

T.C.  
MARMARA UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTE RESEARCH OF MIDDLE EAST AND ISLAMIC COUNTRIES  
POLITICAL HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE MIDDLE  
EAST



**SUPPORT FOR NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS (NAGs):  
IRAN'S NAGs STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

MASTER'S THESIS

Merve İrem Ayar

Istanbul, 2018

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## TEZ ONAYI

Marmara Üniversitesi Orta Doğu ve İslam Ülkeleri Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Ortadoğu Siyasi Tarihi ve Uluslararası İlişkileri Anabilim Dalında Yüksek Lisans öğrenimi gören 506314002 no'lu Merve İrem AYAR'ın hazırladığı "Support For Non-State Armed Groups (NAGs):Iran's NAGs Strategy in The Middle East" konulu YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ ile ilgili TEZ SAVUNMA SINAVI M.Ü.Lisansüstü Öğretim ve Sınav Yönetmeliği uyarınca 14.08.2018 tarihinde saat 14: 00 de yapılmış, sorulan sorulara alınan cevaplar sonucunda adayın tezinin ...**kabülü**.....' ne OYBİRLİĞİ/~~OYÇOKLUĞUYLA~~ karar verilmiştir.

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## ABSTRACT

### SUPPORT FOR NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS (NAGs): IRAN'S NAGs STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The relationship between states and non-state armed groups has remained one of the most debated topics of the international politics since the end of the Cold War. Today, ethnic and religious insurgents and rebel groups are challenging states and the international environment as a troublesome threat. State support for these groups significantly affects regional security relations in the Middle East. However, the main reason for state support for such armed groups is based on the changes in the state's perceived threat, which is shaped by the material power of states. Today, Iran is considered as the country that is in contact with non-state armed groups (NAGs) in the Middle East the most. This study investigates the structure of Iran's support commitment to NAGs depending on the changing threat perception against Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

**Keywords:** Non-State Armed Groups, Iran, Middle East, Balance of Threat

## ÖZET

### DEVLET DIŐI SİLAHLI ÖRGÜTLERE (DSÖ) DESTEK: İRAN'IN ORTADOĐU'DA DSÖ'LERE DESTEK STRATEJİSİ

Devletler ve devlet dıŐı silahlı gruplar arasındaki iliŐki, SoĐuk SavaŐ'ın sona ermesinden bu yana uluslararası siyasetin en ok tartıŐılan konularından biri olmaya devam etmiŐtir. 2000'li yıllarda da etnik ayrılıkı, dinî ve diĐer isyancı gruplar, devletler ve uluslararası sisteme meydan okumaktadır. Devletlerin bu gruplara verdikleri destekler, OrtadoĐu'da bölgesel gvenlik iliŐkilerini önemli bir Őekilde etkilemektedir. Ancak devletlerin bu tr silahlı grupları desteklemesinin ardında devletlerin materyal gle baĐlantılı olarak deĐiŐen tehdit algısındaki deĐiŐimler yatmaktadır. Gnmzde İnan, OrtadoĐu bölgesinde DSÖ yapılanmaları ile en ok iliŐkilendirilen lke konumundadır. Bu alıŐma, İnan'ın deĐiŐen tehdit algısına baĐlı olarak bölgesel rakipleri olan Suudi Arabistan ve Trkiye'ye karŐı desteklediĐi DSÖ yapılanmalarını incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Devlet DıŐı Silahlı Gruplar, İnan, OrtadoĐu, Tehdit Dengesi

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ETA</b>	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque separatist group in Spain)
<b>GCC</b>	Gulf Cooperation Council
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Price
<b>HAMAS</b>	Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya
<b>IGOs</b>	Inter Governmental Organizations
<b>IMCTC</b>	Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition
<b>IRGC</b>	Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
<b>KADEK</b>	Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress
<b>KDP</b>	Kurdistan Democratic Party
<b>MEK</b>	Mujahideen-e Khalq
<b>NAGs</b>	Non-State Armed Groups
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>PJAK</b>	Partiya Jiyana Azadi Kurdistan
<b>PKK</b>	Partiya Karkerên Kurdîstan
<b>PMF</b>	Iraq Popular Mobilization Forces ( <i>al-hashd al-sha'abi</i> )
<b>SAMs</b>	Surface-to-Air Missiles
<b>SIPRI</b>	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
<b>UAVs</b>	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
<b>UN</b>	United Nation
<b>YPG</b>	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The relationship between states and non-state armed groups have remained one of the main topics in international politics since the end of the Cold War. Today, ethnic and religious insurgents, rebel and terrorist groups are challenging states and international environment as a troublesome threat. While some states try to eliminate NAGs that are a threat to state security; the support that some states have provided these groups have positively affected their capacity and lifetime. Many of them received support from states, and some of them still take advantage of this support. For example, Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian controversial resistance group, exploited the Iran-Iraq rivalry for many years. MEK was supported and hosted by Iraq during the 1980-1988 war when relations between Iran-Iraq hit bottom ground.<sup>1</sup> The group orchestrated terrorist attacks in Iran. Until the US invasion of Iraq, Saddam Hussein remained the leading supporter of MEK against the Iranian regime. Another example, Hamas, a Palestinian resistance group, has also received different support from many Arab states since its establishment in 1987. The PKK has enjoyed support from many states, including Western countries, for decades.<sup>2</sup>

The current unrest in the Middle East makes the issue of non-state armed actors and their support by states more critical. Power vacuums left by failed and weak governments whether through domestic reasons or foreign interventions pave the way of increase in the number of armed groups. In order to understand how states affect the NAGs capacity to act, and how this relationship affects the political and military activities of the supportive state, it is essential to think about how these groups are operationalized against adversaries and the implications of this for the region. Especially when we think of current civil wars and instabilities in the region, understanding the main reasons for the increasing number of state commitment to NAGs are noteworthy. Some states are unable to prevent attacks of NAGs; some of them have the military power to stop NAG activities within their territories, but it gradually weakens the economic, political and military power of targeted states. For example, in Syria and Yemen, there is an ongoing war in which NAGs play a significant role in the battleground. Most of them are bolstered by state supporters that aim to find

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Masters, "Mujahadeen-e-Khalq (MEK)", **Council on Foreign Relations**, July 28, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Belgin San Akça and İlayda Bilge Onder, "PKK Terörizmine Uluslar Ötesi Bir Bakış", Fahrettin Altun and Hasan Basri Yalçın (Ed.), **Terörün Kökenleri ve Terörle Mücadele Stratejisi** in. (53-79), İstanbul: SETA Kitapları, 2018.

a room for maneuver by weakening the others. All these issues are crucial in understanding current Middle East security politics.

## **1.1 Thesis Statement and Research Question**

“Why do states sponsor non-state armed groups?” is the main research question of this study. In this regard, the study also tries to answer the following questions. “What is the major reason for states to support non-state armed groups instead of making allies with other states?”, “Why would a state support NAGs forces rather than taking direct military action?”, “What is the nature of state support for armed groups?”, “What are the motivations for state backers?” and “What defines the scope of support?” are secondary questions of this study aiming to assess the strategy of state sponsor of NAGs in the Middle East.

The study argues that the level of engagement and scope of support mainly depends on the perceived threat and external security environment of the supporter states. International pressure and lack of reliable state allies have a multiplier effect on the support commitment of the supporter states. If there is an increase in perceived threat from a rival, the state’s need for balancing increases. Under these circumstances, states use NAGs as a means of counterbalancing their adversaries. This counterbalancing instrument functions as war-making and destabilizing instruments against adversaries.

Both state and non-state armed groups rationally accept the commitment.<sup>3</sup> If the support commitment is insignificant or harms state interests, then states abandon support for NAGs even if the rivalry continues.

## **1.2 Methodology**

In this section, firstly, the scope of the study is defined. The logic of the case selection and how the cases are used in testing the Balance of Threat theory are discussed. Secondly, this study describes the concepts and variables to explain how they are operationalized in the study. After showing how to measure dependent and independent variables, the study then outlines the chapters that will commence.

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<sup>3</sup> Belgin San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

### 1.2.1 The Logic of Case Selection

Since the study examines intentional state support, it excludes failed states and weak governments from its supporter states set. The case pool also excludes “overt military intervention” of civil wars as a third-party intervention to internal conflict.<sup>4</sup> Cases are selected from the states that make an “intentional and often secret support, encouragement and assistance” to NAGs targeting a foreign state or states.

Among various NAGs and state supporters, Iran provides for the research different comparable cases to understand the reason of state support for NAGs. Iran today is considered the country most in contact with non-state armed groups (NAGs) in the Middle East. Many non-state armed groups have been affiliated with Iran. In addition to this, Iran has also been on the American state sponsor of terrorism list since 1984. Alignments between Iran and non-state actors as part of foreign policy and a war-making instrument challenged the stability of other countries for decades.

Hezbollah and Iran relations can be considered as the most striking and rigorous state-NAG relation example.<sup>5</sup> There are others such as Al-Gama’a al Islamiyya in Egypt between 1993-1998, Al Mahdi Army in Iraq between 2004-2008, Harakati Islami-yi Afghanistan in 1984 and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq between 1961-1991 having relations with Iran with higher and lower commitment levels.

Since Iran has had an important relationship with NAGs since 1979 and also provides many cases to compare, the study tries to answer the research questions through Iran and its ties with the PKK in Turkey between 1988- 2017 and the relations with Houthi rebels in Yemen between 1984- 2017.

The study chooses two groups from two different states, which Iran had disputes with from time to time: Turkey and Saudi Arabia. It is argued that state support is very much associated with ethnic identity and religious and sectarian affinity most of the time. By choosing these two different motivated groups, the research tries to

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Cunningham, “Blocking Resolution: How External States Can Prolong Civil Wars”, **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol.47, No.2 (February 16, 2010), p.115-127; Patrick M. Regan and Aysegul Aydin, “Diplomacy and Other Forms of Intervention in Civil Wars”, **Journal of Conflict Resolution**, Vol.50, No.5 (October 2006), p.736-56.

<sup>5</sup> Hezbollah founded in 1982 as an armed Shia organization in Lebanon. It turned a coherent organization in mid-80’s with the help of Iran and Syria. Iran played a leading role in the founding of the organization since it gave Iran an opportunity for the realization of the “revolutionary campaign” and for striking indirectly at both the United States and Israel. Currently, Hezbollah has an extensive network of militants throughout the Middle East. They have actively operated in the Syrian civil war to support the Assad regime militarily under the coordination of Iran. (See: Augustus Richard Norton, **Hezbollah : A Short History**, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007)

overcome the argument of “Iran supports non-state actors according to the religious and sectarian consideration.” However, the relationship between Iran and Shia groups in the Middle East does not necessarily reflect the cause of support behavior of Iran. The support of Shia militant groups is more about practical reasons. States may prefer to support a group, which have an ideological, political or religious affinity. Under this condition, it is easier to set an agenda beneficial for both camps. So, finding common ground and shared motivations with a NAG affiliated with Shia Islam is easier for Iran.

Iran supports Houthi rebels, a religious minority belonging to the Shia Zaydi sect. The PKK is a leftist socialist organization based in Turkey, on the other hand, they have different motivations. While the PKK is a politically and ethnically motivated Kurdish group, Houthis are motivated politically and religiously. The PKK has targeted Turkey and Houthis targeted the Yemeni government under the control of Saudi Arabia and also Saudi Arabia itself. Even though both groups have different motivations to act and they have different positions about Islam, Iran has supported both groups depending on the relations with targeted states, which are Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

The case selection also allows to trace longitudinal and cross-sectional variation. The level of support and commitment of Iran for both of groups show a variation by depending on its relation with Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

## **1.2.2 State Support for NAGs: Definitions of Concepts**

### ***1.2.2.1 Defining Non-State Armed Groups***

The literature on state support of non-state armed groups mainly uses “state sponsor of terrorism” as a term.<sup>6</sup> However, it is obvious that the complexity and multiplicity of terrorism include a serious challenge when conceptualizing, theorizing, and defining terrorism. Since there is not an international rule or a shared belief to designate a group as a “terrorist” one, the definition remains controversial. The conflicts and disputes within the Middle East make it challenging to define all violent non-state actors as terrorists.

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<sup>6</sup> Yonah Alexander and Milton M. Hoenig, **The New Iranian Leadership: Ahmadinejad, Terrorism, Nuclear Ambition, and the Middle East**, Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 2008; Magdalena Kirchner, “A Good Investment? State Sponsorship of Terrorism as an Instrument of Iraqi Foreign Policy (1979-1991), **Cambridge Review of International Affairs**, Vol.27, No.3 (July 2014), p.521-537; Daniel Byman, **Deadly Connections States that Sponsor Terrorism**, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

“Non-State Armed Groups (NAGs)” is preferred as the main concept of this study but we can make a categorization in itself: Insurgents, terrorist groups, and militias.<sup>7</sup> According to Shultz et al. “The classic insurgent model is designed to mobilize supporters and establish an alternative political authority to the existing government while employing intelligence and military means to attack and weaken the state through escalating violence.” Since there is a group of people that revolt against a recognized government, we can also label them as “rebels”.

Terrorism and terrorist groups are defined in many ways because terrorism remained “a matter of perception for the observers.”<sup>8</sup> Terrorist groups can be distinguished from insurgents in tactics and targets. While insurgents can use both political and paramilitary tools, terrorist groups usually prefer to use force.<sup>9</sup>

Militias are a group of organized armed people identified as not being part of regular security forces generally in failed or weak states.<sup>10</sup> They can be either pro-government or anti-government. Many attempts have been made to classify the subject. However, terms are often used interchangeably. For this reason, despite the differences among them, checking the shared points are more useful for this study<sup>11</sup>:

Although there are different kinds of armed groups, they share some common points: First, all non-state armed groups challenge the authority and power of the targeted state in various degrees even though they have different aims such as toppling down a leader/government or weakening the government. Second, they use unconventional and asymmetric force to a large extent. While some of them have both political and armed wings at the same time, use of force remains a vital instrument for these groups. Third, they can use force against state adversaries both at home and abroad. Finally, they do not resort to the rule of law to reach their goals.

In this study, I apply a general definition of the term non-state armed groups (NAGs). These groups include politically motivated armed groups, revolutionary parties and also terrorist groups. Since there is a political dispute on how we distinguish

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<sup>7</sup> Richard H Shultz, Douglas Farah and Itamara V. Lochard, “Armed Groups: A Tier-One Security Priority”, **INSS Occasional Paper 57**, Colorado Springs, Co: USAF Institute for National Security Studies, (2004), p.14.

<sup>8</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Introduction: Meeting and Managing the Threat”, Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes (Ed.), **Attacking the Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy**, in. (1-16), Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004, p.3.

<sup>9</sup> Shultz, Farah and Lochard, p.21.

<sup>10</sup> Sabine C. Carey, Neil J. Mitchell and Will Lowe, “States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence: A New Database on pro-Government Militias”, **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol.50, No.2 (March 2013), p.249-258; Ariel Ira Ahran, **Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias**, California: Stanford University Press, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Shultz, Farah and Lochard, p.16-17.



terrorist groups from the rebel ones, we can use the term of “non-state armed groups” which is not morally or ideologically loaded.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.2.2.2 *Defining Support of NAGs*

Hoffman defines state-sponsored terrorism as “the active and often clandestine support, encouragement and assistance provided by a foreign government to a terrorist group.”<sup>13</sup> Daniel Byman defines the concept of “intentional assistance to a terrorist group, bolster its political activities or sustain the organization by turning a blind eye.”<sup>14</sup> Based on Hoffman’s and Byman’s definition of state support of terrorism, the study defines state support of NAGs as “state’s intentional and often secretly support, encouragement and assistance to NAGs targeting a foreign state by violence.”

