

SOFT POWER PROJECTION OF ASPIRING MIDDLE EASTERN POWERS TOWARDS YEMEN: THE CASE OF THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

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Abstract. The multiple hard power engagements of the aspiring Middle East powers (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran) in Yemen are self-evident. However, the disposition of foreign interference in Yemen is multifaced. Current research papers have primarily focused on using hard power military or economic tools, but soft power tools were left behind. Therefore, this article explores soft power's nature influencing the countries above assert towards the Yemeni population. It focused on three ostensibly distinct areas of soft power – education, religion, and media – within each particular analysis since those three areas are key elements of the Saudi and Iranian soft-power toolkit. Multiple religious, educational, and media tools towards Yemen were detected in each case.

Keywords: Yemen, Yemeni Civil War, Middle East, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran, soft power, soft power tools, media, education, religion.

Introduction

Even though the civil war in Yemen belongs to the category of the most recent and still ongoing conflicts, it seems like there is not so strong political, public, and – to a lesser extent – academic interest in it, as it is

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the case with different events in the Arab world.¹ The reasons explaining the lack of interest can be found on multiple levels. Firstly, in the Middle East, there are already conflicts that attract worldwide attention – wars in Syria and Libya. Moreover, if we step out of the Middle East context, the war in Ukraine has drawn the attention of the Euro-Atlantic World. Secondly, Yemen is not considered a key regional actor. In comparison to Middle Eastern major players, it lacks size and sufficient natural resources. In the eyes of international actors, these characteristics potentially make it less significant. However, this statement cannot be applied to the other actors in the region. Even though Yemen's general description is still the same, their view of the whole situation is different. The war in Yemen represents one of many events (as an example of other events, we can mention the Arab Spring, the war in Syria, Qatar's situation, etc.) that have the power to reshape the geopolitical order in the Middle East. It can also be seen as an opportunity to solidify the aspiring Middle Eastern Powers' position in the region by widening the regional geopolitical influence.²

Since the beginning of the Yemen crisis, significant focus has been on the manner in which Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) have done in terms of the use of hard power tools. In the case of Yemen, both the academic and non-academic sphere is often preoccupied with research concerning "hard" power.³ The reasons behind this are quite

¹ Amanda Taub, "Why Some Wars (Like Syria's) Get More Attention Than Others (Like Yemen's)," *New York Times*, March 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/why-some-wars-like-syrias-get-more-attention-than-others-like-yemens.html>; Matthias Von Hein and Oliver Pieper, "War in Yemen: 'The World Isn't Paying Enough Attention,'" *DW*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/war-in-yemen-the-world-isnt-paying-enough-attention/a-41750040>; Annie Slemrod, "Why Does No One Care about Yemen?," *New Humanitarian*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2016/02/11/why-does-no-one-care-about-yemen>.

² Marek Čejka, "Rozkrytá spojení, probuzené spory. Na Blízkém východě vzniká nový geopolitický řád" [ANALYSIS: Uncovered alliances, awakened conflicts. New geopolitical order is being created in the Middle East], *ČT24*, March 26, 2018, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/svet/2429767-analyza-rozkryta-spojenectvi-probuzene-spory-na-blizkem-vychode-vznika-novy>.

³ May Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 125-142; Merve Akin, *A Self-Defeating War: Merve Akin Regional Powers and Local Actors in Yemen* (Washington, DC: Research Centre, TRT World, 2019); Seed Al-Batati,

obvious. Hard power is easily approachable.⁴ Simply said, tanks, soldiers, and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) are visible, traceable, and countable. Most scholars continue to analyze the hard power tools since they serve as “rough but reliable” sources of power being easily available in databases.⁵ On the contrary, the “second face of power” – soft power – is often overlooked. Due to its character, soft power does not create extensive interest among scholars. However, as several scholars state, it is first of all a crucial element of national influence, secondly more advantageous to use due to low input costs, and thirdly it implies a significant venture to understand it.⁶

Soft power is a part of the foreign policies of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. For example, Iran uses soft power in Iraq and Syria, while Saudi Arabia operates with it in Indonesia.⁷ Various works suggest that their strategy toward Yemen includes also soft power.⁸ The aforementioned

“Iran’s arms shipments to Houthis el war in Yemen, experts say,” *Arab News*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1697466/middle-east>.

⁴ Gregory Treverton and Seth Jones, *Measuring National Power* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005), xi.

⁵ Michael Beckley, “The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters,” *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2018): 7-44.

⁶ Giulio Gallarotti, “Soft Power: What it is, Why it’s Important, and the Conditions Under Which it Can Be Effectively Used,” *Division II Faculty Publications*, Paper 57 (2011): 1–51; Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Joseph Nye, “The Benefits of Soft Power,” Harvard Business School, February 8, 2004, <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/the-benefits-of-soft-power>; Colin Grey, *Hard Power And Soft Power: The Utility of Military Force as an Instrument of Policy in the 21st Century* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011).

⁷ Ahmad Majidiyar, “Iran’s soft power: Islamic Azad University opening branches in major Syrian and Iraqi cities,” *Middle East Institute*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-soft-power-islamic-azad-university-opening-branches-major-syrian-and-iraqi>; Carolyn Nash, “Saudi Arabia’s Soft Power Strategy in Indonesia,” *Middle East Institute*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-arabias-soft-power-strategy-indonesia>.

⁸ Ali Al-Dahab, *Regional conflict over Yemen: Agendas and outcomes* (Doha: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2020); Katarzyna Czornik, “Hard and Soft Power in Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy in the Second Half of the 21st Century. The Case of Bahrain and Yemen,” *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 52, no. 1 (2016): 189-210; Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, “Saudi Arabia’s Soft Power Strategy in Yemen,” *Carnegie Endowment*, April 2, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78749>.

works are successful in naming which tools Iran and the KSA use but without developing much on the subject, the analytical dimension is often missing as they limit to mere description. However, to understand the role of soft power in Yemen and why it is used, we assume it is vital to analyze particular soft power tools Iran and the KSA deploy. By doing so, we should be able to detect how are those tools used and what they are supposed to achieve.

The article aims to analyze which soft power tools connected to religion, education, and media the KSA and Iran project towards Yemen, but without seeking to map and analyze all soft-power tools both of the aforementioned countries use in Yemen. Such an approach would, in connection to the extent of this paper, lead to vague results. The research will, therefore, mainly focus on specific soft power tools connected to religion, education, and media (examples of such tools are mentioned in the part below). The selection of these “areas” of soft power was driven by a combination of more factors. On one hand their undeniable importance for any state and society (more on that below). Secondly, their mutual interconnection, especially in the Middle East. Thirdly, the availability of the source material. Thus, the goal of this article is to detect the aforementioned soft power tools, analyze them, and subsequently uncover why they are used, i.e. what both KSA and Iran want to achieve.

