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Transnational alliances in civil wars:

Analyzing Iran's and Saudi Arabia's decision to get involved in the Yemen civil war

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Bachelor Thesis

Civil wars in theory and practice

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This thesis will focus on states supporting or allying with actors during a civil war. Within most civil wars there is some form of outside aid or intervention. This can have a large effect on the outcome and the duration of the conflict. This support by third states, falls under the umbrella of transnational alliance formation. These alliances present themselves in different levels of support. This can for instance be monetary, with arms or with military presence in the conflict. Understanding the decision making process that goes into forming these alliances is key to analyze the dynamics of a civil war. To research this phenomenon I will focus on general alliance literature. Seeing as most of the literature is focused on alliances in classic warfare, it will be applied to the support of insurgent groups or the government involved in civil war. The main goal is to determine what the most important reasons for third states are to provide support and form a transnational alliance in civil wars.

This specific phenomenon has already been studied and theorized, by analyzing the Congo wars. In an article by Tamm (2016), he describes multiple reasons for states to support specific sides in civil wars. According to his research, all of these reasons can be boiled down to an internal security threat. The state feels the need to pre-emptively form an alliance in a nearby civil war, as to secure its own political survival. He argues that this is visible throughout Africa, and poses the question if this is the case in other areas of the world. I will study this by looking at a different region, the Middle East. The research will specifically focus on the most recent civil war in Yemen and the support of Saudi Arabia and Iran in this war.

The Yemen case is both fascinating and horrifying. It is an ongoing civil war without any possible resolution on the horizon. For many years it has been ignored by Western media. In recent years the media interest in the war has increased, mainly due to the conditions of the Yemeni people. The people of the country have suffered enormously as victims of the war and the famine that it created. The ongoing nature of the war makes it an interesting case,

while at the same time making research difficult. As states are still militarily involved they are less likely to provide detailed explanations.

To analyze the reasons for allying with certain factions, first the literature of surrounding civil wars and transnational alliances will be analyzed. This will include an extensive explanation of the theory by Tamm, which will be tested on the Yemen case. Next, the research design will be explained to show which method will be used to determine if the theory is applicable. The general situation in Yemen will be explained, as well as the general relations between the two states involved. This is to give context to the findings and provide necessary background information. Afterwards, the level of involvement and the reasons for support of both Iran and Saudi Arabia will be laid out and compared to each other. With these results, a comparison between the Middle Eastern and the Congo case can be made. This should determine if Tamm's theory also applies to this region. Finally the main findings will be summarized and some limitations and implications of this research will be discussed.

Literature review

A lot of research in political science has focused on wars. To understand factors and mechanisms in wars is of vital importance to reach the end of a conflict and to get more insights in the dynamics surrounding it. This research used to be mainly focused on interstate wars, but in the last decades this type of war has become less prominent. Civil wars have been on the rise and therefore, more recent research has gone into this specific type of war. A problem that stems from this change in relative importance of civil wars is, that a lot of the research and terms are still connected to a more traditional type of war. This means that research into specific factors of war needs to be 'translated' to fit into civil war.

One aspect of war is whether or not states form alliances with each other to fight more effectively. This has been extensively researched in general warfare (Weitsman, 2017). Dynamics in this area include anarchy in the international system and states using cooperation to achieve their own goals. With civil wars and alliance theory, the focus has mostly been on alliances between rebel groups (Akcinaroglu, 2012). Research into this and reasons why rebel groups choose to cooperate has led to theories that state rebel groups use alliances to be able to win and to maximize their share of the win (Christia, 2012). This is of course only applicable in situations where there are multiple smaller groups fighting a larger entity such as a government.

When looking at third party support for civil wars there has been research into how the duration of wars has been affected by international intervention (Regan, 2002). The conclusion of this was that civil wars that have foreign intervention are more likely to last longer than ones where this does not happen. This has also been shown in further empirical research (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000). The focus on the effect of intervention on civil war has been studied extensively, however another aspect to foreign intervention and alliances is

the decision of a third state to enter in such a construction. Reasons for third states to form alliances in civil wars is a less studied area and is in need of more research (Checkel, 2013).

