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YEMEN CIVIL WAR IN THE SHADOW OF PROXY WARS: THE IRAN-SAUDI NEXUS

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ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring uprisings that began in Tunisia quickly spread to many countries in the region with social problems. One of these countries was Yemen. After 2009, Yemen, which had been unable to solve its problems since the 1962 coup d'état, was once again plunged into civil war. People were tired of the country's problems for a long time and supported the uprising, thinking it would be a way out to resolve the conflicts as soon as possible. However, the civil war in Yemen was not limited to the Yemeni people. Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two strategic rival powers in the geography of the Middle East, took the political power struggle between them to Yemen and intervened indirectly in the internal politics of the country. This intervention put the concept of "proxy wars" on the agenda. Yemen is strategically located. The success of the Houthis, who control the Gulf of Aden, in controlling international trade has focused all eyes on the country. The hypothesis of this study is that Saudi Arabia and Iran are waging a proxy war in the Yemeni civil war by supporting some groups in the country. In order to test the hypothesis, the study sought to answer the following research questions: What is the concept of proxy war? Why did Yemen become involved in a civil war? From which countries did the warring parties in the country receive external support? How did Iran and Saudi Arabia interpret developments in Yemen and which groups did they support? The study concludes that Saudi Arabia, which does not want Shia communities in the Middle East to gain position and strength, is supporting the government wing in Yemen for this purpose, while Iran wants to consolidate its regional position by supporting the Shia Houthis. In fact, Iran and Saudi Arabia intervened in the civil war in Yemen, which is an independent sovereign state, and intervened in the internal problem of the country through various groups.

Key Words: Yemen, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Houthis, Proxy war.

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VEKÂLET SAVAŞLARI GÖLGESİNDE YEMEN İÇ SAVAŞI: İRAN-SUUDİ ARABİSTAN BAĞLANTISI

ÖZET

Tunus'ta başlayan Arap Baharı ayaklanmaları toplumsal sorunlar yaşayan birçok bölge ülkesine hızla sıçramıştır. Bu alanlardan birisi de Yemen olmuştur. 1962 Darbesinden beri sorunlarını çözümleyemeyen Yemen 2009'dan sonra bir kez daha iç savaşa sürüklenmiştir. Halk uzun süredir ülkede yaşanan sorunlardan yorulmuş ve anlaşmazlıkları bir an önce çözümleyebilmek için sürecin bir çıkış yolu olacağını düşünerek ayaklanmaya destek vermiştir. Ancak Yemen'de yaşanan iç savaş sadece Yemen halkı ile sınırlı kalmamıştır. Ortadoğu coğrafyasındaki iki stratejik karşıt güç olan Suudi Arabistan ile İran aralarındaki siyasi güç mücadelesini Yemen'e taşımış ve ülkenin iç siyasetine dolaylı olarak müdahale etmiştir. Bu müdahale beraberinde "vekalet savaşları" kavramını gündeme getirmiştir. Yemen coğrafi olarak stratejik bir konumdadır. Aden Körfezi'ni kontrol eden Husilerin uluslararası ticareti kontrol etme başarısı kazanması tüm gözlerin bu ülkeye çevrilmesine sebep olmuştur. Bu çalışmanın hipotezi Yemen iç savaşında Suudi Arabistan ve İran'ın ülkede bulunan bazı grupları destekleyerek vekalet savaşı yürüttükleridir. Hipotezi sınamak için çalışmada şu araştırma sorularına cevap aranmıştır: Vekâlet Savaşı kavramı nedir? Yemen neden iç savaşa sürüklenmiştir? Ülkede çatışan taraflar hangi ülkelerden dış destek almıştır? İran ve Suudi Arabistan Yemen'de yaşanan gelişmeleri nasıl yorumlamış ve ülkede hangi grupları desteklemiştir? Çalışmada Orta Doğu'da Şii toplulukların mevzi kazanmasını ve güçlenmesini istemeyen Suudi Arabistan'ın bu amaçla Yemen'de hükümet kanadını desteklediği, İran'ın ise Şii Husilere yardım ederek bölgesel konumlarını pekiştirmek istediği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Aslında İran ve Suudi Arabistan bağımsız egemen bir devlet olan Yemen'in geçirdiği iç savaşa müdahale ederek, ülkenin iç sorununa çeşitli gruplar üzerinden müdahil olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yemen, İran, Suudi Arabistan, Husiler, Vekâlet savaşı.