This article explored that KSA and Iran use particular religious, educational, and media soft power to their advantage in the Yemeni war. The analysis has shown Iran’s strategy is more complex and elaborate, including a major focus on education. The KSA concentrates more on hard power activities, whereas Iran uses the Yemeni war to present itself as a leader of all Arabs in comparison to the KSA’s effort to balance Iran. Furthermore, on one hand, Iran’s strategy is not only to balance the KSA but also to present itself as a viable leader of the Arab world. On the other hand, since the KSA focuses more on hard power activities, their soft power ones aim more to balance Iran than to promote Saudi Arabia. Lastly, interconnection and mutual reinforcement of the analysed soft power areas since both KSA and Iran use them to a greater or lesser extent.

Regarding the structure of the article, first, we present why soft power tools can be the basis of the foreign policy toolkit and what role is

played by religion, education, and media. In the second part, the research design of the article is developed. Consequently, we analyze the soft power tools connected to religion, education, and media used by the KSA and Iran in Yemen.

Religious, Educational, and Media Soft Power Tools as the Basis of the Foreign Policy Toolkit

The term *soft power* became important right after it was coined by Joseph Nye more than three decades ago. Nye wanted to express the double-faced nature of power and showed that the USA had *another* type of power beyond the military and economic one.⁹ Since then, the term has evolved and even included military and economic power. For example, Nye himself stated that the economic dimension is “hybrid” and also belongs among soft power policy tools.¹⁰

To better understand how soft power is used, it is important to define soft power tools. Those tools constitute “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion and payment.”¹¹ They are also frequently associated with intangible factors like institutions, ideas, values, culture, and perceived legitimacy of policies.¹² On the contrary, hard power tools draw on the use of a “policy of coercion resting on a threat of use and/or use of military force against a given country.”¹³ It is important to point out that both hard and soft power tools have the same objective but different ways how to achieve it.

⁹ Eric Li, “The Rise and Fall of Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/20/the-rise-and-fall-of-soft-power/>.

¹⁰ Joseph Nye, “Hard, Soft, and Smart Power,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, eds. Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine and Ramesh Thakur (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

¹¹ Joseph Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 95.

¹² Joseph Nye, “Hard, Soft, and Smart Power,” 4.

¹³ Olga G. Leonova, “Soft Power as a State’s Foreign Policy Resource,” *Globalistics and Globalization Studies* (2014): 4.

Concerning the Middle East and especially Yemen as a proxy war between the two aspiring regional powers, we tend to perceive the importance of religion, education, and media as one of the building blocks of each power's strategy. Moreover, according to many scholars, the analyzed soft power areas belong among the key sources of soft power itself. Hence, those three concepts will be defined below.¹⁴

With regards to religion, according to Natalia Paunic, both Iran and the KSA perceive religion as a key soft power source since they position themselves as leaders of Shi'a, respectively Sunni Islam.¹⁵ This strategy is heavily influenced by the role of Islam in the Middle East. It manifests in not only the ordinary life of people, but also in the political, social, and cultural ones. For illustration, according to the estimation (since there are no official statistics), more than 99% of the Yemeni population is Muslim, with approximately 55–65% being Sunni Muslims and 35–45% Zaydi (Shi'a) Muslims.¹⁶ There are various existing religious soft power tools. However, the most imminent examples of what is considered to be religious tools according to the current scholarship are the following: the construction of mosques, celebrations of religious events, renovations of religious places, or activities of imams (speeches, social media activities).¹⁷

¹⁴ Joseph Nye, "Public diplomacy and soft power;" Irene S. Wu, "Soft Power Amidst Great Power Competition," *Wilson Center*, May, 2018, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/2018-05-soft_power_-_wu.pdf; Ansgar Jödicke, *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus* (London: Routledge, 2018); Zikun Yang and Li Li, "Positioning Religion in International Relations: The Performative, Discursive, and Relational Dimension of Religious Soft Power," *Religions* 12, no. 940 (2021): 21–23; Terry Flew, "Entertainment media, cultural power, and post-globalization: The case of China's international media expansion and the discourse of soft power," *SAGE Journals* 1, no. 4 (2016): 278–294.

¹⁵ Natalia Paunic, "The Rising Shi'a Crescent: Iranian Smart Power and Implications for the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf," *Carleton Review of International Affairs* 3 (2016): 71.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Yemen," undated, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/yemen>.

¹⁷ Yasmine Farouk and Nathan J. Brown, *Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 2021); Frederic Wehre, *Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-option, and Contention* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment For

Education is another significant element. For example, Romy Haber mentions how Houthis, a Shia group fighting the Sunni Yemeni government, engaged themselves in education to use it as a possible tool to gain control over future generations.¹⁸ Moreover, Aigerim Raimzhanova clearly states that education is one of the most effective resources of the soft power toolkit when influencing populations.¹⁹ Prime examples of educational soft power tools are the production and distribution of culturally specific exercise books, the training of teachers, student exchange programs, and the curriculums modifications.²⁰

The media world (TV channels, social media, radio, and so forth) is also seen as a key area of soft power since it can be used to easily spread specific worldviews to masses of people and thus influence them accordingly. Steve B. Rothman stated that the actor is considered very powerful at influencing the locals once the actor dominates in the media discourse.²¹ For example, Massoumeh Torfeh points out the important role of media in Iran's soft power strategy in the region of the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria.²² Media tools can be constituted of self-promoting TV and radio production, newspaper distribution, and regime-supporting social sites campaigns.

The aforementioned soft power areas are also mutually reinforced and interconnected. This statement holds true, especially in the Middle East, where religion, as stated above, plays a crucial role in every aspect

International Peace, 2021); Nina Shea, *Saudi Publications On Hate Ideology Invade American Mosques* (Washington D.C.: Center for Religious Freedom Freedom House, 2005); Anthony Chase, *Routledge Handbook on Human Rights and the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁸ Romy Haber, "The Houthis and the Hijacking of Yemen's Education Sector," *The Euro-Gulf Information Centre*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.egic.info/houthis-hijacking-education-yemen>.

¹⁹ Aigerim Raimzhanova, *Power in IR: Hard, Soft, and Smart* (Bucharest: Institute for Cultural Diplomacy and the University of Bucharest, 2015), 15-16.

²⁰ William Racimora, *Salafist/Wahhabite Financial Support to Educational, Social and Religious Institutions* (Brussels: Policy Department DG External Policies, 2013); Anthony Chase, *Routledge Handbook on Human Rights and the Middle East and North Africa*; Ann E. McDougall, *Engaging with a Legacy: Nehemia Levtzion (1935-2003)* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

²¹ Steve B. Rothman, "Revising the Soft Power Concept: What Are the Means and Mechanisms of Soft Power?," *Journal of Political Power* 4, no. 1 (2011): 60.

²² Massoumeh Torfeh, *The Role of Iran's Regional Media in its Soft War Policy* (Doha: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2017).

of human life. Therefore, religious, educational, and media soft power tools represent a powerful combination if used together.

Research Design

In the part above, we discussed the variety and importance of soft power tools which are often neglected when studying the conflict in Yemen. Therefore, this article aims to analyze what religious, educational, and media tools are used by KSA and Iran in order to project their soft power towards Yemen and how they potentially differ. The timeframe of this paper coincides with the Yemeni crisis which started in 2011. Nevertheless, for contextual purposes, we may sometimes get out of the aforementioned period.

