# Middle Power Dynamics in Conflict: Understanding the Motives Behind Turkish and Saudi Arabian Military Interventions in Neighboring Civil Wars

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# Middle Power Dynamics in Conflict

## Understanding the Motives Behind Turkish and Saudi Arabian Military Interventions in Neighboring Civil Wars

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Date of submission: 14/06/2024

Word Count:14517

# Table of Contents

# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AKP | Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - Justice and Development Party |
| AQAP | Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula |
| FSA | Free Syrian Army |
| GCC | Gulf Cooperation Council |
| HTS | Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham |
| MENA | Middle East and North Africa |
| NLF | National Front for Liberation |
| PKK | Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê -Kurdistan Workers' Party |
| PLC | Presidential Leadership Council |
| PYD | Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat- Democratic Union Party |
| ROYG | Republic of Yemen Government |
| SAA | Syrian Arab Army |
| SDF | Syrian Democratic forces |
| SNA | Syrian National Army |
| SNC | Syrian National Council |
| STC | Southern Transitional Council |
| TFSA | Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNSC | United Nations Security Council |
| US | the United States |
| USSR | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics- Soviet Union |
| YPG | Yekîneyên Parastina Gel- People's Protection Units |

# INTRODUCTION

Regionally, friendly politico-diplomatic relations are required, in order for peace and stability to be preserved between geographically neighboring and bordering states. Yet, the 2011 Arab Spring in the MENA region, a series of anti-government protests and a period of rebel group formation opposing their respective governments caused regional instability and chaos. Numerous civil wars erupted, such as in Syria and Yemen, of which some are still ongoing. This type of war, defined as 'a conflict between a government and a non-governmental party' (UCDP, no date), being the state and non-state actor respectively, is included in the broader category of intra-state wars. Intra-state war is fought 'between or among two or more groups within the internationally recognized territory of the state' (Sarkees *et al.*, 2003, p.59). On the one hand, the opposition movement consists of the insurgent or rebel group, i.e. an organized group of non-state actors, aiming to achieve political or economic objectives through the use of armed violence (Ameyaw-Brobbey, 2023, p.2). On the other hand, state actors consist of primarily internationally recognized governments, claiming sovereignty over their state territory.

At times, third-party states, when their neighboring country experiences a civil war, proceed to direct or indirect intervention by supporting one of the two sides, driven by their motives and interests. Initially, states use nonviolent policy tools including diplomacy and the impose of economic sanctions against the target states, as the most common instrument of indirect intervention (Peksen and Lounsbery, 2012a, p.349). Other forms of both direct and indirect intervention include the deployment of combat personnel to the civil war (Yoon, 1997, p.585), the provision of logistical aid (Woo, 2017, p.29), financial assistance, arms, materiel, external sanctuaries (safe havens) and training to rebels, or even moral support and encouragement (Byman *et al.*, 2001a).

Nevertheless, while considering other possible forms of external intervention, this academic paper only emphasizes to the form of direct military intervention by third-party states in a state at war. This form of intervention is categorized as 'hostile' (against the legitimate government or aiding rebels), 'friendly' (supporting the legitimate government or opposing rebels) or 'neutral' (Pearson, 1974a, p.435). However, 'neutral' interventions are excluded from this research, while such operations are part of the UN's Department of Peace Operations and are, in this case, irrelevant.

The concept of military intervention that is used for the purpose of this research question derives from the one proposed by the MIPS (Military Intervention by Powerful States) Codebook. In accordance with it, 'military intervention' refers to the use of armed force that involves the official deployment of at least 500 regular military personnel (ground, air, or naval) to attain immediate term political objectives through action against a foreign adversary.

• To qualify as a 'use of armed force', the military personnel deployed must either use force or be prepared to use force if they encounter resistance.

•The deployment of military advisors is considered a use of force only if the advisors actually engage in combat.

• To be 'official', the deployment of national troops must be authorized by a state's political leaders (Pearson and Baumann, 1993).

• The deployment must be intended to attain immediate-term political objectives through military action, or the imminent threat of military action, against another actor. Routine military movements and operations without a defined target like military training exercises, the routine forward deployment of military troops, non-combatant evacuation operations, and disaster relief should be excluded.

• Foreign adversaries can be either state or non-state actors like insurgent groups and terrorist organizations. A military operation that targets a state's own citizens and is conducted within a state's internationally-recognized borders should be excluded unless both citizenship and borders are in dispute by an armed independence movement in territory claimed as national homeland by a distinct ethnic group (Sullivan and Koch, 2018, p.3).

Since the beginning of Arab spring, a number of neighboring states and especially bordering ones, considered it necessary to act by intervening militarily. During this period of protests and conflicts in the Middle East, some middle power border states intervened in their neighbors' civil wars, including the Syrian civil war (Turkish military intervention) and Yemeni civil war (Saudi-led intervention). To specify, middle powers are the states which possess 'considerable resources and capabilities', but do not dominate the international scene (Wang and French, 2013a, p.985).

On the other hand, all the minor powers, being the countries that are ranked among the weakest in the global scene (in terms of economy and/ or low size of population) (Schweller, 2017, p.6), did not militarily intervene in their neighbors' conflicts. For instance, in the case of the Yemeni civil war, Oman, the second border state of Yemen, which is ranked as a minor power (see Mason, 2014), remained neutral in the conflict (Baabood and Baabood, 2020a). At the same time, Jordan, a country also ranked as a minor power in the global scene (see Ponížilová 2013), avoided to operate any direct military intervention to Syria, during the Syrian civil war. Thus, as the cases of civil war in Yemen and Syria illustrate, the involvement of states in their neighbors' civil wars in the Middle East, is mostly observed by middle power border states rather than that of minor powers. Consequently, this thesis' research question attempts to study how can we explain the decision of Middle East's middle powers to militarily intervene in their neighbors' civil wars, after the Arab Spring of 2011?

Following the explanation of the research puzzle, the structure is divided into five chapters. The first chapter consists of the literature review that focusses on the research of middle power studies, military intervention and the factors that motivate external actors to intervene in their neighbors' civil wars. The second chapter is devoted to the research methodology and the limitations of this study. Afterwards, the analysis focuses on the explanation of the Syrian civil war, the overview of the Turkish military intervention to Syria and the application of the five factors (discussed in the research methodology section) to the decision of Türkiye to militarily intervene. The subsequent chapter delves into the case of Yemeni civil war, focusing on the historical background of the case, the overview of the Saudi-led military intervention to Yemen and similar to the third chapter, the application of the five factors to the latter operation (sole focus on Saudi Arabia). The fifth chapter provides the findings of the third and fourth chapter respectively, and comparatively discusses the two cases based on this paper's research question. Lastly, in the conclusion, the results of this thesis are summarized, the contribution of the study to the academic field is demonstrated, while future topics for research are recommended for research.

# CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into three parts that look into middle power studies, external military intervention and the factors that motivate the latter action by third-party states. The first part of the review explains middle power theory and relevant academic material.  A variety of middle power states' concepts and characteristics are defined (see Riddell 1948; Holbraad 1984; Wood 1987; Chapnick 1999; Hurrell 2000; Ungerer 2007; Kim 2009; Wang and French 2013; Moeini *et al*. 2022). Followingly, the division between 'traditional' and 'emerging' middle powers is examined (see Jordaan 2003; Öniş and Kutlay 2017; Oosterveld and Torossian 2018; Aydin 2021), and then the term of 'regional' middle power is introduced (see Nolte 2010; Saouli 2021).

The second part examines the literature regarding external intervention. In the first place, the categorization of military intervention is explained ('hostile' and 'supportive') (see Redaelli, 2021), related to its regional impact (see Peksen and Lounsbery 2012). Consecutively, middle powers' preference of intervention type is stated (see Pearson 1974), as well as the main motives of interveners are analyzed (see Peksen and Lounsbery 2012).

