



# The Construction of Strategic Narrative in the Saudi-Iranian Regional Rivalry: The Case of the Yemeni Civil War

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**Abstract:** This study discusses strategic narratives of Saudi Arabia and Iran through the example of the Yemeni Civil War (2011-2021). During their regional power struggle, the two countries construct their narratives against each other by means of the media. The strategic narratives of Saudi Arabia and Iran are examined at three levels: issue, identity and system narratives. The research has intended to determine how the media of the two countries define the Yemeni Civil War, the identity references they have made to each other and the type of regional order they have envisioned. An issue-based news survey was conducted a ten-year period by selecting three international media outlets of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The news texts were analyzed by applying the qualitative content analysis technique. It was observed that by using the strategic narrative as a tool, the two regional rival powers made a great effort to present their attitudes and behavior as legitimate, and the other side as illegitimate in the presence of international public opinion.

**Keywords:** Strategic narrative, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemeni Civil War, regional rivalry.

**Öz:** Bu çalışma, Suudi Arabistan ve İran'ın bölgesel güç rekabeti sürecinde medya aracılığıyla birbirlerine yönelik inşa ettikleri stratejik anlatıyı Yemen İç Savaşı (2011-2021) örneği üzerinden ele almaktadır. İki ülkenin stratejik anlatıları; olay, kimlik ve sistem anlatıları olmak üzere üç seviyede incelendi. Araştırmada, iki ülke medyasının Yemen İç Savaşı'nı nasıl tanımladığı, birbirlerine ilişkin hangi kimlik atıflarında bulunduğu ve nasıl bir bölgesel düzen tahayyülü içinde olduğu tespit edilmeye çalışıldı. İran ve Suudi Arabistan'ın uluslararası yayın yapan medya organları arasından üçer tane seçilerek on yıllık zaman diliminde olay bazlı haber taraması yapıldı. Haber metinleri, nitel içerik analizi tekniğiyle çözümlendi. İki bölgesel rakip gücün stratejik anlatıyı bir araç olarak kullanarak uluslararası kamuoyu karşısında kendi tutum ve davranışlarını meşru, karşı tarafı ise gayrimeşru gösterme yönünde büyük bir çaba harcadığı gözlemlendi.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Stratejik anlatı, Suudi Arabistan, İran, Yemen İç Savaşı, bölgesel rekabet.

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## Introduction

There has been a fierce regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East in the last decade (2011-2021). Arab countries, such as Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Syria, have become a field for this struggle between Riyadh and Tehran. Compared to the other countries where the rivalry take place, Yemen has turned into an area where the regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran manifests itself concretely and fiercely with the [onset of the] civil war. It has been witnessed that both Saudi Arabia and Iran exerted a great deal of efforts to effectively use all foreign policy instruments just to gain the upper-hand in Yemen.

Both countries have been involved in the Yemeni Civil War by providing political support, economic aid, arms supplies and military training to their local proxy groups. In parallel with the fierce competition on the ground, their competition in strategic communication through the media has been witnessed, as well. Along the way, the two regional powers have inclined to intensively use against each other strategic communication techniques in foreign policy, such as information wars, psychological warfare, propaganda, perception management, public diplomacy and strategic narrative. Therefore, what kind of strategic narratives these two countries built for each other during the regional power rivalry arouse curiosity. It is considered that revealing these strategic narratives will contribute to the understanding of the intensity, extent and depth of this regional power struggle between them.

In the new regional equation that has emerged after the Arab Spring, the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has increased in terms of content, field and intensity. For instance, when Iran-backed Shiite groups started an uprising in Bahrain to overthrow the Saudi-backed government, Saudi Arabia suppressed the uprising with military intervention. On the contrary, while Saudi Arabia supported the uprisings against the regime in Syria, Iran endeavored to prevent the collapse of the current government and provided political, economic and military assistance. Saudi Arabia and Iran were engaged in a struggle for influence in the power vacuum brought about by the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. (Ehteshami, 2018; Hiro, 2018; Mabon, 2017) Their rivalry not only occurred on the ground in political, economic and military dimensions, but also continued in the media narrative. In this respect, the study mainly examines, in a comparative way, the strategic narrative that Saudi Arabia and Iran have built towards each other through the Yemeni Civil War (2011-2021). The main purpose of the study is to identify and compare the strategic narratives that Saudi Arabia and Iran have generated through the media to gain superiority over each other during this civil war.

The study focuses on the strategic communication dimension of their competition during the civil war in Yemen following the Arab Spring. Hence, the three aspects below determine the scope of the research. Firstly, the paper examined the strategic narrative constructed through the media. In doing so, the reason behind the regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and its political, economic and military repercussions on Yemen are excluded from the scope of the research. Secondly, the study deals with the construction and implementation of the strategic narrative and does not examine whether it is effective (in its reception) in the international public opinion. Thirdly, the strategic narratives generated by these two countries during the Yemeni Civil War are discussed.