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Introduction

The proxy war defines a military situation that has been used by mankind for many years. The concept means the intervention of a third state or power in the conflict during the war between two states or groups. Although proxy war is seen as a military strategic move, in fact, resorting to it can have both advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages of proxy wars is that states or groups use their military power to gain superiority over their opponents with the support they receive. One of the disadvantages is that the states or groups involved in the war do not see it as their national war, and therefore the support they provide is not permanent. If there is the slightest danger of defeat, these states or groups may break their agreements and withdraw from the war in order to avoid suffering too much damage from the conflict. This situation means that the side already showing signs of defeat in the middle of the war is suddenly isolated and can accelerate the defeat of that side by falling into a deficient situation in terms of military personnel and armaments.¹ Proxy war is not only used to support military units during wartime. States can sometimes direct the war by making agreements with certain groups or organizations in the country in question to realize their national interests on the territory of another country without using their military forces at all.² Another purpose of proxy war is to prevent a state from increasing the presence and power of a rival state in a country far away from its geography. To achieve this, agreements are made with groups or organizations that know the geopolitical situation in the region, the situation of the country, and the hot conflict, if any.³

When states cannot persuade their own public opinion to engage in costly land wars that would also endanger their people, they look to other groups to fulfill their national interests. Therefore, one of the reasons why states engage in proxy wars is their domestic politics. Proxy wars relieve states of the obligation to send both military ammunition and their soldiers to the region in which they want to intervene. As a result, in a possible land war, continuous logistical support will be needed for the accommodation and daily basic needs of the soldiers. Since this situation will cause high budgetary costs, they can achieve the same dominance in the region by contacting some groups already existing in the region and minimizing the costs. This is why proxy wars are advantageous. However, these groups, which are contracted to minimize costs, can sometimes create more costs for the state, contrary to what is calculated. The results can be different due to the wrong actions of these groups using remote warfare techniques or incomplete work to be done. These groups may know the region and geography well, but they may not fight as well militarily as a state's soldiers, or they may cause an international problem by ignoring certain rules. In this case, the country that agrees will have to spend more to cover these damages and may even have to send its military forces by directly intervening in the region, despite having agreed with some groups. As a result, agreements made to spend less in terms of costs may cause more damage to themselves.⁴

If we look at the development of the concept of proxy war in the historical process, this method was initially used as an option, mainly during the Cold War period. During the Cold War, the two dominant powers preferred to use proxy wars instead of fighting directly. However, seeing the positive results of this method, especially the USA, Russia, and even

¹ Levent Özdemir ve Çağdaş Akif Kahraman, "Modern-Day Proxy Warfare: From Agency Theory Perspective", *Dumlupınar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 78, (2023): 175.

² Özdemir ve Kahraman, "Modern-Day Proxy", 176.

³ Stephen Watts vd., "Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition", *California: RAND Corporation*, (2023), 14-18.

⁴ Watts vd., "Proxy Warfare", 19-23.

Iran continued to resort to proxy wars after the end of the Cold War and tried to realize their national interests in various regions through this concept.⁵

In the post-Cold War era, states have not only contracted with other states to wage proxy wars but have also begun to involve non-state actors to a greater extent. This situation has led to a proliferation of non-state actors over time and increased security threats in some parts of the world.⁶ In particular, countries that possess weapons of mass destruction have used the method of proxy warfare, avoiding direct confrontation, because if they confront each other in the event of war, the scope of the war may increase and problems such as the outbreak of nuclear war may arise. Thanks to this method, the big countries have not only avoided getting involved in a major war but have also been able to easily get rid of the events themselves.⁷

One of the most recent examples of proxy war in the Middle East is Iran's behavior during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Iran created resistance to the US by using local power elements in Iraq. Iran did not use its own military power, thus avoiding any harm to its soldiers, and took a position by activating the Shiite forces close to it in the region. If Iran had not used the method of proxy war in this process and had intervened directly against the USA by using its military power, the war could have spread and grown to a larger area and could have had worse military and financial consequences for both countries.⁸ For this reason, Iran's model of waging proxy war through Shia groups, which began after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, accelerated with the Arab Spring process and Iran adopted a similar attitude in other countries. The aim of this study is to draw attention to the fact that the process of change and transformation began in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East with the Arab Spring, and to reveal how Yemen has carried out this process, the conditions and parties of the civil war, and the reasons for Iran and Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen through proxy war. The study began by mentioning Yemen's social problems and its importance as a country, then analyzed the civil war and revealed Saudi Arabia's and Iran's Yemen policy.

1. Structural Features of Yemen

In order to analyze the situation in Yemen, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, it is necessary to look at the country's geopolitical position, social structure and economic situation. In this way, the social problems can be identified and the reasons for the country's descent into civil war can be understood.

a) *Social Structure and Geostrategic Importance of Yemen*: According to 2022 data, Yemen has a population of 33 million, also has a high birth rate.⁹ Islam is the official religion of the country. In Yemen, 65 percent of the population is Sunni and 35 percent Shia.¹⁰ The Shiite population of the country belongs to the Zaydi branch. Yemeni Shiites do not recognize all twelve Imams in the Shiite faith. They believe that after the fourth Imam, the Imamate passed to Zayd, the grandson of Hazrat Ali. For this reason, Yemeni Shiites differ in some respects from Shiites in other countries like Iran and Lebanon. Yemeni Shiites are more similar to Sunnis in their forms of worship, and for this reason, there is a closeness between Shiite

⁵ Tarık Solmaz, "Vekâlet Savaşlarında Yükselen Trend: Devlet Sponsorluğunda Olmayan Vekâlet Savaşı", *Diplomasi ve Strateji Dergisi* 4, sayı 2, (2023): 151-152.