As part of this research and based on the previous part's material, the rest of the literature review focusses on the factors motivating external states to intervene militarily in their neighbors' civil wars. Primarily, scholars in the field illustrate that third-party actors' intervention based on geographical proximity is driven by the emergence of geopolitical interests and security concerns (see Yoon 2005; Salehyan 2007; Huibregtse 2010; Kathman 2010; Kathman 2011). Furthermore, interstate rivalries and alliances (see Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski 2005; Salehyan *et al.* 2011; Maoz and San-Akca 2012), as also risks and opportunities (see Siverson and Starr 1991; Yoon 2005; Kathman 2010; Stojek and Chacha 2015; Findley and Marineau 2015; Bove *et al.* 2016; San-Akca *et al.* 2020; Adelaiye 2022) motivate external state actors to become involved in their neighbor's civil wars. Lastly, it is argued that co-ethnic (see Davis and Moore 1997; Huibregtse 2010; Nome 2013), and co-religious linkages (see Ives 2019) between third-party states and rebels positively impact the support of the former actor to the rebel group. All these consist of reasons and factors that motivate external states to intervene in other countries' civil wars. In the remainder of this section, these motivational factors are discussed and deeply explained in the order referred above, given that the analysis of middle power studies' literature is previously reviewed.

## 1.1. Middle power theory

The study of middle powers consists of a complex academic field, as the concept is constantly evolving due to the changing dynamics of international affairs over the centuries (Abbondanza, 2020, p.416). The term 'middle power' was introduced by Australia and Canada which rose in prominence by the end of WWII, in essence to improve their global diplomatic power (Shin, 2012). More specifically, the Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King primarily referred to the concept of 'Middlepowerhood' in 1944, arguing that states of this category should be cooperative with each other on the global stage (Holbraad, 1984a). Adam Chapnick (1999) divides middle powers into three perspectives: the functional, the behavioral and the hierarchical. The functional perspective refers to the ability of middle powers to be influential in the world politics. The behavioral perspective argues that middle powers act in a certain way in global affairs, such as the pursuit of multilateralism and interest in conflict management (contribution to peacekeeping operations). The third perspective, being the hierarchical, demonstrates that in international scene, states are distinguished by their capabilities, meaning that middle powers are grouped between great and minor.

 Academic scholars indicate that the extent of countries' GDP, military capabilities, population and size of the country (Riddell, 1948a; Wood, 1987a; Kim, 2009a), level of participation in international organizations (Kim, 2009b), and influence (Riddell, 1948b; Wood, 1987b), are elements that define middle powers. A common middle power behavior for the pursuit of foreign policy agenda is multilateralism and active participation in international organizations (Hurrell, 2000; Ungerer, 2007; Wang and French, 2013b). In contrast to these characteristics of middle powers, Jordaan (2017) rejects the argument that middle powers are defined by their size, power, international actions, niche diplomacy or national self-identification. According to Moeini *et al.* (2022) a middle power is described as a historical, cultural and civilizational state with active regional presence and superior economic and military capacity compared to their neighbors, whose agenda refrain from seeking domination at the international stage. In a similar manner, Holbraad (1984b) supports that middle power states tend to mostly focus on regional and local issues rather than global ones.

Moreover, not long ago, scholars started distinguishing between 'traditional' and 'emerging' middle powers. A common characteristic that defines both is their diplomatic behavior and pursuit

of foreign policy through multilateralism and cooperation with other states (Jordaan, 2003a). The main distinction between the two categories is that traditional middle powers are committed to today's liberal-democratic world order, unlike emerging middle powers which are not necessarily committed to it (Oosterveld and Torossian, 2018). Traditional middle powers, as wealthy and democratic states, do not aim to be regionally influential, but globally, in contrast with emerging middle powers which, as recent liberal states, tend to favor regional orientation (Jordaan, 2003b). Based on that, Öniş and Kutlay (2017) identify four conditions by which emerging middle powers can be active in the international scene. These conditions include: the ability of being role models using soft power resources; the effective building of coalitions with both traditional and emerging middle powers; the recognition of their extent of influence and understanding of their limits (in terms of capabilities); as well as the identification of regional and global areas in which they can uniquely contribute through niche diplomacy. However, this category's recent economic and democratic backsliding including trade protectionism and policies of anti-migration, caused the decrease of their tendency to use soft power and foreign policy activism, that leading to the detriment of the liberal international order (Aydin, 2021).

As part of this field, the concept of 'regional' middle power has been recently introduced. 'Regional' middle powers, according to Saouli (2021), consist of the countries that: are geographically positioned in a region whose role is significant; their focus remains mostly regional rather than international; they seek to build alliances and coalitions in the region; are active in regional affairs and able to affect or challenge great powers in their region. Along with that, these states need to: preserve leading-regional position which is recognized on the global scene; display material, organizational and ideological resources in the region; be extensively influential in regional affairs; be interconnected with the region in terms of economy, politics and culture; care for the collective good of their region; authorize the regional security agenda and be active in international organizations, representing not only domestic interests, but also regional (Nolte, 2010).

## 1.2. Third-party states intervention

As the literature proves, external states intervene either in favor of the government (supportive intervention) or the rebel group (hostile intervention) (Redaelli, 2021). By quantitively using time-series and cross-national data from 1951-2004, Peksen and Lounsberry (2012b) find that hostile

interventions are more likely to cause civil conflict onset in bordering nations, while on the other hand, supportive interventions lead to regional stability, as the likelihood for domestic unrest in neighboring countries is reduced. Regarding the previous argument, middle powers are more likely to militarily intervene supporting the opposition, being characterized as 'hostile' intervention (Pearson, 1974b).

Overall, states often decide to militarily intervene in other countries to achieve strategic goals including the support of a friendly regime, the strengthening of national security, the promotion of regional stability, the pursuit of economic interests and more recently, to protect civilians during a conflict, hence to operate within the context of humanitarian intervention (Peksen and Lounsbery, 2012c).

## **1.3. Factors that motivate external (military) intervention**

Factor 1-Geographical proximity:

One of the most important reasons why third parties intervene in their neighbors' civil wars are the geographical boundaries that create, at times, the threat of war contagion, not only to the neighboring countries, but to the broader region, as well. Equally important, geographical proximity encourages external actors to pursue regional and foreign policy interests. Byman *et al.* (2001b) show that in more than half of the 74 post-Cold war insurgency cases they used, external interveners and supporters were neighboring states.

To start, Yoon (2005a) demonstrates that shared borders between states constitute a significant variable that influences external actors' decision to intervene in their neighbor state's civil conflict. Third-party actors who share borders with neighboring states that experience civil war, intervene, in contrast with other geographically distant states, to prevent the diffusion of war inside their borders and in the broader region, as well as in response to the threat caused by the conflict (Kathman, 2010a). At the same time, while a civil war in a region might lead to the risk of war contagion and threatens the security of neighboring states, third-party intervention by border states is more likely because of the essence to protect regional and foreign policy interests (Kathman, 2011). Contradicting that argument, Regan (1998) explains that the more a country at war shares borders with other countries, the less likely it is to receive external intervention.

In addition, geographical proximity is a factor that especially influences external support to rebel groups (Huibregtse, 2010a). The provision of external sanctuaries to rebels for their protection and organization during a civil war consists of the most useful form of support that a neighboring state can assist the rebels with. This type of support, being an opportunity for rebels, encourages their mobilization (Salehyan, 2007). Concerning neighboring countries' security concerns and threat perception from the involved government in the intra-state conflict, external sanctuaries and in general, the support to insurgent groups attempts to reduce the target state's influence and power. The interests that motivate external actors to intervene in a conflict, may lead them into supporting rebels, in an attempt to decrease the target state's influence in the wider geopolitical area and international scene. Therefore, as the literature demonstrates, external state actors whose borders are adjacent to countries which experience civil war, act by intervening or by providing external sanctuaries to rebels, motivated to achieve regional interests, as also to reduce the threat caused by the conflict and prevent war diffusion.

<u>Factor 2-Interstate rivalries and alliances:</u>

At the same time, alliances of the intervened state and existing interstate rivalries influence third-party actors' decision to intervene in their border countries' civil conflicts. Salehyan *et al.* (2011) concludes that external support is more likely to be offered when interstate rivalries between the sponsoring and the targeting state exist and when the targeting state also receives support from other external actors. This argument proposes that the target states' alliances and their extent of support during a civil war, mobilizes external actors (rival to the target states), to support the rebels. Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski (2005) underline that interstate rivalries influence the decision of third-party states to become involved in other states' ongoing civil wars by supporting the rebel side. Similarly, when an ongoing civil war takes place in a country that has rival relations with a different state, the latter actor is more likely to intervene in the conflict and cooperate with the opposition (the non-state armed group), an act as a tool to weaken the enemy and a strategy for indirectly confronting the rival (Maoz and San-Akca, 2012). To sum up, the literature supports that rebels are more likely to receive help by third-party states interveners during a civil war when interstate rivalries exist, including hostile relations or contradicted interests between the targeting and the sponsoring state.

