Rising Powers Quarterly Volume 3, Issue 1, 2018, 65-85

Article

Regional Leadership in Authoritarian Contexts – Saudi Arabia's New Military Interventionism as Part of Its Leadership Bid in the Middle East

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia's coalition-based intervention in the Yemeni Civil War in March 2015 marked a stark departure from its previous foreign policy characterized by the leverage of its financial power ("riyalpolitik") instead of military interventionism. Saudi Arabia's "new assertiveness" in recent years has been analyzed as a form of balancing against Iran and a reaction against regional instability in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings since 2011 and the US withdrawal from the region. While this explains the heightened foreign policy activity and militarization, it does not present a convincing rationale for the Saudi intervention in Yemen: Why not confront Iranian expansionism in Syria or Iraq? And why would a largely reclusive autocracy model its alliance formation after the Western "coalition of the willing"? By adding insights from literature on autocratic institutions to the existing systemic arguments, this article suggests that while regional power shifts provided the opportunity structure for Saudi assertiveness, the symbolic dimension of the coalition to signal regional leadership explains the shape of its new regional foreign policy.

Keywords

Regional Power, Regional Hegeomny, Autocratic Foreign Policy, Military Coalitions

Introduction

When Adel al-Jubair, then Saudi Ambassador to the United States, announced in a press conference on March 26, 2015 that Saudi Arabia had launched a military operation together with nine other countries in Yemen to "defend the legitimate government of President Hadi from the takeover attempts by the Houthi militias in Yemen" who had taken over the capital Sana'a (Al Arabiya 2015a), many observers were dumbfounded. That Saudi Arabia and its neighbors took military

initiative seems to herald a new era of Gulf foreign policy. How did this come to pass? And is it more than an ephemeral phenomenon?

Bringing IR, Middle East area studies and autocracy research together, this article aims to explain the shape of Saudi Arabia's recent foreign policy activity focusing on the intervention in Yemen. It thereby follows a recent call for IR approaches to account for the changed regional context since the transformative wave of the Arab Uprisings since 2011 (Valbjørn 2017). While the Saudi Arabian foreign policy activism and its militarization has already been illuminated by a combination of Neorealist balance-of-threat approaches and identity factors, the choices of tactics and arenas of the struggle for regional hegemony have not yet been adequately covered. This article attempts to illuminate these choices exemplified by the formation and leadership of the "Decisive Storm" coalition in Yemen by utilizing research on symbolic functions of autocratic institutions. It proceeds by sketching the puzzle of the militarization of Saudi politics and the decision to intervene in the Yemeni Civil War, followed by a structured presentation of the research explaining this heightened activity and the introduction of insights from autocracy research to explain the intervention in Yemen by symbolic functions of authoritarian institutions.

The Rediscovery of the Gulf Military Ethos: From *Ghazwa* to Riyalpolitik and Back?

Up to the early 20th century, wars, skirmishes and raids by desert warriors were a ubiquitous experience for the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, these were so common that the Arabic word for raid – – has made it into European languages in the version of the "razzia". The history of state formation in the Peninsula is essentially a history of war and conquest as much as it is a history of the political economy of oil and colonial politics. The most "militarized" of these states, up to the early 20th century, was Saudi Arabia, founded in 1932 by 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Saud. Also known as Ibn Saud in the West, he was a major military leader, often stylized in the Western image as a "desert warrior" (Al-Rasheed 2010, p.5).

Yet, for the rest of the century, military action was almost completely discarded. After the 1934 Saudi Arabian-Yemeni War, Saudi troops were rarely utilized abroad apart from token divisions sent to the Arab effort against Israel. Of the 444 militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) between 1945-2001 involving participants from the Middle East, Saudi Arabia appears as a participant merely 34 times (out of 748 Middle East participants overall; in 7.7% of disputes and forming 4.5% of all dispute participants) (Ghosn, Palmer & Bremer 2004).[1] This

[1] Compared to its neighbors in the region it remains a very low number, especially for its size. All other large states in the Middle East (except for Morocco and Algeria) and even tiny Lebanon participated more often, referring Saudi Arabia to the 7th rank in terms of MID involvement. The figures cover the

is despite its long history of independence and ample reason (many unsolved territorial conflicts) and opportunity (being large and wealthy) for militarized action.

