policy. Their study concludes that Iranian strategy orientation is defensive and justify the political and militant overseas activity on the terms of national interest defense and security preservation. Furthermore, this research provides us with a better understanding how the Shiite Islam ideological-religious tenets are compatible with an active defensive deterrence policy in the region. The rationality and the pragmatism which are derived from the strategic limitations are the main features of Iranian foreign policy according Kayhan Barzegar and Abdolrasool Divsallar, on their work *Political Rationality in Iranian Foreign Policy*.¹² In this study are analysed the concepts of the strategic patience and the low-cost engagements as crucial components of Iranian strategy. The defensive nature of Iranian foreign policy is also supported by Rusty Trevino in his work, *Is Iran an Offensives Realist or a Defensive Realist? A Theoretical Reflection on Iranian Motives for Creating Instability*,¹³ Trevino argues that Iran is a defensive actor due to its limitations on sufficient resources (technology, economy, military) which prevent it from becoming a regional hegemon. Furthermore, the author justifies Iran proxy militancy as defensive rather than offensive action, due the imbalance of conventional military hardware in the region. Eva Patricia Rakel's article, *Iranian Foreign Policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution: 1979-2006*,¹⁴ analyses the Iranian foreign policy from 1979 till 2006. The study examines the influence of Shiism on the Iranian power relations and the decision-making centres which are shaping its foreign policy. Furthermore, it analyses the conducted foreign policies of the four presidencies, since 1979. The author concludes that the changes in the IRI's foreign policy are related to the regime's necessity for survival and security preservation. Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi analysis, *Understanding Iran's Decision-makings in Defense Issues and*

¹¹ Kayhan Barzegar and Masoud Rezaei, "Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Thinking," *An Iranian Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 27-54.

¹² Kayhan Barzegar and Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Political Rationality in Iranian Foreign Policy," *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 39-53.

¹³ Rusty Trevino, "Is Iran an Offensives Realist or a Defensive Realist? A Theoretical Reflection on Iranian Motives for Creating Instability," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 5 (Fall 2013): 382-392.

¹⁴ Eva Patricia Rakel, "Iranian Foreign Policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution: 1979-2006," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 6, no. 1-3 (January 2007): 159-187.

Missile Program,¹⁵ presents us the incentives of the Iranian military strategy. The author points to the defensive nature of Iran's missile's program. Dolatabadi, states that the state's survival and Tehran's geopolitical 'loneliness', especially during the Iran-Iraq war are the crucial determinants of Iranian military deterrence strategy.

The third group of the literature review provides us with data related to the theoretical framework, IRI's domestic ideological struggles, the regional geopolitics and their power dynamics. The work of Shahram Akbarzadeh & James Barry, *State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy*,¹⁶ is an analysis on the role of the state identity in the Iranian foreign policy. The study follows a constructivist theoretic perspective which attempts to present the key components of the Iranian state identity and their interplay in the foreign policy goals and strategies shaping. This paper provides us a better understanding about the determinants and the constraints which are framing Iranian diplomacy. Ruhollah Ramazani, *Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy*,¹⁷ is focused on the question of ideological or pragmatic nature of the Iranian foreign policy. Although the author does not ignore the influence of the Islamic ideology, it concludes that the pragmatism prevails over ideological determinants. Though the limited scope of the research, this study provides us with an important historical background and information about the formation process of the Iranian foreign policy and the interplay between religious perceptions and national interest goals and aspirations, from the pre-Islamic era till Khatami's governance. Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss work, *The Political Power of Proxies: Why Nonstate Actors Use Local Surrogates*,¹⁸ provides us a better understanding about the incentives and the goals of state-sponsor proxy's strategy. Afshon Ostovar analysis, *The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's*

¹⁵ Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi, "Understanding Iran's Decision-makings in Defence Issues and Missile Program," *India Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2020): 226–242.

¹⁶ Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy," *British Journal of Middle eastern studies* 43, no. 4 (2016): 613–629.

¹⁷ Ruhollah K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 2 (Autumn 2004): 549-559.

¹⁸ Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss, "The Political Power of Proxies: Why Nonstate Actors Use Local Surrogates," *International Security* 44, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 119–157.

Way of War,¹⁹ about Iran's regional proxy strategy provides useful data about the utility of the network of Shiite militias on the Iranian security policy. Simon Mabon work, *The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry*,²⁰ analyses the rivalry between IRI and KSA in Bahrain on religious and geopolitical terms and its connection with both rival's legitimacy regionally and domestically. Friedman Brandon work the, *Battle for Bahrain: What One Uprising Meant for the Gulf States and Iran*,²¹ presents us the impact of the Bahraini uprising in 2011 on KSA and the rest of the Gulf states. The paper analyses how the events in Bahrain provoked a shift to KSA and the rest Gulf monarchies regional security approach. The strategic importance of Syria, for Tehran's foreign policy and national security designs are analyzed on Edward Wastnidge paper, *Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis*.²² Moreover, the works of Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*,²³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The False Promise of International Institutions*,²⁴ Steven Lobell, *Structural Realism/Offensive and defensive realism*,²⁵ Stephen S. Walt, *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power*,²⁶ Robert Jervis, *Cooperation under the Security Dilemma*,²⁷ and the book of Nukhet Sandal and Jonathan Fox, *Religion in International relations Theory: Interaction and Possibilities*,²⁸ will be used as theoretical foundation of this thesis paper.

¹⁹ Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019):159–188.

²⁰ Simon Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 84-97.

²¹ Brandon Friedman, "Battle for Bahrain: What One Uprising Meant for the Gulf States and Iran," *World Affairs* 174, no. 6 (March 2012): 74-84.

²² Edward Wastnidge, "Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 148-159.

²³ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of the International Politics* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

²⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter, 1994-1995): 5-49.

²⁵ Steven E. Lobell, "Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, (March 2010): 1-26.

²⁶ Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 3-43.

²⁷ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167- 214.

²⁸ Nukhet Sandal and Jonathan Fox, *Religion in International relations Theory: Interaction and Possibilities* (London: Routledge, 2013).

The existed scholarship gives a deeper understanding of the Iranian foreign policy nature and provides us with several conclusions. Rationality and the pragmatism are key features of the Iranian foreign policy. The State's survival and national interest narrative prevails as the ideological one as the main determinant of the foreign policy strategy. Nevertheless, the ideological factor remains significant in Iranian policy making. Shiism plays a multilevel role on foreign policy design. It provides IRI with resources that are necessary for the fulfillment of its strategic goals. It is used as a mobilization factor for IRI's military activities in the region by providing ideological incentives and recruiting sources for its proxy militant activities. Moreover, Shiism functions as a socio-cultural bridge between regional Shiite communities and Iran, establishing a patron-client system, which provides Tehran with influence and strategic depth. Furthermore, the scholarship showcases that the militancy, i.e asymmetric warfare, via paramilitary proxies is a key element of IRI's foreign policy.

The scholarship which considers IRI as a revisionist power with hegemonic goals has several defensible arguments. The existence of an active pro-Iranian militant network which is utilized by Tehran as a means for enhancement regional influence is undeniable.²⁹ Nevertheless, the non-interference stance of IRI in the case of Bahrain,³⁰ during 2011 uprising and the following, the Saudi-led, Gulf Cooperation Council (henceforth GCC) military intervention questions the hegemonism narrative. Why did IRI not exploit the advantage of the unrest in a Shiite majority state which is located on strategic position and its control would have given a strategic advantage in the Persian Gulf? What is Bahrain's role on IRI's security strategy structure? Does IRI possess the military technological advantage and the economic strength, in order to set itself as a regional hegemon? How it can be considered as a strong political power when its response to KSA's hard power, military approach, in Bahrain was restricted on soft power measures such as diplomatic initiatives and rhetoric condemnations.³¹

²⁹ Statement of the Iranian MP and close to Ayatollah Khamenei Ali Reza Zakani, "Sanaa is the fourth Arab capital to join the Iranian revolution," *Middle East Monitor*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140927-sanaa-is-the-fourth-arab-capital-to-join-the-iranian-revolution/>.

³⁰ Brandon Friedman, "Battle for Bahrain," 80.

³¹ *Ibid*, 79.

On the other hand, the scholarship which defends the defensive character of Iranian strategy and considers it as security maximizing has valid arguments. Iran has not waged an offensive war for more than a century. Even when its diplomats were executed by Taliban in 1998.³² Nevertheless, the current Iranian involvement in Yemen challenges the argument of the defensive character of the Iranian security strategy (as it is a direct and overt conflict between KSA conventional troops and a pro-Iranian militia, the Houthis,³³ on the borders of KSA with strikes on strategic Saudi targets.) How it can be considered as defensive action, the unconcealed Iranian military activity against KSA regular troops since there is no official declaration of war? Is IRI's military endeavor on its main rival borders, distant from its borders, a defensive strategy since it threatens KSA's vital strategic interests in the region and violates its national sovereignty itself?

Thus, the existing scholarship does not clearly answer to the question of the Iranian foreign policy nature towards KSA. The current study will try to fill that gap by posing and answering several questions about the incentives of IRI's different foreign policy approaches between Bahraini Uprising and Yemeni Civil War. What explains Iranian passiveness towards Saudi militancy in Bahrain? How vital for IRI's survival was a *status quo* shift in Bahrain? How valid can be the argument of Iranian expansionism since the Iranian military involvement in Yemen is without the engagement and the presence of its conventional forces or a substantial number of forces and heavy equipment? Moreover, to clarify if the Iranian asymmetric military interference which has not led to territorial (KSA) occupation can be justified as offensive strategy. Also, whether the offensive military tactics can justify a defensive national security strategy.

Theoretical Approach

The current study will apply the theory of the structural realism or neorealism, in order to analyse the IRI's foreign policy behaviour in the subsystem of the Middle East, within the context of IRI and KSA regional antagonism. Structural realism is an international relations theory which

³² Douglas Jehl, "Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats' Deaths," *The New York Times*, September 11, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/11/world/iran-holds-taliban-responsible-for-9-diplomats-deaths.html>.

³³ "Yemen's Houthi rebels: Who are they and what do they want?" *Deutsche Welle*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/yemens-houthi-rebels-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-want/a-50667558>.

considers that the principal end of a state is its survival, which is by definition a defensive goal,³⁴ in an anarchic international system where there is not a central authority.³⁵ According to Kenneth Waltz, the founder of Neorealism “in anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power” and that “the first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system.”³⁶ Within structural realism, there are two theoretical trends: the ‘offensive’ and ‘defensive’ realism. The offensive realists support that state’s survival can be attained through power maximization, meaning, that the state’s security can be attained through expansion and domination, implemented by an aggressive “foreign economic, political, and military policies to alter the balance of power.”³⁷ The defensive realists on the other hand, though they agree with offensive realists that states need security in order to survive, reject the arguments about power-maximizing policies. Instead, defensive realists support that states are keen to follow a non-expansionist, defensive policy which aims to the preservation of the balance of power.³⁸ For defensive realists, the expansion and the aggressive military policy is self-defeating, because it undermines the state’s security by provoking counter-balancing measures by its opponents.³⁹

Nevertheless, defensive realists admit that in the case of a security dilemma, i.e when one state’s security is threatened by an aggressor state (or when it is insecure in any other way), then the conflict is necessary option as a defensive measure.⁴⁰ According to Robert Jervis, a defensive realist, “many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others,”⁴¹ and that “an increase in one state’s security decreases the security of others.”⁴² The

³⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter, 1994-1995): 10.

³⁵ Steven E. Lobell, “Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism,” 1.

³⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 126.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

³⁸ Lobell, “Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism,” 3, 10.

³⁹ Stephen S. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 11-12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

⁴¹ Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 169.