The support of NAGs by external states takes place in two ways. It can either be a deliberate move in which states find a channel to back NAGs, or it can be unintentional support due to the inability of states to prevent NAGs activities in country borders.

To define the relationship between states and non-state armed actors, it is important first to look at the use of NAGs as a means. Since the intentional assistance to NAGs has a positive impact on bolstering the political activities, using violence and maintaining the organization, intentional assistance is a matter for the study. Failed states are inactive due to their weakness or incapability to deal effectively with NAGs.<sup>15</sup> Even though a state provides a safe haven, which is one of the most crucial forms of support, for the reasons mentioned above, they are not included in “the supporter states” category.

When a NAG is highly dependent on a state, the group acts as a means of the state for more comprehensive strategic concerns.<sup>16</sup> NAGs can be supported by multiple states. Under this condition, the group has various support networks. While a state provides a safe haven to the group, another state may meet the need of intelligence.

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<sup>12</sup> To address this problem, Daniel Byman in his *Deadly Connections States that Sponsor Terrorism* highlights that “terrorism term are ideologically and morally loaded.”

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p.14, 26, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Byman, *Deadly Connections States that Sponsor Terrorism*, p.10.

<sup>15</sup> John Alan Cohan, “Formulation of a State’s Response to Terrorism and State Sponsored Terrorism”, *Pace International Law Review*, Vol.14, No.1 (April 2002), p.77-119; Daniel Byman, “Changing Nature of State Sponsored Terrorism”, Washington DC: *The Saban Center for Middle East Foreign Policy at The Brookings Institute*, Vol.16 (May 2008), p.3; Richard J.Erickson, *Legitimate Use of Military Force against State Sponsored International Terrorism*, Alabama: Air University Press, 1989, p.26.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander and Hoenig, p.54.

### 1.2.2.3 Operationalization of Variables

In explaining state sponsorship/support, scholars focus on dyadic relations of sponsor state and targeted state or a network of interactions among sponsor state, target state, and NAGs.<sup>17</sup> This study focuses on such a dyadic relation between the supporter state and a non-state armed group.

#### **Perceived Threat (Independent Variable):**

This study uses “perceived threat” based on Stephen Walt’s Balance of Threat theory as the independent variable. There are four indicators to measure the perceived threat. These are *aggregate power*, *geographic proximity*, *offensive capabilities* and *offensive intentions*. In the cases of Iran-Turkey and Iran-Saudi Arabia, there is geographic proximity which is constant, so it cannot explain overtime variation.

Offensive intentions are also seen in the open remarks of these states. I look at official statements made at critical times that change the situation of relations between countries. I show the aggressive intentions of the countries by revealing the negative and accusative discourses that arise in official statements.

I measure offensive capabilities by looking at the military expenditure of states. I measure the aggregate power by looking at economic indicators (Gross Domestic Price-GDP per capita) and a state’s ability to form allies with militarily powerful states.

#### **State Support/Commitment (Dependent Variable):**

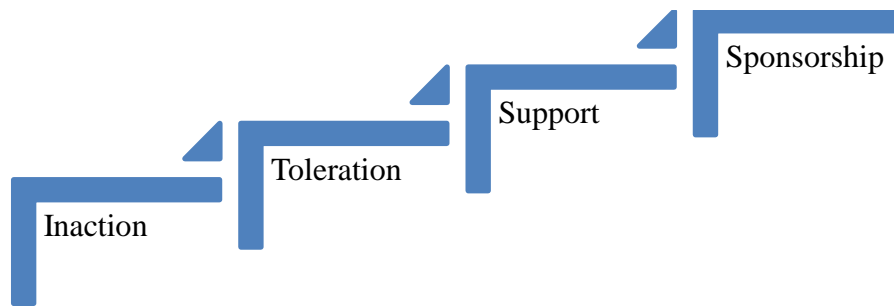
There are different kinds of state support for NAGs. Some scholars categorize the state support for NAGs as “*sponsorship, support, toleration, and inaction*”<sup>18</sup> They use these categories to show the level of commitment. For example, according to Erickson, “*sponsorship*” represents the highest level of commitment while “*inaction*” reflects the “failed state” level. Toleration, which is a mod of “turn a blind eye”, is the next level after “*inaction.*” Lastly, Support represents a level between “*toleration*” and “*sponsorship.*”

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<sup>17</sup> San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*.

<sup>18</sup> R. Erickson p.25-27; Noemi Gal-Or, “State-Sponsored Terrorism: A Mode of Diplomacy?”, *Conflict Quarterly*, Vol.13, No.3 (1993), p.7-23.

**Figure 1: The Summary of Richard Erickson’s State Commitment Level Design**



**Source:** Richard J. Erickson, *Legitimate Use of Military Force against State-Sponsored International Terrorism*, Alabama: 1989.

On the other hand, Gal-Or makes a distinction between “state sponsorship” and “state support” by referring to the type of support, not the level.<sup>19</sup> According to this, if a state is accepted as a sponsor one, it should provide NAG intelligence and planning in its activities. In other respects, if a state provides a safe haven, financial aid and training, it should be accepted as the “state support” for NAGs.

Although there is still vagueness in the definitions and categorizations, some scholars describe sponsorship/support behavior in a spectrum rather than an “all-or-nothing” classification.<sup>20</sup> Kirchner designated new relationship types by depending on different commitment levels and scopes. Types of state sponsor of non-state armed group, what she calls terrorist groups, can be classified as a *fellow traveler*, *defector*, *secret backers*, and *brother in arms*. She organizes four categories according to the relations between a state’s endorsement and its material commitment.

Reeves uses the same approach and describes sponsorship in a spectrum. He specifies three main levels of involvement categories as “toleration, support and sponsorship”, four means of support categories as financing, government services, logistics, and safe havens. Each category of support is described as a spectrum and a state’s relationship with a terrorist organization regarding the level and type of support is shaped by different motivations.<sup>21</sup> The last two categorizations more accurately reflect the relationship between state and non-state actors.

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<sup>19</sup> Gal-Or, p.7-23.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremy R. Reeves, “A New Typology For State-Sponsored International Terrorism”, (**Unpublished Master Thesis**, Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey, California, 2011), p.8, 16; Magdalena Kirchner, **Why States Rebel: Understanding State Sponsorship of Terrorism**, Berlin: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2006, p.79.

<sup>21</sup> Reeves, p.16.

By relying on this categorization on state support commitment, I use the terms “sponsorship” and “support” interchangeably for measuring the commitment level. While the terms of “sponsorship” and “support” can be used interchangeably in this study, “inaction” behavior is not included in the research realm directly.

For these reasons, in this study, sponsorship commitment is measured in three levels: high, moderate, and low. The indicators of these levels are based on “types of support” sorted by the importance order “*safe haven/hosting, military support (training, weapons, and arms), financial assistance, endorsement.*” In the next section, these levels are identified by looking at the requirements of NAGs and also the types of state support.

#### ***1.2.2.4 Requirements of NAGs and Content of Support***

Why is state support for non-state armed groups important? Regardless of their motivations and goals, almost all NAGs strengthen their hand vis-à-vis the target state both in fighting and negotiating with them.<sup>22</sup> Especially the success of a secessionist movement is mainly defined by the balance of interest and state support to that movement.<sup>23</sup> States may have motivations to support NAGs, but under some conditions, the support commitment becomes easier for countries.

A safe haven, weapons, and other military instruments are the main needs of NAGs activities. Anarchical or uncontrolled regions are suitable places for training and planning activities. Since obtaining weapons and arms become easier at politically uncontrolled places, armament becomes easier as well. In addition to environmental conditions, if there is outside support for money and another requirement of those groups, lifetime and effectiveness of NAGs activities are more likely to increase.

These groups can have various resources for making money, militant recruitment and providing military materials. While they are based on inside resources such as smuggling and drug trade, they are also based on outside resources. Although state support is no longer the only way to live for non-state armed groups, it is still the most crucial support among other outside support sources including diaspora groups and other non-state supporters. However, state support for armed groups has remained one of the most controversial issues in international politics.

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<sup>22</sup> Alexis Heraclides, “Secessionist Minorities and External Involvement”, **International Organization**, Vol. 44, No.3 (June 1990), p.341-378.

<sup>23</sup> Donald Horowitz, **Ethnic Groups in Conflict**. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.

In the literature, forms of state support for terrorist groups, insurgencies, and rebels in particular, non-state armed groups, in general, focuses on two dimensions which are material and human-based support. These two groups have different support categories such as safe haven, finance, military support, training, weapons, logistical support, and intelligence. This spectrum also has support levels.

**Table 1: Categories of State Support Instruments of NAGs**

Human-Based Support	Material Based Support
Command and control	Safe haven and transition
Training	Financial aid
Intelligence	Direct military support
Organizational aid	Arms and other kinds of materials

**Source:** Trends in Outside Support, Rand Corporation, 2001.

External state support can also be categorized as “tangible” and “political-diplomatic” or “moral” support. Tangible support can be evaluated under three categories:<sup>24</sup>

1. *Material aid (arms, ammunition, aircraft, other military equipment and means of transportation, funds, foodstuffs, medicine, and fuel);*
2. *Access to communications media and transportation and other networks; or*
3. *Services and assistance rendered within or outside the secessionist territory, such as sanctuary, asylum, a base (serving as a springboard) for operations, military training, personnel as advisers on various issues, military personnel, and, in rare instances, direct military assistance by combat units, artillery cover in border skirmishes, and armed intervention.*

In addition to tangible support, political-diplomatic support covers statements of governments, support in intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and diplomatic recognition.

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<sup>24</sup> Heraclides, p.341.

If a state is associated with the actions of NAGs, its support to that group has to be marked in concrete terms. The direction of support activities, its scope, and level matter when interpreting state commitment. In this study, I use four categories of support and three of support level.

**Table 2: Levels of Support Commitment and Types of Support**

<i>Levels of support commitment</i>	<b>High</b> <i>Active military involvement</i>	<b>Moderate</b> <i>Diplomatic involvement</i>	<b>Low</b> <i>Symbolic support</i>
<i>Types of support</i>			
<i>Safe Haven-Hosting</i>	Presence of militants at training camps	Permission for political activities	Tolerance of some group members
<i>Military support (training, weapons, and arms)</i>	Direct military assistance (sophisticated arms such as missiles, drones, anti-tank), military intelligence	Tolerating outside military support, military intelligence to some extent	-
<i>Financial assistance</i>	Direct financial assistance	Toleration of fundraising	-
<i>Discursive/ ideological approval</i>	In high-level commitments, they generally do not need to show discursive approval openly	Rhetoric to support a group (mostly in resistance movements)	-

**Source:** Kirchner (2016), p.92, Daniel Byman et al. (2001).

The qualitative track is employed in the research. Both comparative historical analysis and process tracing are used as a way to make sense of general patterns of how states support NAGs and to determine how they work together. The case study is preferred since it provides an opportunity to explore this phenomenon within the

context of Middle Eastern politics and reach the features and peculiarities of state support of NAGs and explore the relations among states and NAGs. In doing this, the table above gives us a guideline to determine the level of commitment in the historical context.

In collecting data, the study mainly relies on military documents and articles, other open sources, and also data programs such as SIPRI, World Bank Database for defining military capabilities of compared countries.

### **1.2.3 Outline of Chapters**

This thesis begins with an examination of the phenomenon of state support for non-state armed groups. In the theory chapter, state and NAGs alignment is assessed from a realist perspective and is compared to the other approaches that aim to explain this relationship. It reveals motivations of supporter states and states cost-benefit calculations according to conventional approaches- realist and liberal school- and also the constructivist school.

Firstly, historically change in the security environment of the Middle East, and its effects on Middle Eastern countries are addressed. Secondly, the constituents of external security environment such as interstate conflict, level of material capability, strategic interest and existence of alternative allies for the addressed state is specified. Lastly, the casual relationship between the “levels of perceived threat,” which depends on the external security environment and “level of support commitment” is discussed.

In the last part of this study, in order to explain policy variations over time, the relations between systemic incentives and Iran’s support for NAGs are reviewed concerning Iran’s support commitment towards the PKK in Turkey and Houthi rebels in Yemen between 1979-2018.

## 2 THE CAUSES OF SUPPORT FOR NAGS

The research agenda focuses on investigating and understanding the causal mechanism leading states to support NAGs for individual state interest and the regional impacts of this relationship on Middle Eastern security formation. In this chapter, firstly the study evaluates the literature on state sponsor of non-state armed groups from the Cold War to today. It tries to figure out the critical periods in a changing security environment and also the general trend in state's support behavior for NAGs within this period.

Secondly, the study categorizes the cost, benefit, and the limits of supporting non-state armed groups in order to understand the strategic calculations of states for support commitments. The last section will show how realist alliance theories can be adapted to the relationship between state and non-state actors.

### 2.1 Literature Review on State Sponsor of NAGs

There is extended literature on terrorist groups and other non-state armed groups in general, and state sponsor of terrorism in particular which seems to increase in the Cold War period. This trend during the Cold War period defies the idea that interstate rivalry led the two camps to support non-state armed groups and other proxies.

Many scholars associate its roots to the Soviet Union's use of terrorist organizations or client states in order to achieve its foreign policy objectives and the US response to the Soviet Union during the last decade of the Cold War.<sup>25</sup> However, Wilkinson argues that it even goes before the Cold War period. During the Stalin period of the Soviet Union and fascist states like "Italy and Hungary provided money, training centers and shelters" to NAGs and especially terrorist movements.<sup>26</sup>

However, the support of non-state armed groups as a part of the proxy war is more directly linked to the Cold War imagination. According to Cold War rivalry approach, it was easier for NAGs to find a supporting state during the Cold War period.<sup>27</sup> The peak of state support was experienced during the last stages of the Cold

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<sup>25</sup> Neil C. Livingston and Terrell E. Arnold, *Fighting Back: Winning the War against Terrorism*, MA: Lexington Books, 1986, p.10; Byman, *Deadly Connections: State that Sponsor Terrorism*, p.79.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Wilkinson, "State Sponsored International Terrorism: the Problems of Response", *The World Today*, Vol.40, No.7 (1984), p.292-298.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Byman, "Passive Sponsors of Terrorism", *Survival Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol.47, No.4 (December 2005), p.117-144.



War, and after 1990, this support trend gradually decreased due to the demise of the Soviet bloc and strengthened norms against terrorist support.<sup>28</sup>

After the Cold War, it was expected for these groups to dissolve dramatically or to find new outside supporters. Some NAGs terminated their terror activities by making agreements with targeted states. For example, the ETA made ceasefire in 2010 and left their weapons in 2017. While some groups found new supporters in the post-Cold War period, ending the big rivalry between American and Soviet camps, state sponsorship of NAGs has still been used as policy and war-making instrument. The question remains: Why does state support for NAGs remain a critical issue since the end of the Cold War?