While Arab states in other sub-regions of the Middle East and North Africa modernized their militaries, waged major interstate wars and used the military to transform society and state, Saudi Arabia instead saw a "military modernization in reverse" (Cronin 2013, p.2). In fact, in the late 1970s, the Saudi National Guard (SANG), the tribally-based military counterbalancing the regular army and making up one third of all troops, remained the "only force in over thirty Third World countries unable to maintain and service its own armoured vehicles!" (Ayubi 1995, p.283). Financial support – "Riyalpolitik" – was pursued instead of military participation in war and conflicts in post-statehood years: examples include the support of the Royalists in the 1962-1967 Yemeni Civil War, of various factions in the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), and of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Only with the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990 did Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states in general provide an (albeit limited) number of troops to the coalition (Allison 2012, pp.120–122; Heard-Bey 2006, p.205).

The lamentations about Gulf military efficiency have a long tradition – from being showcases of politicized fragmentation and deliberate weakening of the military aimed at coup-proofing the regime (Quinlivan 1999; Hertog 2011) to forming the culmination of a general tendency towards military inefficiency in Arab militaries (Pollack 2002). Already in 1995, Ayubi notes the discrepancy between the high military spending, both in absolute terms and terms relative to GDP, and the lacking military effectiveness and performance of the Saudis: "In short therefore the state of Saudi Arabia's military capability leaves much to be desired" (1995, p.280). Pollack reserves the most scathing assessment of the inefficacy of Arab militaries for the Saudi case, blaming the oil wealth and strong reliance on the US for magnifying the effect: "In the end, they had little to show for their billions of dollars spent on defense since the first oil boom. Saudi troops suffered from all of the same problems as other Arab armies, only worse" (Pollack 2002, p.446).

In light of these long-term developments, the sudden flurry of military adventurism of the kingdom and its smaller neighbors seems all the more surprising. There have been early signs of an increased foreign policy activism and military outlook of the Gulf states in the last few years, catalyzed by the turmoil ignited by the Arab Uprisings. Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait have passed laws to introduce compulsory military service for citizens in 2013-2015 (Smith Diwan 2015; Sophia 2015). Hitherto, their militaries were mostly composed of foreign nationals, who made up most of the workforce in all other work areas seen as "menial" in the states whose populations are overwhelmingly composed of guest workers. These

time period 1945-2001 and exclude Sudan and Turkey. Otherwise, the tendency would be even more pronounced.

activities have been accompanied by a steep rise in defense spending and weapons procurement (although the budget especially in Saudi Arabia has slumped since 2015 because of low oil prices) (IISS 2017).

Following the 2011 uprising, Peninsula Shield Force (the military component of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the GCC) troops were sent to Bahrain to quell protests (Guzansky 2014). In August 2014, the UAE and Egyptian air forces surprised observers when they conducted joint airstrikes against the Islamist "Dawn" (*Fajr*) alliance in Libya (Kirkpatrick & Schmitt 2014). Since 2014, the monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE as well as Jordan and Morocco were the Arab participants in the US-led anti-Islamic State (IS) coalition ("Inherent Resolve") that flew airstrikes against IS targets on Syrian territory (Jordan later expanded to Iraq). However, the contributions of the GCC states were limited and criticism of a lack of commitment on the Arab part abounded (Thompson 2015). Saudi pledges to commit more resources and possibly ground troops in Syria were soon forgotten (or retracted) (Mustafa & Mehta 2016).

An effective military slowly became a greater priority for the GCC states with Saudi Arabia pushing greater cooperation and coordination in the security sphere. In its 34th summit in December 2013, the GCC had agreed on the establishment of a joint military command that was to be instituted alongside the Peninsula Shield Force and to have a force of 100,000, half of which to be provided by Saudi Arabia (Saidy 2014). At the summit the following year, the institution of a joint police force (based in Abu Dhabi) and a joint navy (based in Bahrain) were decided (Vela 2014). A project that transcends the Gulf is a joint military command in the Arab League frame supposed to number 40,000 (Mustafa 2015) which has, however, not progressed since 2015.

