

**IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

MASTER'S THESIS

**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SAUDI ARABIA
AND UAE'S FOREIGN POLICIES TOWARDS
YEMEN AND SYRIA WARS**

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ISTANBUL, 2025

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THE YEMEN AND SYRIA WARS**

**by
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I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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ÖZ

SUUDİ ARABİSTAN VE BAE'NİN YEMEN VE SURİYE SAVAŞLARINA YÖNELİK DIŞ POLİTİKALARININ KARŞILAŞTIRMALI BİR ANALİZİ

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Bu çalışma, Suudi Arabistan ve Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri'nin (BAE) Yemen ve Suriye'deki uzun süreli krizlerdeki dış politika stratejilerini inceleyerek, yaklaşımlarındaki hem yakınlaşmayı hem de ayrışmayı yönlendiren faktörleri analiz ediyor. Neoklasik realizm ve ontolojik güvenliğin teorik çerçevelerine dayanan çalışma, bölgesel rekabetler ve değişen güç dengesi gibi sistemik baskıların, tehdit algıları, rejim güvenliği endişeleri, liderlik tarzları ve bölgesel özlemler gibi yerel düzeydeki faktörlerle nasıl kesiştiğini ve bu iki Körfez devletinin dış politika davranışlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini araştırıyor. Çapraz karşılaştırmalı bir analiz ve süreç izleme metodolojisi aracılığıyla araştırma, Suudi Arabistan ve BAE'nin bu çatışmalarda nasıl yol aldığını araştırıyor. Çalışma, Yemen'de Suudi liderliğindeki koalisyon içindeki başlangıçtaki uyumun farklı öncelikler nedeniyle nasıl bozulduğunu gösteriyor: Suudi Arabistan toprak bütünlüğünü ve İran etkisine karşı koymayı vurgularken, BAE bölgesel istikrar ve ekonomik çıkarlar konusundaki endişelerle motive olarak güney Yemen ve önemli deniz rotaları üzerinde stratejik kontrole öncelik verdi. Suriye'de analiz, Suudi Arabistan'ın muhalif grupları desteklemekten Esad rejimiyle daha pragmatik bir ilişkiye geçişini vurgularken, BAE'nin istikrarı ve ekonomik yeniden yapılanmayı teşvik etmek için daha önceki diplomatik yeniden ilişki kurmasıyla karşılaştırıyor. Bulgular, her iki devletin politikalarını şekillendirmede bölgesel özlemlerin, ittifak stratejilerinin ve tehdit algılarının rolünü vurguluyor. Tez, Suudi Arabistan ve BAE'nin örtüşen güvenlik

endişelerini ve hedeflerini paylaşıırken, farklı yaklaşımlarının ulusal çıkarlar, kimlik ve bölgesel liderlik hakkındaki kendi yorumlarından derinden etkilendiğini gösteriyor. Güvenlik tehditleri ve bölgesel özelemlerin farklı yorumlarıyla şekillenen bu farklı yaklaşımların, Körfez iş birliği, Yemen ve Suriye çatışmalarının yörüngeleri ve daha geniş bölgesel düzen için önemli etkileri var. Neoklasik gerçekçilik ve ontolojik güvenlik merceklerini kullanarak, bu tez sistemik faktörlerin ve iç zorunlulukların devlet davranışını şekillendirmek için nasıl etkileşime girdiğine dair ayrıntılı bir anlayış sağlıyor. Çok kutuplu Ortadoğu'da ittifak siyasetinin dinamikleri, rejimlerin hayatta kalma stratejileri ve bölgesel güvenlik konusunda değerli içgörüler sunarak, otoriter devletlerin dış politika davranışlarına ilişkin daha geniş bir söyleme katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: BAE Dış Politikası, Rejim Güvenliği, Suriye Savaşı, Suudi Dış Politikası, Tehdit Algıları, Yemen Savaşı.

ABSTRACT

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SAUDI ARABIA AND UAE'S FOREIGN POLICIES TOWARDS THE YEMEN AND SYRIA WARS

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This study examines the foreign policy strategies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) during the prolonged crises in Yemen and Syria, analyzing the factors that drive both convergence and divergence in their approaches. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of neoclassical realism and ontological security, the study investigates how systemic pressures—such as regional rivalries and the shifting balance of power—intersect with domestic-level factors, including threat perceptions, regime security concerns, leadership styles, and regional aspirations, to shape the foreign policy behaviors of these two Gulf states. Through a cross-comparative analysis and process tracing methodology, the research explores how Saudi Arabia and the UAE have navigated these conflicts. In the case of Yemen, the study illustrates how initial alignment within the Saudi-led coalition unraveled due to differing priorities: Saudi Arabia emphasized territorial integrity and countering Iranian influence, while the UAE focused on strategic control over southern Yemen and key maritime routes, driven by concerns over regional stability and economic interests. In Syria, the analysis highlights Saudi Arabia's transition from supporting opposition groups to a more pragmatic engagement with the Assad regime, contrasting with the UAE's earlier diplomatic re-engagement to promote stability and economic reconstruction. The findings underscore the roles of regional aspirations, alliance strategies, and threat perceptions in shaping the policies of both states. The thesis demonstrates that while Saudi Arabia and the UAE share overlapping security concerns and goals, their distinct

approaches are significantly influenced by their national interests, identity, and regional leadership interpretations. These differing approaches, shaped by varied interpretations of security threats and regional aspirations, have significant implications for Gulf cooperation, the trajectories of the Yemen and Syria conflicts, and the broader regional order. This thesis utilizes neoclassical realism and ontological security to explain the interaction between systemic forces and domestic imperatives in influencing state behavior. It provides significant insights into the dynamics of alliance politics, regime survival strategies, and regional security in the multipolar Middle East, enhancing the broader discourse on authoritarian states' foreign policy behavior.

Keywords: Regime Security, Saudi Foreign Policy, Syria War, Threat Perceptions, UAE's Foreign Policy, Yemen War.

DEDICATION

It is dedicated to the loving memory of my beloved parents: my mother, whose sacrifices inspire me endlessly, and my father, whose recent passing became both my greatest sorrow and my strongest motivation. May Allah grant you both the highest ranks in Heaven.



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All praise and gratitude are due to Allah, the Almighty, for His boundless blessings and guidance throughout this academic endeavor. This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my late parents. To my mother, whose enduring love continues to inspire me. And to my father, who departed this world earlier this year, leaving an indelible mark on my life and academic journey.

The loss of my father during this crucial period of my studies presented an immense challenge. The profound grief threatened to impede my progress, yet it paradoxically became a powerful motivator. His unwavering faith in my abilities and the principles he instilled in me transformed me into a driving force, propelling me to persevere in my academic pursuits. This work is a testament to his lasting influence and aspirations for my future.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The long-running conflicts in Yemen and Syria have become crucial hotspots in the Middle East's larger geopolitical environment. Their people desired more freedom, reform, and political representation, and the 2011 Arab upheavals that swept the region, including Yemen and Syria, have since resulted in protracted periods of unrest and bloody conflict in these nations. Despite these public upheavals, the Saleh and Assad administrations have remained strong, using severe crackdowns and security-focused measures to stay in power (Lutterbeck, 2011). Considering the rise of counterrevolutionary forces and their crucial role in the Arab Spring uprisings' failure in many authoritarian-ruled countries, Yemen and Syria have become battlegrounds where initially localized conflicts have drawn in diverse international and regional powers, each seeking to advance their interests and shape the trajectory of events. In Yemen, the internal power struggles between the various factions, including the Houthis rebels, the southern separatist movement, and forces loyal to the ousted president Saleh, have evolved into a complex multi-party civil war. In Syria, the conflict has transformed from an internal uprising against the Assad regime into a conflagration involving various rebel factions, Kurdish groups, regional powers, and both state and non-state international actors. Through their foreign policy strategies and interventions, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have become two of the most significant regional players in this regard, actively influencing the developments in Yemen and Syria. (Aras & Falk, 2016).

Despite being close allies, Gulf Cooperation Council partners, and having numerous strategic interests in the region, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have taken somewhat different stances on the wars in Yemen and Syria. The UAE has progressively decreased its direct military involvement and instead concentrated on securing strategic positions in southern Yemen. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has spearheaded a military intervention in Yemen with the goal of defeating the Iran-

backed Houthi rebels and restoring the internationally recognized government (Al-Madhaji et al., 2015).

In contrast, Saudi Arabia's approach to the conflict in Syria has shifted from an initial, more oppositional stance towards the Assad regime, in which it supported various rebel groups in their fight against the government, to a more pragmatic and engaged policy in recent years. Meanwhile, the UAE has maintained a more cautious and measured engagement, including efforts to normalize relations with the Assad regime (Ramani, 2020). The convergence and divergence in the foreign policy strategies of Saudi Arabia and the Emirati government regarding Yemen and Syria can be attributed to distinct threat perceptions, regime security concerns, and regional aspirations that have influenced their approaches. This study aims to comparatively analyze the factors shaping the convergent and divergent foreign policy strategies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the conflicts in Yemen and Syria and to explore the implications of these strategies for the trajectories of the conflicts and the broader regional dynamics (Ziadah, 2019).

1.1. Background on Yemen and Syria Conflicts

Over the past ten years, the wars in Yemen and Syria have changed dramatically, mirroring the broader changes in Middle Eastern power and geopolitics. The current crisis in Yemen has its origins in the 2011 political transition's failure, which resulted in the overthrow of longtime president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The underlying political, economic, and social grievances that had sparked the initial protests remained unresolved, even though Saleh transferred power to his deputy Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi through the Gulf Initiative as a result of the nearly year-long youth uprisings (Dosari & George, 2020). The political parties could not preserve the fragile political balance, as the transitional government under Hadi could not effectively address the country's multifaceted challenges and govern the fractured nation. The major opposition parties and the party of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh each had equal participation in the recently established transitional government.

Furthermore, as stipulated in the Gulf agreement, Saleh and his elderly son Ahmed were granted parliamentary immunity from any crimes committed during his reign,

even after he resigned. Due to these changes, the new government was unable to effectively handle concerns related to public service, economics, and security; instead, it became a site of institutional and political competition between the two groups (Salisbury, 2016).

Meanwhile, the parties, along with marginalized groups and actors like the Houthis, the southern secessionist Hirak, and youth, enrolled in the National Dialogue Conference as agreed in the Gulf Initiative to solve the crisis. Despite the significant polarization and divisions among the various parties, a final draft for a new constitution and the proposed political system was produced in 2015 in line with the initiative. The Houthi rebels aggressively advanced from their stronghold in Saada and seized control of critical northern governorates on the route to Sana'a, capitalizing on the political unrest and security void. This was facilitated by Saleh's military forces and his tribal loyalists, who formed a de facto alliance with the Houthis, overpowering his political opponents' military groups in an attempt to regain the power he had lost in 2011 (Al-Tamimi & Venkatesha, 2021).

One of Yemen's longest and most complex civil wars resulted from the breakdown of the political transition process, which was brought on by the Houthis' capture of the capital, Sana'a, and President Hadi's subsequent flight to Saudi Arabia. The conflict became a major regional struggle when Saudi Arabia, in March 2015, forged a coalition with several regional allies and launched a military intervention in Yemen to reinstate the internationally recognized government under Hadi after realizing the Houthis' growing threat and influence. The Houthis are then seen as a close proxy of Iran (Sharp, 2015).

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings similarly triggered the conflict in Syria. A group of children in the southern city of Daraa wrote anti-regime graffiti on a school wall, inspired by the pro-democracy demonstrations and the fall of long-standing regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. In response, Syrian security forces under Atef Najib, Bashar Al-Assad's infamous cousin, arrested the children and subjected them to brutal beatings and torture in prison. This led to peaceful protests by the people of Daraa demanding the release of their children. However, the government's severe crackdown on these initial nonviolent protests, which involved military force, escalated the situation and

triggered extensive demonstrations and rallies that spread throughout the country. As protests gained more momentum and the demands rose to the fall of the regime, the government responded with even more repressive actions like arbitrary arrests, torture, and massacres, which only served to fuel the protests further, escalating them into an armed rebellion against the Assad regime (Tarabay, 2018).

As armed opposition groups formed due to defections from the Syrian army, the conflict in Syria began to militarize more significantly in mid-2011. Colonel Riad Al-Asaad, a dissident, spearheaded the establishment of the Free Syrian Army, a coordinated rebel force in Idlib, northern Syria. The armed resistance evolved over time, with various Islamist and secular groups emerging to pursue diverging objectives (Fahham, 2024).

International and regional organizations, including the United Nations and the Arab League, initiated mediation efforts in the latter half of 2011 to pressure the Assad government to cease its brutal suppression of demonstrators, withdraw its troops from urban areas, and release its detainees. However, the Assad regime's persistent refusal to comply with these demands and its unwavering violence against the civilians left the international community with little choice but to resort to economic sanctions to apply pressure on the government. The Assad regime's regional alliances with Iran and Hezbollah, which provided military, financial, and political backing, as well as its international diplomatic support from Russia and China through their veto of United Nations Security Council resolutions condemning or acting against the Syrian government, bolstered its position (Hinnebusch, 2019).

This external support enabled the Assad regime to intensify its violent crackdown on civilian protesters, which in turn compelled many Syrians to resort to armed self-defense, which consequently escalated the conflict into a protracted civil war. Furthermore, the dynamics of the conflict and its resolution were greatly complicated by the rise of radical Islamist organizations like ISIS, which exploited the security vacuum and the collapse of the government to gain control of significant areas in Syria. Due to their differing interests and reliance on proxy warfare, regional and global powers—including the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—have all become directly involved in the Syrian civil war,

making the situation more complex and worsening the humanitarian crisis (Hove & Mutanda, 2015).

1.2. Saudi Arabia and UAE's Involvement

The participation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the conflicts occurring in Yemen and Syria has been characterized by a multifaceted and dynamic array of strategic imperatives. In the context of Yemen, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates initially coalesced to form a military coalition in the year 2015, intending to intervene in the ongoing civil conflict within the nation. What has been construed by these two Gulf states as a strategic opportunity to leverage the ascent of the Houthis as a means to counteract the influence of political Islamists in Yemen has ultimately emerged as a predominant threat to their national interests and overall stability. Saudi Arabia viewed the Houthis as an Iranian proxy intended to escalate regional rivalry and threaten its territorial integrity. As a result, it adopted a more proactive and bold strategy in leading the military intervention to restore the internationally recognized government of President Hadi. It is essential to recognize that the rise and support of the Houthis initially came from forces loyal to former President Saleh, who skillfully maintained strong tribal and military ties despite being ousted from power in 2011.

Geopolitical, ideological, and security concerns have consistently driven Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen. From early border conflicts to the ongoing struggle with the Houthis, Riyadh has had a significant impact on Yemen's political landscape. The initial hostilities between Saudi Arabia and Yemen stemmed from territorial disputes. After the Saudi-Yemeni War of 1934, the Treaty of Taif was signed, giving Saudi Arabia control over Asir, Najran, and Jizan, while Yemen retained its sovereignty. Although the agreement brought temporary peace, Yemen's feelings of grievance over the loss of these regions fueled lasting hostilities. The overthrow of Yemen's monarchy in 1962 and the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) led to a proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh, concerned about the rise of Nasser's pan-Arab socialism, supported the Yemeni royalists, while Egypt backed the republicans. Despite Saudi influence, the republicans triumphed in 1970, forcing

Riyadh to recognize the new government while remaining cautious about its policies (Tynan, 2023).

Following the withdrawal of Egyptian soldiers that had supported the republican government in 1967, Saudi Arabia turned its allegiance to the Yemen Arab Republic. However, North Yemen experienced significant political and social turbulence during the civil war (1962-1970), and some northern leaders attempted to distance themselves from Riyadh through reconciliation with Aden or openness to the Soviet Union. In this setting, Riyadh saw Islamic groups and tribal sheikhs as crucial ways of maintaining peace and protecting its interests. South Yemen experienced its own political problems, most notably the civil war in January 1986 and the breakup of the Soviet Union. However, events took an unexpected turn for Saudi Arabia when the Sana'a and Aden administrations joined together and declared a single Republic of Yemen in 1990 (Radman, 2022).

North and South Yemen unified in 1990 under President Ali Abdullah Saleh, which Saudi Arabia viewed with distrust. Relations deteriorated further when Yemen opposed the Gulf War in 1991, prompting Riyadh to remove 800,000 Yemeni workers, badly harming Yemen's economy. Saudi Arabia also backed southern rebels during the 1994 Yemeni Civil War, however Saleh eventually took control. In the early 2000s, the Houthis, a Zaidi Shia rebel group, rose to challenge Yemen's government. The group sprang from economic and social problems in northern Yemen, particularly in the province of Sa'dah. It challenged the central government's authority in Yemen and sparked an active uprising in northern Yemen against Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime. When the Houthis stormed Saudi border territories in 2009, Saudi Arabia initiated military actions against them, citing their Iranian support. Although Riyadh successfully repulsed them, the crisis remained unsolved, paving the way for further escalation (Radman, 2022).

Nevertheless, the Kingdom's prior engagement in its military operations against the Houthis during the initial decade of the 21st century, coupled with its apprehensions regarding Iran's influence within the regional context, prompted a more assertive participation in the ongoing conflict. The military initiative known as Operation Decisive Storm encompassed aerial bombardments, a maritime blockade, and ground

offensives, executed with the collaboration of its coalition allies, including the United Arab Emirates, under the justification of reinstating the internationally recognized government of President Hadi and bolstering pro-Hadi forces in executing military campaigns aimed at reversing the territorial gains of the Houthis (Hoetjes, 2022).

Despite its initial military success, the coalition's intervention in Yemen, led by Saudi Arabia, has not achieved its intended outcome. The conflict has continued, with the Houthis demonstrating resilience and effectively adapting their tactics, even launching cross-border attacks aimed at Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Iranian support for the Houthis has increased significantly, even after the death of the former president, Saleh, in 2017 and the subsequent rift within the de facto government of Sana'a. Under Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's command, Saudi Arabia gradually shifted its strategy from an aggressive military approach to seeking a negotiated political settlement as the conflict intensified and grew more complex. Additionally, the focus on Saudi Arabia's economic vision for 2030, the changing perspective of the international community regarding the war, and the Houthis' attacks on significant Saudi infrastructure, alongside the US remaining silent, have prompted the Kingdom to reassess its strategy and look for a way out of the prolonged conflict (Ozarowski, 2023).

The United Arab Emirates has emerged as a key player in the Saudi-led coalition active in Yemen. While Saudi Arabia has taken the lead in military operations, the UAE has significantly contributed through its supportive actions, especially in the southern regions of Yemen. Initially, the UAE's strategic direction aligned with Saudi Arabia's goals to strengthen the Hadi administration and curb Iranian influence in Yemen. However, the UAE also pursued its own distinct counter-revolutionary agenda, aiming to reduce the regional influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and its Yemeni affiliates, in addition to combating terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. While Saudi Arabia concentrated its air strikes on the Houthi-controlled north and deployed troops along its southern borders, the UAE focused its elite forces on the south of Yemen. The UAE's efforts centered on liberating the strategic port city of Aden from Houthi control, pushing them back to the north, and consolidating the UAE's influence and control over Yemen's southern regions (Krieg, 2022).

Prior to 2015, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen had a relationship centered on economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and security concerns. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which has long viewed Yemen as a strategic buffer state, the UAE's initial involvement focused on commerce, infrastructure development, and counterterrorism efforts. However, regional instability, the rise of extremist groups, and shifting geopolitical dynamics all contributed to the UAE's increasing strategic interest in Yemen. By the time the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, the UAE had already established significant commercial and security foundations in Yemen, setting the stage for its later military actions. Formal relations between the UAE and Yemen began when the UAE gained independence in 1971. The UAE fostered relations with both North Yemen (Yemen Arab Republic) and South Yemen (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen), although its approach varied. The UAE maintained a friendly relationship with North Yemen, aligning with Saudi Arabia to support the conservative monarchy and later the republican administration. In contrast, its relations with South Yemen were more strained, as the PDRY's Marxist ideology and ties with the Soviet Union conflicted with the UAE's pro-Western stance. When North and South Yemen unified in 1990, the UAE cautiously welcomed the merger but remained wary of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's increasing dominance (Ulrichsen, 2016).

Following Yemen's unification in 1990, the UAE cautiously supported development but questioned President Ali Abdullah Saleh's leadership. This concern intensified when Yemen backed Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War, straining relations. During the 1994 Yemeni Civil War, the UAE attempted mediation, but Saleh's victory over southern rebels heightened Emirati fears regarding his growing power. Despite political tensions, economic ties strengthened in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The UAE made substantial investments in infrastructure, energy, and trade, particularly in Aden, Hadramawt, and Socotra. UAE-based companies engaged in port development, energy initiatives, and logistics, while humanitarian efforts supported underprivileged areas. By the early 2000s, the UAE had become one of Yemen's top trading partners (Ulrichsen, 2016).

Financial ties developed further as liberal-minded financial authorities and young reformers close to Saleh's elder son Ahmed Ali moved to open Yemen's economy. In 2008, DP World, the Dubai ports administrator, entered a joint venture with the Yemeni

state-owned Yemen Inlet of Aden Ports company to run the harbor of Aden, as part of a driven territorial development drive through which DP World moreover took over administration of Djibouti port. According to one previous Yemeni ambassador who has close ties to the Saleh family, relations were normal ahead of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, especially with Ahmed Ali who had been prepared and arranged to succeed his father, empowering financial change in Yemen (Salisbury, 2020).

However, security concerns also influenced UAE policy, particularly the rise of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islah Party, which see it as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE supported counterterrorism operations in Abyan and Shabwa, working alongside Yemeni military forces to combat terrorist groups. The UAE has increased its naval presence near Bab Al-Mandeb to protect maritime trade routes and fight piracy. While steering clear of open political interference, the UAE established discreet connections with southern forces, anticipating potential unrest. By 2011, its economic and security interests had made it a key foreign player in Yemen. The Arab Spring and subsequent power struggles prompted the UAE to shift from economic engagement to military action, paving the way for its heightened involvement after 2015 (Brehony, 2020).

Post-2015, the UAE's military operations enabled it to exert considerable influence and control over Yemen's southern and southwestern regions, including key strategic ports in Aden, Mukalla, and Mokha. Furthermore, the UAE formed and equipped local militant groups that aligned with its regional interests and objectives in Yemen. Due to a shortage of ground troops and manpower, the Saudi military strategy faced challenges in making significant progress against the Houthi forces in northern Yemen, leading the Saudi-led coalition to increasingly rely on Emirati forces and their local allies in the south. To bolster its position in the south, the UAE recruited and trained mercenaries from Latin American countries while also equipping and organizing local militia groups, including the Security Belt Forces in Aden, the Hadrami Elite Forces in Hadramawt, and the Shabwani Elite Forces in Shabwa (Steinberg, 2020).

Recognizing the complexities and challenges posed by the enduring conflict in Yemen, the UAE implemented a more practical policy strategy in 2019, gradually reducing the deployment of most of its military forces within the country. This policy shift

prioritized preserving the UAE's strategic interests and consolidating its influence and leverage in Yemen's southern regions, particularly in Aden and other key cities, through utilizing local proxy forces and allied militia groups. Over time, the war in Yemen has become more complex due to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates' conflicting goals, visions, and approaches, which have also caused the anti-Houthi forces to become more fragmented. Clashes between Saudi-backed forces and UAE-backed southern separatist groups have further complicated the conflict and undermined efforts to achieve a political solution. This division within the coalition has brought to light the differences in the two Gulf powers' priorities, threat perceptions, and conflicting regional aspirations in Yemen, diverting their attention from the primary goal of defeating the Houthis and restoring the internationally recognized government of President Hadi (Krieg, 2022).

Since the conflict began in 2011, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have both been involved in Syria. Initially, they regarded the Assad government as an ally of Iran. They perceived the public demonstrations as an opportunity to persuade the Assad regime to sever its ties with the Iran-Hezbollah alliance. However, when these efforts failed, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates gradually shifted their positions. They demanded political and economic reforms from the Assad government and called for an end to its brutal suppression of the Syrian people. Saudi Arabia has taken a careful stance towards the Syrian conflict, as it has sought to balance the threats posed by the Assad regime while also aiming to prevent further deterioration of the situation, mainly due to concerns over the potential rise of extremist Islamist groups that could pose threats to the Kingdom's national security and domestic stability. Accordingly, the Kingdom initially pursued diplomatic channels, urging the Assad regime to respect human rights and accept reforms (Saudi Arabia Calls for Syrian Reforms, 2011).

