Rebel Diplomacy – How the Houthis and Hezbollah Conducted Foreign Affairs

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Master Thesis

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Abstract

How do rebels actively engage in diplomacy? The analysis of case-studies of the Houthis and Hezbollah contributes to enhancing the knowledge of the often-understudied phenomenon of rebel diplomacy. Striving to shed light on this matter, the thesis uses a qualitative approach and engages in a comparative case study analysis. Existing scholarship has primarily focused either on the operationalisation of diplomacy or on rebels' interactions with the stakeholders of the international community. However, combining the theory with empirical findings, the research conducted demonstrates that the Houthis and Hezbollah pursue diplomacy in other and inventive ways. Together, these cases illustrate that the 'how' is often accounted for state-based diplomatic strategies. The Houthis and Hezbollah, furthermore, showcase that becoming diplomatically active enables them to extend their (rebel) governance beyond the domestic realm.

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List of Abbreviations

FRD   Foreign Relations Department

IGO   International Governmental Organisation

IHL   International Humanitarian Law

INGO   International Non-Governmental Organisation

IRGC   Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

MENA   Middle East and North Africa

NGO   Non-Governmental Organisation

SCMCHA Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UN   United Nations

Introduction

Non-state actors often engaged in diplomatic activities (Huang 2016). They could exert their authority internationally by establishing their own kind of diplomacy (Malejacq 2017). Amongst them, the Houthis and Hezbollah were emblematic examples, since they could be analysed not only from the angle of domestic organisational capabilities, but also through the lens of actors adept at operating in the international system. In this light, the present thesis draws attention to quite recent literature on rebel diplomacy to comprehend how rebels pursue their goals internationally. Rebel diplomacy, in fact, could be a complementary strategy to strengthen political authority and achieve a domestic agenda as well as an international one (Malejacq 2017).

A central premise of this study is that rebel groups embraced, at times combined, diverse approaches to diplomacy. They saw diplomacy as a tool to obtain credibility and visibility in the global arena (Huang 2016). Not only did rebels seek to portray themselves as political rivals for state power and as willing to peacefully communicate, but they also tried to voice causes that could reach a wide foreign audience (Huang 2016). Although the investigation of causes and functions of rebel diplomacy is certainly insightful as it emerges from these few sentences, the aim of the present project is to study the 'how'. More specifically, the thesis will identify ways in which the Houthis and Hezbollah behaved like diplomats in the international platform. There were numerous practices, tactics and gestures that rebels could implement. The Houthis and Hezbollah hosted foreign missions, and sent delegations abroad; their diplomacy was sometimes represented by the opening of offices abroad and/or the takeover of existing diplomatic institutions; other times, they showed their concern for international diplomacy by holding strategic speeches or using tools of public diplomacy (Jones & Mattiacci 2017). The study of rebels' diplomatic activism contributes to better comprehending the rebel phenomenon itself. In fact, this practice was a way to communicate and exchange information about rebels' preferences with external entities (Kaplan 2016). On the face of it, the triggers for the Houthis and Hezbollah's diplomatic engagement will be analysed. Particularly, the present research sheds light not only on their ideology and organisation within the groups, but also on contextual factors which could explain their commitment at regional and international levels. Therefore, the thesis aims at answering the following research question:

How did the Houthis (2015-2022) and Hezbollah (1982-2022) actively engage in rebel diplomacy?

Due to its length, the overall question is investigated through three sub-questions: (1) what is rebel diplomacy? (2) How did the Houthis and Hezbollah develop their international diplomacy? And, (3) which analogies and dissimilarities in their international engagement can be identified?

The present project will employ a qualitative method based on comparative case study analysis. This thesis will compare groups' experiences and thus focus on empirical evidence of practices while enlightening the role of these two groups as *de facto* authority. Existing scholarship has primarily focused on either the operationalisation of diplomacy or rebels' interactions with the stakeholders of the international community. In light of this, the thesis will develop a unique puzzle where the answers to the sub-questions will be found by proceeding on multiple levels of analysis. It will allow for studying this topic further and expanding the theory with aspects and contexts which have never been investigated with such a focus. The Houthis and Hezbollah were non-state actors that developed their domestic apparatus similarly (Almahfali & Root 2020); however, they behaved differently regarding external actors, specifically Iran. Therefore, these case-studies will also allow for investigating whether and how rebels' long-distance relations and transnational networks affected the Houthis and Hezbollah's international behaviour.

To accomplish this goal, the present thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter focuses on the state of art discussing the existing literature of rebel diplomacy. This section will illustrate that the practice of diplomacy was commonplace for those rebels willing to consolidate their political power and to attain recognition in the international arena. It will unpack the concept of diplomacy to then dig into what rebel diplomacy is about.

The second chapter outlines the methodological approach that will be applied throughout the entire research. After having defined the investigation and the main concept used, the chapter offers a description of the overall research design and case selection process. Next, it explicates the data collection method and the limitations of the study.

The third chapter is dedicated to the case-studies of the Houthis and Hezbollah. It will begin with a paragraph on acts of governance performed by these two organisations. After having briefly re-traced the historical background of the groups, the thesis dips in the core of the investigation: how the Houthis and Hezbollah conducted their foreign affairs in the concrete and how this largely diffused practice was employed to achieve their political and military ends.

The fourth chapter is divided into two main parts. It will first focus on analogies and then on differences between the Houthis and Hezbollah's behaviours adopted at the international level.

The conclusion will outline the main findings of the investigation and illustrate the key contributions of this study enabling to extend the existing theory. Lastly, it will provide some avenues for future research on rebel diplomacy.

Chapter One

Theory

1.1 Retracing the Main Tenets of Rebel Diplomacy

The overall thematic setting in this section deals with the topic of the rebel diplomacy and aims to advance the understanding of the roots of the phenomenon itself. Prior to discussing the existing debate, clarification regarding the main term (rebel) employed in the thesis is essential. Being an elastic term, a rebel can be widely understood as a member of a group "willing to use violence to achieve political ends" (Kasfir 2020: xv). This group, which identifies itself by name, is composed of command and control structures (Staniland 2014).

Traditionally, diplomacy was a practice used by and reserved for states; it was, in fact, widely comprehended as "the strategic use of talk by states" (Coggins 2015: 101). In practice, however, rebels *did* engage diplomatically. Although diplomacy has been observed to be a commonly used kind of "rebelcraft" in several internal conflicts ongoing since 1950 (Huang 2016: 91), some scholars have engaged in the debate on the concept of rebel diplomacy only over the last two decades. From a political science point of view, Coggins (2015: 106) defined the diplomacy of rebel groups as a participation "in strategic communication with foreign governments or agents, or with an occupying regime they deemed foreign". Similarly, Huang (2016: 90) described rebel diplomacy as "a rebel group's conduct of foreign affairs during civil war for the purpose of advancing its military and political objectives". Both authors, therefore, theorised this practice as hinging upon the relationship between non-state armed groups and their targeted entities, mainly states, by the means of formal and informal diplomatic pathways (Bos and Melissen 2019).

1.1.1 Purposes of Rebels' Diplomatic Activism

Drawing on the existing literature, this sub-section will look at purposes and functions of rebel diplomacy. This constitutes the larger framework within the 'how' will be assessed. Because rebels had various aims that could differ from one group to another one, the practice of diplomacy itself could serve several functions (Huang 2016). Evidence suggests that rebels on the verge of statehood and those seeking support and legitimacy were more likely to become diplomatically active (Huang 2016). Zooming in on rebels seeking external support, diplomatic activism could help them improve their political appeal (Huang 2016). It was a way to present the group beyond the lens of military violence during wartime: rebels had the chance to show the international community to be politically organised and able of mingling with policymakers and diplomats (Huang 2016).

The engagement in diplomacy could demonstrate rebels' ability to perform significant acts particularly when they sought statehood by taking over central government or establishing autonomy in their region (Huang 2016). Besides exhibiting governance functions and running social services, rebels emulated all kinds of acts linked to "good citizenship" at the global level (Huang 2016: 101). They sometimes, and strategically, displayed their conformity with the international humanitarian law (IHL) and committed themselves to governing in a transparent and clear way (Huang 2016).

Domestically, the practice of diplomacy served the same purpose. As rebels were keen to convince locals of their political competence (Huang & Sullivan 2020), diplomatic activism was an efficient means to improve their image in the area(s) upon which they were based (Huang 2016). In particular, secessionist groups or those concerned about their domestic organisation could create sophisticated political and governance structures at home simultaneously developing a network abroad (Huang 2016; Malejacq 2017). The international diplomatic activism signalled locals that rebel groups did not fight alone but had the help of external entities (Huang 2016). Rebel diplomacy and the group's political structures could therefore be seen as two protracted strategies during wartime that reciprocally reinforced their effects in the two arenas (Huang 2016).

1.2 How Did Rebel Groups Conduct Diplomacy?

Identifying different practices of rebels' diplomatic activism, what new forms of diplomacy could emerge, or how they could relate to the state-based diplomacy, are critical questions towards a deeper comprehension of rebels' international commitment.