Saudi Arabia's regional engagement grew extensively since 2011. Apart from its participation in the anti-IS coalition and its engagement in Bahrain, its notable activities include the intensive support of rebels in Syria (Hokayem 2014). Many of Saudi Arabia's projects include large-scale multilateral coalition-building. In December 2015, the kingdom announced the formation of a by now 37-members-strong Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) (although some of the alleged members initially expressed surprise at their inclusion) (Gaub 2016), and conducted a major military exercise in February 2016 ("North Thunder") which reportedly involved 150,000 troops from 20 countries (Riedel 2016). Following years of enormous defense spending, it now has the best-equipped military after Israel (IISS 2017, p.401).[2]

[2] Although the title for the most capable armed forces in the Gulf is held by the UAE (IISS 2017, p.409).

The intervention in the Yemeni Civil War: Operation "Decisive Storm" (*Asifat al-Hazm*)

The most impactful engagement which will form the focus of the analysis is, however, the military intervention in Yemen initiated by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in March 2015. In September 2014, the Houthis, a Zaidi Shia militia, took over the Yemeni capital Sana'a. After encroaching on the provisional capital in Aden on May 25, 2015, the Houthi invasion caused President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia from where he called for military support against the rebels, citing Article 51 of the UN charter. Saudi Arabia announced its intentions of forming a military coalition and launched airstrikes overnight on March 26, 2015. Apart from the kingdom, nine countries agreed to join from the outset: the UAE, Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Morocco, Pakistan and Sudan – including all GCC members except for Oman. Senegal, Somalia and Eritrea later also agreed to join the coalition (Binnie 2015a; Madabish 2015). US President Barack Obama authorized logistical and intelligence support which was soon expanded (Hennigan, King & Al-Alayaa 2015). The main drivers behind and architects of the Yemen intervention were Saudi Arabian and the UAE decision-makers.[3]

Saudi Arabia contributed the most resources to the coalition and reported deploying 100 fighter jets and 150,000 troops while Qatar sent 10, Bahrain and Kuwait 15 jets in the first hours (Shaheen & Kamali Dehghan 2015).[4] Except for Pakistan, where parliament resisted military participation, all the other initiative countries sent fighter jets as well, the UAE 30, and Jordan up to six (AFP 2015). Saudi Arabia and the UAE also deployed Special Forces in July (Binnie 2015b). In contrast to "Inherent Resolve" in Syria and Iraq, the intervention in Yemen also included ground troops from the outset, initially 3,000 from Saudi Arabia and the UAE alone (Salisbury & Kerr 2015). Qatar reportedly provided another 1,000 troops before dropping out of the coalition following the row with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain in June 2017 (El Yaakoubi 2017). Apart from the high material costs of the coalition, great losses were also incurred in terms of casualties. Having been mostly unaccustomed to war and war casualties, battlefield deaths had a dramatic effect. One of the most shocking events for the Gulf monarchies transpired on September 4, when 52 Emirati, 10 Saudi and 5 Bahraini soldiers were killed during a single operation (Smith Diwan 2015). In June 2016, the UAE announced the end of the military part of its operation, but Emirati troops remained in place, even leading to further casualties (Kedem 2016). Saudi

[3] Especially the Crown Princes of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, Muhammad bin Salman and Muhammad bin Zayed, are most often identified as the architects of the intervention (Henderson 2017).

[4] All troop numbers are based on open-source media information and are probably highly exaggerated. More credible estimates put the numbers of Saudi combat troop numbers at about 3,500 (with 6,500 support personnel) (Mustafa & Mehta 2016).

Arabia suffered the greatest losses although the casualty number are a matter of great debate, ranging from officially 300 to up to tenfold the number (Law 2016). Never before had the Saudi rulers sacrificed their own citizens in wars for their national goals on such a scale.