⁶ Solmaz, "Vekâlet Savaşlarında", 153.

⁷ Veysel Kurt, "Arap İsyânları Sonrasında Ortadoğu'da Vekalet Savaşları: Yemen Örneği", *Uluslararası Siyaset Bilimi ve Kentsel Araştırmalar Dergisi* 7, sayı 1, (2019): 309-310.

⁸ Kurt, "Arap İsyânları". 312.

⁹ "Yemen People Stats", *Nation Master*. Erişim Tarihi: 14.04.2024. <https://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/profiles/Yemen/People> "l "2011" \.

¹⁰ CIA The World Factbook, "Yemen". Erişim Tarihi: 04.02.2024. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/yemen/>.

groups and Sunnis in the country.¹¹ Apart from these two groups, there are also Ismailis in the country, but they number around 15,000. On the other hand, the people of Yemen are ethnically Arab, but there are also Afro-Arabs in the country. The black minority makes up about 2-5 per cent of the population. Apart from these groups, there are also small Jewish minorities in the country¹². When Yemen is categorized according to class, the country is home to Hashemites, Tribesmen, Bedouins, Mazaina, and the Muhamasheen (Akhdam). The Muhamasheen are the most marginalized group in Yemeni society and, historically, the most discriminated against. At times, they were not even recognized as citizens in Yemen. Therefore, while other religious groups in Yemen develop a political identity by arguing that they are subject to sectarian discrimination, the Muhamasheen are discriminated against on the basis of their skin color and ethnic origin. Although they have lived in Yemen for centuries, they are not recognized as Yemenis.¹³

Yemen is a desert country. Although other countries in the region have large-scale nonrenewable energy resources like coal, natural gas or oil, Yemen has very few natural resources. The country's local resources are petrol, rock salt, and marble. There are large areas of agricultural land, particularly in the west of the country.¹⁴ However, the country is unable to fully exploit this vast agricultural land due to tribal and sectarian conflicts and, above all, water shortages.¹⁵ Yemen also has a geostrategic location. The geographical importance of Yemen is evident when companies involved in international trade and energy transport come from the Indian Ocean, pass through the Gulf of Aden, and head towards the Suez Canal through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. The country is very influential in energy and maritime transport on the route from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. Another factor that makes Yemen so effective is that it also has missiles in this transport area. For this reason, Yemen uses its geographical position as an element of power. Other powerful states in the region do not want a state like Yemen to have missile power here.¹⁶

b) Yemen's Economic Situation: Although Yemen has been trying to develop economically since the 1970s, it has not achieved the desired development and has taken its place among the economically underdeveloped countries compared to other countries in the region. It is even one of the poorest countries in the world. Yemen's natural resources are both small in quantity and very low in quality compared to other countries in the region. As a result, the country's economy is based on agriculture. The country meets its food needs through agricultural production. In fact, 5% of the country's gross domestic product comes from agriculture. Another area of production in the country is the industrial sector. 35.6% of the economy belongs to the industrial sector. However, the country's involvement in a civil war has worsened an already poor economic situation, causing the economy to shrink by 28%. The country's per capita income will be around \$891 in 2022. Inflation rates are on the rise. Inflation will rise from 23.1% in 2020 to 63.8% in 2021.¹⁷ After 2015, Yemen began to experience a significant decline in exports, infrastructure, and public services. All these

¹¹ The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples-Yemen: Zaydi Shias", 2018. Erişim Tarihi: 30.04.2024. <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/mrgi/2018/en/64960>.

¹² Minority Rights Group, (2019). "Yemen", (Çevrimiçi) <https://minorityrights.org/country/yemen/>, Erişim Tarihi: 05.01.2024.

¹³ Mohammed Al-Mahfali, Minorities in Yemen: Reality and Challenges, *INSAF Center for Defending Freedoms and Minorities Publications*, no.1, (2019), 9.

¹⁴ Samea Calawy, "The Proxy War in Yemen", *College of Law and Political Science* 1, no, 7, (2020), 538-539.

¹⁵ Murat Tinas, "Yemen İç Savaşı'nda Husiler: Vekalet İlişkisinin Karmaşık Yapısı", *Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 21, sayı 1, (2020): 119-120.

¹⁶ Magdalena El Ghamari, "Jemen-the Proxy War", *Securitologia* 22, sayı 2, (2015): 48-50.