Especially in the Middle East, many NAGs find state supporters. Many of them have multiple supporters. It was turned to a kind of “proxy wars” led by regional powers in the Middle East instead of proxy wars based on superpower rivalry. Regional powers began to use cross-border militia and armed groups. According to Mumford, what changed is that there was a shift from “internationalized conflicts of an ideological nature to regionalized interventions motivated by inter- and intra-state competition for power and resources.”<sup>29</sup>

Especially in the last two decades, an increasing number of failed states and turmoil in the Middle East paved the way that increased the number of NAGs and supporter states. For this reason, there is an extended body of literature in international relations, and security studies that mainly distinguishes Iran and Syria as the main supporters of non-state groups in the Middle East.<sup>30</sup>

Failed states are fertile areas for the maturing of available means. The power vacuum that increased since the American Invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011 has become the main contributors of anarchy in the Middle East. The vacuum of authority in the region has provided material means for the motivated groups. Those material means have created rebels, insurgent, and terrorist groups and bolstered their motivations. In relation to state interests, if a state rationalizes its support for NAGs, the support commitment strengthens the material

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen D. Collins, “State-Sponsored Terrorism: In Decline, Yet Still a Potent Threat”, *Politics & Policy*, Vol.42, No.1 (2014), p.131-159.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Mumford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict”, *The RUSI Journal*, Vol.158, No.2 (April 2013), p.45.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew A. Levitt, “Iranian State Sponsorship of Terror: Threatening U.S. Security, Global Stability, and Regional Peace”, Washington DC: **The Washington Institute for Near East Policy**, 2005; Kenneth Katzman, “Iran’s Activities and Influence in Iraq”, Washington DC: **CRS Report for Congress**, 2008; Eyal Ziser, **Commanding Syria: Bashar Al-Asad and the First Years in Power**, New York: IB Tauris, 2007.

capability of the group, drastically in many cases. Moreover, a high level outside state support commitments may also provide NAGs an international aspect.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, states can be thought of as strengthening factors for the capability of NAGs rather than a cause to emerge them.<sup>32</sup> Within all support mechanisms such as diaspora groups and other NAGs, intentional state support is still the most significant contributor to the activities of NAGs. For example, between 1945-2010, while there were 454 NAGs, half of them received outside support from states.<sup>33</sup>

Many researchers try to figure out the reasons why states support NAGs and why they form allies with a non-state group instead of other states. What are the systemic incentives that lead them to form such a relationship? The alternative explanations can be mainly categorized according to the motivations of supporter states.<sup>34</sup> The explanations on a state's support commitment to NAGs refer to the different levels of analysis such as individual, state (domestic), and systemic.<sup>35</sup>

The destabilizing neighbor, projecting power, regime change in another state, exporting a political system, ethnic and religious affinity are considered as the primary motivations for state support of NAGs. The two categories of explanation on state support motivations emerges: material and cultural. Scholars who make *material* explanations focus on the weakening of the neighbor through destabilizing efforts and other strategic interests that cause an increase in relative power against adversary states.<sup>36</sup> Studies that analyze the relation between state and non-state armed groups' through *cultural* factors largely address the state's appetite for prestige and the state's identity formations.

The cultural explanations generally reflect the constructivist approach. These groups of scholars argue that in a state's support commitment, internal aspects of states or the beliefs of leaders' and appetite for prestige and other symbolic motives are the

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<sup>31</sup> San Akça and Önder, *ibid*.

<sup>32</sup> Hasan Basri Yalçın, "Terörle Mücadeleye Stratejik Yaklaşım", Fahrettin Altun and Hasan Basri Yalçın (Ed.), **Terörün Kökenleri ve Terörle Mücadele Stratejisi** in (19-52), İstanbul: SETA Kitapları, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> "Dangerous Companions Cooperation between States and Nonstate Armed Groups (NAGs)", Koc University Date Page, nonstatesarmedgroups.ku.edu.tr, (20 May 2018).

<sup>34</sup> San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, **Man, the State, and War A Theoretical Analysis**, revised edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

<sup>36</sup> Byman, *Passive Sponsors of Terrorism*, p.117-144; David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Idean Salehyan, "Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset", **Conflict Management and Peace Science**, Vol.30, No.5 (November 2013), p.516-531; Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and David E. Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups", **International Organization**, Vol. 65, No.4 (October 2011), p.709-744.

driving factors instead of power and security.<sup>37</sup> Since constructivists assume that there is a constant and mutual construction between “agent and structure”,<sup>38</sup> identity shapes the foreign policy behavior of states according to what others have.<sup>39</sup>

From this perspective, it can be argued that states support some NAGs, which share a common identity including religious, ideological affinity or ethnic kinship.<sup>40</sup> For this reason, the identity or political culture of a supporter state plays a decisive role in sponsoring NAGs activities against adversaries. The “rogue state” argument reflects this approach as well. Rogue states are considered to generally behave “irrationally” within the systemic order. They are designated as “outlaw”, “authoritarian” and “undemocratic” in nature.<sup>41</sup> So, the identity of rogue states leads them to ally with “violent” non-state armed groups. Rogue states can provide sophisticated weapons to these groups which pose a significant threat to systemic stability and the Western world.<sup>42</sup>

Identity is perceived as the main driving force for states’ behavior regarding support commitment to NAGs, and there are other explanations firmly challenging constructivist interpretations. Identity is a factor but a facilitator factor for the state support decision. It cannot be regarded as the primary cause of the state sponsorship.

While there are different explanations on the issue, most of them converge the idea that state support for NAGs – especially terrorist groups- is a “secret and undeclared warfare” between the adversaries whatever the motivation is.<sup>43</sup> Since it is

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, **A Cultural Theory of International Relations**, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> States and international system refer to agent and structure accordingly. (See Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics”, **International Organization**, Vol.46, No.2 (March 1992), p.391.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics*, p.391; Vendulka Kubalkova, **International Relations in a Constructed World**, NY: Routledge, 1998; Ted Hopf, **Social Construction of Foreign Policy: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999**, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002; Richard Ned Lebow, “Identity and International Relations”, **International Relations**, Vol.22, No.4 (December 1, 2008), p.473-492.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen M. Saideman, “Discrimination in International Relations: Analyzing External Support for Ethnic Groups”, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol.39, No.1 2002, p.27-50; Stephen M Saideman, **The Ties That Divide: Ethnic Politics, Foreign Policy, and International Conflict**, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas H. Henriksen, “The Rise and Decline of Rogue States”, **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol.54, No.2 (2001), p.349-373; Karen P. O'Reilly, “Perceiving Rogue States: The Use of the “Rogue State” Concept by U.S. Foreign Policy Elites”, **Foreign Policy Analysis**, Vol.3, No.4 (1 October 2007), p.295-315.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Litwak, **Rogue States and US Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War**, Baltimore: Widrow Wilson Center Press, 2000; George W. Bush, **The National Security Strategy of the United States of America**, Washington DC: White House, 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander and Hoenig, p.47; Keith A. Petty, “Veiled Impunity: Iran’s Use of Non-State Armed Groups”, **Denv. J. Int’l L. & Pol’y**, Vol.36, No.2 (2007), p.191.

secret warfare between adversaries, it serves as a foreign policy tool. This argument is widely argued by addressing Carl von Clausewitz's prominent phrases<sup>44</sup>:

*War is a mere continuation of policy by other means. War, therefore is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will.*

From the Clausewitzian formula, state support for NAGs can be understood as “forms of conflict have as their ultimate objective the compulsory submission of the enemy to the will of the aggressor.”<sup>45</sup> In this context, the “aggressor” can be referred to as the “adversaries” or “enemies” of supporter states. Thus, it serves the purpose of the pursuit of policy is a “continuation of war by other means.” This policy option is more common among the neighboring countries that have an interstate rivalry. According to San-Akca, 65 percent of intentional state support occurs in the context of interstate rivalry and state supporters mainly compose of neighboring states.<sup>46</sup> While this option can be helpful for the supporter state's interests, it can also be beneficial in strengthening of supporter state's hand in bargaining with other countries.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, a foreign policy tool as party of covert warfare highlights the fact that in comparison to ethnic and religious affinity or ideology, geopolitics plays a major role in state motivation.<sup>48</sup> If the supporter state escapes from a direct military confrontation with the adversary, they are more likely to support a non-state armed group targeting rivals. According to Rand's report, state support for insurgent movements are mainly motivated by “geopolitics rather than ideology, ethnic affinity or religious sentiment”.<sup>49</sup> It is also strongly argued that the main motivation of the supporter states depends on the “strategic reasoning” rather than ideology, ethnic or religious affinity.<sup>50</sup>

In reinforcing this argument, Daniel Byman, who is a landmark scholar on the issue, argues that the most important strategic interest behind this act is “to influence

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<sup>44</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, **On War by Carl Von Clausewitz** trans. Colonel J. J. Graham. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Vol. 1 (1969), p.2.

<sup>45</sup> Alexander and Hoenig, p.47.

<sup>46</sup> San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*, p.23.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Byman et al., “Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements”, **RAND**, Rand Cooperation: Arlington 2001, p.9-10.

<sup>48</sup> Idean Salehyan, “No Shelter Here: Rebel Sanctuaries and International Conflict”, **The Journal of Politics**, Vol.70, No.1 (Jan 2008), p.54-66; Byman et al., San Akça, *State in Disguise*.

<sup>49</sup> Byman et al. p. XIV

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

their neighbors, topple adversary regime and to counter US hegemony.”<sup>51</sup> The main motivation behind this strategic tool is to weaken rivals.

## 2.2 Cost, Benefit, and Limits of State Support for NAGs

There are some expected costs and benefits of supporting NAGs for states and armed groups. State support of NAGs has had a widespread impact on the effectiveness of NAGs activities from the Cold War to today. When a rebel group receives support from a state, the conflict between the rebels and target state becomes internationalized. On the other hand, if the non-state group is highly dependent on the sources of the sponsor state; its activities can be limited by the supporter state to escape a full war and other punishments and escalation of conflicts.<sup>52</sup>

### *Benefits for States:*

States can find valid reasons mainly related to interstate relations. Some scholars highlight the utility of this policy for supporter states. According to this, support for NAGs is a cost-effective alliance for states.<sup>53</sup> A state can mobilize “whenever wishes to project its power into a territory of another without accepting the responsibility, accountability, and risks of overt belligerency.”<sup>54</sup> States that prefer to follow this path also prefer the “low-intensity conflict” strategy in dealing with adversaries.

Developing conventional military capacity is costly and time taking when compared to the developing ability to use NAGs as instruments beyond the borders.<sup>55</sup>

Sponsor states can obtain concessions from their opponents without employing a direct military operation. It can also decrease its total defense expenditure. For example; even though there is an apparent power imbalance between Iran and Saudi Arabia regarding military expenditure, Iran searches for concession in the Middle East by using a sponsorship mechanism.

It can also function as a deterrent instrument when the targeted state is threatened by the “terrorist attacks”. Even though the relationship between state and non-state groups has an informal formation, it provides nearly all the benefits of alliance

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<sup>51</sup> Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism*, p.4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism*, p.6.

<sup>53</sup> Steven R. David, “Explaining Third World Alignment”, *World Politics*, Vol.43, No.2 (Jan 1991), p.233-256.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander and Hoenig, p.48.

<sup>55</sup> Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism*, p.5-6.

formation between states. However, it has some costs as in interstate alliances.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Costs for States:***

When rebels are supported by arms and financial resources, the severity of violent activities are more likely to increase.<sup>57</sup> Several examples show that state support of NAGs especially terrorist groups increases the likelihood escalation in interstate conflicts.<sup>58</sup> Especially granting safe havens to these groups may cause deepening tensions between the supporter and the targeted state.<sup>59</sup>

The supporter state has a risk to be designated as a “rogue or pariah” state; or it can be exposed to embargoes, military interventions and other types of diplomatic and economic sanctions. Like the formations of alliances, it can trigger a counterbalancing mechanism led by the targeted states. It can face a regional or international risk of isolation and sanctions for weakening the economic and military power of the supporters again.<sup>60</sup> For example, since Iran has been on the US terrorist sponsor list since 1984, it has been exposed to heavy sanctions that have caused economic disturbance many times. In addition to this, counterterrorism or counterinsurgency policies of the targeted states can activate the offensive capabilities to attack training camps and other potential areas for a safe haven. For example, in 1993, Turkey started a military campaign with mass troops in the border regions of Syria who was the chief state supporter of the PKK at that period.<sup>61</sup>

There are similarities between interstate alliances and state –NAGs partnerships in this regard. As in interstate alliances, “the risk of counterbalancing and conflict escalation increases” as a consequence of the state sponsorship policy.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Kirchner, *Why States Rebel: Understanding State Sponsorship of Terrorism*, p.70-71.

<sup>57</sup> David Carment, “The International Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict: Concepts, Indicators, and Theory”, **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol.30, No.2 (1993), p.137-150.

<sup>58</sup> Grant Wardlaw, “Terror as an instrument of Foreign Policy”, David Rapoport (Ed.), **Inside Terrorist Organizations** in (237-259), London: Frank Cass, 1988.

<sup>59</sup> Saleyhan, *No Shelter Here: Rebel Sanctuaries and International Conflict*, p.54-66.

<sup>60</sup> Byman, *Passive Sponsors of Terrorism*, p.117–144.

<sup>61</sup> Mahmut Bali Aykan, “The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October: The Turkish View”, **The Middle East Policy**, Vol.6, No.4 (1999), p.174-191.

<sup>62</sup> Kirchner, *Why States Rebel: Understanding State Sponsorship of Terrorism*, p.74.

**Table 3: Summary of Costs and Benefits of State Support**

	<i>BENEFITS</i>	<i>COSTS</i>
<i>For STATES</i>	weakening adversaries with limited resources	Risk of “terrorist sponsor” designation by international institutions (reputational cost)
	Increases the offensive and non-conventional warfare capabilities in the changing security environment	Increasing other counterbalancing mechanism such as sanctions and counter alliance between the targeted states
	Escaping from a direct military confrontation – Low-intensity conflict	The risk of military escalation and entrapment in interstate conflicts
<i>For NAGs</i>	Increase in capacity of action	Limitation of activities by the supporter state
	Internationalization of the cause	Risk of abandonment from the supporter state while the conflict continues between NAG and targeted state.

### 2.3 Realism and State Support for NAGs

Alliance formation, security, and power gain literature have mainly been based on the structural realist approach.<sup>63</sup> However, state support for non-state armed groups “poses a theoretical challenge to structural realist thinking about alliance politics in international relations.”<sup>64</sup> Even though state sponsorship of NAGs used to stay out in structural realist studies, various studies seek to apply the state sponsor of NAGs for realist thought by referring to alliance theories.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics”, *World Politics*, Vol.36, No.4 (1984), p.461-495; Randall L. Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status-quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?”, *Security Studies*, Vol.5, No.3 (1996), p.90-121; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading: Mass Addison-Wesley, 1979.

<sup>64</sup> Kirchner, *A Good Investment?’ State Sponsorship of Terrorism as an Instrument of Iraqi Foreign Policy (1979–1991)*, p.521-537.

<sup>65</sup> Kirchner, *Why States Rebel: Understanding State Sponsorship of Terrorism*; Kirchner, *A Good Investment?’ State Sponsorship of Terrorism as an Instrument of Iraqi Foreign Policy (1979–1991)*; San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*; Zeev Maoz and Belgin San-Akca, “Rivalry and State Support of Non-state Armed Groups (NAGs), 1946–2001”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No.4 (2012), p.720-734.