To be clear, it was not the first time that Arab states formed military coalitions against a common threat (the multiple Arab-Israeli wars from 1948 to 1973). It was also not the first time Saudi Arabia was involved militarily in Yemen (e.g. in the Yemeni Civil Wars and airstrikes against the Houthis in 2009-2010). But it was the first time that Saudi Arabia and its neighbors, militarily weak and inexperienced, especially in ground combat, designed and lead a prolonged military operation involving heavy burdens and commitment on their own, under purely regional leadership. Even in conflicts of vital importance to the Saudis, as during the Yemeni Civil War 1962-1967 and the two Yemeni border clashes in 1972 and 1979, the kingdom has never committed its own armed forces for offensive purposes. For most of its history, Saudi Arabia "could not credibly threaten either [South or North] Yemen with direct military attack" (Gause 1990, p.10).

But the puzzle is not just Gulf or Saudi military initiative per se, but also its shape. The coalition that carried out "Decisive Storm" (*asifat al-hazm*) resembles "coalitions of the willing" which are usually initiated and led by multilateral-minded democracies (mostly, the US). It is no accident that even the name invokes the "Desert Storm" (*asifat al-sahra'* in Arabic) operation against Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait. Being an autocratic monarchy, Saudi Arabia always eschewed "friendships that are too close and also enmities that are too intense" (Gause 1994, p.121) and did not initiate large-scale committed coalitions.

The choice of intervention location also warrants an explanation. The main justifications for the intervention cited by the coalition members are the restoration of the "legitimate government" of Yemen and the containment of Iranian expansionism. However, most researchers concur that the evidence for Iranian involvement in Yemen has been minor to non-existent – at least before the intervention (e.g. Juneau 2016). Given its broad activities in the region and its major investment in the Syrian Civil War, why open another battle ground, one which is not even well suited to balance and contain the main rival?

Why Militarization? Shifts in Regional Power Constellations: The Withdrawal of the US, the Rise of Iran

Traditionally, foreign policy in the Middle East and especially of Saudi Arabia has often been explained with variants of Neorealist *balance-of-power* (Waltz 1979) and *balance-of-threat* approaches (Walt 1990). Already implied in Walt's theory, ideational factors regarding threat perception were inseparable from material ca-

pabilities. These approaches were then enhanced by the concept of *omnibalancing* (David 1991) that adds the dimension of regime security that is especially relevant for autocracies (see e.g. Nonneman 2005). According to the omnibalancing approach, states, and especially autocracies, do not only balance against external, but also domestic threats and the external powers allied with them. To that end, they may even align with secondary adversaries (David 1991, pp.235–236).

These approaches, combining external and domestic security as the main drivers of foreign policy, are still dominating explanations of heightened foreign policy activity of Saudi Arabia and the international relations of the Persian Gulf in the last few years (Legrenzi & Gause 2016, p.306). The geopolitical restructuring of the region since 2011 has fundamentally changed the regional security context and opened windows of opportunity for heightened activism of regional actors (see e.g. Colombo 2017; Gause 2017; Salloukh 2017; Mabon 2015).

The timing of Saudi activism coincides with major shifts in the behavior and capabilities of its main ally – the US – and its main rival – Iran. As the US, previously an extra-regional hegemon, withdraws, a power vacuum ensues – to be filled by one of the regional powers. The withdrawal created an opportunity structure that enabled the foreign policy aspirations and activity of non-traditional regional powers like Qatar and the UAE (Ulrichsen 2017; Kamrava 2013) and boosted the activity of the dominant power on the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia.

Whereas previously, Persian Gulf dynamics were shaped by the power triangle of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq (Fürtig 2007), the collapse of Iraq following the US invasion in 2003 turned the tripole into a bipolar competition. When faced with the Scylla of Iran and the Charybdis of Iraq, Saudi Arabia had to remain wary of both. With the collapse of Iraq as a relevant state actor, the kingdom could turn its focus to an arms race with the only remaining regional power – Iran. Catalyzed by the turmoil since 2011, a classic security dilemma ensued – both on the material and ideological/identity level (Mabon 2015, 2017; Partrick 2016).