Saudi Arabia also offered to assist the Assad regime and opposition officials to engage in a dialogue for reconciliation, but the Assad regime rejected this proposal. Following the realization of the futility of these diplomatic efforts, Saudi Arabia joined Gulf nations and Western powers in condemning the Assad regime's crackdown on civilian demonstrators (Hokayem, 2014). Saudi Arabia gradually increased its criticism of the Assad regime and strongly denounced the regime's violent crackdown on civilians, demanding an immediate end to the violence and bloodshed as the Syrian conflict grew

more intense and the Assad regime refused to participate in a political solution (Pierret, 2013).

Additionally, by removing its ambassador from Damascus and pressing the Arab League to take decisive action against the Syrian government, Saudi Arabia used its diplomatic clout to mobilize regional and global support for the isolation of the Assad regime. The Kingdom supported the Arab League's move to suspend Syria's membership in the League following the Assad regime's noncompliance with the League's previously negotiated peace deal under duress. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia joined the Arab League's resolution calling for the UN Security Council to implement economic sanctions and political and military measures to protect civilians by the Responsibility to Protect principle. Following this, Saudi Arabia and Qatar openly supported the armed opposition financially and logistically through Gulf allies. Along with Qatar and Turkey, the Kingdom helped arm, train, and equip the Syrian opposition forces. Additionally, Saudi Arabia funded efforts to improve the armed opposition's capacity to oppose the Assad regime in Syria, including the creation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionaries and the Free Syrian Army as a single opposition force (Pierret, 2013).

Despite its direct involvement in the Syrian conflict at this point, Saudi Arabia sought to balance its concerns about the increasing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood faction and extremist groups like Al-Nusra Front and later ISIS within the Syrian opposition with the perceived threat posed by the pro-Iranian Assad regime. Unlike Qatar, Saudi Arabia channeled its military and financial assistance away from the Islamist elements of the Syrian opposition and toward more moderate, secular opposition organizations such as Jaish Al-Islam or the Army of Islam. This strategic approach was driven by Riyadh's fear that a complete victory of the Islamist rebels could lead to the establishment of a Syria ruled by Sunni Islamists, which would be even more detrimental to Saudi's regional interests. Despite its reservations, Saudi Arabia continued to support the Syrian opposition groups in their efforts to topple the Assad government and limit the influence of Iran, which was viewed as the main danger. The Kingdom collaborated with regional partners such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon to facilitate engagement with the opposition groups and supply them with

equipment, training, and other forms of support to enhance their capabilities against the Assad regime (Hokayem, 2014).

Comparatively, the UAE adopted a more cautious and selective approach in its engagement with the Syrian conflict. Like other Gulf states, the UAE did not directly seek to topple the Assad government. Instead, the UAE's primary focus was mitigating the potential spillover of the Syrian crisis into the Gulf region and preventing further destabilization. The UAE cooperated with multilateral organizations, including the GCC, Arab League, and the international coalition known as "Friends of Syria" to apply diplomatic pressure on the Assad regime, even though it did not play a significant part in the Syrian crisis. The objective was to compel the regime to cease its violent crackdown on civilians and engage in a negotiated political transition. However, unlike its counterparts in the GCC, like the Kingdom and Qatar, which were proactively involved in the conflict in Syria, the UAE adopted a more reserved and prudent approach to providing direct military support to the Syrian opposition forces. The UAE's regional counter-revolutionary policy drove this cautious stance, as it sought to balance the threats posed by the Iranian-backed Assad regime and the Islamist opposition groups. Ultimately, the United Arab Emirates supported the Syrian opposition militarily and financially, concentrating on non-Islamist, secular groups and individuals inside the Free Syrian Army. In contrast to Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's more interventionist strategies, this action demonstrated the UAE's desire to preserve its interests and influence on the ground and to stop Islamist factions from winning the Syrian war (Daher, 2019).

Its broader regional security concerns shaped the UAE's balancing strategy in the Syrian conflict. It aimed to reduce the possible disruptive spillover effects of the Syrian crisis into the Gulf states, limit Iran's expanding influence, and advance more stability in the Middle East (Hokayem, 2014). The UAE's focus extended beyond just the situation in Syria itself, reflecting concerns over the broader regional geopolitical landscape and the potential for the Syrian conflict to heighten sectarian divisions and empower extremist forces that could threaten the UAE's security and regime stability. The UAE maintained connections with the Assad regime, providing a platform for some of Assad's relatives and pro-regime businessmen, some of whom were sanctioned internationally, to pursue economic activities within the Emirati state.

Simultaneously, the UAE cultivated relationships with a range of Syrian opposition factions, including Islamist groups, by channeling logistical support and funding through Emirati-based business networks. Moreover, the UAE sought to leverage its political influence and expand its leverage in Syria by directing significant resources toward reconstruction and humanitarian aid efforts in regime-controlled and opposition-held territories (Daher, 2019).

Distinct threat perceptions, regime security concerns, and regional aspirations drove the differing foreign policy approaches of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the Yemen and Syrian wars. Saudi Arabia's military involvement in Yemen was prompted by fears regarding the Houthi rebels' ties to Iran and the potential for the conflict to spread into the Kingdom. Conversely, instead of directly confronting Iran, the UAE's approach in Yemen emphasized safeguarding the southern regions and combating Islamist extremist groups. Saudi Arabia's approach to the Syrian war was to help the opposition, especially Islamist groups, overthrow the Assad government to offset Iran's regional influence. On the other hand, the UAE took a more circumspect approach, focusing on reducing the likelihood of destabilizing spillover effects and avoiding the rise of Islamist opposition organizations as the dominant force. Because of their conflicting aims and concerns, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates did not always have the same tactics and actions during the conflicts in Yemen and Syria, even though they were close friends and had similar regional interests.

1.3. Research Question and Thesis Statement

This study examines and compares the foreign policy approaches adopted by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the Yemen and Syria conflicts, highlighting the convergences, divergences, and underlying drivers that shaped their respective strategies. During the last decade, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been at the forefront of developments in these regional conflicts, with their involvement and policies having profound implications for regional dynamics and the broader Middle East. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE are both allies and share common interests, they have also pursued divergent foreign policy strategies in Yemen and Syria, driven by distinct threat perceptions, regime security concerns, and regional aspirations. Their perceptions of the shifting threat landscape, drive to maintain regime stability, and

competing regional ambitions have all shaped their differing approaches in these conflict theaters. A comparative analysis of their policies in these two conflict theaters provides valuable insights into the nuances of Gulf regional power dynamics and the factors influencing the foreign policy decision-making of these two influential Arab states.

The guiding research question that this study aims to answer is: “How have changing regional dynamics, combined with threat perceptions and regime security concerns, contributed to the convergence and divergence of Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's foreign policy strategies in the Yemen and Syria wars between 2011 and 2023?”

There are further sub-questions related to the evolution of the Saudi and Emirati approaches:

- a) What makes two allies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE pursue divergent foreign policy strategies in these conflict theaters despite sharing common regional interests?
- b) How do domestic factors like leaders' perceptions of threats and regime structure influence the foreign policy decision-making of these two regional states and their responses to instability and conflict in Yemen and Syria?
- c) How have Saudi Arabia and the UAE's initial alignments, interventions, and subsequent shifts in their behavior towards the Yemen and Syria wars evolved, and what key factors have driven these changes?

The principal argument of this study is that although Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been close allies and share common regional interests, their foreign policy strategies in the Yemen and Syria wars have also diverged at times, driven by distinct threat perceptions, regime security concerns, and competing regional aspirations. This divergence is reflected in their varying approaches to these conflicts, with Saudi Arabia initially pursuing a more assertive military intervention in Yemen and a more confrontational stance against the Assad regime in Syria. At the same time, the UAE has adopted a more careful and pragmatic approach, even in its participation within the Arab coalition led by its ally, Saudi Arabia, focused on securing its regional influence and mitigating destabilizing spillover effects.

1.4. Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of Gulf regional dynamics and the foreign policy decision-making of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two of the most influential state actors in the Middle East. By comparatively analyzing their policies and responses to the Yemen and Syria wars, the study will shed light on the complex interplay between regional power struggles, threat perceptions, regime security, and the evolution of foreign policy strategies in the Gulf. The key research objectives are to:

- a) Examine the convergences and divergences in Saudi Arabia and the UAE's foreign policy approaches in the Yemen and Syria conflicts
- b) Identify the underlying factors, such as threat perceptions, regime security concerns, and regional aspirations, that have shaped their respective strategies
- c) Trace the evolution of their policies over time and understand the drivers behind the changes and
- d) Contribute to the broader literature on Gulf regional dynamics, foreign policy analysis, and the impact of domestic factors on the foreign policy decision-making of states in the Middle East.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between regional power dynamics, domestic politics, and foreign policy in the Gulf. By examining the case studies of Yemen and Syria, the research will offer valuable insights into how Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as key regional powers, navigate the challenges posed by instability and conflict in their immediate geographic region and how their threat perceptions, regime security concerns, and competing regional ambitions shape their policy responses. These two states have been central to the evolving regional security landscape, and their policies in Yemen and Syria have had far-reaching implications for conflict dynamics, regional alliances, and the broader geopolitical situation in the Middle East. The wars in Yemen and Syria have been pivotal events that have reshaped the regional security environment, and analyzing the roles and motivations of key players like Saudi Arabia and the UAE in these two war-torn states provides valuable insights into the evolving proactive policies they have adopted since the Arab Spring uprisings, which often go

beyond their traditional defense and security concerns and reflect their broader regional aspirations and power dynamics, known as the "Gulf Moment."

1.5. Methodology and Data Collection

This study will employ a qualitative cross-comparative, small-N case study methodology to examine and analyze the foreign policy strategies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemen and Syria wars. Comparing the behavior and involvement of the two Gulf states allows for a thorough exploration of the similarities and differences in their policies while also enabling the identification of the underlying factors and causal mechanisms driving their decision-making processes. The comparative case study method enhances our understanding of how both states' distinct threat perceptions, regime security concerns, and regional ambitions have influenced their foreign policy strategies in Yemen and Syria over time and impacted the evolving dynamics between the two allies. Through this methodology, it will be possible to identify the key factors that have shaped the convergences and divergences in the policies of the two allies across these conflict theatres. It will examine the nature of their involvement in the Yemen and Syria wars and the drivers and interests behind their actions.

To provide a comprehensive contribution to understanding these complex dynamics, the study begins by explaining the foreign policies of the two states regarding the Yemen and Syria wars through the lens of neoclassical realism theory and foreign policy analysis. The study examines the structural pressures and the set of comparable domestic factors that shape the regime interests and policy priorities behind Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's involvement in the Yemen and Syria wars. It analyzes these states' political structures, leadership compositions, and economic conditions to clarify the domestic constraints and considerations that intervene in and influence their foreign policy decision-making processes. The ontological security theory is also employed to understand how the two states' need to maintain stability, protect their identity, and preserve their status in the regional order, since the onset of the popular uprisings in 2011, has shaped their policy choices in the two conflict contexts.

The research will be operationalized by collecting and analyzing data from various primary and secondary sources, including academic journal articles, policy briefs, reports from think tanks and research institutes, and statements from government officials and leaders. Due to the restrictions in Saudi Arabia and the UAE and the challenging security circumstances in conflict zones, it is not feasible to engage directly with decision-makers through interviews with officials or experts. Consequently, the study will rely on existing research and analysis by various experts to examine the evolving foreign policy trajectories of the two states. This will be complemented by process tracing to uncover the causal mechanisms linking domestic and structural conditions to the observed policy outcomes in the two case studies. Finally, a comparative analysis will synthesize the key similarities, differences, and underlying drivers that have shaped the convergences and divergences in Saudi and Emirati foreign policies toward the conflicts in Yemen and Syria over time.

So, the study will employ a combination of qualitative data collection methods, including:

- a) Document analysis: Review of official government statements, policy papers, diplomatic cables, press releases, and other relevant documents to understand the policy positions and rationales of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
- b) Data analysis: Examine existing academic literature, think tank reports, and some media sources to understand and explain the two states' foreign policy behavior and domestic drivers.
- c) Process tracing: Examine the causal mechanisms and contextual conditions that link the identified domestic and structural factors to the observed foreign policy outcomes.
- d) Comparative analysis: Comparing and contrasting Saudi Arabia and the UAE's foreign policy approaches, priorities, and outcomes in the Yemen and Syria wars.

Ethically, the study will strictly adhere to academic integrity and avoid misusing the information gathered. Proper attribution will be provided for all sources used, and the analysis will aim to present an objective and thorough understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Examining the foreign policy strategies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemen and Syria conflicts requires a multi-layered theoretical framework that can capture the interplay between structural conditions, domestic influences, and the perceptions and priorities of key decision-makers. The study will draw upon several theoretical approaches to comprehensively understand the causal mechanisms underlying the convergences and divergences in Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's policy choices in the Yemen and Syria wars. These include Neoclassical realism, which emphasizes the role of systemic factors and domestic-level variables in shaping state foreign policy, and Ontological Security Theory, which examines how states' need for stability and identity preservation influences their external behavior. Concepts like threat perceptions and regime security will also be central to the analysis.

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks: Neoclassical Realism and Ontological Security

Neoclassical realism provides a valuable framework for understanding how structural pressures from the international system, such as shifting power balances and regional rivalries, interact with domestic-level factors, such as state institutions, leadership dynamics, economic reforms, and state-society relationships, to shape a state's foreign policy choices. Unlike traditional realist theories that privilege systemic factors, neoclassical realism recognizes that how states perceive and respond to structural constraints is mediated by their internal characteristics and the perceptions of key decision-makers (L. Cerioli, 2023). Rose defines Neoclassical realism, a theory he coined its name himself as a foreign policy theory that ““incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought. [Arguing that] the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why [its adherents] they

are realists... [However] the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level ... [and] this is why they are neoclassical ” (Rose, 1998). They argue that states’ foreign policies are primarily driven by their assessments of relative power and threats in the international system. Still, these systemic pressures are filtered through the prism of domestic politics and decision-making processes. By moving beyond the structuralist theories, which link power capabilities to states’ foreign policy behavior in a direct fashion, Neoclassical realism states that there are domestic intervening constraints that act as “imperfect transmission belts” between systemic incentives and constraints and foreign policies chosen, and between leaders’ assessment of international and regional threats and the actual policies they pursue, especially in the short term (Lobell, 2009).

Neoclassical realism provides a predetermined model with a hierarchical model that identifies the circumstances under which domestic politics play an essential role within international politics. So, neoclassical realists set three steps in a causal chain: 1) The distribution of power in the international system, which creates external constraints and opportunities for states; 2) Domestic factors such as threat perceptions, state capacity, leadership style, and state-society relationship, which act as intervening variables, and 3) The foreign policies that states implement in response to systemic incentives and constraints. Within this causal chain, states are not treated as unitary rational actors, and domestic politics are included to explain the complex relationship between systemic factors and foreign policy (Rose, 1998). State leaders or elites, who are the foreign policy decision-makers or Foreign Policy Executives (FPE) (Kitchen, 2010) (Meibauer et al., 2021), do not continuously pursue the optimal policy in realist logic. Instead, they may deviate from it due to their subjective assessments of relative power, threats, and opportunities and because they try to manage domestic political constraints and challenges to regime security (Lobell et al., 2009). Therefore, leaders determine their national interests and formulate foreign policy by evaluating other states' relative power and intentions, but they are also always constrained by domestic factors. Neoclassical realism acknowledges that state processes are shaped not only by external systemic factors and calculations of power and security but also by cultural and ideological biases, domestic political pressures, and prevalent beliefs (Kitchen, 2010).

Applying this theory to analyze the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates during the conflicts in Yemen and Syria may clarify the causal relationship between the independent variable, domestic intervening variables, and the dependent variable. The study's research question specifies that the independent variable will be the shifting power dynamics or the relative positions and influence of the two states in the region. This creates opportunities and pressures for both governments to pursue their foreign policy objectives. The independent variable has been defined in the post-Arab Spring regional context, highlighting the ontological threats associated with it. The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings created a new framework of regional dynamics in the Middle East. This pressure compelled states in the region, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to reframe their foreign policy goals, often more than the international system, which is the focal point of the neoclassical realist perspective (Mason, 2023).

The second step of the causal chain is represented in the domestic intervening variables, which channel, mediate, and redirect the systemic pressure of the regional dynamics into specific foreign policy behavior. The domestic variables in these two Gulf countries are threat perceptions, regime security concerns, leadership style, state-society relations, and regional aspirations, likely to determine their foreign policy responses. These intervening variables are important because they act as "filter and mediating factors" and affect how the Gulf countries perceive and respond to the systemic pressure and opportunities created by the post-Arab Spring regional context. They are answering the variation in both states foreign policy behaviors in the Yemen and Syria wars, despite the pressure they face from the same regional environment. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE may possess convergent interests at the regional level, they can also pursue divergent foreign policy options in the Yemen and Syria wars based on domestic factors, even though they may create threats and weaknesses in the long run due to not being objective or optimal from a pure realist perspective (M. Darwich, 2022).

The final step is the dependent variable, which reflects the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates regarding the wars in Yemen and Syria. By analyzing how the two states assessed and interpreted the regional dynamics and threats posed by the post-Arab Spring context and how these perceptions were filtered

and translated into specific foreign policy decisions and actions in Yemen and Syria, neoclassical realism can help explain how these foreign policies evolved. It allows us to outline the path of changes in their external behavior resulting from the shifting balance of power and regional tensions arising from the new geopolitical landscape created by the Arab Spring, especially in Yemen and Syria. Therefore, this research will examine how the leaderships of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have understood and responded to the changing regional power dynamics and security challenges, particularly following the Arab uprisings, while also exploring how these systemic factors have interacted with their respective domestic political and economic priorities to produce policy outcomes, whether convergent or divergent, in the conflicts in Yemen and Syria (Rose, 1998).

While Neoclassical Realism provides a valuable framework for understanding the interplay between external and internal factors in shaping foreign policy, this study will also draw on Ontological Security Theory to provide additional explanatory power. Ontological security refers to a state's need to maintain a stable and coherent sense of self and identity in the external environment. Anthony Giddens defines ontological security as "the confidence most humans have in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. It is the sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly in one's perceptual environment" (Giddens, 1991). Agents or actors, whether they are individuals or states, have a basic need for ontological security, as it allows them to maintain predictable routines and a coherent narrative of self. Here, security pertains not to the body but to the self; it is the subjective sense of identity that enables and motivates action and choice. Security of the self means that one's understanding of it is relatively stable (Mitzen, 2006).

On the state level, Ontological Security Theory argues that states may pursue foreign policies not just based on calculations of material security or power but also to maintain a stable and consistent self-identity and narrative. States can engage in ontological security-seeking behavior to preserve a sense of self and meaning, even if such behavior contradicts their material security interests (Mitzen, 2006). They also tend to maintain and routinize policies consistent with their established identity and historical roles with the other actor, whether that other is another state or sub-state

group. On the other hand, states may feel ontologically insecure when they fail internally to maintain or restore their stable identity and autobiographical narratives or encounter external disruptions and threats to their established self-understandings and routine practices. Moreover, uncertainty constitutes a key source of ontological insecurity for states and increases anxiety, undermining their ability to form and sustain predictable routines and coherent self-narratives (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017).

However, the Middle East region proved that not just states with divergent identities and cultures threaten each other's ontological security, but also similarity in identity could be a source of enmity and conflict. Darwich argues that similarity can generate anxiety and insecurity due to the erosion of the distinctiveness of the self, which is the core of a stable self-identity. States must have a distinctive, unique, and persistent self-image and be recognized by others who underpin their ontological security-seeking behavior. She also argues that “the sources of ontological security are internal and external, and are inseparably interrelated,” which means that “ontological security emerges from that nexus of actor’s understanding of the self and its interaction with others.” Accordingly, states seek to maintain ontological security by cultivating a distinct self-identity with others and affirming this self-narrative by the external environment. However, she also mentions that “critical situations” like revolutions or regime changes can disrupt a state's sense of distinctiveness and undermine its recognition by relevant others, posing significant challenges to ontological security, which may lead to physical threats, too. In such cases, states tend to restore their ontological security through some strategies like demonizing the other to reaffirm their positive self-identity and denounce the other's identity or generate a new and secure self-narrative that reinforces the self-other distinction (M. Darwich, 2016).

Applying Ontological Security Theory to the cases of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemen and Syria wars could help uncover some identity-based factors behind their evolving foreign policy strategies. In this context, the Arab Spring uprisings were considered a critical situation in the region, posing serious ontological threats to the ruling regimes' identities and fundamental sources of legitimacy as traditional monarchies (Ejdus, 2018). The rise of the Iranian influence and the political Islam movements like the Muslim Brotherhood following the uprisings, particularly in Syria and Yemen, posed serious ontological threats to the stability of the two Gulf regimes

and forced them to reaffirm their distinct Sunni, pro-status quo identities through assertive regional policies and dehumanization of these others (Ehteshami, 2018). The growing anxieties over regime survival and the perceived threats to domestic stability and identity have been significant drivers of their foreign policies in these two conflicts, alongside material considerations. Moreover, their divergent approaches and the evolution of their strategies over time could be attributed to their differing ontological security needs and identities at both the state and regime levels (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017).

The regenerating of stable self-identity and narratives through the mobilization of patriotism and the narrowing of their national identity have reflected Saudi Arabia and the UAE's ontological security-seeking behavior for distinctiveness, even if it deviates from rational calculations of national interest (Al-Otaibi, 2020). Both states are monarchies and share similar conservative regimes, development models, and national identities, which can be sources of rivalry and competition. Such close ideational links between the two states could also generate ontological anxieties as they sought to distinguish themselves strategically and politically to maintain their sense of self and autonomy in the regional power dynamics (M. Darwich, 2016). Therefore, this study will investigate how the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE are preoccupied with preserving their political systems and how the traditional monarchical order has shaped their policy choices in the Yemen and Syria wars, given the ontological insecurity they experienced following the regional unrest.

2.2. Conceptual Framework: Threat Perceptions and Regime Security

The threat perception and regime security considerations of Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been significant drivers of their foreign policies in the Yemen and Syria wars. Both countries have adopted assertive foreign policies, driven by the need to counter perceived threats, both internal and external threats, and to ensure regime stability. This has led to different approaches in Yemen and Syria, reflecting their strategic priorities and security concerns. As a concept, threat perception is a multifaceted process by which individuals or states recognize and interpret potential dangers based on subjective and objective factors. It is defined as apprehending through the senses and recognizing and interpreting what is processed, which can occur even without

concrete evidence of danger. This perception is not solely dependent on the actual presence of a threat. Still, it can also arise from assumed or perceived intentions of harm, highlighting the subjective nature of threat perception (M. A. H. Darwich, 2015). In the context of the Middle East region, it can be further shaped by historical legacies, sectarian divides, and ideological incompatibilities that have long-defined regional dynamics and security dilemmas. Furthermore, more realistic evaluations of national interests based on stability and relationships with societies are frequently preceded by the regime's rather than the state's views of threat. The process of interaction between regimes, between regimes and societies, and between the material capacities and identity narratives of regimes is therefore defined as the process of threat perception (M. Darwich, 2019b).

Threat perception plays a significant role in forming alliances, with its importance arising from the complex interaction of material and ideational forces that shape how states understand threats and interact with each other. Both internal and external threats must be considered to evaluate the legitimacy of Middle Eastern governments and their vulnerability to these dangers. Regimes formulate their foreign policy decisions based on their interpretations of threats and prioritize them according to the material and conceptual sources of those threats. Two interconnected conditions—the fluidity of regime identification and the variety of policy options arising from the relative power distribution within regional dynamics—underpin the differences in the threat perception processes between ideational and material forces (M. Darwich, 2019b). The significance of ideational versus material variables in the regimes' threat perception largely depends on their self-narratives, whether these are fixed or fluid, and the policy options available due to regional power distribution. In other words, regimes prioritize their physical and ontological security in assessing threats based on these two factors (M. Darwich, 2015).