The research employs the concept of strategic narrative as the conceptual ground. The model put forward by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) is taken as a basis in the process of determining the strategic narrative in international politics. Accordingly, the strategic narrative in international politics is examined at three different levels; as issue narrative, identity narrative and system narrative. Qualitative research method is used in the research process. The data surveyed and collected using the qualitative method are categorized and analyzed with the qualitative content analysis technique. For surveying and collection of data, three leading international media outlets of each country have been selected. In this respect, *al-Arabiya*, *Arab News* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat* from Saudi Arabia; and *Tehran Times*, *Kayhan International*, and *Fars News* from Iran are examined. The news surveying in the selected media outlets, the important breaking points that occurred in the ten-year period of the Yemeni Civil War and the news published when the tension between the two countries escalated are evaluated. Lastly, the design of the research is as follows: The first part focuses on the concept of strategic narrative used in the research process. The second part clarifies the method and rationale of the research. The third part handles the visualization and the decoding of the collected data.

## The Construction of Strategic Narrative in Foreign Policy

In order to achieve results in foreign policy; states, as the main actors of international politics, have to adapt to the conditions of changing international communication and interaction. The progressive development and widespread use of mass media have undoubtedly made accessing and sharing information an extremely easy human activity. That enabled masses to obtain information and have opinion about international developments owing to the mass media. Thus, political elites began to relatively experience legitimacy issues in order to justify their foreign policy positions and behaviors. One of the ways to overcome this is through the effective

use of strategic communication techniques and mass media. While this whole process amplified the importance of public opinion in international politics, it forced states to attach more importance to strategic communication activities in foreign policy.

Political elites resort to strategic narrative as a strategic communication tool in order to achieve their foreign policy goals. In other words, these elites have a golden touch to design and implement communication on a strategic scale to reach their foreign policy goals. This means that communication is used for a specific purpose in the period of strategic communication (Hallahan et al., 2007, p.3). Therefore, unplanned, systematic and non-target-oriented forms of communication do not fall within the scope of strategic communication (Zaharna, 2010, p.6). Paterson and Monroe (1998, pp.315-316) examining the use of narrative in the field of social sciences argue that narratives affect people's perceptions of political reality and their reactions to political developments. Narratives play an important role in the process of determining political behavior and are designed to understand and interpret political reality. Suganami (1999, p.179) argues that social actors construct both themselves and the social structure they are in by producing narratives. He states that this social structure presents a complex form of relationship in which three elements, i.e. actor, structure and narrative, shape each other.

Roselle (2006, p.1), examining the withdrawal processes of two superpowers (USA and USSR) from Vietnam and Afghanistan during the Cold War period, exposes that political elites try to legitimize their foreign policy decisions and practices in the face of national and international public opinion by producing strategic narratives through the media. Freedman (2006, p.22) defines strategic narrative as "a plot that provides convincing explanations for events and making inferences". Moreover, Freedman draws attention to the strategic use of narrative in military conflicts to weaken the legitimacy of the enemy arguing that narratives help to persuade the public opinion why the use of military force is necessary. According to Antoniadou et al. (2010, p.5), strategic narrative is a communication tool that serves to construe a certain meaning to the past, present and future so as to achieve desired political goals.

By using of strategic narrative, political elites, in case of uncertainty, make explainable and understandable the decisions and practices questioned in the presence of the society. Political elites need strategic narrative to guide debate and remove ambiguity. While the society has information and opinion about events, and exhibits behavior through strategic narrative, governments can reach political decisions that they would not be able to get the support of the public otherwise (Jankowski, 2013, p.12). Similarly, Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011, pp. 505-528) state

that if the political power produces an effective strategic narrative, the possibility of gaining public support for military interventions increases. Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015, p.4) point out that the strategic narrative is the “purposeful communication practice” in which the communicating power centers act to reach the goal. According to Nissen (2015, p.45), strategic narrative provides a framework that helps to shape the past, present and future of conflicts in order to gain and maintain power in international politics.

Krebs (2015, pp. 1-23) expressing that the strategic narrative presents the past failures, current challenges and possible future with a good plot, underlines that it plays a functional role in areas such as making sense of international developments, determining the boundaries of legitimate politics and shaping national security policy. Kivilcim (2018, p.118) defines the strategic narrative as a basic tool that ensures the consent of people in case of conflict and war, and emphasizes that the consent of people is a great source of power for the political power, and dwells on the vital importance of the strategic narrative in obtaining this power. Madisson and Ventsel (2021, p.22) drawing attention to the purpose and use of strategic narratives as a tool, emphasise that the meaning of conflicts is shaped in the desired direction through these narratives and that they help the target audience to interpret the developments.

Three separate studies published by Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle in 2013, 2014 and 2017 carried the concept of strategic narrative into a more systematic dimension. These researchers, who have made a great contribution to the literature on strategic narrative in foreign policy, have introduced the accepted definition in the literature about the concept. Miskimmon et al. (2013, pp.13-14) defines strategic narrative as a tool used by political elites to both shape the thoughts and behaviors of the target audience and to manage perceptions about events, identities and the international system. Strategic narrative is seen as a functional tool used by states to expand their sphere of influence and create a favorable discourse environment. Any strategic narrative constructed, not only defines the identities of the political elites and the goals they want to achieve, but also determines the obstacles in front of reaching these goals and how to overcome them (Roselle et al., 2014, p.76). Miskimmon et al. (2017, pp. 6;50) defines strategic narrative as a means by which political actors try to build a common meaning about the past, present and future of international politics to shape the positions and behaviors of the national and international public opinion. It is considered that if the political power uses the strategic narrative effectively, it can legitimize its own actions and acquire the power to influence the behavior of the target audience.

