

**MAQBARAT AL-ATRAK:
SAUDI ARABIA'S INTERVENTION IN YEMEN**

by

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki,
the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.
We are all Treaty people.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the Saudi Arabian intervention in Yemen in order to ascertain the motivations behind the choice to directly intervene. Existing research and literature covering this topic tends to be relegated to news media, with little academic attention being paid to the subject. The intervention is examined from structural realist, domestic-political, and neoclassical realist lenses to determine which is more effective in developing a more granular and nuanced understanding of the motivations behind the intervention. The author concludes that neoclassical realism is most effective in determining why Saudi Arabia chose to intervene in Yemen and contributes to the broader discussion around the role of neoclassical realism in international relations literature.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

‘Egypt’s Vietnam’ and *Maqbarat al-Atrak*¹ are two colloquial names given to Yemen, and aptly highlight its ability to withstand foreign invasion. Yemen “had consumed four Turkish divisions in the 19th century,” and its terrain denied any form of victory to the Egyptian military during their unsuccessful intervention in the 1962 Yemeni Civil War.² Yemen’s repeated history of turning invasions into quagmires draws many parallels with Afghanistan. Keeping this context in mind generates the primary question which drove my research: what enabled Saudi Arabia’s decision to directly intervene in the ongoing Yemeni Civil War, versus softer forms of intervention such as financial support/funding, utilization of proxy groups, and so on? The approach taken by Saudi Arabia to address the Yemeni Civil War is in stark contrast to how Saudi Arabia has conducted foreign policy in both Yemen and other regions in the past when faced with security situations. Though there are discussions on this shift in foreign policy strategy and its implications, there has been comparatively little discussion on *why* this shift has happened.

While Saudi Arabia’s involvement in Yemen’s domestic politics is not surprising given the proximity of the two countries, it is not clear why Saudi Arabia chose to intervene so directly. In the prior Yemeni Civil War of 1962-70 Saudi Arabia’s involvement was limited to increased border security and monetary and indirect support

¹ Lit. translation: “Graveyard of the Turks.”

² Jesse Ferris, “Egypt’s Vietnam,” *Foreign Policy*, April 3, 2015, para. 8, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/03/egypts-vietnam-yemen-nasser-sisi/>.

to the royalist North Yemeni government, as well as occasional retaliatory airstrikes.³ Saudi Arabia also ran an aerial campaign in 2009 to counter resurgent Houthi activity, but this lacked the sheer scope of the current intervention. Even leaving Yemen itself aside, Saudi Arabia has historically maintained a very conservative approach to foreign policy decisions—in direct contrast to how this intervention has been handled.⁴

The current intervention has left over 18,000 civilians wounded or injured and over 10 million at risk of famine.⁵ Ulrichson indicates that “[e]stimates of the cost of the campaign vary widely but are believed to exceed \$66 million per day, part of a record \$50.8 billion earmarked for defense spending in the 2017 budget...”⁶ with other sources claiming the total cost to Saudi Arabia as being upwards of \$100 billion USD so far.⁷ Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has failed to achieve its goals by intervening: namely, the solidification of a Saudi-friendly government, and enough stability within Yemen to not pose a threat to Saudi Arabia’s security. This thesis will demonstrate that not only have

³ Joseph Mann, “Yemeni Threat to Saudi Arabia’s Internal Security, 1962–70,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 52–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2014.918468>.

⁴ F. Gregory Gause, “Fresh Prince: The Schemes and Dreams of Saudi Arabia’s Next King,” *Foreign Affairs* (New York, United Kingdom: Council on Foreign Relations NY, June 2018).

⁵ “Yemen Data Project,” yemendataproject.org, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://yemendataproject.org/index.html>; “World Report 2020: Rights Trends in Yemen,” Human Rights Watch, December 12, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/yemen>.

⁶ Kristian Ulrichson, “Endgames for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen,” Project on Middle East Political Science, n.d., <https://pomeps.org/2018/01/12/endgames-for-saudi-arabia-and-the-united-arab-emirates-in-yemen/>.

⁷ “Saudi Arabia Looks for a Peace Deal in Yemen, but at What Price?,” *Inside Arabia*, April 2, 2020, <https://insidearabia.com/saudi-arabia-looks-for-a-peace-deal-in-yemen-but-at-what-price/>.

these goals not been met, but the choice of direct intervention itself may have actually resulted in the opposite outcome.

In this thesis, I argue that Saudi Arabia's decision to directly intervene in Yemen was caused by a misreading of geopolitical currents which created the perception that intervening in Yemen was necessary to balance against Iranian influence. Furthermore, the decision to directly intervene was enabled—despite Saudi Arabia's historically conservative approach to foreign policy—by the increasingly centralized power under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS). I also utilize my conclusions to demonstrate how parsimonious and generalizable theories such as structural realism are not sufficient in explaining abnormal or suboptimal foreign policy decisions. I argue for the use of Neoclassical Realism (NCR) as a 'subsidiary' theory with which to apply realist assumptions about the international system when one decides to examine internal factors which contributed to a particular foreign policy decision.

This thesis topic is relevant and interesting in a real-world policy sense for several reasons. Firstly, peer-reviewed academic literature on the Saudi intervention in Yemen is rather limited. While there are many 'grey' literature sources (i.e., news media, blogs, non-academic sources, etc.) and opinion articles by academics, there are very few detailed analyses which examine why Saudi Arabia chose to directly intervene in this conflict—in contrast to its previous foreign policy decision making strategy.⁸ Much of the literature frames it as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia (part of the broader Saudi-Iranian Cold War), or as “simply the product of rash decision-making by young,

⁸ Ben Rich and Kylie Moore-Gilbert, “From Defense to Offense: Realist Shifts in Saudi Foreign Policy,” *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 3 (2019): 62–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12438>.

capricious leaders...”⁹ While Yemen has certainly become a proxy battleground between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Saudi Arabia’s decision to intervene occurred prior to any evidence that Iran was investing significant effort or resources in making it as such, and ultimately created a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹⁰

Despite being one of the largest humanitarian crises of the 21st century, the Yemeni Civil War itself has received much less attention than the Syrian Civil War. While there has been more academic engagement over the past few years, it still pales in comparison to what is available on the Syrian Civil War. It is my hope that this thesis, along with any additional academic material released will spur further research into this dynamic conflict and its worrying implications for Yemen’s future stability and the quality of life for its people. Furthermore, I anticipate that additional research on this clear change in Saudi foreign policy will be conducted, as evidenced by the recent release of journal articles on the topic.¹¹

Secondly, Saudi Arabia’s decision to intervene represents a recurring problem in foreign policy theory crafting: states making apparently dysfunctional decisions to commit to costly, long-term, and ultimately fruitless interventions in other countries—whether they be outright invasions or interventions in civil wars. Given Saudi Arabia’s

⁹ Emile Hokayem and David B. Roberts, “The War in Yemen,” *Survival* 58, no. 6 (November 1, 2016): 164–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1257202>.

¹⁰ Thomas Juneau, “Iran’s Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (May 1, 2016): 647–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12599>; Hubert Świątek, “The Yemen War: A Proxy War, or a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?,” *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs; Warsaw* 26, no. 2 (2017): 38–54.

¹¹ Rich and Moore-Gilbert, “From Defense to Offense”; Faisal AlSulaib, “Offensive Realism and Saudi Foreign Policy towards Iran,” *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Regional Programme Gulf States*, no. Policy Report No. 14 (2020): 1–4.

proximity to Yemen, it is no surprise that the Saudi state has a vested interest in Yemen's stability. A less stable Yemen would likely mean an increased presence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—a group which has often acted against the Saudi state—or other groups, provisional governments, and so on which could be hostile towards Saudi Arabia. While this frames an obvious incentive for Saudi Arabia to address the Yemeni Civil War, their intervention, much like the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the NATO-led intervention in Libya, has resulted in a significantly worse security situation, a less stable country, and has cost the Saudi state a considerable sum of money over time on top of a worsening international image. Yemen in particular has been a problematic location for empires and states seeking to invade it, which should have resulted in more hesitation prior to intervention.

When utilizing international relations (IR) theories, structural realism provides a strong overall explanation for what would prompt Saudi Arabia to intervene in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has a rival with whom it struggles for regional hegemony (Iran), said rival is perceived to be influencing and indirectly intervening in a neighbouring country to weaken Saudi Arabia, and the Saudi state responds to avoid losing power to its rival. However, structural realism tends to be more concerned with predicting the behaviour of 'black-box' states in an international system when placed in replicable circumstances. In addition to having suddenly shifted from its historically conservative approach to foreign policy with no clear cause,¹² Saudi Arabia has also continued to commit to this very costly intervention which has failed to achieve its goals so far. These factors prompt further examination to a level of detail that cannot be attained by a solely systemic-level

¹² Gause, "Fresh Prince."

theory like structural realism. Furthermore, even in situations such as the Saudi-Iranian Cold War, where there is an obvious incentive for Saudi Arabia to act, states are rarely prescribed with the correct or optimal course of action. I aim to demonstrate a potential use case for NCR as a tool for case study analysis in situations where standard structural realism does not provide the granularity needed to discover why states take seemingly dysfunctional approaches to foreign policy dilemmas.

This thesis will be structured as follows: Firstly, I conduct a literature review of available sources and group them into the following categories: structural realism, domestic-political arguments, and applicable sources that fuse these two approaches in the style of NCR. For the purpose of this thesis, systemic arguments—which tend to focus more on the Saudi-Iranian Cold War as opposed to domestic factors—will be categorized as structural realist arguments and will be treated as such, as they do not take formal theoretical approaches to their explanations. As many sources used are grey literature, they often take an implicitly realist approach to explaining Saudi Arabia’s motivations, and I will indicate how these sources fit well under a structural realist umbrella to conduct a theoretical debate. The literature review will also include a brief explanation of the basic assumptions of each theory and explanation. However, due to the lack of academic sources which make formal theoretical arguments on this topic, there will also be more in-depth explanation of the theories and how they relate to the analysis of the Saudi intervention in each respective analysis chapter. Secondly, the research design section provides more context on what types of evidence I require in order to adequately test each explanation of the Saudi intervention, as well as what kinds of sources I utilize. I detail this for each explanatory theme, as well as what would determine if a theory were ‘correct’ in explaining Saudi Arabia’s actions.