The legitimacy of states in the Middle East is primarily determined by their ruling regimes' physical and existential security considerations, which constitute the principal drivers of their foreign policy decisions. Regime security is directly related to the survival and stability of a state's ruling leadership, elite, and political institutions. It is closely tied to these regimes' threat perceptions and identity narratives, primarily based on internal and external threats (M. Darwich, 2019b). Domestic political,

ideological, and socioeconomic instabilities, including protests, uprisings, and the rise of oppositional forces, can pose severe challenges to the legitimacy and survival of ruling regimes in the region, and they are primarily concerned with these threats more than external or structural ones. Regime interests are often the leadership's or political elite's interest in maintaining domestic power (Calculli & Legrenzi, 2016) (Lima, 2023). The concept of regime security is rooted in ontological security, which refers to the security of the self, the continuity of the individual's and the state's narrative of identity. It refers to the personalization and concentration of power in the hands of the ruler or ruling elite, whereby the regime's survival is inextricably linked to the leadership's survival (Ehteshami, 2018).

In the Middle East scholarship on regime security, the focus on regime survival is overweighted over state security as a unit of analysis. It argues that the regimes in the region are preoccupied with maintaining and securing their domestic stability from threats regardless of their legitimate causes or the interests of the state and society, even if it means sacrificing sustainable, inclusive, and accountable security governance to the societies. These regimes perceive transnational political identities and ideologies as significant threats to their survival because they challenge the regimes' constructed narratives of national identity and sovereignty and undermine the basis of their legitimacy within their societies. This leads the ruling leadership or elites to adopt and implement “ideational balancing” strategies and policies. They utilize countering narratives like sectarian narratives to mobilize the masses, challenge these ideational threats, and consolidate their power domestically (Rubin, 2014). The role of regime security is crucial in explaining the foreign policy behavior of Middle Eastern states and the pursuit of divergent strategies despite sharing similar threat perceptions and geo-strategic contexts. Ruling leaders or elites perceive threats through the lens of their regime's security, formulate their foreign policy decisions, and choose their allies, regionally and internationally, according to which policies and alliances would best serve their regime's survival and stability (GAUSE III, 2003).

The concepts of threat perception and regime security are crucial to understanding the foreign policy approaches of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemen and Syria conflicts. Within the framework of Neoclassical Realism and Ontological Security Theories, these two intervening variables can provide a more nuanced understanding

of the reasons behind the convergence and divergence in their policies towards the wars in Yemen and Syria. After the Arab Spring uprisings that spread along many Arab capitals, the two Gulf countries faced major stability threats to their regimes. Shifts in regional dynamics and the rise of transnational ideologies have significantly shaped the threat perceptions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE regimes, leading them to pursue assertive foreign policies to counter such perceived threats. For Saudi Arabia, the war in Yemen was perceived as an existential threat due to concerns about the approaching risk of the Iranian-allied Houthis group just across its southern border. It perceived it as both an ideational and a physical threat that would threaten its ruling regime's security and domestic control of society. However, in Syria, the threats were more ideational for Saudi Arabia as the continuation of the Assad regime's rule was seen as empowering its regional rival Iran and threatening its influence in the Levant.

On the other hand, the UAE's primary motivation for involvement in the Yemen war was to assert regional dominance and influence, particularly in Yemen's strategically significant southern provinces. Its main objective was establishing a strategic presence and sphere of influence in Yemen. Simultaneously, it was concerned about potential ideological threats to its security posed by the rise of Islamist and Houthi groups in the region. The UAE's stance on the Syrian crisis was more pragmatic and strategic, influenced by economic and geopolitical factors, unlike Saudi Arabia's more ideologically driven approach. Therefore, the strategies employed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the conflicts in Yemen and Syria may relate to their regimes' security concerns and threat perceptions, which influenced how their foreign policy strategies converged and diverged based on each state's distinct goals and circumstances.

2.3. Evolution of Saudi and Emirati Foreign Policies Post-Arab Uprisings

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's foreign policies have undergone significant changes following the Arab Uprising, reflecting their unique national interests and regional dynamics. Both countries have adopted a more interventionist military stance. The Saudi-UAE coalition's military intervention in Yemen in 2015 exemplifies this shift, as they aimed to assert their influence and counter perceived threats in the region. This represented a departure from earlier policies that focused less on military solutions

(Khalife, 2020). The Arab Uprising led Saudi Arabia and the UAE to prioritize the maintenance of authoritarian regimes within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). They have collaborated to establish unified interventionist policies to reassert control and stability in the region, particularly in response to domestic uprisings and the emergence of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Ulrichsen, 2019).

While a desire for power maximization drives both countries, their strategies vary. Saudi Arabia has faced challenges in converting its military investments into effective outcomes on the battlefield, whereas the UAE has successfully utilized its military capabilities to achieve political gains. This divergence underscores the complexities of their foreign policy actions despite their alliance (Khalife, 2020) (Ulrichsen, 2019) (Alshehabi, 2014). Despite their differences, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have maintained economic and political cooperation as members of the GCC. However, their foreign policies reflect their distinct domestic political contexts and security considerations, shaping how they respond to regional challenges (Khalife, 2020) (Ulrichsen, 2019). The absence of a coordinated regional security policy has heightened rivalries and international interventions in the Gulf. Their differing responses to the Arab Spring, particularly the siege of Qatar led by the UAE and supported by Saudi Arabia, illustrate the complexities of their foreign policy dynamics (Ragab, 2017).

The Arab Uprisings of 2011 prompted Saudi Arabia and the UAE to reassess their foreign policies, prioritizing regime survival and regional stability (Calculli & Legrenzi, 2016) (Esfandiary, 2021). Under Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia adopted a more assertive regional posture to counter perceived threats from Iran and to assert its leadership in the Gulf (Salisbury, 2020) (Roberts, 2020). The UAE, influenced by the rise of Mohammed Bin Zayed, moved towards a more assertive foreign policy, emphasizing self-sufficiency and the development of military capabilities to address regional threats (Ibish, 2017). Both nations viewed the 2011 protests as a shared threat, temporarily unifying the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states under Saudi leadership to address regional instability (Lynch, 2016). The UAE's foreign policy became increasingly autonomous, motivated by concerns over Saudi hegemony and the need to safeguard its interests, especially when it diverged from those of Saudi Arabia (Salisbury, 2020) (Roberts, 2020). The leadership transitions in

both countries, particularly with Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, facilitated a shift towards a more interventionist and proactive approach in foreign affairs. Their foreign policies have increasingly focused on balancing relationships with major powers like the US and China, reflecting a strategic pivot in response to changing global dynamics. The Gulf states have also sought to enhance their influence through economic statecraft and military alliances, particularly in regional conflicts and the evolving geopolitical landscape (Mason, 2023).



CHAPTER III

SAUDI ARABIA AND UAE IN YEMEN AND SYRIA WARS

After the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East underwent significant changes. These changes resulted in increased assertiveness and interventionist tendencies in the foreign policy strategies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Ehteshami, 2018). The crises in Yemen and Syria posed distinct security challenges for both countries despite their shared regional ambitions and concerns over the growing influence of threatening actors such as Iran and political Islamist groups. Their adopted counter-revolution strategy, jointly led by both nations in response to the Arab Spring uprisings, prompted them to take a more proactive and interventionist role in the domestic affairs of the affected nations and the ensuing regional conflicts. This approach marked a clear departure from their previous cautious policies as they aimed to actively shape events in their immediate neighborhood to protect their interests and strengthen their regional influence. Despite their success in countering and containing the spread of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and the UAE continued to face significant challenges that tested the cohesion of their coalition and the coherence of their strategies, particularly in Yemen and Syria. This chapter will examine each state's approaches, policies, and evolution in these two major wars to understand their responses to regional threats better.

3.1. Saudi Arabia's Approach to The Yemen War: From Adventurous Intervention to Strategic Reevaluation

Shortly after the outbreak of the Arab Spring protests in Yemen in 2011, Saudi Arabia grew increasingly concerned about the potential for instability in Yemen on its southern border. Historically, Yemen has been viewed as a source of instability for the Saudi regime for decades, with ongoing border conflicts and the emergence of non-state armed groups threatening Saudi national security. Additionally, the key

differences between the two countries' political identities, forms of governance, and strategic interests compelled Saudi Arabia to actively influence events at every critical juncture in Yemen's modern history to protect its own national and regional interests (Johnsen, 2021). However, the Saudi intervention in Yemen through the military operation 'Decisive Storm' in March 2015 marked a notable shift in Saudi foreign policy. This represented a transition from its previously cautious and reactive approach to a more assertive and proactive stance (M. Darwich, 2018).

3.1.1. Initial Alignment and Coalition Formation

The military intervention in Yemen marked a significant shift in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, indicating a move away from its traditionally cautious and reactive approach towards a more assertive and proactive regional role following the Arab Spring uprisings. Saudi Arabia's decision to intervene militarily in Yemen was driven by various factors, including the desire to reinforce its regional dominance and exert influence, along with concerns about the growing power of the Houthis and their potential to threaten Yemen's stability and territorial integrity, especially along its southern borders. While Saudi Arabia, together with the UAE, intervened in Bahrain in March 2011 to quell pro-democracy protests that endangered the Bahraini monarchy, this action was framed as a collective duty of GCC members to maintain security and stability within the region as a unified entity. Moreover, the scale and intensity of their military operations in Yemen surpassed those of previous interventions (Ziadah, 2019).

As hostilities swiftly intensified following the Houthis' takeover of the capital city of Sana'a in September 2014, Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates and various regional partners, formed the Arab Coalition and launched a military intervention known as 'Operation Decisive Storm.' This operation aimed explicitly at restoring the internationally recognized Yemeni government led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. Before the Houthis' occupation of the Yemeni capital in late 2014, Saudi Arabia had refrained from actively hindering the Houthis' military advancement from their stronghold in the northern governorate of Sa'ada. As the Houthis expanded their control over more governorates and urban areas on the way to Sana'a, they were not considered an immediate threat to Saudi interests at that time

(M. Darwich, 2018). In fact, the Saudi authorities appeared to have utilized the Houthis to diminish the influence of their political rivals in Yemen, particularly the Islah party, which represents the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—an organization that Saudi Arabia perceives as a significant threat within the regional context (Al-Sofari, 2021) (Salisbury, 2016). However, once the Houthis took control of the capital and began to threaten the internationally recognized government, their rising presence and growing influence in Yemen were increasingly viewed by Saudi Arabia as a direct challenge to its national security interests and regional standing.

The Saudis were compelled to intervene militarily in response to the Houthis' conquest of the capital, Sana'a, and their consolidation of governmental power in Yemen, marking a dramatic change in the regional balance of power. Saudi Arabia failed to foresee that the Houthis would maintain their connections with Iran and Hezbollah and that they were as capable as their former partner, the overthrown president Ali Abdullah Saleh, leading to a miscalculation of the Houthis' ambitions and military strength. The Saudis' swift action in response to President Hadi's appeal for intervention, which led to forming a regional coalition to restore the previous Yemeni administration, was ultimately explained and justified by these reasons (Khalife, 2020). Given the shifting dynamics of the Saudi leadership and the centralization of power in the hands of the Deputy Crown Prince, the decision to initiate a military intervention in Yemen, directed by Mohammed bin Salman, the Defense Minister, and Deputy Crown Prince, was both audacious and risky (Riedel, 2020). Due to the political vacuum that emerged following the transfer of authority, alongside the sidelining of the customary princesses responsible for the Yemeni issue, there was little discussion within the Al-Saud royal family (Tynan, 2021).

Nine nations, including the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan, comprised the original Arab Coalition, which Saudi Arabia led. The United States, the United Kingdom, and France supported the intervention by offering refueling capability, logistical assistance, and intelligence. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216, which called for the Houthis to withdraw from the areas they had occupied and for the legitimate Yemeni government to be reinstated, further legitimized the intervention. On March 26, 2015, the coalition began its military campaign by heavily bombarding Houthis and Saleh's

loyalist forces from the air throughout Yemen. In addition to enforcing an air and naval embargo to stop the flow of weapons and ammunition to the Houthis from Iran, it targeted Houthi military installations, command centers, and ballistic missile sites (M. Darwich, 2018).

The coalition's unprecedented level of military mobilization and technology demonstrated Saudi Arabia's and its allies' determination to overthrow the Houthis and restore the former Yemeni government without resorting to a ground invasion. It also underscored Saudi Arabia's desire to project its regional power and influence. Over 170 aircraft, including fighter jets, combat helicopters, aerial tankers, and other support planes, participated from most Gulf nations (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016). The Royal Saudi Air Force, equipped with several Pave-way and Joint Direct Attack Munitions, was among the 100 aircraft supplied by Saudi Arabia (Shield, 2018). The UAE was the second-largest air power source with 30 distinct aircraft collections, including F-16e and Mirage 2000 models and various helicopters (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016). Egypt sent four ships to protect the Gulf of Aden, Sudan three, Qatar ten, Jordan six, and Kuwait and Bahrain fifteen fighter planes (Shaheen & Dehghan, 2015).

The alliance was able to gain air supremacy against the rebel forces in Yemen because of the embargo. The military operation's aftermath, however, showed that the Houthis were not discouraged and instead persisted in shooting rockets across the border into Saudi Arabia in retaliation (Shield, 2018). A serious humanitarian catastrophe was also brought on by the coalition's airstrikes, which destroyed Yemen's vital infrastructure and resulted in countless civilian deaths. Saudi Arabia canceled the previous operation and its airstrike through Coalition Spokesman Brigadier General Ahmed Asiri, who also announced the start of a second operation in April 2015 called "Operation Restoring Hope.", shifting its focus from an all-out military campaign to a more limited counterinsurgency effort aimed at protecting its southern borders and reaching a political settlement (M. Darwich, 2018). However, that was not applied on the ground as the airstrikes continued in several cities in Taiz, Sa'ada, and Sana'a. The Kingdom resorted to deploying 150 thousands of ground troops to secure its southern border against the Houthis, which was not initially envisaged at the beginning of the intervention (Knights & Almeida, 2015a).

In addition, it announced the Golden Arrow operation in July, which sought to establish a buffer zone along the Saudi-Yemeni border to enhance security and mitigate cross-border attacks by the Houthis. However, its main objective was to free the strategic port city of Aden from the grip of the Houthis and Saleh. It aimed to secure the airpower operation's objectives with a ground strategy that included Saudi special troops, Emirati Presidential Guard forces, and brigades that led and supported the Yemeni government troops to retake Aden and areas in the south. Therefore, the coalition's military strategy had evolved from an air campaign to a gradual ground strategy focused on specific goals of securing borders and reclaiming the south (Knights & Almeida, 2015a). Supported by airstrikes, the ground operation helped recapture Aden in July 2015, marking the coalition forces' first significant victory over the Houthis. Key maritime locations, including the Bab Al-Mandab Strait and Al-Makha port, were secured, along with the reclaiming of the airport and the old US base at Al-Anad. This allowed the Yemeni government, led by President Hadi, to enhance its presence and territorial authority in the south. The Houthi-Saleh coalition troops were pushed back from the Saudi-Yemeni border, and the Al-Wadeah crossing point was liberated from their control over the Kingdom's southern border (Shield, 2018).

The period afterward witnessed the intensification of the fighting between the two parties, with the Houthis assaulting to expand their control to the oil-rich regions like Marib and Shabwa. At the same time, the coalition forces continued to support the Yemeni forces to reclaim the territories taken by the Houthis. The Houthis still had the capabilities to launch numerous cross-border missile and drone attacks against Saudi towns, cities, and key infrastructure in retaliation to the coalition's military campaign and pressure Saudi Arabia to end its intervention (Knights & Almeida, 2015b). This highlights the Houthis' determination to sustain their resistance against the coalition and their ability to inflict significant damage despite the coalition's air superiority and ground operations.

3.1.2. Evolution of Strategy Over Time

The Kingdom's official justification for its intervention in Yemen was to restore President Hadi's legitimate government, aiming to limit Iranian influence in the region and prevent the emergence of a Houthi government supported by Iran (M. Darwich,

2018). During the 26th Arab League convention in Sharm Al-Sheikh, King Salman declared that "the campaign will continue until it achieves its goals for the Yemeni people to attain security" (Al Arabiya News, 2015). A different narrative quickly emerged as the main reason behind the Saudi decision: a conflict between the Kingdom and the Iranian-backed Houthis, who belong to a Shiite sect. The Saudi-owned media and religious leaders quickly depicted Yemen as a war where the Saudis were battling the Shias, who were seen as a threat not only to Yemen but to the entire region. King Salman claimed that the Houthis, receiving Iranian support, are responsible for inciting sectarian tensions in Yemen. To address the Iranian threat, the spread of Shiism in the Gulf, and the potential collapse of the fourth Arab capital under Iranian influence, the Kingdom sought to frame its actions in Yemen as central to a Sunni regional campaign (M. Darwich, 2018). In a bid to garner domestic support and justify its military measures in Yemen, the Kingdom highlighted the sectarian narrative.

Saudi Arabia's military involvement in Yemen was driven by both regional ambitions and domestic security concerns, as well as a response to the Houthi takeover of Sana'a. The emergence of the Houthis placed Saudi Arabia's traditional sphere of influence and its efforts to control Yemen's internal affairs at risk. Before the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia made significant investments to maintain a network of patronage links with the Yemeni government, tribal leaders, and Islamist groups. A significant blow to Saudi Arabia's regional power projection was caused by the overthrow of Saleh's government in 2011 and the following ascent of the Houthis, which threatened to tip the scales of power in Yemen in favor of its adversary Iran (Al-Iryani et al., 2015). Therefore, Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen was motivated mainly by the Kingdom's ambition to restore its regional dominance and prevent the establishment of an entity backed by Iran on its southern border, notwithstanding the rhetoric about defending Yemen's legitimate government (Al-Madhaji et al., 2015).

As the goals and tactics of the coalition have changed, so too has the character of Saudi Arabia's military engagement in Yemen. Saudi Arabia's bold 2015 military involvement in Yemen was predicated on the hope of an immediate and resounding triumph (M. Darwich, 2018). However, the Saudi-led coalition's military campaign failed to achieve its initial objectives, leading to a protracted conflict. As the war dragged on and casualties mounted, Saudi Arabia gradually shifted its focus towards

seeking a political solution to the conflict, including attempts to negotiate directly with the Houthi rebels. The cost of the war in Yemen, both financially and in terms of the number of lives lost, has become increasingly difficult for the Kingdom to sustain.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's regional status and its attempts to counter Iranian influence have been weakened by the failure to entirely defeat the Houthis and restore the Hadi government's authority over the entire nation. Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, who was the former defense minister and marginalized his cousin Mohammed Bin Nayef to become the crown prince in 2017, has come under fire for his handling of the Yemen war, which has been viewed as an expansion that has harmed Saudi Arabia's standing abroad and its regional influence (Juul, 2020). While maintaining its fundamental interests in Yemen, the Kingdom has made numerous attempts to pull itself out of the quagmire by aiding UN-sponsored peace efforts.

The KSA came to the conclusion that a political resolution was the only way to stop the catastrophic war in Yemen and that there was no military answer. The Houthis have demonstrated their ability to inflict damage on Saudi territory, as seen by their September 2019 strikes on the oil-related facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais. Despite the doubts by the Kingdom and the US also regarding the origin of the attacks, in which it is widely believed that Iran is behind the attacks, the Houthis accept their responsibility for the attacks. This incident was interpreted as clear evidence of the strengthening proxy relationship between Iran and the Houthis, which has heightened Saudi's concerns regarding potential Iranian influence in Yemen bordering the Kingdom (Clausen, 2022). Moreover, by attacking the Kingdom's vital oil infrastructure that makes up a significant portion of its national income, the Houthis proved that they don't fear any retaliation by Saudi Arabia and that the latter cannot fully protect its territory. Such attacks serve the goals of the Houthis in Yemen and the region, strengthening their position in possible future peace negotiations. Thus, the Kingdom realized that its adopted rhetoric of the Houthis and military adventurism in Yemen had not served their interests; conversely, these led to empowering the Houthis and pushing them closer to Iran (Clausen, 2022).

The tendency of Saudi Arabia to shift towards a more pragmatic approach in Yemen started at the end of 2015 when the Kingdom began exploring options for a political

solution to the conflict. By this time, the war against the Houthis had reached a static status, with neither side gaining a decisive victory. The Kingdom supported the UN-sponsored peace negotiations in Geneva and Kuwait between the internationally recognized government and the Houthis, hoping for a political settlement that would allow Saudi Arabia to extricate itself from the war, with its interests being guaranteed through having a friendly government in Sana'a. However, both negotiations ultimately collapsed, and Saudi Arabia was forced to continue its airstrikes in response to escalating Houthi attacks on its territory (Juneau, 2024).

Later, the Kingdom, with alignment with critical changes in the region and its internal shifts in leadership, sought to make some changes in the anti-Houthis camp by giving up the legitimate President Hadi and transferring his power to his then Vice President Khaled Bahah and form a new government that is acceptable by all parties in an attempt to pave the way for a political settlement. Before that, with pressure from the UAE, the Kingdom pushed Hadi to include some UAE-aligned Southern secessionist leaders like Aiderous Al-Zubaidi, Shalal Shayea, and Hani Bin Braik into the Saudi-backed government in Aden. Simultaneously, It worked on de-escalating military actions in its southern borders through periodic ceasefire initiatives and engagement with the Houthis, signaling its shift towards accepting a political settlement to end the conflict (Radman, 2022).

President Hadi and local allies realized they would be out of any possible peace under the political arrangements prepared by Saudi Arabia and its ally, the UAE, with the blessing of the US. In April 2016, Hadi rejected the new power-sharing arrangement proposed in Kuwait-based ceasefire negotiations, causing their collapse. Besides, he blocked Saudi Arabia's plans by replacing his Vice President Khaled Bahah with a well-known political and military figure, General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, who is also aligned with the controversial Islamic party Al-Islah, and appointed Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr as the new Prime Minister. These critical decisions extended the political age of President Hadi by hindering the Saudi-backed political settlement and the UAE's plans of gradually sidelining him in the south (Radman, 2022). Another move by President Hadi that targeted the UAE's interests in the south was his dismissal of the UAE-allied southern secessionist governor in Aden, Aiderous Al-Zubaidi, the commander of the Aden-based Security Belt Forces, Shalal Ali Shayea, and the extremist Salafi Minister

of State Hani Bin Braik in April 2017. This was followed by the dismissal of three more governors of Hadhramout, Shabwa, and the Island of Socotra, UAE-aligned secessionist southern figures, in July 2017. These moves led to more complications in the Yemen war, in which the UAE-backed southern groups created the Southern Transitional Council and engaged in clashes with the national army and forces loyal to President Hadi (Ardemagni, 2017).

Saudi Arabia's strategy in Yemen has evolved over time, reflecting changing threat assessments and the necessity to balance conflicting regional and domestic policy objectives. As a result of the 2017 Gulf diplomatic crisis with Qatar, the 2017 leadership transitions, and international pressure due to the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Yemen and the 2018 killing of Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia has taken a more pragmatic approach towards the Houthis and in addressing differences with its ally, the United Arab Emirates, in Yemen (Juneau, 2020b). A crucial step in this approach was the 2018 signing of the Stockholm Agreement, which established a framework for a national ceasefire, a prisoner exchange, and the evacuation of troops from the crucial port city of Hodeidah. Simultaneously, it led to a divide between the alliance and the legitimate Yemeni government. Despite the UAE's resistance and the ongoing conflicts between pro-Hadi and UAE-backed southern forces, Saudi Arabia has kept contact with the Houthis in an apparent effort to find a political solution to the conflict. At the same time, UN special envoy Martin Griffiths has focused on implementing the terms of the agreement (Radman, 2022).

Moreover, to handle the growing tensions and competing interests between the internationally recognized Yemeni government led by President Hadi and the Southern Transitional Council, which the United Arab Emirates supports, the Kingdom has reoriented its strategy to the south. With this new strategy, it hopes to compete with the UAE's military and economic clout in the so-called freed south and increase its influence there. This was demonstrated in November 2019 when Saudi Arabia openly mediated and sponsored the Riyadh Agreement, which sought to establish a government with shared authority between President Hadi and the Southern Transitional Council under Saudi oversight. Saudi Arabia has increased its political and economic influence in southern Yemen since the UAE's armed forces left the

region in October 2019, giving local leaders who support legitimate government protection and financial assistance (M. Darwich, 2018).

To reduce the UAE's ability to exert influence in these regions, it sought to weaken its proxies in the south, especially in the eastern governorates such as Hadramout, Shabwa, and Al-Mahra. At the same time, the Kingdom is working to prevent the Riyadh Agreement from collapsing by helping to establish the new Yemeni government, supporting both military and civilian tribal groups, providing subsidies for fuel and essential services, supplying liquidity to the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden to safeguard its interests, and covering the salaries of the government and Southern Transitional (Radman, 2022).