¹⁷ Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu (DEİK), "Yemen Bilgi Notu", 2022. Erişim tarihi: 19.04.2024. https://www.deik.org.tr/uploads/yemen_bilgi-notu_-eylul-22.pdf,

negative indicators were compounded by rumors of corruption in the country, which led to the collapse of the economy. The instability and civil war in the country led to a decline in food production and water resources, further impoverishing the country. Although Yemen has entered a period of recovery with the help of other countries, the economy has contracted again due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it remains unclear what the country's economic situation will be and where it will go.¹⁸

2. The Arab Spring experience in Yemen: From protests to civil war

The apparent reason for the start of the Arab Spring was the outbreak of social demonstrations in Tunisia after a university student, a street vendor, set himself on fire after being beaten by the police and having his stall confiscated. As a result, street protests in Tunisia became increasingly violent, and political change took place in the country. The impact of events in Tunisia spread to other Arab countries experiencing similar economic and political processes. In particular, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria have seen protests turn into civil wars and internal crises. The new type of social event that started in Tunisia and spread to other Arab countries, demanding political and economic transformation, was called the "Arab Spring".¹⁹ The process was characterized by the positive word "spring" because of the expectation that societies would have a more democratic political life. After the overthrow of the government in Tunisia, it was hoped that the authoritarian regimes that had been in power for years in other Arab countries would also change.²⁰ Another reason why the events are called the "Arab Spring", especially by the Western media, is that they believe that only a country with a Western form of government can experience a spring. Western states have historically experienced a lot of political turmoil until they found their ideal state governments, so when North African and Middle Eastern countries were plunged into civil war; they likened it to their own political power struggles. But the use of the term 'spring' is an act of public diplomacy. By giving it such a name, the Western states ensured that the people of the region would continue their struggles and that the turmoil would continue. Twelve years on, there is no environment in the countries of the region that could be called spring. After the outbreak of civil war in the Arab countries, there has been political instability, hunger, extreme economic deterioration, unemployment, and the loss of many lives in the region, and now the Western press has accepted this and is commenting that the Arab Spring has turned into the Arab Winter.²¹

There are many reasons why the Arab Spring spread so quickly to other countries in the region, but the main reason is the way the countries are governed. There is a long history of political marginalization in the countries of the region. Economic problems, sectarian divisions, and governance issues have also contributed to the countries' inability to overcome the political crisis. Most of the current leaders in the region came to power through coups and have developed authoritarian forms of governance. By leaving people without a choice and keeping them under constant repression, a spark like the Arab Spring turned into a fire. Economic problems are the second factor that contributed to the immediate spread of events. These communities, oppressed under oppressive rule, have become more aggressive as they live under difficult economic conditions. Knowing that there are hydrocarbon energy resources in their countries, people saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity when they realized

¹⁸ Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu, "Yemen Bilgi Notu".

¹⁹ Mehmet Çelenk ve Bayram Keklik, "Arap Baharı Dönemi Yemen Siyasetinde Mezhep Unsuru", *İLSAM Akademi Dergisi* 3, sayı:1, (2023): 7-8.

²⁰ Taşkın Deniz, "Arap Baharı ve Türkiye: Siyasi ve Coğrafya Açısından Bir Değerlendirme", *Doğu Coğrafya Dergisi* 18, sayı 29, (2014): 68.

²¹ Çelenk, Keklik, "Arap Baharı Dönemi", 8.

that there was inequality in income distribution and that the wealthy class was getting richer while the middle class was eroding and the narrow income groups were growing. From a sectarian perspective, the Arab Spring was also seen as an opportunity by those who felt that they did not benefit enough from the political system and the economic pie in their country and that they were discriminated against. This is mainly due to the excessive favoring of one sect (usually the sect of the group in power) over the others by the political authorities. Therefore, those who felt sectarian discrimination supported the Arab Spring in the hope of finding a place in the political system.²²

If we look at how Yemen was drawn into the Arab Spring process, the first thing we see is that the conditions in which the country has been living for a long time have created a favorable ground for these new social events to spread here. Political repression, unstable governments, economic problems, income inequality, and sectarian divisions in the country led to the outbreak of events in Yemen. Already unstable and troubled, the country was quickly plunged into a new civil war. To understand the background of this situation, it is necessary to analyze Yemen's historical-social burden before the Arab Spring. The Kingdom of Yemen lost its territorial integrity after the Ottoman Empire lost its sovereignty in the aftermath of World War I. While the Zaidis and Idrisis gained territory for themselves under British rule, an area covering the Gulf of Aden was created under the auspices of Britain itself. After the British withdrew from the region, the country was divided into North Yemen and South Yemen. North and South Yemen have often clashed throughout history. The United Republic of Yemen was established in 1990.²³ The founder of this new country was Ali Abdullah Saleh, the leader of North Yemen. While the unification of the two states was expected to lead to a process of integration, events did not unfold as expected. Instead of pursuing a conciliatory policy and reconciling the two communities, President Ali Abdullah Saleh oppressed the people with a dictatorial rule. During this period, a southern Yemeni rebellion developed, and civil war broke out. When Saleh crushed this rebellion, he became even more authoritarian. The problem is not just the integration of the two countries. The Houthis in the north of the country took no steps towards harmonization, and even rebelled in 2004, claiming that Saleh was discriminating against them. This uprising grew quickly and a battle was launched to catch the perpetrators. Although Qatar tried to mediate several times, no result was achieved and hundreds of people lost their lives and suffered in the process.²⁴ The Houthis are not the only organized structure causing problems in Yemen. Al-Qaeda, which fled Saudi Arabia and set up a new organization in the region, has managed to increase its influence in Yemen in a short period, taking advantage of the instability in Yemen and the government's inability to rule everywhere. Not only politically, but also the poor economic indicators have allowed the organization to find new members and grow rapidly in the country²⁵.