Alliance formations are perceived as “an association of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, in specified circumstances, against states outside their own membership.”<sup>66</sup> The main function of alliances is to compose “military strength against a common enemy”.<sup>67</sup>

Realist thinkers perceive alliance formation different from “cooperation” which is based mainly on the common interest or any issue or policy concern. Alliances do not work as international regimes cooperating for common goods, economic or other purposes. In cooperation, there are rules for keeping actors away from conflict with each other. It is also a solution for the pressure of an anarchic system leading them to conflict. On the other hand, in alliances “meeting external threat more effectively than could be done by their members individually” is more determinant than reducing conflict among the members.<sup>68</sup>

The realist school accepts that states are unitary actors. Therefore states respond to systemic incentives rationally. Even though they accept that states are still the most prominent actors of the international system, neoclassical realists highlight the importance of unit-level factors to some extent. As structural realists are interested in the systemic reasons for state behavior, neo-classical realist foreign policy approach refers to the “leader’s perception” of power which is a reflection of systemic incentives.<sup>69</sup> Even though neo-classical realists address unit-level factors to explain the state behavior, the impact of the systemic incentives to the state behavior is common in both perspectives.

For Kenneth Waltz, state behavior is shaped by the distribution of power in an international system defined as anarchism. State power consists of the “size of the population, resource, economic capacity, military strength and political stability.”<sup>70</sup> The reason why states align their behavior with others is to increase their relative power and security within the system since a state’s placement in the international system is based on “its responses to what other states do” and what possess materially. Realism is not a foreign policy approach, but it reveals the principals of state behaviors affected

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<sup>66</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.4-5.

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Walt, *Origins of Alliance*, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987; Steven R. David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the third World*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1991; Michael N. Barnett and Jack S. Levy, “Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962-73”, *International Organization*, Vol. 45, No.3 (1991), p.369-395,

<sup>70</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p.131.



the international politics. So, the assumptions indicated by the realist school is admitted as crucial for realist foreign policy analysis.<sup>71</sup>

We can treat the alliance formed between NAGs and states the same as an alliance between states. Realist theory suggests that the primary motivation for an alliance between states is to balance against a rising power<sup>72</sup> or balance against a common threat.<sup>73</sup> According to Waltz, security issues are fundamental for alliances. The foreign policy of states and alliance formations with other states are a result of systemic incentives for “maximization of the state’s security.”<sup>74</sup>

Walt’s “balance of threat” theory is another statist alliance theory that explains the alliance behavior of states.<sup>75</sup> According to this, states balance against threat instead of power. Walt’s theory relies on the perception of a threat. The level of threat that states may pose is influenced by four constituents. These are “aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability and offensive intentions.”<sup>76</sup>

In an anarchic system, states have inadequate knowledge about the power capabilities and intentions of other states. Under these conditions, a state’s potential to perceive threat from other states increases.

Moreover, these states search for shared interest and common ground in order to ally with non-threatening ones. If there is a “conflict of interest” between states that prove itself with offensive action, the sides of the conflict make a bid to counterbalance others.<sup>77</sup> The balancing effort manifests itself with armament efforts, alliances and military action; they also call for internal and external balancing respectively. The choice between them relies on the systemic pressures and calculation for relative gain because if you go to armament, you have to dedicate domestic resources.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, if you form an alliance, you have to face the risk to lose your autonomy or freedom of action.

From this perspective, states are the only actors of alliances. Non-state groups such as insurgents, revolutionary groups or non-governmental organizations are not

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<sup>71</sup> Kirchner, *A Good Investment? State Sponsorship of Terrorism as an Instrument of Iraqi Foreign Policy (1979-1991)*, p.524.

<sup>72</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>73</sup> Walt, *Origins of Alliance*.

<sup>74</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>75</sup> Walt, *Origins of Alliance*.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power”, *International Security*, Vol.9, No.4 (Spring, 1985), p.3-43.

<sup>77</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Snyder, *Origins of Alliance*.

<sup>78</sup> Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.

included in the association called “alliance”. Therefore, realist alliance theorists exclude non-state actors from the alliance formation. Even though classical alliance theorists discount non-state armed groups in alliance formations, in today’s security environment we profoundly see state-NAGs alignments.

At this stage, the actorness of NAGs remains a crucial concern.<sup>79</sup> Allying actors should have a degree of autonomy from each other. Recognition from other actors is also crucial for NAGs actorness in the international system. For Waltz, “States are not and never have been the only international actors...the importance of non-state actors and the extent of transnational activities is obvious.”<sup>80</sup> Especially in counterterrorism efforts, most of the states treated “non-state enemy largely equivalent to an aggressive and openly hostile state”.<sup>81</sup> This study has simplifying assumptions such as “states are rational actors”. They prefer compatible means that are available and which fit their ends. Many scholars support the idea that NAGs also have enough rationality to enter an alliance.<sup>82</sup>

The logic of alliance can be applied for the alignment between state and NAGs to a large extent. States ally with NAGs in order to counterbalance a rival or enemy state. States and non-state armed groups act together for military purposes and to meet strategic military concerns. Both camps utilize their positions and act together against a common enemy.

We can categorize the key features of alliance as “formality, publicity and membership.”<sup>83</sup> According to this categorization, unlike alliances among states, there is not legal status for the obligation between states and NAGs. The obligation is crucial for the credibility of the alliance. The other key feature publicity is another concern since alliance have a deterrent function against other states. However, the informality and secrecy of alliances reduces the costs such as loss of autonomy and entrapment. It provides a compelling advantage for supporter states.

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<sup>79</sup> Arne Niemann and Charlotte Bretherton, “EU External Policy at the Crossroads: The Challenge of Actorness and Effectiveness”, *International Relations*, Vol.27, No.3 (2013), p.261–275.

<sup>80</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p.93-94.

<sup>81</sup> Kirchner, *Why States Rebel*, p.59.

<sup>82</sup> San-Akça, *State in Disguise*, Martha Crenshaw, “the Causes of Terrorism”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1981), p. 379-399; Anthony Vinci, *Armed Groups and the Balance of Power: the International Relations of Terrorists, Warlords and Insurgents*, LSE International Studies, New York: Routledge, 2009; Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş (eds.), *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology and Strategy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Kirchner, *Why States Rebel*, p. 55-58.

Long campaigns against the targeted state challenges the states monopoly of force, its economy, and reputation.<sup>84</sup> For interminable campaigns, NAGs have to be supported from various canals. In the alliance formations among states, “Alliances are cooperative endeavors, in that their members concert their resources in the pursuit of some common goals. The goal, however, is the prosecution of conflict with an outside party.”<sup>85</sup> Resembling the alliance formations among states, in the state-NAGs alliances, the supporter states provide NAGs with financial assistance, military supply, training, providing a safe haven, and recruiting militants for common goals.<sup>86</sup> With this, the supporter state and allied NAGs are able to weaken adversaries or strategic rivals.

In this circumstance, the targeted state has to transfer economic and military resources to deal with NAGs. The economic and political costs of dealing with armed groups cause a lessening of the adversary’s relative power. Thus, this kind of security concerns can motivate states to ally with NAGs. In other words, according to the logic of balance of power or logic of balance of threat, if the relative power of states is vital for the alliance decision, then the weakening of the adversary state also increases the security of the weaker one.<sup>87</sup>

When we consider the balance of threat theory and a state’s support commitment to non-state actors, support behavior serves as a substitute for interstate alliances.<sup>88</sup> A change in the security environment leads to the change in perceived threat. Geographic proximity, aggressive intentions, offensive capabilities and aggregate power are the four main dimensions of perceived threat.<sup>89</sup> The increase in a perceived threat pushes states to balancing behavior. For balancing, states can go to the military escalation if they have enough resources or they can search for alliances. If the offensive capabilities and aggregate power of the adversary state are more than the supporter state, states may ally with the non-state actors. This means that even “if the gap in relative power is large, relatively weak actors sometimes wins” due to these kinds of asymmetric tools.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Bruno S. Frey, Simon Luechinger and Alois Stutzer, “Calculating Tragedy: Assessing the Costs of Terrorism”, **Journal of Economic Surveys**, Vol.21, No.1 (2007), p.1-24.

<sup>85</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, **Alliance Politics**, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997, p.1.

<sup>86</sup> Byman, *Changing Nature of State Sponsored Terrorism*.

<sup>87</sup> Robert P. Hager and David A. Lake, “Balancing Empires: Competitive Decolonization in International Politics”, **Security Studies**, Vol.9, No.3 (March 2000), p.108-148.

<sup>88</sup> Belgin San Akca, “Supporting Non-State Armed Groups: A Resort to Illegality?”, **Journal of Strategic Studies**, Vol.32, No.4 (August 2009), p.589-613.

<sup>89</sup> Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power”.

<sup>90</sup> Ivan Arreguin-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict”, **International Security**, Vol.26, No.1 (2001), p.93-128.

Since forming an alliance with NAGs is more advantageous for the short-term solutions and weakening operations of adversaries, the supporter state firstly goes to increase its commitment to a NAG rather than targeting the adversary of the supporter. The alliance between the state and NAG continues as long as the alignment is cost-efficient for the supporter. However, a reconciliation between the supporter and the targeted state changes the nature of the relationship between the supporter state and non-state group.<sup>91</sup> The supporter state may abandon supporting the NAG when the supporter state realigns with the former enemy. Termination of the support is also possible when two states reconcile because of international or internal pressures from both sides. The failure of the NAG against the adversary also paves the way for the termination of state support.

The next chapter will firstly consider the balance of threat between Iran and its regional rivals Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Geographic proximity is a constant factor. When it comes to aggressive intentions, between Iran- Saudi Arabia and Iran- Turkey, there is always a sense of rivalry, and in some periods this turns into enmity. So, for these cases, we consider that these two factors are constant. However, offensive capabilities and the aggregate power of these states change in the studied period. Iran's armament option for counterbalancing Saudi Arabia and its main ally the United States is not practical since there is a considerable armament gap. Instead of building an army against external threats, it creates a network of alliance system precisely composed of non-state armed groups. Iran has continued to enter alliances as long as "benefits exceed the costs".<sup>92</sup>

## 2.4 Conclusion

The relationship between a state and non-state armed group have a secret and informal character in general. However, we have the opportunity to identify the very nature of this relationship from various canals such as the intelligence reports of states, reports of international institutions, and international news resources. We also have the formal alliance formation which is overt. Despite the fact that there is a difference

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<sup>91</sup> Kirchner, *Why States Rebel*, p. 70.

<sup>92</sup> Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, p.190.

regarding formality, the relationship between a state and a NAG shares common features of alliance formations and carry similar risks on the ground.<sup>93</sup>

Change in the security environment of the Middle East leads to the change of threat perception of states. If the perceived threat of a state increases, the state goes to counterbalance the threat by forming allies. If the state is not able to find a reliable ally or if the formation of an alliance with another state is costly for the state, then NAGs can be used as a substitute for state allies.

Iran's support commitment to armed groups supports a causal relation as could be explained mostly by realist alliance theory. In contrast to "rogue state" or "axis of evil" arguments,<sup>94</sup> states are rational actors and act compatibly for their strategic interest. Iran, like other states, evaluated power position of other countries and recognized the ones that have the potential to be aggressive and hostile.

The imbalance of power between the adversaries increased Iran's threat perception via-a-vis Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In addition to constant factors such as proximity and sense of rivalry, the case of Iran, the perceived threat relying on offensive and aggregate power plays a crucial role in the country's support commitment to NAGs.

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<sup>93</sup> Kirchner, *A Good Investment? State Sponsorship of Terrorism as an Instrument of Iraqi Foreign Policy (1979-1991)*, p.71.

<sup>94</sup> Jenifer Rubin, "An irrational regime", **The Washington Post**, May 26, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2015/05/26/an-irrational-regime/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.1152a3139f2d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2015/05/26/an-irrational-regime/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1152a3139f2d), (10.06.2018).; Douglas Buckland Luanda, "Iran's irrational regime; Uniting behind Obama", **The New York Times**, February 3, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/23/opinion/23iht-edlet.1.19632148.html>, (10.06.2018).; Aaron David Miller, "The 'axis of evil' is back", **BBC**, April 26, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/26/opinions/axis-of-evil-is-back-miller-sokolsky/index.html>, (10.06.2018); Danny Danon, "Rogue Iran Is a Global Threat", **Foreign Policy**, October 16, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/16/rogue-iran-is-a-global-threat/>, (10.06.2018).

### 3 IRAN'S STRATEGY OF SUPPORTING NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Middle East history witnessed major shifts in regional power structures in 1979. This chapter firstly tests the balance of threat theory by focusing on Iran and its regional rival states – Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Following, this chapter analyzes the variables that shape Iran's foreign policy behavior.

Iran and Turkey have been rivals for years. They have never formed a real alliance against a common threat, or nor have confronted each other with direct military means since 1979. The relationship between the countries waxes and wanes depending on the political conjecture and security concerns, but the sense of rivalry remains between them. The PKK has been violently challenging Turkey's stability and security since 1984. Within this context, the PKK issue is a very controversial security problem, which profoundly affects the nature of the relationship between the countries especially after 1988. The rise of the PKK in Turkey was an opportunity for Iran to obtain some leverage against Turkey a lower cost.

The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia also experienced its worst period after the Iranian revolution. While Iran has been targeted by Saudi Arabia and its allies, Iran also targeted Saudi Arabia by several means. Since Iran escaped from a direct military confrontation with Saudis and its allies in the region, non-state armed groups are employed as functional tools against the chief adversaries in the region.<sup>95</sup>

Yemeni Houthis are struggling against Saudi led government in Yemen and have also been challenging Saudi Arabia's security since 2004.<sup>96</sup> Iran and the Houthis group also called "Ansar Allah" have been brought together for their shared "anti-status quo" interest especially after 2004.<sup>97</sup> Thus, Saudi Arabia and Turkey were targeted by Iran with the help of the non-state armed groups in different time periods but for the same reason and with the same tools.

Depending on the literature above, this study anticipates changes in Iran's support commitment to NAGs to be related to Iran's perceived threat against these

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<sup>95</sup> Karim Sadjadpour and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Iran, Leveraging Chaos", Kristina Kausch (Ed.), **Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East** in. (35-49), Madrid: FRIDE, 2015, p.37.

<sup>96</sup> A religious group affiliated with the Zaydi sect of Shia Islam in Yemen. The Houthis was mainly strong in the northern province of Saada. The Houthis group turned to an armed movement in 2004 aiming to self-defense when the first conflict with the Yemeni government erupted.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: a Limited Return on a Modest Investment", **International Affairs**, Vol.92 No.3 (2016), p.647-663.

rivals. Therefore, two case studies associated with Iran's regional relations with countries mentioned above from 1979 to today are suitable for testing the hypotheses. Within this period, I check how states can use NAGs as a means for counterbalancing external security threats.

### **3.1 A History of the Relationship between Iran and Non-State Armed Groups in the Middle East**

Today, Iran is considered as the country that is in contact with non-state armed groups (NAGs) in the Middle East the most. The alignments between the Iranian regime and non-state actors have played a crucial role in Iranian foreign policy and military strategy after 1979, and this behavior has challenged and weakened the political rule of targeted states. This policy firstly received reactions from the United States by designating Iran as a "state sponsor of terrorism" in 1984.<sup>98</sup>

Hezbollah is the most well-known NAG that has a tight relationship with the Iranian regime. It can be considered as the highest-level commitment of Iran to a NAG. It can also be called as a relation of "brother in arms."<sup>99</sup> According to the US State Department's annual "Country Reports on Terrorism-2016", Iran is the main ally of Hezbollah.<sup>100</sup> Iran has supplied Hezbollah with rockets, missiles and small arms in addition to financial support and training for militants at camps in Iran since it was founded in 1982.

