

## **Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Tale of Two Media**

**by Anne Hagood**

### **Introduction**

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have a long history of difficult relations with Tehran and are increasingly concerned about Iran's expanding regional influence. The most prominent of those countries is Saudi Arabia, the leading regional Sunni power, an economic and political rival of Shia Iran and, as the birthplace of Islam, a country with a claim to worldwide Muslim leadership. As the conflict raged between the Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq over the past few years, relations have unraveled between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iranian-Saudi relations help define broader Arab-Iranian ties and are pivotal to the security of the Gulf region. Throughout the numerous regional crises that have occurred in the region over the past decades, these two powers have used the media as a platform to win the hearts and minds of the Arab populations, to reshape their discourse and legitimize their actions.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia use the media to portray their own distorted reality through the prism of their own agendas; and to compete with each other, they exaggerate this distortion. The media have also been instrumental in stirring up *fitna* (discord) between Sunnis and Shi'ites, which has been exacerbated by the last war in Iraq, by the sectarian divisions in Lebanon, and by the desire of Saudi Arabia and Western allies to counter Iran's expanding influence in the Middle East and what certain commentators and politicians have called the "Shia crescent."

Both countries use the media to propagate their message, exert influence in Middle Eastern politics, and develop power relations by using the media's ability to shape their relationships with other nations and with ethno-sectarian populations. Through these channels they also construct their own political discourse and indirectly communicate with one another.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are now key players in the Arabic-language media market, transforming it into an arena for confrontation and quests for popularity. Every conflict or crisis in the region becomes an opportunity for them to exert their influence and the media provides them with the ability to legitimize their actions while trying to win the hearts and minds of the Arab world through their own propaganda.

### **Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia**

After the founding of the modern state of Saudi Arabia in 1932, Saudi-Iranian relations were

initially colored by the lens of the ancient Shia-Sunni conflict. Riyadh and Tehran developed more cordial relations under the rule of King Saud and King Faisal, and both countries managed to overcome complex territorial disputes in the Gulf. Their relationship remained rooted within strategic and political arenas, and to a certain extent was pushed forward by the American agenda in the region. Both countries' ties to America remained amiable until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The geopolitical situation was based on a bipolar system where the Great Game<sup>1</sup> came back to the Middle East under the muted form of the Cold War. Iran and Saudi Arabia, fearing the expansion of the Soviet Union in the Persian/Arabian Gulf and rejecting Arab nationalism such as that of Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, faced the possibility of unrest. More importantly, the Middle East evolved into a battleground for proxy wars, a strategy that Iran and Saudi Arabia would adopt as their own.

Another reality hit the international scene at that time: the world's largest reserves of petroleum, essential to fuel the world's economies, are in the Middle East. These geopolitical and strategic elements consequently influenced Saudi-Iranian relations, as Tehran and Riyadh assumed unparalleled status in the 1970s as a result of the oil boom. The Iranian revolution in 1979 ended decades of friendly ties between the two states. The new Islamic regime denounced the corruption of the Saudis and accused them of serving American interests. The Saudi government retaliated by declaring that its Iranian counterpart's aim was to export revolution. The Islamic revolution was also seen as the first sign of a Shia revival that could threaten Saudi national stability and help expand Iranian influence. The Iran-Iraq War, in which Saudi Arabia and the United States helped Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, paved the way for further deterioration in Saudi-Iranian relations.

Relations between Tehran and Riyadh improved after the 1991 war over Kuwait, although they remained constrained by past grievances. Among the most recent events in the region, the war in Iraq and the consolidation of sectarian politics, more specifically Shia parties dominating the Iraqi political landscape, Iran's nuclear program and U.S. politics, have shaped a new dynamic in Iranian-Saudi relations.

Iran has considerably benefited from the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and it is an increasingly emboldened Iran that now seeks to advance its agenda in the Middle East. The regional context has paved the way for a reinterpretation of Iranian policies and Saudi strategy through a series of proxy confrontations. The current crisis in Yemen provides another theater where both have an opportunity to exert some influence in the hearts and minds of Arab populations, using the media to propagate their own ideology.

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<sup>1</sup> Term attributed to Arthur Conolly to describe rivalry and strategic conflict between the British Empire and Tsarist Russian Empire for supremacy in Central Asia.

The lack of political cohesion and national identity in Yemen has left a vacuum for militant groups and foreign interference, a space where these two regional giants can act out their rivalry through the fragmented tribal population of the country. The Yemeni government has for the past five years waged a campaign against the secessionist Houthi movement. Saudi media have insinuated on numerous occasions that the Houthis are not motivated by tribal and economic grievances, but that their grievances are defined on sectarian lines. The continuing conflict with the Houthis stems in fact from local and tribal issues that date back to the Yemeni revolution of 1962.

The revolution in Yemen, which paved the way for national unity, put an end to the rule of the Zaydi imams, who had ruled all or parts of the country since the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Zaydism is part of Shia Islam but differs from the mainstream Shia tradition upheld by Iran. The Houthis include members of numerous tribes, which are mainly Shia and adhere to Zaydism. Sa'da, in the northern part of Yemen, was the main stronghold of the Zaydis but following their political demise the region became economically marginalized.

