Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry and the Yemen Crisis

İran-Suudi Arabistan Rekabeti ve Yemen Krizi

Ramazan İZOL[*] - Murat CİNGÖZ[**]

Abstract

Iran's confrontation with the USA and its allies within the framework of its revolutionary Islamic identity has led many Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, to be vigilant. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia deteriorated fundamentally, and the ideological and geopolitical struggle between the two countries deepened. This situation not only affected the two countries, but also drew many countries in the region to the firing line. While regional instability has increased in the Middle East, sectarian rivalry and ideological struggle have also escalated. The Arab Spring process, on the other hand, made the Hobbesian anarchic structure among the Middle Eastern states even more evident. In this respect, after the Arab Spring, an axis of tension has emerged between Iran and Saudi Arabia, covering countries such as Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain. The hottest point of this tension axis has been Yemen. As a matter of fact, the progress of the Zaydi Houthis, known as Shiite, in Yemen was supported by Iran, but was found unacceptable by Saudi Arabia and its allies. Ultimately, Saudi Arabia and its allies started a struggle against the Houthis, which they saw as part of Shiite expansionism. On the other hand, with the aggressive policy of Saudi Arabia towards them, the Houthis have further developed their relations with Iran for pragmatic and ideological reasons. In essence, the Houthis, which emerged as a result of Yemen's local and social problems, gradually became another denominator in the equation of the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry.

*   **Key Words:** *Iran, Saudi Arabia, Houthis, Hobbesian Anarchic Culture, Yemen Crisis*

Öz

İran'ın devrimci İslami kimliği çerçevesinde ABD ve müttefiklerine karşı cephe alması başta Suudi Arabistan olmak üzere pek çok Arap ülkesinin teyakkuza geçmesine yol açmıştır. 1979 İran Devrimi'nden sonra İran ile Suudi Arabistan arasındaki ilişkiler temelden bozulurken,

[*]   Dr. Faculty Member, Akdeniz University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations, e-mail: ramazanizol@akdeniz.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2028-3477.

[**]   Research Asistant, Ph.D. Candidate, Adana Science and Technology University, Faculty of Political Science, Department of International Relations, e-mail: mcingoz@atu.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5995-8713.

iki ülke arasındaki ideolojik ve jeopolitik mücadele derinleşmiştir. Bu durum sadece iki ülkeyi etkilemekle kalmamış, bölgedeki birçok aktörün de jeopolitik ve ideolojik olarak tehdit altında hissetmesine yol açmıştır. Orta Doğu'da bölgesel istikarsızlık artarken mezhebi rekabet ve ideolojik mücadele de tırmanmıştır. Arap Baharı süreci ise Orta Doğu devletleri arasındaki Hobbesçu anarşik yapıyı daha da belirgin hale getirmiştir. Bu minvalde Arap Baharı'nın ardından İran ile Suudi Arabistan arasında Yemen, Suriye, Lübnan, Irak ve Bahreyn gibi ülkeleri kapsayan bir gerilim ekseni ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu gerilim ekseninin en sıcak noktası ise Yemen olmuştur. Nitekim Şii kimlikleriyle bilinen Zeydi Husilerin Yemen'deki ilerleyişi İran tarafından desteklenmiş ancak Suudi Arabistan ve müttefikleri tarafından kabul edilemez bulunmuştur. Nihayetinde Suudi Arabistan ve müttefikleri, Şii yayılmacılığının bir parçası olarak gördükleri Husilere karşı mücadeleye girişmişlerdir. Öte yandan Suudi Arabistan'ın kendilerine yönelik saldırgan politikasıyla Husiler, pragmatik ve ideolojik gerekçelerle İran'la ilişkilerini daha çok geliştirmişlerdir. Özünde Yemen'in yerel ve toplumsal sorunlarının bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıkan Husiler zamanla İran-Suudi Arabistan rekabetin denkleminde bir başka payda haline gelmişlerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *İran, Suudi Arabistan, Husiler, Hobbesçu Anarşik Kültür, Yemen Krizi*

Introduction

The Middle East has long been the scene of struggles for influence between Great Britain and France, and later between the USA and the USSR. The gradual withdrawal of Western countries left the field open to new actors who until then had no serious voice on the issue. Since the early 2000s, Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, which have become real regional powers, have played an important and sometimes inevitable role in the chaos of the Middle East.[1] Especially recently, the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia has become more evident.

In line with their religious-ideological views, Iran and Saudi Arabia are trying to achieve their geopolitical goals as well as pursue the leadership of the Islamic World. In this sense, Iran follows an expansionist policy in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain over the claim of being the protector of the Shiite world. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia, which has adopted the slogan of Salafist expansionism, mobilizes the Sunni world against the Shiite threat, on the other and, lays the foundations of its hegemony in the Gulf region.[2] However, the gradual deterioration of relations between the two countries and the intensification of the struggle between them have severely brought to light the sectarian fault lines in the Middle East. Many regions in the Middle East are now suffering from the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The dependence of this struggle on Hobbesian norms

Akademik
Bakış
346
Cilt 16
Sayı 31
Kış 2022

---

1   Denis Bauchard, "Arabie Saoudite, Iran, Turquie à la Poursuite d'un Leadership Régional", éd., *Le Moyen-Orient et le monde*, La Découverte, 2020, p.47.
2   See Also. Muharrem H. Özev, "Saudi Society and the State: Ideational and Material Basis", Arab Studies Quarterly, 39(4), 2017.

and values is of great importance not only for the relations between the two countries but also for the countries in the Middle East. Therefore, understanding the nature of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is essential for a correct explanation and resolution of conflicts in many parts of the Middle East. This is even more evident when it comes to Yemen.