However, Iran's support commitment to Hezbollah should be placed in a different place today. In the beginning, Iran used Hezbollah to interfere into the internal affairs of Lebanon and also as an ally against Israel who became one of the main adversaries after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Even though Iran has more military personnel than Israel, Israel has a more effective army reinforced by military technologies and modern devices in comparison with the Iranian army.

Under these circumstances, non-state armed groups become perfect allies in the conflict with adversaries.<sup>101</sup> Hezbollah's well-trained militant cells confront modern armies by using guerrilla tactics and apparatus provided by Iran. By the time it

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<sup>98</sup> US Department of State, "State Sponsors of Terrorism", <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/list/c14151.htm>, (20 June 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Kirchner, *Why States Rebel: Understanding State Sponsorship of Terrorism*, p. 140.

<sup>100</sup> United States Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2016", United States Department of State Publication, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/272488.pdf>, (21 June 2018).

<sup>101</sup> Kristina Kausch, "State and Non-State Alliances in the Middle East", *The International Spectator*, Vol.52, No.3 (2017), p.39.

serves in different regions for various tasks such as backing the Assad regime in Syria and training Shia militants to pursue Iranian interest in the region<sup>102</sup>. Hezbollah helps Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in providing training and logistics activities most of the time.

There are also other groups that Iran shares a common interest with. The American Invasion of Iraq, Arab Spring, and the recent civil wars in the region especially in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have caused power vacuums throughout the region.<sup>103</sup> In the absence of state authority, the number of non-state armed groups and their capacity for action have increased. Failed states and the power vacuumed areas are ideal places for countries to support these kinds of armed groups. Iran has a chance to increase its capacity for action via these groups in the context of the absence of authority and the state of ambiguity for deterring and disturbing adversaries in the region.<sup>104</sup>

For example, Iran supports Houthi military forces in Yemen through military and financial means and intelligence. Houthis forces are a notable security threat for Saudi Arabia. Similarly, when Iraq turned into a failed state due to the American Invasion of Iraq, Iran gain leverage in using non-state armed groups affiliated to Shia. In Iraq, Iran supported Shiite armed militias who were involved in a military conflict with US troops. In Afghanistan, Shite elements have been supported against the Taliban, as well.

It is widely considered that throughout the Middle East, Iran appeals to religious ties to interact with NAGs since Iran has a considerable influence on Shia Islam communities.<sup>105</sup> However, it does not necessarily mean that there is a causal relation between Shia identity/ideology and Iran's support commitment to these groups. Shia identity makes allying easier for Iran, so it is a facilitating factor under this conditions. However, Iran has also supported non-Shia groups where they shared a common interest.<sup>106</sup> For example, Iran supported Ansar al-Islam- a Sunni insurgent

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<sup>102</sup> Ben Hubbard, "Iran Out to Remake Mideast with Arab Enforcer: Hezbollah", **The New York Times**, August 27, 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Florence Gaub, "State Vacuums and Non-state Actors in the Middle East and North Africa", Lorenzo Kamel (Ed.), **The Frailty of Authority: Borders, Non-State Actors and Power Vacuums in a Changing Middle East** in. (51-65), Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2017; Fadi Elhousseini, "The Arab Spring and the Rise of Non-state Actors", **the Middle East Monitor**, June 13, 2015.

<sup>104</sup> Melissa G. Dalton, "How Iran's Hybrid-War Tactics Help and Hurt It", **Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists**, Vol.73, No.5 (August 21, 2017), p.312-315.

<sup>105</sup> Ibrahim Halawi, "The Non-States of the Middle East", **Middle East Eye**, June 26, 2015.

<sup>106</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, "Terrorist and Extremist Movements in the Middle East: The Impact on the Regional Military Balance", **CSIS**, 2005, p.5, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/media/csis/pubs/050329\\_terrandextmvmts%5B1%5D.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/050329_terrandextmvmts%5B1%5D.pdf), (25 June 2018),



group- based in Iraq and Syria during the 2000s. Similarly, Iran materially endorsed some Sunni armed groups hostile to the US and UK troops in Iraq while supporting the Shite groups.<sup>107</sup> It is also known that Iran has provided funding and training to Hamas and other Sunni Palestinian resistance groups through the Quds Forces of IRGC.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to NAGs that primarily define themselves as Islamic religious groups, the PKK, as a Marxist leftist terrorist organization, was also supported by Iran against Turkey between 1988-1999.<sup>109</sup> It is also worth noting that, even though Iran pursued anti-Kurdish policies at home, this did not prevent Iran to cut its ties with the PKK.<sup>110</sup>

Iran's support commitment to NAGs cannot be limited to Iran's aggressive behavior and destabilizing aims, or its desire for stretching the so-called "Shiite crescent". Systemic incentives have shaped Iran's strategic thinking and military strategy for filling the security gaps in favor of Iran. For this strategy, non-state armed groups flattered around the Middle East give Iran necessary means for maneuver. The following section looks at the main pillars of Iran's military strategy in which NAGs play a crucial role.

### 3.2 Iran's Military Behavior

Iran's shifting security environment over the past decades and its confrontation with the central security issues find a place in Iranian military thinking. Military doctrines of states are a combination of a state's opportunities against threats, the goals of military forces in current and future security environment, the available means of states to reach national security and a state's military thinking feeding on previous experiences. Iran's military doctrine has improved under the influence of restrained resources, past conflicts and defeats, and challenges from the United States.<sup>111</sup>

It is highly argued that Iran is an unpredictable, rogue and irrational state. Regarding this, Iran's regional behavior is often accepted as "aggressive and

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<sup>107</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, **Iran's Military Forces and War fighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf**, Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 2007, p.208.

<sup>108</sup> S. Schneidmann, "Hamas Supporters Deeply Divided Over Movement's Links With Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)", **MEMRI**, April 4, 2018, <https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-supporters-deeply-divided-over-movements-links-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guards>, (9 June 2018).

<sup>109</sup> Cenker Korhan Demir, **Sebeplerinden Mücadele Yöntemlerine Etnik Ayrılıkçı Terörizm, ETA, PIRA, PKK**, Ankara: Nobel Yayınları, 2017, p.237.

<sup>110</sup> Daniel Byman (Ed.), **Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era**, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001, p.66.

<sup>111</sup> Steven R. Ward, "The Continuing Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine", **Middle East Journal**, Vol.59, No.4 (Autumn 2005), p.559-576.

destabilizing” regardless of Iran’s intentions.<sup>112</sup> However, Iran like other states pursues its national interest, makes strategic calculus and responds to these national threats.<sup>113</sup> It is an actor that able to make a cost-benefit analysis and assess the risks of a particular action.<sup>114</sup>

Iran’s “sense of isolation and a historical lack of natural allies” are derived from its geographic position in the Middle East.<sup>115</sup> The feeling of being besieged by the US, and policies of Israel and Sunni states have paved the way for increasing the security concerns of Iran. In addition to this, the regional developments in the Middle East have profoundly influenced Iran’s threat perception and concern about Iran’s stability and security.

Iran has confronted very substantial strategic challenges since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Once the United States was the closest ally, Iran lost its most reliable partner and has far the most dominant military power in the Gulf in addition to regional rivalries. Other than the United States and its primary ally Israel, Iran also has major Sunni competitors in the Middle East like Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. They all claimed a prevailing political and military posture.

The Iran-Iraq War was a defining moment for the Iranian military doctrine.<sup>116</sup> Immediately after the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the Iraq-Iran War further weakened Iranian military power. During this period, Iran was in a difficult position to carry on the war. Iran’s military equipment and its supplies such as military support vehicles and small arms were heavily dependent on American and European war machines purchased in the Shah period.<sup>117</sup> The decline of Iranian arms purchases because of Western embargoes played a critical role on imbalances in arms purchases between Iran and Iraq.<sup>118</sup> Iran tried to build up a self-reliance domestic defense industry in addition to finding alternative suppliers for arms procurement with limited economic resources during that period.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Dalton, p.312-315; Cordesman and Kleiber, *ibid*.

<sup>113</sup> Matthew J. McInnis, “Iran’s Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution”, **American Enterprise Institute**, May 12, 2015, <http://www.aei.org/publication/irans-strategic-thinking-origins-and-evolution/>, (21 June 2018); Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, “Iran and Turkey: Not Quite Enemies but Less Than Friends”, **Third World Quarterly**, (2016), p.1-16.

<sup>114</sup> Cordesman and Kleiber, *ibid*.

<sup>115</sup> McInnis, p.3-4.

<sup>116</sup> Michael Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine”, **United States Institute of Peace**, The Iran Primer, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine> , (1 May 2018).

<sup>117</sup> Ben Offiler, **US Foreign Policy and the Modernization of Iran Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and the Shah**, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

<sup>118</sup> CIA, “**Iran-Iraq: Buying Weapons of War**”, May 1984, released date: 23.05.2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00283R000500120005-5.pdf>, (10 May 2018).

<sup>119</sup> Daniel Byman (Ed.), *Iran’s Security Policy in the Post-revolutionary Era*. p.35.

Even after the Iraq-Iran war, “security vulnerabilities” before other states increased the security concerns of Iran. The country has been exposed to arms embargoes by leading arms-supplying Western countries. In addition to this, in order to increase its defense in the international arena, Iran has been retained out of any alliance formations such as NATO. Under this condition, Iran’s ambitions to improve its national defense industry and also rapid building of nuclear capability was a part of Iran’s solutions for Iran’s security concerns. However, Iran’s military building efforts and search for alliance have fallen behind its major rivals for decades. Iran’s quest for nuclear deterrence was also impeded by Western countries and its allied states in the region.

In addition to these security concerns, relative power gain also matters for states when they have many regional adversaries and rivals. Increased power can be used as a tool for both national survival and also for behaving more autonomously. Iran like other Middle Eastern countries seeks maximum freedom of action in its political and security affairs by pressuring others. For this strategy, NAGs come into play most of the time.

### **3.2.1 Iran’s Military Strategy and Non-State Armed Groups (NAGs)**

There is a widely accepted belief that Iran’s military strategy is under the domination of nationalism and religious ideology.<sup>120</sup> However, Iran’s national interest cannot be limited to ensuring regime security and flag-waving. Iran also pursues a military strategy consistent with its “national interest” to a large extent.

Since Iran has restricted military capabilities, it has embraced a deterrence-oriented strategy that aims to increase the cost for adversaries and reduces the cost for itself. Today Iran is not the dominant power of the region, but it has a notable conventional and asymmetric military capability. Immediately after the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran seemed to evade a conventional military confrontation especially with the United States, which has made an implication of possession of mass destruction and it concentrated on asymmetric warfare as an essential defense method.<sup>121</sup>

For many years this asymmetric warfare capability differed from any other

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<sup>120</sup> Daniel Byman (Ed.), *Iran’s Security Policy in the Post-revolutionary Era*. p.35.

<sup>121</sup> Ward, p.559-576; Abdullah Yeğın, *Iran’ın Bölgesel Faaliyetleri ve Güç Unsurları*, SETA Kitapları: Ankara, p. 38.

state in the Middle East. The focus on asymmetric warfare strategy rather than conventional warfare tactics is the specific characteristics of the Iranian defense strategy.<sup>122</sup> In order to deal with adversaries and mitigate the adverse effects of new developments and current regional turmoil, Iran has continued to pursue a low intensity and covert conflict strategy.

In this way, Iran transforms its methods into a comprehensive system in which non-state actors are the main actors. Moreover, following this strategy, it has gradually increased both intelligence capacity and the use of NAGs and militia groups such as Hezbollah and other Shia militias and rebels.<sup>123</sup>

Especially after 2003, the Iranian regular army increased the inclusion of irregular means and tactics in its military training. In 2005, the IRGC announced that it shifted its doctrine called “mosaic defense”, which is a “flexible and layered” defense program.<sup>124</sup> This defense strategy heavily depends on asymmetric warfare capability and the mobilization of Iran’s militia power which creates a “no safe zone” for enemy forces in the Iranian interest area.<sup>125</sup> While Iran is avoiding conventional war with its rivalries in the region, it finds it more advantageous to use other means against opponents.<sup>126</sup> This is a kind of “soft spot tactics” of Iran against regional adversaries.

Within the unstable security environment, Iran often seeks to collaborate with dissatisfied groups. They are mostly opposed to the status-quo defined by the United States and its regional partners.<sup>127</sup> These groups have significantly increased Iran's operational capability and bargaining power.<sup>128</sup> In the case of need, Iran is able to move these groups to different conflict zones especially during cross-border operations. US power centers and its alliances in the Middle East have become the main targets of this strategy.<sup>129</sup> However, it is also an essential strategy against other regional rivals with whom Iran avoids direct conflict.

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<sup>122</sup> Yeğin, p. 55.

<sup>123</sup> Kenneth Katzman, “Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies”, **CRS Report for Congress**, July 18, 2018.

<sup>124</sup> Connell, *ibid*.

<sup>125</sup> Ward, p.559-576.

<sup>126</sup> Nihat Dumlupınar, “Hibrit Savaş: İran Silahlı Kuvvetleri”, **ANKASAM**, Vol.1, No.2 (October 2017) p.68-105.

<sup>127</sup> Juneau, p.647–663.

<sup>128</sup> Yeğin, p. 42.

<sup>129</sup> Ali Hajizade, “Iran’s Selective Approach to Hybrid War”, **Al Arabiya**, February 23, 2018, (28 March 2018), <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/02/23/Iran-s-selective-approach-to-hybrid-war.html>, (15 April 2018).

### 3.2.2 Iran's Support Mechanism For NAGs

Even though Iran has supported various NAGs since 1979, the countries that have a considerable Shia population in the Middle East are the primary support commitment areas for Iran. Iran boosted up recruiting and training activities by deploying and mobilizing Shia militants from across the region. Especially in the Syrian Civil War, Iraqis, Afghans, and Pakistanis fought alongside Iran backed groups.<sup>130</sup> At the center of this attempt, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah have played a crucial role. Iran sponsorship activities remained significant through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force and Intelligence Units.<sup>131</sup>

For direct support activities, Iran deploys Al-Quds force, which is a special unit of IRGC, to arm and train non-state armed actors. This unit is able to conduct unconventional covert operations via these groups in foreign territories. While the Al-Quds force has actively operated especially in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, it is active in cells in the other countries.<sup>132</sup>

Even though most of the training bases are located out of Iran, some of them are operational in Iran.<sup>133</sup> More experienced militants take advanced training from Iranian and Hezbollah commanders whether in Iran or Lebanon.<sup>134</sup> Especially Qom, Tabriz, and Mashhad cities of Iran hosts various training facilities.<sup>135</sup>

Although Iran supports any kind of NAGs especially in the Middle East, the practical considerations make it easier to give military training and financial aid to the Shia groups in the Levant after the American Invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>136</sup> In the Middle East new non-state armed groups have mobilized.<sup>137</sup> Iranian regional influence has

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<sup>130</sup> Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Afghan Refugees in Iran Being Sent to Fight and Die for Assad in Syria", *The Guardian*, November 5, 2015.