The conflict expanded because of a series of latent religious, social, political and economic tensions, taking on, at times, the form of a sectarian conflict rooted in historical grievances and endemic underdevelopment. A core of Zaydi revivalists remained, including the Houthis, and they fought to protect Zaydism from the challenge posed by the spread of salafi influences, mainly from Saudi Arabia, and out of a sense that Zaydism was besieged.

The development of the conflict has also been largely influenced by the regional confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has intensified the religious dimension. As the government accuses the rebels of alignment with Iran and of loyalty to the Lebanese Shi'ite movement Hezbollah, Houthi leaders have denounced the government's alignment with the United States. They also claim that Saudi Arabia has interfered, in particular by funding the government and local tribes.

The Sa'dah war, with its underlying albeit largely misleading Sunni/Shi'ite dimension, has become part of this narrative of geopolitical and sectarian rivalry, and although an Iranian role cannot be excluded, it is not self-evident. From Tehran's perspective, a Shia rebellion along Saudi Arabia's borders is strategically beneficial. Still, serious theological differences between Zaydism and the Jaafari Shi'ism dominant in Iran and the persistent Arab-Persian divide have limited Iran's influence.

After many years of back and forth in truce negotiations, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh declared that the Houthis showed no intention of adhering to the peace process<sup>2</sup> and accused them

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<sup>2</sup> <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/08/200981294214604934.html>

of destroying homes and farms while blocking food distribution.

The campaign began again and worsened when Houthi rebels killed a Saudi border guard and wounded eleven others in early November 2009. The Houthis protested they were only defending themselves against the Saudis, who led a military incursion and bombed Houthi villages, apparently with the aim of helping its troubled southern neighbor control what Arab diplomats portrayed as an escalating Shiite rebellion<sup>3</sup>.

Like the Iranian media, the Houthis have claimed that the governments of Yemen and Saudi Arabia are pawns of American hegemonic ambitions in the region and serve Israeli interests. This rhetoric has been used countless times in attacking Saudi Arabia in Iranian media to undermine and delegitimize the kingdom in Arab eyes.

The timing of the crisis, from the political and strategic regional perspectives, has yielded its own distinctive features. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are at a watershed moment given the recent developments in the political landscape in the region. The issue at stake remains to determine what role they will be playing in the ever-changing Middle East and how each will define itself within this context. Eventually, both Saudi Arabia and Iran cater their messages to entice Arab populations into backing their ideological campaigns. While Saudi Arabia still claims to be a stabilizing force in the region, standing in contrast to the unstable influence of Iran, the Islamic Republic claims to offer a new found freedom within the framework of a revolutionary and religious approach.

### **Iranian interference: Myth or Reality?**

Since the Islamic revolution, Iran has been promoting itself as the only legitimate umbrella for all the Shias of the region, while nurturing the ambition of being the greater representative of all Muslims<sup>4</sup>. The nuanced interests of the Houthis and Iran do not help in understanding the context in which a symbiotic relationship between the two has grown. It is a multidimensional and complex context that is not necessarily mutual and has grown over a relatively long period.

Iran, being officially a Shia state, safeguards Shia Islam and acts as a reference point to many Shia movements worldwide through funding programs or political support. This support has been provided to Shia groups in Iraq, to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and even to some Sunni groups, such as Hamas in the Palestinian territories. Iran has developed strong relations with popular Shia parties abroad, becoming politically more influential. Consequently, Iran is seen as a threat to Saudi Arabia, the symbol of Sunni ideology, and to Saudi influence in the Middle East and the

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/05/saudi-arabia-bombs-yemen\\_n\\_346787.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/05/saudi-arabia-bombs-yemen_n_346787.html)

<sup>4</sup> The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape The Future. Vali Nasr

Gulf.

It is certain that Iran has a clear interest in increasing the strength of the Houthis, who are ideologically close to it and could be recruited - one way or another - to achieve objectives that would help promote Iran's national and regional interests.

Hussein Al-Houthi, the Houthi leader killed in September 2004 during confrontations between the government and his group, was instrumental in the Sa'dah insurgency<sup>5</sup>. The Yemeni government alleged that the Houthis were seeking to overthrow it and to implement Shia religious law, while the latter party countered that they are "defending their community against discrimination" and government aggression. Al-Houthi, originally a member of parliament in Yemen prior to the southern separatist movement that broke out in the country in 1994, was a member of the Al-Haqq party – a sectarian party established by the Zaydi people. However, he later fled to Syria and then Iran. There Hussein experienced the Iranian economic system and the ideological formation of the Islamic republic, and on his return to Yemen, he left the Al-Haqq party as it no longer appealed to him for its lack of enthusiasm to challenge the Yemeni government.

Consequently, in 1997 Hussein Al-Houthi founded the “Believing Youth Party” (al-Shabab al-Mu'mineen), which took ideological cues from the Iranian revolution, organizing summer camps where children received ideological and revolutionary education, inciting people against the Yemeni state and depicting America and Israel as well as other Arab regimes in the region as enemies of Islam<sup>6</sup>.