One study that looked more in depth into the reasons for states to get involved in civil wars has taken the Congo wars as a case study (Tamm, 2016). This research uses these wars to develop a theory for why states are inclined to support the government or rebel groups in civil wars. The theory was created with a specific set of states in mind. It focuses on leaders that have not been elected democratically and therefore are more afraid to lose their power in an undemocratic way. Tamm (2016) raises the question if the theory presented in his work holds up in other areas of the world (p. 181). If this is not the case, it signals that there is something unique in how African leaders deal with civil war. Looking at this problem in the Arab world is one way of testing the theories applicability in a broader manner, which is what this thesis will focus on.

Theory section

Tamm (2016) provides a theory of why states decide to intervene in civil wars. The intervention he focuses on is mostly between a third state and a rebel group, however he also applies it to states that provide support for the government that is fighting in the civil war (p. 167). This theory therefore focuses on the general concept of transnational alliance formation. The theory gives three main reasons for third states supporting a civil war: a transnational threat for the intervening states, the ability to gain resources from getting involved and support for, or a connection to specific ethnic groups (p. 150). These all have to do with security and political survival. The first is to prevent threats that will put a leader out of power. The second and third are ways to gather more support with monetary or political means, and therefore a more stable position within their own state. Within the case study of the Congo wars Tamm shows that in most cases these explanations are the main reasons for giving support to rebel groups.

Transnational alliances are said to be mainly dependent on the leaders' decision to form an alliance with a rebel group. Taking the state as the ultimate level of analysis is something that stems from realism, but focusing on the actual leader and looking at more external threats falls under omnibalancing (David, 1991, p. 237). This is a broader view of what influences decision making than realism and takes into account more transnational factors. Using the individualistic focus of this approach aligns well with personalistic regimes in which the leader is the ultimate decision maker. This, in combination with a competition that exists between states, the desire of states to maximize their own gains, and uncertainty in the political arena is what Tamm's theory is based on.

Transnational alliance formation as a variable is quite broad. It ranges from monetary or organizational support to actual military support and providing troops. This means that a wide range of actions can be analyzed and compared to each other. In this research support will be

used as an indicator for how deep the alliance is. This means that the use of the term support indicates at least a basic level of transnational alliance formation.

In terms of support, providing military support or troops is clearly the more expensive option in both monetary cost and political capital. Within the theory of Tamm, there is not a lot of consideration of the differences between the levels of support or what their implications for the theory are. The closest thing to taking these into account is the fact that the theory bases itself in rationality and that the leaders make calculations based on the information they have (Tamm, 2016, p. 149). A problem that exists with the rational approach is when they are combined with a personalistic approach. It assumes leaders to be rational. Leaders of states can of course make irrational choices or base themselves on misinformation. This can lead to irrational involvement in civil wars and high costs.

When looking at the theory Tamm proposes, the question is if the theory is applicable to the Middle East. Before this can be tested, it must be clear that the basic conditions that make this theory work in Africa, are present in the Middle East. The given requirements of the theory must be compared to the cases that will be analyzed in the Middle East. If these requirements are present the analysis can proceed.

A limiting factor of the theory is that this applies to rulers that are afraid to lose power in an undemocratic way. This is because they do not rule a democratic system or have rigged it to such an extent that they do not fear losing elections. This qualifier makes it a good fit for studying the influence of the theory in the Middle East. In the specific cases the research in this paper looks into, the countries cannot be considered democratic. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. There are almost no civil liberties and the state keeps control by monitoring their citizens closely (Freedom House, 2021). This is possible due to the extreme wealth the country has because of their oil reserves. This leads to the situation where the only possibility for change in the country could come from overthrowing the government by force.

Iran is a partly democratic country but has a strong theological influence and control which makes real political change impossible (Freedom House, 2020). There are elections, however all candidates need to be approved by the Guardian council to be able to run. The Guardian council is a group that is not chosen by the people. This means, the only choice of candidates that exists are the ones that will not disturb the status quo too much and prevent actual democracy. On the other side in the political system are the Supreme leader and the religious institutions. These are all unelected and lead to a massive amount of power in the hands of this leader. All these factors taken together make Iran an undemocratic country in which real political change would also come from rising against the sitting powers and revolution.

Although the leaders in Iran and Saudi Arabia are not elected democratically, there are some differences in their ability to stay in power. This difference stems from the fact that monarchies are usually more stable than dictators that came into power during a coup. With Iran the power of the governing class is provided by religious justification. This is a more stable basis than exists in the African states that are studied by Tamm. A factor that does contribute to making this theory applicable for this region, is the Arab Spring. The revolutions showed that political change can come from the bottom and that a democratic desire exists throughout the region. This wave of revolution scared many Arab leaders, including the ones from the countries in this research. Fear for public uprisings is different than fear for military coups, but still provide a reason for the leading class to be worried about their position in the state. It is also included in Tamm's theory as a serious threat to a regime (Tamm, 2016, p. 155).