Thirdly, I dedicate analysis chapters for each explanation to empirically test whether or not they provide a sufficient explanation for the Saudi intervention. Due to the relative lack of formal, theoretical, and academic arguments on this topic, I take a non-traditional approach to the analysis chapters by including more robust descriptions and comparison of the particular theories used alongside the analysis to provide more clarity and context for the analyses made.

Lastly, my conclusion recaps the intention behind this research project and what I sought to accomplish. The findings of my analyses are restated in a more concise format, as well as which theory was found to have the most explanatory power for this case study. Finally, I begin a discussion on the ways in which NCR may still be able to find a home alongside structural realism in broader foreign policy theory crafting going forward.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The three separate explanations that will be tested in my thesis are: structural realism, domestic-political explanations, and NCR. Structural realism focuses on the interactions between states at an international level and treats the state as the lowest level unit of analysis. It assumes a zero-sum and inherently competitive relationship between states at the international level—as there exists no supranational authority under which states are forced to cooperate, they can never be sure of other states’ intentions, leading to accumulation of material power as a safeguard against other potentially aggressive states. These assumptions would naturally lead to the expectation that Saudi Arabia, seeing Yemen as an ongoing security situation, would seek to balance against what was perceived as growing rival influence within the country.

Domestic interpretations within the context of this thesis do not follow an existing cohesive theory, and function as ad-hoc explanations with similar themes which primarily focus on domestic leaders. While these theories could be argued to fall under Gideon Rose’s categorization of *Innenpolitik* explanations,¹³ due to the lack of consistency between these sources and which specific factors are given primacy, I treat them as ad-hoc in nature.

Lastly, NCR shares similar assumptions with structural realism, with the difference being the inclusion of intervening variables between systemic imperatives and state responses. Though NCR still holds the assumptions of an anarchic international system with zero-sum competition between states, it differs from structural realism in that the state is not the lowest unit of analysis. The state remains the primary ‘topic’ of

¹³ Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” ed. Michael E. Brown et al., *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72.

study, but rather than viewing foreign policy as an abstract, replicable flow of systemic imperative equaling foreign policy decision, NCR includes intervening variables in the form of the foreign policy executive (FPE), which includes any individuals or groups within a state that wield influence over its decision making process.¹⁴ States are still expected to respond to the same imperatives, but the concept of the FPE allows for more granularity in examining the *why* behind an action while naturally reducing predictive strength.

As discussed in my introduction, there is not a significant amount of formal, academic attention being paid to the motivations behind Saudi Arabia's decision to intervene directly in Yemen. Academic and grey literature sources typically focus on Yemen's civil war, or the Saudi/GCC intervention more broadly, and many of these sources approach the topic with structural realist logic. These sources treat Saudi Arabia as a black box and focus solely on their ongoing cold war with Iran—with emphasis placed on either secular or sectarian divisions leading to proxy wars within the MENA region.

The sources which are in line with structural realist logic focus heavily on the Saudi-Iranian state-level relationship over the past number of decades and will be referred to in this thesis as the proxy war interpretation. While many of the sources which follow this interpretation do not make an explicit link to IR theory, I argue that the proxy war interpretation fits well with a structural realist approach. Instances where

¹⁴ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

sectarianism come up tend to be more sensational news stories that do not reflect broader academic opinion.¹⁵

The proxy war interpretation is a common explanatory factor behind many academic (or grey lit. written by academics) sources which touch on the Saudi intervention. These sources argue that Saudi Arabia intervened to counter Iranian influence in the region due to their ongoing cold war.¹⁶ This type of argument falls directly in line with a structural realist interpretation: Saudi Arabia sees Yemen as a country within its sphere of influence, and whose relative stability impacts Saudi Arabia's security. The perceived support of a hostile rebel group by Saudi Arabia's regional rival (Iran), would naturally prompt a response from the Saudi state—completely ignoring the situation could, in a worst-case scenario, provide Iran a new sphere of influence or base of operations with which to harass Saudi Arabia and force it to divert resources away from other, more important regional conflicts. As these sources understandably place importance on the broader Saudi-Iranian Cold War being a driver

¹⁵ e.g., Gayeti Singh, "Yemen the Battleground for a Major Sectarian War," *The Citizen*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/2/3091/Yemen-the-Battleground-for-a-Major-Sectarian-war>; Patrick Cockburn, "Donald Trump Puts US on Sunni Muslim Side of Bitter Sectarian War with Shias," *The Independent*, May 21, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-saudi-arabia-trip-sunni-shia-sectarian-war-iran-a7748386.html>; "Yemen Conflict Indicates 'broader Sectarian War' in Middle East," *Israel Hayom*, March 27, 2015, <http://www.israelhayom.com/2017/07/20/yemen-conflict-indicates-broader-sectarian-war-in-middle-east/>.

¹⁶ e.g., Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen"; Fahim, "U.N. Probe Details Fallout of Proxy War in Yemen between Saudi Coalition and Iran"; Fisher, "How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East"; Gause, "Fresh Prince"; Hokayem and Roberts, "The War in Yemen"; e.g., Świątek, "The Yemen War."

behind decisions both countries make that involve the other, they invoke the key elements of structural realist theory in their explanations.

It is important to note that that some of these sources identify the proxy war motivation as being perceptive rather than prescriptive. That is, they are not suggesting that Saudi Arabia ‘should have’ intervened in Yemen to counter Iran, but that Saudi Arabia thought that was the only feasible choice. AlSulaib, and co-authors Rich & Moore-Gilbert, explicitly tie Saudi foreign policy to offensive realism, and refer to the Yemeni intervention, but they do not place heavy focus on Yemen.¹⁷

Although there are some arguments tying the Saudi-Iranian conflict back to sectarianism, they do so more sensationally, or describe how both Saudi Arabia and Iran have utilized this (mostly public-level) perception to justify their continued involvement. These sources tend to draw on the differences between Saudi Arabia’s predominantly Sunni Muslim population and Iran’s Shi’a Muslim population. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Houthis do not neatly fit into a Sunni-Shi’a dichotomy. While Saudi Arabia can be considered Sunni, it is more accurate to say that they follow Wahhabi or Salafi Islam—an extremely strict school of jurisprudence which often puts them at theological odds with other Sunnis. Furthermore, it is more precise to say that Iran largely follows Twelver (or *Imamiyyah*) Shi’a beliefs, whereas the Houthis follow Fiver (or *Zaydi*) Shi’a beliefs. Zaydi Shi’a adherents are in many ways closer to Sunni Islam than they are mainstream Shi’a Islam.¹⁸

¹⁷ AlSulaib, “Offensive Realism and Saudi Foreign Policy towards Iran”; Rich and Moore-Gilbert, “From Defense to Offense.”

¹⁸ Thomas Juneau, “No, Yemen’s Houthis Actually Aren’t Iranian Puppets,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 2016, sec. Monkey Cage,

Colgan and Darwich are prominent in their framing of the sectarian angle being utilized in a pragmatic manner by both Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹⁹ Colgan additionally raises a very important distinction of viewing sectarianism in this context as conflict between Muslim monarchical rule, and Muslim republican rule—with the apparent Sunni-Shi’a divide merely providing rhetoric and public support for conflict with the other. Darwich, while predominantly arguing from a structural realist angle, departs from mainstream realism by arguing that the decision to intervene, rather than being solely motivated by material and tangible factors, actually had more to do with Saudi Arabia seeking to gain stronger status and reputation within the region for the same end goal of increased security for the Saudi state. As this is the only source making an argument which deviates from traditional structural realism, I do not separate this with its own analytical chapter due to the lack of information that would be present.

As the sectarian conflict angle which places the impetus on religious differences does not appear to be a widespread interpretation outside of some lesser-known news sources, I will not focus on it in my analysis. I will, however, briefly discuss the implications of Saudi Arabia and Iran activating domestic sectarianism to garner support for their involvements in Yemen, as brought forward by authors such as Ahmad, Colgan, and Darwich.²⁰

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/16/contrary-to-popular-belief-houthis-arent-iranian-proxies/>.

¹⁹ Colgan, “How Sectarianism Shapes Yemen’s War”; May Darwich, “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status,” *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 125–42, <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2018202.08>.

²⁰ Junaid S. Ahmad, “Understanding the Politics of Saudi Sectarianism,” *Tanqeed* (blog), April 2015, <http://www.tanqeed.org/2015/04/understanding-the-politics-of-saudi->

The second most common explanatory grouping I have identified focuses on Saudi domestic factors which led to the intervention—though they do not ignore the impetus of the Saudi-Iranian Cold War. This grouping of theories will be termed the domestic-political interpretation. Particular primacy is placed on King Salman and/or MbS as the driving force(s) behind the decision to directly intervene.²¹ Importance is not placed on historical or domestic structures within Saudi Arabia. Sources falling under this category do not tend to match existing theoretical perspectives in a consistent manner, contra to the proxy war interpretation, and will be addressed on their own.

Examples of sources which follow this interpretation include Black, Colombo, Karim, and Gause.²² Though these sources, as stated before, do not advance a formal theoretical argument, they are consistent between each other in holding Saudi-Iranian relations as a key motivator of intervention, and treat domestic factors within Saudi Arabia as the reason behind direct intervention. It is important to note that sources following this line of argumentation are somewhat similar to how an argument using

sectarianism/; Colgan, “How Sectarianism Shapes Yemen’s War”; Darwich, “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen.”