The production of strategic narrative in international politics is examined at three different levels (Roselle et al., 2014, p.76). The first-level, issue narrative, forms the basis of discourse on why it is necessary to follow a certain policy in the face of a development, how the adopted policy will be put into practice, and how it will be successful. In addition, the narrative of the issue reveals what the issue/conflict is, who the important actors are, and which action plan how and why can produce a solution to this problem. Thus, it is tried to explain/elucidate to the national and international public opinion that the policy followed in the face of the event/issue is inevitable, reasonable and rational, and that the stated goal is attainable. The issue narrative is used to shape the discourse environment in which the political decision will be implemented, and to influence the political course. On top of all these, the issue narrative helps the political stance of the political power on any foreign policy issue to be accepted by the public as correct, legitimate and applicable.

The second level, identity narrative, tells what the story of a state or nation is, and what values and goals it has. Political actors in the production of identity narratives construct not only their own identities (self), but also the identities of other actors (other). The third level, system narrative, expresses how any state both defines the current global/regional order and points out what kind of global/regional order it envisions. The system narrative reveals how international politics works and who are the main players in this field. The system narrative explains how the power structure emerged, survived, changed and transformed, but also identifies who challenged and posed a threat to this existing system. Each state above a certain power capacity tends to construct a strategic narrative in the process of establishing and maintaining a regional or global order that will work in its favor.

As a result, the strategic narrative is constructed and put into practice in order to influence, direct and shape the thoughts and behaviors of the selected target audience. It is considered that the states using strategic narrative in the process of foreign policy development intend to achieve the following basic goals: First, the political elites try to create legitimacy in the eyes of the national or international public opinion about their foreign policy decisions and practices by constructing a strategic narrative. Secondly, by producing a strategic narrative, a state aims to prevent or reduce the possible opposition of other states to its foreign policy positions and behaviors adopted for a particular development or state. Thirdly, through the strategic narrative, a state aims to gain the support of third countries about a certain policy that it adopts towards a certain state. Finally, by using a strategic narrative, a state tries to damage the legitimacy of the counter positions and behaviors of a target state adopted against the policy of that state.

## The Method of Research

The following aspects determine the scope of the study. First, the study tries to reveal the strategic narratives generated by the two regional powers in the context of the Yemeni Civil War (2011-2021). Therefore, the strategic narratives of these two states adopted towards other countries in the Middle East that they are simultaneously in competition and conflict with are beyond the scope of the research. The second, the study deals with the strategic narratives of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the media. The third, the study is not concerned about the reception phase in the target audience while it deals with the construction and implementation phase of the generated strategic narrative. The matters not included in the scope of the work are: First, the questions of why Saudi Arabia and Iran are in regional competition and why they are involved in the Yemeni Civil War are not the subject of this study. The second, the study tries to uncover the strategic narrative they have built to influence and direct the international public opinion; hence, it does not focus on the two countries shaping their national public opinions.

The study adopts the qualitative research method. Surveying and collection of data is carried out using the qualitative method. In addition, the obtained data is analyzed with the qualitative content analysis technique. Thus, the study aims to identify the strategic narrative themes that stand out in the news and commentary texts in media organizations. News surveying and data collection is carried out by identifying three different international (English) news organizations from each country. *Al-Arabiya*, *Arab News* and *as-Sharq al-Awsat* have been selected from Saudi Arabia, and *Tehran Times*, *Kayhan International* and *Fars News* from Iran. The fact that these media outlets reach the international public opinion by broadcasting in English and that they are, in a foreign language, the most followed news organizations of these countries have been effective in the selection of these news institutions. Besides, data surveying and collection in the selected news outlets is carried out, for convenience, based on the important turning points of the Yemeni Civil War. To this end, the study has examined the news stories published during the periods in which the initial uprisings in Yemen started (2011), the Hadi government was established (2012), the Houthi movement overthrew the Hadi government (2014), Saudi Arabia launched a military intervention (2015), the Aramco attack took place and the Riyadh Agreement was signed (2019), and the ballistic missile attacks occurred (2021).

The study is based on the category of data analysis model put forward by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) in the process of determining the strategic narrative used in the news texts. Accordingly, as mentioned above, there are three different levels of strategic narrative in foreign policy: issue narrative, identity

narrative and system narrative. This study aims to unveil all three narrative levels through the rivalry and conflict in Yemen. The data surveyed in the news outlets are classified by considering these three levels, and then they have been analyzed. Thus, it is determined how Saudi Arabia and Iran define the Yemeni Civil War (issue narrative), how they describe themselves and each other (self/other identity narrative), and what kind of regional order vision they have (system narrative). This paper also uses Entman’s media framing model to compare two states’s media narratives (Entman, 1993). By determining the strategic narrative at three levels, the study tries to understand how Riyadh and Tehran use in the regional competition process the strategic communication technique to legitimize their foreign policy behaviors, weaken the rival side, and attract the support of other states or prevent their opposition.

## Visualization and Evaluation of Data

### Issue Narrative

The data on the issue narrative of the research are assorted in Table I and Table II. The data listed here serve to determine the strategic narratives of both countries on how they define the crisis in Yemen, what the causes of the civil war are, and what policy should be followed and why, and how the problem will be resolved.