<sup>131</sup> US Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Country Reports on Terrorism, 2016", July 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/272488.pdf>, (19 April 2018).

<sup>132</sup> *Al Araby*. "Iraq's Shia Militias Formally Integrated into State's Security Apparatus", March 9, 2018 <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/3/9/iraqs-shia-militias-formally-integrated-into-states-security-apparatus/>, (21 May 2018); Cordesman and Kleiber, p.202.

<sup>133</sup> Cordesman and Kleiber, p.206; *Forbes*, "Iran Builds New Terror Centers as US Stalls on Terrorist Designation", May 23, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2017/05/23/iran-builds-new-terror-centers-as-us-stalls-on-terrorist-designation/>, (21 May 2018).

<sup>134</sup> Ben Hubbard, "Iran Out to Remake Mideast With Arab Enforcer: Hezbollah", *The New York Times*, August 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/27/world/middleeast/hezbollah-iran-syria-israel-lebanon.html>, (30 May 2018).

<sup>135</sup> *Iran Focus*, "Exclusive: Terrorist Training Camps in Iran", February 27, 2006, [https://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5956:exclusive-terrorist-training-camps-in-iran&catid=9&Itemid=114](https://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5956:exclusive-terrorist-training-camps-in-iran&catid=9&Itemid=114), (21 May 2018).

<sup>136</sup> McInnis, p.4.

<sup>137</sup> Renad Mansour, "More Than Militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces Are Here to Stay", *War on the Rocks*, April 3, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/>, (10 May 2018).

grown through the proliferation of Shite militias in Iraq especially after the rise of ISIS in 2014.<sup>138</sup> Hezbollah and other Iranian operatives went to Iraq to organize militias against American forces.

For example in Iraq Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-hashed al-sha'abi*, or PMF) as an “umbrella organization” for some 50 paramilitary groups, Houthis militias in Yemen and Afghan Fatemiyoun brigades in Syria were organized and supported against the competitors. Non-state armed groups have filled the security gap on behalf of Iran.

By using NAGs, Iran has either tried to weaken its adversaries or to protect a friendly regime in order to secure relations. For example, in Syria, Iran has mobilized thousands of fighters including Hezbollah, Iraqi and Afghan, Pakistan, recruits to bolster Assad’s regime.<sup>139</sup> Iran tries to deal with the threats by empowering a “web of allies” consisting of paramilitary forces and non-state armed groups as a power bloc for long-term deterrence strategy.<sup>140</sup>

Within this alliance system, Hezbollah has become a privileged partner for Iran. Its state like attribute, close integration of armed forces to the Iranian army and arsenal possession and military tactics of Hezbollah differentiated it from other non-state groups. Since its formations, Iran has supported Hezbollah’s military units via Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. It is estimated that every year Iran used to transfer 50-100 million dollars to the leadership cadre of Hezbollah.<sup>141</sup>

When Hezbollah gain a victory against Israel in 2006 through using asymmetric warfare tactics and exploit the weakness of the enemy, the importance of this help became apparent. The success of Hezbollah came from the effective use of light anti-tank rockets, anti-tank guided missiles and also unmanned aerial vehicles.<sup>142</sup> Availability of sophisticated armaments and also training activities are an inevitable result of state support most of the time.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, “Iran's Axis of Resistance Rises”, **Foreign Affairs**, Jan 24, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-01-24/irans-axis-resistance-rises> (10 January 2018).

<sup>139</sup> Dalton, p.312-315; Dehghan, *ibid*.

<sup>140</sup> Mohseni and Kalout, *ibid*.

<sup>141</sup> Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski, “Hezbollah: The Model of a Hybrid Threat”, **the Polish Institute of International Affairs**, Vol. 24, No.756 (2015).

<sup>142</sup> Piotrowski, *Hezbollah: The Model of a Hybrid Threat*.

<sup>143</sup> Alexander and Hoenig, *The New Iranian Leadership: Ahmadinejad, Terrorism, Nuclear Ambition, and the Middle East*, p.55.

### 3.3 Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry and Iran's Support for Houthis

This section firstly explains, the relationship level between Iran and Saudi Arabia within a historical context. As the adversaries of the Middle East, I show the reason of this adversary and its implications on the aggressive behavior of Iran. The reason for the increase in the threat perception of Iran against Saudi Arabia is discussed based on the material capabilities of both states.

#### 3.3.1 Describing the Iran- Saudi Arabia Rivalry after 1979

Saudi Arabia has been a significant concern in Iran's foreign policy along with the United States, which is the enduring competitor in the power distribution of the Middle East. The first stage in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran began with the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, which paved the way for creating the hostile environment. It was a double threat. Firstly, Iran challenged Saudi Arabia by creating a new type of state in the region.<sup>144</sup> Secondly, it was opposed to the American influence in the region that of which Saudi Arabia has taken the advantage.

Iran tended to seek a revolutionary change with various degrees throughout the Middle East in general, in the Gulf region in particular. Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States in varying degrees “often seek to contain Iran’s quest for dominance.”<sup>145</sup>

Saudi Arabia initiated the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 to form a closer relationship with the five Sunni states in the Persian Gulf: Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>146</sup> Even though it was not a military alliance against Iran, the cooperation gives a sense of common action in various areas.

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<sup>144</sup> Jonathan Marcus, “Why Saudi Arabia and Iran are bitter rivals”, **BBC**, Nov 18, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809>, (22 June 2018).

<sup>145</sup> W. Andrew Terrill, “The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and The Future Of Middle East Security”, Mackenzie Tyler and Anthony M. Boone (Ed.), **Rivalry In The Middle East Saudi Arabia And Iran** in. ( 1-52), New York: Nova Publishers, 2012.

<sup>146</sup> “The purpose of the GCC is to achieve unity among its members based on their common objectives and their similar political and cultural identities, which are rooted in Islamic beliefs. Presidency of the council rotates annually. Arguably the most important article of the GCC charter is Article 4, which states that the alliance was formed to strengthen relations among its member countries and to promote cooperation among the countries’ citizens. The GCC also has a defense planning council that coordinates military cooperation between member countries. The highest decision-making entity of the GCC is the Supreme Council, which meets on an annual basis and consists of GCC heads of state. Some of the most important achievements of the GCC include the creation of the Peninsula Shield Force, a joint military venture based in Saudi Arabia, and the signing of an intelligence-sharing pact in 2004. At a GCC summit in December 2009, an agreement was reached to launch a single regional currency similar to the euro.” See: Encyclopedia Britannica, “Gulf Cooperation Council”, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gulf-Cooperation-Council>, (20 June 2018).

During the war between Iraq and Iran, Saudi Arabia supported Saddam Hussein which had a significant impact on the escalating the tension.<sup>147</sup>

“Iran’s sense of isolation” peaked when the US started large military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>148</sup> Since the 1970’s, there was a power struggle between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq after Britain’s military withdrawal from the Middle East.<sup>149</sup> This rivalry continued between Iran and Saudi Arabia after Iran’s military influence increased in Iraq after the removal of Iran’s primary adversary. Once they were two main pillars of the United States security strategy in the Middle East, they remained as two major rivals in the region. Even though the overthrow of Saddam reinforced the hand of Iran in the long run, Iran’s search for nuclear power capacity caused increased isolation of Iran because of robust economic sanctions during the 2000s.

With the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011, uprising caused instability in the Middle East. Iran and Saudi Arabia have taken advantage of instability in the region especially in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, and try to exploit rebel groups to increase power.<sup>150</sup> The strategic rivalry upgraded the regional struggle. It turns a “geopolitical confrontations among regional states”.<sup>151</sup> While Iran has sought to limit the influence of Saudi Arabia in the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia has tried to keep its key role on the Gulf countries by relying on US military power against Iran. The uprising in Bahrain in 2011 and its suppression by the Gulf Cooperation Council states led by Saudi Arabia further intensified the regional rivalry between the two camps.

Currently, all these stages determine the Iranian geopolitical interest in Yemen. Both sides try to mobilize its resources and back the cause by available means. As Saudi Arabia decided to intervene in the Yemeni conflict with direct military instruments, the imbalance of threat perceived by Iran mounted. Material imbalances between the two adversaries and possession of reliable ally capacities and international political and economic pressure are significant concerns for Iran as well.

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<sup>147</sup> Amanda Erickson, “What’s Behind the Feud Between Saudi Arabia and Iran? Power”, **The Washington Post**, December 20, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/20/whats-behind-the-feud-between-saudi-arabia-and-iran-power/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.6151e72e8531](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/20/whats-behind-the-feud-between-saudi-arabia-and-iran-power/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6151e72e8531), (22 June 2018).

<sup>148</sup> W. Andrew Terrill, “Iranian Involvement in Yemen”, **Orbis**, Vol.58, (Summer 2014), p.429-440.

<sup>149</sup> Emad Y. Kaddorah, “The Regional Geo-Sectarian Contest over the Gulf”, **Insight Turkey**, Vol.20, No.2, (Spring 2018), p.21-31.

<sup>150</sup> Muharrem Ekşi, “Regional Hegemony Quests in the Middle East from the Balance of Power System to the Balance of Proxy Wars: Turkey as Balancing Power for the Iran - Saudi Rivalry”, **Akademik Bakış**, Vol.11, No.2 (Winter 2017) p.133-156.

<sup>151</sup> Emad Y. Kaddorah, *The Regional Geo-Sectarian Contest over the Gulf*, p.21-31.



On the other hand, Iran's reflections to the systemic pressure lead Saudi Arabia to feel under pressure due to the Iranian activities in its southern borders. Since the establishment of Yemen in 1932, Saudi Arabia plays a more significant role in the internal affairs of Yemen. It expanded its control over the southern neighbor and controlled it to hinder endangering its interest since that time. Saudi Arabia accepted that the security and stability of the Arabian Peninsula were associated with the stability of Yemen.<sup>152</sup>

To do this, Saudis resort to intervening with Yemeni internal affairs, contact with local groups and tribal leaders, keep the leverage of Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia and keep a limited size of military troops on the borders.<sup>153</sup> Iran's historical ties with Houthis leaders were quickly reviewed after the Yemen conflict broke out. Houthis appears as an instrumental partner for Iran playing its role in the border area at the beginning, and also at the capital of Yemen by the time. While Houthis increased its position in Yemen, Iran has leverage against Saudi Arabia and raised fear in Riyadh especially after the takeover of Sana by Houthis.

Iran does not follow a policy that is backing all Shia groups in the Middle East. Instead, it pursues to support groups that have the potential to weaken adversaries. Iran's "secret" alliance with Houthis group in Yemen is an example of this. Iran is the main state supporter of Houthis in Yemen. Even though Houthis movement came to appear even before Iranian support to the group, today they much less an ally of Iran like many other Shia militias throughout the Middle East.

#### ***History of the Conflict: Who are Houthis?***

Houthis, a tribe that belongs to the Zaydi sect of Shia Islam<sup>154</sup>, have been in contact with Iran since the mid-1980s. The Zeydis have been a dominant group in Yemen politics for centuries. However, after the civil war between 1963-1970, the group gradually became marginalized.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, Saudi Arabia increased the promotion of Wahhabism in Yemen through various means in response to the

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<sup>152</sup> Ali Adami and Najmieh Pouresmaeili, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Islamic Awakening Case", **Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs**, Vol.3, No.4 (Winter 2013), p.153-178.

<sup>153</sup> May Darwich, "the Saudi Intervention in Yemen: Struggling for Status", **Insight Turkey**, Vol. 20, No.2 (2018), p.125-141.

<sup>154</sup> Zeydi sect split from the Shia school in the ninth century. Zaydis are minority of Shiites and they follow a different belief that is different from Iranian Twelve Imams.

Revolution. During the 80s and 90s, “anti-Shia Wahabization campaign” felt threatened by Houthis in addition to the economic discrimination problem.<sup>155</sup>

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, Saudi Arabia increased the promotion of Wahhabism in Yemen through various means in response to the Revolution. During the 80s and 90s, “anti-Shia Wahabization campaign” felt threatened by Houthis in addition to the economic discrimination problem.

They organized and become a part of Parliament in the 90s and followed a policy that opposed the Yemeni Government. This political stance later turned into an insurgent movement called the “Houthi movement” in the mid-2000s. The American invasion of Iraq deeply radicalized Houthis and extended their hostility against the US and its allies. They formed an armed group called Ansar Allah (Supporters of God). Their slogan is “Death to America, death to Israel, Damn the Jews, victory to Islam.”<sup>156</sup> From this date onwards, they “morphed into a militia with a political affinity for Iran and Hezbollah, and a posture explicitly opposed to the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.”<sup>157</sup>

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia relied on Ali Abdallah Saleh, president of North Yemen from 1978 to 1990 and unified Yemen from 1990 to 2012. With the rise of Ansar Allah, the Saudi concern about instability in Yemen increased.

After 2003, Saleh took a stand against the Houthi rebels. In 2004, Hussein al Houthi was killed by Saleh’s forces. Armed confrontations between two camps increased in Yemen. In 2004, military operations against the insurgents especially in the Saada province of North Yemen, culminated the military failure of Yemen despite the military support of Saudis.<sup>158</sup> Oppression of the rebels in the Saada province was not a successful operation for Yemeni military forces.

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<sup>155</sup> Mohsen Milani, “Iran’s Game in Yemen”, **Foreign Affairs**, April 19, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2015-04-19/irans-game-yemen>, (21 June 2018); W. Andrew Terrill, *Iranian Involvement in Yemen*, p.429-440.

<sup>156</sup> Peter Salisbury, “Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian Cold War”, **Middle East and North Africa Programme**, Chatham House, February 2015, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field\\_document/20150218YemenIranSaudi.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150218YemenIranSaudi.pdf), (6 June 2018).

<sup>157</sup> Ali Watkins, Ryan Grim, and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, “Iran Warned Houthis Against Yemen Takeover”, **Huffington Post**, April 20, 2015, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen\\_n\\_7101456.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen_n_7101456.html), (25 June 2018).

<sup>158</sup> Bruce Riedel, “Who are the Houthis, and Why are We at War with Them?”, **Brookings Institute**, December 18, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/18/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/>, (19 May 2018).

In 2009, Saudi Air Forces directly intervened with the Yemeni government. While Iran exploited the instability of the region after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Saudi Arabia tried to reserve its place in Yemen in order to prevent Iranian influence.

After the arrival of the Arab Spring in Yemen in 2011, Houthis joined the mass protests against Saleh's government. During the protests, Iran did not only back Houthis but also some fractions by financial help and encouragement against the Hadi government.<sup>159</sup> The protests caused the end of Saleh's reign and the start of the Mansur Hadi period, who was the Vice President of Saleh. Even though the Houthis, did not welcome Hadi after the overthrow of Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen had the opportunity to provide the smoothest transition within the countries where the Arab uprisings took place.<sup>160</sup>

Between March 2013 and January 2014, The National Dialogue Conference (NDC), under the auspices of the UN Representative and involving all political and social parties in Yemen, was a mechanism to discuss the transition period. The fall of Saleh, the stalemate of conflicts and the formulation of the NDC, pointed to the minimum requirements for a peaceful transition process in Yemen. However, these efforts were unreciprocated in political terms.