Focusing more on the organising structure rebels set up at the international level, Huang (2016) observed that diplomacy was conducted by a rebel group when it (1) opened office(s) abroad; (2) sent delegations on political missions; or (3) established political bodies to handle international relations. Besides being much the same ways states behaved, these acts were employed during an armed conflict against the state and intended to illustrate rebels' commitment to handling international affairs (Huang 2016). A closer look at offices abroad revealed the presence of departments that carried out activities under diverse names and had a twofold goal: on one hand, they aimed at extending the rebel organisation through gathering supporters and setting up external networks; on the other, they collected funds, organised training and purchased weaponry (Huang 2016). These diplomatic corps spread rebels' ideology, interacted with media, and provided their constituency abroad with some services such as legal assistance (Coggins 2015). Evidence suggests rebel organisations could set up foreign offices and visit high-level representatives without any

official invitations from the host state (Huang 2016). Rebels' offices abroad could benefit from the "official status" in countries considered "friendly" and/or simply enlist their offices as cultural centres, lobbying organisations or quasi-think tanks (Huang 2016: 107). Sometimes, thus, the practice of rebel diplomacy took place via unofficial paths (Huang 2016). Often, it seemed the result of years of diplomatic relations with rebels' old acquaintances and/or their sympathisers (Huang 2016). This indicates that rebels could engage in diplomacy well-before embassies and other foreign actors signalled their intention to support the group in an 'official' way (Huang 2016).

Moving away from the organisational approach, there were a plethora of practices and processes that could be adopted by rebels. Here, the relationship-building was a crucial component in their conduct of foreign affairs. Research suggests rebels extensively interacted with their diasporas (Huang 2016; Mampilly 2011). It was not unusual that members of the diaspora coordinated rebels' offices, operated as professional lobbyist within their adopted states and hosted representatives (Mampilly 2011). Because of their experiences and background, diaspora members were better qualified to comprehend the significance of human rights and the international perception of an internal war (Mampilly 2011). They were more able to mould the group's image abroad (Mampilly 2011). This is to say that rebels accurately and strategically chose entities they relied on. The attractiveness of diasporas mainly lay on connections they established in their adopted countries: these were used by, and thus allowed, rebels to build up relationships with the diasporas' host states (Mampilly 2011). Linkages to the rebels' command and control wing and connections garnered in the adopted countries ensured diasporas to perform non-military tasks within rebel groups (Mampilly 2011). One of the most considerable activities was the establishment of humanitarian organisations by diasporas through funds they collected within their community abroad (Mampilly 2011).

More broadly, the relationship-building process resulted in linking rebels to external or internal forces, to what Mampilly (2011: 83) called "transboundary formations". The connection amongst these forces occurred via discourses, third-party networks and structures (Mampilly 2011). These forces did not simply include foreign entities acting abroad, but also international actors operating in rebel-controlled territories such as INGOs and IGOs (Coggins 2015; Mampilly 2011). In their efforts to build relations with these representatives of the international community, rebels adopted various strategies (Mampilly 2011). Most concretely, rebels positioned themselves between the NGO and the citizens with the intent to manage the relation for their personal benefit (Mampilly 2011). They could put their linkage liaisons in the NGO to have a direct control over the activities and resources of the organisation itself (Mampilly 2011). Even though they did not directly provide

locals with food and medical aid, rebel groups usually obtained people's support and popularity on the ground (Mampilly 2011). Only in some cases, rebels directly established their own NGOs, that were often used to gather information or divert resources to their military wing (Coggins 2015; Mampilly 2011).

As the nature of the international organisation varied, so did rebels' diplomatic contacts with it. Although many IGOs did not allow rebels to either become members or participate in the organisations' normal activities, some exceptions have been observed. When non-state actors diplomatically interacted with some international agencies – the UN included –, it was often through *ad hoc* bodies such as Civil Society Organisations or Working Groups (Coggins 2015). With other agencies, instead, rebel groups were allowed to directly give testimony, finalise deals concerning truce and peacekeepers, or authorise the passage of aid convoys (Coggins 2015). The partnerships and cooperation with IGOs and NGOs could prove very important. It could serve to show rebels' genuine concern for civilians in warzones, but also represent a nonverbal sign to other transnational actors of rebels' capability to be involved in non-violent interactions (Coggins 2015; Mampilly 2011).

1.2.1 Strategic Communications and News Management

Based on the targeted audience, rebel groups found diverse ways to communicate. They combined indirect and one-sided communications with direct personal contacts and linkages to local and transnational organisations (Coggins 2015). In their attempt to gain public attention and reach out to external entities, rebel organisations *did* engage in strategic communications. Particularly, their strategic talks were about not only making claims but also creating the circumstances where these claims could be underscored and found a wide consensus (Schlichte & Schneckener 2015). This is why, rebel organisations tried to read the climate at the international level and then adapt their discourses to it (Coggins 2015). In this process, rebels made "strategic move(s)" that aimed at shaping foreign perceptions and influencing thoughts and values (Jones & Mattiacci 2017: 740). They spread their own narrative of the war by publicising events and arguments carefully chosen (Jones & Mattiacci 2017). Despite the fact that rebel claims could not be readily confirmed, that information could still have a significant impact on third parties (Jones & Mattiacci 2017). As local disputes could not be captivating, rebels could build up their appeals to external actors by making various, however effective, claims (Kaplan 2016). In some contexts, they could claim to fight notorious enemies such as imperialism and communism (Kaplan 2016); in others, they could insist on foreign occupations or ecological concerns while targeting indigenous groups or diasporas (Bob

2005). Often, rebels made extensive usage of religious identities and affiliations in their speeches by drawing on Jewish, Christian, Islamic or Hindu themes to secure support, and consolidate their rule amongst audiences fighting the same cause but in diverse contexts (Bob 2005; Kaplan 2016). Strategic communications were thus intended to build up, at times strengthen, linkages with the targeted community or actor by also proving the rebels' alignment with the third entity's strategic interests (Kaplan 2016).

Relying upon images and videos brings to the surface the management of the news. It was a rather common tactic to disseminate rebels' messages, and handle foreign policy (Bos & Melissen 2019). Rebels could manage the information via diverse means such as newspapers, websites, emails, TV channels and radio stations frequently broadcasting from neighbouring countries (Coggins 2015). As rebel groups might combine diverse techniques and approaches within their arsenal, new technological tools have become increasingly present in their news management since the mind-2000s. The usage of social media was one of them, showing a clear attempt at rebel diplomacy through the Internet (Coggins 2015). Social media platforms and their user-friendliness have revolutionised the way and speed through which a piece of information was spread. The rebels' employment of the internet and instantaneous communication platforms could largely fit in what has been theorised as public diplomacy. It was "an instrument to offer international audiences [rebels'] narrative of the conflict", in this case through the online activism (Jones & Mattiacci 2017: 739). Jones & Mattiacci (2017) contended that the usage of social media could attract external support and reach foreign audiences when (1) the messages stressed crimes committed by the state and (2) clearly indicated the type of social order rebels wanted to establish. Social media was thus a tool enhancing rebels' ability to frame the conflict, their identity and on-the-ground activities (Bos & Melissen 2019). Public diplomacy, thus, fit in rebel multifaceted attempts to portray themselves as a reliable alternative to the internationally recognised governments (Coggins 2015).

Further, the establishment of social and non-social media campaigns could help rebel groups raise public awareness. They invested much energy in supporting name recognition amongst the foreign public essentially through two diverse practices (Bob 2005). The first was lobbying activities to target possible partners by engaging in relationship-building, as illustrated above (Bos & Melissen 2019). The second involved other means of news management, namely intermediaries like the press (Bob 2005). However, relying only upon journalists could be uncertain as they could promote a side or perspective of the story potentially damaging to the group's image and narrative (Bob 2005). To overcome this issue, rebels established their own media campaigns where they spread their ideas and publicised important political events including international rallies (Bob

2005). Sometimes, wealthier groups enjoyed the help of public relations firms hired to manage their non-domestic contacts (Bob 2005); other times, they trained spokespersons that were an integral part of the group's core leadership (Bob 2005).

Summarising, rebel groups widely benefited from the international arena and, diplomacy seems to be a tool to seek and garner these benefits. Rebels seeking external support and those vying to control a state or a part of it were more likely to conduct their foreign affairs. For the purpose of this project, Huang's organisational indicators alongside relationship-building, strategic communications and news management will be taken from the theory and applied throughout the investigation.

Chapter Two

Research Design

The thesis combines a conceptual analysis of rebel diplomacy with an empirical analysis of how the Houthis and Hezbollah's international engagement emerged and was then conducted. The project begins as an empirical puzzle where the mimicking and adoption of state-like features by the Houthis and Hezbollah is used as starting point for the development of a general framework to comprehend what actions were taken by them in the international arena.

The present chapter details the research methods which will be applied for analysing rebel diplomacy. It begins by situating the investigation in the main concept used; next, it goes on describing the overall research design, the case selection process, and data collection. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations of the study.

2.1 Methodology

The primary concept employed in the thesis is rebel diplomacy. The present project is inspired by, and thus adopted, Huang's (2016) definition of rebel diplomacy. The approach taken is considerably strict: it focuses on the comprehension of 'how' question [*how did the Houthis (2015-2022) and Hezbollah (1982-2022) actively engage in rebel diplomacy?*] instead of 'why' question. The qualitative approach has been chosen to analyse the phenomenon of rebel diplomacy in the concrete. The research will be inductive and will thus go from particular claims to general conclusions trying to find plausible answers in a situation characterised by a lack of research. The thesis will test theoretical claims discussed in the sections 1.2 and 1.2.1 and will focus on empirical evidence of practices. Certainly, the theory guided the entire process and was used, as it will be illustrated below, to identify some variables. However, although the theoretical framework was built independently, the empirical cases allowed to 'adjust' and expand the theory enriching it with new aspects and contexts which have never been investigated with this focus.