The empirical outcomes will strictly focus on religious, educational, and media activities carried out by the KSA and Iran or via affiliated intra-state actors. We will use the theoretical framework outlined above where the tools are described in detail. We would also like to clarify how we will differentiate religious, educational, and media soft power tools from others, particularly economic ones. In general, we are interested in every soft power tool connected to the areas of religion, education, and media. If there is uncertainty about whether a specific tool falls under cited areas, we will use the purpose of the tool at hand as a decisive criterium. For example, a mosque construction can be seen as both an economic and religious soft power tool. However, the purpose of the construction is more likely to be religious (attempt to spread Islam, specific information, etc.) than economic one. Therefore, such activity would be assessed as a religious tool. Furthermore, if a tool exhibits signs of more than one of analysed soft power areas, the decisive criterium will be proportionality. For example, the provision of a religious educational program certified by the university can be seen as both a religious and educational soft power tool. However, even though the program concerns religion, it is an educational program provided by the university. As proportionally it has more in common with education than religion, it belongs to the area of education. If a teacher or university professor gives religious lectures in the mosque, such activity would be seen as a religious one.

We also acknowledge the role of intra-state actors, not necessarily officially affiliated with the KSA and Iran, who can indirectly project the Saudi and Iranian soft power tools. This is especially the role of local preachers who could have been influenced by Saudi and Iranian values in the past and now they disseminate them in Yemen, independently of the aforementioned states' official governments.

In terms of the methodology, we present a qualitative exploratory case study to develop an initial understanding of the use of soft power tools used by the KSA and Iran in Yemen. We will primarily use the so-called secondary research methods of open-source intelligence research, literature research, qualitative content, context and text analysis. The source base includes academic journals, media articles, and governmental and non-governmental policy papers. If possible, we use data triangulation to ensure the accuracy of information. This approach is especially important with regard to the existence of propaganda connected to the Yemeni war.²³

In the following section, we will present two case studies. Each one of them will analyze religious, educational, and media soft power tools used towards Yemen. In conclusion, we will sum up the particular tools used by each of the case studies and present them area by area – religious, educational, and lastly media tools.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

To better understand the KSA's role in Yemen, it is essential to mention that it is not circumstantial. Instead, Saudi soft power tools are part of the broader framework of the KSA's current foreign policy which focuses on fostering stability and security.²⁴ Additionally, it can be considered that the conflict in Yemen represents a proxy war not only for the KSA, but also for Iran – Saudi Arabia's regional rival. Therefore,

²³ See Elisabeth J. Wood, "The Ethical Challenges Field Research in Conflict Zones," *Qualitative Sociology* 29, no. 3 (2006): 373-383.

²⁴ Turki Al-Saud, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy," MEPC, October 22, 2013, <https://mepc.org/saudi-arabias-foreign-policy>; Arlinda Rrustemi, Rob De Wijk and Connor Dunlop, *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans* (Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019).

the Yemeni war provides the KSA with an opportunity to lessen Iranian influence over the Middle East and increase its own.²⁵ As depicted above, that is why it is not very easy to identify which vectors run the KSA's ambitions in war-torn Yemen. Given these reasons, the KSA tries to limit the influence of other external actors.²⁶

Religious soft power tools play a crucial role in the KSA's foreign policy due to the fact that KSA is the world protagonist of the Wahhabism – version of Sunni Islam. Whereas Wahhabism is a key Saudi regional concept, it is necessary to shortly introduce it to better comprehend the following analysis. Wahhabism became the fundamental creed of KSA in 1932, and since then, Wahhabism has shaped domestic and foreign policies and its thoughts have been spread through Saudi missionaries abroad.²⁷ Nevertheless, the KSA promoted Wahhabism globally for the first time in the 1970s.²⁸ Since that time, "Wahhabism's export has systematically inflicted on Muslim communities globally for at least two generations."²⁹ And Yemen is not an exception. Wahhabism was first introduced in Yemen in the 1980s by religious cleric Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi`I who gained his education at the Islamic University of Medina and was active in widening the thoughts of Wahhabism until his death in 2001.

In the Yemeni conflict context, Wahhabism has been introduced to thousands of Yemeni students either during their studies in the KSA or Yemen itself.³⁰ In order to support the Wahhabi influence, we found that Saudis operate via a specific institution to widen Wahhabism abroad – Special Office for Yemen Affairs founded by the late defense minister,

²⁵ Laura Hartmann, *Saudi Arabia as a Regional Actor: Threat Perception and Balancing at Home and Abroad* (Paris: SciencesPo, 2016).

²⁶ Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power Strategy in Yemen."

²⁷ Carol E. B. Choksy and Jamsheed K. Choksy, "The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad," *World Affairs* 178, no. 1 (2015): 23-34; Maysam Behraves, "The Sectarian Dimension," *Dandc*, September 20, 2019, <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/b-oth-iran-and-saudi-arabia-are-instrumentalising-religious-doctrines-political-purposes>.

²⁸ Hamad Albloshi, "Ideological Roots of the Ḥūthī Movement in Yemen," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2016): 143-162.

²⁹ John Hannah, "It's Time for Saudi Arabia to Stop Exporting Extremism," *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/03/its-time-for-saudi-arabia-to-stopexporting-extremism/>.

³⁰ Laurent Bonnefoy, "Deconstructing Salafism in Yemen," *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 2 (2009): 1-3.

Prince Sultan. This special small royal committee reclaimed a wide network of contacts and informants to facilitate Saudi activities in Yemen. To be certain, the commission funded countless religious leaders since its annual budget is approximately \$3,5 billion.³¹ Besides this, the special royal committee has also supported politicians, tribal sheiks, religious leaders, and military officers.³² However, after the death of Prince Sultan in 2011, the committee decreased its activity due to the alteration of the domestic situation in the KSA. And the House of Saud stopped the committee's financing operations, mainly given the lack of a clear strategy and coordination.³³ Nowadays, it appears that the Committee instead plays a marginalized role, but in the past, its work had significantly influenced the Yemeni population, who can pass Wahhabi thoughts to further generations.

Furthermore, some authors such as Andrew McDonnell, Henry Burbridge, and Yara Z. Salloum argue that due to the extensive influence the KSA exercises, the KSA has become somehow enmeshed in Yemeni religious institutions that consequently cultivate the patronage of formal and informal networks that favor the Saudi-led intervention.³⁴ Besides, in 2015, Saudis stepped into the conflict with the nationalist narrative of the kingdom presenting itself as the defender of the 'Sunnis' in the region.³⁵

When analyzing the KSA religious influence, we were confronted with various considerably followed (mainly through the social sites) clerics who spread their worldviews regarding Yemen. The first one, Saudi religious cleric and Muslim scholar Salman al-Awda noticeably influenced the religious as well as the social environment in the Arab

³¹ Stig Stenslie, *Not Too Strong, Not Too Weak: Saudi Arabia's Policy Towards Yemen* (Oslo: NOREF, 2013).

³² Ibid.

³³ Stig Stenslie, *Not Too Strong, Not Too Weak*; Ginny Hill and Gerd Nonneman, *Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests and Regional Diplomacy* (London: Chatham House, 2011).