Despite ceasefires brokered by Saudi Arabia, the Houthis in northern Yemen escalated their attacks on Saudi Arabia's southern borders. They continued their push on the strategically vital Marib governorate, the last bastion of the internationally recognized Yemeni government in the north. In an effort to compel the Houthis to engage in negotiations, the Kingdom intensified airstrikes on Houthi-held territories. It also maintained its blockade of Yemen's ports, especially Hodeidah, in response to the September 2019 assault on Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil facilities. At the end of 2019, the Houthis and the Kingdom publicly announced their willingness to consider a ceasefire. Reports suggest that the Kingdom has since aimed to secure its southern borders by engaging in covert discussions with the Houthis, facilitated by Omani officials, without the involvement of the legitimate Yemeni government (Salisbury, 2024). As a result, the US's hesitance to guarantee the Kingdom's security and defend its interests after the attacks on its territory illustrated the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation and the Kingdom's intention to de-escalate the situation and pursue a political resolution (Tynan, 2021).

In the same direction, the Kingdom was finally able to transfer power and authority from President Hadi to the newly established Presidential Leadership Council in April 2022. This council consisted of one president and seven vice presidents, with the goal of reviving the Riyadh Agreement to pave the way for a comprehensive political settlement. The Houthis and the new council agreed to a truce, which allowed humanitarian supplies to be delivered and commercial flights to and from Sanaa airport

to resume (UN News, 2022). The fact that Saudi Arabia and the Houthis continued their conversations despite the ceasefire's brief six-month duration shows that the Kingdom is prepared to deal with the Houthis directly and find a political solution to the war. In January 2023, to increase its influence and authority in the conflict, the Presidential Leadership Council announced the creation of the National Shield Forces, which would be directly commanded by Council President Rashad Al-Alimi and independent of the Yemeni army. The Kingdom fully supported this operation, which reflected its desire to fortify the legitimate government and the council as a check on the military groups backed by the UAE in the south (Ardemagni, 2023).

3.2. UAE's Approach to The Yemen War: Strategic Interests and Power Projection

The UAE's approach to the Yemen war has been shaped by its distinct strategic interests and regional power ambitions, which have diverged from Saudi Arabia's priorities over time. Although the UAE shares Saudi Arabia in its perception of the Houthi rebels and Iranian influence in Yemen as a threat to its security, it has also pursued an assertive policy aimed at expanding its regional influence and securing its economic and geopolitical interests in the country. The UAE significantly contributes to the Saudi-led Arab Coalition's military operations in Yemen, including both aerial support and ground forces. Its approach has changed from ensuring coalition control of southern Yemen to a more focused participation focused on counterterrorism operations, strengthening its position in key islands and coastal areas, and guaranteeing its political influence in any future settlement.

3.2.1. Initial Involvement and Subsequent Drawdown

The UAE was an active participant in the initial Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen in March 2015, contributing significant air and ground forces to the military campaign. With 30 different aircraft, including F-16s, Mirage 2000s, and several helicopters, the United Arab Emirates was the second-largest contributor of air power (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016). The UAE also deployed ground troops, including its elite Presidential Guard, Special Forces, and regular army units, to support the Yemeni government forces in recapturing territory from the Houthis. It was estimated that

around 7 thousand UAE troops and foreign mercenaries were involved in the fighting on the ground across Yemen (Knights & Almeida, 2015a). The UAE's role was crucial in the coalition's efforts to secure control over southern Yemen and strategic coastal areas, including Aden. Special forces were deployed in Aden, guiding UAE aircraft onto pre-identified targets by forward air directors.

They also oversaw the coordination of numerous local resistance groups throughout the city. Armored vehicles were delivered to these forces in Aden. The UAE, along with the remaining members of President Hadi's regular army, collaborated to expel the Houthis from Aden by the end of July 2015. Then, in early August, an Emirati-led fighting group, mostly comprised of Yemeni fighters, arrived and later departed from Aden. By the end of August, they had taken control of much of the Lahej and Al-Dali provinces with the support of local militias. They were on the way to drive the Houthis out of Abyan and establish a significant Houthi-free zone. The Coalition forces quickly reopened the port and airport of Aden for military and restricted humanitarian activities. To assist other coalition forces in taking over the oil-rich province and to support planned operations advancing to Al-Jawf and Sana'a, several hundred UAE personnel and forces were sent to Mareb near the end of the year (Brehony, 2020).

However, unexpectedly, the killing of 52 Emirati soldiers in an attack launched by the Houthis in Marib put the UAE in a lousy situation and under criticism as facing the first human cost. The painful human loss within Emirati forces continued when 80 soldiers were killed in mid-2016, which caused a significant impact on the Emirati people (Juneau, 2020a). Despite the UAE's active military role in the early stages of the conflict, the Gulf nation began to shift its strategy in Yemen starting in 2017.

The UAE began to gradually scale down its military operations and commitments in Yemen, particularly in the northern and central parts of the country. The UAE's drawdown was driven by a combination of factors, including rising domestic opposition to the conflict back home, growing concerns over overextending Emirati military capabilities, and shifting priorities towards the south that aligned with the UAE's regional ambitions (Juneau, 2020a). So, to secure the southern and western port cities, protect trade networks, and lessen the influence of Iran on the Arabian Peninsula, the UAE supported separatist organizations in the south. The UAE's

interests in the Horn of Africa would be preserved if their interests in Yemen were protected. Thus, the UAE used most of its resources to train and bolster forces in the south (Hummel, 2018) (Ardemagni, 2016a).

As a significant partner in the Saudi-led coalition, the UAE has succeeded in seizing all the port cities and coastal cities of Yemen, including Aden, Al-Mukalla, and Al-Makha. It persisted in acting independently by building unique and informal ties with the local tribes and coordinating them for its purposes despite all the protests of the legitimate Hadi government. Moreover, the UAE forces also controlled airports and ports on the Yemeni island of Socotra, a crucial location for trade in the Indian Ocean. The flag of the UAE and photos of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, plastered at the official buildings of the island, demonstrate the UAE's goal of controlling that strategic area (Al Jazeera, 2018) (Dogan-Akkas, 2021). This was possible due to the vacuum of central authority in Yemen and the disintegration of Yemen's national army after the 2011 Arab uprising. Moreover, the UAE focused its efforts on confronting Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State in Yemen, which had taken advantage of the chaos and civil war in the country to expand their influence. There appeared to be a shift in priorities, recommitting to both the coalition and the counterinsurgency against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, where more than 12 thousand UAE-supported troops participated in this effort (Juneau, 2020a).

In its fight against Al-Qaeda, the UAE brought to Yemen more than 400 Colombian fighters and mercenaries as the war in Yemen exposed the shortage of Emirati fighters. Such flexible attitude interpreted the measures and the factors of the UAE's actions in the war of Yemen, its willingness to use financial assets and resources to achieve objectives abroad, maximizing its military forces and tendency to use them when needed, and even getting use of foreign forces to reach its goals in conflict areas. The UAE appeared to be able to count on US support for countering terrorism and launching airstrikes against terrorists in the south of Yemen. Moreover, in January, the raid on an Al-Qaeda compound, which killed several civilians and marines by a joint unit of US and Emirati special forces, with Trump's focus on fighting against terrorism, represented controversially the level of US-Emirati cooperation, which may be the largest in the South of Yemen in the coming years (Ibish, 2017). Another controversial

issue in The UAE's relation and coordination with the US was its willingness to accept prisoners released from US military detention in Guantanamo and send them to the south of Yemen. In 2008, the USA released an Emirati citizen, followed by the release of five Yemenis in 2015 and 15 others in August 2016. This movement was to gain more power in the south of Yemen and attract several fighting ties and groups against Al-Qaeda. So, accepting the released Yemenis should be viewed as an attempt to maintain relations with the USA and strengthen the UAE-led military operations in Yemen (Ibish, 2017).

Additionally, the UAE had to contend with political Islamist groups in Yemen, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated al-Islah party. The UAE sees the MB and its affiliates as a danger to both its internal security and regional interests. Considering this, the UAE has concentrated on reducing or eradicating the presence of Al-Islah in southern Yemen and many provinces, including Hadramawt, Shabwah, and Lahij. Despite the fact that the Al-Islah party is a close ally of the Saudi-led coalition and an official member of the legitimate government, the UAE maintained a hostile attitude toward the party, including participating in many military clashes with its militia through its proxies. Even though cooperation with Islah was essential to the fight in the north, the UAE leadership was hesitant to do so. On two occasions, leading Islah leaders who had nothing to do with the Muslim Brotherhood were greeted by the then-Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zaid. However, no policy change, and the UAE's anti-Islah rhetoric intensified, particularly after the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt blockaded Qatar in 2017 (Brehony, 2020).

However, the UAE's foreign policy in Yemen has faced challenges and criticisms. In September 2019, the UAE announced plans to withdraw its forces from Yemen, arguing that the military operations had achieved their objectives. The UAE's leadership saw that the maximum influence and leverage the country could exert in Yemen had been reached, and a change in approach would be more beneficial for its interests. Also, they assessed the escalating costs of their intervention in the war in Yemen, which became unacceptable and unsustainable for the UAE both financially and politically. Without declaring the time and the number of this withdrawal, the UAE started to take its forces from central areas such as Marib, Hodeidah, and Shabwa.

On the other hand, the UAE continued its financial and military support to many southern militias, which led to political and institutional choices in the southern cities, especially Aden, to maintain its influence and control in the south. These actions in the south of Yemen are attributed to its regional ambitions. By the beginning of 2020, only hundreds of Emirati forces still stood in Yemen (Salisbury, 2020). The UAE viewed this shift from a war-first to a peace-first approach as a tactical, reasonable, and pragmatic pullback. The Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the Gulf state characterized it as a confidence-building strategy to encourage the Houthis and other fighters to pursue a peaceful resolution (Gargash, 2019).

The UAE's foreign policy in Yemen has evolved, shifting from an initial alignment with the Saudi-led coalition to a more independent and assertive approach focused on securing its strategic interests in the country's south.

3.2.2. Focus on Southern Yemen and Strategic Interests

While the UAE was part of the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen, it increasingly pursued its independent agenda in the country, which at times diverged from Saudi Arabia's priorities. The UAE's primary focus was establishing control over southern Yemen and strategically important trade routes and logistical hubs, such as the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, aligning with its broader geopolitical and economic interests (Krieg, 2024). The UAE continues to participate in Yemen indirectly even after deciding to withdraw its troops by the end of June 2019. In just five years, the UAE mobilized and gained control over several armed groups, with an estimated 90,000 fighters spread across multiple locations, receiving direct training and salaries, logistical support, and capacity-building services (Ramadhan et al., 2021).

The UAE formed the Security Belt forces in the south in 2015, both of which have challenged the legitimacy of President Hadi's government and sought to advance the UAE's vision of a semi-autonomous or independent southern Yemen. The Security Belt forces have fought against Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in southern Yemen but have also clashed with forces loyal to the Al-Islah party. The UAE has also developed deep ties with tribal leaders, local strongmen, and militia groups in southern Yemen, providing them with financial and military support in its effort to counter Houthi and

Islamist influence in the region. It also trained and equipped the Hadrami Elite forces in Hadramawt and the Shabwa Elite forces, which focused on liberating Al-Mukalla and Shabwa provinces from Al-Qaeda in 2016 (Ardemagni, 2016a). The UAE trained and financially supported the Giants Brigades, Abu Al-Abbas Brigades, the Guardians of the Republic, and the Tihama Resistance, which are Salafis and operate in Hodeidah and Taiz. Although these militias participated in counterterrorism operations supported by the United States against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, they also provided the UAE with the chance to place allies along the coast to seize control of Yemeni ports, oil and gas reserves, and export terminals. All these militia forces have two common things - they are trained and equipped by the UAE, and all are enemies of the Al-Islah party and affiliated groups on the ground (Yaghi, 2022).

In its endeavor to guarantee a say in the political future of Yemen and secure its interests in the country's southern and western port areas, the UAE has pursued an assertive and independent foreign policy course, at times diverging from the priorities of its Saudi ally. The formation of the Southern Transitional Council in 2017 by two UAE-supported figures - former governor of Aden Aidarous Al-Zubaidi and former minister of state and Salafi leader Hani bin Buraik - represents an attempt by the UAE to strengthen its influence and shape the political landscape in southern Yemen in a way that aligns with its regional ambitions (Brehony, 2020). It aimed at challenging the Hadi-led government and its member Al-Islah party in reaction to Hadi's decisions to marginalize UAE loyal forces in the south. In 2018, the Southern Transitional Council and the Security Belt forces briefly took control of Aden and other southern cities, clashing with Hadi's forces, Al-Islah affiliated groups, and army units until a power-sharing deal was reached. Similar clashes occurred in late 2021 in Shabwa province between UAE-backed and Al-Islah-aligned forces, signaling the insistence of the UAE and its proxies to weaken the Al-Islah party and maintain influence and control in the region (Yaghi, 2022).

Thus, the UAE has worked on building an interim administration in southern Yemen, which has further fractured the country and complicated the prospects for a unified political settlement (Krieg, 2024). Even though it decided to withdraw its troops from Yemen, the UAE continues to wield significant influence in the country through its support of local militia and proxy forces in the south. The Southern Transitional

Council and other Elite forces, backed by the UAE, have remained active in southern Yemen, undermining the authority of the Saudi-backed Hadi government. Such conflict within the anti-Houthis party serves the UAE's interests in controlling the port areas and maritime trade through securitizing the southern part of Yemen, even if it contradicts the coalition's main goals (Khalife, 2020). The significant shifts in the UAE's priorities and strategic policies reflect its willingness to adapt and evolve its approach to safeguard its broader regional interests and influence in Yemen. Geopolitically, fearing growing competition from Saudi Arabia, China, and Turkey for ports in the Horn of Africa, the UAE decided to concentrate more on Yemen, where there was less international rivalry. From a security perspective, the UAE remains focused on combating Islamic extremist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS and political Islamist groups like al-Islah, which it views as a direct threat to its interests. Economically, the UAE continues to see Yemen as a key geographic location for maritime trade and regional influence, facilitating its ability to project power across the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Horn of Africa. The UAE's approach towards the Houthis has shifted from direct military confrontation to a more pragmatic stance - reportedly engaging in back-channel negotiations and exploring potential deals with the rebels as it seeks a more sustainable solution for its interests in Yemen (Dogan-Akkas, 2021).

3.3. Saudi Arabia's Approach to Syria War: From Opposition Support to Pragmatism

Whereas Saudi Arabia's approach in Yemen was marked by direct military intervention, its policy towards the Syrian conflict underwent a gradual and pragmatic transformation. Initially, the Kingdom sought to persuade the Assad regime to cease violence against protesters and introduce fundamental reforms, maintain regional stability, and distance itself from Iran. However, Saudi Arabia later opted to play a crucial and assertive role within the anti-Assad coalition, aiming to shape the outcome of the Syrian civil war in line with its strategic interests. The Kingdom's policy towards the Syrian conflict underwent continuous, pragmatic adjustments, reflecting its evolving calculations and responses to shifting regional power dynamics. Initially, Saudi Arabia adopted a hardline stance, severing diplomatic ties and providing financial and military support to opposition factions seeking to oust the Assad regime.

However, over time, the Kingdom shifted towards a more gradual reengagement and recalibration of its approach as the regional landscape changed. This led to a strategy of containing the Assad regime through normalizing relations with the Syrian government and accepting it back into the Arab League.

3.3.1. Initial Stance Against Assad Regime and Support for Opposition Groups

The situation created in Syria following the outbreak of the Arab Spring was different from Yemen and other countries affected by the waves of popular uprisings. The Syrian case was very sensitive regarding its regional implications, especially with the prospect of a regime change and its ramifications for the balance of power in the region. For Saudi Arabia, the outbreak of the uprisings against the Assad regime in Syria represented both strategic, complicated challenges, given the potential strengthening of Iran's influence in the Levant and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated opposition groups, as well as an opportunity to weaken the Resistance Axis which the Kingdom viewed as a significant threat to its regional aspirations and security (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

In the initial stages of the popular uprising against the Assad regime in Syria, Saudi Arabia attempted to renew its previous policy from 2009 of engaging directly with the Assad regime. This involved offering financial and political support to the Assad regime to draw Syria into the Arab world and distance it away from Iran. The Kingdom's 'wedge strategy' towards Syria targeted two key objectives: undermining Iran's regional influence in the Arab world by driving a wedge between Syria and Iran and preventing the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups by preserving stability in the country (Mansour, 2021). However, the Assad regime was unconvinced and instead stepped up its violent crackdown on demonstrators. As a result, the Saudi leadership changed course and eventually began denouncing the regime's brutality and demanding substantive reforms. In collaboration with other regional allies like Turkey and Qatar, Saudi Arabia gradually increased its efforts to back the armed opposition against Assad as the Syrian crisis escalated, giving them significant financial and logistical support (Hokayem, 2014).

The Kingdom has reached a belief that the Assad regime's survival would strengthen the Resistance Axis comprising Iran, Hezbollah, and other Iran-aligned actors more, which Riyadh views as a significant threat to its regional influence and security. It also realized the opportunity to shape the outcome of the Syrian civil war to align with Saudi Arabia's broader regional interests and aspirations and curb Iranian influence. The failure of previous efforts to engage the Assad regime led Saudi Arabia to reshape its approach and has pursued three subsequent strategies, which are supporting the armed opposition, pressuring the international community to intervene, and seeking a political solution to the conflict without Assad's involvement (M. Darwich, 2019a). The Kingdom gradually increased its assertive policy in Syria, going beyond its traditional diplomatic initiatives to contain instability. The Kingdom took a more assertive stance, forcefully denouncing the Assad regime's violent crackdown on its people. It also exerted diplomatic and economic pressure by spearheading regional efforts to suspend Syria from the Arab League, pursuing UN sanctions, and imposing political and economic sanctions on the Assad regime (Blanga, 2017).

In November 2011, the Saudi Kingdom actively collaborated with the Arab League to present the Arab Peace Plan Initiative, which centered on a unity government and the transfer of authority from al-Assad to his deputy. However, the Assad regime violated the plans and continued its violent suppression of the opposition, and the Kingdom withdrew its representatives from the observer forces in Syria. Prince Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, accused in January 2012 the Assad regime of behaving dishonestly by refusing to carry out the Arab League's recommendation. Additionally, he stated that the Kingdom, along with Qatar, is demanding international intervention in Syria as follows: “We are calling on the international community to bear its responsibility, and that includes our brothers in Islamic states and our friends in Russia, China, Europe, and the United States.” The Kingdom also started publicly discussing the prospects of arming the opposition groups fighting the Assad regime, calling for political and material support for the Syrian opposition, and advocating the idea of supporting the military as a good idea (Blanga, 2017).

At this point, Saudi Arabia went beyond diplomacy and started providing significant financial and logistical support to various opposition groups, including the Free Syrian Army and other factions, to oust the Assad regime (Al-Rasheed, 2013). The Kingdom,

by adopting another type of wedging strategy known as the dealignment strategy, has sought to undermine Iran's regional influence by neutralizing its ally, the Assad regime, in Syria through military backing of the opposition. It was determined to get rid of the Assad regime militarily by supporting armed opposition and sidelining Iran and Hezbollah's stronghold in the Levant region (Mansour, 2021). Communication with the Syrian opposition highlighted Saudi Arabia's eagerness to arm the rebels, finance them, and provide them with political backing with the ultimate aim of removing the Assad regime.

Accordingly, throughout 2012 and 2013, The Kingdom provided the opposition armed groups with massive financial support and weaponry. It coordinated with Qatar and Türkiye to facilitate the flow of arms and funds to the Syrian opposition, especially the Free Syrian Army. The Free Syrian Army received the majority of its support in the hopes that it would be the backbone of a stable government following the Assad regime's downfall. The Kingdom only backed Free Syrian Army-affiliated and other secular organizations throughout this time. It also convinced the US to support the Syrian opposition with military training for the Free Syrian Army (M. Darwich, 2019a). The Kingdom facilitated the flow of significant resources, including funds, weapons, and training, to various Syrian opposition groups, notably the Free Syrian Army, through the Türkiye and Jordan. It allowed Syrian businessmen raising funds in the Gulf to be channeled to the armed opposition in Syria. Moreover, to promote defections from Assad's military, Riyadh resorted to paying salaries to the Free Syrian Army members (Mabon, 2023).

Politically, Saudi Arabia provided financial support to the Syrian National Coalition - the leading political opposition group - and later formed the National Coalition for Syria Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and pressured other allies to follow the same path. The newly appointed Saudi Intelligence Chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, had forged close ties with Syrian opposition figures and coordinated the support flow to them. He relied on his extensive regional and international connections to channel resources to the opposition forces in Syria. Also, he utilized personal ties and tribal connections to distribute military equipment and funds to rebels on the ground (M. Darwich, 2019a). Nevertheless, this process faced significant challenges due to the increasing number of Syrian forces and the rise of Islamist and Jihadist groups. More

importantly, the Kingdom was concerned about the rising power of the Muslim Brotherhood within the Syrian opposition, which was a significant threat to Saudi regional interests and its domestic stability. The support of the Muslim Brotherhood faction within the Syrian National Coalition by Qatar led to a rift between the two Gulf states. It also affected the cooperation within the Syrian military opposition and undermined its operations and cohesion (Blanga, 2017).

As the Muslim Brotherhood represented a dangerous rising Islamic force and a threat equal to the Assad Regime, the Kingdom sought to counter and marginalize its influence within the Syrian opposition. Despite its success in reducing the Muslim Brotherhood's power and influence in the Syrian National Coalition, the kingdom indirectly helped in weakening the cohesion and effectiveness of the armed Syrian opposition against the Assad forces. Consequently, it shifted its support to a Salafist group, Jaysh Al-Islam, or the Army of Islam, as a substitute for the Free Syrian Army. Jaysh Al-Islam separated from the Free Syrian Army and joined forces with other Islamist groups to establish the Islamic Front in November 2013, which also opposed ISIS. Meanwhile, Qatar first supported Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations like the Free Syrian Army's Liwa al-Tawhid. Later on, Qatar took action to back radicalized organizations like Jabhat Al-Nusrah (M. Darwich, 2019a). Saudi Arabia's backing for these groups comes from both direct assistance and armament of anti-Assad troops as well as individual donations made by Syrians to Salafi organizations and popular committees. The Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People is one of the primary beneficiaries of a Gulf donation. Salafi militias like Ahrar al-Sham have received millions of dollars in funding and humanitarian assistance from the organization, which has been used to purchase weapons and provide local support.

The focus on supporting Islamist groups, rather than secular factions, by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states highlighted a shift in their strategic calculus. It was a result of the rising power and influence of extremist Islamist groups like ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusrah. The shift towards backing Islamist groups instead of secular factions was an attempt by Saudi Arabia to counter the increasing strength of radical Islamists and gain more leverage over the Syrian opposition. Another important factor that affected the shift in Saudi Arabia's strategy was the weak and reluctant stance of the US and the Obama administration against the Assad regime, especially after the failure to act on

the declared "red line" against the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Al-Ghaota in 2013. This influenced Saudi Arabia to increasingly rely on its resources and work with Islamist factions to confront the Assad regime and Iran in Syria (Blanga, 2017).

However, due to international pressure and the proliferation of radical Jihadist groups, Saudi Arabia has gradually scaled back its support for extremist groups in Syria and returned to its old policy of supporting anti-Assad but moderate rebel factions within the Free Syrian Army. With the replacement of Bander bin Sultan with Mohammed bin Nayef, Saudi Arabia has also sought to exert more indirect influence on the Syrian opposition through its regional allies and external partners like Turkey and Qatar. Despite the rise of ISIS, the Saudi government remained equally concerned about the threat posed by the Iran-backed Assad regime and the influence of Iran and its Shia allies in the region. The Kingdom declared by its new Foreign Minister, Adel Al-Jubair, that the removal of Assad from power remained a priority for Saudi Arabia in Syria and even essential for defeating ISIS (Blanga, 2017).

The Russian intervention in September 2015, however, limited Saudi Arabia's capacity to arm and finance Syrian opposition groups and aid their advance in strategic cities like Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. The international component of Russian intervention changed the path of the Syrian war. It undermined the increasing levels of cooperation between Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey in their attempts to overthrow Assad (Quilliam, 2017).