**Table I**

*Saudi Arabia’s Issue Narrative Themes*

Sub Categories	Featured Themes
Problem Definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The developments in Yemen are an attempt to change the regional balance of power in favor of Iran and its allies.</li><li>• Iran’s sectarian policies are behind the civil war in Yemen.</li><li>• The conflicts in Yemen are a civil war/proxy war with Iran behind it.</li><li>• Iran is causing instability in Yemen through the Houthis.</li><li>• The Shiite Houthis, like al-Qaeda and the Southern Separatists, want to divide Yemen.</li><li>• The Houthis try to seize Yemen and turn it into a “terrorist state” just like ISIS try to do in Iraq.</li><li>• The Houthi coup threatens the security and stability of Yemen, the region and the world.</li></ul>

<p>Causal Relationship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The crisis and turmoil in Yemen is the result of Iran’s destructive role in the region.</li> <li>• The reason why Yemen is dragged into a civil war is the coup d’etat by the Iranian-backed Houthis.</li> <li>• Iran’s “ policy of exporting revolution “ is dragging the region into turmoil.</li> <li>• Iran’s Yemen policy causes terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Houthis to gain strength.</li> <li>• Iran’s transfer of resources obtained from the nuclear agreement to terrorist organizations plunges the region in war.</li> <li>• Operation Decisive Storm was launched to protect the legitimate government and people in Yemen.</li> </ul>
<p>Solution Suggestion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The international community should not remain silent about Iran’s activities in Yemen.</li> <li>• Iran’s intervention in Yemen should be prevented immediately.</li> <li>• The legitimate government in Yemen should be supported.</li> <li>• Iran should be prevented from interfering in the internal affairs of the countries of the region.</li> <li>• The countries of the region should unite and take measures against Iran.</li> <li>• The attacks of terrorist organizations that threaten the people of Yemen should not be allowed.</li> <li>• Yemen must be prevented from falling under the influence of Iran and turning it into an Iraq and Syria.</li> <li>• Iran’s support to Sunni and Shiite radical organizations should be stopped.</li> <li>• In order for a solution to be reached in Yemen, it must be prevented the Houthis’ seizure of power in Sanaa.</li> <li>• Western countries should not only fight ISIS militants, but also Iran-backed Houthis.</li> </ul>

**Note:** Based on news sources in the appendix.

By looking at Table I, first of all, it is observed that Saudi Arabia defines Iran quite negatively in its view of the Yemeni Civil War problem. According to the Saudis, what is happening in Yemen is a process that has turned into chaos and a civil war as a result of Iran’s meddling in the internal affairs of the country in question. The Saudi narrative is built on the movement of an outside country (Iran) to overthrow the legitimate power (Mansur Hadi) through its internal proxy group (Houthi), not as a revolt of masses whose uprisings against an authoritarian regime in Yemen were oppressed. In Saudi news texts, statements such as Iran’s following sectarian policies, interfering in Yemen’s internal affairs, supporting the Houthis who carry

out terrorist activities, and Iran being behind the armed coup carried out by the Houthis in Yemen stand out as the most frequently used themes. In addition, also covered in the texts are the themes such as that Iran is a dangerous country not only for Yemen but also for the entire region, the Gulf countries in particular, and even for the world, and that Iran is the country that benefits most from the chaos in the region. When we look at the keywords that stand out in the Saudi narrative regarding Iran in the Yemeni Civil War, which are the words “Iran” and “Houthi”, it is seen that they are used together with harsh expressions such as intervention in internal affairs, espionage activities, coup, terrorist organization, and terrorist regime.

When the causal relationship dimension, the second sub-category of the issue narrative, is examined, it is seen that a cause-effect relation has been established between the environment of chaos in Yemen and Iran’s aggressive policies. The legitimate power in Yemen was overthrown as a result of a coup, with Tehran’s direct support to Iran’s proxy group Houthis, and the country was dragged into a civil war. The narrative constructed by the Iranian media as the “just” struggle of the “victimized” people against the “authoritarian” regime is rejected by the Saudis. According to the Saudis, the reason for the instability of not only Yemen but the entire Middle East is Iran’s Shiite sectarian and the export of revolution policies. The reason why the coming of peace to the region in the near future remains a “dream far away” is because of these aggressive, expansionist and revisionist steps of Iran. Another reason for the chaos in Yemen is the nuclear agreement that the Westerners signed with Iran. According to the Saudi media, Iran transferred its economic gains through the nuclear agreement to “terrorist” proxies such as the Houthis and Ansarullah in Yemen, causing the country to be dragged into a civil war.

Considering the third sub-category of the issue narrative, solution suggestion; the main Saudi statement that draws attention is that the aggressive Iran is a regime that must be completely controlled. However, Saudis frequently stated that Iran should be expelled from Yemen with the intervention of the international community and that it should be prevented from interfering in Yemen’s internal affairs. The Saudis making a call to the Western society, state that the nuclear agreement signed with Iran gives Iran the power of expansion in the region; therefore, the West should withdraw from this agreement. In addition, it is emphasized in Saudi narratives that the countries in the region, as well as the international community, should unite against Iran and prevent its aggressive expansionist policies. Again, the Saudis addressing the international community stressed that the Iranian-backed Houthis should be treated in the same way as the ISIS in Iraq and Syria are intervened, and that treating Houtis as ISIS will ensure security and stability in Yemen.