Yemen, located in one of the strategic points of the Middle East and hosting a significant population, faces a dire crisis today. The crisis in Yemen has many dimensions: local, regional and global. It is very difficult to understand the problems in Yemen without considering the local and national dynamics, which are the basis of the Yemeni crisis, together with the regional-global power struggle. For this reason, while examining the Yemen crisis, it is necessary to take into account the local dynamics in Yemen as well as the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The identities of many actors in Yemen, especially the Houthis, and their relations with regional-global powers have not been adequately examined. So, in this study, the effects of the geopolitical and ideological struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the Yemen crisis, the identities of the Houthis, and the roles of local and global actors in the deterioration of the internal balance in Yemen have been discussed. In this way, by trying to shed light on the real source of the crisis in Yemen, criticism has been brought to the stereotypical approaches to the crisis.

A Place of Anarchic Structures in Competition

While Alexander Wendt expresses the international system's structure as "culture", he claims that the anarchic structure is shaped in line with these cultures.[3] According to Wendt's assumptions, there are three types of anarchic structures. These are Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian cultures. Wendt predicts that states will act on the norms and values in their anarchic culture. In this direction, states will be in the enemy role structure in Hobbesian culture and rivals in Lockean culture, and friendly in Kantian countries. It is important which culture and therefore which norms and values the states adopt among themselves. This is due to the fact that the possibilities of cooperation or the relationship of hostility between them will be shaped through the anarchic structure they are in. According to Wendt, Hobbesian culture is shaped by zero-sum play and for Hobbesian culture, the security dilemma is at the forefront. In this structure, which is called the war of everyone against everyone, states do not trust the other and assume the worst. As a result, relations between states come under the domination of Hobbesian norms. Another phenomenon in Hobbesian culture is the portrayal of the other as an existential threat. Generating us depends on the "other" and the phenomenon of danger arising from the "other". In the Hobbesian structure, states try to destroy or eliminate each other. In Lockean culture, which is

---

3 Alexander Wendt, *Uluslararası Siyasetin Sosyal Teorisi*, (Trans. Sarı Ertem), Küre Publishing, İstanbul, 2016, p.327-344.

another anarchic structure, there are rivals rather than enemies. The struggle and competition between the states continue, but the difference between this culture from the Hobbesian (*hostile*) culture is that the states accept the sovereignty of the other party as a right, in other words, it adopts the logic of "live and let live". Even if the rivals use violence in this structure, they do this within the framework of "live and let live" logic. In Lockean culture, threats are not existential. Although the Lockean culture has generally dominated the world for the last three hundred years, Hobbesianism occasionally raises its head. Lockean culture is the first step on the road to cooperation. The next stage is the Kantian culture, in which violence is completely abandoned and team play norms are taken into account. Although relations between some Western countries are now evolving from Lockean culture to Kantian culture, relations between Middle Eastern countries are far from friendly. In particular, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are based on the Hobbesian anarchic structure.

The regional struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia is one of the most important conflict dynamics in the Middle East. The power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia has now come to be called "proxy wars" or "cold wars".[4] Saudi Arabia, which adopts Salafi/Wahhabi expansionism and stands against all kinds of Shiite communities in the region, on the one hand, and Iran, which pursues Shiite expansionism, on the other hand, is gradually deepening the sectarian fault lines in the Middle East. The struggle and conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran are shaped by Hobbesian norms. In this sense, Saudi Arabia; while considering Iran-backed Shiite expansionism as an "existential threat" and describing Iran as "a snake whose head needs to be cut off", the Iranian front argues that Saudi Arabia, which they see as the "igniter of conflicts in the region", tries to destroy the Iranian regime and supports terrorist organizations.[5] Considering that the two countries managed to establish a relationship in a positive atmosphere despite the geopolitical struggle between them in the early and mid-1970s, the question of why Iran and Saudi Arabia now display such a hostile attitude towards each other comes to mind. In response to this, it can be said that the event that radically changed the relationship between the two countries was the Islamic Revolution in Iran.[6] With the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the new Iranian regime has adopted an identity in which the Shiite ideology is at the forefront. The fact that the Wahhabi/Shiite tension has a deep-rooted historical background, along with the new Iranian regime, has made it easier for the two states to code each other as enemies, especially ideologically.[7] While

Akademik
Bakış
348
Cilt 16
Sayı 31
Kış 2022

---

4   Bennett-Jones Owen, "Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy", Intelligence and National Security, 37:5, 2012.
5   Ross Colvin, "Cut off head of snake" Saudis told U.S. on Iran, Reuters, 2010. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-wikileaks-iran-saudis-idUSTRE6AS02B20101129
6   Mohammad-Reza Djalili, "La Politique Arabe de l'Iran", *A Contrario*, 5(1), 2008, p.140.
7   Ibid, p.91.