3.3.2. Shift Towards Pragmatism Under New Saudi Leadership

The Russian intervention significantly influenced Saudi Arabia's change in foreign policy on the Syrian conflict. With Russian help, the Syrian army of the Assad administration was able to recapture key cities. It has taken over 70% of Syrian land, including the four major towns of Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, and Homs, and it has also secured the Syrian capital Damascus from any opposition forces. The Syrian army was on the verge of disintegrating before Moscow's intervention, but it managed to initiate offensive operations against the opposition forces (Mansour, 2021). Saudi Arabia's focus switched more and more to diplomatic initiatives and political talks for a

transition in Syria as the war's dynamics changed in favor of Assad and his supporters. Saudi Arabia's shift towards a more pragmatic approach to the Syrian conflict was characterized by several factors. First, the Kingdom recognized that its previous policy of arming and funding the Syrian opposition had failed to achieve its goal of removing Assad from power. Second, the Syrian opposition forces, especially the moderate Free Syrian Army, were unable to gain significant military advances against the Assad regime and its allies. On the contrary, they have been weakened due to the Russian intervention. Third, Saudi Arabia's potential to affect the outcome of the conflict was diminished when the Kingdom saw that the United States was no longer prepared to step in as a countermeasure to Russian efforts in Syria (Mansour, 2021). Consequently, Saudi Arabia adopted a more practical strategy by interacting with a larger spectrum of regional actors, including those who had previously opposed it, in an attempt to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict, even though it still saw the overthrow of Assad as a necessary condition for a political settlement.

This change in Saudi Arabia's Syria policy was also influenced by the 2015 rise of King Salman bin Abdulaziz, which shifted the country's leadership. Rather than concentrating on the ideological factors that shaped the previous foreign policy, the new Saudi leadership, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, adopted a more pragmatic and realist approach, emphasizing regional power dynamics and balances of power (Blanga, 2017). This shift represented a significant departure from Saudi Arabia's earlier efforts to undermine the Assad government by supporting opposition groups. It allowed for engagement with Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime in a bid for a political transition in Syria. The initial indication of this shift emerged in October 2016, when Bashar al-Assad mentioned in an interview that Saudi Arabia had proposed assistance to his government contingent on severing ties with Iran, Syria's main ally.

Saudi Arabia's new strategy was first indicated in August 2017, when a source within the Syrian political opposition disclosed that Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir had informed the opposition that Assad's withdrawal during the transition was not feasible. Consequently, the opposition was barred from participating in talks to find a solution in Syria unless they presented a 'new vision,' which represented a clear departure from their initial demand for the overthrow of the Assad government. In an

interview with the Times, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman confirmed that Assad will remain in power but should not permit the Iranians to act freely. He saw this as a tactic to exploit the tensions between Iran and Syria (Mansour, 2021).

A series of political and strategic events may have contributed to this shift, including the initiation of the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in Yemen, the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015, the rise of ISIS, the diplomatic isolation of Qatar in 2017, and the withdrawal of US troops from Syria under the Trump administration in 2019. The war on the Houthis in Yemen became a major priority for Saudi Arabia, which consumed significant resources and attention, reducing its financial capability to provide continued support to Syrian opposition groups, which became costly and less effective in achieving the goal of toppling Assad (M. Darwich, 2019a).

The Kingdom realized that it should align its policy towards Syria with the interests of other key global and regional actors, such as the US, Russia, and Iran, to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict, especially after the signing of the Iran nuclear deal. Moreover, the weakening Arab influence in Syria due to the Russian intervention, the changing Turkish priority towards containing the Kurds, and the rising Iranian influence in the region forced the Kingdom to adopt a more pragmatic and gradual approach to Syria. This was envisaged in the absence of any Arab state, including Saudi Arabia, in the peace talks for Syria brokered by Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Astana and Sochi in 2017 and 2018, respectively (Alamer, 2023).

The subsequent years showed the period of Saudi Arabia's deepening engagement with the Assad regime. The idea of normalizing relations with Damascus gained momentum, reflecting Saudi Arabia's efforts to balance against the growing Iranian influence in the region and improve regional stability. This marked a significant shift from its earlier position that had called for Assad's removal as a prerequisite for any political settlement in Syria. While Saudi Arabia no longer prioritized the removal of Assad from power, it sought to contain Iran's influence in Syria and the broader region through different channels of engagement with the Assad regime. However, it didn't rush into full normalization of relations with Damascus.

Since 2018, many Arab states, including the UAE, have moved to reestablish ties with the Assad government. Still, Saudi Arabia has remained more cautious and gradual in its approach, seeking to balance its interests and mitigate risks. It was not until the devastating earthquake, which hit Türkiye and Syria, that Saudi Arabia dispatched its first aid convoy to the regime-held areas of Syria in February 2023, marking a pragmatic move towards normalization of ties with Damascus. In the same month, Saudi foreign minister Faisal bin Farhan called for adopting a new approach to the Syrian crisis (Kardas & Aras, 2023). Later in April, formal visits by Saudi officials to Damascus and rapprochement with the Assad regime gained momentum. The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement was manifested in March 2023, when the two countries agreed to restore diplomatic relations, providing additional leverage for Saudi Arabia to further engage with the Assad regime and the broader regional dynamics (Ali, 2023). In May, Saudi Arabia led the effort to adopt the Jordanian proposal, which emphasized the gradual approach of normalization with the Assad regime and secured Syria's readmission to the Arab League after a 12-year suspension, reflecting Saudi Arabia's evolving and pragmatic policy towards the Syrian conflict (Alamer, 2023).

3.3.3. Engagement with Regional and International Actors

Saudi Arabia has sought to balance its interests and mitigate risks in its approach to the Syrian conflict by engaging with a range of regional and international actors. Since the start of the war, Saudi Arabia has supported various opposition groups in Syria, including the Free Syrian Army and Islamist factions, in cooperation with other regional powers like Turkey and Qatar. This was the case in Yemen as well, where the Kingdom initiated a military coalition against the Houthis, often in coordination with the UAE. However, it had a leading role in the coalition compared to its cooperative role in Syria. The Kingdom engaged with Jordan and Türkiye, particularly in the initial stages of the conflict, to coordinate support for the Syrian opposition. It coordinated with them to establish the operations command center in Amman and Adana to facilitate the flow of weapons and supplies to rebel groups.

Prince Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz, the then King's son and deputy foreign minister, visited Ankara and requested establishing a center near Adana, around 100 kilometers from the Turkish-Syrian border, to pass arms and communication equipment to the

opposition groups. His father, the then King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz, also visited Ankara in 2011 and offered support to the Turkish efforts to train and arm the Syrian opposition. He also pressed Jordan to facilitate the supply of arms and aid to opposition forces and help them reach Damascus from its territories (Blanga, 2017). Nevertheless, conflicts between Riyadh and Doha quickly arose concerning the preferred group for support, with Qatar and Turkey endorsing the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia opted for alternative factions (Mabon, 2023).

In its endeavor to mobilize international support against the Assad regime, Saudi Arabia leveraged its ties with the United States and relied on its regional leadership to push for greater Western involvement in Syria. Prince Bandar bin Sultan also made contacts with other international countries as part of the Saudis' anti-Assad campaign to persuade them to apply pressure on the Syrian government to ensure its overthrow. In 2013, Prince Bandar requested the White House to provide heavy armaments to the opposition forces, including anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles. He succeeded in that, and the US decided to arm and train Syrian opposition forces, with Saudi Arabia providing funds and logistical assistance (Mabon, 2023). Furthermore, the same year, Prince Bander sought to convince Putin to withdraw his support for Assad, offering him a monopoly on exporting natural gas to Europe, investment opportunities, and guaranteeing Russian interests in the eastern Mediterranean. All these efforts, however, did not materialize as Saudi Arabia failed to secure a firm US commitment to intervening directly against the Assad regime or to convince Russia to abandon its support for the Syrian government (Phillips, 2017).

The Kingdom played an essential role in fighting terrorism, and it was represented in the regional and international coalitions to combat ISIS in Iraq and Syria through intelligence sharing, logistical support, and the provision of funding and equipment. It was the first country to sign up to the US-led Global Coalition Against ISIS in 2014. It has contributed to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS by providing support and contributing to military operations against the terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. The then-Saudi foreign minister, Adel Al-Jubair, stated that Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf countries, is willing to deploy special ground forces in support of the US-led Global Coalition to combat ISIS in Syria (Boghardt, 2017). He also mentioned the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, formed in 2015, to coordinate

counterterrorism efforts among its member states. However, this coalition did not prove very effective in operations against ISIS or other terrorist groups, as the central countries related to the conflict, like Iran, Syria, and Iraq, did not join the coalition, and this was interpreted that its agenda was more driven by the Saudi's anti-Iran narrative rather than a genuine counter-terrorism initiative (Mabon, 2023).

3.4. UAE's Approach to Syria War: Cautious Engagement and Normalization Efforts

During the early stages of the Syrian conflict, the UAE adopted a more cautious approach than its assertive involvement in Yemen. The Emiratis' stance in Syria was shaped by pragmatic and strategic considerations, primarily driven by a desire to limit regional instability originating from the Arab Spring waves and to protect their economic and strategic interests in Syria. As a result, the UAE's involvement in the Syrian war was more limited in scope and scale compared to Saudi Arabia's efforts to support the armed opposition against the Assad regime, actively and publicly demanding the regime's overthrow. Moreover, the UAE's approach in Syria was influenced by its concerns about the rise of Islamist forces, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, which was perceived as a threat to its internal stability. Accordingly, the UAE engaged cautiously with different actors in the Syrian conflict, maintaining contact with the Assad regime while also providing some limited support to select opposition groups that were seen as moderates and aligned with Emirati interests. In short, the UAE's priorities in Syria were stability, containment of Iran's and Türkiye's influence, and combating terrorism rather than the overthrow of the Assad regime.

3.4.1. Cautious Engagement and Limited Involvement

While Saudi Arabia and Qatar adopted a more assertive stance and actively supported the armed opposition against the Assad regime, the UAE took an ambiguous attitude and limited approach to its involvement in the Syrian conflict. Unlike its military intervention in Yemen and a more aggressive foreign policy in Libya, the UAE avoided being involved directly in military operations in Syria. The UAE sought to influence the conflict dynamics through diplomatic outreach, humanitarian aid, and support for selected opposition groups aligned with their interests. But it also maintained lines of

communication with the Assad regime, in contrast to the anti-Assad positions of Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Daher, 2019).

The UAE's cautious engagement in Syria was driven by a desire to limit regional instability and preserve its economic and strategic interests. Before 2011, the UAE had developed strong relations with the Assad regime, especially after the Qatari agreement reached in Lebanon, which followed the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. The UAE was amongst the first Gulf countries to invest extensively in Syria, establishing a significant commercial presence across various sectors of the Syrian economy, including real estate, transportation, and trade. As the Arab Spring waves reached Syria, the UAE sought to maintain its political and economic ties with Syria, hoping to protect its investments and business interests from being affected (Daher, 2019). The UAE's initial position aligned with other Gulf countries in trying to convince the Assad regime to implement political reforms to address the grievances of the Syrian population. The UAE disagreed with the violent crackdown on anti-government protests and the growing militarization of the conflict. However, it still refrained from openly calling for the downfall of the Assad regime or actively supporting armed opposition groups. The UAE regional strategy was to contain the widespread protests across the region, including in Syria, by preventing the collapse of established authoritarian regimes.

The UAE remained cautious about the Syrian conflict following the initial revolt. However, it recognized the distinct nature of Syrian society, which includes a wide range of religions and sects, and the importance of the state's many regional and international partners. The UAE realized the conflict's various actors, including allies, friends, and individuals with opposing views. Within this situation, the UAE was in a challenging position when dealing with the uprisings in Syria. So, the UAE decided to align its policy with Saudi Arabia, calling for a political transition in Syria without demanding the removal of the Assad regime. In April 2011, the UAE foreign minister urged the Syrian regime to address the demands of peaceful demonstrators through reforms rather than repression (Almezaini, 2021). However, when the Assad regime's violence against its people intensified, the UAE joined its ally Saudi Arabia and other Arab states in condemning the crackdown of protestors, suspending Syria's membership in the Arab League in November 2011 and withdrawing its ambassador

from Damascus, although it was a late move compared to other Gulf States (Daher, 2019).

As the UAE had a minor role in its involvement in the Syrian conflict compared to the Saudi and Qatari roles, it deliberately acted within regional and international coalitions rather than pursuing a unilateral approach. In February 2012, the UAE joined the 'Friends of Syria' international alliance to oppose the Assad regime, which met in Tunis. In 2013, the UAE was one of the 'London 11' countries that met with the opposition's Syrian National Coalition in the British capital. However, in its relations with the political and military Syrian opposition, the UAE focused its support on specific factions seen as moderate and aligned with its interests, avoiding comprehensive support for the broader opposition movement. Specifically, the UAE provided limited logistical and financial aid to the Free Syrian Army and other select rebel groups, especially those opposing Muslim Brotherhood factions (Almezaini, 2021). The UAE relied on its relations with tribal leaders like Ahmed Jarba and Khaled Mahamid, who headed the Syrian National Coalition and some rebel factions, to channel its influence and support to the Syrian opposition. Moreover, the UAE focused on supporting opposition forces in the southern part of Syria, near the Jordanian border, in coordination with the CIA's Timber Sycamore covert program through the Military Operations Center based in Jordan. Like the case in Yemen, the UAE was responsible for supervising and training the forces south of Syria, which developed into the Southern Front coalition (Daher, 2019).

The UAE has allowed raising funds in its territory through reliable Syrian businessmen residing in the country to support specific Syrian opposition factions. It also provided humanitarian and relief assistance to opposition-held areas in northern Syria, particularly those controlled by factions aligned with its interests and the broader regional coalition. It was among the first countries to respond to Syria's humanitarian disaster. Between 2012 and 2015, the UAE gave up to \$600 million in aid to Syrian refugees. In 2013, the UAE sent over 65% of its humanitarian aid to Syria (Almezaini, 2021). However, since 2014, the UAE's humanitarian assistance to Syria has decreased as its focus has shifted toward the Yemen conflict. The UAE didn't limit its humanitarian assistance to the opposition-held areas. Still, it also provided some assistance to government-controlled areas to maintain channels of communication

with the regime and preserve its economic interests in Syria. The UAE offered humanitarian aid to Syria via UN agencies stationed in Damascus, collaborating closely with the Syrian government. Between 2012 and the beginning of 2019, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and UAE AID provided Syria with 977 million USD as foreign assistance (Daher, 2019).

The UAE pursued its more comprehensive regional policy, which envisaged defending authoritarian regimes, opposing democracy, and combating Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups as all ways to prevent extreme change. In Syria, and to the surprise of many, the Syrian embassy in Abu Dhabi was open throughout the conflict, and Assad's relatives were able to enter the UAE and reside there without facing any obstacles. Despite the international sanctions imposed on the Assad regime, the UAE continued to engage with Damascus, seeking to preserve its economic interests and leverage in the country. Several pro-Assad regime businessmen, like Assad's first cousin Rami Makhlouf and Samer Foz, continue to conduct business through local firms in the UAE with relative freedom. Emirati businesspeople with close ties to the UAE government maintained relations with Damascus even after Syria's uprising began. Some created new enterprises in Syria or opened branches of UAE-based companies there. In 2013, Abdul Jalil al-Blooki, a businessman with deep ties to the Abu Dhabi ruling family, founded a development and investment company in Syria. Moreover, many of these businessmen were financially supporting the Assad regime directly or indirectly for war efforts. Several companies were fined and blacklisted in 2018 by the US Treasury Department for providing financial support to the Assad government (Daher, 2019).

The practical shift in UAE policy during the Syrian war started in 2015 due to several regional and international factors. The UAE shifted its attention and resources more towards the war in Yemen, where it led a military intervention against the Houthi rebels and its allies. Also, it has focused its policy efforts on countering Türkiye's influence and its Islamist allies, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, in Syria and Libya. The UAE leaders were concerned about the rising influence of Turkey and Qatar in Syria and Libya, which were supporting the opposition factions with Islamist ideological backgrounds. The rise of ISIS and extremist Islamist groups has been a major driver for the UAE to cautiously engage with the Assad regime, as it shared the UAE's threat perception of such groups. Many reports stated that there was a strong coordination

between the UAE and the Assad regime in fighting against ISIS and other extremist groups, in which the UAE's aircraft were not attacked by Assad's forces while striking ISIS targets. Furthermore, the UAE saw stabilizing and restoring Assad's control in Syria as necessary to constrain the spread of Iranian influence and limit Türkiye's involvement (Arab Center, 2021).

More importantly, the Russian intervention in Syria and its military support to the Assad regime since 2015 has pushed the UAE to reform its policy towards Syria, accept the survival of the Assad regime, and, as a consequence, restore ties with Damascus. In this regard, the UAE has increased its diversification of security partners due to US changes in its foreign policy towards the Middle East and the Gulf. This diversification will enhance the UAE's chances of influencing Syria and strengthening its growing relationship with Russia. The UAE shares more common ground with Russia than any other Gulf Arab country. Despite officially opposing the Assad regime's retention of power, Abu Dhabi distinguishes itself from Saudi Arabia and Qatar by refusing to support armed Islamist opposition groups in Syria (Ramani, 2019). Thus, the UAE began to gradually shift its stance on Syria starting in 2015, moving towards a pragmatic policy aimed at restoring ties with the Assad regime and containing Turkish, Qatari, and Iranian influence in Syria.

3.4.2. Normalization Efforts with The Assad Regime

As the conflict in Syria persisted and the Assad regime consolidated its control over much of the country with support from Russia and Iran, the UAE's policy towards Syria underwent a significant transformation. The southern front, especially in Daraa and Qunaitra, was deliberately frozen with the mediation of the UAE in 2018 in coordination with the Syrian government and Russian forces. This move was seen as the UAE's attempt to facilitate the stabilization and consolidation of the Assad regime's control over southern Syria after the large-scale military offense of Russian and Syrian government forces against the opposition-held areas in the region. As a result, the opposition forces were pushed to surrender and reach a "local reconciliation agreement" with the Russian forces (Daher, 2019).

The UAE's efforts to normalize relations with the Assad regime gained momentum in late 2018 when it reopened its embassy in Damascus. The UAE celebrated its national day in Damascus, expressing hope for security and stability in the Syrian Arab Republic under President Bashar Al-Assad's leadership. The UAE's Chargé d'Affaires in Damascus stated that UAE-Syria relations are strong and solid. Syria's deputy foreign minister, Faisal Maqdad, supported the UAE's role in Syria's war against terrorism (Al-Qasemi, 2020). The UAE has been ahead of many countries in promoting stability, security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Syria as an independent Arab country. The UAE justified this move as necessary to reactivate the Arab role and presence in Syria and to counter the growing influence of regional adversaries like Turkey and Iran. The UAE's decision to restore ties with the Assad regime was driven by a combination of factors, including economic considerations, geopolitical calculations, and a desire to curb the growing influence of regional rivals. This move was taken before the decision to withdraw the UAE's troops from the Yemen war in 2019, which indicates a shift in its regional strategy. It is also claimed that the UAE pushed eastern Libya, which was under Khalifa Haftar's control, to reopen the Libyan embassy in Damascus and engage with Assad Regime, highlighting the UAE's ambition to bridge its allies in the region against regional rivals (Arab Center, 2021).

The UAE's pragmatism originated from its distinct perception and understanding of the region's security environment and its desire to hedge against risks and protect its vital interests. The UAE's shift towards normalization with Assad underscores its belief that the survival of the regime is now a foregone conclusion and that engaging with it is necessary to secure economic opportunities and enhance its regional influence. It adopted a more balanced approach to navigate the complexities of the Syrian conflict and the shifting regional power dynamics. In this regard, the UAE decided to normalize relations with the Assad regime as a way to counter Turkey's growing influence in northern Syria and beyond, as well as Iran's expansion in the country. Moreover, the UAE preferred to maintain a secular authoritarian regime in Syria rather than seeing the rise of Islamist groups, which is aligned with its ideological stance against the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional affiliates. Since 2011, the UAE has promoted secular regimes in the Arab world to prevent the spread of Islamist influences (Almezaini, 2021).

The UAE's normalization with the Assad regime can be primarily attributed to the strengthening relations between the UAE and Russia, who have become the key power brokers in Syria. The US's weakening stance, reduced involvement in the Middle East region, and the UAE's uncertainty about the reliability of the US as a security guarantor have pushed the UAE to diversify its partnerships and seek closer ties with Russia. The UAE sees Russia as a valuable partner in balancing regional power dynamics and countering the influence of Iran and Turkey in Syria. The UAE used the conflict in Syria to interact with Russia and influence its actions toward Turkey. Rivalry between Turkey and the UAE has exacerbated regional instability in the Middle East. The UAE's partnership with Russia has reduced the number of non-state actors fighting in Syria. Besides, the UAE views this partnership as a means to guarantee an essential role in Syria's reconstruction efforts and enhance its economic interests (Almezaini, 2021).

On October 20, 2021, a phone call between Mohammed bin Zayed and Bashar al-Assad led to an agreement for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah bin Zayed, to visit Damascus, signaling a peak in normalization between the two sides. Before this, the Syrian regime's Minister of Economy visited Dubai in response to an invitation to participate in Expo 2020 Dubai. The following year, President Assad visited the UAE for the first time since the war began. Assad visited again with his wife, Asma al-Assad, and they invited the UAE to the COP28 climate summit, which it will host at the end of the year (Daher, 2019). The UAE's leadership has pursued new official contacts with Damascus to secure a political role in a future Syria through different ways, including economic involvement in reconstruction projects. Although the UAE's normalization of ties with the Assad regime has provoked criticism from some regional and international actors, it paved the way for Arab states to gradually resume diplomatic relations with Syria and facilitate the return of Syria to the Arab League.

3.4.3. Economic and Strategic Considerations

Alongside its political normalization efforts, the UAE has also worked to rebuild economic ties with Syria. The economic relations between the UAE and Syria have been a key driver behind Abu Dhabi's policy shift. Emirati companies have been actively pursuing investment opportunities in Syria, particularly in the real estate and

infrastructure sectors. Both the UAE and Syria perceive considerable economic benefits from this cooperation. Specifically, the business community from both nations has been an essential driver in restoring this relationship. Emirati investors have always been attracted to the substantial financial returns of revitalizing Syria's economy during its post-conflict reconstruction period. The UAE's involvement with Syria started informally and was characterized as an economic collaboration. The Damascus trade expo provided an opportunity for enterprises to act as intermediaries. An Emirati team of 40 investors attended the Fair from August 28 to September 6, 2019. Due to the devastation in Syria, the nation requires partners to undertake rehabilitation projects valued at billions of dollars (Almezaini, 2021).

The UAE and Assad regime paid more attention to the economic aspect, which facilitated the work of Syrian companies and individuals, allowed them to practice transfer operations, and increased economic interactions between the two parties, the most influential of which was the establishment of a pavilion for the Assad regime's government at the "Dubai Expo." Several official delegations from various nations visited and met with them, implying that the exhibition enabled Syrians to arrange talks they would not have had in Damascus. There were also trips between businesses and ministers, and the Emirates became a destination for Assad regime ministers seeking to expand and develop contacts. Since mid-2018, the UAE has shown interest in luxury real estate opportunities in Syria, particularly the Marota City project in Damascus. In August 2018, Abdul Jalil al-Blooki, deputy chairman of Aafaq Islamic Finance and head of the Syrian Emirates Private Development and Investment Company LLC, expressed interest in investing in the Marota City development. In January 2019, a Damascus Cham Holding delegation, represented by its former Chief Executive Nassouh Nabulsi, visited the UAE to encourage investment and partnerships in various sectors, including real estate, meeting UAE Chambers of Commerce and Industry and local businessmen (Daher, 2019).

Regarding trade, even before normalization, the UAE remained one of Syria's most important trading partners. In 2017, the UAE was the seventh or eighth most significant market for Syrian exporters, with 44.5 million USD. The UAE's exports to Syria amounted to 968 million USD in the same year and 1.5 million USD in the next year. After 2018, trade relations expanded with the official restoration of diplomatic

relations and increased investment activities. The UAE is Syria's most prominent Arab trading partner and third in the world, accounting for 14% of Syria's foreign trade. The UAE's economic gains from Syria might be increased by the amount of its portion of the reconstruction pie, which President Assad estimates to be over \$400 billion, the same amount that the UN has estimated. By the end of 2022, it was evident that regime-affiliated businesspeople and Syrian companies operating in Syria might gain from the Emirates in terms of importing goods, particularly those restricted in the fields of technology and techniques. The UAE has also facilitated the activities of Syrian businesses wanting to relocate to and from the UAE and awarded many of them privileges for commercial and tourism work through golden residencies, all to reduce the regime's isolation and pressure. In the UAE, dozens of enterprises are owned by businessmen connected to the Assad regime (Daher, 2019).