Factor 3-Risks and opportunities:

Another motivational factor for third-party actors' decision to intervene concerns risks and opportunities, including financial motives and resources. More particularly, economic and bilateral trade ties, natural resources and especially lootable by which financial income could be gained, influence the decision of third-party states to intervene in other countries' civil conflicts. In sub-Saharan Africa from 1989 to 2001, expected economic gains as a variable, mobilized third-party states to become involved in other countries' civil wars (Yoon, 2005b). According to Adelaiye (2022), high amounts of foreign investment in states at war are more probable to receive external third-party (diplomatic) intervention, aiming towards peaceful conflict resolution rather than one-sided victory. When a country that fights in a civil war has established trade and bilateral economic ties with a third-party state, the latter is more likely to intervene in the conflict, supporting the government (Stojek and Chacha, 2015a).

In contrast, natural resources as economic interest (Stojek and Chacha, 2015b), and especially lootable resources (Findley and Marineau, 2015), motivate third-party states towards pro-rebel intervention in civil wars. More specifically, the presence of fossil fuel in a country at war is a determinant to the third-party states' decision for intervention. According to the literature, external states are more likely to intervene when the nation engaged in conflict has large oil reserves, when the relative competition in the particular sector is limited and when the third-party state necessarily needs oil (Bove *et al.*, 2016). Natural gas, also motivates external actors to intervene in other countries' conflicts**.** San-Akca *et al.* (2020a) concludes that natural gas-rich states are more likely to intervene in other states' civil wars by supporting the rebel group, considering that the target state has to also be rich in natural gas. The decision of pro-rebel intervention is based on the competition logic of global markets and the external actor's necessity to secure access to resources and supply routes (San-Akca *et al.,* 2020b).

However, third-party states that consider intervening in a civil conflict must have both the opportunity and willingness to act in that way (Siverson and Starr, 1991). According to Kathman (2010b), motivations concerning third parties' desire of involvement in civil wars include opportunism or threat reduction. Thus, it is argued that third-party states are more likely to intervene in a resource rich country's civil war (pro-rebel intervention) when they have the opportunity and willingness to profit financially by accessing the natural, and especially lootable

resources of the state at war, or in cases of established trade and bilateral economic ties (pro-government intervention).

Factor 4-Co-ethnic linkages:

Co-ethnic linkages between a neighboring state and an opposition group that fights in a civil war, is according to the academic literature a pivotal aspect of external actors' decision to intervene, most of the cases towards pro-rebel support. Huibregtse (2010b) illustrates that ethnic groups located in the same geographical area are more likely to be assisted by other states' ethnically dominant kin. Furthermore, in ethnically diverse states dominated by a large ethnic group, intervention in a civil war is more likely compared to ethnically diverse states with no dominant ethnic group (Huibregtse, 2010c). Moreover, when external states, governed by an ethnic group, are tied with a marginal co-ethnic group that fights in a civil war, they are more likely to intervene, supporting their co-ethnics (Nome, 2013). That finding is an example of how the transnational ethnic ties influence third-party states' decision to intervene in other countries' civil wars. Not only that, but Davis and Moore (1997) support that ethnic affinity serves as a linkage of information exchange (e.g. immaterial support) and motivation for action towards conflict (e.g. external sanctuaries).

Overall, ethnicity matters, as co-ethnic linkages between third-party states and the rebel group that fights in a civil war operate firstly, as an opportunity for both actors to exchange information and secondly, as a motivation for the external state to act by providing rebels with external sanctuaries. However, pro-rebel support depends on the extent of third-party states' ethnic group domination domestically.

Factor 5- Co-religious linkages:

Another factor that impacts third party states' decision to intervene in their neighbors' civil wars are the co-religious ties. According to the literature, co-religious ties impact the decision of external actors towards pro-rebel intervention. In cases where external and target state's religion is different and when the external state is structured by high level of religious institutionalism, then the support to co-religious rebel groups is more likely (Ives, 2019a). However, Ives (2019b) demonstrates that co-religious links alone do not cause support, but their association with religious institutionalism does. What is more, religious organizations, being a type of external non-state

actors, are able to help and sustain rebel groups based on co-religious linkages (Byman *et al.*, 2001c). Still, this type of support cannot assist the rebel groups to the extent that diaspora and states do (Byman *et al.*, 2001d). All in all, religious ties between external state actors and rebels lead to higher chances of support from the former to the latter.

## 1.4. Concluding remarks from the literature review

To summarize, the literature review focused on middle power studies, external military intervention and the factors that encourage third-party states to militarily intervene in their neighbors' ongoing civil wars. Regarding the first field of research, middle powers are distinguished by the extent of their GDP, military capabilities, population and size of the country, level of participation to international organizations throughout the use of multilateralism, along with the degree of regional influence and superiority to their neighbors, in terms of economic and military capabilities. They are divided into 'traditional', states which abide by the liberal democratic world order and are globally oriented, and 'emerging', states that are not necessarily committed to the liberal democratic world order and their focus remains regional. In addition, 'regional' powers, as a concept that was recently introduced to the field of middle power studies, are the states which maintain regional leading position but are simultaneously active internationally.

External military intervention by third-party states is categorized into 'supportive', that being against the opposition, and 'hostile', that being against the government. The former category leads to regional stability, but the latter increases the chances of civil conflict onset in neighboring countries. Notably, middle powers are more likely to operate a 'hostile' intervention to pursue their national interests.

The factors that motivate external intervention by third-party states are: geographical proximity, interstate rivalries and alliances, risks and opportunities, and finally, co-ethnic and co-religious linkages. As for the geographical proximity, shared borders consist of a variable for intervention, in an essence to prevent war contagion and to protect regional interests. In contrast, it is argued that the more the borders a country at war has with other states, the less likely it is to receive external intervention. Moreover, geography's role for rebels is significant, as neighboring countries

can provide external sanctuaries to the former for protection, formation, organization and mobilization, and as an attempt to reduce the influence of target state.

Interstate rivalries between the external and target state, and the latter's alliances motivate pro-rebel support during a civil war, as an act to weaken their enemies (the target state). Risks and opportunities, including the pursuit of financial profit throughout lootable and natural resources, also consist of a factor that impacts external states' decision to intervene. In addition, trade and bilateral economic ties between the external and intervened state lead to pro-government support. However, natural resources and especially lootable, such as oil and natural gas, motivate external actors towards pro-rebel support. Finally, co-ethnic and co-religious ties are overall significant for external support towards rebels, the former type, serving as a linkage for information exchange and motivation for action during the conflict (e.g. provision of external sanctuaries).

# CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

## 2.1. Research Methodology

For the analysis of this thesis, theory testing with comparative design is applied, using the cases of the Syrian civil war (2011-) and Yemeni civil war (2014-). Both cases take place in the Middle East and are geographically surrounded by countries which, as middle powers and third-party states, intervened in the civil war of their neighbors. In the case of the Syrian civil war, the neighboring countries of Syria are Türkiye, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon and Jordan. The first country, being categorized in the global power rank status as middle power, proceeded to intervene militarily in Syria (Al-Hilu, 2021a). This categorization is justified through numerous academic sources that labelled as 'middle power', the state of Türkiye (see Öniş and Kutlay 2017; Oosterveld and Torossian 2018; Aydin 2021; Moeini *et al.* 2022), Israel (see Fürtig 2014; Schweller 2017) and Iraq (see Oosterveld and Torossian 2018). In this conflict, Jordan and Lebanon, two minor powers (see Hirst 2010; Ponížilová 2013), namely the states whose resources (diplomatic or material) are very limited (Krause and Singer, 2001, p.12), did not intervene militarily. While Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian civil war, was characterized as 'military operation' (Tokmajyan, 2014), it still does not meet the requirements of this thesis' definition for 'military intervention', derived from the MIPS Codebook. To specify, this intervention was neither 'official', nor the deployment of troops was authorized by the state (see Pearson and Baumann, 1993).