US-Saudi relations were already tense following the superpower's perceived reneging on alliance commitments to long-standing US ally Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011, a dynamic the rise of Iran in a contested regional system exacerbated (Fawcett 2015; Baxter & Simpson 2015). US behavior towards Iran fueled Saudi suspicions. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA), the agreement between the P5+1+EU (and thereby the US) and Iran on nuclear nonproliferation, deepened the Iran-Saudi rivalry in the short run. Not only did it provide Iran with greater economic capabilities, it also bestowed international recognition on the pariah state and thus re-incorporated it into regional power constellations (Bahi 2017). This additional sign of US "abandonment" parallel to the boost of Iranian capabilities further stoked fears that induced self-reliance,

even in the nuclear sphere where a nuclear arms race seems likely in case of an Iranian nuclear breakout (Cigar 2016).

Identity and perception are inseparable from balance-of-threat explanations in the Middle East (cf. Gause 2017; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2014). The perception of the Iranian threat is governed not only by material capabilities but also by two major identity-linked ways in which it undermines Saudi domestic stability. First, it challenges the core of the ruling family's religious legitimacy by showing an alternative form of Islamic government: an "Islamic Republic" instead of the Islamic monarchy. Secondly, it is seen by Saudi Arabia as fostering "sectarianism" and instigate rebellion and separatism of Shia groups in a Sunni-majority Arab world (al-Saud 2004; Hubbard & Sheikh 2015). That Saudi Arabia chooses to balance against Iran is therefore no surprise, whether the Iranian ascendancy is real or imagined by the kingdom.

However, Saudi Arabia's ability to form an alliance against Iran is impeded by two main problems. First, the traditional regional hegemon, Saudi ally and balancer against Iran, the US, is unable and unwilling to fulfill this role anymore. While the military bases are still present, the political will to be involved is weakened. The last two presidents, Donald Trump as well as Barack Obama campaigned on policies calling for isolationism or a "pivot to Asia", i.e. away from Europe and the Middle East.[5]

Second, attracting regional allies for the purpose of balancing is impeded by ideological obstacles that lead to "underbalancing", i.e. the failure of multiple regional states who also see Iran as a threat (like Israel, Egypt and Turkey or Sunni states in general) to ally (Gause 2017).

The rise of Iran and withdrawal of the US are the main drivers for the new Saudi "assertiveness" and militarization. But additional explanation is warranted to explain the shape of that assertiveness and the engagement in Yemen. While balance-of-threat approaches can also explain why Saudi Arabia chose to tackle the Houthis instead of IS, they do not explain why it chose Yemen instead of the Assad regime in Syria. Fighting IS in Syria or Iraq would strengthen Iran as it would ultimately benefit the allied Syrian regime. But Assad's Syria, as the only "state" ally to Iran apart from the weak and fragmented Iraqi government, is so vital to the Islamic Republic that it invests massive resources and parts of its own military to avoid regime change. The periphery Houthis tribal warriors and their allies, however, are of low strategic importance and consequently do not enjoy priority in Iranian calculations and little tangible support. Weakening Assad in Syria

[5] Given the erratic nature of Donald Trump's foreign policy thus far, the current administration's anti-Iranian rhetoric is unlikely to lead to a long-term change towards a return to Cold-War-era interventionism.

would harm Iranian influence much more than weakening the Houthis and their allies – still, Saudi Arabia's battleground choice took the opposite route. Instead of allying with the militarily most powerful states in the region (most of which are anti-Iranian), it chose to amass a "coalition of the willing", a cooperation form known from democracies, with itself at the helm. Saudi Arabian coalition-building in Yemen, but also in the IMAFT mostly consists of inactive and militarily weak members who do little to contribute and strengthen the alliance – which runs counter to the idea that a key parameter for the choice of alliance partners is reliability and state reputation (Crescenzi et al. 2012, p.260). Clearly, the explanation cannot lie in power or security maximization alone (cf. Gause 2017).