Besides the economic interests, the UAE has strategic considerations in Syria that motivate its policy shift. The UAE is interested in having a gateway to the Mediterranean Sea and controlling maritime routes connecting the Persian Gulf and Asia with Europe. It is considered a significant piece in the UAE's vision to project power beyond its borders and become a regional trade, investment, and logistics hub. Syria represents a strategic location that can provide the UAE access to the Mediterranean and improve its regional influence. Syria's location in the Eastern Mediterranean is significant from this perspective because it is close to several vital locations for the Emirates, including the shores of eastern Libya, where it aspires to be present, the Suez Canal, southern Cyprus, which is investing in offshore oil fields, and Greece, its ally in confronting Turkey, and its opportunity to benefit from its offshore energy reserves (Al-Hawwas, 2021).

In this regard, Dubai Ports (DP World), a major global port operator, announced the creation of a 2,500 km transport corridor from Jebel Ali to the Nassib-Jaber border crossing between Jordan and Syria in January 2019. The corridor will involve collaboration between customs authorities and logistics providers in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon to improve the flow of goods. The first convoy of three Dubai-registered trucks completed the journey in six days, significantly improving from the average 24 days required before the border reopened. Furthermore, the Assad regime may mediate with its partner, Hezbollah, to aid the Emirates'

acquisition of port locations in Lebanon. The improving relations between the UAE and Iran could also serve as a means for the UAE to expand its influence in Syria and Lebanon and potentially gain access to strategic maritime locations in the region (Daher, 2019).

Abu Dhabi's growing connections with Moscow are another potential economic opportunity for the UAE. In June 2018, the UAE and Russia signed a Declaration of Strategic Partnership to improve bilateral, regional, and international discussion on topics of mutual political importance. In the Syrian instance, the UAE's current posture is more similar to Russia's than any other Gulf monarchy's, except Oman, in that it recognizes Bashar al-Assad as the rightful ruler of post-war Syria. Similarly, both Moscow and Abu Dhabi strongly condemn Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups in Syria and elsewhere. This alignment provides potential opportunities for the UAE to participate in Syrian reconstruction efforts and leverage its ties with Moscow to gain advantageous economic deals, infrastructure contracts, and future trade relations with the Assad regime (Daher, 2019).

3.5. The Involvement's Impact on Yemen, Syria, and Regional Balance of Power

The intervention of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen has significantly impacted the political landscape and regional dynamics of the poorest country in the Peninsula. Since the start of the war in 2015, Yemen has entered a period of chaos and fragmentation, with various local and regional actors contesting for power and influence. The state's failure has enabled the rise of new power centers, such as the Iran-backed Houthi movement, the UAE-supported Southern Transitional Council, and local jihadist groups, who have filled the vacuum left by the collapse of the central government. The war in Yemen has destroyed the fragile political and social fabric of the country, exacerbating pre-existing divisions and creating new ones. It is characterized as a complicated multi-dimensional conflict with shifting alliances and the involvement of domestic and foreign actors pursuing divergent interests and agendas (Clausen, 2018) (Dosari & George, 2020).

Yemen became like a collection of mini-states involved in a complex intraregional struggle rather than a divided nation because each region has its own internal politics,

leadership structure, and external supporters. Third parties, external parties with distinct and frequently divergent objectives, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, the United Kingdom, and the United States, contribute to the conflict's complexity and continuity (Salisbury, 2017).

With the weak role of the UN mediation and its distance from the fragmented political reality, the competing interests of the external parties and shifting alliances on the ground have undermined the prospects for a comprehensive political solution to the Yemeni crisis. Since 2017, internal power competition between alleged allies, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has outweighed the dispute at the national level. Both allies didn't formulate a coherent and agreed-upon strategy to address the complex challenges of conflict resolution and state-building in Yemen.

On the contrary, after the liberation of the southern governorates from the Houthis, the political and military competition between the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council and the Saudi-supported Hadi government over the control of the south had overshadowed the focus on pursuing the primary goal of the Arab Coalition which is defeating the Houthis, end their coup and restore the legitimate International Recognized Government, which led to the destabilization of the country and undermining the legitimacy of the Yemeni government and prospects for a political resolution of the conflict (Albasoos & Al Hinai, 2020).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's evolving policy approaches have significantly impacted the Syrian crisis. Both countries have influenced the dynamics in Syria, albeit their involvement and stances have changed during the conflict. Their early positions and subsequent shifts have shaped the war's course and Syria's political environment. Their appraisal of the Assad administration and their strategic considerations for distancing it from Iran have significantly impacted the country. Despite differences in Saudi Arabia and the UAE's activities, both countries have contributed to prolonging the conflict and hampered efforts to reach a diplomatic settlement. The two governments have used regional tensions and power dynamics to achieve their strategic goals in the Syrian theater, deepening internal differences and hindering long-term peace.

Along with their miscalculation of the Assad regime's resilience and its international and regional allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's diverse regional goals and shifting alliances have only added to the complexity of the Syrian conflict. As a result, Syria continues to deal with the complex consequences of its engagement in the catastrophic civil conflict (Daher, 2019). Furthermore, by providing financial and military support to opposition rebels, both states helped to empower extremist armed groups, the creation of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and the spread of violence throughout the area (Pierret, 2013). This split anti-Assad forces, preventing the formation of a coherent opposition capable of toppling the regime in the early stages of the conflict.

Regionally, the war in Yemen has become a theatre for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and had spillover effects on the geopolitics of the Gulf region and the broader Middle East. The conflict is seen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with both sides backing different local actors to advance their respective interests and influence in the country. Although the two rival states signed the China-brokered normalization agreement in March 2023, the conflict in Yemen remains a point of contention and a significant source of instability in the region. The threats from the Houthis on Saudi Arabia's southern border and the possibility of them obtaining sophisticated weapons from Iran have been a significant security concern for Riyadh. Also, the insecurity the Houthis created in the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea has threatened the flow of global trade and energy shipments, which are vital economic interests for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the international community as a whole (Clausen, 2022).

The long duration of the war has also strained the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, longstanding allies who, despite having a shared goal in Yemen, have pursued divergent and sometimes conflicting policies in the regions under their control. The two allied states could manage their differences in Yemen during the initial stages of the intervention. Still, the war's complexity and the emergence of local power centers have created friction between them. As the hope for achieving the Coalition goals evaded, both states have become increasingly preoccupied with local power struggles, protecting their respective strategic and economic interests and counter-balancing each other's influence in the south and East parts of Yemen, struggling to guarantee a firm foothold and leverage in any possible political

settlement. Thus, the fragmentation within the Arab Coalition, coupled with the regional and international lack of coordination and consensus on formulating a coherent strategy for the Yemeni conflict resolution, has significantly contributed to the perpetuation of the war and its implication on the broader geopolitics and security of the region (Poornima, 2024).



CHAPTER IV

CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE: ANALYZING SAUDI ARABIA AND UAE FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGIES

As was covered in the previous chapter, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have adopted different foreign policy approaches in the Yemen and Syria wars, despite their tight alliance and common goals following the Arab Spring. Their different perspectives on the threat, regime security concerns, and regional aspirations have all influenced these differing strategies. During the Arab Spring upheavals in the area, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates first allied to oppose the emergence of political Islam, symbolized by the Muslim Brotherhood. Subsequently, this partnership also included Iran's growing and infiltrating influence, which took advantage of the political and security void in the area as a significant danger to both Gulf states. However, due to the length of the hostilities and the slow change in Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's strategic goals and areas of concentration over time, the two nations have evolved their own unique strategies and taken different paths in the conflicts in Syria and Yemen. In addition to analyzing the main forces behind the convergence and divergence between the two Gulf nations, this chapter will look further at the foreign policy approaches taken by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the wars in Yemen and Syria. By altering and restricting their actions in reaction to the structural element or pressure—the shifting regional dynamics and balance of power in the Yemen and Syria conflicts—it will analyze these intervening variables that have influenced the foreign policy of the two nations. Additionally, it will examine how Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's foreign policies and strategic concerns in these regional wars have been indirectly influenced by external players, including the US, UK, and Russia. It will also examine the consequences and effects of these opposing viewpoints on the two Gulf nations' ties and the dynamics of the Saudi Emirati alliance going forward.

4.1. Similarities and Differences in Saudi Arabia and UAE's Approaches to The Wars in Yemen and Syria

This section of the research will look at the parallels and discrepancies between Saudi Arabia's and the United Arab Emirates' foreign policy approaches to the wars in Yemen and Syria. Both similarities and differences in the two Gulf nations' responses and strategies to these wars have resulted from the region's protracted crises over the past ten years, especially in Yemen and Syria, as well as from changing regional dynamics and objectives. Similar danger perceptions and the intention to restrain and counteract the spread of political Islam and Iranian influence in the area were the reasons for the parallels between Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's interventionist policies (Yetim & Telci, 2022). The continuous unrest and violence in Yemen and Syria were seen by both nations as a danger to their economic interests, regional clout, and national security. However, over time, their particular goals and techniques—which sprang from their shared security interests and similarities—have changed, leading to significant distinctions in their foreign policy approaches in the wars in Syria and Yemen (van Slooten, 2019).

4.1.1. Shared Interventionist Policies on Political Islam and Iran's Expanding Influence

Before 2011, relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE were not as strong and close as after the Arab Spring. The uprisings that swept across the Middle East and North Africa region in 2011 marked a turning point, as both Gulf monarchies became increasingly concerned about the rise of political Islam, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaeda, and Iran's expanding influence in the region. Recognizing the shared threat, Saudi Arabia and the UAE consolidated their alliance and coordinated their foreign policy approaches with unwavering determination to contain these challenges and ontological threats.

The interventionist policies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen and Syria were conducted within this alliance, which has a shared approach to regional security, and their initial actions in these conflicts had many similarities (Donelli, 2020). Both countries intervened militarily, either directly or through proxy forces, to support

incumbent regimes and prevent anti-status quo forces, who were perceived to be aligned with political Islam or Iran, from gaining power and influence (Parker, 2021). In both cases, Saudi Arabia and the UAE played active roles in shaping the political and security landscapes of the countries, starting with supporting the Saleh and Assad regimes against the popular uprisings, which have been led mainly by Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups, and later in using their military capabilities and diplomatic leverage to influence the course of the conflicts against the Houthis in Yemen and Assad regime in Syria, which are supported by Iran (JIBRIL, 2021). These similar policies reflected the two states' convergence in their threat perceptions and the strategies to address them, at least in the initial stages of the conflicts.

The perceived US unwillingness to support its traditional regional allies during the Arab Spring upheavals prompted Saudi Arabia and the UAE to adopt a more forceful and active stance. The goal was to control the outcomes of the uprisings in a way that would protect their own interests and regional power. The fall of US-backed authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia heightened Saudi and Emirati concerns about losing strategic partners, reinforcing their resolve to oppose the rise of political Islam and Iranian influence in the region. This pushed the two Gulf monarchies to collaborate closely and form a more comprehensive strategic partnership to fill the regional power vacuum created by US disengagement (Yossef, 2020). Furthermore, the United States' reluctance to defend both Gulf states against Houthi missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE contributed to their foreign policy alignment during this time. Furthermore, the 2015 Nuclear Deal between Iran and the P5+1 group, which removed sanctions on Iran and allowed the country to extend its regional influence, raised Saudi and Emirati fears about Iran's rising regional dominance and ambitions (Ahmadian, 2018).

Saudi Arabia has been involved in Yemen since the start of the popular protests, seeking a peaceful transition of power and a political settlement through the GCC effort because of its historical importance and geographic closeness. Saudi Arabia's initiatives inside the GCC coalition were backed by the UAE. However, the widespread perception of the threat led to Saudi-Emirati military intervention through the formation of the Saudi-led coalition to restore the internationally recognized government of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and thwart the Houthis' advances against the

government forces as the conflict intensified and turned into a civil war involving the Houthis' coup (Ziadah, 2019). By aiding the government in its fight against the Houthis, who were thought to have Iranian assistance, the Coalition also aimed to thwart what it saw as Iran's expanding influence and proxy operations in Yemen. As the Kingdom and the UAE collaborated closely to accomplish their common aims in Yemen, the first few years of the intervention demonstrated how their ambitions aligned. After driving the Houthis out of other key areas in the South, the military intervention, which was coordinated by the two Gulf states, was successful in keeping them from expanding their hold on Yemen and confined their territorial gains primarily to the country's north (Said, 2019). Preventing Iran's growth of influence in Yemen and along the Bab El-Mandeb strait, as well as safeguarding the vital sea lanes, ports, and islands that are essential to their economic and security interests, have also been top priorities for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Baabood, 2023).

Besides fighting against the Houthis, both states have enrolled in countering terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS in Yemen, demonstrating their shared priority to maintain security and stability in the region. Al-Qaeda has utilized the ongoing conflict in Yemen to expand its presence and activities, especially in southern cities like Al-Mukalla and Abyan. To thwart the group's resurgence, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have conducted military operations and counterterrorism efforts, particularly in the south, in cooperation with the Yemeni government forces (Sharp, 2015). The UAE played a significant role in liberating Al-Mukalla from AQAP's control in 2016 as part of these counterterrorism efforts, demonstrating the convergence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE's priorities in Yemen to combat extremist groups and maintain stability (Parker, 2021). In Abyan, the UAE-backed Giants Brigades and Saudi Arabia-supported President Hadi's forces have been responsible for confronting AQAP and ISIS terrorists, highlighting the collaborative nature of the Saudi-Emirati military campaign in the country. These joint actions against terrorist groups have been a crucial component of the two Gulf states' interventionist policies in Yemen. Another unifying factor between Saudi Arabia and the UAE's policies in Yemen has been their shared concern over the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islah party in Yemen. Both states have a shared interest in weakening the Islah party, which they view as a threat to their domestic stability due to its Islamist ideology and ties to the Muslim Brotherhood movement that the two Gulf monarchies have designated as a terrorist

organization. As a result, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have utilized the ongoing military campaign in Yemen to undermine the power and influence of the Islah party, a key component of the anti-Houthi coalition, both on the battleground and in the political landscape of Yemen (Poornima, 2024).

In Syria, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were initially united in their opposition to the Assad regime and support for various opposition forces, especially in the early years of the conflict. Both countries provided financial and material support to rebel groups fighting against them to counter the growing influence of Iran and Hezbollah, whom they saw as reinforcing the Assad regime. They have also engaged actively in international diplomatic efforts to find a political solution to the conflict and facilitate a transition of power away from the Assad family (Sottimano, 2018). Along with other Arab countries, they suspended Syria's membership in the Arab League in 2011. They imposed economic sanctions on the Assad regime as a punitive measure against it in response to its violent crackdown on civilian protesters. They played a significant role in forming the Syrian National Council and supporting the Free Syrian Army in the early stages of the conflict. However, they focused their support on secular factions of the opposition rather than Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, which they viewed as a potential threat to their domestic stability (Phillips, 2015). Unlike Qatar and Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were more cautious in embracing Islamist opposition groups due to their concerns over the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region. Their antagonism towards the Muslim Brotherhood was no less than their opposition to the Assad regime and its ally Iran (Lefèvre, 2013).

Moreover, the two Gulf states have actively participated in the international coalition against ISIS, which emerged as a significant threat in Syria and Iraq. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE contributed to the coalition's military operations against ISIS, with the former conducting airstrikes against the terrorist group's targets in Syria. At the same time, the latter provided aircraft and logistical support for the campaign, underscoring their shared commitment to combating the extremist threat in the region (Ardemagni, 2016b). They have also worked in close coordination with the United States to disrupt the terrorist group's financial networks and counter its propaganda across the region. The main reason for their active involvement in the anti-ISIS campaign was to prevent the group from making further territorial gains that could threaten regional stability

and their security interests. Also, they fear that the extremist ideology spread by ISIS and its activities could potentially inspire domestic radicalization and unrest, thereby posing a direct threat to the stability and legitimacy of their regimes (Binhuwaidin, 2015).

Following the fall of Aleppo to the Assad regime in 2016 and its control over two-thirds of Syrian territories, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have adopted a more pragmatic approach to the conflict. Their focus has shifted to limiting the influence of Iran and its proxies in Syria through diplomatic engagement and normalization efforts with the Assad regime. The two states have recognized that the Assad regime is likely to remain in power, at least shortly, and have adjusted their strategies to manage the conflict and mitigate its repercussions on regional security. Under the new leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a more pragmatic stance, engaging in back-channel communications with the Assad regime and even exploring avenues for normalizing ties. The UAE was quicker in taking gradual steps towards re-engaging with the Assad regime, breaking the Arab diplomatic isolation and playing a role in Syria's reconstruction efforts. These similar policy shifts reflect a convergence in Saudi and Emirati threat perceptions, as they have come to prioritize containing Iran's expanding influence in Syria over the continued rule of the Assad family. This convergence is also driven by their shared desire to prevent further instability and turmoil in the region, which could have detrimental consequences for both countries' domestic security and economic well-being.

4.1.2. Divergent Priorities and Tactical Preferences

Over time, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have taken different stances and objectives in their handling of the wars in Syria and Yemen, even though they agree on a number of important matters. Although both nations first joined the Saudi-led military alliance to fight the Houthi rebels in Yemen, their tactical inclinations and strategic goals have progressively changed. Saudi Arabia's strategy in Yemen has been mostly motivated by its aim to defend its southern border and counter Iran's regional influence by thwarting the Houthi takeover of Yemen and preserving an amicable government in Sana'a that serves Riyadh's interests. In addition to launching airstrikes and giving the

Yemeni government troops financial and logistical support, the Saudis have made significant investments in the military effort (SAUDI ARABIA AND THE YEMEN CONFLICT, 2017). Saudi Arabia has concentrated on the Houthi rebels' stronghold in northern Yemen to stem their progress and eventually reinstate President Abdu Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's internationally recognized administration. Saudi Arabia has continued to assist the internationally recognized government despite Hadi's administration's major obstacles and failures, including as the inability to secure a clear military triumph and the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the nation (Pradhan, 2020).

In contrast, the UAE has taken a more narrow and targeted approach in Yemen, focusing primarily on securing its interests in its southern regions. After pushing the Houthis out of Aden and driving them northward, the UAE has selectively supported local militias and separatist factions in southern Yemen, particularly the Southern Transitional Council, which aims to restore an independent South Yemeni state (Ardemagni, 2017). This has allowed the UAE to establish control over the strategically important southern ports and the Bab el-Mandeb strait, as well as to build a network of military bases and intelligence outposts in south Yemen and the Socotra archipelago, which it considers vital to its regional security and economic interests. However, the UAE's support for these southern separatist groups has repeatedly put it at odds with the internationally recognized Hadi government, leading to periodic clashes between their respective local allies (Krieg, 2023). This divergence was driven mainly by the UAE's concerns over the strong presence of the Islamist Al-Islah party within the Hadi government, which the UAE views as a threat due to the party's close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, the UAE has chosen to support southern factions and groups that are hostile to the Al-Islah party and its affiliated forces (Ardemagni, 2016).

Despite the Saudi leadership's growing hostility against the group in the area, Saudi Arabia supported Al-Islah, which is associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. As with the overthrown president Saleh, the Saudis wanted Al-Islah to support the Hadi government. Saleh departed in 2012 as a result of the Hashid tribal confederation in the north supporting al-Islah and the removal of officials like Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar. Since 2017, Mohammad bin Salman and Mohammed Al-Yadoumi, the leader of Al-Islah, have met often (Öztürk, 2023). The Emiratis have been fiercely opposed to the

Brotherhood since the Arab Spring because they are more idealistic than the pragmatic Saudis. The Emiratis tried to get Saleh to join the Saudi-UAE coalition and leave the Houthi camp in 2017. But this tactic was foiled when the Houthis killed Saleh. In 2012, the Emiratis turned to his son, Ahmed Ali Saleh, who was ambassador to the United Arab Emirates and resided in Abu Dhabi. The Emiratis' animosity for al-Islah and the Muslim Brotherhood was also shared by Ahmed Ali Saleh (Patrick, 2017).

As the war in Yemen continued and the Houthis proved more resilient and difficult to remove than initially anticipated, divisions within the anti-Houthi coalition began to emerge. The strategic priorities and operational tactics of Saudi Arabia and the UAE diverged increasingly over time, with the two allies pursuing distinct paths and sometimes even working at cross-purposes in their approach to the conflict. This was evident in the periodic clashes between the forces of the Hadi government and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council in southern Yemen, which threatened to open a new front in an already complex and multi-layered conflict (Al-Hamdani & Lackner, 2020). Realizing that its interests in the south, where the UAE was focused, were not being served, Saudi Arabia explored alternative approaches, including tentative engagement with the Houthi rebels in the north to find a political solution while shifting its focus to the south. The Kingdom also started to train local tribal forces and militias to counter the UAE-backed southern separatists to maintain influence in the south and avoid being sidelined by its Emirati ally's regional ambitions (Poornima, 2024).

By 2019, the divisions within the anti-Houthi coalition had become public, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE even competing for local allies in southern Yemen. The withdrawal of UAE forces from Yemen in 2019 further exacerbated this rift, leaving Saudi Arabia to bear the burden of the military campaign while facing growing domestic and international pressure to find a political settlement to the conflict. However, the UAE secured its control over the south and built up its military and economic presence in the region, paving the way for its future influence and leverage in any potential political settlement. Saudi Arabia's inability to transform Yemen dramatically can be attributed to its more "nontransformative" policy, which was driven by a material threat perception focused on countering the Houthi rebels in the north. In contrast, the UAE's "transformative" ambition to reshape the political

landscape in southern Yemen was driven by its regime security concerns and desire to counter Islamist influence (Parker, 2021).

Saudi Arabia's rising interest in the south and engagement with local players can be seen as an attempt to adapt its strategy and reclaim influence in a region critical to its security interests. The Kingdom has tried to reconcile the differences between the Hadi government and the Southern Transitional Council, exemplified by the Riyadh Agreement in 2019. Additionally, it has integrated both sides into a new power-sharing government under Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed in 2021. Furthermore, the Kingdom orchestrated the transition of Hadi's presidency to the newly formed Presidential Leadership Council in 2022, which included representatives from both northern and southern factions, as part of its efforts to navigate the complex political dynamics in Yemen and maintain its influence (Nasser, 2024). At the same time, the Kingdom has engaged in indirect talks with the Houthis to find a political solution to the conflict, coinciding with the ceasefire agreement reached in 2022 between the internationally recognized government and the Houthis (Radman, 2022).

With this relative ceasefire, especially along its southern borders, the Kingdom has focused on reinforcing the Presidential Leadership Council's control over the key regions of south Yemen to counter the UAE's influence and secure its strategic interests. It has supported the formation of the National Shield Forces, under the direct command of the Council's President Al-Alimi, to address the security challenges posed by the UAE-backed factions in the south and consolidate the central government's authority in the region. Through these efforts, the Kingdom has managed to contend with Emirati presence and influence in strategic areas like The Ghaidha Port, the Port of Aden, the Socotra archipelago, and the Bab al-Mandab Strait (Salisbury, 2024).

Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE initially aligned in their opposition to the Assad regime in the Syrian conflict, their strategic approaches have diverged over time. Since the start of the Syrian war, the Kingdom has played a significant role in supporting various opposition groups, including both moderate and more radical factions, intending to weaken and ultimately topple the Assad regime (Darwich, 2017). The Kingdom was more invested in ousting the Assad regime than the UAE, which adopted a more cautious and selective approach to supporting the Syrian opposition groups.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia intensified its military support for Islamist rebel groups such as Jaysh Al-Islam and Ahrar Al-Sham, which were seen as more capable of confronting the Assad regime and extremist jihadist forces. However, these groups also had ideological leanings that aligned more closely with Saudi Arabia's regional aspirations and desired influence in post-conflict Syria, even if they conflicted with the UAE's more pragmatic approach (Khatib, 2019). This was also a response to the US reluctance to intervene directly against the Assad regime after the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta in 2013. The Kingdom portrayed its involvement in Syria as part of its broader regional strategy to counter Iranian influence and assert its leadership in the Arab world, seeking to enhance its role and influence in the conflict (Darwich, 2017). At the same time, the UAE adopted a more cautious stance, mindful of the potential rise of Islamist forces in the vacuum left by the Assad regime's potential downfall (Salisbury, 2020).