⁴² *Ibid*, 186.

security dilemma can lead to an “unintended hostility spiral among states that harbour no aggressive or revisionist intent.”⁴³ Moreover, defensive realists suggest that a state can reduce its security dilemma by taking several measures against the state which threatens its security. Accordingly, the “increasing the costs from non-cooperation,” “reducing the unilateral gains from the sucker’s payoff,” and the “increasing the costs from mutual defection are among a few of the strategies,”⁴⁴ are a few strategies the defensive realists suggest.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach in aiming to understand the incentives of IRI’s foreign policy behaviour in the region and to question its nature. The applied analytical pattern is the case study analysis, the Yemeni Civil War and Iranian involvement in it. Bahraini crisis, though it will be covered, it will not follow the analytical depth of the Yemeni Civil War due to the fact that the Iranian absence of military activity does not substantially challenge my hypothesis. Nevertheless, the incentives and the determinants of Iranian non-interference in Bahraini Uprising will be presented and analysed. Therefore, my main research framework will be spatially focused in the region of Yemen and temporally in the 2014-2019 period. The conflict in Yemen, which is an episode of the regional IRI-KSA power struggle, was selected because it is one of the most challenging case for the validity of my hypothesis due to the geographical proximity and the direct military engagement of the KSA troops and IRI’s military elements, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC henceforth),⁴⁵ alongside with its regional allies, the Hezbollah,⁴⁶ and the Yemeni Houthi’s militants. The research will attempt to reason out the causality of the Iranian engagement. Finally, it questions if the Iranian military involvement in the KSA-Yemeni borders can be considered as a defensive strategy.

The study will be divided into four chapters. In the first chapter an attempt at foreign policy analysis will be made. More specifically, the historical modifiers of the Iranian foreign policy

⁴³ Lobell, 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁵ Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Risisng: Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 23-25.

culture; the determinants of the Iranian foreign policy and its security dilemma; the ideological or pragmatic nature of the Iranian foreign policy will be illustrated and analysed. The analysis of the Iranian security doctrine will be the topic of the second chapter. In this chapter the research will be focused on the analysis of two issues. Firstly, the features, the means and the goals of the Iranian military doctrine and strategy. Secondly, on the strategic perceptions of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, a key institutional decision maker of the Foreign and Security policy. The third chapter will be devoted on Bahraini Uprising. In that chapter it will be attempted to depict a brief analysis of the determinants and the incentives which led IRI to keep a passive non-interference stance against the KSA's military involvement in Bahrain. The last chapter is the case study analysis on the Iranian involvement in the Yemen Civil War and will be divided on three topics. Firstly, it will present (briefly) the political background of the civil conflict political background, as well as the nature of the Iranian engagement. Secondly, will be presented the reasoning of the causes and the incentives of the Iranian involvement in Yemeni Crisis. Thirdly, the theoretical analysis through the application of the neorealism's theory where an analysis of the IRI's foreign policy posture in the Yemeni civil conflict within the framework of IRI-KSA antagonism will be attempted.

This thesis aims to contribute to the academic scholarship of foreign policy and the security studies. Particularly, it aims to explain how offensive military tactics can serve defensive in nature, i.e security-maximizing foreign policies strategies. It will also illustrate how the asymmetric, low-cost engagement is used as a foreign policy means. Concepts such as balance of threat, security dilemma, forward defense, active deterrence, and interconnected security, will be presented and analyzed. Moreover, the geopolitical impact and influence of the non-state actors in the Middle East will be depicted. Yet, to question the level effectiveness, as a foreign policy means, of the expensive and modern, conventional military tactics and hardware compare to a low cost, low technology, irregular warfare approach in the future regional conflicts.

This paper will attempt to shed light mainly on the most recent hotspot of the KSA-IRI rivalry. Despite the Bahraini Uprising and the following Iranian foreign policy posture will be covered, nevertheless the main analytical field will be the Iranian militant involvement in the Yemeni Civil War and its influence on the regional balance of power. Thus, it is not a study that covers the full spectrum of the regional competition, but is rather than a narrow one. Moreover, it

is focused on specific dimensions, such as the foreign policy, military and the geopolitical (thus excluding the economic, the social and the humanitarian aspects of the conflict). In addition, due to the corona pandemic the research has met several hardships which have created restrictions on domestic and overseas mobility which make the data collection by primary and secondary sources, such as interviews and non-digital data collection more difficult.

CHAPTER 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY.

1.1 Foreign Policy Culture Modifiers

Before we examine the goals, the nature, and the determinants of the Iranian foreign policy, we should search briefly, the geopolitical environment which the Iranian state exists and functions in the recent centuries. It will assist as to the understanding of the construction of the modern foreign policy culture. Yet, it will be attempted to answer the question how and why that culture was shaped historically in Iran.

The uninterrupted continuity of the Iranian political entity began with the establishment of the Safavid empire in 1501 by Ismail I or Shah Ismail (1487-1524.) and since then, with the exception of British-Soviet occupation between 1941-1946, it was never fully occupied or colonized by any foreign power(s). Though, in the last three centuries Iran experienced constant external pressure and interventions by the surrounding competing empires such as the Ottoman, Russian and the British which led to grave threats towards domestic stability and territorial integrity.⁴⁷ Russians invaded twice during the 19th century, ceding Iranian territory, and a third time as the Soviet Union (alongside with the British) during WW II.⁴⁸

Moreover, during post-WW II era two historical events shaped the modern Iranian strategic thought. Firstly, the 1953 *coup d'état*, directed by U.S.A and Great Britain against the first democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh (1882-1967), in favour of Shah Pahlavi, created a widespread feeling of mistrust and animosity towards U.S. and western powers in general.⁴⁹ Secondly, the Iraqi invasion against the nascent IRI only increased that existed distrust and animosity towards West. Saddam Hussein's aggression was fully supported on every level by the U.S. and several Western and Arab allies.⁵⁰ The eight years of the Iran-Iraq war besides the huge human and material casualties, the aggravation of the relation with West and the neighbouring Arab states had an additional implication. It created a sentiment of strategic isolation

⁴⁷ Barzegar, "Iran and the Shiite Crescent," 94.

⁴⁸ He Jingjie, "A Secured Iran? Iran's Independent Active Deterrence Strategy," *Contemporary International Relations* 27, no. 5 (2017): 138.

⁴⁹ Rieffer-Flanagan, "Islamic Realpolitik: Two Level Iranian Foreign Policy," 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 12-13.

and the necessity of a constant security awareness and military readiness.⁵¹ The U.S. incentives of the Iraqi military endeavour can be explained on geopolitical pragmatic terms. Since the early 70s the U.S. strategy in the Gulf was twofold. Firstly, to secure the uninterrupted access of the Gulf's oil resources to the global markets, and secondly the survival of Israeli statehood.⁵² This twofold strategy was relied on the functioning of Iran and KSA as the military and financial foci of U.S. influence in the region preventing the influence of pro-Soviet, Arab regimes.⁵³ The Iranian revolution ended the 'two pillar,' U.S. strategy though its strategic aims are remain a priority.⁵⁴

1.2 Determinants of Iranian foreign policy

The geopolitical environment of IRI is crucial determinant of its foreign policy design.⁵⁵ According to the Iran's Strategic 20-Year Plan (2005-2025), "Iran is a developed country ranking the first in the region economically, scientifically, and technologically."⁵⁶ This assertion indicates the Iranian elite's expressed perceptions about the position of the country in the region. Among other requirements for such a vision's implementation are domestic peace and stability, as well as no presence of a hostile big power on Iranian regional sphere of influence. Thus, IRI can be prosperous and influential on a friendly geopolitical environment where it will be able to permeate its political and economic capital.

Nevertheless, the volatility of the regional geopolitics intimidates these ends. The instability and militant violence in Afghanistan expose the Iranian eastern borders to threats such as terrorism, refugees waves, human and narcotics trafficking. The same situation exists on its west borders with Iraq since the 2003, U.S. invasion which created a power vacuum, civil war and fueling of the anti-Iranian Sunni extremism (Al Qaeda, ISIS). Moreover, the military presence of the U.S. on Iraq, Afghanistan and Gulf states, alongside with its hostile rhetoric (Axis of Evil),

⁵¹ Barzegar and Rezaei, "Ayatollah Khamenei strategic Thinking," 28.

⁵² Kayhan Barzegar, "Balance of Power in the Persian Gulf: An Iranian View," *Middle East Policy* 17, Issue. 3 (Fall 2010): 76.

⁵³ Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural genealogy* (London: Routledge, 2006), 12-14.

⁵⁴ Rieffer-Flanagan, "Islamic Realpolitic," 14.

⁵⁵ Barzegar, "Iran and the Shiite Crescent," 95.

⁵⁶ "20 Year National Vision," *Iran Data Portal*, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/20-year-national-vision>.

possessed a serious threat to IRI's sovereignty. Furthermore, this volatile regional security environment, prevents Iranian economical engagement with its peripheral markets and does not allow IRI to fully capitalize on its vital geographic position. Furthermore, IRI can be the crucial trade bridge between Europe and Asia, through the Chinese project, Belt Road Initiative (BRI).⁵⁷ Therefore, the regional insecurity set serious obstacles and risks against the Iranian national interest.

Yet, another key determinant is the Iranian state identity which has a significant role on the foreign policy making.⁵⁸ The state identity contributes both to security threats management and to the regional, soft power, projection of IRI due its three-dimensional construction, which is Iranism, Shiism and Islam. Iranian identity or Iranism referred not only to the residents of modern Iran, but also to the populations which have cultural, linguistic and historic ties with IRI through the history.⁵⁹ Thus, Iranism provides the Iranian foreign policy makers, opportunities to expand their influence on Central Asia states (Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan) according to Dr Hassan Beheshtipour of the Institute of Iran-Eurasian Studies (IRAS).⁶⁰ Moreover, according to Professor Abolhassan-Shirazi, a political scientist at Tehran's Azad University, Iran attempted to "to say to these people [post-Soviet nations in Central Asia] that we have many commonalities; culture is one of them, religion and history and language are others".⁶¹ Yet, the Iranian president, Rouhani stated that "the history of our two countries binds our people, and although we are independent countries, our nations are tied to each other,"⁶² during a visit in Tajikistan, on 10 of September, 2014. This illustrates the significance of Iranism as a tool of the foreign policy fulfillment. Furthermore, Iranism allow to the Islamic republic to expand its influence to the non-Muslim countries as well to serve its national interest. The strong relationship

⁵⁷ Daniel S. Markey, *China's Western horizons: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2020), 150-151.

⁵⁸ Mahdi Mohammad Nia, "Understanding Iran's Foreign Policy: An Application of Holistic Constructivism," *Turkish Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 1 (2010): 173.

⁵⁹ Shahram and Barry, "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy," 617.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 617.

⁶¹ Ibid, 618.

⁶² "Rouhani: Different thoughts in parliament are components of a nation's power. Tehran and Dushanbe are like two friends together," *Khabaronline*, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/374805>.

with the Christian Armenia, which shared historical ties with IRI, allows IRI to counter Azerbaijani nationalism,⁶³ and its influence of the Iranian Azerbaijanis. Furthermore, it provides IRI a “strategic bond with Russia,”⁶⁴ thus an opportunity to increase its leverage in the regional and international system.

The Shiite’s identity as a foreign policy means, provides geopolitical and security maximizing incentives to IRI. According to Nukhet Sandal and Jonathan Fox, “sacred territories constitute an important source of prestige, power, and legitimacy.”⁶⁵ IRI which depicts itself as the protector of the Shiism and Shiites in the region can increase its regional influence and merits. The protection of the sacred sites of Shiism in Iraq and Syria have used as a justification for Iranian involvement. Iraq hosts the tombs of the forefathers of Shiism, Imam Ali and Imam Hussein in the Iraqi cities of Najaf and Karbala which play significant role in the Shiite faith.⁶⁶ Especially Karbala and the battle which took place there in 680, where Imam Hussein and his companions martyred by Caliph Yazid. Furthermore, in Damascus is located the Sayyeda Zainab Shrine which host the grave of Imam Hussein’s sister, Zainab, who followed Hussein in Karbala and also martyred by Yazid. Zainab is considered by Shiites as a saint.⁶⁷ Khamenei endorsed Shiite militant mobilization in support of Syrian regime against the rebels, indirectly through proxy Clerics, such as Ayatollah Kadhim al-Husseini al-Haeri, under the pretext of Zainab shrine protection by Sunni militants.⁶⁸ Moreover, on the eve of the ISIS rapid advance against the Iraqi government in 2014, Iranian government “declared that the ‘fall’ of Karbala or Najaf would trigger its direct intervention.”⁶⁹ Once again IRI justified its foreign policy agenda on religious-ideological terms.

⁶³ Jullien Zarifian, “Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran: Two (Not So) Strange Companions, Iran and the Caucasus,” *Brill Academic Publishers* 12, no. 1 (2008): 126, 130.