the Islamic Revolution in Iran has led to radical changes in Iran's identity, it also has revised Iran's interests and threat perceptions. The new Iranian regime, which assumed an anti-Western identity, has attempted to change the status quo in the region against the United States. Iran, which became a revisionist state with the revolution, has built new others in parallel with its new identity while questioning the legitimacy of the pro-US monarchies in the region through the discourse of exporting the revolution.[8] In this sense, it has targeted pro-US monarchies in the region, primarily Saudi Arabia, as well as the USA and Israel. Taking into account the Shiite population in its territory Saudi Arabia considers Iran's ideological power as an existential threat and has started to balance Iran. Saudi Arabia's policies towards Iran, on the other hand, have escalated Iran's threat perceptions towards Saudi Arabia, and the two countries, which were caught in a security dilemma, have eventually been thrown into a hostile relationship. With the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the anarchic structure between the two countries has come under the domination of the Hobbesian (hostile) culture, one of Wendt's anarchic structures. The main feature of Hobbesian culture is as follows countries are caught in a security dilemma by seeing each other as existential threats and they fight to destroy each other / each other's regimes. The effectiveness of Hobbesian institutions in the relations of the two countries is the basis of the disagreement and conflict that continues today. According to many Arab countries, even today, Iran's mission of exporting the revolution continues and the influence of the revolutionary ideology persists in Iran.[9]

1979 Iranian Revolution and the Basis of Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry

When evaluated from various perspectives, it is not possible to explain the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia only with sectarian conflicts, nor can it be reduced to purely geopolitical issues. There are many variables in the competition between the two countries. Addressing the constantly tense political and cultural relations and interactions at different levels between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two important countries of the Middle East, is very important in terms of understanding the balances in the region. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has remained a constant feature of the regional systemic structure in the Middle East for half a century.[10] The recent arrival of Mohammed bin Salman as the crown prince of Saudi Arabia has paved the way for him to launch multiple attacks against Iran as well as some Iran-supported allies. Reaching an agreement between the two countries does not seem easy, given that currently existing conditions remain stable.

---

8   Davoud Garayag, "Asl-i ve Meban-i Siyaset-i Haric-i Cumhur-i İslam-i İran: Custar-i Der Metun", *Quarterly Journal of Strategic Studies*, 11(40), 2008, p.280.

9   M. Mohammed Nia, "Holistic Constructivism: A Theoretical Approach to Understand Iran's Foreign Policy", Perceptions, Spring- Summer, 2010, p.35.

10   Curtis R. Ryan, "Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East", *The Qatar Crisis*, POMEPS Briefings, 2017, p.36.

Insecurity based on the Hobbesian anarchic structure, sectarian differences, and ideological and geopolitical struggle between the parties complicate the Iran-Saudi Arabian relations.

With the 1979 revolution, Iran's identity underwent a radical transformation. State identity can change abruptly, and the transformation brought about by the 1979 revolution is just one example of this. With the revolution, a Western-oriented, secular, and status quo defending monarchy was replaced by a revisionist regime that adopted an anti-Western, anti-imperialist rhetoric and acted on the slogan of "neither east nor west is just the Islamic Republic". The change caused by the Islamic Revolution in Iran's identity also strikingly shows how identities are socially constructed. While the Iranian regime went to define its own identity with its discourses and revolutionary ideology after the revolution, it built new definitions of interests and others to complete its identity. Iran, which has based its new foreign policy understanding on anti-Westernism, has frequently used the word "devil" in its discourses to express its internal and external enemies. Especially the discourses in line with the exportation of the revolution had an important place in shaping the identity of the new regime. In this sense, the new Iranian regime announced that it "undertook the protection of the oppressed and oppressed peoples in the Islamic world" in line with its understanding of revolutionary export.[11] What is meant by oppressed peoples here is societies under the influence of Western and US imperialism. This also includes a challenge to Western-leaning governments. In other words, the new regime in Iran, which was established after the revolution, followed an aggressive attitude toward the Arab monarchies in the Gulf region in a way that complements the opposition to the USA and Israel, which it describes as "big and small devils".[12]

Iranian statesmen, especially Khomeini, followed an anti-US and anti-Western discursive framework to establish the identity of the new regime and ensure its legitimacy of the new regime. In this direction, the Islamic Republic of Iran pursued a revisionist policy under the name of the "resistance front" and declared that it was against the "Satanic World Order".[13] In this context, the new Iranian regime argued that the existing international structure has an unfair and unjust basis and that this structure should be replaced with a just and just system. On the other hand, Shi'ism has come to the fore as the main ideological force that provides the movement of the revolutionary ideology, and this has deeply affected the relationship of the Shiite communities in the region with Iran.

While Iran's identity underwent a radical change with the 1979 Re-

Akademik
Bakış
350
Cilt 16
Sayı 31
Kış 2022

---

11   Olivier Roy, "L'impact de la Révolution Iranienne au Moyen-Orient", *Les Mondes chiites et l'Iran*, Paris, Karthala, 2007.
12   , Mohammad Reza Djalili, "La Politique Arabe de l'Iran", A Contrario, 5(1), 2008, p.140.
13   Mohammad-Reza Djalili ve Thierry Kellner, "L'Iran Dans son Contexte Régional", *Politique Etrangère*, 3, 2012, p.525-527.

volution, Iran's relations with many countries began to deteriorate, and Iran-Saudi Arabia relations became one of the dynamics most affected by this situation. The main reason for this is that Iran has become an ideological power after the revolution and is trying to use this ideological power to change the systemic structure of the region within the framework of the principle of exporting the revolution.[14] Despite the geopolitical and economic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia before the revolution, they were in the same bloc as two countries that were pro-Western and pro-US, anti-Soviet, ruled by the monarchy, and shared similar norms and values about the international structure. In fact, in the 1970s, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which were positioned as allies of the USA, started to fill the power vacuum created after the withdrawal of the British from the Gulf Region.[15] Although there are disagreements such as the division of Bahrain islands and oil prices, it can be said that this was the period when the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were the brightest. Moreover, in this period, Iran increased its military and economic capacity by assuming the role of the gendarmerie in the region as per the "twin pillars" strategy of the USA, but this was seen by Saudi Arabia as a way of balancing the Soviet threat rather than being perceived as an existential threat. In the period immediately after the revolution, although Iran's military and economic capacity decreased, the new Iranian regime was perceived as an existential threat by Saudi Arabia.[16]