According to Saudi sources<sup>7</sup>, the Houthis' form of protest against the government was inspired by the model adopted by Hezbollah. These claims hint at the intention of Saudi Arabia to emphasize the destabilizing threat that the group may represent to the Yemeni government as well as to the region by drawing a parallel between the role of Hezbollah in the destabilization of Lebanese politics and the problems the Houthis represent to the Yemeni government. Saudi media compare the tribal group with secessionist ambitions to Hezbollah by alleging that it amounts to a state within a state inside Yemen<sup>8</sup> so that, in time, the Houthis might be able to challenge the Yemeni government and impose their political ideology on the whole country. Al-Houthi, however, always claimed that he had no intention of being an extended arm of Iran in Yemen, and while he may have enjoyed some form of support, he claimed to remain independent.

Abdel Malik Al-Houthi, Hussein's brother and the current Houthi leader, has repeatedly

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<sup>5</sup> The insurgency was in fact a civil war that began in June 2004 when Hussein Al-Houthi launched an uprising against the government of Yemen and ended in February 2010 with a truce and a ceasefire. Although most of the fighting occurred in the Sada'a governorate, it spread to neighboring governorates and the Saudi province of Najran.

<sup>6</sup> [http://almajalla.think.srmg.kunder.linpro.no/en/cover\\_story/article7320.ece](http://almajalla.think.srmg.kunder.linpro.no/en/cover_story/article7320.ece)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.alasr.ws/index.cfm?method=home.con&contentid=11160>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.daralhayat.com/print/103413>

denied any Iranian role in supporting his movement, but recent evidence brings Abdel Malik's declarations into question. The political representative of the Houthis abroad, Yahya Al-Houthi, has implied in one of his press interviews that his group has opened communication channels with the Iranian leadership. He said he sees Iran as a "hope for the humiliated people in oppressed nations"<sup>9</sup>; a perception that resonates with the Zaydi narrative, since they perceive themselves to be targets of Yemeni government attacks.

Tehran's actions in the region are based on a geostrategic framework for the region, which is not necessarily based on Islamic or Shia motives. Iran's interference in the affairs of many Arab states, its influence in the region and particularly the means the Islamic Republic employs have been increasingly debated. Iranian interference and influence can be felt through its support for opposition and non-state actors and promotion of views among Arab populations through Arabic-speaking media.

Unprecedented and biased coverage by the Iranian official media of the events in northern Yemen adds credence to accusations that Iran is supporting the Houthis. The media in question include TV channels like Al-Alam, Tehran Radio, and other satellite channels close to Iran such as Al-Manar, Al-Zahra and Al-Kawthar.

Iran has also called for a political solution in Yemen, implying that it favors recognizing the Houthis as a legitimate political force in the conflict. Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki has expressed his country's alleged concern over the situation of Shias in Yemen<sup>10</sup>. He was quoted by the Iranian Student News Agency ISNA on August 27, 2009, as saying during a meeting with the Yemeni ambassador to Tehran: "Iran supports good relations between the Yemeni government and Shi'ite Houthis in the country." He added: "The Yemeni government and the Houthis can acquire the support of each other through constructive interaction." In claiming so, the news site invites the readers to believe that Iran is acting as an intermediary between the government of Yemen and the Houthis, seeking to establish peace and dialogue between both parties.

In any case, the relationship between Iran and the Houthi group seems clearer and less ambiguous today, with indications that the two do share mutual interests. Their policies have converged on implementing ambitious geostrategic projects that go beyond the issue of "justice and equality" and "defending the vulnerable and the oppressed". In the case of the Houthis, the rebel group is aspiring to form an independent Shi'ite principality in the north of Yemen.

What is more problematic, however, is that Iran is framing political differences in a religious or sectarian framework. Part of Iran's political strategy in the past has been to rely on the historical

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.majalla.com/en/cover\\_story/article12189.ece?service=print](http://www.majalla.com/en/cover_story/article12189.ece?service=print)

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tradition of martyrdom associated with Shi'ism. It has taken this tradition and reframed it as the basis for a revolutionary, anti-western force in the Middle East. Iran has developed a modern revolutionary ideology wrapped in traditional Shia images and symbols that it has redefined. Shi'ism has come to be defined as a struggle for justice against foreign rule, tyranny, feudalism and exploitation. The iconography of revolutionary propaganda is clearly drawn from the traditional portrayals of martyrdom. It is this very notion of martyrdom that was instrumentalized for the 1979 revolution in Iran and later in conflicts against perceived aggressors.

Iranian media dismiss the possibility that the Houthis are of any danger to Yemen's national unity but also sympathize with them by emphasizing the sectarian link, referring to them as “our Muslim brothers”, or “Shia resistance”. This stance has encouraged allegations that Iran is supporting Yemeni Shias militarily and financially.