The analysis of the Houthis and Hezbollah's diplomacy is framed by the method of "structured focused case comparisons" systematised by Alexander George (1979: 67-68). Making less restrictive assumptions, this method was defined as the usage "of a well-defined set of theoretical questions or propositions to structure an empirical inquiry on a particular analytically defined aspect of a set of events" (Levy 2008: 2). The comparative cases give not only a chance for expanding the general knowledge of such phenomenon, but also insights into the 'how' this phenomenon might generate different outcomes, in this case the attempts to purse political goals

(Bennett 2004). Because of that, the methodology used does not set specific conditions/circumstances under which rebel diplomacy was conducted, but rather embraces a broad-minded approach.

By applying the method of structured focused case comparisons, the answers to the sub-questions of the present study will be found through proceeding on multiple levels of analysis at the same time. The choice of such a combination is justified by the fact that little attention has been paid to rebels' diplomatic activism in the MENA region. The comparative analysis will therefore take into account narratives and practices adopted by rebels while borrowing other variables from some scholars. The thesis draws on the variables set by Huang (2016) in her work on rebel diplomacy. The project will, therefore, test organisational indicators – identified by Huang – demonstrating rebels' conduct of foreign affairs, which were: (1) the opening of office(s) abroad; (2) the creation of political bodies; and, (3) the visit of delegations in foreign capitals for political purposes.

The aforementioned organisational approach will be then combined with three other variables. Firstly, unpacking Huang's (2016) definition of rebel diplomacy emerges that the conceptualisation of this phenomenon was based on the rebels' relations with the outside actors. Thus, the relationship-building process will be set as variable. The investigation will consequently test those ties established between the two groups and foreign entities: first and foremost diaspora members, IGOs, NGOs, religious centres, and other powerful entities abroad.

Secondly, relying on Coggins' (2015) definition of rebel diplomacy, the participation in strategic communications will be employed as a variable. It means that the investigation will look at how they communicated with foreign entities in the concrete; and, how they promoted their agenda throughout their discourses – which elements they included in the act of talking (Coggins 2015).

Thirdly, being intrinsically linked to strategic talks, news management has been set as another indicator of the Houthis and Hezbollah's diplomacy. Here, the attention will be drawn to the pure handling of the news: particularly, to how they spread messages to entities and people living outside their controlled-areas (Bos & Melissen 2019).

To sum up, relationship-building, strategic communications and news management alongside the organisational approach adopted in the international arena have been set as variables which might have accounted for the pursuit of diplomacy. This suggests that any combination or diverse shades of the aforementioned acts might provide an answer to the 'how' question, thus illustrating ways through which the Houthis and Hezbollah behaved abroad. It will thereby allow for distinguishing what constitutes rebel diplomacy and what does *not*. These indicators will make
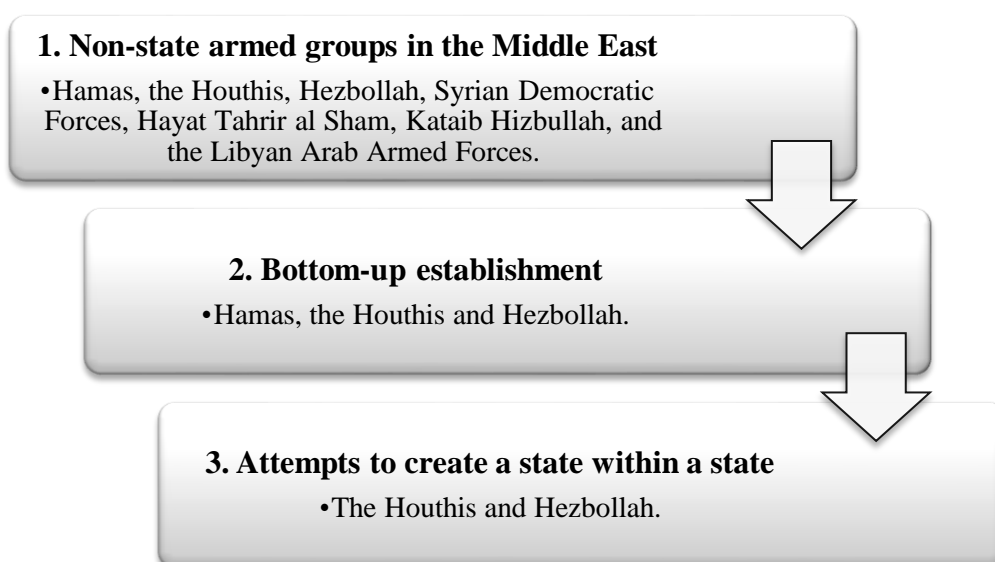
possible to highlight differences and similarities in their *modus operandi* – at the international level – answering the questions and generating additional potential knowledge capable of enriching the theory.

2.1.1 Case Selection

Even though they came out from rather different national contexts, the Houthi movement and Hezbollah became paradigmatic cases regarding rebel diplomacy. These two groups have never been compared in a structured way for their conduct of foreign affairs: always seen through the analytical lens of Iranian proxy actors in the MENA region (Nagi 2019), the Houthis and Hezbollah were often addressed as single case studies. Their complexity, exacerbated by the breakout of the civil war in Yemen and Hezbollah's official participation in the Lebanese Parliament, has often discouraged a comparative analysis. However, as will be illustrated below, their comparison is feasible and rather insightful.

The case selection for the present thesis has been partially inspired by a project led by the European Council on Foreign Relations (Barnes-Dacey *et al.* 2020) on non-state armed groups in the Middle East and then carried out through the scope conditions criteria.

Figure 1 Case Selection Process

1. **Non-state armed groups in the Middle East**
   - Hamas, the Houthis, Hezbollah, Syrian Democratic Forces, Hayat Tahrir al Sham, Kataib Hizbullah, and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces.

2. **Bottom-up establishment**
   - Hamas, the Houthis and Hezbollah.

3. **Attempts to create a state within a state**
   - The Houthis and Hezbollah.

The first scope condition is strictly dependent on the author's area of interest and requires that the non-state armed actors have to be situated in the Middle Eastern region. The second scope requirement is about how these groups were established and requires that they did not originate from the re-organisation of pre-existing groups. Not only did the Houthis and Hezbollah emerge in

a bottom-up way, but they also originated as resistance movements that perceived the oppression by neighbouring states (Ardemagni 2023). They enjoyed encouragements from and had connections with one of the most prominent actors in the MENA region, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran. This state had influenced, though not completely, a wide spectrum of their ideological and political ideas and their internal organisational structure (Barnes-Dacey *et al.* 2020). The final scope condition is the attempt to constitute a state within a state. They did not simply aspire to act as powerful non-state players within the existing structures, but they rather challenged state's monopoly on violence by portraying themselves as sources of governance (Barnes-Dacey *et al.* 2020). The war (the 1975-1989 Lebanese civil war and the Yemeni civil war broke out in 2014) appears to be a crucial moment for the organisations as it enabled them to wield their political power outside their countries (Ardemagni 2023). In the Houthis and Hezbollah' attempts of coping or adopting state-like features, diplomacy was part of the puzzle. Indeed, diplomatic activism is supposed to internationally represent interests of the quasi-state they established and it is thus a component of a large discussion about the governance itself. The Houthis and Hezbollah increasingly performed state-like actions in which diplomacy, or the attempt to the mimicking of state-diplomacy, was a relevant part.

2.2 Data Collection

This section deals with data sources. The collection was qualitative: varying in length, form and type, the written materials were mainly found through internet searches: while some were publicly accessible through Google Scholar, others were chosen by extensively using the Leiden University Catalogue database.

In addition to the academic literature discussed in the Chapter One, policy-orientated papers produced by analysts and academics will be widely employed. These two types of written materials will be then integrated with newspaper articles in English by a few knowledgeably journalists that tried to explain the Houthis and Hezbollah's transnational bounds to a wider audience.

2.3 Limitations

Prior to analysing the Houthis and Hezbollah's practice of rebel diplomacy, it is crucial to briefly clarify the limitations of the study and the timeframes selected.

Focusing on large-scale actions, the work does not include interactions with other non-state groups emerged locally in both Yemen and Lebanon. It is intended to shed light on *how* the Houthis and Hezbollah behaved at the international and regional levels. However, it should be noticed that

the investigation on rebel diplomats and foreign states' behaviour "neither reveals the full extent of rebel groups' diplomatic activism nor is theoretically necessary for explaining why some groups conduct diplomacy and others do not" (Huang 2016: 107). Therein, the present project certainly has some limitations which impede a complete response to the main research question.

Firstly, the Arabic language is the main barrier of this investigation. The basic knowledge of Arabic will not allow the author to access the work of some Middle Eastern researchers and other Arabic-speaking scholars. It will also limit the comprehension of statements in Arabic released by the two organisations themselves.

Secondly, the lack of fieldwork, where interviews could be collected and observations took place, represents another problematic aspect. It limits an extensive understanding of how the groups communicated and diplomatically engaged with foreign entities.

Two timeframes have been taken into account. Regarding the Houthi movement, the thesis will draw attention to those events occurred from the Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015 to 2022; whereas the timeframe selected to investigate Hezbollah's diplomacy ranges from 1982 to 2022.