The cases in Tamm's study also mentions that 'coup proofing' is a strategy that is strongly visible in the cases analyzed (p. 180). This is an indicator of the risk calculation that the leaders have made for how likely it is that there will be coups. Both the states in this study also heavily invested in coup proofing. Iran created the Revolutionary guards, an alternative

armed force which is independent from the regular military (Brown et al., 2016, p. 4). Saudi Arabia uses the connection to tribes and their loyalty as a way to prevent coups, as well as an alternative armed force (Quinlivan, 1999, pp. 138, 142).

With these qualifiers being met in the countries that will be analyzed, it shows that there is a possibility for comparison. With this comparison it should be possible to determine if Tamm's theory applies to the cases in the Middle East. This means that the hypothesis of this research will be: *Internal security threats are a main reason for the states in the Middle East to intervene and form transnational alliances in civil wars.*

Methodology

To answer the research question and test the hypothesis, a small n comparative study will be done. This comparison will be between the reasons for Iran to intervene in Yemen and the reasons of Saudi Arabia. This method of analysis is helpful for theory testing. The main theory that will be tested by this analysis is one that has been constructed by looking at the Congo wars and reasons for third states to intervene here. This theory by Tamm (2016) is one where internal security threats are the main reasons for this intervention. By comparing Iran's and Saudi Arabia's justifications, it will lead to a general understanding of possible reasons within the region. This will then be compared to the Congo wars and the explanation given for those alliances.

A problem that exists with this type of research is in the form of case selection (Halperin & Heath, 2017). Seeing as there are only two cases this bias must be prevented to ensure the validity of the research. To choose cases this qualitative comparative study will make use of the Most Dissimilar System Design [MDS]. This means that the dependent variable remains the same in both cases but a difference in independent variables exists. In this case both of these states have decided to intervene in the Yemen civil war to an extent. Therefore, the dependent variable is the similar. A main difference in independent variables is the leaders of the states and the specific political situations they are in. This could possibly influence their reasons for intervening. This difference will be key in showing whether or not the explanation Tamm provides for the Congo wars, holds up in other situations.

In terms of data collection, the analysis will be based on existing data. Such as, literature and analysis written about the Yemen wars by scholars as well as research into regional factors that might explain the dynamics. The literature will mostly be focused on scholarly works and not as much on the public statements of the states involved. This is done, to prevent the bias or misinformation that comes from political considerations in the statements from the heads of

states.

With this data collected a content analysis will be done which will show if the reasons that explain foreign intervention in the Congo wars are present in the Iranian or Saudi Arabian case. The content analysis will be made on the basis if there are internal threats that could explain the actions of the intervening states. If the independent variable of internal threats does exist in both the states, it will show a connection with the African case. In case of a proven connection, the theory could be applied to more regions. If this connection does not exist in this case, the theory is not applicable to this region and possible alternative explanations for the results will be looked at briefly.

The Yemen conflict and the relation between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Yemen is one of the poorest countries of the Middle East. This is part of the reason why the current civil war has hit the country so hard. The civil war has turned into one of the worst humanitarian crises of this age. It has led to many deaths, even more displaced people, and a devastating famine.

This is not the first civil war that plagues the country, but it is one of the worst. It has its origins within the Arab spring of 2011 (Ahmed, 2019, p. 82). As a wave of pro democracy protests rose through the Middle East and North African countries, it spread to Yemen as well. The protestors demanded the sitting president to resign. President Saleh had been in power for over three decades and the protestors accused him of not being active enough in democratizing the country. After months of protests he stepped down and was replaced by his vice president Hadi. The stepping down of the president, as well as the civil unrest, made the situation in the country very unstable. Yemen always was a very divided country with different factions competing for power. These factors go back to the creation of the Yemeni state from south Arabia (Brehony, 2011, pp. 3–13). The country was divided into a northern Yemen and a southern Yemen in the past. Even though the two united in 1990, the division between the north and south persisted. The instability that followed the Arab spring proliferated these divisions and led to conflict. In 2015 the government fell and the capital was taken over by a group called the ‘Houthis’. This group is named after the most prominent family behind the organization. They have been around since the 1990’s and have been involved in multiple conflicts within the region (Rugh, 2015, p. 143). The Houthis gained influence in the north of Yemen and became a strong military presence. They are a Shia minority within Yemen. Their version of Shia Islam is not the same as the one practiced in Iran. However, interviews with high placed Houthi members show that the Houthis took a lot of inspiration from the Iranians (Salisbury, 2015, p. 6). In the south of Yemen, both Al Qaeda