On the contrary, on the day of the announcement of the conclusion report of the NDC, Houthis and the separatist groups in South Yemen did not recognize the final declaration and the conflicts resumed. During the one-year NDC talks, several groups, mainly Houthis, were prepared for a new conflict process.<sup>161</sup>

In 2014, Houthis made a deal with Saleh since Hadi was perceived as a Saudi ally. Saleh and its cadres within the army and intelligence also joined the resistance alliance against the Hadi government. After the reconciliation of Saleh and the Houthis, in a year, Hadi was toppled and obliged to escape to Saudi Arabia for protection.

In 2015, the US forces decided to support its ally Saudi Arabia against the Houthi movement. Saudis launched airstrikes on Yemen both for restoring the pro-Saudi Hadi government and also for defeating the Houthi groups. Operation "Decisive Storm" in Yemen was a clear sign of geopolitical rivalry for the regional power. In the

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<sup>159</sup> Eric Schmitt and Robert F. Worth, "With Arms for Yemen rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role", **The New York Times**, March 15, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html>, (12 June 2018).

<sup>160</sup> Veysel Kurt, "Yemen için Ümit Işığı Var mı?", **Anadolu Ajansı**, March 16, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz-haber/yemen-icin-umit-isigi-var-mi/1090647>, (30 May 2018).

<sup>161</sup> Christopher Stille, "Iran's Role in Yemen's Civil War", **the Pardee Periodical Journal of Global Affairs**, Vol. 1, No.1 (Spring 2017), p.115-129.

same year, Iran's commitment to Ansar Allah - the armed wing of the Houthi movement - increased. Since 26 March 2015, when the coalition forces under the leadership of Saudi Arabia launched a military operation to support the legitimate administration in Yemen, the Houthis often attacked different regions of Saudi Arabia.<sup>162</sup>

In 2017, US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley presented "concrete evidence" to show the level of relationship between Iran and Houthis.<sup>163</sup> She showed a missile labeled by an Iranian defense firm and which was launched against Saudi Arabia and allied forces.

Even though Iran rejects the accusation of supporting the rebels in Yemen, their shared interest converged against Saudi Arabia- Iran's regional nemesis. They both look for challenging Saudi, and US dominance of the Middle East and in Yemen Houthi forces are the main opposition group against the Saudi-led government.<sup>164</sup> Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-backed Hadi government perceive Houthis as a proxy of Iran, so Saudi Arabia formulates the war in Yemen to counter Iranian influence in the region:<sup>165</sup>

*Iran, rather than confronting the isolation it has created for itself, opts to obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies, as well as its support for terrorism, by leveling unsubstantiated charges against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia...As a consequence, Iran has supported violent extremist groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and sectarian militias in Iraq. Iran or its proxies have been blamed for terrorist attacks around the world.*

Saudi Arabia also believes that Iran undermines both the security of Saudi Arabia and its allies. Since Iran has been on the sponsor of terrorism list of America

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<sup>162</sup> **Habertürk**, "Husiler'den Suudi Arabistan'a Füze saldırısı!", June 13, 2018, <http://www.haberturk.com/husiler-den-suudi-arabistan-a-fuze-saldirisi-2013958#>, (13 June 2018).

<sup>163</sup> Julian Borger and Partrick Wintour, "US Gives Evidence Iran Supplied Missiles that Yemen Rebels Fired at Saudi Arabia", **The Guardian**, December 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/14/us-gives-evidence-iran-supplied-missiles-that-yemen-rebels-fired-at-saudi-arabia>, (5 June 2018).

<sup>164</sup> Zachary Laub, "Yemen in Crisis", **Council on Foreign Relations**, April 29, 2015, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/190632/Backgrounder\\_%20Yemen's%20Ci...pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/190632/Backgrounder_%20Yemen's%20Ci...pdf), (29 May 2018).

<sup>165</sup> Adel Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir (Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia), "Can Iran Change?", **The New York Times**, January 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-can-iran-change.html>, (20 June 2018).

since 1984, Saudi Arabia blames Iranian activities being extracanonical aggression “as part of its broader hegemonic ambitions in the region.”<sup>166</sup>

Saudi Arabia perceives this rivalry between “good and evil” to a large extent. So, there is a call for Iran to obey international rules.<sup>167</sup> It can be considered that Saudi Arabia as a “benevolent power” tries to justify its ambitions in the region by overstating the Iranian activities in Yemen.<sup>168</sup>

The United States as the biggest ally of Saudi Arabia in Yemen against the Houthis also uses the same discourse to fortify the idea of “benevolent power of Saudi Arabia” by referring the Iranian commitment to the conflict<sup>169</sup>:

*Iran believes they have been given a pass. It is hard to find a conflict or terror group in the Middle East that doesn't have Iran's fingerprints all over it. We must speak in one voice. A threat to the peace to the peace and security of the entire world. We call all nations to join us.*

Saudi Arabia also highlights that Houthis in Yemen are not a threat for itself but also the entire region. They assert that Saudis fight for Yemeni people to save from the Houthis aggression. For example, during a speech he made at the 26th Arab League Summit, King Salman of Saudi Arabia stated that the campaign “will continue until it achieves its goals for the Yemeni people to enjoy security.”<sup>170</sup> Using this portraying of the situation, Saudi Arabia put itself at the center of the “counter-Iran effort” as a benevolent regional power.

### **3.3.2 Iran in Yemen: Support Commitment to the Houthis**

Iran first gravitated to Yemen in the late 1980s after the Iran–Iraq war. Yemen’s decision to side with Saddam Hussein after the invasion of Kuwait increased

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<sup>166</sup> International Crisis Group, “**Saada, Yemen**”, July 26, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list/flashpoints/yemen>, (29 June 2018).

<sup>167</sup> Adel Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, *ibid*.

<sup>168</sup> Mohsen Milani, *ibid*.

<sup>169</sup> Nikki Haley, “Haley: Missile Debris 'Proof' of Iran's UN Violations”, **CNN**, December 15, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/14/politics/haley-us-evidence-iran-yemen-rebels/index.html>, (2 May 2018).

<sup>170</sup> **Al Arabia News**, “King Salman Vows to Continue Yemen Campaign”, March 18, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/28/King-Salman-arrives-in-Egypt-for-Arab-summit.html>, (20 June 2018).

the conflict between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Under this circumstances, Iran took a chance to strengthen its affiliation further.<sup>171</sup>

Even though Iran has contact with Houthis, the group tend to behave autonomously to a large extent. . The political goals of the Houthi movement are embedded in the Yemeni leadership. For example, a US intelligence official stated that even though Iran did not want the Houthis to take over Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, the rebels did so anyway in 2014.<sup>172</sup> Not all decisions and actions of Houthis are controlled by Iran. So, the relationship between Houthis and Iran does not resemble the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah in terms of the tight ties between them regarding decision-making level.<sup>173</sup> However, Iran is often blamed for providing weapons, money and other kinds of military supports to Houthi rebels. The military support for Houthis draw attention first in 2009 when Houthi rocketed a Saudi military base in Jizan. According to a UN Security Council Report dated April 2015, although a limited amount, Iran's ship of small weapons to the Yemeni Houthis traced back to at least 2009.<sup>174</sup>

Houthis have various canals to obtain military equipment. The first canal is the black market and battlefield captured within Yemen. The second resource is the Yemeni army. The ally with Ali Abdullah Saleh was crucial for Houthis for obtaining military equipment from the former president who had a close relationship with the high army personnel.<sup>175</sup> The army ammunition was largely composed of US weapons. A large portion of the stockpile was taken by Houthis.<sup>176</sup> The last one is the Iranian military equipment that is smuggled from the Iranian canals. Even though Iran rejects the accusation of support to Houthis, Iran's support commitment has been proved many times.

Iran's support activities date back to 2004 the killing of Houthis leader by the Yemeni government, but 2011 is accepted the date which Iranian assistance became more apparent.<sup>177</sup> This indicator is not only about military aid it is also about moral

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<sup>171</sup> Alex Vatanka, "Iran's Yemen Play: What Tehran Wants-and What it Doesn't", **Foreign Affairs**, March 4, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2015-03-04/irans-yemen-play>, (20 June 2018).

<sup>172</sup> Watkins, Grim and Ahmed, *ibid*.

<sup>173</sup> Joost Hiltermann and April Longley Alley, "The Houthis Are Not Hezbollah", **Foreign Policy**, February 27, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/27/the-houthis-are-not-hezbollah/>, (30 May 2018).

<sup>174</sup> Carole Landry, "Iran Arming Yemen's Houthi Rebels Since 2009: UN Report", **Middle East Eye**, May 1, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-arming-yemens-huthi-rebels-2009-un-report-1170499355>, (27 June 2018).

<sup>175</sup> Darwich, p.125-141.

<sup>176</sup> Gareth Porter, "Houthi Arms Bonanza Came from Saleh, not Iran", **the Middle East Eye**, April 23, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/houthi-arms-bonanza-came-saleh-not-iran-1224808066>, (11 June 2018).

<sup>177</sup> Terrill, *Iranian Involvement in Yemen*, p.429-440.

support. Ali Hassan al Ahmadi (Yemen's National Security Chief) stated that Houthi groups periodically visit "Iran's seminary city of Qom for indoctrination."<sup>178</sup> In addition to military assistance claims, Iran provides motivational support for Houthi rebels in order to ensure that they stick to their cause.

In 2012, US ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein made several statements to define US concerns on Iranian activities to support Houthis in Yemen<sup>179</sup>:

*We are worried about the growing cooperation between the Houthis and the Iranian government. If this continues, the Houthis would become Iranian agents in Yemen...We strongly believe that they are providing military support and training to radical elements in diverse groups, especially the Houthis.*

Western and regional media focused more on Iranian relationship with the Houthi groups when an Iranian vessel called *Jihan I* investigated by the Yemeni Coast Guards. In 2013, a ship full of weapons including "surface-to-air missiles, military grade explosives, rocket-propelled grenades and bomb-making equipment", was found routed to Yemen.<sup>180</sup>

In March 2013, an Iranian vessel captured on the Yemeni coast was stocking advanced Chinese anti-aircraft missiles labeled QW-1M. Missiles produced by China-owned corporation "sanctioned by the United States for transfers of missile technology to Pakistan and Iran".<sup>181</sup>

The series of events displaying the relationship between Iran and Houthis has increased since the takeover of Sana'a province by the Houthi rebels in mid-2014. In addition to the military material assistance, Iran raised the level of support commitment in other areas such as technology transfer, diplomatic backing, and training for Houthi fighters.

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<sup>178</sup> Angus McDonald, "Yemen Security Chief Tells Iran to Stop Backing Rebels", **Reuters**, December 9, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-qaeda/yemen-security-chief-tells-iran-to-stop-backing-rebels-idUSBRE8B80AG20121209>, (25 June 2018).

<sup>179</sup> **Asharq Al-Awsat**, "Asharq Al-Awsat interview: US Envoy to Yemen Gerald M. Feierstein", July 8, 2012, <https://eng-archiv.aawsat.com/theaawsat/features/asharq-al-awsat-interview-us-envoy-to-yemen-gerald-m-feierstein>, (15 June 2018).

<sup>180</sup> Phil Stewart, "Yemen Demands Iran Halt Support for Insurgents", **Chicago Tribune**, February 7, 2013, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-01-28/news/sns-rt-us-yemen-weapons-iranbre90s01b-20130128\\_1\\_yemeni-forces-sanaa-yemeni-coast-guard](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-01-28/news/sns-rt-us-yemen-weapons-iranbre90s01b-20130128_1_yemeni-forces-sanaa-yemeni-coast-guard), (24 June 2018); Terrill, *Iranian Involvement in Yemen*, p.429-440.

<sup>181</sup> Robert F. Worth and C. J. Chivers, "Seized Chinese Weapons Raise Concerns on Iran", **The New York Times**, March 2, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/world/middleeast/seized-arms-off-yemen-raise-alarm-over-iran.html>, (19 June 2018).

In 2015, US intelligence assessments stated that Houthi militants receive military training from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps advisors to use sophisticated weapon systems.<sup>182</sup> Some of them travel to Iran and Lebanon for the training activities under the expertise of Hezbollah forces.<sup>183</sup>

While the conflict increased in Yemen, Iran has transferred its military technology to, Houthi forces Ansar Allah, to a critical extent. These forces have deployed dramatically sophisticated weapons systems such as SAMs missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to target Saudi forces.<sup>184</sup> The news report states that Houthis are able to launch Badr-1 type ballistic missiles to the Saudi's military bases.<sup>185</sup> Saudi coalition asserted that Iran smuggles Sayyad-2 type surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) to the Houthi rebel group.<sup>186</sup>

Houthi forces have the ability to employ this technology against coalition forces even though the Coalition forces arrayed with more sophisticated military means on the ground. Houthis acquisition of *Qasef-1* UAV designed by Iran strengthen the claim of the partnership between Iran and Houthi forces on the military level.<sup>187</sup> It is also highly claimed that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) smuggled weapons and cash to reach Houthis.<sup>188</sup> In addition to military equipment, to bolster the Houthis financially, Iran smuggled drugs as well.<sup>189</sup> In this way, Iran has strengthened the capacity of its allied NAG.

Iran denied the support for the Houthis, but in some remarks, we can see that Iran defends the rebel attacks on Saudi Arabia. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani named the takeover of Sana'a by the Houthis rebels as a "brilliant and resounding

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<sup>182</sup> Warren Strobel and Mark Hosenball, "Elite Iranian Guards Training Yemen's Houthis: U.S. Officials", **Reuters**, March 28, 2015, , <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-houthis-iran/elite-iranian-guards-training-yemens-houthis-u-s-officials-idUSKBN0MN2MI20150327>, (27 June 2018).

<sup>183</sup> Riedel, *ibid*.

<sup>184</sup> **the National**, "Yemen Says Iran is Arming Houthis with Drones to Attack Saudi Arabia", April 15, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/yemen-says-iran-is-arming-houthis-with-drones-to-attack-saudi-arabia-1.721618>, (21 June 2018).

<sup>185</sup> **Yemen Press**, ""Badr-1 Ballistic Missile" Hit The Saudi National Guard Camp In Najran", April 1, 2018, <https://www.yemenpress.org/yemen/badr-1-ballistic-missile-hit-the-saudi-national-guard-camp-in-najran/>, (13 June 2018).

<sup>186</sup> Jeremy Binnie, "Saudi Coalition Says Iran Smuggling SAMs to Yemen", **Jane's 360**, March 27, 2018, , <http://www.janes.com/article/78910/saudi-coalition-says-iran-smuggling-sams-to-yemen>, (13 June 2018).

<sup>187</sup> **Conflict Armament Research**, "Iranian Technology Transfers To Yemen", March 2017, <http://www.conflictarm.com/perspectives/iranian-technology-transfers-to-yemen/>, (1 July 2018).

<sup>188</sup> Eric Schmitt and Robert F. Worth, "With Arms for Yemen rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role", **The New York Times**, March 15, 2012.

<sup>189</sup> Jonathan Saul, "Exclusive: Iran Revolutionary Guards Find New Route to Arm Yemen Rebels", **Reuters**, August 1, 2017, , <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-kuwait-iran-exclusive/exclusive-iran-revolutionary-guards-find-new-route-to-arm-yemen-rebels-idUSKBN1AH4I4>, (24 June 2018).



victory”.<sup>190</sup> For example in regards to the missile attacks conducted by the Houthis on Saudi Arabia, in 2017 Hassan Rouhani stated in 2017:<sup>191</sup>

*What reaction can the nation of Yemen show toward this amount of bombardment? They say that they should not use weapons? Well, you stop the bombs, and then see if you do not get a positive reaction from the nation of Yemen...They should know that respect for others will not do harm. They should know that Iran wants nothing but creating stability and security in the region.*

Even though at the beginning Iran rejected its the assistance to Houthis, it began to accept the close relationship developed with the Yemeni crisis. The increasing support commitment reflects the increasing tension between the two countries.