Chapter Three

Case Studies

3.1 Rebel Governance in Yemen and Lebanon

In Yemen and Lebanon, the breakout of internal wars did not just undermine the existing political order, it also played a crucial part in moulding and creating it (Péclard 2015). During the conflict, the Houthis gained control over vast areas of the North in Yemen, whereas Hezbollah spread its influence throughout the South in Lebanon. They began performing acts of governing in the orders they created; they put into practice their "micro-politics", or what has recently been called as "rebel governance" (Péclard 2015: 6). Amongst the different definitions of rebel governance, that of Mampilly (2011) is well suited for the purpose of this thesis because of its emphasis on a combination of factors. He (2011: 4) defined it as a "governance system [which] referred not only to the structures that provided certain goods but also to the practices of rule insurgents adopted". This becomes apparent in the Houthis and Hezbollah's pockets of territorial control. The Houthi movement developed its governance system by first seizing control of the existing state apparatus and then setting up new bodies once it was powerful enough (Al-Deen 2022). Through introducing the supervisor system, they took control over local councils and ran day-to-day affairs such as health, education, water and electricity supply and even waste collection (Al-Mahdaij 2016). In parallel, they gained the ability to launch development projects, and introduce the electronic currency in the wake of a liquidity crisis (Al-Mahdaij 2016).

Hezbollah also went beyond security and taxation in Lebanon. Its social services allowed for providing support to civilians wounded in Israeli attacks, offering scholarships and study materials to children and establishing charity organisations (Flanigan & Abdel-Samad 2009). Yet, the movement lent locals money to launch new initiatives and helped improve under-developed areas (Flanigan & Abdel-Samad 2009). Hezbollah not only regulated social and economic life, but its actions even had political ramifications concerning their relations with civilians (Flanigan & Abdel-Samad 2009). These acts produced a sense of belonging to a community and contributed to establishing a mutual dependence between the organisation and the ruled population: while locals relied on Hezbollah for the provision of welfare services, the organisation itself earned loyalty and resources from civilians including intelligence and shelters (Cammett 2014).

Being a complicated project, the Houthis and Hezbollah engaged in governance only when they reached an extensive level of capacities. Indeed, the act of extensively governing implies various complementary elements within the movement itself: a clear system of command and

control, functional differentiation amongst internal wings and important organisational capabilities (Huang & Sullivan 2020). The Houthis and Hezbollah exerted their governance not just from the bottom – the territories they controlled – and the inside – the organisation itself. They played it out also from the above, which was the international arena (Péclard 2015). Here, the pursuit of diplomacy was amongst the most sophisticated expressions of rebel governance (Huang & Sullivan 2020).

3.2 The Houthis

3.2.1 Background

The Houthi movement emerged in the northern governorate of Sa'ada in the 1990s under the leadership of the al-Houthi family – who adhered to the Zaydi sect of Shi'a Islam (Ardemagni 2017). Seeking an end to the economic and political marginalisation of the north-eastern regions, the Houthis' tensions against the regime grew in six rounds of fighting from 2004 and 2009 allowing them to increase local support (Ardemagni 2017). After having joined the 2011 Arab Spring protests, they entered the national political scene by participating in the 2013 National Dialogue Conference (NDC), aimed at discussing the future structure of the Yemeni State (Clausen 2016). At that time, the Houthis had not yet developed their form of rebel diplomacy; nonetheless, their involvement in the NDC occurred at pivotal time as it enabled them to make first contact with Western diplomats involved in the process (Nagi 2019). In fact, one of the main actors was the UN that provided diplomatic, logistical and technical help through a team of experts (OSESGY 2014). Being committed to portraying themselves as a political actor, the Houthis further emphasised the political agenda by renaming themselves *Ansar Allah* (Partisans of God) (Nagi 2019). While participating in the NDC, the movement continued its military competition inching closer to the capital that was captured in mid-September 2014 (Clausen 2016). After the request of the then-legitimate Yemeni President, a Saudi-led coalition began its military intervention in the country on March 26, 2015 (Clausen 2016).

Since then, the Houthis have developed a functional differentiation within the group itself led by Abd al-Malik al-Houthi. The movement consisted of two different networks. The first was the kinship network: the religious scholar Badr al-Din al-Houthi had four marriages and 13 sons who linked him to diverse tribes across the Sa'ada governorate creating "the first incubator" of the movement (Knights *et al.* 2022: 2). The second network comprised those loyal to the Houthi family during the six rounds of fighting, establishing the Houthis' current ruling circle (Knights *et al.* 2022). Upon these two networks, the Houthis built the General and Jihadist Councils. While the

former dealt with non-military matters and consisted of five departments, the latter was the core organisational entity of the Houthis and handled military and strategic affairs (Knights *et al.* 2022).

3.2.2 The Houthis' Diplomacy: Organisational Approach and Relationship-Building

This sub-section will discuss first the organisational approach and then the relationship-building process in the Houthi case-study; being related to the 'how', these aspects will help answer part of the main research question [*how did the Houthis (2015-2022) and Hezbollah (1982-2022) actively engage in rebel diplomacy?*]. From the outset, the Houthis developed their form of diplomacy aimed at advancing their political agenda at the international stage. Here, they adopted a well-structured organisation: first, the movement officially appointed 'ambassadors' to Syria and Iran in March 2016 and August 2019 respectively (Zimmerman 2022). Second, they created a political body devoted to the management of foreign affairs, namely the External Relations Office that was under the General Council (al-Gabarni 2022). Third, the group sent representatives abroad: before the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, the Houthis had multiple meetings with the Iranian government in 2015; months later, the Houthi representatives met the Iraqi Vice President al-Maliki; then, a Houthi delegation visited Hezbollah officials in Beirut in October 2015, April 2016, and August 2018 (Zimmerman 2022). In addition to these meetings, Houthi delegations were hosted by Iraqi Shiites and the Assad regime in 2018 and 2021 respectively (Zimmerman 2022). Some visits took also place beyond the Middle Eastern region as the one in Beijing in 2016 (Memo 2016).

In parallel to the organisational approach, Ansar Allah engaged in the relationship-building process with various external entities. Its key diplomatic relation was with Iran: it was the first State to officially recognise the Houthi government in Yemen and establish formal diplomatic relations, which were then finalised with the appointment of the Iranian ambassador to Yemen (Zimmarman 2022). While the majority of international diplomats abandoned the country after having burnt documents in their compounds, Hassan Irlu, an IRGC Quds Force official, was named ambassador to Sana'a in October 2020 (Zimmerman 2022). Further, Iran helped the Houthis establish contacts with some Shia militias across the Middle East such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haw (Zimmerman 2022). The relationship-building process with these forces followed the military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and occurred through regular meetings in Iraq, where the Houthis also knew Shi'a religious figures (Zimmerman 2022). Not only did this diplomatic network voice support for the Houthis on the regional level, it also opened the door to military aid on the ground (Zimmerman 2022). Additionally, instead of maintaining diplomatic channels with Yemen's internationally recognised government, Syria established relations with the

Houthis (Zimmerman 2022). To maintain and reinvigorate diplomatic contacts, Ansar Allah oftentimes planned events in its embassy in Damascus and Tehran: in May 2021, for instance, the ambassador to Syria hosted 'Yemen's Unity Day' with members of Iranian-backed militias (Zimmerman 2022).

As part of their relationship-building efforts, the Houthis interacted with international organisations that were present in their territories (Lackner & al-Hamdani 2020a). Being the home of "the world's worst humanitarian crisis", Yemen and, primarily, the Houthi-held lands hosted various NGOs and international agencies (Lackner & al-Hamdani 2020a: 3). They engaged with the NGOs by putting their personnel or trusted persons into the organisations, a strategy enabling to control which segment of the population received medical aid and goods (Human Rights Watch 2020). Most of interactions with IGOs and NGOs occurred through the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (SCMCHA) set up in 2019. The Houthis used the SCMCHA to interfere in programme preparation and to select humanitarian actors that could undertake aid work in their controlled areas (Human Rights Watch 2020). The SCMCHA had indirect contacts with Human Rights Watch: evidence suggests that an exchange of letters concerning allegations for the manipulations of aid occurred in July and August 2020 (Human Rights Watch 2020).

3.2.3 Strategic Communications and News Management

The Houthis put into practice a variety of ways to strategically communicate. Here, the participation in international conferences was rather common in the Houthis' approach. They attended the 'International Conference on Supporting the Oppressed and Resistant Yemenis' organised by Iran, where they directly communicated with several members of the civil society and intellectuals (Mehr 2018). The promotion of their narrative on the Yemeni conflict continued in the late November 2020 when some Houthi representatives took part in 'the 32th International Islamic Unity Conference' (Zimmerman 2022). Being framed into the Islamic countries brotherhood, the conference created the circumstances in which the Houthis' claims against Western countries could be highlighted (The Iran Project 2020). On several occasions, the Houthis adopted anti-Semitic slogans to make appeal to a wider segment of audiences in the MENA region (Zimmerman 2022). They also hosted media and press conferences to identify a strategy against Israel, and organised fundraising campaigns for the Palestinians and Hezbollah hit by the US financial sanctions in 2019 (Zimmerman 2022).

More formally, they took part in peace talks. Although the UN did not recognise Ansar Allah as the legitimate government of Yemen, it allowed the movement to participate in the peace process as a partner in the negotiations (Lackner & al-Hamdani 2020b). On December 13, 2018, the Houthis negotiated and then signed the Stockholm Agreement, the UN-brokered accord consisting of three main components (Jalal 2020). Among them, the prisoner exchange was also the only component of the agreement to have been successfully implemented (Jalal 2020). Despite having missed the deadline, Ansar Allah released around 300 Saudi prisoners between September and December 2019 (Jalal 2020). On the side-lines of the Stockholm negotiation, the Houthis benefited from their diplomatic ties with Iran. Although the lack of progress to date, Iran tried to internationally represent the movement's interests and, occasionally, make the Houthis engage in talks with European diplomats (Zimmerman 2020). Muscat was the major centre for peace talks between the Houthis and the international envoys, since the Sultanate of Oman played an active role as a mediator in the Yemeni conflict (Lackner & al-Hamdani 2020b). Essentially, the movement was reliant on the Sultanate as it was the only GCC state that gave them a safe place to talk to the outside world (Lackner & al-Hamdani 2020b). The Stockholm agreement was not the only accord negotiated and signed by the Houthis in the UN framework. The movement attempted to demonstrate its concerns for children's protection by signing an Action Plan with the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict on April 18, 2022, that aimed at preventing the employment of children during the conflict (UN 2022). The Action Plan appeared to be consistent with the National Vision (2019), the official document aimed at laying out plans for the future of Yemen. Here, the movement made clear its intention to pursue diplomacy by adopting the language of good governance and establishing relations with Western diplomats (National Vision 2019).