³⁴ Andrew McDonnell, Henry Burbridge and Yara Z. Salloum, *Addressing Jihadi-Salafism in Yemen* (Washington, DC: International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, 2017).

³⁵ Toby Matthiesen, *The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy: Islamists and the State in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institutions, 2015); Luiza G. Cerioli, "Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain's and Yemen's Arab Spring," *Contexto Internacional* 40, no. 2 (2018): 295-317.

world, especially through public interviews and his Twitter account (@salman_alodah) which gathers around 7 million followers.³⁶ Additionally, al-Awda strongly supported the intervention in Yemen and even announced that the killing of the Houthis could be religiously justified.³⁷ Similarly, Mohamed al-Arifi, another prominent Saudi cleric with millions of followers on Twitter, announced the Yemenis fighting with Houthi rebels should abandon those Houthis “in order not to be used by the «Safavid» state, a reference to the Persian Safavid Empire.”³⁸ Last but not least, another prominent preacher, Ayid al-Qarni, endorsed the KSA’s role in Yemen and designated the Yemenis opposing the Houthi movement as “soldiers of God.”³⁹ Based on the information mentioned above, it can be assumed that these sectarian narratives have been fruitful in calling up for Islamic support for the regime’s foreign policy.⁴⁰ Given their influential positions, we assume their thoughts have considerably impacted the local population.

Another influential person is Saad bin Ateeq al-Ateeq who is a Saudi preacher with long-standing ties to the kingdom’s government. Ateeq can be indisputably considered a hardliner among Saudi preachers. In 2015, Ateeq declared on the Saudi state news channel al-Ekhbariya “that Yemen’s lands were designated «purely for monotheism» and may not be polluted, neither by Houthis nor Iranians.”⁴¹ Additionally, Ateeq labelled Houthis as “rats that need to be cleansed.”⁴² Undoubtedly, such strong expressions coming from the KSA’s territory could negatively influence the inter-religious reconciliation in Yemen and could only incite the Yemeni Sunnis against Shiites. According to Daniel Byman, there is also evidence that Saudis, for a long time, have been trying to

³⁶ Toby Matthiesen, *The domestic sources of Saudi foreign policy*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Toby Matthiesen, “Saudi Arabia,” in *Rethinking Political Islam*, eds. Shadi Hamid and William McCants (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 127.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, *Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion In Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2018).

⁴¹ Oren Adaki and David Weinberg, “Preaching Hate and Sectarianism in the Gulf,” *Foreign Policy*, May 5, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/05/preaching-hate-and-sectarianism-in-the-gulf-saudi-arabia-qatar-uae-saad-bin-ateeq-al-ateeq/>.

⁴² Ibid.

prompt specific bottom-up activities to advance the KSA's austere and anti-Shiite interpretation of Islam.⁴³ These particular activities are mainly carried out by Saudi Wahhabi preachers operating in Yemen.

Of course, these activities created a fertile ground for Saudi religious authority in Yemen in the sense that individual Yemeni Sunni believers keep relatively close ties with Riyadh. For instance, in August 2016, a group of over one hundred Yemeni Sunni scholars gathered at the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs in order to issue an agreement concerning Islamic ethics. This particular agreement aimed to lessen the influence of Iranian religious/ideological activities. According to the contracting parties, it is believed that the Quran and Sunnah inspired this agreement. Therefore, Yemeni Islamic scholars needed to sign it.⁴⁴ In 2019, the Royal Court Advisor Sheikh Saad bin Nasser Al-Shathri invited a group of Yemeni scholars and preachers to reaffirm "the importance of their role in stabilizing the nation on monotheism and Sunnah and fighting deviations in Yemeni society."⁴⁵ The meeting also stressed out that:

"the absolute commitment to Islam, and maintaining the unity of the nation and the entity of the state, will defeat the Iranian project, or any project that wants to undermine the homeland."⁴⁶

In terms of educational soft power tools, to support the Wahhabi line of thinking, Saudis have financed a large number of Wahhabi schools that are officially called "scientific centres" where young students are educated according to Wahhabi beliefs and credence.⁴⁷ For example, the Dammaj Institute, funded and supported by the KSA, helped spread the Salafist

⁴³ Daniel L. Byman, "Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have a disastrous Yemen strategy," *Brookings*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/07/17/saudi-arabia-and-the-united-arab-emirates-have-a-disastrous-yemen-strategy/>.

⁴⁴ Halaa Al-Dosari, "Saudi Arabia's Struggle for Sunni Leadership," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 7, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64501>.

⁴⁵ Saudi Press Agency, "Scholars and preachers of Yemen praise the role of Kingdom and stress: Yemen in good hands," October 29, 2019, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/1987895>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hillridge, "Religions and Ethnic Groups in Yemen," January 12, 2010, <https://hillridge.nl/2010/01/12/religions-and-ethnic-groups/>; Fanack, "Yemen," 2020, <https://fanack.com/yemen/population/>.

ideology in the KSA's approach through specific Yemeni-based schools. This institute was built near Saadah, the Houthi center, to counterbalance the Houthi's form of Islam.⁴⁸ Such educational interference supports Raimzhanova's argument, stating that education is one of the most effective resources of a soft power toolkit when influencing the population.⁴⁹ It seems the KSA is aware of it. From the KSA perspective, it would also be way cheaper to build schools than purchase guns, as we argue elsewhere in this article that soft power tools can have similar significance as hard power tools but for lower costs. For instance, the German-based organization WAAI states that school in Yemeni conditions can be built for approximately USD 540,000, which is a negligible amount of money compared with military purchases worth millions of dollars.⁵⁰

It appears that KSA primarily focuses on the Sunnis. However, the KSA has also been working on influencing the Shia population with Wahhabism for a long time, namely in traditionally Zaydis areas.⁵¹ Also, it can be taken into consideration that the KSA showed a certain interest in Zaydis areas because their branch of Shia Islam has more similarities with the Sunni than Shia Islam.⁵² Incidentally, it can be assumed that the KSA's activities in the Zaydis areas were one of the catalysts of the Houthi movement to balance the KSA's soft power.⁵³

Although it was already partially mentioned that numerous prominent preachers have used TV channels to cultivate the KSA's religious authority in Yemen, it appears that the media's soft power role is rather complex. With this in mind, Saudi control over the media space became even more prevalent in 2015 after the Saudi intervention.⁵⁴ Therefore, this

⁴⁸ Ben Buchholz, *The Forgotten War: The Ongoing Disaster In Yemen* (New York: The Soufan Center, 2018).

⁴⁹ Aigerim Raimzhanova, *Power in IR*, 15-16.

⁵⁰ WAAI, "Help us build a school in Yemen," 2019, <http://waa-i-org.com/help-us-build-a-school-in-yemen-en/>.

⁵¹ Adam Baron, "Mapping the Yemen Conflict," ECFR, 2019, <https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen>.

⁵² Minority Rights Group International, "Zaydi Shi'a," 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/aydi-shias/>.

⁵³ Adam Baron, "Mapping the Yemen Conflict."