Today, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia manifests itself in many regions, especially in Yemen. Iran-Saudi relations remained under control, albeit not very well, until the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which shook the Arab world and intensified the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, systemic changes in the region since the 2011 Arab Spring have further increased the competition between the two countries. As a matter of fact, the increasing influence of Iran in Yemen and Iraq caused the perception of being besieged in Saudi Arabia, and the increasing insecurity caused Saudi Arabia to enter a direct war in Yemen, eventually including the Gulf countries in 2015. This is because of the ripple effect of the Arab Spring in the Middle East region, at first it seemed like an advantage for Iran, which aims to be in a decision-making position in the region.

On the other hand, this sudden change caused by the Arab Spring prompted Saudi Arabia and its allies to take security measures, as it would both negatively affect the ability to intervene in the region and pose a threat to the security of the Gulf Cooperation Council member states. Thus, the

Akademik
Bakış
351
Cilt 16
Sayı 31
Kış 2022

---

14 Lawrance Rubin, Islam and Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics, California, Stanford University Press, 2014, s.3
15 M. Kamrava, The International Politics of the Persian Gulf, Syracuse University Press, 2011.
16 Ibid, s.127.

Arab Spring process, which started in 2011, paved the way for a new hostile rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in which the powers in the region and the big states are also occasionally involved.[17]

The radical changes created by the Arab Spring in the region, the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, one of Saudi Arabia's allies, and the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013, which favored Iran and turned against Saudi Arabia, has triggered a backlash. Saudi Arabia started to follow a reactive foreign policy against Iran's possible Iranian expansionism, as the power in Iraq came under the domination of Shiites on the one hand, and the destabilization of the Bahrain, Yemen, and Syrian regimes due to the Arab Spring on the other, brought Iran to an advantageous position in the region.

In this respect, since the 1979 revolution, Saudi Arabia has focused on ensuring its regional security by using all political and economic means against Iran. Saudi Arabia is trying to balance Iran by providing economic and political aid to anti-Iranian actors, trying to spread Wahhabism, and increasing its military power. On the other hand, Iran has gained influence since 1979 by establishing cultural centers belonging to the Persian or Shiite sect, supporting the formation of militia forces, and using its ideological power to frighten Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, witnessed its allies such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen fall one by one during the Arab Spring. More importantly, the Saudi rulers and their allies were concerned that this wave would reach their people.[18] On the other hand, Iran incurs great political and economic costs to carry out the Khomeinism project on the one hand and to sustain the Axis of Resistance on the other. These costs have come to the detriment of the Iranian society, which has become impoverished over time due to the economic and political blockades imposed by the West, especially the sanctions imposed by the United States. Iran's spending policy beyond its borders causes protests and dissatisfaction among the people. In addition, almost all countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq where Iran has the presence and ability to intervene are experiencing civil wars. This situation increases Iran's costs even more.

In addition, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has led to huge costs for the Gulf countries. This situation weakened the monarchies in the region and caused even the GCC, which has a history of more than forty years, to experience significant problems.[19] The Qatar Crisis has been the most

---

17   Laurent Bonnefoy ve Abdulsalam Al-Rubaidi, "Recompositions Islamistes sunnites et Polarisation Confessionnelle dans le Yémen en Guerre", *Critique Internationale*, 78(1), 2018, p.86-88.
18   Ibid, p.90-93.
19   Jamal Abdullah vd., Gulf Cooperation Council's Challenges and Prospects, Al Jazeera

concrete example of this.[20] Moreover, this undermines Saudi Arabia's prestige and erodes its position towards Iran and its claim to leadership in the Arab-Muslim world. It also allows Iran to intervene in the internal affairs of the Gulf countries. It is possible to say that Iran has become adept at posing a threat to the security of Saudi Arabia by using smart soft power through its militia forces in the region. As a matter of fact, despite its economic situation weakened by embargoes and its political isolation, Iran forces Saudi Arabia to implement a reactionary policy in the face of these policies, which are well organized and carried out by Iran's militia forces.

The Most Obvious Manifestation of Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry: Yemen Crisis

The crisis in Yemen has now become a special area for the regional power struggle and sectarian superiority.[21] Considering that they are surrounded by Iran, Saudi Arabia sees the Houthi advance in Yemen as an existential threat to their security and fears the establishment of a Shiite state next to it. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia tries to reinforce its claim to the leadership of the Sunni world by highlighting the Iranian threat. It can also be said that the Saudi regime uses sectarianism as a tool to strengthen its regime's legitimacy.[22] However, whatever the real reason or reasons are, the factor that deepens the Yemeni crisis is Saudi Arabia's active intervention in Yemen. Historically, another civil war took place in Yemen in the 1960s, and Saudi Arabia and Egypt were involved in this conflict on different sides. The fact that in the 1960s Saudi Arabia supported the Houthis against the Egyptian-backed RepublicansIn this process, Saudi Arabia, which stood against pro-Nasser Egypt, supported the Kingdom of Yemen, which was ruled by Zaydi imams.[23] In the current Yemen crisis, Saudi Arabia considers Yemen under the control of the Zaydi Houthis as an existential threat. Because Shiite expansionism has become the most important threat to Saudi Arabia, Saudis are worried about the mobilization of Shiites in their territory.