**Table II**

*Iran's Issue Narrative Themes*

Sub Categories	Featured Themes
<p>Problem Definition</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· The uprising in Yemen is an “Arab awakening” and will bring the end of the authoritarian regime.</li> <li>· Protesters in Yemen seek revolutionary change to end widespread corruption and tyranny.</li> <li>· The conflicts in Yemen are a civil war/proxy war with Saudi Arabia behind it.</li> <li>· The Yemeni Civil War is a US-Israeli conspiracy, and its perpetrator is Saudi Arabia.</li> <li>· Saudi Arabia, together with the USA, is trying to prevent the revolution in Yemen.</li> <li>· Saudi-led military intervention; It is an intervention that is incompatible with Islamic principles and international law and harms the Islamic world.</li> <li>· Saudi intervention is an unjust war against the poor Yemeni people and interference in Yemen’s internal affairs.</li> <li>· Saudi intervention is no different than Israel’s Zionist regime launching a war against the city of Gaza.</li> </ul>
<p>Causal Relationship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· The Yemeni Civil War is the result of the undemocratic and oppressive attitude towards the Yemeni people.</li> <li>· The USA and Israel are intensifying the war by supporting Saudi Arabia’s unlawful interference with international law.</li> <li>· The Saudi Arabian-led military intervention is a status quo invasion movement and deepens the war, leading to the spread of terrorism.</li> <li>· Saudi intervention serves the enemies of Islam and benefits the Zionist regime.</li> <li>· Saudi Arabia’s effort to divide Yemen brought the crisis to this point.</li> <li>· The Saudi regime’s efforts to spread Wahhabi Islam deepen the Yemeni problem.</li> <li>· The support of the dictators by violent anti-Shiite factions such as Saudi Arabia and Al Qaeda causes the chaotic situation in the country.</li> <li>· The intervention of the Saudi-led coalition not only spreads terrorism and extremism, it also spreads insecurity throughout the region.</li> <li>· The ballistic missile attacks of the Houthis are a legitimate defense against Saudi aggression.</li> <li>· The democratic demonstrations and revolution in Yemen were inspired by the Iranian Islamic Revolution.</li> </ul>

Solution Suggestion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· A political compromise must be achieved in Yemen that will meet the rights of the people and all parties.</li> <li>· Saudi Arabian and other foreign attacks on Yemen must be stopped.</li> <li>· The division of Yemen must be prevented.</li> <li>· Direct and indirect intervention of the USA and Israel in Yemen should be prevented.</li> <li>· The political and military support of the Western countries to the aggressors must be ended.</li> <li>· Military intervention is not the solution to the crisis, ceasefire and dialogue is the only solution.</li> <li>· Foreign powers should not set the terms for the future of Yemen and should not enter into negotiations.</li> <li>· The problem should be resolved through Yemen-Yemen talks by establishing a national dialogue.</li> <li>· An inclusive government of national unity must be established.</li> <li>· Muslim countries should unite against foreign interference and terrorism in the region.</li> <li>· The Saudis must be prevented from supporting al-Qaeda and similar organisations close to them in Yemen and throughout the region</li> </ul>
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**Note:** Based on news sources in the appendix.

When Table II is examined, there is a direct contrast between Iran and Saudi Arabia in terms of the narrative of the Yemeni Civil War. Iran describes the events in Yemen as a “revolutionary process” and “Arab awakening” and presents the protests in Yemen as peaceful demonstrations against corruption and authoritarianism. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran views the process positively and sees the demonstrations as indispensable for the freedom of Yemenis and argues that the process resembles and is inspired by the Iranian revolution. Contrary to the Saudi approach that sees the Houthis and other groups as terrorists, for Iran the Houthis are represented as peaceful and freedom-seeking victimized Yemenis. From the point of view of Iran, the crisis in Yemen is the result of a proxy war backed by Saudi Arabia and Western powers, and the search for freedom of poor Yemenis is hindered by Saudi Arabia.

In addition to these points frequently mentioned in the texts on the Yemeni Civil War, it is important to note that Iran emphasizes the attacks are entirely committed with the weapons produced by Yemen itself in response to the allegations that Iran provides weapons to the Houthis in Yemen and the attacks are carried out by Iran. Thus, Iran’s narrative that it does not interfere in Yemen’s internal affairs and intervene neither directly nor indirectly is repeatedly emphasized in the texts. As for the Aramco attack that is one of the turning-points of the Yemeni Civil War and

the cause of the war's spreading into Saudi Arabia in a sense and the other attacks, Iran sees them as the end result of Saudi Arabia's aggression and lawlessness. Thus, the Houthi's attack on the Saudi territory is frequently covered in the news texts as a "self-defense" and a mandatory action. In the detailed narratives on this particular attack, it is welcomed in a sense by emphasizing that unlike the Saudi forces, the Houthi attacks did not target civilians but only caused material damage. Conversely, the Saudi attacks on innocent people in Yemen are highlighted. Iran particularly emphasized in the narratives that the Saudis, with the attempts such as the Riyadh agreement, are trying to legitimize the coup in Yemen. Looking at the keywords Iran used while constructing its narrative; the words "Yemeni demonstrators," "Arab awakening," "Islamic uprising," "revolution," "democracy," and "resistance" seem to be frequently preferred.