⁵⁴ Afrah Nasser, "The Yemen War, Media, and Propaganda," Atlantic Council, May 3, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-yemen-war-media-and-propaganda/>.

issue deserves special attention. Before we take a closer look at this issue, it is inevitable to realize that while exerting external influence, the KSA as well as Iran are the key actors which perform “[...] in the Arabic-language media market, transforming it into an arena for confrontation and quests for popularity.”⁵⁵ The media also serves as the determining element to win the hearts and minds of Arabs. The KSA has also invested a considerable amount of money into the regional media sphere, making the KSA one of the most influential owners and lobby actors in the Middle East’s media business.⁵⁶

In the first instance, Saudi-owned or supported media had played a key role in enforcing the soft power influence before the Yemeni conflict even started. Saudis have tried to shape the Yemeni social discourse according to the political-cultural context for their purposes, (1) to fight Iran, and (2) to exert Saudis influence among the Yemeni population. Tehran has been purposely described as the destructive and demonic element, while Saudis as stabilizers to be admired. In the Yemeni context, the KSA also realizes that is vital to portray itself in a rather positive way.⁵⁷ Therefore, for Saudis, it is crucial to display their politics, society, culture, and religion which are often purposely depicted as liberal, reformist, moderate, or modern.⁵⁸

Besides, Saudi-owned media accompanied by religious authorities have tried to postulate among the Yemenis the Saudi narrative that the conflict in Yemen can be perceived as the clash of civilizations – meaning the clash of Sunnis and Shiites – where Shias are presented as a threat to Yemen and the region as a whole.⁵⁹ Due to this information, it comes as no surprise that the KSA is also buying the so-called *media silence*, which is pursued by professional PR companies to polish the KSA’s image in the Yemeni media space in the context in which, as Zainab Sultan noted,

⁵⁵ Anne Hagood, “Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Tale of Two Media Covering Conflict in Yemen,” *Arab Media and Society*, March 30, 2010, <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/saudi-arabia-and-iran-the-tale-of-two-media-covering-conflict-in-yemen/>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ May, Darwich, “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status,” *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2, (2018): 125–142.

the KSA desperately needs to change its image, mainly due to civilian losses because of military operations.⁶⁰ In other words, each KSA's military action that results in civilian losses tends to change the Yemeni mood in the society, weakening the KSA's endeavors to portray itself as a leading power in the region.⁶¹ Moreover, the KSA also aimed to influence Yemeni women with particular religious narratives through religious programs. For instance, one of the most prominent Saudi channels is called *Iqraa* – a Saudi-based satellite channel that is devoted to religious programming.⁶² However, there is currently a lack of data exploring to what extent *Iqraa* has impacted Yemeni women.

Based on the analysis of educational instruments, we assume that the media activities are way more coherent in contrast with religious and educational activities. Saudis realize that controlling the information domain is a key to future development.

Iran

One cannot speak about Iranian foreign policy or Iran in general without mentioning the Islamic revolution in 1979. This event marks a major turning point in the history of Iran and the Middle East as well. Since the revolution, Iran has abandoned the pro-Western course of its foreign policy. Except, Tehran has been targeting states with a significant amount of Shia population (e.g. Iraq, Lebanon, or Yemen) that lie within Tehran's sphere of influence but also projected influence to other Muslim states outside the Middle East region, particularly to sub-Saharan Africa.⁶³ Iranian ideas, hand in hand with its "new" policy, had

⁶⁰ Afrah Nasser, "The Yemen War, Media, and Propaganda," Atlantic Council, May 3, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-yemen-war-media-and-propaganda/>; Zainab Sultan, "Why the press struggles to cover the war in Yemen," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/yemen-war.php>.

⁶¹ May Darwich, "The Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status."

⁶² Sophia Pandya, "Religious Change Among Yemeni Women: The New Popularity of 'Amr Khaled,'" *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 5, no. 1 (2009): 50-79.

⁶³ Eric Lob, *Iran's Reconstruction Jihad: Rural Development and Regime Consolidation after 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

an important inspirational dimension as well. For example, Simon Fuchs described the impact of the revolution on Pakistan stating:

“Pakistani scholars strove to become associated with the Islamic Republic and the appeal of transnational Shi’ism.”⁶⁴

With the revolution, Iran caused an earthquake in the regional and international order and enter the power competition (at least) in the Middle East. However, such a step brought not only followers but also adversaries (see Iran–Iraqi war).

Yemen, the main focus of this paper, plays an interesting role in the Saudi–Iran power competition. Iran has been asserting its influence on the Yemeni Shia community since the 1980s, however, Tehran’s involvement escalated since the start of the Yemeni civil war. Iran has been providing its resources and assistance to Houthi rebels. These efforts greatly increased in 2015 when the Houthis took over the capital city of Sana’a. Since then, Iran has started to provide them with significant material resources (e. g. weapons) and, more importantly, it has also been heavily using various educational, religious, and media soft power tools.⁶⁵

Eldad Pardo stated, “education became a focal point for Tehran’s empire builders.”⁶⁶ This notion alone shows the importance that is being put on education. Iran tries to be very active in several areas – (1) provision of educational programs and scholarships, (2) supervision of curriculums, and (3) institutional establishment, financing, and cooperation. Tehran provides Houthi students with programs that take place in both

⁶⁴ Simon Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi’ism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 187.

⁶⁵ Farea Al-Muslimi, “Iran’s Role in Yemen Exaggerated, but Destructive,” *Century Foundation*, May 19, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/irans-role-yemen-exaggerated-destructive/?agreed=1>; Saad Hasan, “How much influence does Iran have on the Houthis?,” *TRT World*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/how-much-influence-does-iran-have-on-the-houthis-29911>; Mohammed Al-Qadhi, *The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security* (Riyadh: Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies), 38.

⁶⁶ Eldad Pardo, “Foreword,” in *Review of Houthi Educational Materials in Yemen 2015-19*, ed. Itam Shalev (Ramat Gan: IMPACT-se, 2021), 2.

Yemen and Iran. In Iran, the students are attending religious seminars (Hawzas) in the city of Qom. Their studies concern the theology of Twelver and the principles of the Iranian revolution. For example, one of the Qom institutions is Al-Mustafa International University which is attended by hundreds of Houthi students. In Yemen, the students enroll at Twelver's (Ja'fariyah) institutes located in Sana'a and Sa'da. The Iranian Embassy in Yemen offers various scholarships that cover either whole studies or at least their part. Graduates of said institutions subsequently advocate the teachings they have received in different Yemeni regions. They shall spread Iranian values, the Twelver version of Shia Islam, and support Iranian and Houthis interests in Yemen. It is important to add that Iran does not only target youngsters. It organizes visits and training for lawyers, writers, journalists, etc. with the same goal as was in the case above.⁶⁷ A danger connected to educational visits to Iran was sensed by the Yemeni government. In 2017, the Yemeni Ministry of Education stopped scholarships to Iran, as students were taught "destructive ideas."⁶⁸ At that time, there were 7,000 Yemeni students in the aforementioned city of Qom.⁶⁹