⁶⁴ Akbarzadeh and Jerry, “State Identity,” 621.

⁶⁵ Sandal and Fox, *Religion in International relations Theory*, 84.

⁶⁶ Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, “Iran’s ISIS policy,” *International Affairs* 91, no. 1(January 2015): 3.

⁶⁷ Philip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Effects (Washington: The Washington for Near East Policy, 2015)*, 4. See also Edith Szanto, “Sayyida Zaynab in the State of Exception: Shi’i Sainthood as ‘Qualified Life’ in Contemporary Syria,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 286–287.

⁶⁸ Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad*, 16.

⁶⁹ Esfandiary and Tabatabai, “Iran’s ISIS policy,” 8.

IRI counters the security threats that is facing, through the Axis of Resistance, the political and militant network of Shiites (or pro-Shiite) states or non-states actors. IRI equips, trains and arming and led Shiite militias to the battle against its enemies, such as Taliban in Afghanistan on 90s, U.S. troops in Iraq, Saudis in Yemen. Shiism is the crucial mobilizing factor for these pro-Iranian militants. Furthermore, the political influence on the Axis of Resistance states (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon) creates geographical strategic depth for IRI, thus access to Mediterranean Sea and to the ports of Lebanon and Syria. According to Khamenei, the Islamic identity, through the illustration of Iran as the protector of Muslims provides the Shiites, the opportunity to extend their influence, to the Sunni Muslim majority.⁷⁰ The Iranian support to the Palestinian Issue, either through the military aid to Hamas or the pro-Palestinian rhetoric against Israel are evidence of that strategy.⁷¹ The pro-Palestinian stance besides the increase of the influence among Sunni (especially Arab) Muslims aims to increase the pressure towards its regional and global key rivals, Israel and U.S.A. Furthermore, it is an attempt to reduce the accusations by its opponents that IRI promotes a sectarian Shia agenda (Shia Crescent).⁷²

1.3 Iranian Security Dilemma

Another aspect of the Iranian foreign policy that needs to be examined is the Iranian security dilemma and its impact on the policy-making designs. According to John Herz (1908-2005) and Robert Jervis (1940), two scholars of neorealism, security is defined as “one state’s attempt to increase its own security due to the anarchic nature of the international system can inadvertently threaten other states and make them less secure and thereby provoke them to augment their power.”⁷³ Jervis claims that “many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others,”⁷⁴ or “an increase in one state’s security security decreases the security of others”⁷⁵ Furthermore, the “structural modifiers,” such as geography and technology

⁷⁰ Shabnam J. Holliday, *Defining Iran: Politics Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 80.

⁷¹ Akbarzadeh and Jerry, “State Identity,” 622.

⁷² Ibid, 626.

⁷³ Lobell, 12.

⁷⁴ Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” 169.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 186.

can ameliorate or exacerbate the security dilemma.”⁷⁶ Jervis and other neorealist scholars (primarily of defensive realism) lists the “increasing the costs from non-cooperation; reducing the unilateral gains from the sucker’s payoff;” as some of the measures for the security dilemma handling.⁷⁷

IRI’s political elites feel geopolitical insecurity and sieged by hostile countries,⁷⁸ although in the recent years there is relative improvement of that status with the establishment of relations with China and Russia on several levels. The established Russo-Iranian military cooperation in Syria,⁷⁹ and Moscow’s diplomatic support by rejecting United Nations Security Council resolutions against Iran are indicative of those improvements.⁸⁰ Yet, the Iranian candidacy for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a sign of the Iranian efforts to exit from the international economic exclusion.⁸¹

Nevertheless, IRI remains isolated strategically since it is not a full member of any military, political, or economic alliance.⁸² Moreover, besides the U.S, Israel, the Arab Gulf Monarchies also follow a strategy of containment and elimination of IRI’s influence in the region.⁸³ As a result of this policy, the Gulf States have increased their investments on armament policies significantly,⁸⁴ widening the military technological gap with IRI, which is almost totally excluded from international arms markets.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the vast Iranian sea and land borders are, according to

⁷⁶ Lobell, 12.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁷⁸ Norvell Deatkin, “Considerations in The Formation of An Iranian Way of War,” 5-6.

⁷⁹ Ellie Geranmayeh, “The Newest Power Couple: Iran and Russia Band together to Support Assad,” *World Policy Journal* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2016/2017), 84-85.

⁸⁰ Mark N. Katz, “Moscow is not buying Pompeo’s Iran snapback sanction logic,” *Atlantic Council*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/moscow-is-not-buying-pompeos-iran-snapback-sanctions-logic/>.

⁸¹ Akbarzadeh Shahram, “Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Ideology and Realpolitik in Iranian Foreign Policy,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69, no. 1 (2015): 92.

⁸² Berzegar and Rezai, “Ayatollah Khamenei’s Strategic Thinking,” 30.

⁸³ Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky, “Israel’s relations with the Gulf states: Toward the emergence of a tacit security regime?” *Contemporary Security Policy* 38, no. 3 (2017): 407, 412.

⁸⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman and Nicholas Harrington, “The Arab Gulf States and Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, and the Shifting Military Balance,” *CSIS, Iran Gulf Balance Report* (2018): 77.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 27.

Jacob L Haim, under the threat of 422 hostile military airports belonging to NATO, Israel, and Gulf Arab states (331 of which are out of the range of Iranian missiles).⁸⁶ Moreover, another threat towards IRI's security is the U.S-imposed sanctions which cripple Iranian economy. Sanctions caused the reduction of oil exports from 2,5 million barrels in the winter of 2011 to 1,5 million in the spring of 2013.⁸⁷ The 50-60 percent of IRI's revenues come from oil exports, while those exports reduced from \$95 billion in 2012 to \$69 billion in 2012 due the imposed sanctions.⁸⁸ IRI's leadership considers that KSA plays a key role in the military presence of the U.S. in the region, as well as to the enforcement of the sanctions.⁸⁹ According to Mahmood Monshipouri, the reasoning for Saudis' behavior is the scenario that an improvement of the U.S-Iran relations would be at the expense of KSA's regional influence,⁹⁰ and economic prosperity.⁹¹

1.4 Nature of Iranian Foreign Policy: Pragmatic or Ideological?

The religious nature of IRI's political echelon, which is ruled according to the Shiite principles of the *Velayat-e Faqih* or the Guardianship of the Islamist Jurists,⁹² may led to the conclusion that the Iranian foreign policy design is dictated by religious-ideological principles. In spite of what the religious rhetoric suggests, the goals and the nature of the Iranian foreign policy are dictated by realism and pragmatism rather than by religious and ideological incentives. The principal priority of the Iranian foreign policy is the survival of the IRI, i.e the preservation of the regime

⁸⁶ Jacob L. Heim, "The Iranian Missile Threat to Air Bases: A Distant Second to China's Conventional Deterrent," *Air and Space Power Journal*, (2015): 39-40.

⁸⁷ Dmitry Zhdannikov, "Iran's oil exports plummet as sanctions bite, agency says," *Reuters*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iea-idUSL5E8HD4JG20120613>.

⁸⁸ Mahmood Monshipouri and Manochehr Dorraj, "Iran's Foreign Policy: A Shifting Strategic Landscape," *Middle East policy* 20, Issue. 4 (2013): 135.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 142.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 142.

⁹¹ Ibid, 142.

⁹² "The concept of velayat-e faqih (in Farsi, or wilayat al-faqih in Arabic) transfers all political and religious authority to the Shia clergy and makes all of the state's key decisions subject to approval by a supreme clerical leader, the vali-e faqih (guardian Islamic jurist). The supreme clerical leader (the faqih) provides guardianship (velayat) over the nation and, in doing so, ensures the top-down Islamisation of the state." Kasra Aarabi, "What is Velayat-e Faqih?" *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, March 20, 2019. <https://institute.global/policy/what-velayat-e-faqih>.

and the sovereignty of the state. This conclusion is illustrated from several decisions and statements of IRI's political echelon. The first evidence that justifies this conclusion is the Iranian constitution itself. According to the constitution, the fundamental principles of Iranian foreign policy are, "first, the rejection of all forms of external domination; second, preservation of IRI's independence and territorial integrity; third, defense of the rights of all Muslims without allying with hegemonic powers; and, fourth, the maintenance of peaceful relations with all non-belligerent states."⁹³ The initial two principles directly and the third indirectly refers to the territorial, political, and geopolitical preservation and independence of IRI. Also, the constitution, as the formal road map of the Iranian foreign policy, depicts that the goal of IRI is to be an autonomous geopolitical player regionally and internationally.

We can trace elements of a culture of a pragmatic and realistic foreign policy approach since the Safavid era, which was the starting point of the socio-political interplay between Shiism and the political establishment. Safavids had adopted the Shiite doctrine as the cornerstone of state's ideology and identity, and had rejected Sunnism and its principles.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) did not hesitate to compromise with the Sunni key rival, the Ottoman Empire for reasons of national interest. He signed a peace treaty with the Ottomans in 1590, in which, besides territorial concessions, he denounced the Shiite religious tradition of cursing the first three Sunni Imams.⁹⁵ According to the Iranologist, Roger Savory, Shah Abbas I was a "brilliant strategist and tactician whose chief characteristic was prudence. He preferred to obtain his ends by diplomacy rather than by war."⁹⁶ A specialist on Islamic Studies and world historian, the renowned Marshal G.S Hodgson supported that Abbas I had revised the empire's foreign policy to a less ideologically-orientated one, as it was on the early stages of the Safavid dynasty.⁹⁷

⁹³ Ehteshami Anoushiravan and Zweiri Mahjoob, *Iran's Foreign Policy from Khatami to Ahmadinejad* (United Kingdom: Ithaca, 2011), xiii.

⁹⁴ Rainer Brunner, "Shiism in the Modern Context: From Religious Quietism to Political Activism," *Religion compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 139.

⁹⁵ Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism," 552.

⁹⁶ Roger M. Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 101.

⁹⁷ Marshall G.S Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1974), 53-58.

Regardless of the religious rhetoric of IRI's leadership, the pragmatism of the Safavids was adopted in the IRI in its early revolutionary stages. The *Iran-Contras affairs* scandal is a characteristic evidence of the realistic, self-preserving orientation of the Iranian foreign policy. IRI administration during the Iran-Iraq war, despite its vibrant anti-Western and anti-Israeli rhetoric, did not hesitate to (secretly) purchase arms from the US (with Israeli mediation) in exchange for Iranian intermediary for the release of western hostages who were being held by Lebanese pro-Iranian militias.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the improvement of the Iran-Soviet relationship was another evidence of pragmatism. Despite the declared revolutionary doctrine "Neither East, nor West, but the Islamic Republic,"⁹⁹ Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the president of IRI between 1989-1997, did not hesitate to establish the "foundation of the close military, economic and political relation with Soviet Union, which endured after its disintegration."¹⁰⁰ Rafsanjani's pragmatism over ideology on foreign affairs can be further illustrated by his response to reactionary Islamists who rejected IRI's opening to the Communist or Western blocks on ideological terms. Rafsanjani responded that "I believe our principles are obeyed, but in some cases we may be limited and we may have to forego some of these principles."¹⁰¹

Indeed, IRI sought for support from China in the early stages of the revolution. In his visit in February 1981 in China, Khamenei tried to gain a sort of support in order to deal with military hardware shortages in the war with Iraq.¹⁰² The cruciality of Iran-China relationship can be shown by U.S. officials' reports that while 40 percent of the Iranian arms supplies had come from China and North Korea in 1982, it had increased to 70 percent by 1987.¹⁰³ Moreover, the unwillingness of IRI to be militarily engaged in favour of the 'oppressed' Shiite Muslims against their 'oppressors' (which is officially one of the principal ideological tenets of IRI) is another element of pragmatism in foreign policy making. IRI decided to downplay its ideological tenets in favour

⁹⁸ Rieffer-Flanagan, "Islamic Realpolitik: Two Level Iranian Foreign Policy," 15.

⁹⁹ John Esposito and Ruhi Ramazani, *Iran at the Crossroad* (US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 218.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 218.

¹⁰¹ Ruhi K. Ramazani, *Independence Without Freedom: Iran's Foreign Policy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 121.