²¹ e.g., Ian Black, “Saudi King’s Son Drives Reforms and War in a Year of Anxiety and Change,” *The Guardian*, January 20, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/20/saudi-royals-best-of-the-worst-yemen-king-salman-saudi-arabia>; Silvia Colombo, “Foreign Policy Activism in Saudi Arabia and Oman. Diverging Narratives and Stances towards the Syrian and Yemeni Conflicts,” *The International Spectator* 52, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 54–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2017.1303965>; Gause, “Fresh Prince”; Hokayem and Roberts, “The War in Yemen”; Umer Karim, “The Evolution of Saudi Foreign Policy and the Role of Decision-Making Processes and Actors,” *The International Spectator* 52, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 71–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2017.1308643>.

²² *Ibid.*

NCR would be framed, but they lack any mention of, or importance placed upon the international system and its systemic imperatives as outlined by structural realist theory.

Lastly, no sources have advanced a clear and robust explanation using NCR, and I will be creating this interpretation through my own analysis. This approach will be useful to develop a more nuanced understanding of the mechanics behind the decision to intervene. This approach would share similar base assumptions to the proxy war interpretation, while placing focus on the Saudi foreign policy apparatus where applicable. I will draw upon the same literature utilized when examining the first two interpretations for evidence, while also using sources which explain NCR as a research project—with particular focus placed on Lobell et al.'s book covering the theory.²³

²³ Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, 2009.

Chapter 3: Research Design

As explored in my literature review, there are three primary explanatory themes that I will be covering in this thesis: The proxy war interpretation, the domestic-political interpretation, and lastly, my own analysis which utilizes NCR to create a more cohesive understanding of Saudi Arabia's actions.

To test the proxy war interpretation, I first examine the extent of Iranian support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen. This topic is relevant to structural realism and neoclassical realism, as it would be what prompts any form of balancing in the first place. To gather this information, I rely on expert opinion and news media, including relevant leaks related to this topic. Furthermore, I also rely on historical and contemporary sources which focus on Iranian foreign policy strategies—particularly as they relate to support of proxy groups. To verify the strength of this component, I analyze the balance of evidence as presented by the various sources, the validity of the sources themselves, and how these factors hold up under close scrutiny.

Secondly, I examine whether there is agreement within Saudi Arabia's elite groups on the appropriate response to perceived Iranian encroachment. As structural realism views the state as a black box, it would not matter who was 'at the helm': the state would have made the same (or a functionally similar) decision regardless, and elites would be expected to agree with decisions taken. Due to the opaque nature of the Saudi state, I am left to rely on sources which examine social media coverage of societal elite opinion within Saudi Arabia, as well as leaks regarding the opinions of Saudi princes. I then analyze whether there appears to be widespread or significant disagreement within these groups regarding the choice to intervene.

Lastly, I examine whether the intervention has been successful in terms of achieving Saudi Arabia's policy and security goals. Saudi goals, at a high level, can be verified both by what the Saudi state has publicly stated and used as their justification for the intervention, as well as what a structural realist interpretation would reasonably expect a country to seek from this kind of intervention. The explicitly stated goal and justification would be to restore the government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, whereas the implicit goal would be to stall and rollback Iranian influence within Yemen. Both goals will be analyzed via up-to-date news media, as well as leaks and academic sources where the implicit areas are concerned.

As no sources make an explicit structural realist argument, I will create this argument using the literature to test whether the findings are consistent with a structural realist analysis. If the results are consistent with structural realism, I then look at whether the reported results answer the actual problematic of this thesis (i.e., why Saudi Arabia chose to *directly* intervene in Yemen as opposed to softer forms of intervention as they have done in the past).

The second explanatory theme in the literature is the domestic-political interpretation. This takes the Saudi-Iranian cold war as a given for motivating a response from Saudi Arabia. Focus is placed on the ascension and centralization of power under MbS as the primary—if not sole—driver behind Saudi Arabia choosing to directly intervene.²⁴

²⁴ e.g., Gause, “Fresh Prince”; Khalid Al-Karimi and Farah Najjar, “Saudi Arabia’s War in Yemen ‘a Strategic Failure,’” accessed January 9, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/saudi-arabia-war-yemen-strategic-failure-170823072854582.html>; Mark Mazzetti and Ben Hubbard, “Rise of Young Prince Shatters Decades of Saudi Royal Tradition,” *New York Times*, 2016; Maria-Louise Clausen, “Justifying Military Intervention: Yemen as a Failed State,” *Third*

To test this interpretation, I examine Saudi Arabia's domestic politics and decision-making processes using publicly available information to verify the assertion that Saudi decision making has changed in a noticeable or drastic way since the ascension of the current crown prince. If this assertion proves to be correct, I will then investigate whether this change in decision making allowed for a more direct intervention that would not have been considered previously.

This interpretation relies more on contemporary analysis to trace the rise of King Salman and MbS since ~2011 to see whether there is academic or expert agreement that either of these two individuals were a key factor in the decision to intervene. As this interpretation does not neatly fit into an existing theoretical tool, I will be treating it as a mostly ad-hoc explanation and will place primacy on the factors that are commonly brought up in the literature to analyze whether this interpretation is sufficient in explaining the problematic of my thesis.

Finally, to construct my own interpretation, I utilize NCR to analyze the Saudi intervention and synthesize key realist and domestic factors which I argue are intertwined when explaining Saudi Arabia's decision. The underpinning work that informs my use of NCR is the book by Lobell et. al—particularly its concept of the foreign policy executive (FPE).²⁵ The concept of the FPE is perfectly suited as a lens with which to view Saudi Arabia's foreign policy strategies and decisions, given the unique method of governance within the kingdom.

World Quarterly 40, no. 3 (March 4, 2019): 488–502,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1573141>.

²⁵ Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, 2009.

To test my interpretation, I briefly trace the formation of the Saudi FPE—with focus placed on its origins in the creation of the modern Saudi oil state. Though a state’s FPE may include representation from its elite groups, there exists the potential for a particular group to ‘hijack’ the policy making process—consensus is not necessary if a group has sole decision-making power. In doing so, I examine whether the construction of Saudi Arabia’s FPE created conditions under which a particularly ambitious prince or king would be able to drastically alter Saudi foreign policy. I also examine who likely comprises the FPE and would be able to make or influence these decisions.

Like the prior analyses, my sources will largely be expert opinion, academic sources, and grey literature. My interpretation will, however, have more historical documentation and analysis, primarily as it relates to examining the Saudi FPE. As my interpretation shares many assumptions with structural realism, I do not repeat analyses from the chapter on the proxy war interpretation where they remain the same but call attention to where they may differ.

Chapter 4: The Proxy War Interpretation

The first explanation of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen that I analyze is the proxy war interpretation. As noted, I will be treating this explanation as structurally realist. The proxy war interpretation is perhaps the most important of the mainstream explanations of Saudi Arabia's decision to intervene in Yemen. It is no secret that Saudi Arabia and Iran are regional rivals, and many conflicts within the Middle East include both Saudi- and Iranian-backed factions—both of whom utilize these proxy groups to either secure influence within a destabilized country, or at the very least, to deny influence to the other.

Furthermore, while mainstream structural realism often focuses on the behaviour of great (or emergent) powers within the broader international system,²⁶ not all states are equipped to achieve global hegemony and settle instead for maximizing their regional power and obtaining a modicum of global influence—Saudi Arabia and Iran both being good examples of this. As such, any elements of structural realism which focus on great powers and global hegemony will instead be applied to Saudi Arabia and Iran seeking to become hegemons within the Gulf region.

To test the strength of a structural realist explanation, I examine three key factors: the veracity and extent of Iranian support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen, the level of agreement within Saudi Arabia's elite groups; and lastly, whether the intervention has been successful in achieving Saudi Arabia's security goals, and if not, whether there was

²⁶ e.g., John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Joseph M. Parent and Sebastian Rosato, "Balancing in Neorealism," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (October 2015): 51–86, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00216; Lucas G. Freire, "Is Neorealism a Deterministic Theory of International Relations?," *International Studies* 56, no. 1 (January 2019): 58–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881718824760>.

a better decision available to Saudi Arabia. I chose to examine these factors, as evidence of Iranian support for the Houthi rebels would be the initial prompt for a response by Saudi Arabia, while elite group consensus and goal achievement would indicate whether Saudi Arabia made a ‘rational’ decision in line with structural realist predictions. As noted in my research design, while the last of these three factors has enough evidence available, the first two will be more limited due to the closed nature of the Saudi Arabian policy apparatus, as well as Saudi Arabia’s relatively weak independent press. Most of my evidence will be gleaned from regional experts’ opinions on Saudi Arabian (and Iranian) foreign policy, as well as grey literature sources—with particular focus on leaks and interviews involving Saudi Arabia and Iran where applicable.