Despite the tense relations between Saudi Arabia on one side and Qatar and Türkiye on the other regarding their support for different Syrian opposition groups, the Kingdom still coordinated to some extent with them in supporting these groups during the early stages of the conflict. It sought to shape the direction of the opposition and manage the dynamic between the various factions according to its interests by exerting influence over the Syrian National Council, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and the Free Syrian Army. For instance, Saudi Arabia backed its ally Ahmed Al-Jarba's leadership of the Syrian National Coalition, viewing him as a counterweight to the Muslim Brotherhood elements within the opposition (Sayigh, 2014). In contrast, the UAE adopted a more cautious and selective approach, focused on securing its interests in Syria rather than heavily investing in the effort to overthrow the Assad regime. The UAE engaged in limited direct military support and instead concentrated on humanitarian and stabilization efforts in rebel-held areas, particularly in the south. The UAE was careful of the opposition it supported being dominated by Islamist groups, as this could potentially threaten its own regime security and regional interests. Additionally, the UAE maintained communication channels with the Assad regime, driven by its pragmatic and transactional approach, in contrast with Saudi Arabia's more confrontational stance (Kirmanj & Tofik, 2023).

The UAE pursued its strategic approach to counter the influence of Turkey and Qatar in northern Syria, given their alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. For the UAE, the resurgence of Brotherhood-affiliated groups threatened its security and regional standing. To address this, the UAE carefully calibrated its support for Syrian opposition factions, backing those that could serve as a counterweight to Turkish-backed forces and Islamist groups. It funded and equipped the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, as well as other local Arab militias in northern and eastern Syria, allowing it to expand its influence in these areas and limit the leverage of its rivals, Turkey and Qatar (Ramani, 2019). In addition, the UAE provided funding and military support to specific rebel groups within the Southern Front, such as Jaysh Al-Yarmouk, to strengthen its position and maintain influence in southern Syria, where it hoped to prevent the resurgence of Islamist forces and consolidate its regional interests.

Moreover, the UAE did not condemn Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 and even collaborated with Moscow on specific initiatives. The UAE saw this as an opportunity to curtail the influence of Turkey, Qatar, and Islamist groups. In December 2018, the UAE reopened its embassy and reestablished diplomatic relations with Syria, likely in coordination with Russia. This effort aimed to strengthen the secular Assad regime against radical Islamist forces, divert attention away from Iran and create opportunities for Russian and Emirati corporations to contribute to the country's reconstruction (Daher, 2019).

In contrast, Saudi Arabia has maintained its opposition to the Assad regime and has been more vocal in condemning Russian military intervention in Syria. The Kingdom has continued to provide limited support to Syrian opposition groups, enhancing its cooperation with Türkiye and Qatar, especially in the northwest region, in response to the expanding Russian involvement (Blanga, 2017). However, Saudi Arabia's ability to shape the course of events in Syria has diminished over time as other regional and international actors, such as Turkey, Iran, and Russia, have become more directly involved in the conflict. The Syrian opposition has become increasingly fragmented and reliant on its external sponsors, reducing the Kingdom's relative influence and leverage in the conflict. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has sought to find common ground with Russia for a political settlement in Syria, despite their differences, to secure its regional interests and limit Iran's influence. Critical elements of Saudi

Arabia's interaction with Russia in the Syrian war include supporting the territorial integrity of Syria, fighting extremist groups, efforts to unify the Syrian opposition factions, and weakening the Qatari-Turkish influence (Cengiz, 2021). Unlike the UAE, Saudi Arabia has maintained its principled opposition to the Assad regime, rooted in historical animosity and ideological incompatibility, and was, therefore, more reluctant to engage directly with Damascus. It was not until the gradual normalization of relations between Arab states and the Assad regime, as well as the rapprochement between the Kingdom and Iran, that Saudi Arabia began to explore more cautious steps towards gradually normalizing its relations with the Assad regime and participating in regional summits where he was also present. This shift was driven by changing regional dynamics and a pragmatic reassessment of Saudi Arabia's interests (Kardas & Aras, 2023).

4.2. Factors Influencing Policy Convergence and Divergence: Threat Perceptions, Leadership Style, and Alliances

The foreign policy behaviors of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemen and Syria conflicts have been shaped by several key intervening factors, including distinct threat perceptions, regime security concerns, and shifting regional alliances. These factors helped to explain both states' responses to the structural pressure of the regional power dynamics and evolving conflicts in Yemen and Syria. These factors also influence how Saudi Arabia and the UAE have aligned or diverged in their policies towards the Yemen and Syria wars as they grappled with the complex regional dynamics and their national interests.

4.2.1. Threat Perceptions and Regime Security Calculations

The threat perceptions and regime security concerns of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have played a significant role in their separate engagements in the Yemen and Syria crises. The Arab Uprisings caused uprisings and civil conflicts that had a severe negative impact on the two Gulf kingdoms. The toppling of governments and the installation of new ones with alternative ideologies is one effect of the Arab Spring. Massive protests that toppled rulers left the Middle East in ruins by 2011. Since then, the two Gulf nations' foreign and security policies, as well as their assessments

of threats, have been dominated by stability and regime survival. Even while the stability and regime survival criterion inside the status quo-oriented Arab Gulf monarchies have existed since the state's inception, the uprisings brought attention to the importance of the regimes' security rather than the states. This is because the regimes' views of foreign dangers were linked to preexisting domestic threat perceptions, which were heightened by the Arab Spring. The regime security calculations and threat assessments of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have played a pivotal role in formulating their policies in Yemen and Syria, leading to both parallels and divergences in their approaches.

Because of their ties to Iran and their capacity to use drones and missiles to strike Saudi infrastructure, Saudi Arabia, led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has described the Houthis in Yemen as an existential danger to the security of the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia's operation in Yemen, which sought to overthrow the Houthis militarily and impose a government supportive to Riyadh's interests, was motivated by this view.

By directly intervening militarily against the Houthis, who Iran allegedly supports, Saudi Arabia sought to quell the Yemeni revolt and preserve its support for the Yemeni government. This action was taken to stop the Houthis from bringing Yemen under Iranian control, which Riyadh views as a danger to its regional interests and internal security (Young, 2015).

The Houthis have embarrassed the Saudi army and taken hostages during many border-penetrating operations in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has maintained the lengthy border and avoided extensive ground operations despite this. With high-trajectory fire aimed against towns, cities, airports, oil infrastructure, and government symbols, the primary danger from the Yemeni border is aerial. The Houthis also strike oil tankers in the Red Sea region and vessels near Jeddah and Yanbu ports. Despite these threats, Saudi Arabia has managed to maintain its long border and prevent large-scale ground operations (Guzansky & Barak, 2021).

Iran exploited protests in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen to expand its influence. After 2011, the Saudi regime felt encircled by Iranian encroachment and turned to hyper-securitization, aiming to regain control and counter the Arab Spring.

Iran is the primary threat to Saudi Arabia, with the two countries engaging in conflict for years. Geopolitical tensions in the Middle East are partly fueled by a regional Saudi-Iranian rivalry, where each state supports allied actors and non-state proxy groups (L. G. Cerioli, 2018). The motivations behind this rivalry and patron-client relationships vary, with the standard narrative being a sectarian conflict rooted in a centuries-old divide between Sunnis and Shias. This religious and ideological conflict overlaps with more concrete security and geopolitical considerations, such as the balance of regional power, influence, and resource access. This was the case in both Yemen and Syria. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards and intervention in both countries was driven by the perceived Iranian threat and a desire to counter Iran's expanding regional influence (Mirza et al., 2021).

Although the UAE views Iranian influence in Yemen as a threat as well, its goals are very different. The UAE's strategic goals in the maritime domain and its ideological opposition to political Islam, especially groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, influence its foreign policy in Yemen. Compared to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and other Islamist organizations, which it sees as existential threats to its secular, authoritarian system of government, Abu Dhabi sees the Houthis as less of an immediate threat. Due to this ideological orientation, the UAE strongly emphasizes maritime security and counterterrorism operations, especially in essential trading lanes in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Steinberg, 2020). The Southern Transitional Council, a separatist organization aiming to create an independent South Yemen, has received backing from the UAE as part of this campaign. With this support, the UAE can maintain its influence over crucial maritime trade routes and exercise control over key ports like Aden. This is part of a larger UAE plan to secure regional interests and oppose Iranian influence, especially in critical maritime routes like the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The UAE believes that Iran's influence directly threatens its security and economic interests. Hence, it must take aggressive measures to lessen this threat (Shelkovnikov, 2023).

The UAE is concerned by Iran's ambitions to control the Middle East, although not as much as it is about the Muslim Brotherhood doctrine. The UAE has traditionally relied on the US military for security against this opponent, but the Emirati view the US as less loyal than it previously was. To address this, the UAE has vowed to become "the

little Sparta that could," less reliant on US military protection, more self-sufficient in security, more diverse in external connections, more entrepreneurial, and more proactive in preserving and advancing its strategic objectives. In recent years, the rising idea that it can no longer rely on US support has forced the Emirates to strike a careful balance with its adversaries and partners. The UAE backed Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran when the US withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 at the UAE's request (Hiltermann, 2021).

In Syria, Saudi Arabia and the UAE initially joined forces to oppose the Assad regime because they saw it as a vital part of Iran's regional power. Saudi Arabia, in particular, supported opposition groups that wanted to overthrow Assad because it regarded the Syrian conflict as a chance to erode Iran's strategic position. A more significant attempt to limit the so-called "Shia Crescent," a network of Iranian-aligned governments and non-state entities extending from Iraq to Lebanon, including Riyadh's support of anti-Assad groups (Blanga, 2017). Saudi Arabia's aim to strengthen Sunni influence in the area and offset the ideological attractiveness of Shiism was also demonstrated by its assistance to opposition forces in Syria.

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The UAE also opposed Assad in the early stages of the Syrian crisis, but it has now adopted a more pragmatic approach. Abu Dhabi, which views stabilizing Syria under Assad as a crucial step in limiting Islamist extremism and preventing more instability in the region, has progressively shifted its focus from toppling the incumbent government. The Assad regime is viewed by the UAE as a potential line of defense against groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Muslim Brotherhood that pose a direct

danger to Emirati security. The UAE has re-engaged diplomatically with Damascus because of this recalibration, demonstrating a willingness to prioritize stability over ideological disagreement (Kirmanj & Tofik, 2023).

Though at varying rates, the recent efforts by both nations to normalize relations with Syria show how their perceptions of the threat have changed. The UAE has taken a more aggressive approach to normalization, reopening its embassy in Damascus in 2018 and pursuing political and security reconciliation. UAE's larger goal of exploring economic possibilities in post-war reconstruction and strengthening ruling regimes is reflected in this. Saudi Arabia has taken a more measured approach to normalization, having concerns about the ramifications of such actions in the absence of tangible measures to lessen Iranian influence in Syria (Borck, 2021). Though recent diplomatic engagement indicates a reevaluation of how best to further its interests in Syria, the kingdom's stance reflects its ongoing concern over Iranian meddling. This change reflects an increasing understanding that isolation has not produced the desired results, resulting in a more sophisticated strategy that balances practical engagement and containing Iranian influence.

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Their regime security calculations are directly related to the differences in the perception of threats in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. For Saudi Arabia, preserving

Yemen's territorial integrity and averting the rise of an adversarial or unstable neighbor is closely related to safeguarding regime security. Saudi sovereignty and internal security are seen as directly threatened by the possibility of a divided Yemen, with separatist movements in the south and the Houthis ruling the north (Parker, 2021). To restore Yemen's central government and limit the Houthis' power, Riyadh has launched a military operation. However, the UAE's strategy for regime security in Yemen is more concerned with establishing circumstances that serve its interests than maintaining Yemen's unity. UAE's backing of the Southern Transitional Council is indicative of this. By giving it more authority, the UAE hopes to take command of essential ports and shipping lanes in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, protecting its supply networks and commerce (Parker, 2021).

Ultimately, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE have cooperated extensively on regional issues, their different threat perceptions, regime security concerns, and strategic goals have resulted in divergent policies in Yemen and Syria. The security considerations of each government are strongly linked to the differences in the threat assessments of both states. The ability of Saudi Arabia to preserve its territorial integrity and stop regional crises from escalating into its boundaries is closely linked to regime security. The Kingdom is especially vulnerable to the possibility of Iranian-sponsored uprisings or disturbances because of its sizable and diversified population, which includes a sizable Shia minority concentrated in its oil-rich Eastern Province (Jibril, 2021). Therefore, the necessity to protect its internal stability and project power against alleged external dangers is what motivates Riyadh's activities in Yemen and Syria. The UAE's ideological conflict with political Islam and its attempts to establish itself as a regional leader in strategic and economic matters constitute regime security for the country. The UAE's actions in Syria and Yemen are part of a larger plan to quell Islamist forces that might threaten its authoritarian, secular system of government. Abu Dhabi's goal to become a significant force in international trade and logistics is further demonstrated by its emphasis on protecting marine trade routes and investing in essential ports (Kirmanj & Tofik, 2023). The UAE's willingness to deviate from Saudi Arabia's strategy in Yemen and its practical cooperation with Assad in Syria can be explained by these aims.

4.2.2. Leadership Styles and State-Society Relationship

The leadership styles and state-society relations in Saudi Arabia and the UAE are critical factors in understanding how these Gulf states create and implement foreign policy, particularly in light of the Yemen and Syria wars. Both countries have concentrated power systems that centralize decision-making among their ruling elites, allowing for swift policy changes and strategic interventions. These factors, combined with continuing governance changes and the changing structure of state-society interactions, considerably influence their responses to these two complex conflicts (Ehteshami, 2018).

Previously, Saudi foreign policies reflected the King's views and judgments. Following the Arab Spring, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz prioritized establishing a coalition of monarchies to mitigate the impact of the Arab Spring and Iran's disturbing policies. During King Abdullah's reign, Saudi interventionist efforts were limited to supporting armed organizations in Syria and sending troops to Bahrain. After 2015, King Salman delegated foreign policy choices to his then Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, known for his assertiveness and rushness. Thus, the Crown Prince's goals heavily influence Saudi foreign policy. In the UAE, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed plays a significant role in shaping the UAE's foreign policy. Institutionalization is challenging since foreign policy decisions are influenced by individual views and preferences rather than institutions with diverse visions (Ragap, 2017).

Under King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has exhibited a more assertive and risk-taking leadership approach, embodying a transformative foreign policy. Mohammed Bin Salman has transformed Saudi Arabia's traditional government style, moving it away from a consensus-driven monarchy and toward a highly centralized organization under his supervision. Historically, Saudi Arabia's decision-making was based on a collective approach, with senior princes and institutions such as the Council of Ministers playing key roles. Conversely, Mohammed Bin Salman has consolidated power by marginalizing opposing groups within the royal family, diminishing the influence of conventional elites, and confining authority to a tiny band of advisors who support him (Davidson, 2021). This centralization enables him to make significant and unilateral foreign policy decisions,

such as the military intervention in Yemen. His leadership style stresses firmness and quick action, reflecting his goal of converting Saudi Arabia into a regional powerhouse. His leadership style stresses swift, decisive action, as demonstrated by the involvement in Yemen, which he launched shortly after becoming Minister of Defense in 2015. This military campaign reflects his vision of a strong and aggressive Saudi Arabia capable of opposing Iranian influence while also securing its borders. However, this concentration of authority increases the risks of policy mistakes as decision-making becomes less deliberate and more dependent on his judgment and personal advisors (Lima, 2023).

Mohammed Bin Salman's consolidation of power has simplified decision-making by diminishing the role of traditional power centers such as the clergy and tribal elites. Establishing new entities, such as the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA), has enabled the Crown Prince to bypass bureaucratic obstacles and directly oversee critical policy projects (Dazi-Héni, 2021). These reforms have permitted swift responses to global crises, such as the operation in Yemen. However, the suppression of dissenting voices and the concentration of power within the Crown Prince's inner circle have sparked worries about the absence of institutional checks and balances. This centralized decision-making paradigm leaves Saudi foreign policy heavily reliant on the Crown Prince's vision, raising the stakes for his leadership style (Cochran, 2019).

Mohammed Bin Zayed's leadership style in the UAE follows centralized decision-making, although it is more collaborative and technocratic. The then Crown Prince has concentrated power in his hands while taking a unique approach to national identity creation. Since its inception in 1971, the UAE has grown from a flexible tribal hierarchy to a more centralized state under Mohammed Bin Zayed's leadership. His strategy focuses on developing a cohesive Emirati identity while centralizing authority in Abu Dhabi, effectively limiting the autonomy of the other emirates (Salisbury, 2020). Under his leadership, the UAE has taken a strategic, long-term approach to foreign policy, utilizing its economic and military resources to increase regional influence. Mohammed Bin Zayed's approach is characterized by meticulous planning and reliance on professional advice, with foreign policy frequently determined by specialized agencies and experts. This deliberate approach differs from Mohammed

Bin Salman's more decisive and assertive manner, allowing the UAE to pursue nuanced policies such as selective intervention in Yemen and Syria. While less outwardly dictatorial than Saudi Arabia's, the UAE's centralized decision-making structure remains centered on Mohammed Bin Zayed's ideology, ensuring high coherence in its foreign policy aims (Salisbury, 2020).

Both leaders have used a new sort of state-sponsored nationalism as the foundation of their reign. This top-down nationalism is used as an authoritarian tactic to reorganize state-society ties while keeping complete control. Both presidents see the achievement of these nationalist agendas as existential, which has a direct impact on their domestic and foreign policies (van Slooten, 2019). However, regarding the Yemen and Syria wars, their leadership styles have contributed to policy convergence and divergence in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While both leaders are committed to fighting Iranian influence and combating extremism, their approaches and priorities differ dramatically. Mohammed Bin Salman's aggressive pursuit of military solutions in Yemen has occasionally contrasted with Mohammed Bin Zayed's emphasis on strategic advantages and localized influence, causing friction within the Saudi-led coalition (Khalife, 2020). Similarly, in Syria, the UAE was more pragmatic than Saudi Arabia in adapting its policy and normalizing ties with the Assad regime faster, indicating opposing views on the costs and rewards of long-term stability against ideological struggle (Steinberg, 2020).

The transformation of state-society relationships under both leaders involves intense repression of dissent and ambitious modernization initiatives. Their leadership styles reflect a delicate balance between maintaining authoritarian control and projecting themselves as modernizing forces. This approach has influenced their willingness to intervene in regional conflicts as they seek to utilize these interventions to solidify their domestic power, regional influence, and nationalist narratives (Davidson, 2021). The state-society relationship in Saudi Arabia is based on a social contract in which the monarchy provides economic rewards and security in exchange for political obedience. This connection has typically restricted public political participation, allowing Saudi authorities to pursue foreign policy goals with little internal restraints. However, Mohammed Bin Salman's domestic reforms under the Vision 2030 plan have attempted to modify this relationship by diversifying the economy, lowering

dependency on oil earnings, and instilling a feeling of national pride. These reforms have increased Mohammed Bin Salman's credibility among younger Saudis, allowing him to make daring foreign policy decisions such as the Yemen intervention. However, the ongoing conflict in Yemen, with its humanitarian and financial implications, has begun to strain public opinion, raising concerns about the viability of this approach (Lima, 2023).

On the other hand, the UAE's state-society relationship is characterized by a more technocratic and participative model, with Emirati citizens enjoying generous social welfare benefits in exchange for political acquiescence, although within the framework of an authoritarian regime. The Emirati leadership has fostered a sense of national pride and solidarity via economic progress, technological innovation, and international diplomacy. This relationship gives the UAE a high level of legitimacy and public support for its foreign policy, frequently presented as an extension of its domestic achievements (Ketbi, 2020). The Mohammed Bin Zayed's emphasis on promoting stability and countering extremism resonates with Emirati citizens, who see these policies as critical to their country's security and development. This convergence between the state and society has enabled the UAE to take a nuanced and adaptable approach to regional problems, such as its operations in Yemen and Syria.

The UAE's decision-making processes under Mohammed Bin Zayed have similarly been restructured to enhance efficiency and strategic coherence. Unlike Saudi Arabia, the UAE's reforms emphasize technocratic governance and institutional collaboration. Specialized agencies, such as the Emirates Diplomatic Academy and the Abu Dhabi Mohammed Bin Zayed's Court, play key roles in shaping foreign policy, ensuring that decisions are informed by expert analysis and long-term planning (Mason, 2024). These reforms reflect Mohammed Bin Zayed's leadership style, which values expertise and precision over impulsive action. The UAE's pragmatic approach to engaging with regional actors, including its nuanced policies in Yemen and Syria, is a product of this institutionalized and strategic decision-making process (Ketbi, 2020).

4.2.3. Economic Interests and Diversification Efforts

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's economic interests and diversification efforts have a significant impact on their foreign policies, particularly in war zones such as Yemen and Syria. These interests influence the resources each state devotes to such conflicts and affect the underlying purpose of their interventions, reflecting greater economic ambitions linked to national development plans. Both countries are shifting from oil-based economies to more diverse, sustainable ones, and their policies in Yemen and Syria are inextricably related to these efforts. Yemen's strategic location, controlling access to the critical maritime corridors of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which are vital for global trade and energy transport, makes it an important economic consideration for Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Both states' economic interests in Yemen are centered on marine routes and essential ports. The UAE has implemented a comprehensive plan that combines commercial and military aims, particularly in southern Yemen. They have invested significantly in essential infrastructure, such as ports in Aden, Mukalla, and Shihr, as well as energy facilities in Balhaf and oil fields in Masila (Ardemagni, 2018). Saudi Arabia's economic interests in Yemen are primarily focused on energy security. They have pursued control of Mahra's Nishtun Port and planned a pipeline project from Najran Province to Yemen's Mahra coast, trying to secure alternate oil export routes if Iran seals the Strait of Hormuz (Baabood, 2023).

Saudi Arabia's economic interests in Yemen are closely related to the Kingdom's more extensive Vision 2030 program, which aims to diversify the economy and lessen reliance on oil earnings. Yemen's stability is critical to attaining these objectives, particularly given Saudi intentions to transform the Red Sea region into an economic hub. Initiatives such as the NEOM project, a \$500 billion megacity planned on the Saudi-Yemen border, depend on secure maritime routes and a stable regional environment (Algumzi, 2022). The prolonged conflict in Yemen undermines these aspirations by posing security hazards to trade and investment. The war has been very costly, estimated at its peak at \$5-6 billion per month, depleting resources required for economic diversification. The ongoing Houthi attacks on Saudi oil installations and infrastructure have posed further hurdles for recruiting foreign investment and

supporting industrial development, which are critical components of their economic reform strategy (Juneau, 2024). As a result, Saudi Arabia's participation in Yemen is intended not just to contain Iranian influence but also to construct a stable government capable of ensuring the security of these critical economic routes.

The UAE, too, has significant economic interests in Yemen tied to its national diversification agenda. The UAE's economic interests in Yemen are also motivated by strategic considerations, with a greater focus on maritime trade and logistics. The UAE economy is primarily based on global trade and port operations, with Dubai's Jebel Ali Port being among the busiest in the world. Yemen's southern coastline, particularly the Gulf of Aden, presents a potential for the UAE to increase its control over important marine routes (Kirmanj & Tofik, 2023). The UAE aims to defend its marine commercial interests and maintain a dominant position in regional logistics by supporting the Southern Transitional Council and gaining control of ports such as Aden and Mukalla. This approach is consistent with Abu Dhabi's long-term goal of becoming a worldwide hub for trade and transportation, bolstering its economic diversification efforts. The UAE's economic calculations in Yemen revolve around securing alternate shipping routes to supplement Dubai's Jebel Ali port, preserving maritime trade routes from piracy, and boosting its pivot to the East strategy through relationships with Asian markets. Controlling strategic ports through local proxies gives them an advantage in post-conflict economic opportunities (Baabood, 2023).