Economic problems, political divisions and the activities of radical organizations paved the way for Yemen's involvement in the Arab Spring process. In January 2011, protests began at Sanaa University and soon spread to cities such as Aden and Taiz. Even President Saleh's announcement that he would not run in the next elections in 2013, but would remain in power until then, was not enough to calm the situation. Incidents gradually escalated, leading to a heavy-handed response by the security forces. On 21 February 2012, President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down. His departure was the result of political pressure from Yemen's

²² Çelenk, Keklik, "Arap Baharı Dönemi", 9-11.

²³ CIA The World Factbook, "Yemen"

²⁴ Mehmet Salih Gün, "Yemen'de Arap Baharı", *Yasama Dergisi* 22, (2012): 122-125.

²⁵ Gün, "Yemen'de Arap Baharı", 125.

neighbors and the United States. In this way, the 33-year era of Saleh in Yemen has finally come to an end. In a deal initiated by the Gulf Cooperation Council, President Saleh handed over power to Vice President Abdrubbuh Mansur Hadi.²⁶ But Yemen's politics did not allow for a smooth transition, and the Houthis and those who wanted South Yemen to be independent again plunged the country into a new crisis.

a) *Houthis' demands*: To understand the Houthis' demands in the Arab Spring process, it is necessary to look at the group's recent history. When the north and south of Yemen united, Bedrettin Bin Amireddin al-Houthi broke away from the Shia Zaidi Haq Party and founded the Organisation of the Believing Youth in 1991. This formal organization was initially set up to provide cultural services. By 2004, the Organisation of the Believing Youth had transformed into an armed organization. The leader of the Organisation of the Brotherhood of the Faithful, who announced in June that it was an armed militia, was killed in the war with the government in September. He was replaced by his brother, Abdulmalik al-Houthi.²⁷

There are two reasons for the transformation of the Young Believers Organisation from a cultural organization to an armed organization. The first is that Iran is constantly sending military equipment to the Gulf of Aden to create a force against Saudi Arabia. Iran does not want Saudi Arabia to be the only power in the region. The second reason is that there are two military forces in Yemen at the moment. One is in the hands of the government, the Republican Guard, which is led by the son of Yemeni President Saleh. The other military organization is the army under Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. Throughout this period, President Saleh continued to provide armed support to the Young Believers organization and ensured that the Young Believers clashed with Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar.²⁸ When President Saleh was forced to step down during the Arab Spring, he worked with the Houthis. However, the relationship did not work out as expected and President Saleh was assassinated by the Houthis. After that, the war between the Houthis and the government continued. The Houthis brought out Saleh Sammad as the ruler of Yemen. But Sammad was killed by the Arab coalition, including Saudi Arabia.²⁹

If we look at the economic situation of the Houthis, we see that this ethnic group is in a good economic situation. Because the region they live in is fertile land, the Houthis receive one-fifth of their wealth as zakat from the local population. In addition to this income, the Houthis also receive new income from the land they have seized in their conflicts with the government. The Houthis are also supported by Iran. The Houthis receive support from Iran, mainly in the form of arms and other expenditures.³⁰

The Houthis have recently made their most significant move against Israel. On 7 October 2023, as Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip intensified following the operation launched by Hamas, the Houthis stopped the ships passing through the Gulf of Aden to Israel, creating constant difficulties for the passage of the ships. This situation applies not only to ships bound for Israel, but also to those passing through China and the Suez Canal, and extends the time of the ship's voyages. Due to the Houthi blockade, ships lose more than 10 days of time by staying at sea for more than 10 days if they pass through the Cape of Good Hope instead of

²⁶ Adep Al-Tamimi Uddagatti Venkatesha, "Arab Spring in Yemen: Causes and Consequences", *Shodh Sarita An International Bilingual Peer Reviewed Refereed Research Journal* 7, sayı 28, (2020): 59-60.

²⁷ Ali Semin, "Yemen Krizinde Suudi Arabistan ve İran'ın Bölgesel Güç Mücadelesi", *Bilge Strateji Dergisi* 9, sayı 17, (2017): 88.

²⁸ Semin, "Yemen Krizinde", 88-89.