in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP] and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS] have tried to increase their influence (Darwich, 2018, p. 128). These terrorist groups are responsible for many terrorist attacks. Most of these were within the Arab world, but there have been attacks on Western countries as well.

The Houthis have been opposed by Saudi Arabia for many years. Their occupation of the capital led the Saudis to lead a coalition of countries into Yemen to fight the Houthis and support the government of Hadi. The coalition is a cooperation between the Gulf states with support from the United States. With the coalition moving into Yemen the situation worsened. There was not enough force to provide a swift victory. This led to a long and costly war that has been going on for over six years. At the current time there is no end in sight and the humanitarian crisis worsens (Johnsen, 2021).

The two countries that are involved on both sides of this conflict are Saudi Arabia and Iran. These two states are very different in how they are set up and what their ambitions are within the broader region of the middle east. The Iranian revolution was seen by Saudi Arabia as increasing anti monarchical sentiment (Soltaninejad, 2019). With these tensions high, the two countries started to become more opposed to each other. Another reason for tension is that both these countries are Islamic. However, Iran is mostly Shia and Saudi Arabia is mostly Sunni (Ricotta, 2016). Iran also views Saudi Arabia as too involved with the US, which it considers an enemy of Islam. The competition between the two states has been visible in the region by their influence in multiple local conflicts. They do not openly fight each other but support groups opposing each other in civil wars of third states.

Iran's role in the Yemen conflict

To determine the reasons for intervention in the Yemen civil war by Iran, it is important to first analyze the level of involvement Iran has in the conflict. Iran, as a Shia majority country, is one of the most influential players in the region. They support the Houthis in Yemen. This alliance is not fully out in the open. Although they publicly cited their support for the group, they do not provide military personnel to fight in the conflict. There is however, within the international community a consensus that there is monetary support for the Houthis. This support is not as extensive as it was portrayed by the western media, but still exists (Salisbury, 2015, p. 7). There are also signs that Iran supported the Houthis by providing training, organizational support and weapons (Terrill, 2014, p. 436). As mentioned before, this support is not public and Iran denies that it exists.

The reason for this support is mainly to increase their influence within the broader Arab region (Vatanka, 2020, p. 149). Iran is a Shia Islamic state and therefore tries to support the Shia minorities throughout the region. Its main rival within the region is Saudi Arabia, there are multiple fronts on which this rivalry unfolds and this has led to interventions and proxy wars within different countries in the region.

This rivalry is at the same time part of the reason why Iran did not overtly support the Houthi rebels. Iran already was involved in conflicts within multiple states within the region (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016). In Syria and Iraq Iran send their own forces to fight (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2016, p. 156). These are comparable conflicts that also evolved from the Arab spring. Tehran believed it to be unproductive to further increase the tensions with Saudi Arabia in a direct manner and therefore, decided to get less involved in Yemen (Vatanka, 2020, p. 157). This shows that the Iranians made a very clear cost benefit analysis in how to involve themselves. In terms of costs it was not only the potential clash with Saudi Arabia that prevented them from intervening more. Financial costs were a factor as well.

Contrary to Saudi Arabia, Iran does not have the same amount of wealth to invest in conflicts (Nasr, 2018, p. 111). Iran therefore needs to put more thought into where to invest their resources. With the tactics that they employed in Yemen they were able to generate a desirable effect for a relatively small investment .

Another one of the desirable effects that came from supporting the Houthis is precisely the reaction it got from Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia getting involved in the conflict is precisely what Iran wanted. This is because Yemen is not the only place where the rivalry between the states plays out. Throughout the Middle East, there are multiple wars and conflicts where the Saudis and Iran back different sides. Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen means that they can not use as many resources for the fights in Syria and Iraq (Nasr, 2018, p. 112). This is obviously a strategic advantage for Iran who are not as caught up in Yemen. This is due to them not sending any military to the conflict. Therefore, Iran can direct more resources to the other conflicts to gain the upper hand.