Besides direct and face-to-face encounters, Ansar Allah engaged in news management. Early in the war, the movement captured the Yemeni state TV channel, '.ye' domain and YemenNet, which was a local internet service provider through which filtering contents (Muggah 2022). The Houthis acted within the Ministry of Information and through key individuals, namely Abdul Salam (Al-Tamimi 2022). Alongside the director of Saba News, Abdul Salam created contents for attracting foreign attention and disseminating disinformation and messages that could bypass bot detection (Al-Tamimi 2022). Ansar Allah managed these contents in different and amusing ways: from radio stations, cartoons and documentaries to social media platforms and poems adapted into music videos (Porter 2021).

The Houthis also handled the news via al-Masirah, its official media outlet, that broadcasted from Beirut's Southern suburbs with the technical training of Hezbollah (Zimmerman 2022). The

Houthi-Hezbollah connection reverberated in al-Masirah's programming: first, it broadcasted al-Ghaliboun, a series on the foundation of Hezbollah during the Lebanese war in 1982 (Zimmerman 2022); second, it frequently worked in coordination with Hezbollah's official TV outlet: al-Masirah and al-Manar, for example, launched an extensive documentary on atrocities committed by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (Al-Manar 2021).

Acknowledging the role the media had in shaping their image externally, the Houthis' goal was controlling the global narrative. By almost having the monopoly over the communication industry (Porter 2021), the international community received a distorted image of the Yemeni conflict (Porter 2021). The Houthi-side attempted to dehumanised the opponents, instigated regional antagonism and highlighted Saudi-led coalition's atrocities (Muggah 2022). In the past three years, the movement allocated resource to the social media sector, mainly on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (Muggah 2022). This investment fit into the picture of better promoting the Houthis' narrative on (also) international affairs: evidence suggested an increase in "inflammatory speeches" pointing at Jews and others religious faiths on social media (Muggah 2022). Besides giving relevance to their fundraising campaigns, these platforms were also exploited to demonstrate solidarity towards members of their network (Zimmerman 2022).

When examining the Houthis' practice of diplomacy, it has been observed that they invested much energy in sending representatives abroad, visiting foreign capitals and establishing an external relations department. The interaction with the UN and NGOs, the participations in conferences and the relation with Iran and its backed Shi'a militias were very obvious traits in Ansar Allah's conduct of foreign affairs. While a 'close' relationship with journalists was less evident in their international activism, the investigation suggests that the Houthis tended to mostly manage the news on their social media platforms and TV channel.

3.3 Hezbollah

3.3.1 Background

Hezbollah (Party of God) emerged in 1982 in the context of Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Since its foundation, Hezbollah was "many things" (Levitt 2013: 8). It was a group whose inception was linked to the marginalisation of the Shiite Muslims caused by, first, the sectarian-power sharing system and, then, the arrival of (Sunni) Palestinian refugees in the country (Calculli 2020). It rose in response to Israel's invasion of South Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982 aiming at dismantling the Palestine Liberation Organisation (Calculli 2020). During this time, Hezbollah received the first funds and training from Iran that saw the group as an opportunity to increase its leverage in Arab

countries (Levitt 2013). Soon, Hezbollah's military wing revealed itself to be a significant asset to Iran because of the attacks, suicide bombers and kidnappings carried out against foreign targets in Lebanon and, a few years later, abroad (Levitt 2013).

Only on February 16, 1985, the Party of God officially defined its identity in an open manifesto. Billing itself as a Shiite resistance group, Hezbollah called for the creation of an Islamic Republic while emphasising the right to self-determination to all Lebanese communities (Calculli 2020). It further committed to the destruction of the Israeli State and the expulsion of all colonialist entities (Levitt 2013). The open letter and attacks abroad made instantly clear how the international dimension was relevant for Hezbollah. On these pledges, its involvement in the Lebanese politics began. After having won eight seats in the parliament in 1992, Hezbollah took part in municipalities electoral competitions that allowed for consolidating its power in the South and the eastern Bekaa Valley region (Robinson 2022). From this point on, the group has been a regular actor in the Lebanese politics marking its first presence in the cabinet in 2005 (Robinson 2022).

Hezbollah relied on an efficient organisational and hierarchical system. The secretary-general was Hassan Nasrallah who also oversaw the Shura Council and its five bodies, which were political, executive, military and parliamentary councils and the judicial assembly (Levitt 2013). Being composed of seven elected members, this Council was the decision-making apparatus of Hezbollah, also responsible to coordinate activities amongst the sub-councils (Levitt 2013).

3.3.2 Hezbollah's Diplomacy: Organisational Approach and Relationship-Building

Since 1982, Hezbollah has developed its own diplomacy based on a well-established international network. That was made possible thanks to a distinct organisational structure. First, Hezbollah stationed self-styled ambassadors to various countries in Africa, mainly Gambia, Costa d'Ivoire, Senegal and Sierra Leone (Levitt 2016). Second, the group maintained a public presence in the international arena via the Foreign Relations Department (FRD) (Levitt 2016). Not only did the Department deal with delegations and supporters abroad, it also performed fundraising, recruiting and logistical activities (Levitt 2016). Being led by Ali Damush, the FRD reported to the Political Council and organised events amongst Shiite communities around the world (Levitt 2016). In addition to establishing the FRD, Hezbollah opened some offices in Africa and Latin America: some of them operated as foundations and cultural centres like the ones in the Ivory Coast and Brazil, others were registered as real estate agencies as in Syria (Daher 2023; Levitt 2016). Third, the Party of God sent a wide range of representatives abroad: delegations visited different European countries, including Italy, Switzerland and Germany after the 9/11 attack (Levitt 2016). Hezbollah

delegation flew to Tindouf to meet the Polisario Front in 2016 and then two years later in Algiers, where the visit was facilitated by Iranian diplomats (Kasraoui 2021). More recently, in 2021 Hezbollah was received by Foreign Minister Lavrov in Moscow (Daher 2023). Besides the Houthis, other foreign representatives were hosted in Beirut as occurred with Russian Foreign Ministry officials in the late '90s and then in 2002 (Nizameddin 2008). Further, an Iranian delegation visited high-ranking officials of the group in 2017 to discuss their regional commitments (Majidyar 2017).

Concurrently, Hezbollah's engagement in building relationships on the global scale was unprecedented. Here, it mainly relied upon diasporas (Levitt 2013). The first contact between the Party of God and the Lebanese diasporas in West and Central Africa were back to the civil war in Lebanon, when diasporas tempted to fund militias in their homeland (Levitt 2013). Through diaspora communities, especially in Sierra Leone and Senegal, Hezbollah gained the access to a wider network and managed to establish diplomatic relations with heads of state and decision-makers (Levitt 203). Members of diaspora had, in fact, significant political connections in the host states: the more they grew in number, the more they became politicised, particularly after the influx of Shiite Muslims (Levitt 2013). One of the most remarkable activities in which Shi'a diasporas were involved in was the fundraising campaigns that generated thousands of dollars for Hezbollah (Levitt 2013). Besides promoting cohesion amongst its members, Lebanese expatriates used money to rise their international appeal by stressing Lebanese identity or insisting on their religious beliefs (Levitt 2013).

Beyond Shi'a expatriates, Hezbollah had ties with some Christian and Sunni communities abroad. The organisation established public diplomatic relations with the Lebanese Christians of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) (Rabah 2019). The FPM-Hezbollah alliance managed to reach people through lobbying activities enabling them access to various Lebanese embassies across the globe (Rabah 2019). These offices became important since they served as headquarters for the FPM's efforts to recruit Lebanese Christians and make them vote for the parliamentary elections (Rabah 2019). Establishing public contacts with the Sunni Extremists in Sudan was an important propaganda success for the Party of God (Levitt 2013). This was particularly true after the creation of a direct diplomatic channel with the Sudanese government that publicly contributed to echoing typical Hezbollah mantras and mottos (Levitt 2013). Promptly, the Sudanese State became "a safe haven and meeting place" for the organisation that gradually opened various offices (Levitt 2013: 270).

Certainly, Hezbollah' diplomatic network would not have been so extensive if it had not been facilitated by Iran. Since its official establishment in 1985, Hezbollah has received diplomatic

support from Iran, that proved to be Hezbollah's biggest funding source outside of diasporas (Levitt 2013). However, this relationship was not only about regular meetings between their representatives (Zimmerman 2022). Indeed, it consisted of a formal alliance, known as the Axis of Resistance, and the access to the Iranian overseas network (Zimmerman 2022). Firstly, the Axis identified and pursued its political interests in the international scene through also non-violent means (Wastnidge & Mabon 2023). Some of them included deploying diplomatic personnel and/or professing ideological and religious beliefs that were based on "shared ideational heritage" and mutual "security concerns" (Wastnidge & Mabon 2023: 2, 7). Secondly, Iran helped Hezbollah build contacts with state and non-state entities in Latin America (Levitt 2013). Iran opened up cultural hubs in Bolivia, Nicaragua and Mexico that served as espionage network for Hezbollah operatives; while other centres organised activities to spread principles of Islamic Revolutions as the ones in Peru and Brazil (Levitt 2016).