¹⁰² John W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2006), 71.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 72.

of national interest in the cases of the Iraqi Shiite Uprising in 1991,¹⁰⁴ as well as on the capturing of the Shiite populated city of Mazar-e-Sharif by Taliban in Afghanistan in 1998.¹⁰⁵ On both cases Iran declined to interfere militarily, while thousands of Shiites were being slaughtered. Yet, a strong evidence of the pragmatic, self-preservation orientated, foreign affairs policy came from Khomeini himself. In several letters sent to the president Ali Khamenei in 1987 and to the Council of Guardians in 1988, he set the priority of the national interest over religious ideology by putting forward that if the regime's interest requires it, it is legitimate to destroy a mosque or the suspension of observance of the five pillars of Islam by the authorities.¹⁰⁶

Iranian foreign policy designs are influenced by three main factors. The volatile and insecure geopolitical environment of Iran which threatens its security, and the national interest ends have created a perception of strategic isolation. Moreover, the state identity (Shiism, Islam, Iranism) which provides flexibility and pervasiveness to the Iranian strategy in the complex and fluid regional geopolitical environment. Lastly, the pragmatic and realpolitik approach of the Iranian foreign affairs decision makers who they prioritize the service of the national interest over ideological perceptions.

¹⁰⁴ Emilian Kavalski, *The New Central Asia: The Regional Impact of International Actors* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd, 2010), 218.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Eisenstadt, "The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Religion, Expediency and Soft Power in an Era of Disruptive Change," *Middle East Studies*, no. 7 (2015): 4-5.

¹⁰⁶ David Menashri, *Revolution at a Crossroads: Iran's Domestic Politics and Regional Ambitions* (USA: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1997), 8.

CHAPTER 2: IRANIAN NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

This chapter will engage with an illustration and analysis of the principal pillars of the Iranian national security strategy. The concept of national security is a product of the Cold War and it “indicate[s] the state's ability to achieve its security so as not to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war and the ability to protect those interests if forced by war.”¹⁰⁷ Since the end of the Cold War and due to the new international environment and challenges the concept of national security has been transformed to “include all military, economic, and political aspects” which means the “the ability of the state to protect the homeland from the threats it faces” or “or its ability to defend its political independence and internal stability” or “-or its ability to survive and maintain its core values while continuing to grow according to predefined goals and strategies.”¹⁰⁸ This chapter will focus on the military and political aspects of the Iranian security strategy. The analysis of the Iranian military doctrine will cover the determinants, the principles and the factors which define and apply the IRI’s military doctrine. Yet, the political aspect will be covered by the analysis of the role of the Supreme Leader. The institution of the Supreme Leader constitutes the higher decision-making institution of the IRI on the national security affairs.¹⁰⁹

2.1 Iranian Military Doctrine

According to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (henceforth NATO), the concept of military doctrine is defined as “the fundamental principles by which the military forces guide their actions in support of objectives.”¹¹⁰ Following that interpretation, IRI’s military doctrine will be analysed by answering three questions. What were the incentives which led to the adoption of that doctrine? What are principles and the ends of that doctrine? What are the means for the implementation of it?

¹⁰⁷ Sayel F. Al Serhan, Ahed A. Mashagbeh and Mohammed T. Bani Salameh, “Challenges Facing National Security in the Arab Gulf States: A Case Study of Bahrain,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 7, no. 12 (2017): 134.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 134.

¹⁰⁹ Barzegar and Rezaei, “Ayatollah Khamenei strategic Thinking,” 28.

¹¹⁰ Geoffrey Sloan, “Military doctrine, command philosophy and the generation of fighting power: genesis and theory,” *The Royal Institute of International affairs* 88, no. 2 (March 2012): 244.

In order to crystalize the reasoning behind the IRI's military doctrine, we can conclude at three determinants: the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the hostility of U.S.A and its regional Arab allies (mainly KSA) towards IRI, and the imbalance on military hardware and military expenditures. The destructive implications of the eight-year war with Iraq has deeply shaped the national strategy perceptions of IRI's leadership. Iran-Iraq war, the largest conventional war since of the Korean War, costed half million lives, around one million wounded and \$1trillion, with zero sum result for both participants.¹¹¹ According to Bruce Riedel, a former Senior Director for Near East Affairs in the U.S. National Security Council, that war was considered to be imposed by U.S, against IRI, creating deep suspicion against U.S. to the current Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei.¹¹² The Iraqi invasion and the support of Western (and allied Arab) states to Saddam Hussein in the early stages of the Islamic Revolution, played a key role in shaping the IRI's national military doctrine.¹¹³ Furthermore, the presence of U.S. military bases on the borders of IRI, the NATO state's support to the rival GCC states,¹¹⁴ and the Saudi sponsored anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite militant networks of al-Qaeda and Islamic State,¹¹⁵ are crucial determinants of IRI's military doctrine and strategy. Moreover, the armament gap between IRI and its rivals gives us an explanation for its military doctrine approach. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2016, KSA's military budget was \$87 billion, the third place globally.¹¹⁶ The same year, UAE and Israel military budget was \$22,8 and \$16,1 billion respectively, while IRI's military budget was only \$10,3 billion.¹¹⁷ Moreover, between 2006 and 2015 KSA increased its military expenditures by 97 per cent, while the IRI's was reduced by 30 per cent according to the same report.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ Bruce Riedel, "Lessons from America's First War with Iran." *The fletcher forum of world affairs* 37, no. 2 (summer 2013): 101-102.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 104.

¹¹³ Barzegar and Rezaei, "Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Thinking," 28.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

¹¹⁵ Carol E.B. Choksy and Jamsheed K. Choksy, "The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad." *World Affairs* 178, no. 1 (2015): 29-30.

¹¹⁶ Barzegar and Rezaei, "Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Thinking," 35-36.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 36.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 36.

Therefore, and according to Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, the active deterrence is the major military dogma of IRI.¹¹⁹ Khamenei merely follows the perception of the founder of IRI, Ayatollah Khomeini, for the establishment of a military might which will “prevents its enemies from even thinking about the invasion of the land.”¹²⁰ Active or dynamic deterrence, according to the foreign policy academic, Thomas Schelling, is “the deterrence in which the threat is communicated by progressive fulfillment,” and that “making a ‘successful’ conquest costly enough to deter repetition by the same opponent or anyone else,” if the enemy is not repelled.¹²¹ The active deterrence can be applied through the *escalation dominance* process. The *escalation dominance* is the “condition in which a combatant has the ability to escalate a conflict in ways that will be disadvantageous or costly to the adversary while the adversary cannot do the same in return.”¹²² The *escalation dominance* can be applied by “cultivate asymmetries in which the enemy is unable to respond in kind to an escalatory act,” whereby “the opponent cannot respond symmetrically, it may create an escalation dilemma for the adversary in the form of a choice between not countering the escalation or crossing other escalation thresholds, with all the risks and costs of doing so.”¹²³

Iranian deterrence strategy has five major red lines according to Michael Eisenstadt, the director of The Washington Institute’s Military and security Studies Program. I) A direct military offensive against Iran; II) the disruption of its hydrocarbon export capacity; III) its territorial integrity challenging; IV) regime change intimidation and V) redeployment of the US troop in Iraq.¹²⁴ Accordingly, the military doctrine has formed its principals on a way to serve the deterrence strategy requirements. The use of proxy militant allies, the strategic patience, the reciprocity and proportionality on the use of violence, the psychological operations, the tactical adaptability and the ‘divide and conquer’ approach towards hostile alliances are among the

¹¹⁹ “Iran’s military doctrine is based on ‘active deterrence’: Rouhani,” Tehran Times, April 15, 2015, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/246197/Iran-s-military-doctrine-is-based-on-active-deterrence-Rouhani>.

¹²⁰ Dolatabadi, “Understanding Iran’s Decision-makings in Defence Issues and Missile Programme.” 229.

¹²¹ Thomas C. Schelling. *Arms and Influence* (USA: Yale University Press, 1966), 11-12.

¹²² Forrest E. Morgan, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (USA: RAND, 2008), 15.

¹²³ Ibid, 16.

¹²⁴ Eisenstadt, “The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 8.

foremost principles of IRI's military strategy.¹²⁵ According to Afshon Ostovar, an academic expert on Iran, the proxy allies network is vital to the Iranian deterrence strategy because it is the only instrument for countering its opponents militarily, unlike the ballistic missiles and the cyberwarfare.¹²⁶ IRI follows an indirect, unconventional, attrition 'Fabian' strategy,¹²⁷ rather than decisive and direct confrontation.¹²⁸ IRI national security decision makers pursue their goals through a low intensity, gradual progress and aim to attain small tactical victories as a strategic procedure.¹²⁹

The IRGC plays an instrumental role in the implementation of IRI's active deterrence strategy. According to J. Matthew McInnis, the IRGC administrates and leads the proxy militant network in the region. McInnis, argues that IRGC follow a twofold, retaliatory and passive deterrence approach.¹³⁰ The retaliatory deterrence approach utilizes its proxy allies by causing fear and damage to its superior military adversaries so as to prevent them from attacking Iran directly. In other words, IRI is balancing its military conventional inferiority with asymmetric warfare advantage worldwide. Yet, by the passive deterrence approach, IRI prevents the foreign intervention due the presence of its proxies on client states, such as Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. The IRGC and their militia's network considered as one of the most mighty military factors in the regional conflicts, countering IRI's opponents and boosting its political influence concurrently.¹³¹ According to A. Ostovar, the IRGC's elite unit, the *Quds Forces*,¹³² which administrate this proxy war strategy, "has become a pillar of Iran's strategic and foreign policy."¹³³ Furthermore, besides its effectiveness, the traumatic experience of the high human casualties during the Iran-Iraq war

¹²⁵ Ibid, 15.

¹²⁶ Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," 169.

¹²⁷ Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Frederic A Prager, 1954), 46-48.

¹²⁸ Eisenstadt, "The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran," 18.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 15.

¹³⁰ Kathleen H. Hicks and Melissa G. Dalton, *Deterring Iran after the Nuclear Deal* (New York: CSIS, 2017), 26.

¹³¹ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 160.

¹³² Emanuele Ottolenghi, *The Pasdaran: Inside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Corp* (USA: FDD Press, 2011), 12.

¹³³ Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics and Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2016), 237.

contributed to the intensive and extensive establishment and use of that proxy Shiite network or Axis of Resistance.¹³⁴

2.2 Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Perceptions

The hybrid nature and the structure of IRI's political system requires a different analysis related to the national security strategy understanding. In contrast to the Western national security affairs decision making institutions, in the IRI the role of the president or the parliament is limited. According to IRI's constitution (article 110) the Supreme Leader is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.¹³⁵ Thus, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's perceptions over national security strategy is of significance for the understanding of the strategic thinking over Iranian security policies.

Ayatollah Khamenei considers the U.S.A and its allies as major threats for IRI's survival and rejects any measure which will reduce its military capabilities.¹³⁶ Khamenei ranks the state's security preservation as the principal and vital end of IRI policies. He stated in a meeting with the provincial security council that "security is completely objective and tangible, which cannot be provided just by subjective mindset."¹³⁷ Moreover, Khamenei claimed that the value of security is vital for IRI's future. In a meeting with the commanders and the personnel of the IRGC navy, Khamenei stated that "security is a foundation for all advances of a nation. Without security, there will be no economy, culture, personal and public prosperity."¹³⁸ Khamenei, though he considers that the preservation of security requires mobilization and enhancement of the military capabilities,¹³⁹ nevertheless rejects that this policy leads to military aggressiveness. In a military

¹³⁴ Eisenstadt, 27.

¹³⁵ Barzegar and Rezaei, "Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Thinking," 28.

¹³⁶ "Speeches in a meeting between air forces commanders and staff," *Khamenei.IR*, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=25260>. "Meeting of the praisers of the Ahl Al-Bayat with the Leader of the Revolution," *Khamenei.IR*, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=32726>.

¹³⁷ "Statements in the meeting of the members of the Provisional Security Council," *Khamenei.IR*, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3050>.

¹³⁸ "Statements in the meeting between the commanders and naval personnel of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps and their families," *Khamenei.IR*, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=31024>.