Iranian influence on the Houthi community is also visible in its curriculums. Several sources describe how Houthis, directly or indirectly assisted by Iran, have shaped curriculums and the whole education sector to accommodate their needs.⁷⁰ For example, they promote their

⁶⁷ Mohammed Al-Qadhi, *The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security* (Riyadh: Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies), 39-42; Abdo Albabesh, "The Relations of Houthis with Iran and Hezbollah," *Medium*, November 4, 2018, <https://medium.com/@drabdoalbahesh/the-relations-of-al-houthis-movement-with-iran-and-the-lebanese-hezbollah-5a54f05bd544>; Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi "The View From Tehran: Iran's Militia Doctrine," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, February 11, 2021, <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2021-05/Tony%20Blair%20Institute%2C%20The%20View%20From%20Tehran%2C%20February%202021.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Memo Middle East Monitor, "Yemeni government stops scholarships to Iran," January 18, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170118-yemeni-government-stops-scholarships-to-iran/>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ben Hubbard, "Yemen's Houthis Went From Ragtag Militia to Force Threatening Gulf Powers," *New York Times*, April 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/17/world/middleeast/yemen-houthis-gulf.html>; Ahmad Majidiyar, "New Houthi-imposed university curriculum reportedly glorifies Iran, promotes sectarianism," *Middle East*

foreign allies (Iran, Syria, and Lebanon), establish new school subjects – one is called ‘The Arab-Israeli Conflict’ and glorifies Shiites and Hezbollah for their fight against Israel, etc. Itan Shalev reviewed several Houthi educational materials published between 2015–2019 and even though, as he mentions, “[t]he connection to Iran [...] is downplayed in the examined educational materials,” it is undeniable.⁷¹ Some of his major findings include (1) the US is called ‘Great Satan’ and causes all the negatives in the Middle East region, (2) ISIS, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel are all being portrayed as the US tools to maintain hegemony over the Muslim world, and (3) materials depict only Iranian sphere of influence, e. g. Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain. Interestingly enough, Iran is shown as a friend of all Arabs, Shiites as well as Sunnis. Arabs are not enemies of Iran, particular states are. Therefore, the aforementioned states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Saudi’s allies, are subjects of hate, not their Sunni citizens.⁷² Clearly, Tehran tries to put itself in the position of the only leader of the Arab world that will help the region against its Western foes and their ‘tools’ (Saudis and the UAE).

The cited changes were also commented on by the Yemeni teachers. The Yemeni Teachers Syndicate was well aware of those changes and stated that through curriculum changes, Iran is trying to establish a “policy of cultural colonialism” and introduce the “ideology of the Khomeinist revolution in Yemen through public education.”⁷³ Furthermore, except for curriculum changes, the vast majority of school

Institute, March 1, 2018b, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-houthi-imposed-university-curriculum-reportedly-glorifies-iran-promotes>; Romy Haber, “The Houthis and the Hijacking of Yemen’s Education Sector,” *The Euro-Gulf Information Centre*, <https://www.egic.info/houthis-hijacking-education-yemen>, December 11, 2021; Muhammed Ali, “Houthis hijack education in Yemen,” *Arab News*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1295651/middle-east>.

⁷¹ Itan Shalev, *Review of Houthi Educational Materials in Yemen 2015-19* (Ramat Gan: IMPACT-se, 2021), 3.

⁷² *Ibid*, 4-6.

⁷³ Christopher Hamill-Stewart, “Yemeni teachers’ union slams Houthi curriculum takeover,” *Arab News*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1843536/middle-east>.

headmasters were replaced by Houthi supporters.⁷⁴ Iran is pursuing a similar strategy in other Middle Eastern states. To give an illustration, Iran and Syria signed a memorandum that enables Iran to “supervise the overhaul of Syria’s school curricula and to print Syrian textbooks in Iran.”⁷⁵ Additionally, Iran participated in teacher training, vocational education, etc. Tehran’s involvement in Syrian education is, as well as in the case of Yemen, often met with criticism.⁷⁶

Iranian activities also include institutional financing, establishment, and cooperation. Tehran is involved in financing various institutions around Yemen (e. g. the Badr Alami Center in Sana’a, the Center for Islamic Studies in Sana’a, or the Dahyan Center in the Sa’da province) which are subsequently supposed to spread the Iranian *Twelver* version of Shia Islam.⁷⁷ Tehran’s influence may be also found in the tertiary education. With its assistance, the Persian language and literature departments were open at the Sana’a and Dhamar Universities. Additionally, there have been talks about cooperation between the aforementioned Sana’a University and the Iranian Imam al-Sadiq University.⁷⁸ All these activities further strengthen the mutual relationship between the Houthis and Iran.

The second category of examined soft power tools consists of religious ones. Major example of such a tool can be demonstrated in the Houthis’ position toward the Baha’i community. The Baha’is are a religious non-

⁷⁴ Christopher Hamill-Stewart, “Yemeni teachers’ union slams Houthi curriculum takeover,” *Arab News*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1843536/middle-east>; Arab Weekly, “Yemen’s teachers’ union accuses Houthis of indoctrinating children,” April 20, 2021, <https://the arabweekly.com/yemens-teachers-union-accuses-houthis-indoctrinating-children#off-canvas>; Republican Yemen, “Yemeni Teachers Syndicate: Houthi changes in school books meant to instill racism, glorify their leader,” February 12, 2022, <https://republicanyemen.net/archives/30291>.

⁷⁵ Nabil Al-Tamini, “Yemeni educators oppose Houthi curriculum changes,” *Al-Mashareq*, August 11, 2020, https://almashareq.com/en_GB/articles/crmi_am/features/2020/08/11/feature-01.

⁷⁶ “Syrian Journalist: Education Agreement with Syria Will Allow Iran To Control Syrians’ Minds,” *Memri*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.memri.org/reports/syrian-journalist-education-agreement-syria-will-allow-iran-control-syrians%E2%80%99-minds>.

⁷⁷ Mohammed Al-Qadhi, *The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security* (Riyadh: Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies), 39-40.

⁷⁸ Gerald Feierstein and Joshua Koontz, “Iran Ramps Up Its Exchange Programs for the Houthis in Yemen,” *Middle East Institute*, January 27, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-ramps-its-exchange-programs-houthis-yemen>.

Muslim community originally from Iran that, however, also resides in Yemen. The religion itself was established in 1844 but was persecuted during the years leading up to the revolution of 1979 and subsequently banned in 1982, due to the violation of the Iranian law against heresy. The Iranian government even created a specific memorandum that deals with the Baha'i community. It was published in 1991 and expressed a strict goal – the destruction of the Baha'is.⁷⁹ It is fair to say that Tehran's opinions and actions toward the aforementioned community have the power to affect other actors to act in the same way.