### **The Hearts and Minds of the Arab Population**

The politico-cultural foundations of different conflict perspectives and their influence on the selection and presentation of news are essential elements that shape the discourse in both Saudi and Iranian-funded media. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran mobilize satellite television channels and the Arab-speaking press as “weapons of mass communication”<sup>11</sup>. Each country will impart its own perspective on a specific contentious issue, in this case the conflict in Yemen, with a discourse shaped according to its own politico-cultural background. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran, in their claim to be neutral and providing impartial news to buttress their credibility, make any attempt to conceal their different viewpoints. On the contrary, they actually use the media for their own self-promotion by deprecating and undermining each other.

While Saudi Arabia puts itself forward as a stabilizing force containing a destructive Iranian influence in the region, Iran plays the cards of Muslim solidarity and presents itself as the supporter of the oppressed in the Arab and Muslim worlds while portraying Saudi Arabia as a puppet of American and Israeli policies. Iran also highlights the humanitarian crisis in Yemen caused by Saudi air strikes, demonizing Saudi Arabia.

Saudi media culture differs from Iranian media culture even though they constantly battle over the same ground. Any item of information in mass communication is culturally conditioned and coded, and consequently acquires its full meaning within the cultural context in which it is conveyed. The politico-cultural contexts and communication apparatus of Saudi Arabia and Iran have established the various sets of parameters within which their respective media operate.

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<sup>11</sup> Expression borrowed from Rami Khoury

Similarly, the media operate within the communication systems of their target audiences.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi government, more specifically the royal family, has invested large amounts of money to own the region's media, controlling and manipulating the messages broadcast or printed. Today, Saudis are the most influential owners of media in the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia's conservative religious establishment acts as a powerful lobbying force against enterprising coverage of social, cultural, and religious matters.

The fact that the majority of Saudi shareholders in the Arab media market are linked to the royal family means that they dictate and enunciate the content of news programs and therefore shape the political discourse in the region to their own advantage. The coverage of any event is used to either promote the Saudi agenda or to counter any negative news about the kingdom's political and economic objectives.

Although newspapers are privately owned, they are subsidized and regulated by the government. Newspapers may only be created by royal decree. As the Basic Law states that the media's role is to educate and inspire national unity, most popular grievances go unreported in Saudi Arabia. In a further example of Saudi Arabia setting the media agenda, according to Andrew Hammond of Reuters, "Arab media have largely gone along with a Saudi media campaign against Iran over its growing influence in the Arab world."<sup>12</sup>

The struggle for influence and power in and by Iran is played out in the media. The media of Iran are privately and publicly owned but subject to the control of the government, which engages in one of the world's largest and strictest censorship programs to limit the availability of information, the influences of western culture and anything seen as divergent from the country's strict religious regulations. A special court has authority to monitor the print media and may suspend publication or revoke the licenses of papers or journals that a jury finds guilty of publishing anti-religious material, slander, or information detrimental to the national interest.

Iran harnesses satellite TV and radio to get its views across in a variety of languages - Arabic in particular - in an effort to influence opinion in neighboring countries and the wider world<sup>13</sup>. On the international stage, Iran tries to combat other media sources with its own relatively advanced satellite and radio stations. The most significant of these is Al-Alam (The World), a 24-hour news channel in Arabic, which it launched as Saddam Hussein's regime was ousted in Iraq. Iran stole a march on everyone else by launching Al-Alam with a powerful transmitter near the border with Iraq as the dust was still settling from the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Hammond. "Saudi media empire tries to counter opposition," Reuters, 9 August 2007

<sup>13</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4804328.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4804328.stm)



Its influence was felt immediately. It filled a void, as many Iraqis did not have satellite receivers or access to them in the wake of Saddam Hussein's defeat. Its air of professionalism and the visceral impact of its images and reports won it a good proportion of Iraqi viewers. It undeniably helped spread Iran's influence in post-Saddam Iraq. Al-Alam news channel commenced its official media activity prior to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and under the banner of “speed, truth and accuracy” with goals which included investigating the historical roots of Muslims’ problems in order to find solutions on the basis of culture and common interests.

Al-Alam is not the only TV station broadcasting from Iran to the outside world. A state-run radio station also broadcasts in about 30 languages and the Lebanese channel Al-Manar, known as Hezbollah TV, also receives Iranian support.

All of this shows just how seriously Iran takes the role of the media in trying to influence opinion in the Arab world and beyond - just as it tries to control the information available to its own people within the country. State-run Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting - IRIB - operates national and provincial networks. Its Jaam-e Jam international TV channels are available worldwide via satellite.

In 2007 Iran also launched an English-language satellite station, Press TV, and President Ahmadinejad declared that its mission would be "to stand by the oppressed of the world". The claim of Iranian leaders is that Iranian media, unlike others in the region, have a duty to broadcast “the truth immediately, providing precise analysis and exposing the plots of propaganda networks of the enemy”<sup>14</sup>.

In the current conflict in Yemen, the journalistic objectivity claimed by both sides has to be assessed according to their respective politico-cultural commitments. While Saudi Arabia has put a focus on Iranian interference and its destabilizing influence in the region, portraying the Houthi rebellion as another example of “Shia violence”, Iran on its part has rallied around the Houthis in the path of Shia martyrdom and described them as victims of salafi intolerance and Saudi Arabia’s destructive use of force. Interestingly enough, neither of them has discussed the possibility that the Houthi crisis is more a symptom of a political crisis in Yemen, rooted in a lack of national unity.