In today's Yemen crisis, Saudi Arabia has considered a state that can be established under the domination of Zaydi Houthis as an existential threat. It can be said that the current Yemen crisis has two dimensions. The first dimension constitutes the local problems of Yemen in the social, political, and economic context. This first dimension also forms the basis of the Yemen crisis. The second dimension is that regional and global powers,

---

Center for Studies, 2014, s.6.

20   Marc Lynch, "Three Big Lessons of the Qatar Crisis", The Qatar Crisis, POMEPS Briefings, 2017, s.14.

21   Laurent Bonnefoy et al., *Yémen. Le Tournant Révolutionnaire*, Karthala Editions, 2012, p.17-28.

22   Vikas Kumar, "Sectarianism and International Relations: Shia Iran in a Muslim World", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(3), 2016, p.370.

23   Alain Gresh, "Au Yémen, un enchevêtrement de conflits et d'ambitions Géopolitiques", *Orient XXI*, 2015.

especially Iran and Saudi Arabia, support different parties in line with their interests. The interventions of the regional powers in Yemen in line with their own political and ideological calculations have deepened the crisis and made it inextricable. Iran, accused of arming the Houthis, has succeeded in expanding its ideology by establishing a sphere of influence in Yemen with very small costs. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and its allies have become the main cause of the disasters that swept the country in their military and political interventions.[24]

Although Yemen had been ruled by Abdullah Saleh for more than thirty years, it had been an authoritarian state where central authority, stability, and order could not be established. Abdullah Saleh was not a leader who provided his legitimacy with laws or ideology despite the seemingly regular elections.[25] Saleh who ruled Yemen within the framework of patronage relations could not generate permanent solutions to problems such as unjust income distribution, unemployment, poverty, population structure based on tribes, and erosion of the country's reputation in the world. In Yemen, which is currently struggling with regional and sectarian divisions, the Saleh administration's act with an understanding that rewarded its allies and weakened or eliminated its rivals in line with the divide-and-rule strategy led to the marginalization of many groups and tribes. In this sense, especially Zaydis and South Yemenis were pushed into the background socially and economically, along with most of the people. In Saleh's patronage system, while economic gain sharing was made between different power groups, differences between enemies or rivals were also fueled. This situation deepened the instability in Yemen even more. Although the two parts of Yemen were officially united in 1990, this unification was not embraced by the parties, and Northerners led by Saleh won the civil war that broke out in 1994 when South Yemen claimed that be independent.[26] On the other hand; The Zaydis, who live in the northernmost part of Yemen and generally live around the province of Saada, were socially and economically ignored while also being culturally oppressed. In addition, the fact that ordinary people, who constituted an important part of the country, were struggling with social and economic problems, and the Saleh regime's inability to respond to this led to the strengthening of terrorist organizations, etc. Al-Qaeda in the country.

The problems that have been tried to be summarized above came to the fore with the Arab Spring uprisings. The repercussions of the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt also deeply affected Yemen. In January 2011, the protests started by a group of students against the regime on the cam-

Akademik
Bakış

354

Cilt 16
Sayı 31
Kış 2022

---

24   Mermier Franck, "Yémen: Un Conflit Pluriel, un Paysage Politique Éclaté", *Diplomatie*, Number:98, Areion Group, 2019.

25   Philip Barrett Holzapfel, "Yemen's Transition Process: Between Fragmentation and Transformation", United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 2014.

26   Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p.197.

pus of Sanaa University gradually spread and got out of Abdullah Saleh's control. Saleh's harsh intervention intensified the protests and influential people in the army, especially Muhsin El Ahmer, began to take the side of the opposition one by one. Abdullah Saleh, who was attacked by a bomb during the clashes with the opposition, went to Saudi Arabia for treatment. Meanwhile, under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervened in the events in Yemen to ensure a smooth transition. In this direction, Abdullah Saleh was compelled to sit at the negotiating table and had to resign from the presidency. However, Saleh; In addition to having judicial immunity, Saleh maintained his active position in the largest party in Yemen, the General People's Congress and the army.[27] In line with the agreement reached under the leadership of the GCC, Mansur Hadi was appointed as the interim president, and the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was initiated Although many groups and tribes of the country participated in this conference, a clear solution could not be obtained. The failure of the Hadi administration to regulate and stabilize the chaotic process in the country further deepened the economic and political problems. Although Mansur Hadi won the 2012 elections, the al-Hirak movement, which represents the separatist South Yemenis, and the Houthis, who took control of northern Yemen, did not accept these elections as legitimate elections. On the other hand, thoughts such as the continued dominance of the elites even in the transitional regime and the demands of the people were not taken into account, also had an important place. In 2014, Hadi's legitimacy decreased with the increasing economic problems while the NDC was terminated.[28] In the second half of 2014, Hadi's decision to limit some subsidies and aid in the context of austerity measures caused the people to complain about the high costs to take to the streets. Taking advantage of this situation, the Houthis declared that they would raise a flag against the government if the demands of the people were not met.[29]

Having defeated the military wing of the Islah Party, which is currently one of its major rivals, in July 2014, the Houthis controlled northern Yemen. In September 2014, the Houthis, who also received the support of Saleh supporters, took advantage of the power vacuum and seized important points of the capital city of Sanaa and forced Mansur Hadi to resign.[30] Afterward, the Houthis declared that they had dissolved the parliament and formed a "Presidential Council" under their control. After capturing the capital Sanaa, the Houthi-Saleh alliance[31] eliminated their rivals that continued their advance

---

27 Perkins, "Yemen: Between Revolution and Regression", p.300.
28 Peter Salısbury, "Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State", Chatham House, 2016, p.19.
29 Ibid, p.21.
30 Ibid, p.20.
31 The Houthis and Abdullah Saleh allied by the end of 2017. However, in December 2017, the Saleh Houthi alliance was definitively broken, and the Houthis killed Saleh. See Also. April Longley Alley, "Collapse of the Houthi-Saleh Alliance and the Future of Yemen's

in Yemen and besieged the city of Aden, located in the southernmost part of Yemen, in March 2015.