When we look at the causal relationship, the second subcategory of Iran's narrative, the situation in Yemen is seen as the result of undemocratic and authoritarian policies in the country. For Iran, a cause and effect relationship is established between this oppressive and authoritarian attitude, and the Saudis' interference in Yemen's internal affairs and activities to put a name close to them in charge of Yemen. In connection, another issue standing out in the texts is the emphasis on the support and approval of the countries that are "enemy of Islam," such as the USA and Israel, provided to the Saudi interventionism. Thus, one of the prominent facts in the texts is that dragging of Yemen into civil war is the result of the policies of the Western "imperial" powers. By doing so, Iran positions the Yemeni Civil War as a result of the Saudis' betrayal of the Islamic world. In addition to the cooperation with the West, the Saudis' Wahhabi expansionism and intimidation policies against the Shiites are another important issue that has been brought to the attention as the exacerbation of the Yemeni problem.

When the solution suggestions for the problem, the third sub-category, are evaluated, it is seen that their targeting of Saudi Arabia shine out in the Iranian news. In particular, the prevention of Saudi Arabia's interference in Yemen's internal affairs and the involvement of the international community to this end are often mentioned in the texts as an indispensable condition for a solution. In connection, it is emphasized that the support of countries from within and outside the region, giving the Saudis the power to intervene, should end. On the other hand, it is emphasized that a military approach cannot be a solution to the Yemen crisis, and that the problem should be resolved through a political compromise that will meet the rights of all parties in Yemen by establishing a national dialogue. To the more, for the construction of a stable Yemen, Iran recommends in the narratives putting

international pressure on Saudi Arabia to end the Saudi support to “extremist Salafi groups”, such as Al-Qaeda, in the region.

### Identity Narrative

The prominent themes on the identity narrative of Saudi Arabia and Iran about each other and about themselves are given in Table III and Table IV. The identity narratives of Saudis and Iran are analyzed in two categories as “self” and “other” identities in the tables.

**Table III**

*Saudi Arabia’s Identity Narrative Themes*

Sub Categories	Featured Themes
Self Identity	Saudi Arabia; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· is pro-peace, anti-war and pro-dialogue.</li> <li>· Refuses to use violence and threats to resolve conflicts.</li> <li>· does not interfere in the internal affairs of the regional countries.</li> <li>· establishes good neighborly relations.</li> <li>· uses force only for self-defense in the region.</li> <li>· is against terrorist organizations and countries that support terrorism.</li> <li>· pursues a policy towards the protection of global/regional security, peace and justice.</li> </ul>
Other Identity	Iran; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· follows expansionist, intrusive and aggressive policies.</li> <li>· pursues policy of exporting revolution</li> <li>· threatens the security of the regional countries.</li> <li>· disrupts security, stability and peace in the region.</li> <li>· interferes in the internal affairs of the regional countries.</li> <li>· follows a sectarian foreign policies.</li> <li>· is the biggest terrorist state in the world.</li> <li>· is the cruelest dictatorship in the world.</li> <li>· does not respect international law and human rights.</li> <li>· incites Shiites against the governments in the region.</li> <li>· supports terrorist organizations such as Ansarullah, Hezbollah and the Houthis in the region.</li> </ul>

**Note:** Based on news sources in the appendix.

When we look at the self-identity narrative of the Saudis, as seen in Table III, three themes come to the fore. First, Saudi Arabia seems to have been defined as pro-peace and anti-war. The second output of the self-identity narrative built on this theme states that Saudi Arabia is a country that supports legitimate governments of the regional countries against all kinds of terrorism (Sunni-Shiite), that tries to maintain the stability of the region and that cooperates with its allies and international organizations for this purpose. Third and the last draws, in the expressions of the news texts, an image of Saudi Arabia as a benevolent country that brings humanitarian aid not only to Yemen but to all parts of the world. When the identity of the “other” is examined, the Saudi media frequently report news in which Iran is claimed to follow interventionist, expansionist, aggressive and sectarian policies. Moreover, a perception is created about Iran as a country that supports terrorist organizations such as Ansarullah, Hezbollah and the Houthis, and that incites the Shiite population living in the countries of the region against legitimate governments. Besides, the number of statements that Iran is a terrorist regime as dangerous as al-Qaeda and that it is one of the cruelest dictatorships in the world, such as North Korea and Syria, are not to be underestimated. The terms used by the Saudis in their identity narrative othering Iran attract attention, such as Iran’s being a destructive rather than constructive state, its policy of exporting revolution, a hypocrite, today’s Hitler, unchained monster, evil/devil state, and unreliable rogue state.

**Table IV**  
Iran’s Identity Narrative Themes

Sub Categories	Featured Themes
Self Identity	Iran; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· does not interfere in the internal affairs of the countries in the region.</li> <li>· strives to establish peace.</li> <li>· is against violence, terrorism, extremism and sectarianism.</li> <li>· supports peaceful demands.</li> <li>· is not a party to the war in Yemen.</li> <li>· is against the killing of civilians.</li> <li>· develops peaceful relations with its neighbors.</li> <li>· respects the will of people in the region and stands up for the oppressed.</li> <li>· supports the popular uprising in Yemen.</li> </ul>

Other Identity	<p>Saudi Arabia;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· is behaving aggressively.</li> <li>· provides ideological and financial support to terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda and etc.</li> <li>· fuels sectarianism and racism in the region.</li> <li>· is a puppet state of the USA.</li> <li>· cooperates with Israel.</li> <li>· defends despotic leaders and authoritarian regimes.</li> <li>· is an absolute monarchy that does not tolerate dissenting opinions.</li> <li>· is a direct part of the proxy war in Yemen.</li> <li>· is committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and state terrorism in Yemen.</li> <li>· prevents the formation of the democratic system in Yemen.</li> <li>· Saudi Arabia is a corrupt and occupying state that commits genocide against Shiites.</li> <li>· targets civilians, children and hospitals in Yemen.</li> <li>· is the source of hatred and radicalism in the Islamic world.</li> </ul>
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**Note:** Based on news sources in the appendix.