Even though Iranian support for the Houthis is clear, the conflict in Yemen is clearly not their first priority. There is a clear difference between the tactics that they apply in this case and in the case of Iraq and Syria. The low level of involvement of Iran is striking and an important factor in the comparison to Saudi Arabia. To fully understand this, a more in depth look at both of the countries situations is necessary.

Saudi Arabia's role in the Yemen conflict

Saudi Arabia is clearly very involved in the Yemen civil war. They have been influential within Yemen's politics for a long time. Alternating between at times supporting change or instability, and other times trying to maintain the status quo. The latter is what Saudi Arabia is trying in the current Yemeni civil war. They lead a coalition of states that intervened in the conflict by providing military power to support the government of Yemen and the stability of the political system. This intervention was called 'Operation Decisive Storm' and consisted of a group of states within the region that pledged military support to prevent a Houthi takeover of the country. This intervention eventually evolved into 'Operation Restoring Hope'. Unlike the Iranian involvement which is more subtle, this coalition is clearly a costly and intense intervention in the war.

Yemen in general is seen as an important neighbor that needs a lot of focus from the Saudis. A strong Yemen could be dangerous for the stability of Saudi Arabia (Salisbury, 2015, p. 3). This is part of the reason why the Saudis have not used their money and power to increase stability in Yemen. Rather, they have used their money to actively support groups with the goal to divide the country (Rugh, 2015, p. 143). This has been successful; Yemen was, even before the latest civil war, one of the poorest and weakest states in the region. This is why the government was unable to stand up to the protests and rebel groups such as the Houthis. Saudi Arabia keeping Yemen weak, led to them having to be involved in the civil war to keep rebel groups from taking over.

Part of the reason for Saudi Arabia to get involved is the fear of revolutions within their own country (Darwich, 2018, p. 127). This fear stemmed from the Arab spring. The growing support for political change within the region led to fear with the leaders of many countries including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The protestors of the Arab spring mainly wanted to turn their countries more democratic. Some Arab leaders tried to give up some of their powers

to make their country more democratic. This was the case in Yemen and it was still not enough to prevent a larger conflict. Within a kingdom such as Saudi Arabia, there is no room for this change. The Saudi royal family were not willing to give up some of their powers. Seeing this wave in multiple countries surrounding the kingdom made the royal family eager to prevent it from happening in the first place. The kingdom has been stable in the past and their military has been loyal. However, in the last years there has been an alleged coup attempt (Kalin & Rashad, 2020). This shows that this is a fear for a coup is not unfounded or an improbability.

Saudi Arabia also has its own share of Zaydi Shia minorities. The Zaydi is a subsection of Shia Islam that exist mostly in the north of Yemen (Salisbury, 2015, p. 2). They feared these groups would be more likely to cause trouble if the Houthis gained the upper hand in Yemen (Salisbury, 2015, p. 10). This has led Saudi Arabia to speak out against the Houthis since before the civil war started and was another security reason to intervene.

Another reason that the Saudis led a coalition is to prevent the influence from Iran in the region. In the Saudi circles there was a widespread belief that the Houthis were an Iranian proxy and therefore a Houthi victory would lead to a massive increase in Iranian influence in a country that borders Saudi Arabia (Riedel, 2020, p. 122).

The intervention was also a way for the new defense minister, son of the king, to show strength (Riedel, 2020). There were reports by American intelligence services that downplayed the role and involvement of Iran in Yemen and with the Houthis (Riedel, 2020, p. 122). These were ignored by the Saudis. The new minister wanted to show that the moderate attitude of his predecessor was something of the past. In Yemen he saw a chance to make this clear by intervening. The coalition he created was not as large as calculated beforehand. This was due to some allies, mainly Pakistan, not being as interested in sending troops to fight in Yemen. This miscalculation has led to a situation of quagmire (Riedel, 2020, p. 124). This

was an unforeseen situation that has cost the Saudis a lot of money and resources. This is due to the nature of quagmire. If a quagmire happen in a conflict, it almost always prolongs the fighting (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2020, p. 151).

Comparison between Saudi Arabia and Iranian choices

It is clear that both states have different reasons to provide support for the civil war in Yemen and those reasons are likely to be the cause of a difference in execution. Even though both states are to some extent involved in the war, Saudi Arabia does so on a deeper level and has forged a much more costly alliance. Iran on the other hand does not involve itself into the conflict in the same way and takes more of a background role support to the Houthi rebel group.