More formally, the Lebanese diaspora and Iranian linkages boosted Hezbollah's ability to connect with some Latin America governments. The relationship-building process with the Venezuelan State began in 2007 when Hezbollah leader met then-Foreign Minister Maduro and then-Vice Minister of Finance (Neumann 2020). The development of this relation made Venezuela stand out as a country providing Hezbollah with a political shelter and enduring diplomatic ties (Neumann 2020). For instance, a Venezuela diplomat and the president of the Shiite Islamic Centre in Caracas cooperated to raise money for the Party and facilitate travels to and from the country (Neumann 2020). Despite that, travels and other logistics were mainly handled by Piloto Turismo (Levitt 2013). Being in the position to acquire residency documents and false passports, this travel agency was the primary point of contact between diplomats and delegations who sought to access the tri-border region between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay (Levitt 2013). Thus, not only did Hezbollah have travel agencies in charge of organising trips for FDR operatives and foreign delegations, but it also had a person of trust, Assad Ahmad Barak, who took care of individuals once in the tri-border area and maintained unity amongst Hezbollah supporters in these countries (Levitt 2013).

NGOs played an important role in Hezbollah's diplomatic activism. The Party of God managed to harness NGOs operating within its controlled territories as a tactic to take credit for assistance and services supplied by external entities (Flanigan & Abdel-Samad 2009). In parallel, the group dedicated its resources to set up various humanitarian organisations that were famous to eagerly cooperate with foreign entities (Flanigan & Abdel-Samad 2009).

3.3.3 Strategic Communications and News Management

The party of God made significant efforts in presenting itself as a mediator at the regional level. In Iraq, it tried to bridge the gap between the former Prime Minister al-Maliki and local Shiite actors close to Iran (Daher 2023). In his attempts to diffuse tensions and reconcile relations, Nasrallah secretly met the leader of the Iraqi Sadrist moment, Moqtada al-Sadr, in Beirut (Daher 2023). The Party of God also mediated an agreement with some African States on behalf of Sunni Islamist groups in Somalia (Levitt 2013), or encouraged the (re)establishment of relations between the Syrian government and the Palestinian Islamist movements controlling the Gaza Strip (Daher 2023). In this framework, the organisation played an equally important role in Qalamoun region by cooperating with the Assad regime and negotiating with rebel factions to draw Syrian refugees back to this area (Dubin 2017). Further, the organisation publicly welcomed the re-opening of diplomatic channels between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and engaged in official negotiations, mediated by the UN, for the release of soldiers held by Israel (Abu-nasr 2006).

On a more informal side, the Party of God regularly praised the Houthis and other Axis-affiliated militias for their regional efforts, strengthening the political value of the Axis itself (Zimmerman 2022). It, moreover, organised a conference for Saudi opponents in January 2022, which represented a valuable opportunity to make claims against the regional *status quo* and creating the right environment to disseminate the Islamic ideology and principles (Mroue 2022). Non-verbal communications were also used by Hezbollah as a tool of powerful diplomacy. Indeed, it invested resources in forms of cultural production such as the Mleeta museum and the Iranian Garden located on the Palestinian-Lebanese border (Wastnidge & Mabon 2023). The first told the story of the resistance, had tri-lingual websites and guides and was visited by around two million people, where Western tourists accounted for 25% of the total; the second was run in coordination with Iran's cultural diplomatic arm and included symbols of the Palestinian cause and Iranian revolutionaries (Wastnidge & Mabon 2023). Both sites were regularly use by the Party, Palestinian refugees and local artists to host events and exhibitions (Wastnidge & Mabon 2023).

Beyond direct communications, the organisation made considerable efforts in managing the information on multiple levels. It set up the Information Unit which handled external communications and the relations with the press, including interview and meeting requests (Daher 2019). Hezbollah attempted to establish a 'close' and inclusive relationship with some domestic and foreign journalists. As part of its tactic to spread its messages and attract more media attention, the Party arranged activities with journalists such as tours of the Palestinian-Lebanese borders to show them territories occupied by Israel, or signs of battles against Syrian fighters affiliated to al-Qaeda

in 2017 (Los Angeles Times 2017). The Media Activities unit dealt with the organisation of events and the production of propaganda contexts and graphics which were then used in Hezbollah's traditional and more modern means of communication – TV channels, radio stations, newspapers, websites and social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter (Daher 2019). Further, one of Hezbollah's websites hosted the 'Supporters of the Truth from Yemen forum' used by the Houthi movement to post propaganda materials and operational updates (Zimmerman 2022).

To address a wider segment of individuals, the group mainly relied upon al-Ahed newspaper and al-Manar TV operating in Arabic, English, French and Spanish (Daher 2019). Not only did Al-Manar station correspondents in diverse geographic areas, it also had an important presence in Latin America (Esteban 2022). Here, Hezbollah strengthened al-Manar activities by opening another TV channel, al-Mayadeen, that broadcasted entirely in Spanish (Esteban 2022). The group structured its communication with the overseas audiences beyond the religious aspect: at times, it emphasised the hostility against common enemies such as the United States and Israel, at others it highlighted the opposition to colonialism and neoliberalism (Esteban 2022).

Fundamental was the image and video management strategy. It was a "permanent campaign" consisting of Palestinian references and threats against Israel (Khatib 2012: 9). Images and videos showing symbolic events and daily activities aimed at portraying Hezbollah as an inclusive organisation across the world: for instance, an emblematic attempt of self-representation was the re-adaptation of Nasrallah's speeches and famous poems in clips (Clarke 2017; el-Houri 2012). As part of the management strategy, the Party of God made available these audio-visual elements – mainly military operations and incursions – on CDVs or DVDs, and later used them in computer-games and documentaries to get closer to children and teenagers (Clarke 2017; el-Houri 2012).

In short, Hezbollah put great effort into the organisational system at the international level where the opening of offices abroad was a distinct trait of its diplomacy. The engagement with Lebanese diasporas, the creation of its own NGOs and the usage of video-clips were further contributing factors to the 'how'. While forms of cultural diplomatic activities were a key characteristic of Hezbollah's strategic communications, the findings suggest that the participation in conferences was, instead, a less visible way to pursue foreign affairs.

Chapter Four

Analysis

4.1 Analogies

4.1.1 Organisational and Relationship-Building Indicators

The aim of this section is to identify similar strategies and approaches to diplomacy adopted by the Houthis and Hezbollah. The analysis suggests that some patterns of rebel diplomacy were not limited to the time in which they were implemented. Rather, they were common ways to develop rebels' standing in the international arena. This was indeed the case of organisational variables/indicators. While Hezbollah began putting them into practice in the late '80s, the Houthis adopted the same organisational variables from the 2015 onwards. Both groups behaved as states and statesmen did: they stationed official or self-styled ambassadors abroad, visited capitals and sent delegations to foreign states. Here, despite having had diverse purposes and outcomes, both went beyond the MENA region. While the Houthis flew to Beijing to meet Chinese officials in 2016, Hezbollah representatives met Russian officials and various delegations of Latin American and European governments. Interestingly, the investigation demonstrated how external relations departments were crucial in pursuing diplomacy, although little academic attention has been paid to the usefulness of these departments for the practice itself. For instance, not only did Hezbollah's FRD personnel handle travels and other logistics making possible delegations' visits, but it also maintained contacts with sympathisers abroad. Similarly, the Houthi external relations office was responsible for having contacts with foreign entities and international organisations. These departments, thus, appear to be as important as legal political bodies or overseas offices in conducting foreign affairs and showing sensitivity to the global political environment.

The organisational patterns adopted at the international level were only one way to conduct foreign affairs. The Houthis and Hezbollah's diplomatic efforts were mostly about unofficial contacts, also known as Track II diplomacy (Coggins 2015), that included dialogues and relationship-building based on mutual and direct interactions. Here, the diplomatic relationship with Iran was of fundamental importance. In both cases, this relation was about and beyond the official meetings; it allowed the groups to have the access to a wider transnational network made up of Iranian-backed militias in the MENA region. Similar diplomatic behaviours could indeed be seen with these militias: particularly, the Houthis and the Party of God reached out to them directly, engaged in lobbying activities and interacted with prominent Shi'a figures. From the beginning, both groups were interested in garnering outside rhetorical political support; here, the relationship

with these militias served that purpose as it effectively voiced the Houthis and Hezbollah's narratives by stressing common religious and ideological beliefs.

Another interesting point is the diplomatic interactions the Houthis and Hezbollah had with the NGOs operating in their controlled territories. Speaking of potential domestic implications of this phenomenon, Coggins (2015: 115) argues that international "diplomacy had important effects on rebel governance". In the Houthi and Hezbollah cases, the provision of services was the underlying logic of the relationship between rebel governance and rebel diplomacy. In the Yemeni and Lebanese complex scenarios, humanitarian organisations were often the only representatives of the international community (Flanigan & Abdel-Samad 2009). Both the Houthis and Hezbollah diplomatically engaged with NGOs by mainly implementing two strategies. Here, what has been theorised by Huang (2016), Coggins (2015) and Mampilly (2011) found full applicability. First, the engagement occurred through their personnel or prominent loyalists who were appointed into the NGOs to oversee and control the organisations' activities; second, they managed to build a quasi-monopoly over certain territories to the extent that organisations seeking to undertake aid services had to obtain the groups' approval. Essentially, the relationships with humanitarian organisations helped both organisations take credit at home for services that foreigners supplied. In short, the Houthis and Hezbollah's capacity to reach out to humanitarian actors impacted popular support and shaped the likelihood of legitimacy. The interaction with NGOs, then, responded to the wider aim of improving their reputation internationally by showing genuine concerns for civilians affected by decades of conflict (Coggins 2015). In parallel, these contacts were beneficial in terms of intelligence and information gathering, which could be important to the attainment of the groups' political goals and strategic interests (Coggins 2015).