¹³⁹ "Speeches at the meeting between the military commanders and the staff of the Air Force and the Air Defense personnel," *Khamenei.IR*, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=32222>.

ceremony of the units of the Armed Forces in Fars province, Khamenei stated that, “armed forces are the fortification of national security, however, the very existence of armed forces or their strengthening does not mean militancy.”¹⁴⁰ Khamenei rejects conventional war and military invasion as a tool of security preservation. He considers, having Iran-Iraq war as a paradigm, that a conventional conflict favours only extra-regional hostile powers, which in combination with imposed arms embargo against it by U.S.A, will only weaken the defensive capacities of IRI.¹⁴¹

In contrast to conventional military approach as a means of security, Khamenei introduces another, indirect security approach based on the *balance of terror* and the *interconnected security* concepts. Khamenei in a speech at Imam Hussein Officers and Guards Training University said that:

...enemies, together with some stupid officials in the Persian Gulf region - not all of them, some - are trying to bring proxy wars to the borders of Iran. The guards of the Islamic Revolution and all the guards of national security in various organizations are awake and vigilant. Know that if something evil happens the reaction of the Islamic Republic will be very harsh.¹⁴²

On two more occasions, in 2011 at the Imam Ali Military Academy speech and at the Nowruz 2012 speech, Khamenei stated that IRI would respond “threats to threats” against its rivals and that “against an attack by enemies . . . we will attack them on the same level that they attack us.”¹⁴³ Furthermore, Khamenei claimed that “when a nation shows its iron fists and powerful arms in its armed forces, it will not allow the enemies to make fool of it, and the enemies will settle their own accounts.”¹⁴⁴ Those statements indicate a threat to threat or balance of terror approach towards IRI’s enemies and the KSA in particular. Yet, in Khamenei’s strategic perception there is an interrelation between IRI’s and regional security. One of Khamenei ends is to make his opponents in the region to take into account that threats on IRI’s security and interests entails threat to regional

¹⁴⁰ “Statements at the joint military ceremony of the units of the Armed Forces of Fars Province,” *Khamenei.IR*, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3429>.

¹⁴¹ Barzegar and Rezaei, “Ayatollah Khamenei’s Strategic Thinking,” 35.

¹⁴² “Statements at Imam Hussein Officer and Guards Training University,” *Khamenei.IR*, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=29792>.

¹⁴³ Eisenstadt, “The Strategic Culture of Iran,” 19.

¹⁴⁴ Barzegar and Rezaei, 40.

security and their interests itself. Khamenei in a meeting with Revolutionary Guards, in 1996, had stated that, “we always maintained security. Security for ourselves is security for the region. That is, we wanted both our own security and the security of the region, because it is inseparable. Our insecurity is also the insecurity of the region.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ “Statements in a group meeting of the Revolutionary Guards,” *Khamenei.IR*, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2821>.

CHAPTER 3: BAHRAIN UPRAISING AND IRANIAN NON-INTERFERENCE POLICY

Before the analysis of the Iranian involvement in the Yemeni Civil War, a depiction of the incentives which determined IRI's stance during the Bahraini Uprising will be presented and analysed. On 14 March 2011, the Saudi troops interfered in Bahrain and suppressed popular revolt.¹⁴⁶ The Sunni, Royal House of Al Khalifa, with ties to Saudi Arabia,¹⁴⁷ ruled the country, keeping the Shiite majority marginalized.¹⁴⁸ The IRI's passive stance on Saudi military intervention,¹⁴⁹ given its later active engagement in Syrian and Yemeni Civil War, supporting its coreligionists, have raised serious questions about the incentives of its behavior.

Bahrain was vital for KSA's national interest and a shift on its domestic and foreign policy *status quo*, possess a sever threat for Riyadh's national security. That threat was related with the domestic stability and the economic sustainability of KSA. Bahrain is bordering with KSA's East Province where KSA's Shiite minority resides (which is around 10 per cent of the KSA population).¹⁵⁰ Between Bahraini and Saudi Shiites, there are tribal, besides religious bonds. The Bahraini Shiites are divided on three categories. The native Bahrainis, the Saudi Shiites (who moved in Bahrain during 19th century), and the Iranian Shiites (who arrived in the 17th century).¹⁵¹ Due to these religious and tribal ties, a Shiite dominated Bahrain was conceived by Riyadh as a threat to its national security because it could turn Bahrain to adopt a pro-Iranian stance,¹⁵² or at

¹⁴⁶ Luíza Gimenez Cerioli, "Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain's and Yemen's Arab Spring," *Contexto Internacional* 40, no. 2 (2018): 302.

¹⁴⁷ Simon Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (2012): 84.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁴⁹ Cerioli, "Roles and International Behaviour," 304.

¹⁵⁰ Toby Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?': The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011-2012," *The Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (2012): 630.

¹⁵¹ Sayel F. Al-Serhan, "Challenges Facing National Security in the Arab Gulf States: A Case Study of Bahrain," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 7, no. 12 (2017): 137.

¹⁵² Mohammed Nuruzzaman, "Politics, Economics and Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 2 (2013): 370.

encourage the Saudi Shiites for political activism.¹⁵³ Furthermore, the potential enhancement of Bahraini and Saudi Shiites would meet with serious reactions by the Saudi clergy, the Wahhabi *Ulama*, as well as the hardliners of the Saud House, a development which would undermined the social stability, therefore the survival of the Saudi regime itself.¹⁵⁴ The support of the Wahhabi *Ulama* for the House of Saud is the cornerstone of Saud family political legitimacy, as well as KSA social unity.¹⁵⁵ The importance of Bahrain to KSA national security concerns and designs can be illustrated further, by two evidences. Firstly, the plans of Riyadh for political and military unification between KSA and Bahrain.¹⁵⁶ Secondly, the construction of the Causeway, which connects KSA and Bahrain, a decision which aimed to the quick reinforcement and securing of the pro-Saudi, Al Khalifa regime, in case of revolt or Iranian intervention.¹⁵⁷

Furthermore, the interconnection between the KSA and the Bahrain on economic and trade terms had an impact on KSA's security. Bahrain played vital role to KSA economic growth, thus to KSA's regional and international power projection. Bahrain hosts the BAPCO Sitrah Refinery, one of the biggest (267,000 barrels of crude oil per day) refineries plants globally.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, around the five-sixth of the BAPCO refined oil, originating from the KSA, is exported to North American and Asian markets.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, Bahraini financial institutions and networks played a significant role in KSA's regional and global economic projects. According to Raj Madha, an analyst of the Rajmala Investment Bank, "Bahrain is still a major offshore banking market, and a lot of Saudi money goes through Bahrain to their ultimate destinations."¹⁶⁰ Yet, the volume of the Bahrain-KSA trade is the most significant among GCC (39% and 20.1% of Saudi exports and imports respectively), while Bahrain's level of economic and trade transaction with the IRI is very

¹⁵³ Simon Henderson, "Saudi Arabia's Fears for Bahrain," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, PolicyWatch 1759, 2011, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3309>.

¹⁵⁴ Simon Mabon, 93.

¹⁵⁵ Joseph Nevo, "Religion and national identity in Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3 (1998): 35-36.

¹⁵⁶ Abdullah Al Shayji, "Time for GCC to Think Big," *Gulf News*, April 30, 2012, <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/time-for-gcc-to-think-big-1.1015451>. See also the Frederic Wehrey, "The Precarious Ally: Bahrain's impasse and US Policy," *The Carnegie Papers*, (2013): 11.

¹⁵⁷ Simon Hederson, "Saudi Arabia's Fears for Bahrain."

¹⁵⁸ Mohammed Nuruzzaman, "Politics, Economics and Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain," 367.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 368.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 368.

low, only 1% of its total activity.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, Bahrain is the main trade hub of European and Indian products which are re-exported to the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁶²

Moreover, a potential *status quo* change in Bahrain in favour of the Shiite majority would have further destabilizing implications in Saudi soil. The East Province is vital for KSA's growth, since its hydrocarbon resources and the oil industry are located there. The biggest onshore and offshore oil fields in KSA and the world (Ghawar, Safaniya, Khurais) as well refineries and oil export terminals (Abqaiq, Ras Tanura, Ras al Ju'amah) are located in the East Province,¹⁶³ where the 10 per cent of the daily international oil production is produced.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, the KSA and U.S.A economy are interconnected on several fields. The U.S. arms exports to KSA between 2004 to 2011 were up to \$75.7 billion¹⁶⁵ and the total trade between U.S.A and KSA for 2011 only was more than \$61 billion.¹⁶⁶ A distinguishing example of the strong interconnection between Saudi security and its economic prosperity and growth is the U.S.-KSA 'oil for security' deal between King Abdulaziz Al Saud and President Franklin D. Roosevelt in February 1945.¹⁶⁷ According to that agreement, KSA bargained its oil production and excavation rights to U.S. companies in return the guarantee of its security and territorial integrity by Washington.¹⁶⁸ An agreement which transformed the KSA to a U.S. protectorate, according to Laurence Grafftey Smith, a veteran British diplomat.¹⁶⁹

Besides the strong objections and reactions by KSA (like KSA's military intervention in Bahrain) to a potential Iranian direct interference in Bahrain, there is evidence that show us that

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 368-369.

¹⁶² Sayel F. Al-Serhan, "Challenges Facing National Security in the Arab Gulf States," 138.

¹⁶³ Mohammed Nuruzzaman, 370-371.

¹⁶⁴ Simon Hederson, "Saudi Arabia's Fears for Bahrain."

¹⁶⁵ Aaron Metha, "U.S. Sets Record Arms Sale in 2011," *The Center for Public Integrity*, August 28, 2012, <https://publicintegrity.org/national-security/u-s-sets-record-arms-sales-in-2011/>.

¹⁶⁶ "Trade in Goods with Saudi Arabia," *United State Census Bureau*, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5170.html#2011>.

¹⁶⁷ Nuruzzaman, 371.

¹⁶⁸ Anna Viden, "Is the Saudi-U.S. Relationship 'Broken'?" *E-International Relations*, May 9, 2014, <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/09/is-the-saudi-u-s-relationship-broken/>.

¹⁶⁹ Robert Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude: An Essay on American Exceptionalism, Hierarchy and Hegemony in the Gulf," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 2 (2002): 193.

the IRI's passive stance served its national interest better. Among several incentives of IRI non-interference posture, two seems to be relatively more vital. The avoidance of the instigation of regional sectarianism and the engagement to a direct conflict with the U.S. IRI had paid serious efforts to improve its relationship with the Sunni Arab world. Ahmadinejad attended the GCC meeting in Doha in 2007, becoming to first Iranian president to do so.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, Ahmadinejad suggested signing a treaty on mutual security and economic interests between Iran and GCC states.¹⁷¹ Iran considered that the enhancement of sectarianism in the region erected obstacles on the way its regional influence among the Sunni Arabs. According to Mehdi Khaliji, senior fellow at the Washington Institute, the sectarianism instigation prevented IRI to normalize its relationship with states such as Egypt, after Mubarak's fall,¹⁷² therefore also preventing a capitalization of the opportunities presented by the Arab Spring to increase its regional influence. IRI, through its most official voices (such as the Foreign Minister or the Supreme Leader himself) denied any involvement at Bahrain's or any other Arab state internal affairs.¹⁷³ Furthermore, the military presence of the U.S. was an additional, preventive factor for an Iranian direct involvement in Bahrain. U.S. had established in Bahrain a long-term naval presence in order to protect its regional interests and to counter the post-Shah, revolutionary Iran.¹⁷⁴ Bahrain hosted the U.S. Navy's fifth fleet which served "as a nerve centre for America's maritime presence in the Gulf,"¹⁷⁵ and hosted "a number of U.S. air and special operations capabilities."¹⁷⁶ Thus, a potential shift on Bahrain's domestic political *status quo* in favour of a Shiite dominated state puzzled the U.S. policy makers.

¹⁷⁰ Mabon, 93-94.

¹⁷¹ Mehdi Khaliji, "Iran's Policy Confusion about Bahrain," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, PolicyWatch 1823, June 27, 2011, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-policy-confusion-about-bahrain>.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Brandon Friedman, "Battle for Bahrain," 80. See also Luíza Gimenez Cerioli, "Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain's and Yemen's Arab Spring," *Contexto Internacional* 40, no. 2 (2018): 303.

¹⁷⁴ Shahram Chubin, "Iran's Power in Context," *Survival* 51, no. 1 (2009): 167.

¹⁷⁵ Wehrey, "The Precarious Ally," 16.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 3.