The second case concerns the ongoing Yemeni civil war (2014-). In this conflict, Saudi Arabia, a border country to Yemen and identified as a 'middle power' (see Fürtig 2014; Jordaan 2017; Miller and Cardaun 2020), led an operation of military intervention (Ruys and Ferro, 2016). Oman, a minor power border state lying east of Yemen (see Mason, 2014**)**, remained neutral (Baabood and Baabood, 2020b). The cases of the Syrian and Yemeni civil war demonstrate that on the one hand, from the four existing middle powers (Türkiye, Israel, Iraq, Saudi Arabia), half of them (Türkiye and Saudi Arabia) intervened militarily into their respective neighbors' civil wars. On the other hand, none of the three minor powers (Lebanon, Jordan, Oman) intervened militarily, according to the MIPS Codebook definition of 'military intervention'. Hence, the two cases indicate that it is more likely for middle powers to become involved militarily in their neighbors' civil wars.

The five factors that motivate third party intervention in other countries' civil wars, drawn from the literature (geographical proximity, interstate rivalries and alliances, risks and opportunities, co-ethnic and co-religious linkages), consist of the independent variables that impact the decision of third-party states to intervene militarily, that decision being the dependent variable. Based on this, the analysis will focus on examining whether the independent variables caused the dependent variable, meaning the military intervention of Türkiye and Saudi Arabia to Syria and Yemen, respectively. Therefore, by using theory testing with comparative design as research methodology, this thesis aims to explain the decision of Middle Eastern middle power states to militarily intervene in their neighbors' civil wars, after the Arab Spring of 2011.

## 2.2. Limitations of the study

As every research inherently harbors limitations, this one also does. Initially, this thesis acknowledges the presence of a language barrier that limits the accessibility to sources and material written in Arabic, as both Syrian and Yemeni civil wars take place in the Middle East, a region that this language is prevalent. Furthermore, the focus on these cases restricts the generalization of this paper's findings regarding middle powers and their relation to military intervention. Based on that, the results of this research might not be applicable to other regions, or even to other cases in the Middle East. Another important limitation of this study is that both the Syrian civil war and Yemeni civil war are still ongoing conflicts whose dynamics change constantly.

# CHAPTER 3: THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AND ANALYSIS OF THE TURKISH MILITARY INTERVENTION

## 3.1. The Syrian civil war (2011-)

The Syrian civil war is an ongoing conflict that erupted in Daraa, a south city of Syria. Influenced by the Arab Spring, some children living in this city drew graffiti on the walls against the oppressive rule of Bashar al-Assad, showing their dissatisfaction with the government and demanding immediate reform. This event spread all over the country and the immediate brutal response by the Assad regime caused the formation of opposition forces and the consequent beginning of the Syrian civil war.

What led to the initiation of the conflict was the illiberal rule of President Assad and poor living conditions that encouraged people to protest against the government, followed by Assad's oppressive response which transformed the country into an active conflict zone. Therefore, the main rival actors that participate in this conflict include: the Assad regime assisted by the SAA and intelligence services (Erlich and Chomsky, 2016a), fighting against the opposition, comprised of the FSA (Rabinovich and Valensi, 2021a, p.48) and the SNA, a Turkish proxy organization (Erlich and Chomsky, 2016b, p.162). In addition, other domestic non-state actors include: secular and Islamic non-jihadi groups united in the NLF, mostly fighting the Kurdish (Ford, 2019a, p. 8), jihadi groups such as the HTS (Ford, 2019b, p. 8), ISIS and lastly, the Syrian Kurdish YPG, part of the PYD (Rabinovich and Valensi, 2021b, p.62), the backbone of the US-backed SDF (Ford, 2019c, p.10).

These rival groups attracted the involvement of external actors that supported the side that their interests aligned with. The Assad dynasty is supported by Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and Iraq, while the opposition is supported by the US, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, fighting in parallel, the transnational jihadist organization ISIS. At the same time, Türkiye opposes the establishment of Kurdish autonomy adjacent to its border, hence the decision to militarily intervened was impacted by this event (further analysis below).

The Syrian civil war is divided into five phases: the 2011 anti-regime graffiti event that resulted in protests and extreme armed response by Assad, the outbreak of armed conflict in 2012 and the loss

of territory for the government in 2013, the rise of ISIS in 2014 and the US military intervention to defeat ISIS, the Russian military intervention during 2015-16 to support the Assad regime, and lastly, the government's territorial recovery from the opposition forces and regain of its control almost all over Syria by 2016 (Yacoubian, 2021). By 2019, the country is split into three different zones: the first covering most of the country and being under the control of the Assad regime, backed by Iran and Russia, the second in the eastern part of Syria being controlled by the US-backed Kurdish-Arab forces and the third in the northwestern part of Syria, being occupied by Turkish and opposition forces, as a result of the Turkish military intervention (Ford, 2019d).

Thus, some of the main events of the conflict are the coalition efforts to defeat ISIS, clashes between the Assad regime and the opposition forces, as well as the military intervention of Türkiye against Syrian Kurds (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). This complexity of rival actors fighting, being not only domestic, but also regional and international, as well as the war against ISIS, all prolonged the conflict (Rabinovich and Valensi, 2021c, p.21). By 2020, the Syrian civil war has been less intense and clashes are less frequent since 2018, however Bashar al-Assad regained his power, ISIS still operates in limited parts of Syria, with the largest resistance and opposition to be present in the Idlib Governorate, northwest of the country (Kerr, 2020a, p. xxi). Currently, Assad controls approximately 70% of the country and Türkiye possess some parts of the north and northeast of Syria, aiming to defeat US-backed Kurdish militias (Ma'oz, 2023a, pp.101-102).

**3.2. The Turkish military intervention in Syria**

The previous section explained the Syrian civil war including the main causes, rival actors and timeline of the conflict. Based on that explanation, and to examine the research question of this paper focusing on the main reasons why middle power states intervene in their neighbors' civil wars, the role of Türkiye, of a middle power and Syria's neighboring country is analyzed below. The analysis applies the five motivational factors indicated to the literature relevant to the decision of Türkiye to intervene militarily in the Syrian civil war. Before getting into that, Türkiye's approach toward the conflict and more specifically, overview of the Turkish military intervention in Syria is provided.

Dating back to 2002, when AKP, the party of Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan took power, the country aimed to establish a 'zero problem with neighbors' policy and maintain friendly relations with countries like Syria to preserve regional stability (Aslam, 2019, p.1). This peaceful diplomatic relation between Türkiye and Syria that has been improving since 2002, immediately changed when the latter country rejected the Turkish plan for political reform proposed to Assad in 2011 (Van and Yüksel, 2018a). Thus, in the early stages of the Syrian civil war, Türkiye indirectly supported the FSA, the armed opposition that was mostly depended on this country (Yüksel, 2020a, p.141). However, the Turkish plan of solely supporting the FSA failed, as this organization fragmented (succeeded by SNA), ISIS emerged by establishing a Caliphate, Russians militarily backed the Assad regime, and lastly, the PYD managed to control three autonomous administrations in Syria, adjacent to the Turkish border (Yüksel, 2020b, p.139).

These events, and especially the last one, motivated Türkiye to intervene militarily in the conflict. More specifically, Türkiye conducted 'Operation Euphrates Shield', as a necessity to protect its borders from ISIS and the Kurdish militia YPG (military wing of PYD), based on Article 51 of the UN Charter concerning the right of self-defense (Ülgen and Kasapoglu, 2017). In this military operation, a mixture of both FSA and Turkish forces were employed, achieving to control a 100-kilometer strip of the frontier, west of an SDF-controlled area up to the east of Kurdish-controlled Afrin enclave (Hale, 2019, p.30). Significantly, the number of FSA fighters employed in the battle zone reached 7,500 and the number of Turkish forces' soldiers reached 4,000 (Erkmen, 2022, p.45). Therefore, as part of the operation, the coordinated FSA and Turkish forces fought against ISIS and PYG (Yüksel, 2023a, p.156).

Based on the description of 'Operation Euphrates Shield', the next part of this thesis focusses on analyzing each factor that motivates states, in this case, neighboring middle powers to intervene in the conflict of their neighbor. The analysis of factors begins with geographical proximity and proceeds to interstate rivalries and alliances, risk and opportunities (including economic interests and resources), co-ethnic and co-religious linkages.