4.1.2 Strategic Communications and News Management Indicators

Being at the core of the concept of diplomacy, the act of communicating was central in the Houthis and Hezbollah's pursuit of foreign affairs. They implemented a variety of communication ways, while at times borrowing practices from the state-based diplomacy. Oftentimes, the participation in political rallies accounted for the 'how'. The Houthis more than Hezbollah engaged in strategic communications by attending and/or hosting numerous regional conferences. Besides giving them the opportunity to interact with third-party entities and maintain ties, the conferences created the right platform where the Houthis and Hezbollah's discourses could largely be accepted. Being an act of "persuasion", diplomacy – here in the form of effective talks – relied on "issue-framing and marketing strategies" (Kaplan 2016: 378). An emblematic aspect was indeed the flexibility they

showed in aligning themselves with many diverse actors and topics. Specifically, the Houthis demonstrated to have a significant understanding of the foreign arena as they were capable of reading their audiences and adapting their speeches accordingly. Ansar Allah insisted on religious beliefs when participating in Islamic conferences; adopted a language made up of anti-Western sentiments when hosting rallies on resistant Yemenis; or used constant references to the Palestinian cause while attending conferences that gave them wider resonance in the MENA region (Zimmerman 2022). Both groups appeared to increasingly mock state-based features of diplomacy: while Hezbollah expressed its public appreciation for the restoration of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Daher 2023), the Houthis announced their support to the Russia's declaration of the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk (Memo 2022).

Zooming in on more traditional forms of talks, the most obvious observation is about the UN-mediated negotiations. As Coggins (2015: 114) noted, rebel groups can be allowed to take part in negotiation concerning "[…] peacekeepers and humanitarian issues". In both cases, the UN diplomatic contacts took the form of mediation. The Houthis and Hezbollah did participate in rounds of talks to negotiate prisoner exchanges. Besides the UN, they had diplomatic engagement with other representatives of the international community such as humanitarian organisations and states, namely Saudi Arabia and Israel respectively. Being a confidence-building measure, prisoner swaps proved very important. On one side, the accord only emphasised Hezbollah's status as a non-state actor operating at the global level (Shiryaev 2008). Even though the Party of God was part of the Lebanese Parliament when it negotiated the agreement in 2007, it acted – or continued acting – independently from the government (Shiryaev 2008). On the other side, the Houthi movement's participation in UN-mediated talks provided it with the legitimacy the internationally recognised government denied it (Lackner & al-Hamdani 2020b). These talks, moreover, gave the movement a platform to make its demands known on a global scale (Lackner & al-Hamdani 2020b).

The case-studies of the Houthis and Hezbollah illustrated that diplomacy is no longer limited to direct and mutual contacts. Both groups, in fact, became diplomatically active through engaging in social media campaigns or, more broadly, through the Internet and broadcasts. The investigation showed some similarities in how they managed the news. The Houthis and Hezbollah established well-structured apparatus to communicate with external audiences and invested considerable economic and human resources in making these facilities run. Being thus aware that a part of their international standing played out in managing the information, these investments indirectly strengthened their efforts at conducting online diplomacy. Yet, they handled the information by combining traditional means of communication with more innovative and contemporary ones. One

of the most significant attempts at connecting with foreign audiences was the establishment of their own media outlets. While the Houthis' official TV, al-Masirah, had an English-language channel, Hezbollah TV al-Manar broadcasted in four different languages. Further, Ansar Allah and Hezbollah launched their Twitter pages where they posted cultural, political and military contents often addressing foreign affairs. Not only did their narratives make clear what outside actors they wanted to reach out to, but they also demonstrated how rebels' agenda was connected to online communicative practices.

In short, the Houthis and Hezbollah adopted similar organisational patterns at the international level where the external relations departments proved to be a distinct, however often overlooked, trait of their diplomacy. Besides interacting with NGOs active in their held areas, the two groups' relationship-building process mostly revolved around meetings and unofficial contacts with Iran and its network of Shi'a militias across the Middle East. The Houthis and Hezbollah similarly conducted foreign affairs by also participating in regional conferences and mediating prisoner swaps with the UN. The establishment of their TV channels and, more recently, the usage of social media stood out as significant evidence of their analogous efforts in news management.

4.2 Differences

4.2.1 Organisational and Relationship-Building Indicators

The following paragraph singles out dissimilarities in the Houthis and Hezbollah's diplomatic activism. Oftentimes, in fact, the groups articulated the practice of diplomacy quite differently. It is worth noting that while both of them sent representatives in foreign capitals and had self-style ambassadors, only Hezbollah opened up *new* offices abroad.[1] Here, the Party of God put into practice what Huang (2016) theoretically formulated. Hezbollah easily registered abroad its offices as Islamic centres, cultural hubs and even real estate agencies. In neither cases, Hezbollah necessitated formal invitations from the foreign host states: its diplomatic activism, in this instance the openings of offices, occurred through unofficial pathways. Often, these openings were facilitated by personal network of supporters or friendly relations with some states, first and foremost Venezuela or Sudan. Other times, instead, the Party set up offices by benefiting from Iranian diplomatic relations with countries such as Bolivia, Chile or Peru. Despite employing almost the same set of strategies, the Houthis and Hezbollah adopted two diverse tactics to reinvigorate and maintain diplomatic contacts. On the Houthi side, a central role was played by

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[1] More accurately, even though the Houthis did not set up new offices abroad, two existing diplomatic buildings did shift to the Houthi control, namely the Yemeni embassy in Syria and Iran (Zimmerman 2021).

Yemeni embassy in Damascus and Tehran that provided space for hosting events. Additionally, by 2017 Ansar Allah switched from delegations to specific persons, mainly to the figure of the spokesman Mohammed Abdul Salam (Zimmerman 2022). The shift might presumably have helped the movement centralise and better manage contacts with external entities. On the other side, Hezbollah relied upon regular meetings with persons of trust operating in the area or state in question. For instance, the complexity of the Latin American scenario and its geographical distance made frequent reports a necessity.

There were also considerable differences between the Houthis and Hezbollah's engagement in relationship-building. The two groups differed in the way they interacted with the NGOs operating within their controlled areas. The Houthis created a new body, the SCMCHA, to communicate and maintain ties with the NGOs. In a short amount of time, the SCMCHA became the primary point of contact between Ansar Allah and humanitarian aid groups. Instead, no evidence suggests that Hezbollah set up new bodies or offices in charge of interacting with NGOs. Rarely, rebels conducted foreign affairs by establishing their own NGOs (Coggins 2015). And, therein is the second dissimilarity between the two groups. While, at the time of the publication, the Houthis have not dedicated their resources to setting up NGOs, the Party of God legally registered some non-governmental humanitarian organisations in Lebanon (Flanigan & Abdel-Samad 2009). The creation of Hezbollah's NGOs was a way to legally cooperate and cultivate positive relations with other external entities. As the theory suggests, the interaction with other NGOs alongside the establishment of its own organisations further allowed for internationally showcasing Hezbollah's capacity to provide aid and public goods.

Arguably, the most significant difference between the Houthis and Hezbollah's diplomacy lies in the way through which they interacted with the outside world. While the former found in the NGOs the primary tool to engage with the international community (Lackner & al-Hamdani 2020a),[2] the latter mostly relied on the Lebanese diasporas. As Coggins (2015) described, the support of people living outside their home state was as critical as the domestic support. Diplomatically engaging with foreign diasporas was perhaps one the most crucial tools at Hezbollah's disposal. It was a plausible strategy when the group was willing to spread its ideology and Islamic Revolution principles abroad, and when it aimed at building relations with foreign decision-makers, mainly in Venezuela and Sudan. It is apparent that Hezbollah exploited foreign diasporas to achieve short-term and instrumental purposes: Lebanese-Africans and Lebanese-Latin

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[2] In part because of the humanitarian crisis attracting several organisations in Yemen (Lackner & al-Hamdani 2020a).

Americans were often wealthier and politically and economically well-integrated in their host societies (Levitt 2013). The group, in fact, successfully cultivated relations with these communities to the extent that they became its main source of funding (Levitt 2013).

Another obvious observation is that the organisations diverged over the origin of the diplomatic ties with Iran. In the Houthis case, the relation with the Islamic Republic started well before of the making of 'official' contacts. It was "the culmination of years of diplomatic groundwork" where members of the Houthi family flew to Qom, in Iran (Huang 2016: 106). In their attempt to study Shi'a Islam, they met prominent religious figures and expanded their very personal network of contacts (Juneau 2016). The Hezbollah-Iran relation, by contrast, could not be seen as the result of an old acquaintance. From the outset, which almost matched Hezbollah's diplomatic activism, Iran was a central pillar in the group's formation and activities at home and abroad (Levitt 2013). Thus, the diplomatic relationship resulted from the Hezbollah-Iranian abilities to build effective ties and cooperation in multiple fronts.