As stated before, Tamm's theory uses internal security threats to explain the decisions of leaders to form alliances. This can be fear for groups that exist both within the civil war and the third state to rise up and fight the third states' government. Another motivator would be to gain resources from forming the alliance. With these resources a leader can buy support within his own country. This lowers the risk of the leaders' supporters turning against him.

The difference between the Iranian and Saudi Arabian level of influence and the differences in the perceived threat to their internal security is striking. The logic that underlines Tamm's theory is based on a cost benefit calculation by the leaders. Using this logic, there might be an explanation for this. One would expect a leader that gets more benefits to make greater investments. In this case the benefits are the prevention of negative effects. Saudi Arabia is closer in proximity and political ties to Yemen. Therefore, in theory one could expect the involvement to be larger just as we see in practice.

The distance that Iran has had from the conflict might have made it easier for the leaders to make more rational decisions. In the case of Saudi Arabia a large part of the reason to intervene was to show strength to the region and to its own citizens. This is entangled with a change of power in the country; a new defense minister eager to prove his decisiveness and create his own identity in the international arena. At first glance this factor looks to be

something that would invalidate research into this case by influencing the results. However, the personalist nature of the general theory makes that these factors do not negatively impact the overall validity of the research. Focusing on the decisions of the people in power and their interpretation of the situation is what is at the core of the theory. If a new leader feels the need to show power, this can be a part of the cost benefit calculations to enter into transnational alliances.

Comparison between The Congo and Middle East

To make this comparison clear, it is important to understand the situation in the Congo wars. The first of these wars started in 1996 and went on for a year. This war led to the removal of the dictator Mobutu and provided a new president called Kabila (Huening, 2009, p. 130). Less than a year later, the second Congo war broke out. This one would take five years to end. This Also led to a reorganization of the government where the rebel groups were part of reformation (Huening, 2009, p. 130).

The reason why this case is used by Tamm is due to it's multidimensionality. In both of these conflicts, five neighboring countries were involved (Tamm, 2016, p. 147). The large involvement of these states, as well as the short amount of time between the two wars creates possibilities for a clear comparison. Some of the states changed their alliances in the span of a year. This means that there are tactical considerations that form these alliances. These tactical considerations is what Tamm tries to explain and for this he forms a theory. This theory explains the reasons for intervention in both the Congo wars and is backed up by the research into all the states involved.

The reasons for intervention within the Yemen civil war are multifold and the situation is different from the one in Congo. However it is possible to compare the actors and their motivations. The support Iran gives in the conflict to the Houthis is limited. It compares well to the initial involvement that Uganda had in the first Congo war. This involvement mainly consisted of giving some military advisors and weaponry to the rebel group. It was only later in the war that they actually fought and provided troops. This happened after the conflict spilled into their own borders. This shows that this low level of involvement is not an outlier and does not exclude Iran from the theory. Iran definitely got involved and supports the Houthis, but the reason for this is different than in the African states. Within Iran this support is more focused on supporting the Shia influence within the region. This is to gain influence

compared to Saudi Arabia and has less to do with an internal fear for a coup. In this case it is clear that the explanatory factors are not the same as in the Congo cases. This is therefore evidence against the theory being applicable in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabian involvement compares well to the decision of the Sudanese president to support the Congolese ruler Mobutu. In the Congo wars this alliance is explained by the proxy war that existed between Sudan and Uganda as well as fears for hostile groups that could take hold of the country. Parallels can be made between the proxy wars that are fought between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Yemen conflict can not be described as a proxy conflict as there are too many local factors (Salisbury, 2015, p. 12). In addition, the low degree of Iranian involvement with the Houthis makes labeling it as a full proxy inaccurate (Salisbury, 2015, p. 3). Even though it is not a real proxy war, it is clear that Saudi involvement stemmed from a fear of Iran gaining power in the region.

Saudi Arabia did intervene in part to prevent hostile groups like ISIS and AQAP from gaining a foothold within the weak state of Yemen. This compares well to Mobutu who was afraid of hostile groups that had followers in his own country. The Houthi movement in the north also has sympathizers within Saudi Arabia and a victory for the Houthis could potentially cause unrest and trouble within Saudi Arabia. There is also the desire for the new minister of defense to show himself as a strong leader. This does not compare well to any of the cases within the Congo wars, but is nevertheless an important factor.