Washington was afraid that a new Shiite pro-Iranian administration could jeopardize the U.S. military presence, possibly by forcing them to withdraw.¹⁷⁷

All in all, the preservation of the *status quo* in Bahrain was vital for KSA and U.S. strategic interests, and a Saudi retreat was unacceptable both for Riyadh and Washington. An Iranian direct military involvement in favour of Bahraini Shiites would lead to a direct, possibly military confrontation with U.S. and the Gulf Arab states. Such a development would jeopardize IRI's vital national interests. As we mentioned on the second chapter, the avoidance of a direct conventional war and the adoption of an indirect, attrition based 'Fabian' strategy was one of the pillars of IRI's security doctrine. Moreover, a direct conflict with U.S. could lead to its military redeployment in the region, a development which was contradictory IRI's national interest. Yet, a direct military confrontation between the IRI and KSA could have spiralled out the sectarian violence and divisions between Sunni and Shiites out of control. Such a development would undermine IRI's pursuit for acquiring strategic depth in the (predominantly Sunni) Arab/Islamic world, therefore, thwarting the regional stability, which is a crucial factor for IRI's economic growth. In other words, the IRI's, non-militant approach on Bahraini Uprising was fully compatible with its foreign policy strategic ends.

¹⁷⁷ Kenneth Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, March 21, 2011, 8.

CHAPTER 4: YEMEN CONFLICT ANALYSIS: EXPANSIONISM OR FORWARD DEFENCE?

The Yemeni Civil War is the most recent, dynamic and intensive battlefield of the IRI-KSA rivalry. It is a conflict where troops of both adversaries are involved. Furthermore, the implications of this conflict have a direct impact on KSA's sovereignty, alongside with broader geopolitical implications. In this chapter, on the first section we will be analyze the Iranian involvement in Yemen. More specifically, we will, briefly, illustrate the socio-political background of the civil conflict, as well as the nature of the Iranian involvement. On the second section of the chapter, we will analyze the reasoning behind Iranian engagement in Yemen. On the last section, an attempt will be made to present a theoretical analysis through the lens of neorealism theory, in order to understand the nature of the IRI foreign policy strategy towards the KSA in the case of the Yemeni Civil War.

4.1 Yemeni Civil War and Iranian Engagement

4.1.1 Yemeni Civil War Background

The Houthis is a movement which originates by Zaydi's community, an offspring of Shiism, which constitutes the one-third of the Yemeni population,¹⁷⁸ and they are located in the northern provinces of the country.¹⁷⁹ The coalition between Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president of Yemen, was the result of the 2011 uprising and the overthrow of the thirty-three year president Saleh.¹⁸⁰ Prior to the uprising, Saleh and the Houthis were fierce enemies.¹⁸¹ Houthis initially cooperated with the transitional ruling coalition which replaced Ali Saleh after 2011 uprising, but soon Houthis withdrew from that coalition. The reason was the promoted plan for federalization of the country and the suggested regional divisions were considered by the Houthis

¹⁷⁸ Maria-Louise Clausen, "Competing for Control over the State: The Case of Yemen," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 3 (2018): 563.

¹⁷⁹ Jeremy M. Sharp, "Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention," *Congressional Research Service*, R 43960 (2020): 4.

¹⁸⁰ Vincent Durac, "Yemen Arab Spring-Democratic Opening or Regime Maintenance?" *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (July 2012): 161, 163.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 166.

as an attempt to deprive them by segments of their constituencies, thus their power basis.¹⁸² Concurrently, the ousted President Saleh, although he was allowed to preserve his leadership over his party, the General People's Congress (henceforth GPC), considered that his political power and influence was being gradually and deliberately degraded by his opponents. The new president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Al-Hadi, a former and longstanding member of Saleh's government, attempted to reduce the influence of Saleh's power mechanism on the political, military, and social levels.¹⁸³ This created a huge resentment in Saleh's camp which led him to form alliance, with his recent key rivals, Houthis, against the GCC-backed, ruling coalition in order avoid both groups' exclusion from the political power centres.¹⁸⁴ That Houthi/Saleh coalition waged a campaign against president Hadi and its allies, and captured the capital Saana in September, 2014.¹⁸⁵ That blow and the further advance of Houthi/Saleh camp to South, forced Hadi to resign on 22 January, 2015 and to retreat to Aden a month later,¹⁸⁶ and finally to seek refuge in KSA on March, after the seizure of the city of Aden by the Houthi/Saleh coalition.¹⁸⁷

To counter the establishment of Houthi/Saleh coalition, and its advance towards the South, a GCC-sponsored, anti-Houthi coalition, which was more heterogenous than its rivals, was established.¹⁸⁸ The coalition was constituted by five main groups, namely, I) the southern separatists or 'Southern Resistance,' which sought secession from the Yemeni state till 2015.¹⁸⁹ II) The various Islamists groups such as the al- Islah (which is the Yemeni branch of Muslim Brotherhood); the various Salafi anti-Houthi groups; and the Al Qaeda of Arabic Peninsula

¹⁸² Peter Salisbury, "Federalism, conflict, and fragmentation in Yemen," *Saferworld*, Report (October 2015): 17-18. <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/1007-federalism-conflict-and-fragmentation-in-yemen>.

¹⁸³ Stephen W. Day and Noel Brehony, *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020:), 216-217, 237-238, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/lib/leidenuniv/reader.action?docID=6039476&ppg=1>.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 238, 246-247.

¹⁸⁵ April Longley Alley, "Yemen's Houthi takeover", *Middle East Institute*, Dec. 22, 2014, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/yemens-houthi-takeover>.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2016): 653.

¹⁸⁷ "Yemen crisis: President Hadi flees as Houthi rebels advance," *BBC News*, 25 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32048604>.

¹⁸⁸ Serr, "Understanding the War in Yemen," 2-3.

¹⁸⁹ International Crisis Group, "Yemen: IS Peace Possible?" 12.

(AQAP) and the Islamic State. III) Local tribes who they are focused only on the defense of their territory by any invader, in this case the Houthis. IV) The General People's Congress in Riyadh, which have elements of GPC party with traditionally close ties to KSA.¹⁹⁰ V) The Hadi government, the only international recognized Yemeni government. Nonetheless, the rapid advance of the anti-Saudi, Houthi/Saleh coalition led several Gulf/Sunni Arab states, under the leadership of KSA, to interfere militarily in Yemen on 26 March 2015 in order to prevent the fully control of the country by the Houthi/Saleh block.¹⁹¹

4.1.2 Nature of Iranian Engagement

The Iranian military assistance to the Houthis was primarily military. More specifically supply of military hardware; provision of military technological know-how; tactical and strategic training and guidance. IRI provided Houthis with small shipments such as rifles, ammunitions, explosives, anti-tank launchers, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM), man portable air defence system (MANPADS), land and naval mines, night-vision devices, and communication devices.¹⁹² Furthermore, during the Civil War, especially after 2017, Iranians provided Houthis with advanced hardware such as missiles and drones.¹⁹³ According to UN Panel of Experts, in 2018 IRI violated the arms embargo in Yemen by providing Houthis with disassembled ballistic missiles and drones which “then re-assembled on the territory with the technical support of Hezbollah and Iranian trainers.”¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, the UN Panel reported that the *Burkan-2* (a medium range ballistic missile which was used by Houthis against Riyadh and Yanbu since 2017) was produced by Iranians and was a version of the Iranian-made, *Qiam-1* missile.¹⁹⁵ Houthis' UAVs *Qasef-1*, were

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 20.

¹⁹¹ Juneau, 654.

¹⁹² Mohammad Hassan al-Qadhi, “Iranian role in Yemen and its Implication on the Regional security,” *Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies*, (2017): 44-46.

¹⁹³ Serr, 4.

¹⁹⁴ Eleonora Ardemagni, “The Huthis: Adaptable Players in Yemen's Multiple Geographies,” *CRiSSMA*, no. 23 (2019): 57.

¹⁹⁵ Michael Knight, “The Houthi War Machine: From Guerilla War to State Capture,” *CTCSENTINEL* 11, Issue. 8 (2018): 20.

similar to the Iranian-made *Ababil-T* UAVs, according to UN.¹⁹⁶ Yet, Houthis exploited outdated hardware, such as old Soviet, SA-2 surface-to-air missile, which transformed them into the *Qahir-I* surface-to-surface missile with the assistance of Iran or its proxies, since UN report “considers that the alliance’s claims to have manufactured new missile types locally are highly unlikely.”¹⁹⁷

The IRGC and their client militias, mainly Hezbollah, played an active and multi-level role in Yemen in order to implement IRI’s strategic designs. The IRGC and Hezbollah have organised and delivered various arms shipment missions to Yemen.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, the two groups played major roles in the provision of training on light weapons, infantry, antitank missiles, anti-ship tactics, while they also provided valuable tactical and strategic counseling.¹⁹⁹ Besides IRGC and Hezbollah, there are reports that Afghan Shiite fighters, who are connected with the Iranian elite Quds Forces, were providing training and advices to Houthis.²⁰⁰ Yet, besides the training, advisory and guidance activities, there are reports that cooperation among IRGC, Hezbollah and Houthis is extended on the operational field too. In 2016 a Hezbollah commander claimed that Hezbollah was launching missiles from Yemeni soil against KSA.²⁰¹ Moreover, according to the U.S. intelligence the May 2018 drone strike against Saudi soil that were alleged to be coming from the Houthis were launched by pro-Iranian Iraqi militias from Iraqi soil, illustrating a close operational coordination between IRGC and Houthis.²⁰² The role of IRGC in Yemen is well illustrated on the new published book of Arash Aziz, with the title, *The Shadow commander: Soleimani, the US and Iran’s Global Ambitions* supports that Qassem Soleimani (1957-2020), the former commander of

¹⁹⁶ “Iranian Technology Transfers to Yemen”, *Conflict Armament Research*, March 2017, 2, <https://www.conflictarm.com/perspectives/iranian-technology-transfers-to-yemen/>.

¹⁹⁷ “Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen,” *United Nations, Security Council, S/2017/81* (2018): 35.

¹⁹⁸ Ostovar, “Grand Strategy and Militant Clients,” 179, and Hassan al-Qadhi, “Iranian role in Yemen and its Implication on the Regional security.” *Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies*, (2017): 44-45.

¹⁹⁹ Knight, “Houthis war machine,” 21.

²⁰⁰ Elisabeth Kendall. “Iran’s Fingerprints in Yemen: Real or Imagined?” 10.

²⁰¹ Jeremy M. Sharp. “Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention.” 4.

²⁰² Williams and Shaikh, “The missile War in Yemen,” 18.

the *Quds Forces*, played a vital role in the entrenchment of the Iranian influence in Yemen, through resources and training provisions to the Houthis.²⁰³

IRI, through their proxies, Houthi forces, conducted an attrition strategy, which caused material, financial, and political losses to KSA and increase of its security dilemma. The military involvement in Yemen had costed the KSA around \$5-6 billion per month.²⁰⁴ The combined drone and missile attacks have two more effects. First, it challenged the limits and the efficiency of the KSA air-defense systems and its military staff, besides the negative economic and political impact.²⁰⁵ Secondly, on tactical level, it led to the prioritization of the missile-hunting missions of the Saudi-led, Coalition's air-campaign, reducing the pressure over the Houthis ground forces,²⁰⁶ while the KSA air-defense units redeployed on the Yemeni borders,²⁰⁷ potentially weakening the air-defense protection of other regions of the country. Furthermore, it could disrupt the economic and maritime activity of the KSA and the rest of GCC states, as the attack in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb strait, showed.²⁰⁸

4.2 Reasoning of the Iranian Involvement

In order to understand the reasoning behind IRI's decision to involve actively in Yemen we have to try to see through the lens of the regional geopolitics and more specifically the antagonism between IRI and KSA for regional influence, as well as IRI's regional strategic vital interests. The main strategic incentive for IRI's involvement in Yemeni conflict was to deter its key rival, KSA, and preserve its national security. More specifically, it aimed to serve its national interest by protecting its strategic assets, its allies in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (Hezbollah) from Saudi anti-Iranian policies.

²⁰³ Arash Azizi, *The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, The U.S, And Iran's Global Ambitions*, (London: One World, 2020), 199-200.