### 3.3. Application of the five factors to the Turkish military intervention

Factor 1-Geographical proximity:

Regarding the first factor that motivates states to intervene in their neighbors' civil wars, that of geographical proximity, Syria and Türkiye are neighboring countries that share a 900km border. This played a significant role for Ankara's decision to militarily intervene in the Syrian civil war. The Kurdish and ISIS threat caused by the former's control of territory in the north and the latter's transnational mission to establish a global 'Caliphate' motivated Türkiye to militarily intervene. The pretext of self-defense that Türkiye used to intervene in the northern part of Syria during the civil war, demonstrates the action of precaution that it took, as a response to the danger adjacent to its border.

Moreover, the domestic dispute with the rival Kurdish movement PKK, a designated terrorist organization linked to the Syrian-Kurdish PYD and YPG (PYD's military wing), encouraged Turkish military intervention to restrict the border-crossing of Kurdish people residing in Türkiye into the Syrian Kurdish-controlled territories (Ayata, 2015a, p.102). The threat caused by the interconnected PKK-PYD-YPG and the existing terrorist presence close by the Syrian-Turkish border, endangered not only the local Syrian population that used to live under the control of ISIS, but the Turkish citizens that reside close to these areas as well (MFA, 2022a). Hence, while Türkiye's national security and citizens were put at risk due to the country's geographical proximity to the unstable Syria, the action of military intervention was ranked as the best option to preserve their security. At the same time, Ankara worried that the Kurdish establishment of autonomous regions during the Syrian civil war could encourage the PKK to imitate them (Ma'oz, 2023b, p.24).

In addition, it is estimated that more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees have crossed the Turkish border (Ford, 2019e, p.8). Therefore, another important aspect of Ankara's decision to militarily intervene, based on this factor of geographical proximity, was the increasing refugee flow in the Turkish border, caused by the ISIS attacks and Assad's brutal civilian treatment. For the AKP government, that was a major humanitarian issue that needed to be responded to by Turkish involvement in the conflict (Sever, 2020a, p.155), aiming to restrict the cross-bordering and resettle refugees. Not only that, but since the initiation of the Syrian civil war which resulted into a fragile Syrian state, cases of smuggling and illegal cross-border were frequent phenomena (Sever, 2020b, p.155).

All in all, Türkiye's geographical position north of Syria, a country in which an ongoing civil war takes place, encouraged the Turkish military intervention. However, geographical proximity alone as a factor did not directly lead to the intervention, but the cause of Turkish national security's threat did, including the Kurdish and ISIS presence by the Turkish border, the cases of smuggling and illegal cross-bordering of people, as well as the refugee flow.

Factor 2-Interstate rivalries and alliances:

The paper's second factor that motivates states to intervene in their neighbors' civil wars is the interstate rivalries and alliances between the target state and the intervener. During the Syrian civil war, the diplomatic relations of Ankara, and more specifically of Erdogan's AKP government with that of the Assad started deteriorating by the initiation of the conflict. More specifically, Erdogan criticized Assad's brutal response toward civilian protests in 2011, and ever since the Syrian government's refusal to the Turkish proposal recommending political reform in Syria, the ultimate objective of Türkiye has been to overthrow Assad (Van and Yüksel, 2018b). Not only that, but Assad refused the Turkish proposal asking for the integration of the Muslim Brotherhood (a Sunni Islamic organization) into the Syrian political structure (Yüksel, 2023b, p.155). Furthermore, Assad's action to free the population of Kurdish regions from being forced to join the Syrian army and 'allow' Syrian Kurds establishing their autonomous enclaves close to the Turkish border, provoked Ankara (Ayata, 2015b, p.103). In addition, the attack of a Turkish bus transporting pilgrims by Syria during November of 2011, the Syrian shooting down of a Turkish plane in June of 2012, and the Turkish interception of a Syrian passenger jet in October 2012, further deteriorated Ankara-Damascus relations (Ma'oz, 2023c, p.24)

As a response to these events, the eruption of the Syrian civil war prompted the mutual hostility between Türkiye and Assad. That was clear, initially throughout the Turkish provision of salaries, training and materiel to the Syrian opposition (Yüksel, 2020c, p.139). Moreover, during the Turkish military operations in Syria, the Syrian armed opposition forces both served as proxies of Türkiye and collaborated with the Turkish forces (Yüksel, 2020d, p.139). The reorganization of the FSA into the TFSA that was financially and militarily supported by Türkiye was shaped by more than 22,000 trained soldiers (Phillips, 2021, p.161).

Regarding alliances, Iran's financial and military support to the Assad regime (Asseburg and Wimmen, 2014, pp. 2-3) and the overall Iranian involvement in the conflict impacted Türkiye's

decision to intervene, limiting in that way the Shi'a Iranian regional influence and preserving the Sunni Turkish regional dominance in Middle Eastern affairs. To summarize, interstate rivalries between Türkiye and the Syrian regime, as well as Assad's Shi'i allies (Iran and Hezbollah) motivated the Turkish military intervention in the Syrian civil war.

Factor 3-Risk and opportunities:

When the opportunity is provided to achieve possible economic objectives from a target country including the extraction of natural resources, the decision of external states to intervene in their neighbor's civil war, is according to the literature, positively impacted.

Gürcan (2019a) concluded that one of the factors that motivated Turkish military intervention was the desire to benefit from the black energy market and integrate economically with Arab-Gulf countries. Equally important, after each military operation, Türkiye aimed to support the Syrian opposition by building local government structures under their supervision (Al-Hilu, 2021b, p.6). In addition to that, Türkiye established local administrative councils, trained police units and built military bases to protect the controlled areas (Murariu and Anglițoiu, 2020, p.141). The control of Syrian territories and especially the setup of government structures in these areas can financially benefit Ankara, as Türkiye improved economic integration with Turkish land, built infrastructure projects and created new market and trade routes.

All in all, when the opportunity was provided to Ankara to militarily intervene in the Syrian conflict using the pretext of self-defense, possible future government revenue through Syria's natural resources (energy) and financial prospects through the functioning of local government structures motivated Türkiye to act in that way.

Factor 4-Co-ethnic linkages:

Ethnic group ties have long been considered impactful for external support during wartime. However, in the case of the Syrian civil war, Türkiye (dominated by the Turks ethnic group) militarily intervened, not only motivated by co-ethnic linkages with the Turkmen ethnic group, but also to fight the Kurds, a rival ethnic group to Turkish. Related to co-ethnic linkages, Turkmen received political support from Türkiye, intended to preserve the Turkmen's presence and to secure a safe environment for them in Syria (MFA, 2022b). Especially, since the eruption of the Syrian civil war, this ethnic group has been backed by the AKP government (Van and Yüksel, 2018c).

Furthermore, the FSA opposition group that Türkiye supported and received assistance from during the Turkish military intervention was mainly composed of Turkmen (Cantenar and Kozera, 2022a, p.353).

Still, while Türkiye's co-ethnic linkages impacted the decision to militarily intervene in the Syrian civil war, the primary determining factor of intervention was the hostility against a rival ethnic group, that of the Kurds. Consequently, it is argued that the military intervention of Türkiye was a matter of Kurdish ethnopolitics (Gürcan, 2019b), as the country prioritized, after mid-2016, fighting the Syrian Kurdish PYD over overthrowing Assad (Yüksel, 2023c, p.156). The series of Turkish military operations that took place after mid-2016 aimed to defeat PYD's attempts to be autonomous close by the Turkish border (Netjes and Veen, 2021). As PYD being linked with the Turkish-based PKK, a designated terrorist organization, Ankara conducted numerous military operations in Syria to eliminate the emergence of Kurdish autonomy south of Türkiye (Al-Hilu, 2021c, p.13). Hence, to prevent Kurdish autonomy, Ankara decided to militarily intervene in the Syrian civil war (Kerr, 2020b, p.128).

On the whole, while co-ethnic linkages' role of Turkish with Turkmen positively impacted Ankara's decision for intervention, the essence to defeat their rival ethnic group of Kurds, whose presence and establishment of autonomous enclaves threatened Turkish national security, was a major factor that led to the Turkish military intervention in Syria.