Iranian Support

Common understanding within news media and most academic sources is that Iran is, and has been, supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen.²⁷ When approaching the Saudi intervention from a structural realist perspective, this is a driving factor in determining whether Saudi Arabia (or any country in its position) would decide to

²⁷ e.g., Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, “CONFIRMED: Iran’s Foreign Military Arm Is Backing Yemeni Rebels Who Took Control Of The Country,” *Business Insider*, December 15, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-iranian-support-seen-crucial-for-yemens-houthis-2014-12>; Maria-Louise Clausen, “Understanding the Crisis in Yemen: Evaluating Competing Narratives,” *The International Spectator* 50, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 16–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2015.1053707>; Kareem Fahim, “U.N. Probe Details Fallout of Proxy War in Yemen between Saudi Coalition and Iran,” *Washington Post*, January 11, 2018, sec. World, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/un-probe-details-fallout-of-proxy-war-in-yemen-between-saudi-coalition-and-iran-/2018/01/11/3e3f9302-f644-11e7-9af7-a50bc3300042_story.html; Amal Mudallali, “The Iranian Sphere of Influence Expands Into Yemen,” *Foreign Policy*, accessed January 21, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/08/the-iranian-sphere-of-influence-expands-into-yemen/>.

commit to a military operation. Given Yemen's proximity to Saudi Arabia, the goal would be to respond to Iran's aggressions and to prevent them from gaining a foothold in a country whose stability is paramount to Saudi Arabia's security and strategic interests. Additionally, even if Iran were divorced from the conflict entirely, it is highly likely that Saudi Arabia would still aim to either end the Yemeni Civil War, or to ensure working relations with whomever had the strongest chance at winning to prevent a hostile neighbouring state. Saudi Arabia has militarily intervened in Yemen in a limited capacity in the past, but this has been infrequent, and they have primarily focused on funding key Yemeni elites as well as the spread of Wahhabism within Yemen.²⁸ Ultimately, Saudi Arabia adopts a stance "where enough support is given to whichever regime is in power in Sana'a to prevent state collapse, but [where] a certain level of state dysfunction is viewed as attractive."²⁹

In recent years, Iran has been actively supporting the Houthis via "training, [provision of] lethal support, and helping them 'fine-tune' their drone and missile programs."³⁰ This lends credence to the idea that Iran would naturally get involved in the Yemeni civil war from Saudi Arabia's perspective, and provides justification to continue

²⁸ Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen."

²⁹ Peter Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" *Chatham House*, Middle East and North Africa Programme, February 2015, 4.

³⁰ "Iran Giving Houthis 'Significant' and 'Lethal' Support: US Envoy," accessed June 21, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/21/iran-giving-houthis-significant-and-lethal-support-us-envoy>; for other examples, see: Mudallali, "The Iranian Sphere of Influence Expands Into Yemen"; "Iran Admits Supporting Houthis, Holds onto 'Hezbollah's' Arms," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, November 24, 2017, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1093501/iran-admits-supporting-houthis-holds-hezbollah%E2%80%99s-arms>; Bayoumy and Ghobari, "CONFIRMED: Iran's Foreign Military Arm Is Backing Yemeni Rebels Who Took Control Of The Country."

the intervention.³¹ Nonetheless, the Saudi-led intervention began in early 2015, and it is important to determine what Iranian support may have looked like then to more accurately analyze Saudi Arabia's decision to intervene.

Iran's relationship with the Houthi rebels prior to and after the onset of the intervention is not entirely clear. While many sources agree that Iran was supporting the Houthis to some degree following the start of the Saudi intervention, the actual support provided appears to be limited. Juneau argues that the level of Iranian support up to and including 2016 was intentionally limited, as firstly, Yemen was nowhere near as important to Iran as other areas within the region (e.g., Syria, Lebanon, etc.), and secondly, given the importance Saudi Arabia places on Yemen for its security, Iran realized that overt and heavy support could risk a level of escalation which was not desirable.³²

Salisbury argues that while Iran was likely supporting the Houthis to an extent, there exists little evidence which confirms what kind of support was provided.³³ While Iran may have initially provided training and support for capacity building to the Houthis, the Houthis were more than capable of procuring weaponry on their own given Yemen's status as a major hub of the regional arms trade. If Iran was providing weaponry to the Houthis at the time, the effect was marginal in the grand scheme of things. It is likely that former Yemeni president Saleh, who himself received Saudi and US funding and support, may have diverted his remaining resources to the Houthis

³¹ Regardless of whether or not Iran *would* have gotten involved, they are involved now, creating an impetus for a continued response from Saudi Arabia.

³² Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen," 1–2.

³³ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi–Iranian 'Cold War.'"

during their brief alliance, allowing much greater gains in power than what Iran may have provided.³⁴

When discussing alleged Iranian support for the Houthis prior to the Saudi-led intervention, it is also important to note *which* sources tended to argue in favour of the Houthis being Iranian proxies. The Saudi, Yemeni, and US governments were amongst the biggest proponents of the theory that the Houthis were direct proxies of the Iranians, but the first two had vested interests in this narrative (the Saudi government seeking justification for an intervention, and the Yemeni state seeking Saudi help),³⁵ while the latter is a close ally of Saudi Arabia and has had negative relations with Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Furthermore, sources which call into question the extent of Iranian support for the Houthis tend to be academic in nature, rather than being sourced directly from governments.

This casts further doubt on there being substantial support provided by Iran in the early stages of the Yemeni civil war and subsequent Saudi intervention, as do some sources indicating that Iran actually warned the Houthis against taking Sana'a prior to the civil war.³⁶ A factor which makes the analysis of initial Iranian intentions difficult is an Iranian cleric's often-repeated claim that "Iran now controlled four Arab capitals (Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and now Sana'a)," despite Iran having little influence over

³⁴ Ibid.; the importance of Saleh's alliance with the Houthis is also supported by Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen."

³⁵ Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen."

³⁶ Ali Watkins, Ryan Grim, and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "Iran Warned Houthis Against Yemen Takeover," HuffPost Canada, April 20, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen_n_7101456.html.

Houthi decision-making.³⁷ Instead, Iran likely saw the Houthis as an additional avenue in which Saudi Arabia could be harried with little expenditure, investment, or expectations on Iran's part.³⁸

There is a lack of conclusive evidence that the Iranians were helping the Houthis in a significant manner, nor is there evidence to suggest that—at least initially—Iran expected anything more than a minor amount of influence in Yemen going forward.³⁹ However, this in no way disqualifies a perceived need to balance against Iran as an important factor behind the Saudi decision to intervene in Yemen. Regardless of whether Iran was seeking to establish a strong presence in Yemen, or whether they were even supporting the Houthis in any meaningful way, it is more than likely that Yemen's importance to Saudi Arabian security fueled the *perception* that Iran would try and establish a foothold. Regardless of the accuracy of this perception, the Saudi state felt they had to act in some capacity—what remains unclear is why a direct intervention was chosen, in contrast to prior Saudi foreign policy decisions (particularly those that relate to Yemen).

Saudi Elite Consensus

Another important factor to examine is whether there exists (and existed) elite consensus within Saudi Arabia regarding the approach taken vis-à-vis Yemen. If all influential decision makers within Saudi Arabia agreed with the intervention being an

³⁷ Hokayem and Roberts, "The War in Yemen," 8.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Świątek raises similar points to Juneau in that it is possible the aggressive Saudi response actually drove the Houthis to seek more support from Iran: Świątek, "The Yemen War."

appropriate response to perceived Iranian aggression, then the facts presented so far would fit with what would be expected from structural realist predictions. This would suggest that Saudi Arabia was bound to make this decision regardless. However, if it were to be shown that one or more actors within Saudi Arabia had a disproportionate amount of influence behind this decision and had effectively hijacked the decision-making process, this would suggest that a structural realist model is not entirely effective in predicting Saudi Arabia's behaviour, and that more granular, domestic analysis is needed to understand the intervention along with future foreign policy decisions.

Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia's government is opaque in terms of its policy decisions. Gathering explicit evidence on elite opinion, when possible, is exceptionally difficult. As such, I rely heavily on expert opinion, leaks, and rare interviews or quotes that involve Saudi officials or elites.

Gause argues that the intervention in Yemen (as of 2018) "is a drain on Saudi resources and a blot on the country's international reputation, but [that] it still enjoys broad support among Saudi elites."⁴⁰ It is important to note that Gause does not indicate where the evidence for this support comes from. Al-Rashed, while not focusing specifically on Saudi government elites observed via a mixture of Twitter and televised appearances, that support among societal elites for the intervention was more mixed.⁴¹ Interesting to note in the latter example is the echoing of sentiment by some Saudi journalists and scholars of the intervention being a 'necessity' to curb Iranian influence.

⁴⁰ Gause, "Fresh Prince," 5.

⁴¹ Bader al-Rashed, "Saudi Elites Divided on Yemen War," Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East, April 21, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/04/saudi-arabia-elite-yemen-operation-decisive-storm.html>.

Even those who were more critical of Saudi policies toward Yemen or the region more broadly, such as some Saudi opposition members, still speak towards Iranian expansion as if it were a fact rather than a debate. Al-Rashed finishes by saying that “the majority of elites who currently support the intervention are not as enthusiastic about a future large-scale land operation. They generally advocate limited air intervention without getting involved in bloody battles on the ground, because it would result in unpredictable losses and an unknown conclusion.”⁴²

Further sources on elite opinion during the outset of the Saudi intervention are difficult to find. However, Ulrichson raises an important point that “it is likely that few in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi anticipated a campaign that would last for years with no political or military victory in sight.”⁴³ When working with a relative lack of information on elite opinion, it is reasonable to assume that while opinion towards the intervention in Yemen may have been initially positive,⁴⁴ the success or failure of the intervention would also be a helpful indicator as to whether or not there is continued elite support for the intervention. Not only has Saudi leadership expressed desire to end its engagement even prior to brokering peace talks,⁴⁵ the war itself has come to represent a parasite on

⁴² Ibid., para. 14

⁴³ Ulrichson, “Endgames for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen.”

⁴⁴ The following news source covers a Saudi prince’s theoretical offer of luxury cars to pilots who participated in bombing campaigns, which was met with a relatively warm reception within Saudi Arabia: “The Saudi Prince Who Offered Bentleys to Bombers,” *BBC News*, April 23, 2015, sec. Trending, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-32417773>.

⁴⁵ “Saudi Crown Prince MBS ‘wants out’ of Yemen War,” accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/8/14/saudi-crown-prince-mbs-wants-out-of-yemen-war>.

the Saudi budget, with a myriad of shifting, vaguely GCC-aligned groups fighting with one another, the Houthis, and the Yemeni government.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in examining Saudi foreign policy, I argue that it is counterproductive to black box Saudi decision-making and its elite opinions given its unique government structure. Saudi Arabia, as well as other Gulf monarchies operate in ways that are distinct from predicted behaviour under structural realist theory.