²⁹ Emirhan Tambağ, Belal Mansoor Ali Alfakih, "Husiler: Grup Kimliği, Teşkilatları ve Sosyo-Kültürel Tutumları", *Journal of Islamic Civilization* 8, sayı 49, (2022): 41-42.

³⁰ Tambağ, Alfakih, "Husiler: Grup Kimliği", 49-50.

the Suez Canal. This situation adversely affects global maritime trade. Houthis are able to prevent ships from passing thanks to missiles in Yemen.³¹ The Houthis have also said that they have hypersonic missiles with high destructive power and that they are testing these military forces. According to Sputnik from Russia, The Houthis have announced that these missiles can reach a speed of 10,000 kilometers per hour and that they will test them on Israel and even mass-produce them.³² While the Houthis were threatening Israel with such statements, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) issued a statement saying that a cruise missile of unknown origin, but known to have come from the Red Sea, had penetrated the Israeli air defense system in the northern part of the city of Eilat. Although the IDF did not mention the Houthis, the Iranian-backed group in Yemen is ultimately the Houthis.³³ This situation has led the Houthis to increase their political influence in their region.

3. Saudi Arabia's Approach to The Civil War in Yemen

Saudi Arabia and Yemen share a border and the borders were defined by the Jeddah Treaty of June 2000.³⁴ Due to this geographical location, any problem or negativity in Yemen has the potential to spill over into Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia closely follows the developments in Yemen for its national security and even intervenes in the country's internal problems from time to time. The economic, social, political, and security problems in Yemen also affect Saudi Arabia. For this reason, Yemen is a priority state in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. However, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Yemen is constantly changing. As bureaucrats with different political views come to power in Yemen, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, which is sometimes good, sometimes goes through ups and downs. In general, because Saudi Arabia has a higher level of economic development, it projects the image of a state that protects Yemen, which is in a more difficult economic situation than itself.³⁵ If there is political instability in Yemen, Saudi Arabia is concerned about its security. For this reason, Saudi Arabia wants the government in Yemen to be legitimate and in power. There is a risk that the organizations that emerge and gain power in Yemen will pose a direct threat to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia also believes that the Houthis in Yemen are under Iranian influence and want to prevent this. According to Saudi Arabia, Iran is using the Houthis in Yemen to fight a proxy war. If the Houthis become more powerful in Yemen in the future, the country could move closer to Iran, which would mean the presence of an Iran-allied state on Saudi Arabia's border. The Saudis feel surrounded by Iran. Moreover, the rise of the Shi'ites in a country right on its border makes Saudi Arabia fear that the Shi'ites within Saudi Arabia could be mobilized. Since Saudi Arabia does not want this to happen, it is supporting Yemen, especially economically.³⁶

³¹ Kaan Devocioğlu, "Küresel Ticareti Tehdit Eden Husiler Kim? Ne İstiyorlar?", *Ortadoğu Araştırmaları Merkezi*, 2024. Erişim Tarihi: 20.03.2024. <https://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/kuresel-ticareti-tehdit-eden-husiler-kim-ne-istiyorlar>.

³² Tom O'Conner, "US Forces Say Houthi Attacks Threaten World Amid Hypersonic Missile Reports", *Newsweek*, 2024. Erişim tarihi: 01.05.2024. <https://www.newsweek.com/us-forces-say-houthi-attacks-threaten-world-amid-hypersonic-missile-reports-1880605>, Mepa News, "Rusya: Husiler Hipersonik Füzeye Sahip", 2024. Erişim tarihi: 02.05.2024. <https://www.mepanews.com/rusya-husiler-hipersonik-fuzeye-sahip-65520h.htm>.

³³ Yonah Jeremy Bob, "IDF admits Houthis Penetrated Eilat Missile Defense for the First Time", *The Jerusalem Post*, 2024. Erişim tarihi: 01.05.2024 <https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-792788>,

³⁴ U.S. Department of State Office of the Geographer Department of State, "Saudi Arabia-Yemen Boundary", 2001. Erişim Tarihi: 16.05.2024. https://hiu.state.gov/cartographic_guidance_bulletins/21-Saudi-Arabia-Yemen-2001.pdf.

³⁵ İrem Aşkar Karakır, "Ongoing Conflict in Yemen: A Proxy War?", *TESAM Akademi Dergisi* 5, sayı 2, (2018): 129.

³⁶ William A. Rugh, "Problems in Yemen, Domestic and Foreign", *Middle East Policy Council* 22, sayı: 4, (2015): 147-148.