As for Iran’s self-identity narrative, by looking to Table IV, it is seen in the themes that stand out, the Iranian media focus on the issues that the Tehran administration certainly does not interfere in the internal affairs of the countries in the region and that it spends utmost effort to establish peace in the region. The Iranian media describe Iran as a country that respects peaceful demands and free will of the peoples of the region and fully supports democratic efforts. In news texts, Iran is depicted as a libertarian country that particularly supports the oppressed, prioritizes diplomacy, develops peaceful relations with its neighbors, and seeks political solutions to problems rather than military interventions. On the other hand, when the narratives of Iran on its other identity are examined, it is emphasized that Saudi Arabia has fueled sectarianism in the region with its aggressive interventions and support to terrorists. The depiction of Wahhabism and of a Saudi Arabia that spreads Wahhabism stands out in the texts. Iran likens Saudi Arabia to the formations, such as ISIS/al-Qaeda, and strengthens its own narrative in the international arena. Thus, the emphasis on Saudi Arabia having an organic link with terrorism is frequently encountered in the news texts. The Saudi administration is also portrayed as an absolute monarchy without an elected parliament which does not tolerate dissent. In the content of the news, keywords such as “aggressor,” “dictator,” “puppet administration,” “American and Israeli collaborator regime,” “the cause of the humanitarian crisis,” “perpetrator

of brutal violence,” “supporter of terrorism,” “war criminal,” “sectarian” and “anti-Shiite” come to the fore.

## Regional System Narrative

This study discusses the system narrative that constitutes the third and last level of the strategic narrative by focusing on the regional system. Tables V and VI examine the narratives of both countries on the regional system they describe in the context of the Yemeni Civil War.

**Table V**

*Saudi Arabia’s Regional System Narrative Themes*

Sub Categories	Featured Themes
Regional System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Ultimate goal of Iran become a hegemonic power in the region and take under control of the entire region.</li> <li>· The reason for the deterioration and failure of regional security and stability is Iran.</li> <li>· Saudi Arabia works for regional security, stability and peace.</li> <li>· Iran is trying to change the regional order in its favor by following revisionist, expansionist and interventionist policies.</li> <li>· Iran threatens the entire regional security by provoking Shiites living in the region and supporting terrorism.</li> </ul>

**Note:** Based on news sources in the appendix.

In the current regional system narrative of Saudi Arabia, Iran is built as a country wishing to become a hegemonic power in the region and, therefore, harms the security and stability of the region. The Saudis, on the other hand, are portrayed as a country that strives for the region to become a basin of peace and stability. To the contrary, Iran pursues aggressive, expansionist and sectarian policies so as to turn the current balance of power in the region in its favor, and stages revolts in countries populated with the Shiite. The Saudi narrative stresses that such policies of Iran are not new and that it has led the region into turmoil by supporting many Sunni and Shiite terrorist organizations, al-Qaeda and Hezbollah in particular, since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The Saudis present a vision of a regional system in which Iran, Yemen and the people of the region will find peace and prosperity if Iran ceases to support terrorist organizations.

**Table VI**

*Iran's Regional System Narrative Themes*

Sub Categories	Featured Themes
Regional System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Saudi Arabia is trying to establish a hegemonic regional security structure in the region.</li><li>· A Saudi-Israeli-US alliance is being established in the region against Iran, and this situation puts the whole region into a security crisis.</li><li>· Saudi Arabia's support of terrorism has dragged the region into chaos.</li><li>· Foreign interventions restrain development of a regional system in favor of regional countries.</li><li>· Peaceful demonstrations will pave the way for a transition to the democratic order in the region.</li></ul>

**Note:** Based on news sources in the appendix.

The main issue in Iran's regional system narrative is that the foreign interventions violate the sovereignty of the countries in the region and that the development of a regional system in which these countries have a say is prevented. For this reason, Saudi interventionism and "false alliances" established among Western countries, the USA in particular, and Saudi Arabia prevent the formation of a stable regional order and ensure the formation of a regional system in favor of these countries' interests. It is also emphasized that the Saudi support of terrorism nurtures the regional instability because the Saudi-backed Taqfiri terrorists cause separatism among Muslims in the region and lead to a regionally divided Islamic world. Another point that the texts focus on is that Iran sees the events in Yemen as a transition to the republican model and that the situation creates difficulties for authoritarian countries such as Saudi Arabia. At this point, the narrative emphasizes that Iran envisions a regional system that has respect for democratic rights and ends tyrannies.