Mohammed El-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar have referred to this phenomenon as “contextual objectivity” in which media need to present stories “in a fashion that is both somewhat impartial

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/03/world/asia/03iht-web0703iran.6459744.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/03/world/asia/03iht-web0703iran.6459744.html?_r=1)

yet sensitive to local sensibilities”<sup>15</sup>. This contextual objectivity embodies the selective and complex underlying argument that exists in Yemen between what the audience perceives as objective and the claim that the message broadcast is actually factual. This is what leads Saudi news to portray the Houthis as “rebels”, for example, while the Iranian message describes them as “resistance”, granting them some legitimacy and portraying their opponents as aggressors.

Through Arab media, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have established politically motivated communication channels, focusing on information management (censorship) and perceptions (eventually propaganda). Both have considerably relied on the aesthetics of dramatization, while seeking to break the latest news, giving the false impression that they hold the truth. The dramatization is enhanced when they report live events, creating a psychological link between the audience and the object of the reporting, making the media consumer concerned with events and discourses, even though these may in fact be remote. We will see through concrete examples in the last part of this essay how both Saudi Arabia and Iran have been successful in constructing a collective position among their targeted audiences, trying to influence and shape the opinions of Arabs through mass communication and collective processes.

### **Saudi media point of view**

Saudi Arabia has made extensive recourse to the Arab media as a key area for responding to perceived threats to the leadership’s legitimacy and stability, such as challenges to its alliance with the United States and criticism of its political system, decision-making processes and image in the Arab world<sup>16</sup>. Incontestably, the Saudi government has vested interests in keeping the media closely aligned with its policies and orientation at home and abroad.

Saudi Arabia has made an immense effort to control the flow of information in the Arab world and assure positive coverage of its politics and society, or often to assure no coverage at all. This effort has involved saturating Arab viewers with Arab and Western entertainment in the form of dramas, quiz shows, comedies, films, and “soft religion” and only as much politics as is necessary. Saudi Arabia’s pan-Arab media empire promotes specific messages which present themselves as “liberal”, “reformist”, “moderate” and “modern”, but they are also conspicuously Washington-friendly and hostile to Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Iran or any other body presenting a

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<sup>15</sup> Mohammed El-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar, *Al-Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East* (Boulder CO, 2002), pp27,54.

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.arabmediasociety.com/countries/index.php?c\\_article=121](http://www.arabmediasociety.com/countries/index.php?c_article=121)

challenge to the Pax Americana in the Arab world and the governments which form part of that constellation. The pan-Arab media had become a useful tool for the ruling elite to challenge Islamists and promote a limited Saudi domestic agenda of openness, which has involved co-opting as many “liberal intellectuals” as possible.

Saudi media outlets generally feature Arab intellectuals, especially in the London-based newspaper Asharq al-Awsat, in order to rally others to the Saudi national political agenda and hence undermine the message and power of Iran. These intellectuals will be from various countries in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Sudan, so as to provide the appearance of heterogeneous points of view siding with Saudi policies. This exhibits the capacity that Saudi media have in responding to criticism, delivering replies and attacks on behalf of Saudi Arabia and ever expanding Saudi influence.

Saudi Arabia has sought in numerous ways to establish a link between the Houthis and Iran, claiming to expose the destabilizing influence of Iran in Yemen and Gulf affairs at large.

On November 9, 2009, columnist Hamed Majed penned an article<sup>17</sup> for Asharq al-Awsat in which he warned that "there is no smoke on the mountain without Iranian fire". He then added that these "toxic fumes" contaminate the air from Yemen to Iraq to southern Lebanon, referring to the militant Shi'ite groups that Iran sponsors in those countries, and likening the Houthis to Hezbollah. In doing so the author clearly implied that Iran was not only involved in the destabilizing crisis that the government of Yemen was facing, but was also sowing the seeds of long-term problems, by establishing a Shia stronghold in a country politically dominated by Sunnis. The antagonizing of the Sunni-Shia divide echoes well across the Arab world, which has witnessed the destructive power of sectarianism in Iraq.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia warns that in the case of Iran, this relationship goes beyond seeking the Yemenis' interests and preventing fighting between them. The author subtly conveys that Iran believes that it is a historic moment for it to regain its role as a major regional power, with extensions everywhere it can reach; and Yemen is no exception.

On November 10, 2009, Al Arabiya reported in an article that Iran “appeals to the government of Yemen to appease its Shia population”<sup>18</sup>. This element reveals the sectarian dimension that Al Arabiya sees Iran as intending to play in the conflict. This was later contested, however, as Yemeni officials declared that “the conflict is political and not sectarian”, in an attempt to undermine any Iranian sectarian strategy to rouse support among Shia populations in the region. Furthermore, by disputing the sectarian aspect of the conflict put forward by Iran according to its

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<sup>17</sup><http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=11304&article=543501&search=%25CD%25E3%25CF%20%25C7%25E1%25E3%25C7%25CC%25CF&state=true>

<sup>18</sup><http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/11/10/90845.html>

own agenda, Saudi media have tried to prevent any sense of solidarity across the Shia populations of the Arab world.