²⁰⁴ Bruce Riedel, "In Yemen, Iran outsmarts Saudi Arabia again," Brookings, December 6, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/06/in-yemen-iran-outsmartssaudi-arabia-again/>.

²⁰⁵ UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, 36.

²⁰⁶ Ian Williams and Shaan Shaikh, "The Missile War in Yemen," *CSIS*, Missile Defense Project report (2020):14.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 23, 25.

²⁰⁸ Rania El Gamal, "Saudi Arabia halts oil exports in Red Sea lane after Houthi attacks," *Reuters*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/saudi-arabiahalts-oil-exports-in-red-sea-lane-after-houthi-attacks-idUSKBN1KF0XN>.

4.2.1 Iranian Regional Strategic Assets

Iraq played always a vital role in Iranian security designs. Until 2003, Tehran sought to contain Iraq, but after the collapse of the Baathist regime in the country, IRI's primary goal was the U.S. troops withdraw and to control Iraq's behaviour towards Tehran via its influence over the Iraqi Shiite majority.²⁰⁹ Despite IRI's aim to keep Iraq subordinated on its orbit, the stability and territorial integrity of Iraq was vital for IRI for various reasons. Firstly, the fragmentation of the multi-ethnic and multicultural Iraq (Kurds, Sunni/Shiite Arabs, Turkmen) could stimulate centrifugal tendencies and the nationalism among the Iranian minorities (Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis, etc), especially the Kurds, threatening its national unity.²¹⁰ Secondly, the power vacuum by Iraq's disintegration could be filled by hostile powers. For instance, the emergence of the anti-Shiite, Islamic State near the Iranian borders or the potential creation of a vassal to KSA, Arab Sunni state possess serious threats for IRI security.²¹¹ Moreover, Iraq's instability would disrupt the trade between the two countries, which in 2013 reached \$12 billion,²¹² a significant liquid currency source for a state under strict sanctions.

Furthermore, Syria had a strategic role for IRI's deterrence designs. Alliance with Damascus has given to the IRI a strategic depth in the region on various ways. Syria allows to the IRI to project its power and pressure to its regional rival Israel through its key proxy to the Lebanese Shiite movement, Hezbollah.²¹³ IRI used its power projection through Hezbollah, to the Israeli border,²¹⁴ in order to deter Israelis to strike Iranian nuclear facilities during

²⁰⁹ Zweiri Mahjoob, "Iran's presence in Iraq, new realities," *Center for Strategic Studies*, University of Jordan. January 1, 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.mzweiri.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/irans-presence-in-iraq-new-realities.pdf>.

²¹⁰ Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Yemen: an Opportunity for Iran-Saudi Dialogue?" *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2016): 160.

²¹¹ Esfandiary and Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS policy," 4, 7.

²¹² *Ibid*, 4.

²¹³ Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, "Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence," *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 343.

²¹⁴ J. Matthew McInnis, "Iran's Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolutions," *American Enterprise Institute*, (2015): 17, and Cenap Çakmak, "The Arab Spring and the Shia Crescent," *Institute for Global Engagement* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 58.

IRI's dispute with U.S. and Israel over its nuclear program.²¹⁵ Moreover, Syria function as a transit of Iranian support to the Lebanese organization,²¹⁶ and provides Hezbollah with weapons, cash, training and personnel.²¹⁷ The strategic value of Syria for IRI had been expressed by Mehdi Taeb, the former commander of the IRGC's Basij paramilitary division, who claimed that the control of Syria is more significant for Iran's security than the control of the Iranian province of southern Khuzestan.²¹⁸ Yet, the alliance with Syria provided IRI arguments in order to counter the sectarian, Persian-Arab (as well as the Sunni-Shiite) antagonism's narratives. The Iranian support through Syria to Hezbollah allowed Iran to present itself as the key supporter of the anti-Israeli front, providing to IRI depth to the Arab Sunni world on Ideological terms (anti-Zionism) weakening concurrently the Saudi sponsored sectarian policy.²¹⁹

4.2.2 Saudi anti-Iranian Regional Policy

Saudis had attempted to disenfranchise Damascus from Tehran even before the eruption of the Syrian Civil War, when in 2009 Saudis tried to convince Damascus join on an anti-Iranian, Arab front.²²⁰ When civil conflict erupted in Syria, KSA took very intensives initiatives to overthrow Assad's regime. KSA established a network alongside with Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon in order to fuel anti-Assad rebel groups with volunteers and weapons.²²¹ Moreover, KSA took diplomatic initiatives on the highest level. For example, Riyadh pressed U.S. to supply Syrian rebels with heavy armament (like anti-tank and anti-air missiles) while it tried to convince Kremlin to abandon Assad in exchange of significant economic returns (Saudi investments and Russian gas monopoly in Europe).²²² KSA's anti-Assad strategy's main goal was described by a Saudi official, who stressed that "the King knows that other than the collapse of the Islamic Republic itself,

²¹⁵ Edward Wastnidge, "Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 2 (2017): 153.

²¹⁶ Juneau, "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen," 650.

²¹⁷ Esfandiary and Tabatabai, "Yemen: an Opportunity for Iran-Saudi Dialogue?" 161.

²¹⁸ Ostovar, "Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 176.

²¹⁹ Andrew W. Terrill, "Iran's Strategy for Saving Asad," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 2 (2015): 235. See also Ana Belen Soage, "What is really behind the Saudi-Iran cold war," *ieees.es*, (2017): 11.

²²⁰ Yehuda U. Blanga, "Saudi Arabia's Motives in the Syrian Civil War," *Middle east Policy* 24, no. 4 (2017): 48.

²²¹ *Ibid*, 52-53.

²²² *Ibid*, 54.

nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria,”²²³ perhaps expressing KSA’s anti-Iranian regional strategy with the best way.

Saudis supported the anti-Iranian Salafist militants in Syria in order to reduce the Iranian influence.²²⁴ The active anti-Iranian role of the KSA has been expressed by western officials. According to Richard Dearlove, former head of MI6 (British Intelligence Service), the Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan had warned him before 9/11 terrorist attacks that “the time is not far off, in the Middle East when it will be literally, ‘God help the Shia.’ More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them.”²²⁵ The current U.S. president, Joe Biden, had stated that between 2012 and 2015, Saudis supported Jihadist groups such as Islamic State and Al Nushra (Syrian Al Qaeda) with funds and arms in order to ignite a sectarian Sunni-Shia war in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen as a tool against the Iranians and Shiites.²²⁶ Around 11.000 Wahhabi foreign fighters arrived in Syria in September, 2014,²²⁷ only two months after the Islamic State emerged.

4.2.3 Iranian Equivalent *Fait Accompli*

KSA’s anti-Iranian regional strategy, especially Syrian Civil War involvement caused Iranian reaction.²²⁸ Iranians became less restraint to confront Saudis and to make them to pay equivalent cost in terms of security, thus they intensified their interference in the Yemeni conflict by supporting Houthis.²²⁹ Despite the fact that Yemen was not a strategic priority for IRI, yet it could function as a component, a forward outpost, of its ‘active defence’ strategy “in terms of deterrence and retaliation, not only against Saudi Arabia, but also the United Arab Emirates and more significantly Israel.”²³⁰ Afterwards, Yemen was the ‘Achilles heel’ of KSA security

²²³ Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, “Iran’s Syria strategy,” 353.

²²⁴ Melissa G. Dalton, “How Iran’s hybrid-war tactics help and hurt it,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 73, no. 5 (2017): 314.

²²⁵ Carol Choksy and Jamsheed Chosky, “The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad,” 29.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, 29.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 30.

²²⁸ Stephen W. Day and Noel Brehony, *Global, Regional and Local Dynamics in the Yemeni Crisis* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 154.

²²⁹ Andrew W. Terrill, “Iranian Involvement in Yemen,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute* 58, no. 3 (2014): 431.

²³⁰ Achim Vogt and Sarah Schmid, “Navigation the Regional Chessboard: Europe’s Options To Address Conflicts In The Mena,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, (2020): 8.

according with the Khaled Fattah, an expert on Yemeni affairs who claimed that Saudi intelligence was aware that “the weakest link in the chain of security of the Arabian Peninsula, and thus easy prey for Tehran to penetrate and manipulate.”²³¹ Yemen was for Iranians more of a bargaining chip than a strategic asset. IRI could recognize KSA’s security sensitivity in Yemen and would withdraw its military support for Houthis, only for KSA’s mutual stance in Syria.²³²

Indeed, IRI’s President Rouhani have made efforts for the reduction of the tension and the settlement of the rivalry since August 2013.²³³ But, the Iranian suggestions for the acceptance of the Iranian role in Syria and Iraq, stop backing anti-Shiite militias, participation of IRI in the Yemen/Bahrain political solution process, and not undermining of the U.S.-IRI nuclear negotiations were rejected. The Saudis considered them unacceptable and asked Tehran to withdraw its support to Assad, Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite militias.²³⁴ Despite the deadlock, the reconciliatory efforts were repeated May 2014, by both sides this time. The Saudi FM Saud al-Faisal’s invited his Iranian counterpart in the Islamic summit in Jeddah and the Saudi King Abdullah replaced his intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan, an adamant anti-Iranian, while Iranian moderates supported the ending of the Iranian military disengagement from Yemen.²³⁵ Nevertheless, the death of King Abdullah after six month and the new royal leadership of King Salman and his son Muhammad bin Salman opted an anti-Iranian stance and the stalemate continued.²³⁶ However, the IRI continued to seek for détente with KSA. During 2015, also with U.S. instigation,²³⁷ and in 2016 Rouhani made several attempts for a settlement with Riyadh, but all efforts met with rejection from KSA.²³⁸ Moreover, the execution of the Saudi, Shiite leader

²³¹ Esfandiary and Tabatabai, “Yemen: an Opportunity for Iran–Saudi Dialogue?” 162.

²³² Ibid, 167.

²³³ Day and Brehony, *Global, Regional and Local Dynamics in the Yemeni Crisis*, 155-156.

²³⁴ Ibid, 156-157.

²³⁵ Ibid, 158.

²³⁶ Ibid, 158.

²³⁷ Ibid, 160.

²³⁸ Esfandiary and Tabatabai, “Iran’s ISIS policy,” 168.

Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016,²³⁹ and the following diplomatic crisis,²⁴⁰ only deteriorated the situation. The aggressive stance of KSA leadership alongside with the hawkish policy of the new Trump administration in the U.S. led IRI to an increase of its involvement in Yemen especially after 2017.²⁴¹ IRI's increased entrenchment in Yemen was an attempt of restoring the balance of power which derived from three factors. Firstly, Salman's Leadership played significant role on the American 'maximum pressure,' policy against Iran; Secondly, the potential, Saudi nuclear program; and thirdly, the U.S.-sponsored, normalization of relation between Arab states and Israel and the establishment of a common anti-Iranian block.²⁴²

²³⁹ Angus McDowall, "Shi'ite cleric among 47 executed in Saudi Arabia, stirring anger in region," Reuters, January 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-security-idUSKBN0UG03F20160103>.

²⁴⁰ Jiraroj Mamadkul, "Saudi Arabia – Iran's Foreign Policy Crisis: A Case Study of Execution of Saudi Shia Cleric Shaikh Nimr al-Nimr," *RJSH* 4, no. 1 (2017): 80.

²⁴¹ Day and Brehony, 161.

²⁴² Vogt and Schmid, "Navigation the Regional Chessboard," 8-9.

4.3 Theoretical Analysis

There are several proofs which show Iranian foreign policy strategy can be considered as defensive according to the defensive realists' theoretical perceptions. The gap on the armament's expenditures between IRI and KSA, has been increased substantially in favour of the KSA. Moreover, the anti-Shiite anti-Iranian campaign in the region, sponsored by the KSA in Syria and Iraq especially via radical militant organizations such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, threatens IRI's sovereignty and stability, which are vital preconditions for IRI's security and prosperity. Therefore, KSA's security and foreign policy strategies increase IRI's security dilemma. According to defensive realists' perceptions, the increase of a state's security dilemma can lead that to an "unintended hostility spiral among states that harbour no aggressive or revisionist intent."²⁴³ Thus, IRI's foreign policy strategy is justified on defensive terms; it is within the IRI's right to adopt aggressive policies, even military, in order to preserve its security and counterbalance its aggressors' political, diplomatic, and military-superior security and foreign policy means.