In Syria, economic concerns have a less immediate but substantial influence on defining Saudi Arabia and the UAE's policy. Both countries see Syria as a possible location for future rehabilitation and investment if stability can be achieved. Saudi Arabia's engagement in Syria is partially motivated by a desire to curb Iran's economic and political influence in the country. Iran's role in financing and supporting the Assad regime complicates Saudi efforts to decrease Tehran's influence in the region. By funding opposition organizations and lobbying for a political transition, Riyadh hoped to ensure that any post-conflict government in Syria aligned with its economic and strategic interests. However, as it became increasingly clear that the opposition was unlikely to prevail, Saudi Arabia adopted a more pragmatic stance towards the Assad regime, recognizing the need to engage with the Syrian government to protect its broader regional interests (Daher, 2019). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia sees Syria as a

potential market for investment and reconstruction operations, which might help it achieve its Vision 2030 objectives by opening up new economic alliances and opportunities for Saudi firms.

The UAE's attitude toward Syria shows its realistic economic perspective and willingness to work with various groups to protect its interests. While the UAE initially opposed the Assad administration, it has resumed diplomatic relations with Damascus, motivated by realizing Syria's value as a possible economic partner. The UAE has shown an interest in contributing to Syria's reconstruction, portraying itself as crucial in reconstructing its infrastructure and economy. This engagement is consistent with the UAE's economic diversification strategy, prioritizing investments in infrastructure, commerce, and development initiatives throughout the Middle East and beyond. Economic interests impacted both Gulf states' normalization strategies. The UAE has been particularly proactive in exploring economic prospects during postwar reconstruction. Their normalization initiatives demonstrate a realistic approach to securing future economic interests while stabilizing ruling regimes.

The UAE is actively exploring commercial prospects in Syria's reconstruction phase, seeing it as part of its overall economic diversification agenda. Saudi Arabia has been more cautious in its economic engagement with Syria. Still, there are recent hints of opening up, as demonstrated by easing the prohibition on Saudi products entering Syria (Arab Center, 2023). Their economic interests are weighed against fears over Iranian influence, demonstrating that economic reasons intersect with broader ones. In Syria, economic concerns have a less immediate but substantial influence on the definition of Saudi Arabia and the UAE's policy. Both countries see Syria as a possible location for future rehabilitation and investment if stability can be achieved. Saudi Arabia's engagement in Syria is partially motivated by a desire to curb Iran's economic and political influence in the country. Iran's role in financing and supporting the Assad regime complicates Saudi efforts to decrease Tehran's influence in the region. By funding opposition organizations and lobbying for a political transition, Riyadh hoped to ensure that any post-conflict government in Syria aligned with its economic and strategic interests. However, as it became increasingly clear that the opposition was unlikely to prevail, Saudi Arabia adopted a more pragmatic stance towards the Assad regime, recognizing the need to engage with the Syrian government to protect its

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Regarding their diversification efforts, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have recognized the need to move beyond oil as the primary driver of economic growth to build more sustainable and resilient economies. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy, led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is a revolutionary agenda aiming at reducing the Kingdom's reliance on oil earnings through investments in tourism, technology, and clean energy. A stable regional environment must be created to attract international investment and promote economic development to achieve these objectives. Yemen's instability directly threatens these aims since ongoing conflict undermines Saudi

border security and interrupts trade routes crucial to Vision 2030's success. As a result, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in Yemen is inherently linked to its economic ambitions, as the kingdom aims to stabilize the country to safeguard its long-term development plans.

President Mohammed bin Zayed leads the UAE's economic diversification efforts to transform the country into a global hub for innovation, trade, and tourism. This goal is reflected in projects such as the UAE Centennial 2071 plan, which focuses on sustainable development and global influence. Yemen and Syria pose opportunities and difficulties to the UAE's economic objectives. Controlling vital ports and sea routes in Yemen strengthens the UAE's regional trade and logistics leader position. In Syria, re-engagement with the Assad regime gives the UAE a footing in the reconstruction process, allowing it to increase its economic influence and obtain fresh investment opportunities.

4.2.4. Regional Aspirations and Alliance Strategies

Beyond economic interests, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's diverging approaches to the Yemen and Syria conflicts have also been shaped by their distinct regional ambitions and alliance strategies. Since the start of the conflicts, the crises in Yemen and Syria have been crucial arenas for Saudi Arabia and the UAE to test their regional goals and alliance plans. Both countries attempted to use these confrontations to demonstrate leadership, fight perceived threats, and promote their strategic goals. However, their alliance objectives and approaches have not only impacted their foreign policy but also highlighted differences in priorities and methods. These elements have considerably impacted their actions during crises and their developing policies as the wars progressed.

Saudi Arabia's policies in Yemen and Syria are primarily determined by its desire to maintain its position as the Arab and Islamic world's leader. This desire is inextricably linked to its rivalry with Iran and the overarching objective of establishing regional Sunni leadership (Ehteshami, 2018). Throughout both crises, Riyadh sought to form and lead coalitions to counter perceived threats, leveraging its economic and geopolitical might to rally regional support. Saudi Arabia has traditionally aspired to

lead the Arab and Islamic worlds, which informs much of its foreign policy activity. As the cradle of Islam and custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, Riyadh sees itself as the natural leader of Sunni-majority countries (Dorsey, 2016). This ambition is especially evident in its rivalry with Iran, which Saudi Arabia regards as a disruptive entity aiming to spread Shia influence throughout the region. The Kingdom's tactics in Yemen and Syria reflect an enormous ambition to limit Iranian power while strengthening its leadership credentials.

Under Mohammed bin Salman's leadership, Saudi Arabia has undertaken a more assertive regional policy to strengthen its position as a dominating regional force. This shift marks a divergence from traditional Saudi foreign policy, motivated by MBS' desire to position the kingdom as an independent actor rather than a passive US ally. The Yemen incursion exemplifies this new approach since Saudi Arabia demonstrated its readiness to pursue military action without promised US support (Czulda, 2023). Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen is motivated by the desire to keep a stable and cooperative neighbor to the south. By leading the coalition against the Houthi separatists, Riyadh hopes to demonstrate its regional supremacy and ability to unite Arab states around a common cause. The coalition was portrayed as a united front against Iranian influence in Yemen (Öztürk, 2023). This alliance plan sought to legitimize Saudi Arabia's leadership role while spreading the military and political cost of the involvement. However, the inability to achieve a decisive military victory despite its superiority has undermined Saudi leadership ambitions.

On the other hand, the UAE's regional ambitions differ from Saudi Arabia's in scope and emphasis. While Saudi Arabia focuses on Islamic leadership and fighting Iran, the UAE aims to establish itself as a modern, progressive state capable of defining the Middle East's future. This ambition is evident in the focus on economic innovation, technological leadership, and pragmatic diplomacy. The UAE's foreign policy focuses on stability, combating political Islam, and expanding its influence through alliances (Ibish, 2017). The UAE's regional ambitions were clear from its strategic focus on southern Yemen and the Gulf of Aden. Abu Dhabi's support for the Southern Transitional Council and its efforts to safeguard essential ports such as Aden and Mukalla is part of a deliberate strategy to increase its maritime power and preserve vital trade routes. The UAE's partial pullout from Yemen in 2019 and move to back

the Southern Transitional Council demonstrate a change away from direct military participation and toward long-term influence through proxies and infrastructural expenditures. Under Mohammed bin Zayed, the UAE has taken a more pragmatic and adaptable approach to regional politics. This is demonstrated by their "zero problem" approach towards regional rivals and their willingness to participate in diplomatic solutions while keeping strategic flexibility (Alzaabi, 2019). The UAE creates strategic partnerships and secures critical maritime interests, particularly in southern Yemen and the Horn of Africa. The UAE's foreign policy has remained consistent with its regional goals, emphasizing consolidating its victories in southern Yemen and placing itself as a significant player in Gulf and Red Sea security.

Their differing approaches were most visible in their support for various local actors. The UAE backed southern separatists and the Southern Transitional Council, while Saudi Arabia supported President Hadi's internationally recognized government. This caused difficulties within the coalition, as demonstrated by the 2018 crisis in Aden when UAE-backed rebels restricted Hadi's soldiers to the presidential palace (Öztürk, 2023). The UAE's regional policy combines military presence with economic influence, gaining control of vital ports and investing in military stations on islands such as Socotra (Ramadhan et al., 2021). This strategy served security and economic goals by elevating the UAE's status as a global logistics hub and securing critical marine routes. Saudi Arabia's objectives were primarily centered on maintaining its traditional hegemonic status in the Arabian Peninsula (van Slooten, 2019). The monarchy aimed to keep Iran from establishing a permanent presence through the Houthis, which might threaten its land and energy infrastructure.

In Syria, Saudi Arabia's regional goals are evident in its efforts to offset Iran's influence and position itself as a guardian of Sunni interests. Riyadh hoped to destabilize Bashar al-Assad's rule by funding opposition organizations fighting him. This policy was also meant to strengthen Saudi Arabia's leadership among Sunni-majority countries by portraying itself as a protector of Sunni people from alleged sectarian assault. However, the survival of the Assad regime, aided by Russian and Iranian support, has compelled Riyadh to rethink its foreign policy. In the post-war period, Saudi Arabia changed from direct resistance to a careful engagement strategy, attempting to

reestablish its influence in Syria without giving ground to Iran (Berti & Guzansky, 2014).

The UAE has taken a similarly pragmatic approach, demonstrating its willingness to change alliances and strategies to change realities. While initially opposed to the Assad administration, the UAE has recently resumed diplomatic relations with Damascus, reopening its embassy in 2018 and pressing for Syria's reinstatement into the Arab League. This shift demonstrates the UAE's emphasis on stability and appreciation of Assad's durability. By acting as a mediator in Syria's post-war reconstruction, the UAE hopes to increase its regional influence and economic imprint while retaining its ideological opposition to Islamist parties. By 2023, the UAE's involvement with Damascus will highlight its emphasis on stability and economic prospects, in line with its broader goals of shaping regional dynamics through diplomacy and investment (Daher, 2019).

Both states' alliance strategies have changed significantly. Saudi Arabia has broadened its international partnerships, increasing ties with China and expressing willingness to join the BRICS bloc. The UAE has followed a similar path, establishing partnerships with several regional and international countries while maintaining strategic autonomy. These shifting dynamics demonstrate the fluidity of alliance-building in the Middle East, driven by pragmatic concerns rather than rigid ideological alignments (Perthes, 2018). The evolution of their alliance strategies reflects more significant changes in regional dynamics.

The UAE took a more pragmatic approach, establishing connections with various regional actors while maintaining strategic autonomy. This was seen in their support for southern separatist movements and early attempts to normalize relations with Assad in Syria. Saudi Arabia, under Mohammed bin Salman's leadership, adopted more unconventional options in foreign policy, including direct military intervention in Yemen without promised US assistance. Their regional agendas reflect a more significant shift in Middle Eastern geopolitics. Both countries have put themselves at the forefront of regional de-escalation efforts while still pursuing their strategic interests. This dual strategy indicates their rising competence in regional diplomacy and capacity to manage opposing goals in a changing regional order (Ragab, 2017).

The perceived reduction in US security guarantees has profoundly impacted regional tactics. The United States' decision to stop funding military operations in Yemen prompted both countries to reconsider their approaches. This was especially visible following the 2019 Houthi attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure and the 2022 raids on Abu Dhabi, which led both regimes to diversify their security partnerships and invest in their defense capabilities (Salisbury, 2024). These shifting regional aspirations and alliance strategies continue to impact both states' approaches to regional crises, highlighting the intricate interplay between national interests and regional dynamics in the Middle East's changing political landscape. While they maintain cooperation on more significant strategic objectives, such as restraining Iranian influence, their differences in attaining these goals have added new complexity to regional politics (Hoetjes, 2022).

4.3. Implications for Saudi-UAE Relations and Regional Dynamics

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's foreign policy strategies during the Yemen and Syria wars have had a significant impact on their bilateral relationship as well as the broader regional dynamics of the Middle East. While the two Gulf states initially cooperated to tackle common dangers, their differing agendas, leadership styles, and regional aspirations have complicated their cooperation. These dynamics have long-term implications for Saudi-UAE relations and alliance coherence, regional power structures, and Gulf dominance in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have proved their capacity to work together on common goals, particularly in opposing Iranian influence in Yemen and Syria. Their early collaboration in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, as well as their common hostility to the Assad regime in Syria, demonstrated a solid Gulf partnership based on similar security interests. However, their differing priorities have eroded their collaboration over time (JIBRIL, 2021).

In Yemen, Saudi Arabia led the way in establishing a broad coalition to intervene militarily against the Iranian-backed Houthi insurgency. Riyadh aimed to reinstate President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government and safeguard Yemen's territorial integrity, in line with its broader ambitions to impose leadership in the Arabian Peninsula (Salisbury, 2024). The UAE initially backed these goals by providing primary military resources to the Saudi-led coalition. However, as the crisis

progressed, Abu Dhabi focused on securing its strategic and economic interests in southern Yemen. The UAE diverged from Saudi Arabia's stance on a unified Yemen by supporting the Southern Transitional Council and prioritizing control over vital ports and economic routes. This disagreement sparked problems within the coalition, including fighting between Yemeni factions backed by the UAE and those associated with Saudi Arabia (Öztürk, 2023).

In Syria, both states initially opposed the Assad regime, seeing it as a pillar of Iranian dominance in the Levant. Saudi Arabia supported opposition parties as part of a more extensive campaign to challenge Iran and establish itself as a protector of Sunni interests. Meanwhile, the UAE adopted a more pragmatic approach, gradually altering its posture as Assad consolidated control. By reopening its embassy in Damascus in 2018 and campaigning for Syria's reintegration into the Arab League, the UAE has shown willingness to work with Assad for stability and postwar reconstruction (Ramani, 2020). This pragmatic stance contrasted markedly with Saudi Arabia's ongoing pessimism about normalization with Damascus, indicating a gap in their partnership strategies. These divergent priorities in Yemen and Syria show the difficulties of sustaining a cohesive Saudi-UAE relationship. While the two countries share specific strategic objectives, such as combating Iranian influence, their techniques for accomplishing these goals frequently differ. This disparity has created a sense of competition for regional leadership while undermining the coherence of their relationship (Donelli, 2020).

Their differences in Yemen and Syria highlight the difficulties of unifying foreign policy objectives among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, especially those with similar security concerns. These difficulties have resulted in reevaluating the Saudi-UAE collaboration, with both countries pursuing more independent tactics while maintaining nominal cooperation on critical regional problems. This trend may signify a rebalancing of Gulf unity, with partnerships becoming more transactional and issue-specific rather than based on a shared long-term vision (Esfandiary, 2024). Saudi Arabia and the UAE's opposing agendas have contributed to perceptions of weakened Gulf predominance in regional crises. While both countries initially intended to lead the Arab response to the crises in Yemen and Syria, their inability to form a unified front has undermined their combined power. In Yemen, the ongoing battle and

humanitarian disaster have harmed Saudi Arabia's reputation as a regional leader. At the same time, the UAE's concentration on southern Yemen has created concerns about its commitment to a unified approach. The lack of a cohesive Gulf approach in Syria has allowed external countries such as Russia and Iran to dominate conflict resolution, further undermining Gulf dominance (Ibish, 2016).

The shifting regional positions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, stemming from their distinct threat perceptions, regime security objectives, and regional aspirations, impacted the broader regional balance of power. Economic implications have been particularly significant. The UAE's strategic control of ports and maritime routes has enhanced its position as a regional economic hub. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's prolonged involvement in Yemen has strained its resources during a crucial period of economic transformation. These economic considerations have increasingly influenced their foreign policy decisions, leading to more pragmatic approaches to regional conflicts (Tuama, 2018).

The implications extend to their interactions with foreign powers. Both countries have expanded their foreign alliances, lessening their reliance on US security guarantees. This has resulted in more balanced relationships with global powers, notably China and Russia, establishing a more multipolar regional order. These developments have also had an impact on domestic dynamics in both states. The rise of state-sponsored nationalism and the reorganization of state-society ties have posed new obstacles to sustaining domestic stability while achieving regional goals (Mason, 2024). The success or failure of their regional initiatives directly impacts their domestic legitimacy and reform efforts. These implications point to continued evolution in Saudi-UAE ties and regional dynamics. While their strategic collaboration remains critical to regional stability, it is expected to grow more nuanced and pragmatic. This transition parallels regional changes as economic and security pressures redefine conventional relationships.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Examining Saudi Arabia and the UAE's foreign policy strategies in Yemen and Syria has shed light on the complexities and challenges of their strategic partnership. Their foreign policy strategies in Yemen and Syria highlight the complexities of modern Middle Eastern geopolitics. These two Gulf regimes, long viewed as close allies with similar security concerns and aspirations, have exhibited both the possibility for partnership and the unavoidable separation that occurs when national interests and strategic visions disagree. The battles in Yemen and Syria have challenged their alliance, exposing its strengths and weaknesses. This analysis found that while Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sought similar goals in specific ways, their differing and changing priorities and approaches to these conflicts reflect more profound differences in regional aspirations, threat perceptions, and influence techniques.

In Yemen, differences in strategies have been particularly prominent. Saudi Arabia, as the coalition's leader, was focused on restoring President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's internationally recognized government and combating the Iranian-backed Houthi insurgency. This approach mirrored Saudi Arabia's overarching goal of retaining its supremacy in the Arabian Peninsula while protecting its territorial integrity. Despite its hostility toward other ideologies and forces that could threaten the Saudi monarchy and the Gulf region's status quo, like the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Spring upheavals has been shaped by its long-standing view of Iran as its main strategic threat in the region. Furthermore, the priority of regime security, the emergence of state-sponsored nationalism, and the necessity to address economic challenges have all impacted Riyadh's developing Yemen approach. As a result, Saudi Arabia has modified its strategy, abandoning the dramatic military involvement it initially wanted in favor of a negotiated solution. This move is owing to the constraints of securing a conclusive victory solely through military means, as

well as the need to defend its southern borders and maximize its influence and interests in competition with the UAE in Yemen's freed provinces.

In contrast, the UAE prioritized protecting its strategic and economic interests in southern Yemen. It supported the Southern Transitional Council and other Southern Elite forces, focusing on securing key sea routes and ports. Furthermore, the UAE has been less ready to contribute the required military and financial resources to share the full cost of the Yemen conflict with Saudi Arabia. This was attributed to the UAE's different threat perceptions, which prioritized the risks posed by political Islamist and jihadist ideology, as well as regional state fragmentation, rather than the perceived Iranian threat. The UAE government has placed importance on protecting its strategic and economic interests in the south over the distant geography of northern Yemen, which is characterized by complex tribal dynamics. Its committed strategy of attacking Islamist forces such as al-Qaeda and ISIS in Yemen, in collaboration with the United States, has given it some credibility in controlling and strengthening its dominance and leverage in the country's south.

Furthermore, the UAE's hostility toward the Islamist party Al-Islah, viewed as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, has shaped its selective engagement in Yemen. Due to the party's perceived strength, the UAE has refrained from supporting the internationally recognized government. The UAE has also sought to weaken Al-Islah's political and military influence by nurturing and empowering its southern proxies. This strategy has undermined the anti-Houthi coalition and contributed to the increasing fragmentation and regionalization of the Yemeni conflict, which stands in contrast to Saudi Arabia's ultimate objective of reinstating the central government.

In Syria, the contrasts in approaches have been similarly substantial. Saudi Arabia initially took a solid anti-Assad stance, funding opposition groups as part of a larger drive to reduce Iranian influence in the Levant and assert its leadership among Sunni-majority countries. However, as the Assad administration secured power with the help of Iran and Russia, Riyadh adopted a more pragmatic stance, limiting its funding for opposition organizations and seeking options for cautious engagement. On the other hand, the UAE took a cautious and pragmatic approach earlier in the conflict, re-establishing diplomatic relations with the Assad administration and pressing for Syria's

reintegration into the Arab League. This stance reflected the UAE's emphasis on stability and desire to capitalize on economic prospects in Syria's postwar reconstruction.

These divergent approaches highlight the nuanced and shifting nature of Gulf geopolitics. The implications of these different policies go far beyond Yemen and Syria. They raise fundamental questions about the future of Gulf cooperation and the character of leadership in an increasingly divided Middle East. The divergences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE reflect a more significant trend of regional nations favoring national interests over collective aims, frequently at the expense of regional stability. While strong in some areas, their alliance has exposed underlying rivalry for influence, with Saudi Arabia seeking to exert its ideological and geopolitical dominance and the UAE exploiting its economic pragmatism and strategic flexibility to have a distinct role.

These changes reflect a significant trend in Gulf politics, where national interests increasingly take precedence over collective ambitions, leading to transactional partnerships and fragmented responses to regional crises. The Saudi focus on ideological leadership and coalition-building contrasts with the UAE's pragmatic emphasis on strategic partnerships and economic development, demonstrating both countries' unique interests and aspirations. Saudi Arabia and the UAE must implement various strategic adjustments to address these challenges and enhance their regional influence. Strengthening institutional processes within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) would establish a framework for coordinating foreign policy strategies and resolving conflicts. In Yemen, the focus should shift to comprehensive peacebuilding initiatives that tackle governance issues, local grievances, and the involvement of various factions, including the Southern Transitional Council, in a unified political process. In Syria, a more coordinated Gulf strategy for reconstruction and diplomatic engagement with the Assad administration could ensure that regional entities actively shape the country's future while limiting external influence.

The study's main finding is an examination of Saudi Arabia's and the United Arab Emirates' differing foreign policy approaches to the Yemen and Syria conflicts. These variations have been shaped by differing threat perceptions, regime security concerns,

and regional ambitions. Despite their alliance, the two countries have frequently adopted different and, at times, contradictory approaches in these disputes, reflecting an underlying struggle for power and a predisposition to emphasize national interests over collective regional aims. The theoretical frameworks of neoclassical realism and ontological security were used to comprehensively understand the intricate interaction of domestic and foreign forces influencing the two countries' actions in these regional battles. Foreign policies in both countries have been impacted not just by regional power dynamics and security concerns but also by domestic political considerations and competing visions of their leaders, particularly since the Arab revolutions. The intervening variables studied, such as threat perceptions, regime security, economic competition, leadership styles, and regional aspirations, have helped to explain why Saudi Arabia and the UAE have pursued opposing methods despite their shared alliance.

The study also used ontological security theory to examine how the two countries' self-perceptions, identities, and narratives influenced their foreign policy decisions. This theoretical lens shed light on how the Gulf states' desire to retain a stable sense of self affected their behavior, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring's regional protests. It also sheds light on the conceptual and tangible threats to their ontological security, such as perceived challenges to their regional influence, ideological dominance, and domestic political stability. The investigation used a comparative case study approach to trace the evolution of their policies over time, and the driving causes behind the adjustments in their strategy.

The lessons from Yemen and Syria emphasize reconciling national goals with practical cooperation. Saudi Arabia's leadership ambitions must adjust to the realities of an increasingly multipolar Middle East. At the same time, the UAE's emphasis on securing strategic interests must be aligned with more extensive Gulf measures to ensure regional cohesiveness. Both governments must strengthen their ties with international actors and multilateral institutions to guarantee that their actions contribute to long-term conflict resolution and regional stability.

It is important to mention the recent developments and dramatic events that have been happening since 2023. The war in Gaza, the Houthis' attacks on maritime trade ships

in the Red Sea and the fall of the Assad regime are all critical developments that are strongly related to Saudi Arabia and the UAE's policies and interests in the region. Even though this study didn't include these events and developments, it can be considered a reference for further studies of either state's regional policies and goals in relation to ongoing changes in the region, especially in Yemen and Syria. Saudi Arabia and the UAE's policies in these two countries are deeply interconnected with broader regional new trends and escalating developments. Their actions in Yemen aimed at containing Iranian influence through support for the internationally recognized Yemeni government and local proxies, directly related to the Houthis' attacks on significant maritime routes and their need to secure them. In Syria, their differing approaches, which reflect a balancing act between limiting Iranian power and adjusting to the fact of the Assad regime survival, are now facing a new reality of the new state of Syria without the Assad. Both countries' policies were part of a broader strategy to secure regional interests, manage complex relationships with old and new allies, and respond to the shifting power dynamics in the Middle East. These moves show how Saudi Arabia and the UAE are recalibrating their regional roles in response to the growing threat posed by Iran and the broader geopolitical changes unfolding across the region.

To conclude, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's foreign policy measures in Yemen and Syria demonstrate the challenges of navigating regional crises and combining national objectives with communal goals. These events have changed Gulf alliances and underlined Saudi Arabia and the UAE's developing responsibilities as regional heavyweights. As these conflicts progress, both governments' capacity to adjust their methods and align their goals will be necessary to determine the Middle East's trajectory and maintain their importance in an increasingly dynamic geopolitical scene.

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