Two factors unique to Saudi Arabia are important in examining how it conducts foreign policy, and how to analyze its use of realist tenets over time. Firstly, Saudi Arabia is one of the few remaining absolute monarchies on the planet, which would naturally affect how its foreign and domestic policy decisions are made. Secondly, Saudi Arabia has an exceptionally large ruling family, with some estimates placing the House of Saud as having between 15,000 and 20,000 members. Approximately 2,000 members have some level of influence within Saudi Arabia's government,⁴⁷ and positions of authority within the Saudi government have typically been occupied by members of the Saud family.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibrahim Jalal, "The UAE May Have Withdrawn from Yemen, but Its Influence Remains Strong," Middle East Institute, February 25, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-may-have-withdrawn-yemen-its-influence-remains-strong>; "UAE-Backed Group Vows to 'overthrow' Yemen's Government," Al Jazeera English, January 22, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/uae-backed-group-vows-overthrow-yemen-government-180122051136241.html>.

⁴⁷ "Saudi Royal Family Profiles," *House of Saud* (blog), accessed June 18, 2021, <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-profiles/>; Ruth Umoh, "This Royal Family's Wealth Could Be More than \$1 Trillion," News, CNBC, August 18, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/18/this-royal-family-s-wealth-could-be-more-than-1-trillion.html>. Official numbers are difficult to find, but the House of Saud source appears to be connected with, if not run by the Saudi government.

⁴⁸ Gause, "Fresh Prince."

The factors above result in a method of governance which relies on networks of patronage within the sprawling ruling family. In contrast to an ideal meritocracy (elusive as it may be), many influential posts are implicitly required to go to family members, and due to the vaguely ‘elective’ and internal consensus-based method of succession introduced by the creation of the Allegiance Council, decisions, both domestic and international, must also be made with perception on how they would affect the reputation of the decision maker. As such, not only would elite consensus be greatly affected by how much importance is placed on agreement with an autocratic ruler, but a ruler may make less optimal decisions based upon potential domestic benefits that may result.

Saudi Goals and Looking Forward

Ultimately, it is not difficult to make the argument that Saudi Arabia’s goals in Yemen have not been achieved, but the reality is more complex. While the original intention was to restore power to Hadi’s government, prevent Iran from gaining a foothold in Yemen, and ultimately create a stable but weak Yemen, Saudi Arabia has achieved the opposite of these goals. The Hadi government has been weakened after six years of fighting with the Houthis, AQAP cells, and various other armed groups with rapidly shifting loyalties. Furthermore, the Houthis have gained enough territory and support from Iran to be able to launch drone and missile strikes against Saudi Arabia directly. Kocan and Estelle argue that “[t]he al Houthi movement has increased its attack rate significantly since mid-February 2021 and appears to be sustaining this higher frequency. The group attempted a bold drone and ballistic missile attack on March 7 that

targeted Saudi oil facilities in Ras Tanura in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern region.”⁴⁹ The aggressive and uncharacteristic response by Saudi Arabia in intervening directly is likely what drove the Houthis to seek additional and substantive support from Iran in the first place.⁵⁰

On the other hand, some sources argue that, while the Saudi-led intervention was innately counterproductive—much as Egypt’s attempt to invade Yemen in the 1960s was—“[b]y ending their intervention in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE will actually begin the process by which the control of the Houthis—especially that of the core leadership—is slowly diminished. The wars in Yemen are the glue that hold the Houthis and their allies together,” and Yemeni forms of patronage would ensure an eventual cooling of its ongoing civil war.⁵¹ While this may hold validity, it is difficult to assume that the many Yemenis who may have been radicalized by continued and indiscriminate Saudi air strikes would be willing to forget Saudi Arabia’s role in the ongoing humanitarian crisis Yemen faces.

As the intervention has yet to conclude, it is tough to say whether Horton’s prediction regarding Houthi dissolution would come true following a Saudi Arabian withdrawal.⁵² I argue that between the massive costs incurred throughout the conflict, the

⁴⁹ Jessica Kocan and Emily Estelle, “April 2021 Map Update: Al Houthi Attacks on Saudi Arabia,” *Critical Threats*, para. 2, accessed June 24, 2021, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/april-2021-map-update-al-houthi-attacks-on-saudi-arabia>.

⁵⁰ Rich and Moore-Gilbert, “From Defense to Offense.”

⁵¹ Michael Horton, “Hot Issue – Is This the Beginning of the End of the War in Yemen?,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, para. 12, accessed June 23, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-is-this-the-beginning-of-the-end-of-the-war-in-yemen/>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

high likelihood that radicalized elements within Yemen will continue to bear a grudge against the Saudi state—regardless of whether they pull out soon or not—and the fact that Iran has succeeded in its own goals (i.e., forcing Saudi Arabia to engage in a costly quagmire of an intervention in order to bleed their resources and focus), Saudi Arabia has not achieved its goals thus far, and is unlikely to do so. Furthermore, the Saudi government faces a difficult predicament wherein it must find a way to withdraw from Yemen while also ‘saving face’ with respect to having chose to intervene in the first place.⁵³

Though it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia will achieve its original goals, it raises the question: did Saudi Arabia have a choice in choosing to intervene? Structural realism, while working effectively to predict general state behaviour in high-level situations, does not necessarily prescribe the ‘correct’ decision. States are often left to choose from the lesser of multiple evils, with imperfect information informing these decisions. While it is reasonable to expect that Saudi Arabia would respond to what they saw as Iranian aggression in Yemen, “when faced with conflict, the Saudis have historically sought to buckpass and avoid significant material and human costs. Yemen, by contrast, has been estimated to cost the Saudis \$5-6 billion per month.”⁵⁴ Rich and Moore-Gilbert argue that this signals a shift toward offensive realist policies within Saudi Arabia,⁵⁵ and while

⁵³ Al-Karimi and Najjar, “Saudi Arabia’s War in Yemen ‘a Strategic Failure’”; Khairuldeen Al Makhzoomi, “The Failure of Saudi Intervention in Yemen,” *Huffington Post* (blog), November 12, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/khairuldeen-al-makhzoomi/the-failure-of-saudi-intervention-in-yemen_b_8469744.html; “Saudi Arabia Looks for a Peace Deal in Yemen, but at What Price?”

⁵⁴ Rich and Moore-Gilbert, “From Defense to Offense,” 71.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

I do not disagree with this assessment, the *why* behind this shift has not been adequately explored. Though Saudi Arabia's style of governance cannot be the only factor considered if one hopes to maintain a level of predictive strength, its unique factors require exploration, due to the shifts which occurred at a domestic level prior to and during the intervention in Yemen.

Chapter 5: The Domestic-Political Interpretation

The second explanation I analyze is an inverse of a structural realist explanation and focuses on how the increasingly centralized power under MbS and his father were the key influence behind the decision to directly intervene in Yemen. While the Saudi-Iranian Cold War is acknowledged as an motivation to respond to some degree, individuals within the Saudi state are seen as the prime reason behind a decision to directly intervene. This broader explanatory grouping does not neatly match an existing theoretical tool in the way that the proxy war interpretation does, so analysis will focus solely on the expository strength of ad-hoc variables brought forward within the existing academic and grey literature. I start by detailing factors inherent to the Saudi Arabian government, important events that have taken place which may have affected the decision to intervene, the political power of MbS, and how this may have led to a direct intervention.

Saudi Government Structure

As explained in the previous chapter, Saudi Arabia has a unique government structure which it owes partly to being an absolute monarchy. Though many similarities can be identified with other authoritarian regimes (such as the precedent of dictators grooming their children to inherit office and widespread practices of nepotism), the Saudi monarchy is distinctive in having a large ruling family in terms of sheer size, as well as the proportion of this family which has some level of sway in government—whether through actual appointments or positions within businesses and the private

sector.⁵⁶ Furthermore, “[c]onventional wisdom has it that the Saudi regime rests on a social compact among the ruling family, the religious establishment, and the economic elite.”⁵⁷ The state of domestic affairs in Saudi Arabia is therefore important in determining how foreign policy decisions might be enacted.

Saudi Arabia’s kings (theoretically) wield absolute power, but their appointed crown princes play an important role in decision-making processes: a good example of this being then-Crown Prince Abdullah effectively running Saudi Arabia between 1995-2005 due to King Fahd’s failing health.⁵⁸ Furthermore, since 1963, the defense ministers of Saudi Arabia have always ended up being appointed as crown princes—with Salman becoming its current king, and MbS likely to inherit once his father passes. Crown princes are nominally chosen from the current king’s next eldest brother through a system of agnatic seniority (to ensure the continued inheritance of King Abdulaziz bin Saud’s sons), but this has not always been followed, and under the Basic Law of Saudi Arabia,⁵⁹ appointment of a crown prince has been the sole prerogative of the king. However, it is more accurate to say that crown princes have been chosen based on an informal consensus amongst the king and senior family members.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

⁵⁷ Gause, “Fresh Prince,” 1–2. Gause does note, however, that these groups are not equal in their power.

⁵⁸ Madawi Al-Rasheed, “The Gulf War and Its Aftermath, 1990-2000,” in *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 158–81.

⁵⁹ “Basic Law of Governance,” The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d., <https://www.saudiembassy.net/basic-law-governance>.

⁶⁰ Simon Henderson, “After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia” (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2009),

In 2007, King Abdullah established the Allegiance Council to formalize and codify this consensus-based succession process. While the intention of the council was to curb the infighting between the many princes, it is unclear if it has been effective so far. Some sources indicate disagreement by princes with its efficacy, while others argue that the death of King Abdullah in 2015 led to a particularly swift and seamless succession.⁶¹ The relatively recent appointment of MbS to the position of crown prince is said to have had only 3 dissenters out of 34 voting members of the council, but being that these are Saudi state-reported numbers, their validity is not clear.⁶²

It is possible that the Saudi monarchical structure could have had more influence on the decision to intervene than generalized, structural realist incentives. Under the reign of its second and third kings, Saud and Faisal, Saudi Arabia's bureaucracy and governmental decision making were very patrimonial and nepotistic.⁶³ Though Faisal would heavily centralize decision-making within the government to the level where he personally made many decisions, this style of governance would be replicated within each ministry, creating silos which did not easily communicate or cooperate with each

https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/PolicyFocus96_Henderson.pdf.