Saudi Arabia and its allies had met with great concern about the progress of the Houthis in Yemen. They interpreted the capture of the capital city of Sanaa by the Houthis, which they saw as Iran's satellite, as the last link of the Iranian Shiite Crescent.[32] The "Decisive Storm" operation, launched on March 25, 2015, by Deputy Crown Prince Mohamed Ibn Salman , thus aims to restore Hadi's power against the "Shiite" rebels.[33] Although the allied armies managed to stop the Houthis in Aden with "Operation Decisive Storm" in the following process, they could not achieve a definite superiority against the Houthis in the ongoing war. While there are mostly Houthi forces in the north and center of Yemen, the Hadi administration, supported by the allied armies in the south and east, dominates the territory. On the other hand, there are important conflicts between allied countries. For example, while the UAE follows a policy close to the separatist South Yemenis in Yemen, Saudi Arabia is against the disintegration of Yemen. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that the war will reach a definitive solution in the short term. In a situation where the people of Yemen are facing one of the world's greatest humanitarian crises, the territory of Yemen has become a part of proxy wars between the two middle powers.

While Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of supporting the Houthis in the civil war in Yemen, Saudis say that Iran should give up its involvement in the Middle East. Iran, on the other hand, points to Saudi Arabia as responsible for the massacre in Yemen and rejects the accusations that they provide weapons to the Houthis. These statements of Iran are, of course, a political maneuver, and their statements that they don't provide weapons to the Houthis do not reflect the truth. It is observed that Iran's financial support to the Houthis has increased especially after 2014.[34] However, the Saudi imagination that the Houthis are completely dependent on Iran and was founded with Iran's help does not reflect the truth. Before becoming an important factor, the Houthis received very limited financial support from Iran. In this sense, Iran is an actor that values the gains of the Houthis and plans to benefit from them, rather than being responsible for the gains of the Houthis.[35] The policy of Saudi Arabia, which ignores and marginalizes the Houthis, has caused the Houthis to get closer to Iran and become dependent on Iran. Thus, Iran has

---

War", 11 Ocak 2018. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-a-rabian-peninsula/yemen/collapse-houthi-saleh-alliance-and-future-yemens-war

32 Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran and the Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities", Brown J. World Aff. 15, 2008.

33 Fatiha Dazi-Héni, "Le Yémen, test de la nouvelle politique saoudienne", *Orient XXI,* 2015, http://orientxxi.info/magazine/le-yemen-test-de-la-nouvelle-politique-saoudien-ne,0868.

34 Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment", *International Affairs*, 92(3), 2016, p.656.

35 Ibid., p.661.

gained significant opportunities in the region, which the Saudis see as their primary security area, without incurring too much cost. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has faced billions of dollars in costs in Yemen and has to continue a war that it has not yet won. In this sense, Iran has skillfully used the threat perceptions and inexperience of the Saudi rulers in Yemen.[36]

Conclusion

According to Wendt, anarchic cultures are a psychological relationship, and if the beliefs change, the form of competition and the culture of anarchy may also change. In this context, the establishment of a cooperation mechanism between Iran and Saudi Arabia depends on the two countries getting rid of the Hobbesian anarchic structure and making progress toward the Lockean anarchic culture. According to Wendt, progress is a process that is expected and seen as possible. In Western societies, this has generally been the case. However, when we look at the Middle East, it is seen that the Hobbesian anarchic structure is always a danger waiting at the door. This is exactly the transformation in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia caused by the Iranian Islamic Revolution. While the anarchic structure between the two countries was close to the Lockean culture until the Iranian Islamic Revolution, this situation changed radically with the revolution. With the deepening of the security dilemma in the following process, the two countries started to see each other as existential threats. With the problems such as the Iran-Iraq War, oil prices, and the Hajj events, the relations between the two sides gradually deteriorated and the harsh statements of the parties targeting each other's legitimacy have put the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia under the dominance of Hobbesian norms and values. Although the period of softening and rapprochement saw in the nineties removed the anarchic structure between the two countries from the Hobbesian culture, this process could not spread to the basis of the relations. The main reason for this is that with the Iranian revolution, the Hobbesian anarchic structure was deeply embedded in the relations between the two countries. Because while the ideology of revolution continues to be one of the main foreign policy inputs of Iran in every period, the concerns of the Saudis towards the ideology of revolution have never disappeared. As a matter of fact, the deterioration of the balance of power in the Middle East after the US invasion of Iraq and the emergence of Iran as an effective actor by taking advantage of the power vacuum has darkened the atmosphere between the two countries. With regional ruptures such as the Iraq War (2003) and the Arab Spring Uprisings, the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia has intensified and the Hobbesian anarchic structure has become more evident in the relations between the two countries. While Saudi Arabia's Hobbesian fears towards Iran deepened with the perception of the Shiite Crescent, the Saudis started to take a more aggressive attitude toward Iran. Iran, on the other hand, not only increased the dose of the Shiite expansionism policy but also tried to seize any oppor-