Factor 5- Co-religious linkages:

As in the case of co-ethnic linkages, the co-religious linkages between an external state and a rebel group that shares the same religion encourages external intervention for pro-rebel support. Türkiye, a Sunni Muslim state governed by Erdogan's Islamist regime has been a staunch supporter and promoter of Sunni Islamist politics, similar to those of the Sunni Islamist 'Muslim Brotherhood' organization (Rabinovich and Valensi, 2021d, p.130). Since the initiation of the conflict in Syria, Türkiye sheltered Syrian activists, allowing them to form the SNC, an anti-Assad coalition dominated by supporters of the Syrian Sunni 'Muslim Brotherhood' and since 2012 anti-Assad Sunni fighters received Turkish materiel assistance (Çağaptay, 2019a, p.117). Erdogan supported the 'Muslim Brotherhood' because he aimed and hoped that it could replace the Assad regime (Çağaptay, 2019b, p.117).

In 2011, the Sunni-majority Türkiye hosted in Istanbul the Syrian opposition who created the SNC, a council that was represented mostly by Sunni groups (Sever, 2020c, p.153). By supporting the Sunni Arab rebellion and opposing Assad, Ankara aspired to control a Turkish-influenced Sunni group in the Middle East (Sever, 2020d, p.153). Regarding the FSA which was mainly composed by not only Turkmen (Cantenar and Kozera, 2022b), but also co-religious Sunni Arabs, Türkiye provided sanctuaries inside its borders (Carpenter, 2013, p.5). Furthermore, after the completion of 'Operation Euphrates Shield' in 2016, Ankara aimed to revive Syrian 'Islamist nationalists', incorporating them into an effective fighting force under the Turkish control (Yüksel, 2020e, p.138).

Besides that, the religion of Alawite Bashar al-Assad which derived from Shi'a Islam, attracted the support of co-religious Shi'a dominant Iran (Ostovar, 2018) and the support of the Lebanese Shi'a militant organization, Hezbollah. Therefore, in the Syrian civil war which is also characterized as a Sunni-Shi'a confrontation (Rabinovich and Valensi, 2021e, p.124), the Turkish government supported, based on its sectarian policy, the Sunni opposition in the conflict, attempting in that way to limit the Shi'a Iranian influence (Szymański, 2018, p.78). This Sunni sectarianism is considered by Gürcan (2019c) as one among the three main factors that impacted the decision of Turkish military intervention in Syria.

All things considered, not only co-religious linkages between Sunni-majority Türkiye and Sunni Syrians motivated the Turkish military intervention in Syria, but also the existent Sunni-Shia rivalry. Hence, the rivalry between different religions, seemed to also motivate this action of Turkish intervention.

# CHAPTER 4: THE YEMENI CIVIL WAR AND ANALYSIS OF THE SAUDI-LED MILITARY INTERVENTION

## 4.1. The Yemeni civil war (2014-)

Yemen, a country located in the Arabian Peninsula unified in the 1990s after being divided into the Yemeni Arab Republic in the north (Saudi and US-backed) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (USSR-backed) in the south (Laub and Robinson, 2016a, p.1). Saleh, the ex-president of the Yemeni Arab Republic, ruled unified Yemen until 2011, the period when Arab Spring spread around the MENA region (Kaussler and Grant, 2023a, p.1). The protests of the Yemeni people against Saleh's corrupted and bad governance led to his successful overthrow and establishment of Hadi as the new president of Yemen in 2012 (Kaussler and Grant, 2023b, p.1). To specify, Hadi's selection as the new president of Yemen was a political plan recommended by the GCC (Lackner and Varisco, 2017a, p.37).

However, failure of Hadi to deal with cronyism, corruption, the wellbeing of citizens and the termination of the fuel subsidy programme motivated the Houthis, a Shia militant organization to resist and capture the Yemeni capital of Sana'a (Kaussler and Grant, 2023c, p.2). That event signaled the start of the Yemeni civil war. As a result of the capture of Sana'a, President Hadi resigned in January 2015 and fled to Aden, the new interim capital of Yemen (Darwich, 2018a, p.128). Three months later, in March of 2015, Houthis attempted to capture Aden, forcing in that way, Hadi to leave the country and call for external intervention (Darwich, 2018b, p.128). He fled to Saudi Arabia and asked the GCC for help, which responded by conducting a military intervention of an Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia (Mao and Gady, 2021, p.570).

Initially, the main actors of this conflict include the Houthi militia, being the Iran-backed opposition movement (Laub and Robinson, 2016b, p.4), fighting against the Hadi government (supported by Saudi Arabia) until 2022 when power was ceded to the PLC (Kaussler and Grant, 2023d, pp.29-33). The internationally recognized Yemeni government which governed in exile from Riyadh, controlled approximately 40,000 forces including supportive militias in the country (Kaussler and Grant, 2023e, p.33). Among these rival actors, the STC, a southern separatist movement backed by the UAE (until 2017) also fights in the conflict (Sharp, 2019a, p.1). Amid

this chaos, Islamist movements like AQAP also operate in Yemen (Laub and Robinson, 2016c, p.1), fighting against the US.

After the Saudi-led intervention and period of constant clashes between Houthi and ROYG forces, in 2019, STC clashed with ROYG forces, the former capturing the city of Aden (Sharp, 2019b, p.8). Today, the northeastern part of Yemen is mostly controlled by the Yemeni government, the southern part (e.g. Aden) is controlled by the STC forces, the western part is captured by Houthis and in some parts of the north and southeast of Yemen, AQAP is present (Dakers and Duggan, 2024). Below, the five factors indicated in the methodology are applied to the case of Saudi Arabia, as a neighboring middle power state and its decision to intervene militarily in Yemen.

## 4.2. The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen

In March of 2015, during the Yemeni civil war, most of the Gulf countries, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Sudan participated in the Saudi-led military intervention (Arman, 2023a, p.28). This so-called 'Operation Decisive Storm' was led by Saudi Arabia and was supported by American logistical and intelligence support (Laub and Robinson, 2016d, p.5), together with British and French diplomatic support (Darwich, 2018c, p.128). The objectives of this operation were: to strengthen the capacity of the Yemeni state (Clausen 2019a, p.494), to reinstate Hadi as the president of Yemen, defending in that way the legitimate Yemeni government, to prevent the Houthis from controlling the country and to protect the Yemeni people from this militia's aggressiveness (Darwich, 2018d, p.128). Not only that, but Saudi Arabia, by militarily intervening in Yemen attempted to limit Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula, Iran being a country that supported the Houthis (Haddad, 2022).

 'Operation Decisive Storm' was approved by the UN because it was presented as an 'intervention by invitation' and it operated in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, referring to the collective self-defense (Jan and Lawan Haruna, 2015a, p.199), while the UNSC resolution 2216 was adopted, as well (Al-Dawsari and Nasser, 2020, p.220). The coalition members combined air, land and naval forces during 'Operation Decisive Storm', with Saudi Arabia alone contributing 100 aircrafts and 150,000 troops (Writer, 2015). After a month-long campaign the operation was renamed into 'Operation Renewed Hope', focusing mostly on improving the political process in Yemen, but till today, the focus on military operations still remains (Darwich, 2020a, p.104).

Nonetheless, since the beginning of the operation, some coalition members withdrew their forces such as such as Qatar in 2017 and Morocco in 2019, while Egypt and Jordan decreased their contribution to the operation (Darwich, 2020b, p.104). By 2022, as part of 'Operation Renewed Hope', 2,500 Saudi and 650 Sudanese forces are based in Yemen (Kaussler and Grant, 2023f, p.33).

Overall, the Saudi-led military intervention further complicated the conflict and negatively impacted the peacekeeping progress (Arman, 2023b, p.32). Although the UN and other powers of the international scene initially approved the operation, after a series of air campaigns which led to civilian casualties, international criticism was frequent (Sharp, 2019c, p.3). The costs of this operation are estimated at US $100 million per day, the Saudi strategy of overreliance to air bombings seemed to be failed (Darwich, 2020c, p.107), as also Houthi forces are not yet defeated and the Yemeni government is not reinstated (Kaussler and Grant, 2023g, p.62). Thus, this ongoing operation did not achieve its primary objectives. Following the overview of the Saudi-led intervention provided above, the five factors including geographical proximity, interstate and alliances, risk and opportunities, co-ethnic and co-religious linkages, are analyzed to examine whether they motivated Saudi Arabia to intervene militarily in Yemen.