⁶¹ "Saudi Allegiance Council Ineffective: Saudi Prince Talal," Islam Times (Islam Times, June 21, 2012), <https://www.islamtimes.org/en/news/173086/saudi-allegiance-council-ineffective-prince-talal>; Thomas W. Lippman, "Saudi Arabia's Seamless Succession," Middle East Institute, January 28, 2015, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-arabias-seamless-succession>.

⁶² "Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Bin Salman Appointed Crown Prince," Al Arabiya English, June 21, 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2017/06/21/Saudi-Arabia-declares-Mohammed-bin-Salman-as-crown-prince>.

⁶³ David E. Long and Sebastian Maisel, *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010), 41.

other.⁶⁴ Due to the heavily politicized nature of these ministerial fiefdoms, it is likely they could affect the information available to decision makers, as well as the efficacy of any decisions taken. Though MbS has seemed poised to further modernize and streamline Saudi bureaucracy and decision-making, it remains to be seen whether this goal is genuine or in the interests of solidifying his own power.⁶⁵

The Crown Prince & the Pursuit of Power

In examining the influence of Saudi domestic factors on the decision to intervene, MbS is a critical figure to analyze. He is the son of King Salman, and is the current crown prince, deputy prime minister, and minister of defense. Since becoming a private advisor to his father in 2011, MbS has moved up the political ladder remarkably fast, becoming “the most powerful figure in contemporary Saudi history...”⁶⁶ He has been referred to in grey literature and some academic sources as the architect and driving force behind the intervention in Yemen,⁶⁷ and is seen to represent a dramatic shift in Saudi governance and foreign policy decisions.⁶⁸ It is unclear where the delineation between MbS and his father King Salman exists in terms of decision-making power, but it is apparent that MbS currently wields considerable influence and authority.

⁶⁴ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*.

⁶⁵ Gause, “Fresh Prince.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁷ Matt Purple, “Why Saudi Arabia Is Hammering Yemen,” *The National Interest*, April 12, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-saudi-arabia-hammering-yemen-15748>; Black, “Saudi King’s Son Drives Reforms and War in a Year of Anxiety and Change”; Mazzetti and Hubbard, “Rise of Young Prince Shatters Decades of Saudi Royal Tradition.”

⁶⁸ Colombo, “Foreign Policy Activism in Saudi Arabia and Oman. Diverging Narratives and Stances towards the Syrian and Yemeni Conflicts”; Rich and Moore-Gilbert, “From Defense to Offense.”

To examine whether MbS was a driving factor behind the decision to intervene, I analyze both the extent of his current political power domestically and how this would have affected his ability to start a conflict, as well as whether or not he had a vested interest in doing so. My analysis will predominantly rely on expert opinion and leaks, as MbS himself has denied personal involvement in staging the intervention in Yemen, and it is unlikely he would admit to it publicly.⁶⁹ In particular, I look at how much power he has centralized leading up to and following the death of King Abdullah, as well as whether or not there is a strong correlation between his acquisition of power and a clear change in Saudi foreign policy.

MbS' acquisition of power arguably began in 2011 when his father became the second deputy prime minister as well as the minister of defence, choosing MbS to be his private advisor. In 2012, Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz passed away, which led to MbS' father becoming the next crown prince, and first deputy prime minister. MbS' father continued to accrue political power until the death of King Abdullah in 2015, when he became the next king.

Once his father became king, MbS was appointed to be the new minister of defence—mere months before the intervention in Yemen was to be launched. As the Ministry of Defense maintains control over Saudi armed forces, this effectively put MbS in a position where he had influence—if not complete control—over the nature and timing of a response toward the Houthi uprising in Yemen. Darwich argues that the preparations to intervene in Yemen had begun several months prior to Abdullah's death,

⁶⁹ “Transcript: Interview with Muhammad Bin Salman,” *The Economist*, January 6, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/01/06/transcript-interview-with-muhammad-bin-salman>.

which could rule out the likelihood that MbS had any sway over the decision to intervene.⁷⁰ However, the rise of Salman to king and MbS to defence minister along with the decision to intervene in Yemen correlate in a way that cannot be ignored.

Prior to the death of King Abdullah, Saudi foreign policy was nothing if not thoughtful, calculating, and conservative:

In order to counter an internal threat, support has been sought from external resources, and if an external threat becomes menacing, internal unity and legitimacy have been used to counter it. Saudi Arabia used this “pronghorn” approach to defend against external threats that emanated from Nasserite Egypt, Baathist Iraq and post-revolution Iran, as well as to resist against threats posed by supra-state movements like pan-Arabism and the Muslim Brotherhood. These dynamics further intertwined the domains of internal and external policy.⁷¹

Saudi Arabia has used this form of policy crafting in the past without deviation—largely drawing on consensus-based decision-making—and it is only under the reign of King Salman and the rise of MbS that Saudi foreign policy has become significantly more adventurous. In fact, Gause argues that MbS has “removed the restraints that have made Saudi foreign and domestic policy cautious, conservative, and ultimately successful amid the crises of the modern Middle East.”⁷² While not explicitly ascribed to domestic factors, this is supported by Rich and Moore-Gilbert in their examination of shifts in Saudi foreign policy.⁷³

It is difficult to conclusively claim MbS is the sole ‘architect’ of this intervention; as stated prior, there is evidence suggesting plans were in motion to respond to Yemen’s

⁷⁰ Darwich, “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen.”

⁷¹ Karim, “The Evolution of Saudi Foreign Policy and the Role of Decision-Making Processes and Actors,” 72.

⁷² Gause, “Fresh Prince,” 2.

⁷³ Rich and Moore-Gilbert, “From Defense to Offense.”

civil war before MbS became the minister of defence. However, given MbS' position as defence minister, and now crown prince/deputy prime minister, he has been in the command seat from the beginning of the actual intervention. Due to his relative inexperience, it is possible that he and/or his father chose to intervene, expecting a quick win that would reflect very highly on a new king and a new defence minister.⁷⁴ In the time since the intervention began, MbS has also centralized power to such a degree that he "now stands at the top of the Saudi decision-making process ... [answering] only to the king, who has granted him wide-ranging powers, allowing him to make difficult decisions that were previously kicked down the road..."⁷⁵ Due to the nature of political and factional power struggles within Saudi Arabia, MbS does not have the ability to simply 'give up' on this war, as the results of this campaign will have a direct and tangible impact on his political and royal career. Even the United Arab Emirates had to display a manner of caution with regard to how they were to extricate themselves from the campaign, for fear of affecting the reputation of a prince they had backed.⁷⁶

Unfortunately, there is not sufficient evidence to argue conclusively that MbS is the reason behind the intervention in Yemen. Enough evidence has been put forward, however, to still raise this as a reasonable possibility. Furthermore, it is even more likely that whoever was responsible (whether it be an individual, group, or MbS himself), did so partly to bolster his image as defence minister, clearly highlighting the importance of

⁷⁴ Mazzetti and Hubbard, "Rise of Young Prince Shatters Decades of Saudi Royal Tradition"; Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen."

⁷⁵ Gause, "Fresh Prince," 4–5.

⁷⁶ Ulrichson, "Endgames for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen."

domestic factors in this decision—factors not accounted for under a structural realist interpretation.

Chapter 6: A Neoclassical Realist Interpretation

The last interpretation of the Saudi intervention that I cover is a combination of systemic and domestic factors. As I have outlined in previous chapters, focusing solely on the Saudi-Iranian proxy war and systemic level factors is not adequate in developing a granular analysis of this unique foreign policy decision for Saudi Arabia. Nor is it enough to only focus on domestic factors within Saudi Arabia without any form of structure to determine which domestic factors should or should not be utilized. By combining relevant factors from both interpretations, along with a more nuanced look at domestic factors, I hope to give greater insight into Saudi Arabia's decision making while also ensuring I do not ignore the very real systemic factors which prompted a decision in the first place.

To analyze Saudi Arabia's decision to intervene in Yemen, I use a theory of foreign policy—neoclassical realism (NCR)—to argue that Saudi Arabia's decision to directly intervene in Yemen was caused by a misreading of geopolitical currents. This created the perception within its decision-making apparatus that intervening in Yemen was necessary to balance against Iranian influence. While this does not fundamentally diverge from the existing 'proxy war' interpretation of the intervention, I frame the decision as one caused by incomplete information along with unique, leadership-intrinsic biases and examine which elements of the Saudi decision-making body contributed to current outcomes.

To begin this chapter, I give an overview of NCR as a theory and explain how it can be used to examine this problem. I then delineate the 'foreign policy executive'

(FPE)⁷⁷ of Saudi Arabia by briefly tracing its experience with state formation under the rulership of King Abdulaziz, King Saud, and King Faisal, as they most prominently shaped the form of the FPE in Saudi Arabia. Finally, I apply NCR to the events leading up to the intervention along with the intervention itself and conclude with the implications my findings may have on the future trajectory of the Saudi intervention in Yemen.

NCR is first and foremost a theory of international relations, and its major assumptions are drawn from structural realism. However, the way in which it differs from structural realism is a large point of contention within the field of international relations but lends it well to foreign policy analysis. For the purposes of brevity, I will only focus on the differences between structural realism and NCR, as the former has already been explained in its own chapter.