The Saudi-owned Al Arabiya reported that a dozen Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon were killed during battles in Yemen in December<sup>19</sup>. Previously, on October 16, the Kuwait newspaper Al-Seyassah said three Hezbollah experts in explosives had been killed and 19 more taken prisoner by the Yemeni army. If Hezbollah is to some extent popular across the Arab world as a resistance group against Israel, most Arabs do not espouse the group's vision of the world. Despite its popularity across sects, some segments of the Sunni community also perceive it as representing Iranian interests.

The Al Arabiya article blames Hezbollah and consequently Iran for the escalating tensions in Yemen, and refers to the Houthis as insurgents or rebels. Again, the terminology used to designate the actors in this instance reflects the Saudi position on this crisis, and removes any legitimacy from the Houthis by portraying them as an irregular armed force. Contrarily, Iran grants the Houthis a new legitimacy through its narrative and appeals to the solidarity of the Arab population by portraying them as “resistance” and oppressed Muslims, a notion that not only echoes across the Arab world, but also fits with the Shia tradition of martyrdom.

The article further says that “according to reliable intelligence sources” Iran is financially, militarily and logistically supporting the Houthis. Although no tangible proof has been established to corroborate such a statement, the reference to “reliable intelligence sources” adds an element of credibility in delivering the message to Arab audiences. However, despite the allegations, no details are actually provided in the article. Al-Watan also refers to Iran as a force seeking to control Yemeni state affairs by arming the Houthis<sup>20</sup>.

The Al Arabiya article adds that allegedly the Yemeni government “has intercepted weapons and military equipment” at its border, transported by “Iranian vessels”. Using the politico-cultural context of its Arab audiences, the Saudi government warns of Iranian aggression and intervention by proxy and intimates that, as in the Houthi crisis in Yemen, Iran could fund other Shia groups in their own countries.

The Saudi government implies on occasion that Iranian interference is not only motivated by the hegemonic ambitions of the Islamic republic, but is also a response to Western pressures against its nuclear programs<sup>21</sup>. According to Saudi-sponsored media, Tehran would be willing to “spread chaos in the Gulf region, which is the largest oil reservoir in the world and vital to U.S. national security”. In alluding to Iran's nuclear ambitions and the visceral reaction of Iran

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<sup>19</sup> . <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/12/13/94032.html>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.alwatan.net/59985.htm>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2009/11/17/91523.html>.

(“spreading chaos in the Gulf”), the media appeal directly for U.S. government intervention by insinuating that a stronger Iran is also a tangible threat to U.S. interests in the region.

Similarly, Al Arabiya describes the Saudi air strikes and the subsequent military intervention as “engagement” and “support for the government of Yemen”<sup>22</sup>, hence legitimizing the kingdom’s actions. Likewise, Saudi Arabia contests the Iranian accusation that “it shed Muslim blood”, saying that in fact it acted purely in legitimate defense because the Houthis “first chose to spill Saudi blood”. According to Al Arabiya, Saudi Arabia was only exercising “its natural right to defend its territory and its citizens ... by preventing Houthis from creating further problems, leaving a vacuum to be exploited by Al Qaeda”. Again, Saudi news reports also ambiguously but repeatedly establish a link between the conflict, its destabilizing consequences and the potential void to be exploited by Al Qaeda.

Saudi media also play up a fictitious link between Iran and Al Qaeda in Yemen, claiming that Iran has bought the loyalty of tribes, established contact with the separatist Southern Mobility Movement in southern Yemen in order to increase the pressure on the central government from all directions, and engaged in direct coordination with members of Al Qaeda who act as tools of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard<sup>23</sup>.

Saudi media such as Asharq al-Awsat have also played up the extent of Iranian interference. For example, on October 10, 2009, one of its contributors, Hussein Shobokshi, claims to disclose “astonishing new facts ... most importantly the fact that the Iranian involvement in Yemen began in 2004 under the tempting cover of humanitarian charity work that began with the large project of building the Iranian Red Crescent Hospital in Sa'dah”<sup>24</sup>. In this article, the author argues that the revenues of the hospital directly funded the Houthis towards the achievement of their separatist ambitions, which allegedly include allowing Iran to establish a “velayat-e faqih<sup>25</sup>” that would display pro-Iranian religious tendencies. More importantly it would provide Iran with strategic access to the Horn of Africa and control of the Gulf of Aden, a vital maritime passage for oil.

In an article in the Saudi-owned daily *Al-Hayat*, Saudi columnist 'Abdallah Nasser Al-'Utaibi called on the Arab states to support the Sunni minority in Iran: “[The Sunnis] in recent years never had any idea of manufacturing a 50-year Sunni revolution, equivalent to the Iranians' idea of exporting their revolution.” In stating so, he comes close to justifying the use of sectarianism

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<sup>22</sup> *idem*

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2009/11/14/91194.html>, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11338&article=548357>, <http://www.saudiinfofocus.com/ar/forum/showthread.php?t=96206>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=18465>

<sup>25</sup> Meaning the “government of the expert” which is a concept enunciated in a book of the same title written by Iranian Shia cleric and revolutionary Ayatollah Khomeini. According to the book, the principle is that the government should be run in accordance with the Shari’a, and for this to happen a leading Islamic jurist (*faqih*), must provide political “guardianship” (*wilayat* or *velayat*) over the people.

as a response to Iranian sectarian strategies of destabilization. He also clearly denounces Iran's hegemonic ambitions through its ideology and the revolution.