## Conclusion

This study examined the strategic narratives that two regional rivals (Saudi Arabia and Iran) constructed through the media in order to gain superiority over each other during the Yemeni Civil War in the Middle East. The study has tried to reveal what kind of a problem definition Saudi Arabia and Iran have made about the Yemeni Civil War, how they have established a causal relationship and offered solutions, what

identity attributions they have used about each other, and what kind of regional order they envisioned. The study reveals the similarities and differences by comparing the strategic narratives produced by the two regional powers at three different levels: issue narrative, identity narrative and system narrative. It was observed that both Saudi Arabia and Iran have made great efforts to justify their rightness and the wrongfulness of the other before the international public opinion by using strategic narrative as a tool through the media. As a result of the research conducted in this direction, the following basic findings were reached.

First of all, it is observed that both countries tried to manipulate the international public opinion by holding each other accountable in the process of defining the problem, establishing a causal relationship and offering solutions about the Yemeni Civil War. Through the constructed issue narrative, Saudi Arabia tries to legitimize its political/military intervention in Yemen and its support for the overthrown government while Iran makes efforts to show its support to Ansarullah and the attacks of the Houthis against Saudi Arabia as inevitable and legitimate. Accordingly, for Iran, what is happening in Yemen is seen as peaceful/innocent Yemenis seeking justice while, for Saudi Arabia, they are terrorists and sectarian movements having Iran behind it. These two regional powers trying to prevent Yemen from falling under the influence of each other exhibit their Yemeni policies as just and necessary on the one hand, and present local forces they support as legitimate and rightful actors, on the other.

It was witnessed in the beginning (2011-2013) that the Saudi side defined the developments in Yemen as destabilizing and the Iranian side as an Arab awakening. However, it was observed later (2014-2021) that the developments in Yemen were described by the Saudi media as a civil war/proxy war with Iran behind it, and the Iranian media, to the contrary described the developments having Saudi Arabia behind them. This was influenced by the fact that the Houthis overthrew the government in September 2014 and took control of the capital Sana'a, and then the country was dragged into civil war with the military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in April 2015. After this date, both countries became tougher in the strategic narratives they construct against each other. While Saudi Arabia claimed that the legitimate government in Yemen was waging a struggle against separatist, terrorist, Iranian-backed Houthis, Iran stated that it was the rightful struggle of the oppressed people against the Saudi-backed dictatorship. The media of both countries establish a causal relationship between the situation in Yemen and the expansionist behavior of the other side, meddling in the country's internal affairs, foreign intervention, support for terrorist organizations, sectarian regional politics and aggressive foreign policy.

As a solution to the conflict, the Saudi side proposes that Iran's intervention in Yemen and interference in the country's internal affairs, its support to terrorist organizations should be prevented, and that both the regional countries and the international community should show solidarity and cooperate to oppose Iran's penetration into Yemen. On the other hand, the Iranian side proposes to Saudi Arabia to stop the military intervention, to the Western countries to end their support to Saudi Arabia, and to reach a political reconciliation through negotiations among the Yemenis without the involvement of any foreign power.

Secondly, both political leaderships are observed to have made a distinction between the self and the other, and described their self-identity as "problem-solving" and the identity of the other as "problem-producing". In the Saudi media, Saudi Arabia is presented as a responsible state that tries to ensure regional security and stability, fights terrorist organizations and the states behind them, does not interfere in the internal affairs of the regional countries, establishes good neighborly relations, adopts peaceful ways to solve the problem, and uses force only for self-defense. On the other hand, in the Saudi media, Iran is presented as a state that disrupts regional security and stability, supports terrorist organizations, follows sectarian regional politics, acts expansionist and aggressive, interferes in the internal affairs of the countries in the region and violates international law. Iran is described by the Iranian media as a state that strives to establish peace, fights terrorism, extremism and radicalism, respects the will of the people of the region, stands by the oppressed and victimized peoples, and lives together in peace with its neighbors. In the Iranian media, Saudi Arabia is described as a state that cooperates with the USA and Israel, supports terrorism, spreads radicalism, pursues sectarian politics and acts aggressively.

Thirdly, it has been observed that both countries envision a regional order in which their own room for maneuver will be expanded and their national interests will be taken care of. In the regional system narrative, the effect of the regional power struggle between the two countries is clearly noticed. In fact, each country claims that the other is trying to reach the status of a regional hegemon power and establish a regional order in its favor. Besides, each also shows the regional policy of the other party is the reason for the deterioration of regional security and stability. Both state that foreign policy behaviors of each other, such as expansionism, aggressiveness and support for terrorism, create turmoil and uncertainty in the region. While both countries try to turn the current balance of regional power into their favor, they aim to gain an upper-hand in discourse by accusing the other side of doing so. While Saudi Arabia envisions a regional order in which Western states, such as the USA are involved, Iran, on the contrary, talks about a regional order in

which the states from outside the region are not involved. While Saudi Arabia invites allies, such as the USA, to the region thinking that it will not balance Iran on its own, Iran believes it can pursue an effective policy in the Middle East where there are no great Western powers.

As a result, this research tried to expose the media dimension of the competition and power struggle on the ground by determining the strategic narratives of the two countries. The study takes a picture of the strategic narratives of the two sides in a crisis situation through the example of the Yemeni Civil War. On this account, it offers a different perspective for studies examining the two countries' regional rivalry in various dimensions. Apart from this, the strategic narrative dimension of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be further deepened by conducting other studies on how the two are building a narrative for each other in other areas of conflict and whether they are similar to these findings.

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## Appendix

### **Saudi Media**

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