The Houthis' seizure of the capital Sana'a in 2014, Prime Minister Hadi's resignation in January 2015, his decision to go to Aden and declare it the new capital, and this time the Houthis' control of Aden upset all the balances in Yemen. The Hadi government called for outside humanitarian intervention.³⁷ Following these developments, Saudi Arabia felt the need to take action. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen by launching 'Operation Decisive Storm', stating that it aimed to restore the ousted government. Backed by the US, France, and the UK, the Saudis joined an international military coalition led by the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Qatar. Although various regional countries participated in the operation, Saudi Arabia was the leading power.³⁸

Saudi Arabia, supported by the United States, initially decided to conduct an air campaign in Yemen due to the unfavorable geographical conditions in the region, but when it realized that this was not effective, it also launched a ground operation. However, Saudi Arabia was not only fighting terrorism in this operation but also harming civilians and some infrastructure in Yemen with the violence of the operation. Many organizations and institutions criticized Saudi Arabia's operation in Yemen, but no results were achieved. While the criticism continued, when a missile fired at Saudi Arabia by the Houthis turned out to be of Iranian origin, Saudi Arabia, believing that it had proved its legitimacy to the international community, took control of Yemen's ports. This exacerbated Yemen's economic crisis, poverty, and security problems. Saudi Arabia has started to take a tougher stance on foreign policy, especially after Prince Salman became crown prince in 2017 and prime minister in 2022. Saudi Arabia began to respond more harshly to missiles fired by the Houthis on the country's border. The reason for this was to stabilize the region and to pursue a more effective counter-terrorism policy. The United States was the main supporter of Saudi Arabia's policy. The United States supported Saudi Arabia's fight against the Houthis both to rid the region of terrorism and to prevent Iran from increasing its influence in the region.³⁹

4. Iran's Approach to the Civil War in Yemen

While Iran had close relations with the Western alliance under the conditions of the Cold War until the Islamic Revolution, and was even one of the two pillars, along with Saudi Arabia, that the US trusted in the region, it took a different direction with the 1979 revolution led by Khomeini. After the revolution, Iran emerged as an anti-Western state. It redefined itself through its Shia identity and developed a discourse of spreading the Islamic revolution to other countries. These discourses of Iran were seen as an expansionist policy and other Gulf countries were disturbed by these discourses. Even though Iran did not base its foreign policy directly on Shia identity, emphasizing the Islamic revolution of 1979 and putting the Shia faith in the background, this situation created fear in the neighboring countries. Iran's neighbors were afraid that their own Shiites would be influenced by the discourse of 'exporting the revolution'. Moreover, when Iran began to encircle the Sunni states in the region by establishing contacts with Shiite groups in different countries and signaling its intention to create a 'Shiite crescent' in the Middle East, the countries in the region began to experience security concerns.⁴⁰ These developments on the Iranian side have been met with concern by Saudi Arabia, a state that emphasizes its Sunni identity. Iran is not only using the discourse of revolution but is also using Shiism as a tool to improve its relations with the

³⁷ May Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status", *Insight Turkey*, Cilt: 20, Sayı: 2, (2018): 128.

³⁸ Pamela Urrutia Arestizábal, Ainhoa Ruiz Benedicto, Jordi Calvo Rufanges ve Karlos Castilla, "War in Yemen: Saudi Responsibility, European Complicity", the Escola de Cultura de Pau, 2020. Erişim tarihi: 12.05.2024. https://www.idhc.org/arxius/recerca/1590570887-Informe_GuerraYemenIN.pdf.

³⁹ Karakır, "Ongoing Conflict", 132-133.

⁴⁰ Sümeyra Avcı, "İran Dış Politikasında Şii Hilali", *İslam Medeniyeti Dergisi* 8, sayı 50, (2022): 109.

peoples and countries of the region. The regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia came to the fore, especially when countries in North Africa and the Middle East entered the Arab Spring process after 2011. As Iran increased its contacts with Shia groups in Yemen and Iraq, Saudi Arabia felt encircled.⁴¹ After these two countries, Iran's positioning directly on the side of Assad in Syria has raised concerns about Iran's growing regional power.

Relations between Yemen and Iran have not been close in the past. One of the main reasons for this is the sectarian factor. Although both states belong to the same sect, the Shiites in Yemen do not believe in the Twelve Imam Shiism adopted by Iran. For this reason, even though the two states are Shiite, they have not been able to develop a rapprochement due to sectarian differences. However, the Houthi leaders were educated in Iran. For this reason, they saw Shiism in Iran and abandoned their previous opposition to Iranian Shiism. In the following years, the Houthi leader frequently mentioned Hezbollah and the perpetrators of the Islamic revolution in Iran in his speeches.⁴² In fact, according to the US State Department, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has been in close contact with the Houthis for almost a decade, providing them with both military munitions and financial support⁴³.