### **4.3. Application of the five factors to the Saudi-led military intervention**

Factor 1-Geographical proximity:

Saudi Arabia shares a long border in the south with Yemen, hence the political chaos that emerged in the country when Houthi captured Sana'a, an event that led to the Yemeni civil war, threatened Saudi national security (Lackner and Varisco, 2017b, p.38). As a result, the Kingdom strengthened the southern part by employing the National Guard and by conducting aerial bombings in Houthi-controlled areas during 'Operation Decisive Storm' and later 'Operation Renewed Hope' (Parker, 2021a, p.165). These two measures were only taken to fight the hostile Houthi militia, as well as to prevent war spillover (Parker, 2021b, p.165).

Additionally, Salim (2022a, pp.93-97) supports that the geographical factor motivated Saudi Arabia to militarily intervene in Yemen, as the conflict and more specifically, Houthi's attacks in the Saudi border and the presence of AQAP in the Arabian Peninsula threatened the Saudi national and regional security. For that reason, the decision to militarily intervene was an act of self-defense

(Clausen, 2019b, p.495). Simultaneously, Riyadh decided to intervene because a future fragile Yemen, would negatively impact the former, especially from the influx of Yemeni economic migrants crossing into Saudi Arabia (Salisbury, 2015a, p.3).

Therefore, geographical proximity of Saudi Arabia to Yemen played a significant role for intervention, as the civil war's outcome including Houthi's aggression, Yemeni state's dissolution, presence of AQAP, of a terrorist organization and possible influx of migrants into Saudi territory, all motivated Saudi Arabia to lead the military intervention in Yemen.

Factor 2-Interstate rivalries and alliances:

Saudi Arabia conducted its military intervention in Yemen after Hadi's internationally recognized government was forced to leave Yemen by Houthi forces that captured Sana'a. The immediate response of Saudi Arabia to organize the Arab coalition and intervene militarily in an attempt to reinstate Hadi, demonstrates the bond between Hadi and Saudi Arabia. Hadi feared that he lost the monopoly of power that he primarily had when Houthis captured Sana'a (Salim, 2022b, p.101). That event caused the eruption of the Yemeni civil war, a conflict that led to Riyadh intervening militarily to assist the Hadi government. Hence, the coalition conducted the Saudi-led military intervention to attempt the achievement of this objective.

However, the necessity to maintain Hadi's power is intertwined with the necessity to defeat the Houthis, a militia that was supported by Iran, a rival country to Saudi Arabia. Although Tehran did not directly intervene in the Yemeni civil war, it provided the Houthis with training, weapons and financial support (Jan and Lawan Haruna, 2015b, p.198). That is why Saudi Arabia perceives Houthis as 'Iranian puppets' (Clausen,2019c, p.495), being in that way an Iranian proxy (Salisbury, 2015b, p.1).

On the one hand, Saudi Arabia supported the Hadi government to sustain its regional dominance in the Arabian Peninsula (Darwich, 2018e, p.125). On the other hand, Iran is sided with the Houthis to expand its influence in the region (Clause, 2019, p.495). Based on the Riyadh-Tehran rivalry, the Yemeni civil war is characterized as an Iranian-Saudi proxy conflict (Wither, 2023, p.185). Arman (2023c, p.27) states that: 'Yemen has become an arena of operations for an indirect clash between these two major nations'. Likewise, Eleftheriadou (2023, p.139) argues that the motive of Saudi Arabia's military intervention was primarily the hostility against the Houthis and their

backers (Iran), rather than to support Hadi. Altogether, both the friendly diplomatic Hadi-Saudi Arabian relations and the interstate rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the latter country supporting Houthi, motivated Saudi Arabia to intervene militarily in Yemen.

Factor 3-Risks and opportunities:

Potential economic interests obtained from a country that is rich in resources, consist of a factor which according to the literature, motivates third party states to militarily intervene when the former country experiences a civil war. More specifically, Saudi Arabia, a middle power that led the Arab coalition's military intervention in Yemen aimed to both secure and achieve economic objectives by directly intervening in the conflict when the opportunity was given through Hadi's request to intervene.

Firstly, Saudi Arabia intervened in order to protect the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a key route of oil transportation, located near Yemen (Arman, 2023d, p.30). Significantly, through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, 4.7 million barrels of oil are estimated to transmit every day (Laub and Robinson, 2016e, p.5). The scenario of this strait being controlled by Houthi rebels threatened Saudi Arabia whose economy would be negatively impacted by the disruption of oil exportation (Arman, 2023e, p.30). Not only that, but Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen knowing that Houthi forces acted, at times, aggressively, by threatening maritime shipping in this strait (Sharp, 2019d, p.15).

Additionally, the Houthi's aggression that challenged Riyadh's security was indicated throughout the conduct of successful strikes against Saudi oil refineries (Kaussler and Grant, 2023h, p.41), that threatening the country's economy which is mostly based on oil production and exportation. On top of that, since 2019, Saudi Arabia established military bases in the al-Mahra governorate located in the northern part of Yemen (Al-Sewari, 2019), a province in which the Saudi initiative of al-Mahra pipeline focused on, that being a plan that ensures energy security to the Kingdom (Kaussler and Grant, 2023i, p.77).

In short, when the opportunity was provided to reinstate Hadi, Saudi Arabia decided to intervene militarily in Yemen, firstly, to benefit from Yemen's natural resources (al-Mahra initiative) and secondly, to protect economic interests (protection of domestic oil refineries and oil routes in Bab-el-Mandeb Strait).

Factor 4-Co-ethnic linkages:

Co-ethnic linkages, as a factor that motivates external third-party states' decision to intervene in their neighbors' civil wars is not applicable to the case of Saudi Arabia. Obviously, while both Saudi Arabian and Yemeni population are ethnically Arab in majority (CIA 2024), it cannot be argued that co-ethnic linkages motivated Riyadh to militarily intervene in Yemen to support their co-ethnics. There is no clear indication that illustrates Saudi Arabian motivation to intervene in order to support co-ethnic Arabs in Yemen. Even Hadi is an Arab himself, the main reasons of motivation were primarily associated with security, economic interests and co-religious linkages. Therefore, it is concluded that co-ethnic linkages between Saudi Arabia and Hadi's government as a motivational factor for Riyadh to intervene is not applicable, although the two countries are ethnically dominant Arab states.

Factor 5: Co-religious linkages:

Religion undoubtedly played a significant role to the Saudi Arabia's decision to intervene militarily in the Yemeni civil war. Primarily, Yemen is a Sunni-majority country (65% Sunni-35% Shia) (Li, 2023), and the Yemeni president Hadi is a Sunni politician (News Agencies, 2015). Likewise, Saudi Arabia is a Sunni Islamic state (Salim, 2022c, p.100), and the 'defender and propagator of an ascetic vision of Sunni Islam', 'Wahhabism' (Sorenson, 2016, p.105). Both Hadi and Saudi Arabia had a common enemy, the Zaydi Shia Houthi militia that captured Sana'a and forced Hadi to leave the country in 2014-15. Thus, co-religious Sunni linkages between Hadi and Saudi Arabia motivated the latter to intervene militarily to support the Sunni Hadi's government. Equally important, this government was backed by the Popular Resistance, a Sunni militia fighting in the conflict (Jan and Lawan Haruna, 2015c, p.192), as well as by a Sunni political party named 'al-Islah' (Kaussler and Grant, 2023j, p.2).

 Not only that, but Riyadh also attempted to restrict the influence of Shia Zaydi Houthi. This militia's religious doctrine, Zaydism, belongs to a Shi'a sect, that motivating Iran, a Shia-dominant state to back them (Darwich, 2018f, p.129). For Saudis, Shi'a domination threatened their security, hence they militarily intervened in Yemen in order to limit the expansion of Shiism in the Gulf and to counter Iran's threat, the country being their 'long-lived Shia enemy' (Darwich, 2018g, pp.129-134). Considering this, the conflict is described as a Saudi-Iranian proxy war based in the Sunni-Shia division, that is especially promoted from the Saudi Arabian media (Darwich, 2018h, p.126).

To summarize, co-religious linkages between Islamic Sunni Saudi Arabia and Sunni Yemeni president Hadi clearly motivated the former actor to intervene supporting Hadi's government. Simultaneously, the fact that Houthis, a Zaydi Shia militia was backed by Shia-dominant Iran, also motivated Saudi Arabia to intervene because of the existing Sunni-Shia rivalry.