---

36   Thierry Kellner-Mohammad-Reza Djalili, "L'antagonisme İrano-Saoudien et le Nouveau Grand Jeu au Moyen-Orient", *Diplomatie*, Number:91, Mars-April 2018, p.39.

tunity to undermine the interests of the Saudis. As a result, the escalation of the existential struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia has led to the recent resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The basis of the current Yemen crisis is shaped by local and social dynamics, that is, social and economic problems constitute the reasons for the crisis. On the other hand, the ideological and geopolitical struggle between the two countries has deepened the crisis in Yemen. While Saudi Arabia's Hobbesian fears towards Iran deepened with the perception of the "Shiite Crescent", the Saudis started to take a more aggressive attitude towards Iran. Iran, on the other hand, not only increased the dose of Shia expansionist politics but also tried to seize any opportunity to undermine the interests of the Saudis. In the end, the struggle and the fields of the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia have become dependent on a Hobbesian anarchical structure. Thus, Yemen has become one of the edges of this Hobbesian structure.

Saudi Arabia considers the Houthis as an organization affiliated with Iran and interprets the progress of the Houthis as a part of Iranian expansionism. Ultimately, the Saudis take action against the Houthis through the coalition they formed. Iran, another important factor in the conflict, tends to see the Houthis as a useful tool to use against Saudi Arabia. In this sense, Iranian leaders are trying to present the progress of the Houthis as if it has been the success of the revolution. It seems that both countries want to carry the crisis in Yemen to a sectarian dimension. In this way, both countries aim to strengthen their weak regime legitimacy and realize their realpolitik goals. However, the local and social dynamics of Yemen are not what Saudi Arabia envisions, nor what Iran wants to construct. In this sense, the identities of the Houthis, who are the cornerstone of the current crisis in Yemen, need to be read correctly. The Houthis reflect an organized-military projection of the Zaydis' drive to preserve their identity as a starting point. The fact that the Zaydis have been left in a social, cultural, and economic marginal position by the Yemeni central government for decades on the one hand, and the marginalization of Saudi Arabia by sectarian policies on the other, constitutes the root of the Houthi problem. Seeking an answer to the Zaydi problem, the Houthis have turned into a radical-military organization under the influence of Iran's ideological power and the harsh treatment of the Yemeni administration. Considering even Zaidis, who are seen as the closest branch of Shiism to Sunnism, as a part of Shiite violence, Saudi Arabia pursues a very aggressive policy against the Houthis, and this situation pushes the Houthis to the side of Iran. The Houthis, who have to improve their relations with Iran, the only country that backs them in the international arena, have taken their cooperation with Iran to a higher level, especially after 2014. Iran, which sees the Houthis as a useful instrument to undermine the interests of Saudi Arabia, has started to be effective in Yemen, especially through its ideological power. Moreover, the Houthis, who have been cornered by the attacks of the coalition armies led by Saudi Arabia, have started to become more and more dependent on Iran. This situation is an indication of the failed policies

Akademik
Bakış
358
Cilt 16
Sayı 31
Kış 2022

of Saudi Arabia. Because the Saudi regime intervened in Yemen to break the influence of Iran, but on the contrary, it led to a different phase in the relations between the Houthis and Iran. In the current situation, Iran has become an influential actor in Yemen as the only country that backs the Houthis in the international arena. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran aim to carry the crisis in Yemen to a sectarian dimension. However, the ideological and geopolitical struggle between the two countries has brought along an irreversible humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The fact that countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, and Egypt, while considering their interests, but the humanitarian crisis in Yemen in the background, has triggered a great humanitarian crisis. Finding an inclusive and lasting solution in Yemen with the participation of all actors ultimately depends on the realization that the regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran has dangerous consequences not only for Yemen but also for their interests, and they turn to reasonable policies. The duty of the actors related to Yemen and the region is to guide the regional actors in the direction of peace and stability and to assist them in this regard.

References

AL FAISAL, Turki, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy", *Middle East Policy*, 20(4), 2013, pp 37-44.

ABDULLAH, Jamal vd., Gulf Cooperation Council's Challenges and Prospects, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2014.

ALLEY, April L., "Collapse of the Houthi-Saleh Alliance and the Future of Yemen's War", 11 Ocak 2018, https://www.crisisgroup, .org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/collapse-houthi-saleh-alliance-and-future-yemens-war

AL-MONITOR, "Yemen's Houthis proxy, not ally for Iran", 19 November 2014, https://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/yemen-houthis differences-hezbollah-lebanon.html.

AMELOT, Laurent, "Yémen: une Guerre Saoudienne Contre L'Iran". Outre-Terre, Number:3, 2015, pp. 329-338.

ASGARKHANI, Abu Mohammad–Mahmoud Babaei, "Emniyet-i Hesti Şenahti ve Meseleyi Emniyet-i Halic-i Farsi Bade Ez Enqilab-i İslam-i İran", Pejuheşhay-i Siyaset-i Cihan-i İslami, 2(4), 2012.

BARZEGAR, Keyhan-Dinan Seyyed Morteza, "Iran's Political Stance toward Yemen's Ansar Allah Movement: A Constructivist Based Study", Journal of Politics and Law, 9(9), 2016, 77-91.

BAUCHARD Denis, "Arabie saoudite, Iran, Turquie à la poursuite d'un leadership régional", éd., Le Moyen-Orient et le monde, La Découverte, 2020, pp. 47-54.