Furthermore, defensive realism asserts that a state can decrease its security dilemma by taking several measures against the hostile state. By "increasing the costs from non-cooperation," "reducing the unilateral gains from the sucker's payoff," and "increasing the costs from mutual defection,"²⁴⁴ are a few of the strategies that the defensive realists suggest. Based on these theoretical terms, it can be concluded that the IRI's security and foreign policy strategies, the interconnected security and the balance of threat, can be considered as defensive and counterbalancing. Yet, IRI's adoption of retaliatory deterrence in Yemen, are defensive military strategies in order to reduce the unilateral power gains of the KSA in the region (Syria, Iraq)), increase the cost by its hostility, and neutralize its power-maximize policy against Tehran.

Furthermore, the pro-Iranian, Shiite militant network, the Axis of Resistance, can be considered as a defensive instrument of the IRI's foreign policy designs. According to Stephen Walt, a defensive realist, the "states with large offensive capabilities are more likely to provoke an

²⁴³ Lobell, 12.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 12.

alliance.”²⁴⁵ Kenneth Waltz, the originator of neorealism, concluded that the balance of power position of state can be upgraded through establishment of alliances.²⁴⁶ The increased Saudi military expenditures on modern equipment have increased its offensive capabilities,²⁴⁷ and the military technological gap on its favour,²⁴⁸ increasing concurrently, IRI’s security dilemma. Therefore, according to Walt and Waltz, is justified the defensive and counter-balancing nature of IRI’s militant network while are weakening the arguments about the IRI’s expansionism through the Shiite Crescent as a tool for the establishment of an Iranian-Shiite Order in the region.

But it can be argued that the IRI’s militant network activity in Yemen put the non-expansionist nature of IRI foreign policy strategy to question. Since IRI is engaged in asymmetric militancy against the KSA (on its south borders in Yemen), how can the IRI’s foreign policy strategy be justified as defensive and not hegemonic? The defensive nature of the asymmetric militant engagement of IRI in Yemen can be explained with the *escalation dominance* concept. According to *escalation dominance*, which is part of the active deterrence strategy, a state uses military asymmetry on its opponent state which is unable to respond effectively creating an *escalation dilemma* to the opponent state.²⁴⁹ Thus, the use of militancy on tactical level can be justified as defensive, part of active deterrence on a strategic level. Yet, since both states use asymmetric militancy as means on their power struggle, under what criteria we should consider IRI’s militancy in Yemen, instead of KSA (in Iraq and Syria), as defensive and not hegemonic? Robert Gilpin, a hegemonic offensive realist, claims that “as the power of a state increases, it seeks to extend its territorial control, its political influence, and/or its domination of the international economy.”²⁵⁰ Furthermore, according to Jack Snyder, the military technology is a vital requirement

²⁴⁵ Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 11-12.

²⁴⁶ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 118.

²⁴⁷ Samuel Perlo-Freeman, “Who is arming The Yemen war?” *Reinventing Peace*, March 19, 2019. <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2019/03/19/who-is-arming-the-yemen-war-an-update/>.

²⁴⁸ Ostovar, “The Grand strategy,” 170-171.

²⁴⁹ Forrest E. Morgan, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (USA: RAND, 2008), 15-16.

²⁵⁰ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 106.

for adoption of offensive, expansionist policies.²⁵¹ Moreover, Stephen Walt provides four standards which define whether a state is a threat or not for another state. They are the “aggregate strength, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions.”²⁵² Thus, in order to answer that question, we should examine which of two rivals, IRI or KSA, meets the requirement of an expansionist, potential hegemon state. Since offensive intentions is difficult to be measured objectively, and geographical proximity is the same for both states, strength aggregation and military technology capabilities will be examined. The World Bank data show as that KSA’s GDP is double than that of IRI.²⁵³ Furthermore, the military expenditures for IRI and KSA in 2017 were \$14,4 billion and 69,4 billion, respectively.²⁵⁴ The KSA military purchases in the last decade included modern combat aircrafts, tanker aircrafts, airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft, and cruise missiles.²⁵⁵ Moreover, U.S.A, the most powerful state in the world on political, militarily and economic aspects is a close ally of the KSA which guarantees its sovereignty (Roosevelt-Abdul Aziz 1932 deal). On the other hand, without strong alliances, IRI faces U.S. military, economic and political hostility through sanctions, regime change threats, military threats, and heavy military presence on the Iranian borders. Consequently, KSA and not IRI is the state which meets the criteria of a potential expansionist state. All in all, according to the neorealist theory, IRI’s foreign policy behaviour towards KSA in Yemen, meets efficiently the criteria to be considered as defensive aiming to its security preservation and state’s survival. In Bahraini Uprising, despite its vibrant rhetoric, IRI opted for a passive, non-interference stance because a military involvement would not serve its national interest, rather it would damage it. Furthermore, the Saudi-led military intervention in Bahrain, though it had a potential to undermine IRI’s influence among the Shiites, nevertheless it did not violate IRI’s national security strategy ‘red lines,’ as we saw on the third chapter. On the contrary, during the Yemeni civil conflict, IRI adopted an active, militant foreign policy approach towards KSA due to the fact that KSA foreign

²⁵¹ Ibid, 6.

²⁵² Sandal and Fox, *Religion in International relations Theory*, 65.

²⁵³ “GDP (current US \$) - Middle East & North Africa.” *The World Bank*.

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=ZQ-IR>.

²⁵⁴ Pieter D. Wezeman, “Saudi Arabia, armaments and conflict in the Middle East,” *SIPRI*, December 14, 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2018/saudi-arabia-armaments-and-conflict-middle-east>.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

policy behaviour threaten IRI's regional strategic assets (Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah), vital for its national security designs, decreasing its security and endangering its state survival.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to understand and identify the drivers of the Iranian foreign policy behaviour towards KSA in Bahrain and Yemen. In the case of Bahraini Uprising, the findings show us that a non-interference stance served the IRI's national interests and state survival. An Iranian military involvement would have undermined IRI's foreign policy key goals and national security on that specific time period. Nevertheless, in the case of Yemeni Civil War, the main finding of this research is that that IRI chose a militant approach in Yemen in order to counter KSA's anti-Iranian policy in Syria and Iraq which consists of key components of IRI's survival and security preservation strategy. A decline of Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq would have possessed a threat to IRI's vital security interests. This research aimed to illustrate the principles and the determinants of the Iranian foreign policy strategy during Bahraini Uprising and the Yemeni Civil War within the framework of the KSA-IRI regional antagonism. The findings of this research can provide substantial evidence in answering what was the Iranian foreign approach and how it was developed in the way which we defined. On the first chapter the heft of the geopolitical stability and the Iranian state identity as key foreign policy determinants are presented. The regional instability threatens the Iranian national interest. Moreover, the three-fold state identity provides flexibility, influence, and permeation to the national interest objectives. Furthermore, the analysis of IRI's security dilemma (strategic isolation, sanctions, and hostile military presence) explains the reasoning behind the activity of the Iranian militant network and the foreign policy culture in general. Yet, another characteristic of the IRI foreign policy is pragmatism, despite what the religious nature and rhetoric of the political establishment might suggest in the first look. The thesis analysed the military and political aspects of the national security strategy in the second chapter. The military doctrine's analysis illustrates the incentives (Iran-Iraq war, U.S. military presence, and regional armament disequilibrium), the principles, the ends (active deterrence, escalation dominance, proxy war, attrition/Fabian strategy), and the means-instruments (IRGC, Quds Forces). Moreover, on the political level the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's strategic thoughts and perceptions regarding national security are presented. Khamenei prioritizes national interest and states survival over ideological transnational ends. Khamenei introduces the concepts of 'the balance of terror' or 'balance of threat', and 'interconnected security'. In the third chapter there is an analysis of the incentives and the determinants which led IRI's foreign affairs decision makers to keep a passive posture against the Saudi militant engagement in Bahraini Uprising, and

there is an explanation why that stance was compatible with IRI's national interests. The fourth chapter includes our case study on Yemeni Civil War. After a brief presentation of the background of the Yemeni politics this chapter is focusing on three points. Firstly, the nature of the Iranian engagement. Secondly, there is an analysis on the causes of the Iranian involvement in the Yemeni conflict. The incentives and the determinants (strategic value of Syria, Iraq and Hezbollah) of the IRI's decision to engage in Yemeni civil war are analysed, as well as the means that the political ends of this decision attempted to be fulfilled. Thirdly, on the theoretical analysis part the arguments over the expansionism of the Iranian foreign policy are deconstructed. Through the application of the structural realism theory, substantial arguments about the defensive character of the Iranian involvement in the Yemen are presented.

Nevertheless, though there are several fields and levels of IRI-KSA rivalry, this paper does not attempt to examine and to analyse the whole spectrum of that antagonism as it is mentioned in the introduction. Geographically, the focus of this research is mainly at the 'soft underbelly' of the KSA, in Yemen and to a lesser extent in Bahrain. Chronologically, this thesis covered the Yemeni conflict from 2014 until 2019 (while the Yemeni conflict continues), and also focused on the Iranian foreign policy behaviour during the 2011 Bahraini Uprising. Moreover, the research is focused on specific dimensions (such as the foreign policy, military and geopolitical), and excludes the economic, social, political, cultural, and humanitarian aspects of the Yemen conflict and their implication on the antagonism between the IRI and KSA. There were also some practical limitations. Firstly, the lack of knowledge of the Persian and Arabic language narrowed the data only to English language sources. Secondly, the outbreak of the corona pandemic has set more obstacles to the conducted research. Due to the imposed mobility restrictions, field research was practically prohibited. Last but not least, the option of interviewing regional and local factors of the conflict met serious obstacles. The main of these obstacles were the lack of the means for its conduct (internet, and electronic devices), the absence of translator (in contrast with the physical interviews) and their distrust for the online communication.

As a result of this research the Western analysts and expertise of the Euro-Atlantic institutions (EU, NATO, U.S.A) and the Dutch government should reconsider the way they perceive Iranian affairs. Western policy makers should pay attention to a deeper and better understanding of the way the Iranian political establishment and society realize the domestic and

international politics. Western analysts should distance themselves from the Eurocentric analytical framework of the secular state-religion dichotomy. The IRI's religious institutions should not be perceived as entities governed by metaphysical irrationality or lack of political culture's understanding of the domestic and international political issues. Furthermore, we should better understand the role of Shiite Islam as a distinctive sociopolitical narrative in the MENA. Moreover, for a better understanding of the strategic thought of the IRI, the experts should avoid making a distinction of the Iranian strategic culture prior and after the Islamic revolution of 1979. The modern Iranian strategic culture has a historical "strategic depth," providing to the Iranian policymakers strong socio-cultural and political footing in the region as well as the means to conduct multi-faceted, flexible, and pervasive foreign policy strategies. Yet, the Iranian statehood enjoys an almost 500 years old, uninterrupted national sovereignty, though the fluctuated foreign interventionism. Thus, Iran should be perceived and analyzed distinctively from most of the rest of the MENA state entities which are products of the colonial era, some of which have enjoyed relative political and geopolitical sovereignty for the last few decades. Furthermore, the military analysts, in their evaluations related to the military capacity and effectiveness of the IRI's armed forces, should avoid relying solely on the arms expenditures and the technological gap on the military hardware. On the contrary, they should add on their evaluating determinants factors such as military experience and culture as well as the sociopolitical and historical framework of the regional militant hot spots.

At the dawn of the 21st century the international system experiences a fundamental reconstruction causing tectonic changes with destabilizing implications to the post-Cold War Order. In other words, the emerging international system will be not Western-centric, almost after 500 hundred years. A constant transfer of the economical, technological, military and geopolitical power from the West to the East is on the process. Eurasia, the region from Chinese Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean, will be the epicenter of global competition and transformation. IRI possesses a pivotal geopolitical and economic position at this transformative Eurasian field. Thus, this thesis concludes that further research should be conducted on the field of the Iranian strategic culture, further analyzing the political, geopolitical, and military thought and perspectives of the Iranian power centres. Furthermore, deeper analysis of the Iranian Shiite worldviews, institutions, and its interplays with Iranian political establishment and society is needed. Political Shiism in

Iran should be understood, more as a structural factor of Iranian echelons rather than a disruptive anomaly from the Western-oriented, global liberal political “regularity” which should be restored.

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