Internal security threats, as shown before, are definitely a factor in the Saudi decision to intervene in Yemen. When looking solely at this aspect of the decision making it would seem the theory applies to this case. However, when taking all factors into account it is not clear that it is the best explanation. There were multiple reasons why the Saudis decided to support the Yemeni government. Some of these had to do with internal security, but many others were

different in nature. This makes the case of Saudi Arabia inconclusive. It is not possible to attribute the intervention mainly to internal security threats.

Comparing both of these cases to the Congo wars it is clear that there are definitely similarities. In one of the two cases, the explanation given by Tamm is one that can be shown to be a part of the decision making process. Being part of the decision making process though, is not enough to attribute the theory to the case. In the other there is evidence against the theory. When we take the two cases together it does simply not provide enough evidence to be able to confidently connect Tamm's theory with the case of Yemen. It is therefore not possible to accept the hypothesis generated in the theory section of this research. It is not clear that internal security threats are a main reason for Middle Eastern states to form alliance in civil wars.

The fact that the theory does not fit this case leads to an expectation of a difference in certain independent variables. Possible causes might be that there is a larger focus on the regional stability in the Middle East. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran leads to an international order closer to a bipolar one than the multipolar order that exists in Africa. There is not the loose connection between multiple states that can choose to support either side of a conflict. This does not mean that alliances are less likely. The difference is that they are more pre determined. This leads to less room for countries to interfere with each other and more confidence in predicting what other states are more likely to do. Better information leads to less situations in which offensive alliances will be made to prevent others from doing the same to you. This is in line with a possible explanation that Tamm provides for the unique situation in Africa. The states there live in a more anarchic, system where alliances shift more often.

Conclusion & Limitations

This research has focused on the reasons for states to involve themselves in civil wars and the reasons that go into forming transnational alliances. Using a theory that was created to explain this phenomenon in Africa, the case of Yemen was studied. The main question was, what the main reasons for these transnational alliances were in the middle east. The hypothesis was:

Internal security threats are a main reason for the states in the Middle East to intervene and form transnational alliances in civil wars.

All in all the case of Yemen shows how complicated the study of civil wars can be. This difficult war shows the many different political considerations that go into forming alliances. Iran showed a limited alliance with the Houthi rebels. Even though the level of support is limited, it is still enough to be considered an alliance. There is no evidence of Iran choosing to enter this alliance due to an internal security threat. Therefore, this case can count as evidence against the applicability of the theory by Tamm in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia has a much more involved role in supporting the Yemeni government. Leading a military operation into the country is a costly alliance. In this case there is evidence of some internal security threat that influenced the decision making. However, this is only a part of the reason for the involvement. There are multiple factors influencing the decisions and it is not conclusive that internal security threats are the main reason.

These results are different from the ones in the Congo wars. In those cases it could be with near certainty established that internal security was the main reason for alliance formation. Seeing as these results in Yemen are in one case not as clear and in the other evidence against the theory, the hypothesis cannot be accepted. A possible explanation for this difference is the larger regional influence that has a grip on the Middle East. These could make the international arena less uncertain. This, in turn would make pre-emptive alliances to mitigate

internal threats a less rational option for leaders. If this is the case, then it can be assumed that the results of this study can be applied throughout the region.

This study is limited in its scope by multiple factors. The fact that the conflict is still ongoing is a challenge. Some factors will only be unveiled after the conflict ends or when new information comes to light. Another is the difficulty of extrapolating the results of this research into the wider region. This study does provide a basis for the region and the possible explanation also would be applicable to the whole region. If the explanation given for the difference in observations is true it would most certainly be the case that it applies to the whole region. It is not within the means of this research to fully build a theory to explain the differences between the regions. Factors that influence decision making can be more or less present in different civil wars. To get a full view of how this works more case studies within the Middle East should be examined and analyzed using this theory. Another possibility for further research is to build a theory of alliances, specifically for the Middle East. Taking into account the specifics of the region.

With the knowledge that the theory by Tamm most likely does not apply to the Middle East, it gives policy makers options to look at different strategies. The ways to prevent transnational alliances need to be specifically tailored to the Middle East. The main goal of the research was to gain insight into what goes into committing to transnational alliances within civil wars. The prevention of this is desirable, as civil wars that are affected by this phenomenon tend to take longer and have more casualties. This case study will be a small step to a better understanding of transnational alliances and will hopefully result in the prevention of this phenomenon.

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