BARZEGAR, Kayhan "Iran and the Shiite Crescent: Myths and realities", Brown J. World Aff., 15, 2008.

BONNEFOY, Laurent, "Yémen: Comprendre la Guerre", Études, Number:2, 2018, pp.17-28.

BONNEFOY, Laurent et al., *Yémen. Le Tournant Révolutionnaire*, Karthala Editions, 2012.

BONNEFOY Laurent - Abdulsalam Al-Rubaidi, "Recompositions Islamistes sunnites et Polarisation confessionnelle dans le Yémen en guerre", *Critique Internationale*, 78(1), 2018.

COLVIN, Ross. "Cut off head of snake" Saudis told U.S. on Iran, Reuters, 2010. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-wikileaks-iran-saudis-idUSTRE6AS02B20101129

DAZI-HENI Fatiha , "Le Yémen, test de la nouvelle politique saoudienne", Orient XXI, 2015, en ligne: http://orientxxi.info/magazine/le-yemen-test-de-la-nouvelle-politique-saoudienne,0868

DJALILI, Mohammad Reza - Thierry Kellner, "L'Iran Dans son Contexte Régional", *Politique Etrangère*, 3, 2012.

DJALILI, Mohammad-Reza "La Politique Arabe de l'Iran", A Contrario, 5, 2008, pp.134-146.

DRESCH, Paul, *A History of Modern Yemen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

FRANCK, Mermier, "Yémen: Un Conflit Pluriel, Un Paysage Politique Éclaté", *Diplomatie*, Number:98, Areion Group, 2019.

FRISON, François, "Guerre au Yémen: an V. Politique étrangère", Number:2, 2019, pp.91-104.

GAUCHER, Jean, "Pourquoi Riyad Considère-t-elle la Présence İranienne au Yémen Comme une Menace?", in Questions Géopolitiques, Moyen-Orient, https://geopolri.hypotheses.org/?p=2590.

GRESH, Alain, "Au Yémen, un enchevêtrement de conflits et d'ambitions Géopolitiques", *Orient XXI*, 2015.

GARAYAG, Davoud, "Asl-i ve Meban-i Siyaset-i Haric-i Cumhur-i İslam-i İran: Custar-i Der Metun", *Quarterly Journal of Strategic Studies*, 11(40), 2008, pp.275-290.

GÖKALP, Yusuf, "Yemen'de Zeydi-Sünni İlişkilerinin Tarihi Arka Planı", *e-Makalat Mezhep Araştırmaları*, 6(2), 2013, pp.87-114.

HEGGHAMMER, Thomas- Stephane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-Utaybi Revisited", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39(1), 2007, 103-122.

HOLZAPFEL, Philip Barrett, "Yemen's Transition Process: Between Fragmentation and Transformation", United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 2014.

JUNEAU, Thomas, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment", *International Affairs*, 92(3), 2016, pp.647-663.

HAGOOD, Anne, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Tale of Two Media", Arab Media and Society, American University, 2010, pp.1-18.

KAMRAVA M. The International Politics of the Persian Gulf, Syracuse University Press, 2011.

KELLNER, Thierry-Mohammad Reza Djalili, "L'antagonisme İrano-Saoudien et le Nouveau Grand jeu au Moyen-Orient", *Diplomatie*, Number:91, Mars-Avril 2018, pp. 39-43.

KUMAR, Vikas, "Sectarianism and International Relations: Shia Iran in a Muslim World", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(3), 2016, pp.359-373.

LYNCH, Marc, "Three Big Lessons of the Qatar Crisis", The Qatar Crisis, POMEPS Briefings, 2017.

MANJANG, Alieu, "Saudia-Iranian Rivalry in the Horn of Africa: Beyond the Middle East", *International Relations and Diplomacy*, 5(1), 2017, pp.46-60.

NASIR, M. Ali, "Yemen: Another Somalia in the Arabian Peninsula", *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, 3(4), 2015, pp.318-332.

NIA Mohammed M. "Holistic Constructivism: A Theoretical Approach to Understand Iran's Foreign Policy", Perceptions, Spring- Summer, 2010.

OWEN, Bennett-Jones, Cold War in the Islamic world: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the struggle for supremacy, Intelligence and National Security, 37:5, 2012.

ÖZEV, Muharrem H. "Saudi Society and the State: Ideational and Material Basis", Arab Studies Quarterly, 39(4), 2017.

RUBIN, Lawrance, Islam and Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics, California, Stanford University Press, 2014.

ROY, Olivier, "L'impact de la Révolution Iranienne au Moyen-Orient", *Les Mondes chiites et l'Iran*, Paris, Karthala, 2007.

RYAN, Curtis R., "Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East", The Qatar Crisis, POMEPS Briefings, 2017.

SAIKAL, Amin, *The Arab World And Iran: A Turbulent Region in Transition*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2016.

SERMEDI, Hamid, "Cengi Tahmili ve Tesiri An Ber Tağyiri Goftemanı Siyaseti Harici İran Ez ArmanGerayi Dehi Evvel be Amelgerayi Menfaati Mihveri Deh-i Dovvom Enqelabi İslami", *Mahname-yi Pejuheşi Melli*, 1(11), 2017, pp.1-20.

SHOKRI, Abbas, *Fersatha ve Çaleşhay-i Ferheng-i Cumhur-i İslam-i İran der Mıntıgay-i Havermeyan*, I.S.U Press, 2012.

WENDT, Alexander, Uluslararası Siyasetin Sosyal Teorisi (trans Sarı Ertem), Küre Publishing, İstanbul, 2016.