### **From the Insurgents to the Resistance**

Iranian news channels have now for some years been infiltrating the Arab media market, mainly through the main Arab satellite carrier, Arabsat, pitting Iran against Saudi Arabia in a strategic battle for the hearts and minds of the Arab world.

Highly aware of the power of the media, Iranian authorities use a two-pronged approach depending on whether it is at the national or international level. At home, they stifle freedom of expression, although alternative points of views remain available to ordinary Iranians through TV, radio and the internet. Abroad, Iran harnesses radio and satellite TV to get its views across in a variety of languages - Arabic in particular - in an effort to influence opinion in neighboring countries and the wider world.

On the international stage, Iran tries to combat other media sources with its own satellite and radio stations. The most significant of these is Al-Alam, through which Iran established itself as one of the leading news sources in a Shia-dominated country that remains close to Iran<sup>26</sup>. Al-Alam has bureaus in Beirut, Baghdad and Tehran and while it claims to disseminate the news in "an impartial moderate manner"<sup>27</sup>, it actually acts as a mouthpiece for the Iranian regime and seeks to advance its interests.

What is also striking is the clear attempt by Iranian media to discredit the reports put out by Saudi media, by often alleging that Saudi media are close to the White House (which to some extent they have been since they underwent some very mild reforms under the Bush administration), hence undermining their credibility across the Arab world. Iranian media also often charge Saudi Arabia with being pro-Zionist while playing on anti-American sentiments across the Arab world. In discussing the parties to the crisis in Yemen for example, they often refer to the foreigner (the United States) and their mercenaries (the Saudis)<sup>28</sup>.

Al-Alam also says that following the air strikes in November, the Houthis offered a truce and "unilaterally withdrew from Saudi territories, but Saudi air strikes continued"<sup>29</sup>. Their emphasis on the humanitarian aspect of the crisis and the image of a Houthi David against a Saudi Goliath presents the Houthis as victims and appeals to the sympathy of Arab populations. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, appears as a bloodthirsty agent, acting as "a puppet to U.S. interests", a

<sup>26</sup> It will for example often feature high profile Iraqi politicians who praise Iran's "positive influence in maintaining the security in Iraq, such as in this article: <http://www.alalam.ir/detail.aspx?id=97116>.

<sup>27</sup> <http://alalam.ir/stc.aspx?file=about-us>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.alalam.ir/english/detail.aspx?id=97041>

<sup>29</sup> <http://alalam.ir/detail.aspx?id=97133>

portrayal which helps discredit the kingdom politically and militarily and also legitimizes any potential military or logistical support that Iran may provide to the Houthis.

Similarly Al-Vefagh, another leading Arabic-language Iranian newspaper, emphasizes the “savagery” of Saudi Arabia and appeals to Arab sympathy by highlighting the humanitarian and food crisis in Yemen and linking it to the air strikes conducted by Riyadh<sup>30</sup>. Although the food crisis might in fact stem from Yemen’s poverty, the reader receives the impression that Saudi military intervention is the main cause.

Iran also knows how to cultivate the cult of martyrdom, which plays an essential role in Shia rhetoric. The Shia have long been subject to contempt and persecution by the Sunnis for their approach, and this has contributed to the isolation of the Shia. The persecution of the Shia has reinforced the myth of martyrdom (shahada) and shaped Iran’s approach to religion and politics. Traditionally, the imams themselves are an example of shahada; they died as witnesses to their faith, and therefore martyrdom is the highest testament of faith. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad uses this rhetoric of martyrdom abundantly as he accuses other nations of deprecating Iran's quest for equal status through ownership of nuclear technology and of trying to isolate Iran in international diplomacy. Any sanction or measure is depicted in the national media or by the president as an attack on or act of discrimination against Iran. Occasionally, the status of martyr will also be granted to preferential groups that are co-opted by Iran for political and regional interests, in this case the Houthis.

In the Tehran Times<sup>31</sup>, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lashed out at Saudi Arabia for its alleged military offensive against civilians in northern Yemen. "Saudi Arabia was expected to mediate in Yemen's internal conflict as an older brother and restore peace to the Muslim states, rather than launching military strike[s] and pounding bombs on Muslim civilians in the north of Yemen," Ahmadinejad said. Further in the article, the Iranian president questioned why Riyadh had not used its military weapons against “Zionists to defend Gazans during Israel's 22-day Operation Cast Lead, which killed over 1,400 people”.