One way to resolve these discrepancies is by focusing on secondary functions of alliances and coalitions. Neither Decisive Storm nor the IMAFT are primarily about material military capabilities and the ability to project power. Instead, they can be better understood by looking at its functions as generators of symbolic capital and the accumulation of prestige that are meant to bolster the Saudi claim to regional leadership.

Why Yemen? Coalition-Building as a Means of Signaling Leadership

As Levy and Barnett argued, there is more to an alliance than just its provision of security and/or power (1991). An alliance can also serve internal aims such as resource-provision or regime security (David 1991). Other, secondary functions include reputation-building and prestige which may also drive policy. These secondary functions are usually complementary to security-seeking and power maximization, but can also stand on their own or even contradict them (Kim 2004).

Although this applies to both autocracies and democracies (see e.g. for the case of Canadian coalition engagement: Massie 2013), the systematic study of such factors has tended to focus on democracies. For many IR scholars, states might have been "like units" (Waltz 1979, p.93), but some units have been "more like" than others. As Reed described it: "Scholars are consistently finding that the international behavior of democracies differs from that of other regime types" (1997, p.1078). Democracies are said to be more durable, more prosperous (Halperin, Siegle & Weinstein 2005), less warlike (Ray 2013) and more successful in war (Lake 1992). During conflict, they are described as more reliable allies (Leeds 2003), more likely to ally in the first place (Lai & Reiter 2000), and potentially more successful with their coalitions at war (Pilster 2011), especially when they consist of other democracies (Choi 2004).

Not all these assessments are undisputed. That democracies are really more efficient and effective at military coalitions has been controversial for some time (Simon & Gartzke 1996; Lai & Reiter 2000). Additionally, the focus on democ-

racies – while helping broaden the scope of alliance theory – diminished the role of non-democracies to a mere mirror-image. However, "autocratic" foreign policy is more than just the opposite of democratic behavior, an impression which overly "mystifies" autocratic behavior in two ways: first, it obscures their similarities to democracies and second, it ignores that the specificities of autocracies that do exist are not mere opposites of democratic behavior.

The period of heightened autocratic cooperation following the "Color Revolutions" in Central Asia and Eastern Europe and the Arab Uprisings in the Middle East prompted relevant research on the topic (e.g. Soest 2015; Odinius & Kuntz 2015). Especially scholars of Comparative Politics have slowly started to put authoritarian cooperation on the agenda (Erdmann et al. 2013; Mattes & Rodríguez 2014; Young 2014). Some of these studies show convincingly that many assumptions about the differences between autocracies and democracies do not hold and if we look closely at different kinds of autocratic regimes we find evidence that at least some sub-types might not be that different from democracies after all, even regarding key "democratic features" such as institutional constraints and accountability (Mattes & Rodríguez 2014) or audience costs (Weeks 2012, 2014a).

The Yemen coalition is an example of cooperation in the military realm, a new phenomenon for a (sub-)region where military autocratic cooperation and coordination seldom encompassed more than two or three allies at a time. Research on military cooperation and coalition-building has nevertheless remained sparse. Especially the question of why autocrats would want to cooperate in the first place remains understudied (Weeks 2014b).The study of further functions of military coalitions beyond the immediate provision of security is a promising avenue of research and insights from autocracy research can help illuminate this field as they provide an especially nuanced picture of the importance of the symbolic power of alliances. Alliances and especially their more ephemeral manifestation, coalitions, can serve many of the same functions as other institutions do for authoritarian regimes.[6]

Among the most salient (secondary) functions of authoritarian institutions are "operating manual, billboard, blueprint, window-dressing" (Ginsburg & Simpser 2013, p.2). An operating *manual* provides a description, giving clear rules and guidelines toward a particular aim; a *billboard* is an advertisement, signaling intentions or policies – this function is especially likely to be found in democratic institutions as well. The last two functions point to the discrepancies between the actual situation and either an aspired one in the future (*blueprint*) or an expected normative ideal that is not matched by reality, as in the difference between constitutional aspirations and constitutional reality (*window-dressing*) (Ginsburg &

[6] A definition of institutions as "humanely devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction" (North 1991, p.97) is used here to include coalitions.