# CHAPTER 5: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of this paper's research focused on explaining the middle power's decision to intervene militarily in their neighbor's civil war, using two cases. The first case focused on the factors that motivated the Turkish military intervention in the Syrian civil war and the second focused on the factors that motivated Saudi Arabia's decision to form the Arab coalition and conduct military intervention in Yemeni.

| Factor that motivates military intervention | Türkiye | Saudi Arabia |
|---|---|---|
| Geographical proximity | Yes | Yes |
| Interstate rivalries and alliances | Yes | Yes |
| Risk and opportunities | Yes | Yes |
| Co-ethnic linkages | Yes | No |
| Co-religious linkages | Yes | Yes |

*Figure 1. Findings of the research regarding the factors that motivated Türkiye and Saudi Arabia to intervene militarily in Syria and Yemen respectively.*

Notably, as the table above shows, every examined factor, except from the factor of co-ethnic linkages, motivated both Türkiye and Saudi Arabia to militarily intervene in their neighbor's civil war. Both countries, as the analysis indicated, were motivated by the factors of: geographical proximity, interstate rivalries and alliances, risk and opportunities (including economic interests and natural resources) and lastly, co-religious links. In contrast, the factor of co-ethnic linkages only motivated the Turkish military intervention, whereas in the case of Saudi Arabia's decision to militarily intervene, no indication of this factor was found.

Regarding geographical proximity, the threats caused by the initiation of the Syrian civil war (Syria being a border country to Türkiye) such as the Kurdish and ISIS presence, smuggling and illegal people's cross-bordering and refugee flow, all motivated Türkiye to conduct 'Operation Euphrates Shield', a military intervention that aimed to prevent the spillover of war and secure Turkish national security. Similarly, the Yemeni civil war's outcome including Houthi's aggressiveness, unstable Yemeni state, presence of AQAP and the possibility of migration flow into Saudi Arabia as border country to Yemen, led to the Saudi-led military intervention, 'Operation Decisive Storm'. The case of the Saudi military intervention in Yemen contradicts the argument of Huibregtse (2010d) that geographical proximity is more likely to motivate pro-rebel support, as Saudi Arabia intervened to support the legitimate Hadi government, and not Houthi.

As for interstate rivalries and alliances, the Erdogan-Assad rivalry and Assad regime's Shi'a supporters like Iran and Hezbollah, encouraged the Turkish military intervention in Syria. In parallel, Saudi Arabia decided to militarily intervene motivated on the one hand, by the tight Hadi-Saudi Arabian diplomatic relations and on the other hand, by the rival Houthi's Iranian support, a rival to Saudi Arabia. The case of Saudi Arabia reveals that close diplomatic ties between the external third-party state and the intervened state is more likely to lead into pro-government support. Another finding based on this factor is that rivalries between external state on the one side, and the rebel group and their backer on the other side, impacts the decision of external state to militarily intervene to support the government.

Risk and opportunities motivated both the Turkish and Saudi-led military interventions. Türkiye, aimed to obtain financial income through the black energy market of Syria and through the established local government structures in the Syrian land under Turkish possession. Saudi Arabia, also aimed to benefit from Yemeni natural resources (energy) and secure economic interests from the threatened domestic oil refineries and from oil routes in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Hence, natural resources do not only motivate external intervention to support rebels as Stojek and Chacha (2015c) demonstrated but can also be a determinant for pro-government support.

Co-ethnic linkages were the only factor that did not motivate Saudi Arabia's decision to intervene militarily. By contrast, co-ethnic ties of Türkiye's dominant ethnic group, Turks with Turkmen was a significant factor that motivated the conduct of 'Operation Euphrates Shield'. Not only that, but the presence of rival ethnic group to Türkiye by the Turkish border, that of the Kurds, also played

an important role for the latter country's decision to intervene. Based on this finding, it is argued that rival ethnic groups of an ethnically-dominant external third-party state can be an additional factor that impacts the decision to conduct military intervention.

Lastly, co-religious linkages motivated both Türkiye and Saudi Arabia to intervene militarily. In the first case, Turkish military intervention was motivated by co-religious Sunni linkages and also desire to fight a rival religion, that of Shi'a. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's decision to intervene was initially driven, by the co-religious Sunni linkages with Sunni Yemeni president Hadi and secondly, by the existing Sunni-Shia rivalry, the Houthi being a Zaydi Shia militia, backed by the Shia-dominant Iran. Based on the analysis of this factor, it is concluded that co-religious linkages do not only motivate external intervention to rebels (Ives, 2019c), but as in the case of Saudi Arabia, co-religious ties are also possible to motivate pro-government support.

In summary, the main factors that motivate middle powers to militarily intervene in their neighbor's civil war based on the Turkish and Saudi-led military interventions are: geographical proximity, interstate rivalries and alliances between external and intervened states, risk and opportunities, and co-religious linkages. Moreover, geographical proximity is possible to lead states intervening to support the government. Regarding the factor of interstate rivalries and alliances, close relations between an external third-party state and the intervened state drives the former actor to provide support for the government. Not only that, but when rivalries between a third-party state and a rebel group exist, especially when the latter is backed by a rival state, external pro-government military intervention is more likely. Furthermore, existing rivalry between external and intervened state's ethnic group also leads to military intervention, considering that the former actor is dominant by an ethnic group. The last finding indicates that co-religious linkages between an external state and the legitimate government fighting in a civil war is likely to lead the former actor into the conduct of pro-government military intervention.

# CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to answer how can we explain the decision of Middle East's middle powers to militarily intervene in their neighbors' civil wars, after the Arab Spring of 2011? The chosen cases were the Turkish military intervention in Syria during the Syrian civil war, thus Türkiye's decision to intervene was analyzed, and the second case concerned the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen during the Yemeni civil war, focusing on Saudi Arabia's motives to conduct and lead such an operation. While both countries are characterized as 'middle powers', the research attempted to examine the factors that motivate this category of states to militarily intervene in their neighbor's civil war, required that the external and intervened state need to be geographically adjacent to each other. Based on the five factors indicated in the literature including geographical proximity, interstate rivalries and alliances, risk and opportunities, co-ethnic and co-religious linkages, this thesis investigated whether they motivated Türkiye and Saudi Arabia to conduct military intervention.

The findings show that the factors of geographical proximity, interstate rivalries and alliances, risk and opportunities and co-religious linkages were determinant for both Türkiye's and Saudi Arabia's decision to militarily intervene in Syria and Yemen, respectively. In addition, I argued that intervention for pro-government support is possible when the external third-party state and the intervened country are geographically proximate. Simultaneously, another finding of the research illustrates that maintained ties between the neighboring external third-party state and the legitimate government of the intervened state increase the probabilities for pro-government support during a civil war. Along the same lines, when ongoing rivalry between the external state and a rebel group that fights in a civil war exists, especially when the rebel group is supported by a rival country to the external state, then it is more likely for the latter actor to militarily intervene by supporting the government. In addition to these findings, existing ethnic rivalries, also lead to military intervention, considering that the external third-party state is dominated by an ethnic group. Lastly, motivation to intervene supporting the government is likely when co-religious linkages exist between the external third-party state and the government fighting in the civil conflict. Importantly, when referring to external third-party states and their decision to militarily intervene, focus is only dedicated to middle power border states to the intervened countries.

All in all, these findings contribute to the academic field of international relations by focusing on the correlation between middle powers and their decision to conduct a military intervention when a civil war takes place adjacent to their border, motivated by the defined factors. The variation of the five factors illustrated the complexity behind external military interventions. Not only that, but the selection of Turkish and Saudi-led military interventions, provided a nuanced understanding of the regional dynamics of a post-Arab Spring Middle East.

Based on this contribution, the findings of this research paved the way for a deeper examination of middle power's behavior regarding external military intervention, applied to other cases, or in other regions beyond Middle East. Of equal importance is a further exploration as to why the other middle powers of the two cases (Israel and Iraq) did not militarily intervene based on the 'military intervention' definition by MIPS Codebook. Finally, as this thesis focused only on intervention in neighboring states, future studies could focus on middle power states' external military intervention in civil wars that are geographically distant. Research of this kind could improve our understanding of both the motives and objectives that these states attempt to achieve by intervening militarily.

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