As Yemeni-Iranian relations developed, Saudi Arabia became uncomfortable with the situation and accused Iran of being too supportive of Yemen. Iran, on the other hand, does not accept this. If one compares the level of relations that Iran has developed with both Yemen and Syria after the Arab Spring and the proxy war that it has waged through various organizations, one can see that Iran's support for Yemen is actually less than for Syria. However, in recent times, as Saudi Arabia has criticized Iran, it has started to show more closeness to Yemen and made statements about increasing aid.⁴⁴ One of the reasons why Iran's relations with Yemen remain at a certain level is the distance between the two countries. The fact that the two countries are relatively far from each other means that aid cannot be provided immediately or closely monitored. If it were not for the distance between the two countries, Iran would be able to develop more military and political policies in Yemen with Hezbollah. Indeed, Iran does not want to lose a strategically important country like Yemen to its rival Saudi Arabia. However, the Houthis are also reluctant to listen to Iran. Although the Houthis and Iran appear to be closer than Saudi Arabia due to their sectarian affinity, it can also be seen that the Houthis are using Iran to promote themselves to the international community and to increase their recognition. Indeed, Iranian television channels give live coverage to the Houthis when they make a statement or when there is an event related to them. This makes the Houthis more visible. In addition, Iran supports the Houthis both financially and directly with weapons. The groups in Yemen have benefited greatly from the power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two rival powers in the region.⁴⁵ Russia and China are also providing indirect, if not visible, support to the Houthis and are opposing proposals such as an arms embargo on Yemen at the United Nations.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ramazan İzol, Murat Cingöz, "Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry and Yemen Crisis", *Gazi Akademik Bakış* 16, sayı: 31, (2022): 351.

⁴² Tınas, "Yemen İç Savaşı'nda", 127-128.

⁴³ The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "Saudi Arabia and the Yemen Conflict: Humanitarian Aid to the People of Yemen". Erişim Tarihi: 15.05.2024.

https://www.saudiembassy.net/sites/default/files/FactSheet_Humanitarian%20Aid%20Yemen%20Fact_April2017.pdf.

⁴⁴ Karakır, "Ongoing Conflict", s. 135-136.

⁴⁵ Tınas, "Yemen İç Savaşı'nda", 130.

⁴⁶ Devecioğlu, "Küresel Ticareti Tehdit"

Conclusion

Proxy war is one of the oldest war strategies. In this way, states try to achieve their national interests by using other local or regional organizations. Through this method, they avoid land operations whose duration is uncertain, budgets are high, and which require accountability to public opinion in the event of military defeat. With financial support and military ammunition, groups that know the region well are armed and a double victory is achieved. However, this does not always work. Local groups that are armed and supported may change their stance at the most critical points and make some interventions that should not be made. In this case, the state that makes an agreement and provides financial support is in a difficult situation and may even have to solve these problems at a higher cost. However, states still take this risk and resort to the method of proxy war. This allows them to deny when things go wrong and to make statements that they are not a party to the events. The use of the proxy war method also prevents the outbreak of total war. If the great powers were to fight each other directly over a country or territory, this situation would pose the danger of nuclear war, given the advanced level of today's technologies and defense industries. In recent years, the method of proxy wars has become a strategy frequently used by global and regional powers when the Middle East and North African countries entered the Arab Spring process. For example, Yemen has been one of the areas where Iran and Saudi Arabia have waged a proxy war, especially after the Arab Spring.

Yemen is one of the unstable countries where the Arab Spring process took the form of a civil war. The country is densely populated and has not been able to develop, despite its manpower. The country's natural resources are not as great as other countries in the region, but Yemen is a country with potential due to its large agricultural areas and geopolitical position. However, fundamental problems such as high-income inequality and sectarian divisions have prevented the country from developing. This is why the street movements in Tunisia spread to Yemen. In Yemen, people took to the streets in the hope of finding a solution to systemic problems and found themselves in the middle of a civil war. As in other countries, Yemen's oppressive authoritarian government and economic problems were effective in fuelling events. As the country has already experienced popular mobility in the historical process, the integration of separatist groups into events has been easy. The Houthis are at the forefront of these groups. The Houthis, a Shia organization based in the north of Yemen, opposed this process even when North and South Yemen were united. The country has already failed to achieve full national unity. The Houthis have attracted the attention of regional powers that want to play politics in Yemen. In this sense, Iran is the most important state supporting the Houthis. Iran, which continues to support the Houthis financially and with weapons, considers this situation necessary for its regional dominance. Saudi Arabia has responded to Iran's strategy by supporting the Yemeni government.

In the latest regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Houthis are on the winning side. With Iranian help, the Houthis have become very powerful in the country. In particular, since Israel's operation against Gaza in October 2012, the Houthis have refused to allow Israeli ships to pass through the Gulf of Aden. Due to the disruption of these passage permits, not only Israeli ships but also ships traveling to Europe via China are slowed down, and this situation negatively affects global trade. Moreover, the Houthis have begun to test supersonic missiles, which are at the cutting edge of technology, and one of their missiles has even managed to penetrate the Israeli defense system. As a result, the Houthis not only threaten ships passing through the Gulf of Aden but also the ones who are using the Cape of Good Hope in a difficult situation. The rise of the Houthis, who can threaten the flow of global trade by disrupting it, is seen as worrying in terms of regional security. The fact that

Iran and Saudi Arabia are waging a proxy war in Yemen and that states such as the US, Russia, and China are likely to be involved, makes it difficult to bring peace to Yemen.

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