For a theory to remain parsimonious, some elements are given primacy over others. With structural realism, the state is seen as the lowest level unit of analysis when looking at the international system. Though subnational actors such as leaders, political groups, and so on exist and matter (to a degree) they are omitted as casual factors for the types of things that structural realist theory seeks to predict and explain.

This focus is apparent in the goals of structural realist theory: to determine how states interact with each other in an anarchic international system over time, and to explain their behaviour. States are presumed to act with their own survival in mind, so it would make sense to not focus on domestic actors—most subnational forces will not

⁷⁷ I borrow this term from Lobell et al. See Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009) for more information.

actively seek the destruction of their own country. Despite the ease and simplicity with which structural realism explains broad patterns of international relations, states do not always react predictably or rationally to systemic imperatives. Furthermore, it is not always clear to a state what the ideal course of action may be in a new security dilemma.

An example provided of seemingly irrational or self-defeating behaviour by Taliaferro et al. is that of the Bush administration's response to the September 11 attacks. Though a punitive strike against the Taliban (who were providing safe haven to Al Qaeda) via an invasion of Afghanistan was not a particularly surprising decision, the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq cannot be adequately explained or addressed by structural realism.⁷⁸ This campaign has worsened the security of the Middle East, and indirectly led to the growth and prominence of ISIL. They argue that while

external threats and preponderant American power set the parameters for a US military response, unit-level factors such as executive branch dominance in national security, policy entrepreneurship by neoconservatives [...] and the dominance of Wilsonian (or liberal) ideals in US foreign policy discourse determined both the character and the venue of that response.⁷⁹

To apply this example to Saudi Arabia: while some form of Saudi response to Yemen's situation was to be expected, factors within the Saudi state were integral to precisely how (and when) this response would be carried out.

States choosing between 'optimal' and 'suboptimal' decisions is a primary focus of NCR. Though NCR shares the views of structural realists that material power is objective, it argues that decision makers do not perceive material power objectively, and

⁷⁸ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman, "Introduction," in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, ed. Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2–3.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

that this is an important consideration when looking at foreign policy. While the state remains the primary unit of analysis, it is not treated as an opaque black box. One must take domestic factors into account by acknowledging that intervening variables affect the transition between system imperative and foreign policy outcome. For the purposes of my argument, I apply Lobell et al.'s concept of the FPE to Saudi Arabia to categorize these intervening variables, and how they may have led to the decision to directly intervene in Yemen.

The Saudi FPE

The FPE “is Janus-faced, existing at the intersection of the international and the domestic ... leaders can act internationally for domestic reasons, or domestically for international purposes.”⁸⁰ It does not only include heads of state, but anyone at the subnational level who may be involved in decision making, or who may be able to influence this process. This allows for situations wherein a person or group may ‘hijack’ the state to serve their own interests—even if they do not align with optimal foreign policy decisions.

Though NCR faces criticism within IR literature for being a ‘kitchen sink’ approach,⁸¹ this brings some advantages to foreign policy analysis which must be contextualized for the purposes of my argument. By arguing that states cannot be treated as black boxes, NCR is said to “[violate] the core assumptions of the realist paradigm.

⁸⁰ Steven E. Lobell, “Threat Assessment, the State, and Foreign Policy: A Neoclassical Realist Model,” in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, ed. Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 43–44.

⁸¹ i.e., an approach which includes so many variables that it explains each situation on an ad-hoc basis, thus losing any unique or generalizable theoretical features.

Indeed, it is quintessentially liberal.”⁸² By including domestic and non-universal factors, NCR sacrifices its generalizability and ability to predict outcomes, but it gains the potential for case study analysis while still viewing international relations through a realist lens. Wohlforth calls this the “cruel but familiar trade-off of rigor and parsimony in favor of richness and detail.”⁸³ This allows NCR to function as a highly effective theory of foreign policy which can be used to explain suboptimal or irrational foreign policy decisions, which is why I have chosen it for this case study.

The House of Saud occupies a dominant position within the Saudi FPE and has significant influence over the foreign policy decisions of the state. However, this is typically limited to more senior and influential family members (such as the immediate royal family), and even then, this group is not monolithic. The royal family is large enough that different factions exist within which lay claim to various bureaucratic departments (though since MbS has become crown prince, fewer family members are ministers than ever before).⁸⁴ Members of the Gulf capitalist class, which Hanieh terms ‘*Khaleeji Capital*’,⁸⁵ also wield influence—largely due to the fact that domestic support for the royal family is intrinsically linked with the social welfare and benefits provided by oil income. To examine the Saudi FPE, I trace its formation back to King Faisal’s reign by detailing the factors through which the character and structure were solidified.

⁸² Kevin Narizny, “On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics: A Critique of the Newest Realism,” *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017): 165.

⁸³ Michiel Foulon, “Neoclassical Realism: Challengers and Bridging Identities,” *International Studies Review* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 2015): 637–38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12255>.

⁸⁴ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*; Gause, “Fresh Prince.”

⁸⁵ Adam Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Providing this historical context is important as, with the very recent exception of MBS' changes, the FPE has remained largely static in its structure since its foundation.

King Abdulaziz was the architect behind the creation of Saudi Arabia, but King Faisal “was the architect of the modern oil kingdom” and current trends “in Saudi [...] domestic and foreign policies all began during his reign.”⁸⁶ King Faisal occupied the throne in 1964, following his political battle with then-King Saud, at a pivotal period in Saudi history—the Organization of Petroleum Exporting States (OPEC) had just been formed in 1960, and within a decade, Gulf countries (with Saudi Arabia at the fore) would occupy a dominant position in the international oil circuit. As the Saud family maintained a large amount of ownership and control over oil production and distribution, this would further entrench the importance of the royal family within the FPE.

During King Faisal's reign, the bureaucracy also became extremely centralized: Faisal personally made all major national decisions, and even wanted to sign off on bureaucratic issues such as individual promotions.⁸⁷ As explained in the previous chapter, this led to silos which were unable to act independently. Indeed, “[g]overnment agencies, as far as operational, frequently were islands of their own, and their communications, as far as extant, were upwards to their royal superiors only.”⁸⁸ Similar to the monarchy under which these agencies existed: these ministerial ‘rulers’ would consult their favoured advisors prior to implementing decisions with no real legal limitations.

⁸⁶ Long and Maisel, *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 41.

⁸⁷ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 66.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 68

In the early 1970s, opposing the path of nationalization which Iran had followed under Mossadegh, OPEC negotiated an incremental transition to Gulf domestic ownership of their oil—these discussions were largely led by the Saudi lawyer Ahmad Zaki Yamani. These negotiations were successful by 1973, leading to International Oil Companies (IOCs) progressively giving up more concessions of oil resources in the Gulf states in return for guaranteed oil buybacks at fixed percentages.⁸⁹ Access to oil became more important than its outright control in the eyes of IOCs. This increased ownership allowed Saudi Arabia to increase the price of a barrel of crude oil from \$2.59 in January 1973 to \$11.65 in January 1974. Between 1969 and 1973 alone, the profits of oil-producing Gulf states increased by three to four times, and control of the oil industries shifted to become more centralized and under government control.⁹⁰

This substantial increase in income allowed Saudi Arabia to provide generous benefits and rewards for loyal citizens: “under Faysal’s [sic] rule, the state became the source of welfare benefits, medical treatment, new houses, travel documents, legal deeds, birth and death certificates, places at school or university, scholarships to the USA, terrain for agricultural production, construction sites and cash gifts for weddings and hardship. The list was long.”⁹¹ The increase in oil revenue also meant there was little need for taxation and little desire for dissent against the state. They also provided opportunities for those in the disenfranchised merchant class (as well as sidelined

⁸⁹ Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*, 43.

⁹⁰ F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27.

⁹¹ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 121.

nobility) to occupy positions of greater importance—in the downstream of the oil industry, the burgeoning construction sector, and so on.⁹² This would naturally affect which groups would have relevance within the Saudi FPE.

Many of these decisions were made with a strong consideration of domestic security. This is a key motivator for Gulf leaders when considering foreign or domestic policy decisions—sometimes even at the expense of traditional balance of power calculations.⁹³ These considerations led King Faisal and his various defence ministers to develop more entrenched partnerships with the US. This was primarily to secure increased amounts of military resources, but also military support and protection against perceived threats at the time, such as Nasserism and Ba’athism.⁹⁴ Ironically, the growing partnership between Saudi Arabia and the USA drew the attention of anti-imperialist/anti-American revolutionary movements and regimes throughout the MENA region. This fear drove the creation of military cities on the borders with ‘troublesome’ countries, such as Yemen, as well as massively increased purchases of arms. These steps provided a “false sense of security ...” due to the fact that “...if Saudi Arabia were to receive no more military equipment it would take six years for existing personnel to be able to use already bought technology.”⁹⁵ This false sense of security has likely fueled a misperception within Saudi Arabia’s FPE regarding their actual, effective force projection capabilities.

⁹² Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*.

⁹³ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 1.

⁹⁴ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 135.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 137

Under successive Saudi kings, arms procurement has only increased, and the formation and shape of the FPE has remained mostly static: the bureaucratic and organizational structures which were created and solidified during Abdulaziz, Saud, and Faisal's rules have remained largely intact even today—though MbS seems poised to change these to his liking.⁹⁶ Even now, individual Saudi princes can have extraordinary and unchecked control in crafting specific defence policies or purchasing their choice of weapons systems—usually in a very inefficient or corrupt manner.⁹⁷ A key factor that must be taken into consideration, however, is the rise of Iran as a regional rival since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Indeed, “[o]f all the Middle East states, Iran is perceived by the Saudis to pose the greatest potential security threat” and there are “[also] concerns that Iran might encourage or support terrorists or insurgent groups made up of disaffected young Saudi Shi’as and possibly even radicalized Sunnis in order to destabilize or even to threaten to destabilize the Saudi regime.”⁹⁸ Considering Gause’s argument wherein Gulf rulers place strong emphasis on matters of regime security as opposed to sole considerations of balance of power, this poises Iran as a type of double-threat in Saudi perception, wherein they are an external force to balance against that can also affect Saudi Arabia domestically. Whether Iran is actually involved in a particular conflict, Saudi Arabian leaders will be extra wary regardless.