4.2.2 Strategic Communications and News Management Indicators

The Houthis and Hezbollah adopted some, however different, state-based diplomatic behaviours while engaging in strategic talks. Being much the same way states or other international stakeholders behaved, the Party of God presented itself as a mediator in multiple scenarios. It played an essential role in appeasing relations amongst Iran-affiliated militias in Iraq; between the Assad regime and Islamist movements in Syria; and then again, in Somalia where it mediated an agreement on behalf of Sunni Islamist groups. If Hezbollah pursued diplomacy by also positioning itself as a broker for peace in disputes or conflicts, the Houthis, in contrast, represented their interests in more official diplomatic platforms. The Action Plan signed with the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict accounted for the 'how'. It represented a clear tempt to "market" itself in the global arena by demonstrating its compliance with the IHL, and copying state-based practices linked to "the good citizenship" (Bob 2005; Huang 2016: 101). It was, further, consistent with the National Vision (2019) where the movement clearly stated its intention to embrace the language of good governance.

One of the most interesting differences between the two groups could be represented by forms of non-verbal communications. Despite being often relegated to the margins of the academic literature on rebel diplomacy, forms of cultural productions were a significant channel of communication with the outside world. If such forms were absent in the Ansar Allah's diplomatic

conduct, they were a distinct trait in the Hezbollah one. The opening of the Mleeta museum and Iranian Garden was a way to exert diplomacy by being daily present in the society via cultural diplomatic initiatives: the host of artistic events and arts exhibitions promoted Hezbollah's historical heritage and Islamic religious beliefs to thousands of non-Lebanese tourists every year (Wastnidge & Mabon 2023). Both could be seen as strategy to expand Hezbollah's diplomatic reach and deepen ties with Shi'a communities outside Lebanon.

Oftentimes, the two groups implemented the same strategy with a great diversity. This was the case of the dissemination of the information. As Coggins (2015: 110) noted, the usage of private networks and media to promote rebels' beliefs might secure "the favour or neutrality of key constituencies". Hezbollah mostly, however not entirely, relied on the press. The Party along with its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, established close relationships with foreigners and Hezbollah-affiliated journalists. Tours of historical and battles sites were, in fact, intended to influence public opinion while better framing information for international audiences. The Houthis differed from Hezbollah in granting priority to designated speakers or other individuals. Being aware of the centrality of an effective propaganda, the Houthi spokesman, Mohammed Abdul Salam, preferred to bring together skilled media teams that accompanied delegations during diplomatic missions (Zimmerman 2022). Instead, in other occasions, the figure of Mohammed Abdal Salam was the main point of contact with both regional and international entities (Kinights *et al.* 2022).

Conclusion

The present thesis analysed the practice of rebel diplomacy in the case-studies of the Houthis and Hezbollah. This took several steps; from the development of a general theoretical framework to illustrate the functions of rebel diplomacy, over the investigation of *how* diplomacy was pursued internationally, to then get to the specific empirical cases in Yemen and Lebanon.

The focus adopted was considerably restricted as it aimed to understand the 'how' instead of the 'why'; the intent was, therefore, to identify ways in which the Houthis and Hezbollah conducted foreign affairs in practice. This has been done by answering the following sub-questions: how the two groups became internationally active; and, which were the similarities and differences between them. This last sub-question specifically helped comprehend what constituted rebel diplomacy, potentially allowing to 'adjust' or expand the theory. The comparison revolved around the four variables identified in the theory – organisational indicators, relationship-building, strategic communications and news management – that have been analysed in Chapter Four. Mostly because the insights offered by this investigation resist easy summary, the conclusion will illustrate what has emerged from the comparison and how it can enhance the knowledge of this under-studied phenomenon.

As Malejacq (2017) noticed, rebels could simultaneously exert their agency in both the internal and external arenas. While providing services in their controlled territories, the Houthis and Hezbollah engaged in another kind of governance, that is the foreign diplomacy. Comparing the two cases, the investigation showed that the two groups developed their international standing by employing a variety of *similar* strategies. They had the capacity to enter into relations, and build diplomatic ties, with foreign governments, IGOs, NGOs and other representatives of the international community, the UN included. Hezbollah, more than the Ansar Allah, proved to be quite adept at crossing borders and eventually setting up formal and informal support networks. The analysis showed that both appeared to strive for "representational trappings of state-based diplomacy" (Bos & Melissen 2019: 1333). Delegations of both sides visited countries in and beyond the MENA region for political missions; then, while Ansar Allah officially stationed ambassadors to Syria and Iran, the Party of God appointed self-styled ambassadors to Gambia, Senegal, Serra Leone and the Cote d'Ivoire.

Being at the core of the concept of diplomacy, the act of communicating was central in the Houthis and Hezbollah's pursuit of foreign affairs. As in the case of states, external diplomatic activism was a means by which the two groups communicated preferences to the outside (Huang

2016). Oftentimes, their engagement in rallies and conferences accounted for the 'how'. Here, they made claims and created the right environment where such claims could be accepted. For instance, they championed the Palestinian cause while participating in conferences that gave them a larger global appeal; or, activated symbols and context-specific ideas when attending gatherings on the Islamic Revolution. In their attempt to adopt state-like features, their diplomacy was also constituted by public statements made to support the Russian declaration of the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, in the Houthi case; or, to welcome the re-establishment of diplomatic contacts between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the Hezbollah case.

How Ansar Allah and the Party of God managed the news was another crucial way to handle foreign affairs. Radio stations, TV channels operating in multiple languages, video-clips, documentaries, cartoons, videogames and social media platforms were the main ways to frame the conflict, and motivate sympathisers across diverse geographical and temporal compositions (Jones & Mattiacci 2017). In this context, their diplomatic activism was an indicator of their expertise in the media, but also showed their knowledge of a key foreign language – particularly English, but also Spanish on the Hezbollah side.

Further, the investigation identified *differences* in the two groups' international engagement, contributing to answering the probably most interesting sub-question. The Party of God opened up new offices in diverse countries across Latin America and Africa; established and registered in Lebanon its own NGOs which contributed to securing international prestige; and even organised tours of historical sites with journalists establishing a closer relation with them. Most importantly, its diplomacy was mainly about building up relations with the Lebanese diasporas. Not only did the diasporas constitute its main point of contact with the outside world, but they also rapidly became its primary source of funds. Members of diasporas boosted Hezbollah's diplomatic opportunities allowing for reaching out to powerful decision-makers such as the Venezuelan and Sudanese heads of states. On the other hand, the Houthis' practice of diplomacy encompassed some tactics of a great diversity from those implemented by Hezbollah. Ansar Allah arranged events in the Yemeni embassy in Syria and Iran which proved to be an effective way to maintain diplomatic ties with actors located in these two countries; it set up the SCMCHA in charge of interacting with humanitarian organisations operating in Yemen; and, more formally, signed the Action Plan with the UN allowing for showcasing a genuine concern for the children's condition during wartime.

By bringing together multiple levels of analysis, the approach taken in this study enabled some contributions to the theory. There is a tendency in the rebel diplomacy literature to mainly focus on rebels' interactions with the stakeholders of the international community. Nonetheless, the

analysis illustrated that other features appeared to be equally significant ways to exert diplomacy. First, Mleeta museum and the Iranian Garden were forms of cultural diplomacy through which Hezbollah managed to be daily present in the Lebanese society (Wastnidge & Mabon 2023). These sites disseminated the narrative of resistance by drawing upon the idea of the Axis, in addition to attracting attention of a wide segment of outside tourists. Second, despite being often neglected to the margins of academic studies, the external relations departments within the two groups proved very important. They contributed to maintaining diplomatic ties with sympathisers abroad and were an indicator of organisational tact needed to carry out overseas missions. Hence, these empirical findings suggest that forms of cultural diplomacy and the existence of specific departments can be included in the repertoire of practices, rhetoric and gestures that allows rebels to become diplomats.

The key contribution of this study is, however, the extension of the notion of rebel diplomacy. Huang (2016) theorised this phenomenon as a wartime political practice. If this was exactly the case of Houthis, a different observation was made in the Hezbollah case that counters Huang's definition. Even though Hezbollah became diplomatically active during the Lebanese civil war, the group continued conducting its foreign affairs once the hostilities ended. This suggests that rebel diplomacy can be a frequent practice not only during the war, but also within periods of peace.

Empirically, diplomacy emerged as a complex non-linear phenomenon which involved numerous actors, relations and structures across the globe. Alongside a well-structured organisational approach, the Houthis and Hezbollah used strategic talks, built up diplomatic contacts and managed the information to engage *with* and *in* the global arena. By putting each into practice when it was thought to have the biggest effect, the two groups implemented this chain of actions to become diplomatically active. Above all, both the Houthi and Hezbollah case-studies showed that the engagement in diplomacy might be an integral, however unique, part of rebels' political agenda as well as a fluid process (also) enabled by the technological developments. Of course, the rebels' conduct of foreign affairs was not new, but it became a more sophisticated phenomenon during the last decades (Huang 2016). If the Houthis and Hezbollah's discourses and interactions with external audiences reflect their familiarisation with the international relations, the usage of social media is certainly a product of the last century. The two groups, thus, demonstrated great perceptivity to global developments to the extent that they adapted "their tactics accordingly" (Huang 2016: 125).

Among other things, the Houthis and Hezbollah's international activism illustrated a shift in economic and human resources from the battleground to diplomacy (Kaplan 2016). It emphases the significance of understanding how rebels evaluated this trade-off in allocating the resources they

have available. Being a fruitful field, further research is needed not only to better comprehend ways in which rebel diplomacy might affect the international arena, but also to have new insights into historical and current wars.

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