According to several reports, Houthis use: (1) similar language as Iran – portraying the Baha'i community as agents of imperialism or Jews, (2) similar threats of disbanding the community and handing death sentences, and (3) they have the same goal of forcing the community out of the country while gaining their assets.⁸⁰ Arab Weekly went as far as stating that the hostility against the Baha'i community is a reflection of ideological subordination to Iran.⁸¹ A spokesman of Baha'is stated that

⁷⁹ James Mohajer, "We will butcher every Baha'i: How a small religious minority in Yemen became a key target for the Houthis," *LSE*, June 18, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2018/06/we-will-butcher-every-bahai-how-a-small-religious-minority-in-yemen-became-a-key-target-for-the-houthis/>; "Yemen's Houthis accused of targeting Bahai minority under 'directives from Iran,'" *Middle East Eye*, December 24, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sham-trial-houthi-court-accused-targeting-bahai-community-under-directives-iran>; Maysaa Al-Deen, Casey Coombs and Abdullah Olofi, "The Baha'is In Yemen: From Obscurity To Persecution And Exile," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, June 18, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/The_Bahais_in_Yemen_en.pdf.

⁸⁰ Al-Deen, Coombs and Olofi, "The Baha'is In Yemen," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, June 18, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/files/The_Bahais_in_Yemen_en.pdf; Bahá'í International Community, "Houthi judicial farce puts Baha'I lives at risk in Yemen," February 4, 2021, <https://www.bic.org/news/houthi-judicial-farce-puts-bahai-lives-risk-yemen>; Ahmad Majidiyar, "Iran Allegedly Motivates Houthis to Crack Down on Baha'i Minority in Yemen," *MEI*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-allegedly-motivates-houthi-is-crack-down-bahai-minority-yemen>; Seed Al-Batati, "Iran's arms shipments to Houthis fuel war in Yemen, experts say," *Arab News*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1697466/middle-east>.

⁸¹ "Iran-backed Houthis push Baha'is out of Yemen," *Arab Weekly*, August 8, 2020, <https://the arabweekly.com/iran-backed-houthis-push-bahais-out-yemen>.

Tehran is “exporting their policy of persecution.”⁸² There may be debate whether Houthis are acting under direct Iranian orders or not. For example, Maysaa Al-Deen, Casey Coombs and Abdullah Olofi haven’t registered any concrete evidence proving that they are.⁸³ Therefore, Houthis may be, in true ‘power of attraction’ fashion, simply inspired by Tehran’s actions toward the Baha’i community and subsequently try to act in the same manner.

Iran is also trying to enhance the *Twelver* version of Shia Islam and build a deeper connection with the Houthis through certain symbolic acts and celebrations. The latter is supported by the Iranian Embassy in Sana’a whose representatives are keen to participate in various events (*e.g.*, the Event of Ghadir Khumm, Ashura, etc.). As an example of the former activity, Al-Qadhi mentions the renovation of the Shrine of Nasser Haqq, an important historical Imam.⁸⁴

Lastly, Tehran uses different soft power tools in the area of the media as well. Iranian interests cover not only TV and radio but also the training of media personnel. Many media workers (directors, TV/radio anchors, etc.) from Yemen have been trained in Iran, Syria, and Lebanon to strengthen the Iranian influence in the country. Regarding TV, Iran is sponsoring various satellite channels (*e.g.* Mayadeen Maserah channels residing in Beirut or Aden Live channel that belongs to the Southern Movement) that are supporting different Yemeni revolutionary groups and movements.⁸⁵ A slightly different approach is used in the case of the radio. The main protagonists influencing the radio broadcast are the Houthis because they effectively control all the main radio stations in the country (former Hayat FM, Eram FM, and Sam FM). Except for the pro-Houthi broadcast, Eram FM and Sam FM openly support Iran and Hezbollah. The Houthis (through Sam FM) even organized a campaign raising funds for the Lebanese movement. In only ten days, the amount

⁸² Ahmad Majidiyar and Lama Al-Jarallah, “Iran-backed Houthi rebels step up persecution of Baha’i minority in Yemen,” *MEI*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-backed-houthi-rebels-step-persecution-bahai-minority-yemen>.

⁸³ Maysaa Al-Deen, Casey Coombs and Abdullah Olofi, “The Baha’is In Yemen.”

⁸⁴ Mohammed Al-Qadhi, *The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security* (Riyadh: Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies), 41.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

of raised money almost topped USD 300,000.⁸⁶ In Yemen, Iran is also using the newspaper and domestic/allies' sources of TV broadcasting. As an example of the newspaper supported by Iran, Al-Qadhi lists Al-Masar, Demokrati, Balagh, or Ummah. Additionally, broadcasting mainly includes Al-Alam news channel, The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, and Press TV. Through all those media tools, Iran portrays itself as a savior of the oppressed and persecuted. As Al-Qadhi states, "Iran's media arms have worked to depict the Yemen crisis as an 'Islamic awakening.'"⁸⁷

Iranian support for Houthis fits perfectly Thomas Juneau's explanation of Tehran's choices of non-state actors.⁸⁸ Except for gaining access to the territory under Houthi control, both actors share the anti-Saudi, anti-Israeli, and anti-US sentiments. Moreover, anytime Saudi Arabia's influence is diminished somewhere in the Middle East, it opens space for Tehran. Regarding Iranian soft power use in Yemen, the objectives are clear. Tehran doesn't want to be 'present' in Yemen only now but also in the future. Therefore, it targets the education sector. Indoctrination is then carried out on young students as well as journalists, lawyers, etc. Iran provides its values and worldview to be spread all around Yemen, at a minimum. With that, Tehran is creating more and more loyal followers that should help him during the current power competition in the region. Furthermore, thanks to the curriculums, Iran is portrayed as a friend of all Muslims and the leader of the region. Although Tehran supports Houthis, a Shiite group, it also needs to attract Sunnis. Therefore, the enemies are particular Middle Eastern states and not their populations. Tehran's undeniable impact on the Houthis is also demonstrated by their position toward the Baha'i community. This religious group is ostracized in Iran and based on the Houthis' behavior, it is safe to assume they mimic Tehran's actions and rhetoric in this very matter. The fact that Iran is successful in influencing the Houthi community in

⁸⁶ Joshua Holmes, "Radio Becomes New Battlefield in Yemen War," *The Medialine*, August 25, 2019, <https://themedialine.org/people/radio-becomes-new-battlefield-in-yemen-war/>.

⁸⁷ Al-Qadhi, *The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security*, 43.

⁸⁸ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2016): 649-661.

various ways presented above also disproves opinions stating that Tehran's role in Yemen and Houthis' decision-making is marginal.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The Yemeni conflict represents a case study of an active civil war that is, due to different reasons, being constantly overlooked. However, this fact offers scholars a chance to research the conflict and provide interesting conclusions regarding various topics. The Yemeni conflict can also be seen as a 'regional' war, without major non-regional actors' interventions (opposite to *e.g.* Syria). Lastly, it provides an opportunity for regional powers to raise their influence over the region, strengthen their status, and potentially change the established order in the Middle East.

Similarly to many other Middle Eastern conflicts, both Saudi Arabia and Iran try to play their role in the Yemeni war. Although their "presence" in Yemen reaches far back in history, it escalated since the Houthis took over the capital in 2015. Moreover, the aforementioned presence cannot be deduced to only hard power terms (*e.g.* weapons and soldiers) but needs to be understood in wider terms. As we outlined above, hard power occupies the prime spot in connection to Yemeni war research. However, we demonstrated that soft power may play a crucial role in both Saudi Arabia's and Iran's foreign policy strategies toward Yemen. Through soft power tools, the cited Middle Eastern powers influence domestic Yemeni actors in various ways, achieve strategic goals, and try to assure long-lasting success.