Simpser 2013, pp.6–8; Ginsburg 2015).

Although these concepts have been used mainly for constitutions, they are useful for an analysis of alliances and especially coalitions as well. Coalitions are less formal, more ad-hoc and often less durable than alliances (Kober 2002, pp.1–2) and are more applicable to the abovementioned functions which are malleable, often overlapping and likely to change under different circumstances. Changes and adaptations to the more formal and durable alliances incur greater costs if "prime" functions as security and regime security are not addressed as a priority.

These secondary functions are related to the topic of symbolic politics, prestige and signaling of states in international politics (cf. Kim 2004). In this sphere, democracies were also regarded as superior due to their supposedly better ability to create audience costs to signal credible commitment (Fearon 1997). Later studies looking closer at the specificities of autocracies have uncovered that no absolute superiority exists as the ability to generate audience costs depends on specific institutions that vary with regime sub-types. E.g., Saudi Arabia, as a dynastic monarchy, is one of the autocracies that have no relative inferiority to democracies in signaling credible commitment (Weeks 2008). The Saudi decision to assemble a military coalition to fight in Yemen can be thus explained as an attempt to signal the ability to lead in place of the US and to attain prestige to bolster its claim to regional hegemony.

These symbolic functions of authoritarian institutions outlined above can all be traced in the anti-Houthi coalition. First, it took previous US-led "coalitions of the willing", including Inherent Resolve against the IS (as well as the coalition in the two Gulf Wars of 1990/91 and 2003) as an *operating manual* providing guidance how an effective or at least legitimate military intervention should look like. This makes the Yemen coalition a *blueprint*, showing the potential of the Yemen coalition: a stronger integration of regional security institutions. This blueprint is connected to other Saudi initiatives towards regional integration which have failed before (such as the integration of the GCC), but have in recent times re-emerged with the invitation of Jordan and Morocco to the GCC, financial support towards poorer GCC states (cf. Odinius & Kuntz 2015) as well as military cooperation and coordination attempts and plans for a joint police force (*Al Arabiya* 2015b). By providing multilateral legitimacy and acceptance, the coalition also masks (*window-dresses*) the fact that the Yemen intervention is heavily criticized, both for its claims to efficiency as well as its aims which in all likelihood more directly relate to regime security and hegemonic ambitions of kingdom (cf. Darwich 2015) and its allies than to any humanitarian or security-maximizing goal for Yemen itself.

At the same time, the coalition is a *billboard* to showcase its leader's – Saudi Ara-

bia's – international commitment, qualification as a regional political and military power and its ability to replace the reclining US, to which it previously outsourced military leadership, by fighting its fights.[7] The modeling of Decisive Storm on Inherent Resolve (and Desert Storm and other US-led multilateral military coalitions) is therefore in all likelihood not due to accident, but underlines the Saudi bid for succession of the US as regional hegemon and security provider in the Middle East. To become a regional hegemon and to attract allies to overcome underbalancing against Iran, Saudi Arabia needs to prove that it can take over the US military role. This is different from balancing as it refers to the *symbolic* aspects of signaling commitment and military prowess instead of enacting it. This matches the general pattern of the stronger "assertiveness" of Saudi foreign policy and some of its recent efforts, like the announcement of the formation of a large 37-member IMAFT and can be generalized towards Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior in general. The Saudi-led alliance is not the first example of an autocracy participating in military endeavors not for security, but to signal leadership. According to Al-Ahram, Egyptian troops in the coalition against Saddam 1990/1991 were not there as "part of the U.S.-European armada, but to prove to Arab brothers and friends alike" that Egypt was able to take a leadership role (cited in: Long 2004, p.37).

The difference between material and symbolic capabilities is crucial for the dynamics of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Saudi Arabia has less than half the population of Iran and although it has almost caught up with Iran in terms of active military personnel (it now has the third-largest armed forces after Iraq and Iran) (IISS 2017, p.363),[8] the Saudi military is much less capable and experienced than the Iranian one. Iran has fought interstate wars, insurgencies and proxy conflicts in the last decades. This experience and manpower once led US general John Abizaid to describe its military as "the most powerful in the Middle East" among the Muslim-majority states (Hussain 2012).