The newspaper not only portrays Saudi Arabia as a disproportionately armed aggressor, but also accuses the Saudi government of reneging on its commitment to fellow Muslims. By questioning its lack of intervention in the war in Gaza in early 2009, it clearly implies that Saudi Arabia is siding with the state of Israel, declaring it a de facto enemy of Arabs and Muslims. The rhetoric is powerful in discrediting Saudi Arabia in the region, while presenting Iran as the only “savior” of Muslims.

Finally, the Tehran Times, like numerous Iranian outlets, emphasizes the sectarian aspect in

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.al-vefagh.com/1388/11/17/Alvefagh/3558/Page/3/?NewsID=20816>

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=212218](http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=212218)

order to create an illusion of solidarity across its audiences and readership. According to its news site, “Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, however, denied any Saudi involvement whatsoever in military attacks against the Yemeni Shia fighters known as the Houthis.<sup>32</sup>” Iran formulates its political and geostrategic interests in sectarian language, having recourse to the aesthetics of dramatization to establish this psychological link between the object of the news and the reader. While the Houthis are insurgents and rebels in Saudi news, they remain Muslim fighters or resistance in Iranian news. The portrayal of resistance paves the way for a glorification of the Houthis while antagonizing and vilifying Saudi Arabia and the government of Yemen that opposes them. Although both the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels insist that the conflict is not sectarian in nature, the Iranian government is doing everything it can to portray the conflict as two predominantly Sunni Muslim states, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, cooperating to massacre Shia civilians in Yemen. However, given the complexities of the conflict, these Iranian claims are at best exaggerated.

A spokesman for the Houthis, Muhammad Abdussalam, has said that Saudi army attacks on the Yemeni people were taking place based on a “U.S.-Zionist plan”. Speaking exclusively to the Iranian government news agency IRNA, Abdussalam said the Yemeni Shias would welcome the restoration of security in Yemen as that would help secure regional stability. He rejected reports of Iranian interference in Yemen, saying Tehran had no links.

This image of martyrdom and the appeals to solidarity help give spiritual life to a sacred community (the Shia) that transcends space and time. It is perceived as a symbol of the struggle against injustice, tyranny and oppression - a symbol that was used during the Islamic revolution, the Lebanese Civil War, in the 1990s unrest in Bahrain, in the uprising in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and now in the portrayal of the Houthis.

The conservative leaders of Iran are deeply attached to the core values of Shia Islam and those values are ingrained in the country’s political discourse. Their Arabic-speaking media allow them to a certain extent to promote Iran’s status as a regional power through discourses that focus on the United States and Israel to divert attention from the sectarian divide. While they appeal to the sympathy of Muslims and their Shia brothers, Iranian media never mention “Sunni fighters” and the attacks on Saudi Arabia are made in an indirect manner by associating the country with the United States and Israel.

The Houthi spokesman also said that the Saudi attacks on the Houthis prove that “the Saudi regime is, similar to Israel, a bloodthirsty regime committing crimes against thousands of people in northern Yemen thanks to the silence of the international media”<sup>33</sup>. Again, the message clearly

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<sup>32</sup> *idem*

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*



aims to discredit Saudi Arabia by likening it to Israel. Among Arab audiences, rejection of and hatred for Israel are powerful tools to rally masses, regardless of whether they have the same aim.

## **Conclusion**

By the end of January, Arabsat had suspended Al-Alam's broadcasting for the second time in three months, therefore containing the Iranian propaganda apparatus. The suspension reflected not only Saudi Arabia's fear that the conflict could damage its interests, but also its awareness that the Iranian media infringe upon the strategically construed Saudi discourse.

While the war of words heats up between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Arabic media over the conflict in northern Yemen between Shia Houthi rebels and Yemeni security forces, Saudi Arabia and Iran have hijacked the conflict to further spread their influence. In the meantime, both sides apply policies of containment against each other through propaganda and sponsorship of schools, groups, and programs. In the process, however, as both countries promote their competing religio-political ideologies, they represent a destabilizing force in an already unstable country by inciting sectarian warfare.

At the regional level, Saudi Arabia's overt intervention in the Sa'dah war may end up turning the accusation of Iranian support of the Houthis into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Saudi intervention may well create more shared interests between the Houthis and Iran. Influential Yemeni elites, some of whom are close to the Islamists, have not helped matters by stigmatizing the Zaydi identity and alleging an Iranian role in Sa'dah. This creates powerful incentives for Shi'ite groups to embrace transnational solidarity, Iranian news agencies to engage in biased reporting, and the Houthi rebels to seek money and know-how. The Saudi military intervention is bound to encourage all those trends, making a sustainable peace harder to build.

The media remain a powerful tool and also act as an unofficial communication channel where both powers will exchange accusations and threats.

The regional order is changing on the premises of a centuries-long power struggle. The Shia renaissance, combined with the Islamist political revival, threatens the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia's political order. Iran's influence is expanding across the region, using anti-Americanism and attacks on Israel to muster support among Arab populations. While there is no way of predicting how the conflict in Yemen will develop, Iran's constant claims to progress in its nuclear programs is definitely perceived as a threat that leaves Saudi Arabia uneasy and consequently affects its relationships with the West. In parallel Saudi Arabia is trying to counterbalance Iran's influence on the same turf, as in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and

now Yemen.

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