Religion-wise, the KSA and Iran can be designated as the crucial actors that seek to approach the Yemeni society with their particular interpretation of Islam. The KSA primarily asserts Wahhabi thoughts towards the Sunni population. However, evidence indicated that Riyadh also tried to focus on the dominantly Shia areas occupied by Zaydis. Therefore, the nature of Saudi religious clout is multifaced. Our research

⁸⁹ Mareike Transfeld, "Iran's Small Hand in Yemen," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 14, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/67988>; Thomas Juneau, "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen," 647.

also found that Saudis especially portray Wahhabism through prominent Saudi or Yemeni clerics that have been either operational in Yemen itself or in the social media sphere. Surprisingly, it appears that Saudi religious activities lack a comprehensive approach. We did not trace any apparent connection between some aforementioned Wahhabi preachers and the House of Saud. These preachers carried out their activities on their own without any external incentives, therefore can be regarded as actors indirectly supporting the Saudi religious position. The KSA then does not have to put any significant emphasis while those preachers, successfully influenced by Wahhabism, carry out the religious activities on KSA's behalf. It is also very implausible that KSA would not be monitoring those individuals to ensure they follow religious suit. This argument is supported by further research revealing that imminent preachers are being controlled by Saudi intelligence or preachers are on the Saudi payroll.⁹⁰ Lastly, the KSA seeks to determine the conflict by religious terms; thus, the Yemeni war is the war between Sunnis and Shias. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that Wahhabi thoughts represent a crucial factor.

On the contrary, Iran primarily focuses on the Shia population through the lenses of the Twelver version of Shia Islam. Except for various religious celebrations and acts, the main manifestation of the use of religious soft power is the Houthis position towards the Baha'i community. Houthis use the same language and actions toward Baha'is as Iran does which is a clear sign of them being influenced by Tehran. This notion has also been shared by the spokesmen of the Baha'i community. The goal is to get the community out of Yemen. Even without proven direct orders from Teheran, Houthis accepted Iran's values and worldviews, so the Baha'is have become a problem for them as well. This fact is also supported by sheer numbers. According to statistics from 2010, there were only around 1,300 Baha'is in Yemen compared to 251,000 in Iran.⁹¹ It is fair to assume that without shared

⁹⁰ Anthony Chase, *Routledge Handbook on Human Rights and the Middle East and North Africa*; William Racimora, *Salafist/Wahhabite Financial Support to Educational, Social and Religious Institutions*.

⁹¹ These are the most recent statistics: Arda, "Most Baha'i Nations (2010)," https://www.thearda.com/QL2010/QuickList_40.asp.

worldviews, Houthis would hardly persecute the community as marginal as Baha'is are.

Interesting findings were also detected after having analyzed educational soft power tools. Firstly, the present findings confirm that both actors are trying to influence the educational sphere. All of them own or support specific educational centers or schools that interpret their way of being. Saudi schools inevitably focus on Wahhabi teaching, while Iran pursues via educational institutions Iranian 'Twelver' Shia theology. Iran is very effective in spreading its teachings. Not only does Tehran do it 'at home' through scholarships but it managed to modify curriculums to do so in Yemen as well. Even though the scholarships and education programs target specifically Houthi students who should subsequently advocate the 'Twelver' faith and values connected to it, the aim of curriculums is different. The audience of those is wider, as well as presented thoughts. In curriculums, Tehran itself is not the main topic. It is barely explicitly mentioned. The main topic is represented by Iran's values and worldviews – who is the enemy (the US, Saudi Arabia), who is the friend (Lebanon, Iraq), what is good (Khomeini's revolution), what is wrong (the actions of the US, Saudi Arabia), etc. Additionally, the curriculums are not solely focused on targeting Shiites. Sunnis are presented as regular Arabs and Muslims that are on the same level as Shiites. So, the problem is not Sunnis, but certain states, e. g. Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Tehran is thus portrayed as a leader of all Arabs, not only Shiites. Naturally, if Iran wants to play a prominent role in the Middle East, it needs to address the majority population. Without the support of Sunnis, Iran cannot take the next step in the power rivalry with Saudi Arabia.

In terms of the media soft power tools, both states use their national broadcasting stations or affiliated media for their purposes, with religion being the main topic. The media is used to defame the other state and are instrumentally used to portray their specific Saudi and Iranian worldviews to support their cause. A summary of all detected soft power tools is shown in Table 1.

This paper argues that Saudi Arabia and Iran use particular religious, educational, and media soft power to their advantage in the Yemeni war. The analysis has shown what each country does to affect

Yemeni domestic actors, how they do it, and what they want to achieve. Several interesting conclusions may be drawn from the aforementioned information: (1) Iran's strategy is more complex and elaborate, including a major focus on education. It seems that Saudi Arabia knows the importance of soft power, but Riyadh concentrates more on hard power activities; (2) Tehran uses the Yemeni war to present itself as a leader of all Arabs in comparison to Riyadh's effort to balance Iran. This notion goes hand in hand with the previous one. Iran's strategy is not only to balance Saudi Arabia but also to present itself as a viable leader of the Arab world. On the other hand, since the Saudis focus more on hard power activities, their soft power ones aim more to balance Iran than to promote Saudi Arabia; (3) interconnection and mutual reinforcement of the analyzed soft power areas since both KSA and Iran use them to a greater or lesser extent.

With the end of the Yemeni war nowhere near, it will be interesting to follow future developments of the Iran – Saudi Arabia rivalry. As we demonstrated in this paper, the strategy and involvement of both countries change over time, so the evolution of soft power influence of the aforementioned (and other) actors should be worth monitoring. The authors also believe this article may be starting point for discussion concerning (1) the research of specific and distinct soft power tools (e.g. religious, educational, and media ones) that may not always be at the center of scholars' attention, (2) the development of such concepts, and (3) the use of soft power tools within an armed or non-armed conflict.

Table 1

Detected religious, educational, and media soft power tools

| | Religious | Educational | Media |
|------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| <i>The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</i> | Saudi or Yemeni Wahhabi preachers (mainly operational in social media); Special Office for Yemen Affairs'; support of Yemeni religious scholars | Wahhabi schools near Saadah | Saudi-owned or supported media such as the Iqraa channel |
| <i>Iran</i> | Participation of Iranian representatives at various events (Ghadir Khumm, Ashura); religious buildings renovation (Shrine of Nasser Haqq); persecution of the Baha'i community through Houthis | Newly opened departments at universities (e.g., Persian language and literature departments at Sana'a and Dhamar University); financial support for educational institutions; scholarships for Shia theology students in Yemen or Iran; changes of academic curriculums in Houthis-run schools | Training of the media personnel; sponsorship of various TV channels (Mayadeen Maserah channels, Aden Live); the use of newspapers (Al-Masar, Demokrati) and broadcasting for own promotion (Al Alam news channel, Press TV) |

Source: based on the authors' conclusions.