⁹⁶ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*; Gause, “Fresh Prince.”

⁹⁷ “Regional Results: Middle East and North Africa,” Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index (Berlin, Germany: Transparency International, 2015), <http://government.defenceindex.org/downloads/docs/GI-MENA-Regional-Results-web.pdf>.

⁹⁸ Long and Maisel, *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 162.

Revisiting Elite Consensus and Goal Achievement

Though what we know of the Saudi elite shows that they may have supported the decision to intervene,⁹⁹ it is unlikely many view the current situation as a success. What was launched as a GCC-led effort to prevent Houthi rebels from gaining control of the country and endangering the security of Saudi Arabia's Yemeni border has devolved into an expensive, intractable conflict which has left conditions on the ground much worse than they were before the beginning of the campaign.¹⁰⁰ The Houthis now have greater capability and motive to strike Saudi cities with missile attacks since the intervention began.¹⁰¹ While the intervention was being planned to some degree once the Houthis took control of Sana'a, King Salman and MbS were likely responsible for the scope and scale of the intervention.¹⁰²

As Hokayem and Roberts argue, it is quite feasible that the actual decision to intervene "was more than simply the product of rash decision-making by young, capricious leaders," and represented an "inevitable structural reaction to events occurring within a volatile regional context that had sharpened threat perceptions."¹⁰³ This argument fits with an NCR analysis of this case. There were many indications (and perceptions within Saudi Arabia) that Iran was, to some degree, supporting Houthi rebels. Given the strategic importance of ensuring a stable Yemen, intervention was clearly an 'optimal' foreign policy decision, but it is still not clear that *direct* intervention

⁹⁹ al-Rashed, "Saudi Elites Divided on Yemen War."

¹⁰⁰ Al-Karimi and Najjar, "Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen 'a Strategic Failure.'"

¹⁰¹ Kocan and Estelle, "April 2021 Map Update."

¹⁰² Hokayem and Roberts, "The War in Yemen."

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 164-65

was the best response. Though a centralized monarchy does not necessitate that its leaders be an important cause of policy, the very personal and centralized nature of governance in Saudi Arabia leaves it very vulnerable to being hijacked for domestic purposes.

Furthermore, I argue that the extremely aggressive and indiscriminate method of intervention (a massive and ongoing bombing campaign along with a ground invasion) was a mistake which is providing Saudi Arabia with little return—one likely prompted by the expectation that this would be the fastest resolution and provide MbS with recognition to compensate for his limited political experience. Importantly, the reading of geopolitical events in the region by Saudi Arabia's FPE was incorrect.

Saudi fears of Iran attempting to establish a strong foothold in Yemen are rather obvious. This viewpoint is even a prominent framing in media articles on the conflict.¹⁰⁴ However, as I have explained previously, Iran had relatively little interest in seriously stirring the pot in Yemen, preferring other regional hotspots such as Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. While Iran was indeed supporting the Houthis, the level of support provided was rather marginal and did not significantly affect the Houthi balance of power within Yemen.¹⁰⁵ Though Saudi Arabia and the Hadi government in Yemen both used the proxy war narrative as a significant justification for the intervention, it is ironically the

¹⁰⁴ See Fahim, "U.N. Probe Details Fallout of Proxy War in Yemen between Saudi Coalition and Iran"; Fisher, "How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East"; Jonathan Stevenson, ed., "The Percolating Proxy War in Yemen," *Strategic Comments* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): iv–vi, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2017.1291569>.

¹⁰⁵ Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen."

intervention itself which drove the Houthis to seek more support and advanced weaponry from the Iranians.¹⁰⁶

Media accounts of the conflict sometimes call attention to sectarian divisions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but these too are mostly unfounded as an explanatory factor. The sect of Shi'a Islam followed by the Houthis, *Zaidiyyah*, makes up approximately one third of the Yemeni population; “the other two-thirds belong to a Sunni school called *Shafiis*.”¹⁰⁷ Within Yemen, these different sects often get along well enough that it is common for them to pray in the same mosques.¹⁰⁸ The Zaydis follow a different school of Shi'a Islam than the dominant one in Iran: *Imamiyyah* (or Twelver), and economically or politically disenfranchised Sunnis in Yemen had no difficulty in supporting the Houthis. Indeed, in many ways, the Zaydis are closer to Sunnis than they are to other Shi'a.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, Iran does not tend to place serious focus on aligning with groups who follow Imamiyyah Islam. Both the Saudi and Iranian governments, however, activate this ‘sectarian’ angle to ensure continued domestic support for their involvements.¹¹⁰ In this context, any cooperation between Iran and the Houthis is purely political—the Houthi end being a self-fulfilling prophecy created by the Saudi

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ William A. Rugh, “Problems in Yemen, Domestic and Foreign,” *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 4 (December 1, 2015): 143, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12164>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Juneau, “Iran’s Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen.”

¹¹⁰ Darwich, “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen”; Ahmad, “Understanding the Politics of Saudi Sectarianism.”

intervention, while the Iranian end is part of a post-Cold War strategy of opposing US hegemony in the region.¹¹¹

While it is unlikely we will soon—if ever—have conclusive evidence regarding the Saudi decision-making process which led to their intervention in Yemen, I argue there is enough available evidence to support a claim generated through an NCR case study. A structurally realist approach does not give quite enough granularity to determine why Saudi Arabia chose such a direct method of intervention—in stark contrast to how they have previously handled these emergent security situations—while a purely domestic focus on King Salman and MbS does not give enough information on the context behind the structural imperatives to which Saudi Arabia is responding, nor information on how and why the Saudi internal structure is set up in such a way to allow for such an abrupt shift in foreign policy.

¹¹¹ Shireen Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Despite the aptitude of Yemen in resisting foreign incursions, it has been subjected to an ongoing and intractable military intervention by Saudi Arabia. It is apparent that Saudi Arabia, over the course of its six-year involvement in the conflict, has not only failed to achieve its security goals, but has likely worsened the security situation in Yemen and created an enemy in the region which now has the capability to strike at it with long range SCUD missiles. This seemingly illogical situation is what originally framed my research into Saudi Arabia's decision to directly intervene.

Saudi Arabia has always maintained a conservative and measured approach to foreign policy, and the intervention in Yemen has signalled a stark change in how Saudi foreign policy is conducted. Evidence does not clearly indicate why this change has occurred, nor what prompted this decision. I have argued and demonstrated that existing literature does not paint a full and granular picture as to the cause and motivation behind this decision.

In this thesis, I have addressed this problematic intervention by arguing that Saudi Arabia's decision to directly intervene in Yemen was caused by a misreading of geopolitical currents which created the perception that intervening in Yemen was necessary to balance against Iranian influence. Furthermore, I demonstrated that the decision to directly intervene was enabled by the increasingly centralized power under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

This thesis topic is an important problem to solve, as there were very few academic sources covering the Saudi intervention when I began my research. While this is slowly starting to change, most information must still be sourced through grey literature. Sources have also been available since the onset of this intervention which

demonstrated that Iranian influence was minimal in Yemen—despite this being an important perception and justification for Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, this thesis topic and research have also highlighted the inability of structural realism to provide granular analysis into the reasoning behind states making apparently dysfunctional foreign policy decisions. Over the last few decades, there have been numerous examples of unsuccessful wars and interventions (e.g., the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the NATO-led invasion of Libya, The Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands, etc.) that do not neatly fit with structural realist predictions. I have also argued that a solely domestic, ad-hoc approach to these situations is not adequate, as the assumptions of structural realist theory are still critical in analyzing these events—however, there still needs to be a formalized structure under which relevant domestic factors are analyzed.

With the completion of this thesis, I hope that not only will further research be prompted into Saudi Arabia's role in this conflict, but that further discussion will be held regarding the validity of NCR as a theoretical tool which operates in tandem with structural realism, with particular focus being placed on a more 'reactionary' case study approach of dysfunctional state behaviour. In examining Quinn's fork-in-the-road dilemma for NCR, wherein he argues that NCR can either remain a subsidiary tool for structural realism used to explain anomalies, or that it can strive to be a generalizable theory in direct contention with structural realist principles,¹¹² I argue that the former is the most effective road for it to take. Structural realism at a broad level can be taken as a

¹¹² Adam Quinn, "Kenneth Waltz, Adam Smith and the Limits of Science: Hard Choices for Neoclassical Realism," *International Politics* 50, no. 2 (March 2013): 159–82, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/10.1057/ip.2013.5>.

generalizable (whether predictive or normative) theory as it has very few, and relatively ‘simple’ assumptions about states. These assumptions are abstract enough that it is easy to assume states will follow them at a high level. All states are concerned with the solidification of their own security and will ally with (or against) other states to achieve this goal when their own material capabilities may be limited. However, once an analysis involves domestic factors, it inherently inhibits generalization as well as the same level of parsimony, which is at odds with the goals of structural realism as a research project.

Having less parsimony does not make a theoretical model useless, nor does it necessarily make it weak. It results in less generalizability but allows it to focus on specific topics with much more detail and depth. While structural realism acknowledges that states may act against systemic imperatives and subsequently be ‘punished’, it often does not go beyond this analysis. If it does, it confines the analysis to purely systemic factors which limits the explanatory power—the why and the how. NCR does not diverge from the basic assumptions of structural realism, but its departure from parsimony must be acknowledged.¹¹³ Due to NCR’s adoption of basic realist principles, it is not entirely reasonable to say the R should be ‘dropped’ from the name, as it can function particularly well as a subsidiary theory to neorealism, allowing for richer analysis of anomalies in foreign policy theory crafting.

¹¹³ Narizny, “On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics.”

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