In contrast, as described in the introductory section above, Saudi Arabia has very little military experience and its track record in Yemen since 2015 has demonstrated that up-to-date equipment alone is not enough to win wars (Brimelow 2017). In brief, Saudi Arabia, although much wealthier, is not a match for Iran in military terms and could not win in direct confrontation. It could, however, still win on symbolic grounds and by providing a rallying post against Iran. This explains the chosen location for the military engagement. In Syria (or Iraq or Lebanon for that matter), where Iranian involvement is direct and intensive, the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's attempts to signal leadership ability and military prowess would be countered. Saudi Arabia is therefore confined to a mainly fi-

[7] Media framing shows signs that this advertising seems to work (see e.g. Trofimov 2015; Obaid 2015).
[8] While Saudi Arabia now boasts 227,000 active personnel, Iran still has 523,000, although the 2016 Saudi Arabian defense budget was more than three times that of its neighbor (IISS 2017, pp.376, 401).

nancial and diplomatic role there (Hokayem 2014). In Yemen, where no Iranian troops are present and only weak ties between Iran and the Houthis and their allies exist, such signaling is stronger.

Nevertheless, signaling is not completely divorced from material capabilities. To bolster legitimacy and provide credibility, it must be costly (Fearon 1997). This explains the immense financial commitment in Yemen as well as the willingness to sustain heavy unprecedented casualties. It is mirrored in the intense domestic and regional propaganda campaign surrounding the coalition and the fight against Iran in general (see Matthiesen & Sons 2016; Hashemi & Postel 2017).

This does not mean that this policy has been successful. To the contrary, most evidence implies that it failed. Iran was dragged into the conflict in Yemen and began supporting the Houthis, of which there was no prior evidence before the operation, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Saudi and Emirati efforts to sideline Qatar and strengthen their position against Iran backfired as no unified block emerged. To the contrary, Iran and Turkey strengthened their relationships with Qatar and underbalancing is even more pronounced than previously. The Yemen war drags on for more than two years with little visible success (cf. Nasser 2016; El Yaakoubi 2017). Given the amount of investment in the effort by Saudi Arabia, ending the war without tangible results would be problematic for the ruling elite.

Conclusion

As many scholars have so far pointed out, Saudi Arabia's drive to an "assertive" foreign policy is induced by national and regional power and security concerns, given the perception of Iran as the main threat and the US withdrawal from the region. However, systemic balance-of-threat-theory, even if enhanced by ideational elements, struggles to explain the emergence of the multilateral coalition in the first place and the Saudi preference for engagement in Yemen instead of Syria, where Iranian influence is more entrenched and balancing attempts would therefore be more effective. Supplementing this well-established systemic element of regional power shifts with a domestic, regime-type centered element – symbolic functions of authoritarian institutions – helps explain these choices as a means to overcome underbalancing and establish itself as a candidate for regional leadership.

Autocracy research helps demystifying autocratic cooperation, with the emergent literature showing that autocracies are not necessarily that different from democracies when it comes to foreign policy behavior. Literature on the functions of authoritarian institutions illuminates the incentives for autocracies to instigate cooperation and bridges the gap between IR and Comparative Politics. Besides external and regime security, military coalitions have additional symbolic and signaling functions for some authoritarian states. The multilateral cooperation and

coalition-building by Saudi Arabia helps to illuminate the features and drivers of authoritarian cooperation.

At the same time, we need to embed these institutional functions into a regional and global scenario where a superpower is withdrawing from the region, creating a power vacuum which creates balancing behavior by aspiring regional hegemons. This is possibly the first time since the formation of the modern Middle East regional system that an external hegemon hands over the reins completely to regional actors, thereby enabling them but also forcing them to fend for themselves. This marks a watershed for regional actors' security cooperation and a constitutive phenomenon that might cement Saudi assertiveness as a more durable mark of Middle Eastern politics. It appears that the kingdom can no longer rely on "riyal-politik" alone, marking a return to the old-new politics of the "ghazwa".

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