### **3.3.3 Perceived Threat and Comparison of Material Capabilities**

Walt argues that we can measure the threat perception of states by checking four dimensions. These are aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities and offensive intentions. Geographic proximity and offensive intentions are constant dimensions for the Iranian and Saudi case. On the other hand, we can observe variations in offensive capabilities and the aggregate power of states.

Concerning military power resources, Saudi Arabia posed a significant threat to Iran. Saudi’s military investments and close ties with the US and Gulf countries is a central question when we think of the Iran- Saudi rivalry.

There is also some external reason to increase Iran's threat perception. The Syrian regime -Iran's oldest ally in the Middle East- has faced a severe challenge. Since the fall of the "friendly" regime was a significant threat to Iran, it mobilizes its resources to support the allies. At this stage, Hezbollah and other non-state armed groups related with Iranian regime played an exceptional role in securing the Iranian strategic interests.<sup>192</sup>

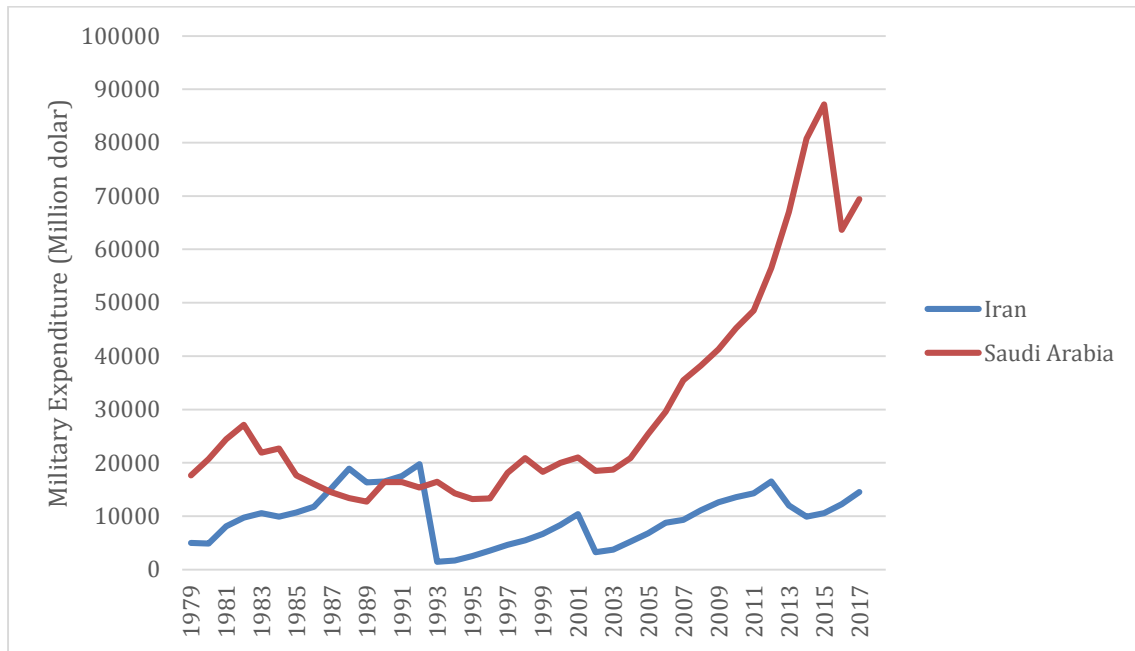
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<sup>190</sup> Cited in Thomas Juneau, *Iran’s Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: a Limited Return on a Modest Investment*, p.647–663; **Aden Al-Ghad (in Arabic)**, “Iranian President: Recent Events in Yemen are Part of the Brilliant and Resounding Victory”, September 25, 2014, [http://adenghad.net/news/124484/#.VZ6SA\\_3bKM-](http://adenghad.net/news/124484/#.VZ6SA_3bKM-), (25 June 2018).

<sup>191</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, “Iran’s President Defends Yemeni Rebel Attack on Saudi Capital”, **The New York Times**, 8 November 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/08/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-arabia-hassan-rouhani.html>, (18 June 2018).

<sup>192</sup> Byman, *Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East*, p.79-100.

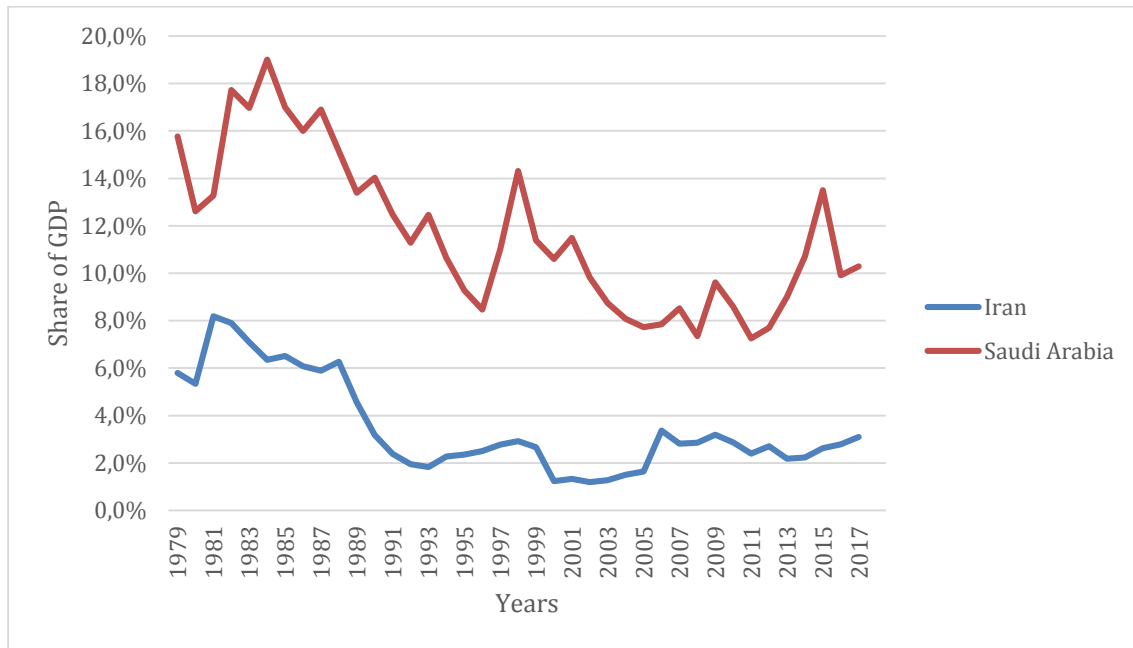
**Figure 2: Iran and Saudi Arabia Military Expenditure**



**Source:** SIPRI, <https://www.sipri.org/> (01.07.2018).

When we compare the Iranian and Saudi military expenditure, the disparity between the military spending of the two countries is increasing dramatically from 2011. However, the increase of the gap dates back to 2004. Beginning in 2000s, the widening gap in military expenditure paved the way for increases in the threat perception against Saudi Arabia. While the strategic rivalry has continued to increase with the regional turmoil, Saudi Arabia increased its military expenditure and has also promoted its relationship with the United States and Gulf countries.

**Figure 3: Saudi Arabia-Iran Military Expenditure Share of GDP**



Source: SIPRI, <https://www.sipri.org/> (01.07.2018).

On the other hand, Iran has fallen behind Saudi Arabia in terms of both the military expenditure and aggregate power of “ally network”. In this table, Iran seems to be in a disadvantageous position when the material capability of the two states are compared. However, the instability in Yemen has revealed the weak spot of Saudi Arabia. Iran realizes that Yemen has continued to be the cornerstone of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy and security issues, and thus, Tehran intends to take advantage of the Saudi Arabia’s weak spot: the instability in the Southern border of Saudi Arabia. Under this condition, Iran aligns with non-state armed groups against the increasing threat coming from the adversaries.

Iran’s effort to supply military equipment to Houthis seems “overwhelming in contrast to the period before 2011.”<sup>193</sup> This period begins coinciding with the increasing Iranian commitment, the political outreach, and weapon smuggled to the rebels in the context of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry since 1979.<sup>194</sup>

While Iran tried to increase its influence in the region, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states attempted to improve diplomatic relations with Turkey, which also have concerns about Iranian influence in Syria. In 2015, Saudi Arabia and Turkey decided to build a “High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council” for political, defense and

<sup>193</sup> Terrill, *Iranian Involvement in Yemen*, p.429-440.

<sup>194</sup> Schmitt and Worth, *ibid.*

security areas.<sup>195</sup> This agreement supports the idea of a “Sunni camp” against Iran. Turkey as a NATO member country can be considered a valuable supporter especially when we think of the military capacity of Turkey. Even before, Turkey openly declared its supports for Saudi-led military operations against Houthi rebels in Yemen in the same year.<sup>196</sup>

In addition to that, Saudi Arabia continued to emphasize its regional role by forming new alliances such as “Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)” in late 2015.<sup>197</sup> IMTC is composed of 41 Muslim countries, but it excludes Iraq, Syria, and Iran. These features of alliance bolster Iran threat perception that it is directed against Iran like an anti-Iran front to isolate and contain it.<sup>198</sup> However, Turkey did not become a part of the Saudi Arabian alliance camp against Iran.

Thus, even though Saudi Arabia made a significant amount of military expenditure recently, at the international level, Saudi Arabia had always depended on external powers. When it was established Britain was the primary security provider of the Kingdom. After that, the United States has ensured the security of the Saudis in the Middle East. The reliable ally capacity and the military expenditure of Saudi Arabia appears be as threatening factors for Iran in the context of the strategic rivalry since 1979 and even in the context of increased turmoil in the Middle East.

### 3.3.4 Analysis: Use of a Non-State Armed Group Against Saudi Arabia

The Iran-Saudi rivalry or Iran itself is not the cause of the conflict in Yemen. The conflict is not driven by sectarianism or the identities of the two camps.<sup>199</sup> Within Yemen, different factions have shifted their allies according to their political cause. The best example of this the alliance between “Saleh’s supporters from the Yemeni army

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<sup>195</sup> **Reuters**, “Saudi Arabia, Turkey to Set up “Strategic Cooperation Council” - Saudi FM”, December 29, 2015, <https://in.reuters.com/article/saudi-turkey/saudi-arabia-turkey-to-set-up-strategic-cooperation-council-saudi-fm-idINL8N14I22F20151229>, (20 June 2018); **DW**, “Saudi Arabia, Turkey to Boost Ties with ‘Strategic Cooperation Council’”, December 30, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-turkey-to-boost-ties-with-strategic-cooperation-council/a-18950601>, (30 June 2018).

<sup>196</sup> **Anadolu Agency**, “Erdogan: Turkey Supports Saudi-led Mission in Yemen”, March 26, 2015, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/erdogan-turkey-supports-saudi-led-mission-in-yemen/63257>, (12 June 2018).

<sup>197</sup> “**Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)**”, <https://imctc.org/English/About>, (26 June 2018).

<sup>198</sup> **DW**, “Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance: Counterterrorism or Counter Iran?”, November 26, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-led-islamic-military-alliance-counterterrorism-or-counter-iran/a-41538781>, (21 June 2018).

<sup>199</sup> Anna Gordon and Sarah E. Parkinson, “How the Houthis Became “Shi’a”, **Middle East Research and Information Project**, January 27, 2018, <https://www.merip.org/mero/mero012718>, (20 May 2018).

fighting with the Houthis are Sunnis.”<sup>200</sup> So, Sunni-Shia proxy war is a “distorted narrative” for the Yemen conflict.

Although the relationship between Iran and the Houthis was weak in the past, Iran has supported Houthis in building a military capacity that “a top of the list external threats” of Saudi Arabia.<sup>201</sup> At the beginning of the crisis between Saudi Arabia and the rebels, the Houthis did not have enough military power and the political position to rule Yemen. However, , the inability of Saudi Arabia to form a solid bloc to limit the rebels paved the way for increasing Iranian influence in Yemen.

Thus, the increase in partnership between Iran and Houthis is not the reason but the consequences of the conflict. Iran has supported Houthis, and the military support given has changed the course of the incident. The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia bolstered with the Yemeni conflict. Yemen has functioned as a pressure point against Saudi Arabia and its allies since Iran recognizes that Yemen is a primary source of security concern for Saudi Arabia.

This rivalry in Yemen has some costs for both parties. It is claimed that while Iran spends a few million dollars, it costs Saudi Arabia about six million dollars per month.<sup>202</sup> When we think of the severity of conflict, the conflict can be concluded where the cost of the commitment exceeds the strategic interest of the parties. In this situation, Iran weakened its rival through help to increase in the severity and the length of the conflict. It also functions as a destabilizing factor at the southern border of Saudi Arabia.<sup>203</sup> Saudi Arabia's effort to counter Houthis rebels has bolstered the hostility. With the help of Iran, Houthis save its power vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia to a large extent. However, if the war continues between two camps, the likelihood of Iranian influence on Houthis increases inevitably. Under this circumstance, the southern border of the Kingdom becomes unstable.

It can be more costly for Iran if the support for Houthis would cause retaliation against Iran. The “secret” support for Houthis gives Iran an opportunity to deny the support commitment in the public realm. In this way, Iran minimizes the risk of escalation of conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>200</sup> Darwich, p.125-141.

<sup>201</sup> Ufuk Ulutaş and Burhanettin Duran, “Traditional Rivalry or Regional Design in the Middle East”, **Insight Turkey**, Vol.20, No.2 (2018), p.81-105; Marieke Brandt, **Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict**, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017, p.203.

<sup>202</sup> Riedel, *ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> **International Crisis Group**, “Saada, Yemen”, *ibid.*

For this reason, the current balance of power is tilted to Iran's advantage in Yemen even though Iran has a limited military capability when it is compared to Saudi Arabia and other players in the Middle East. Since there is still not a direct intervention to curb the Iranian actions in the region, Iran continues to secure its position with its limited power by disrupting the balance of power in its favor in the Middle East. However, given the military capacities and interests of countries that seek to break Iran's influence, it is very unlikely that this effect will continue for a long time.

If Iran begins to think that it has received less than what it has given to Houthis, the relationship begins to weaken, and the support commitment to the rebels likely decreases from high level to the moderate level at best. This commitment can even terminate if a reconciliation period begins between the two states or the Houthis rebels and Saudi Arabia.

### **3.4 Iran-Turkey Rivalry and Iran's Support For the PKK**

This section explains the relationship level between Iran and Turkey firstly in the historical context. As one of the leading competitors in the Middle East, the section shows the reason for this rivalry and its implications on the aggressive behavior of Iran against Turkey. The reason for the increase in the threat perception of Iran against Turkey is discussed based on the material capabilities of both states.

#### **3.4.1 Describing Iran-Turkey Rivalry after 1979**

Turkey and Iran had comparatively steady relations for decades without a severe conflict until 1979. However, they never formed a considerable alliance against something, neither did they maintain a war for centuries. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, this table does not change much. They generally used to make short-term agreements for the sake of both economic and political interest while they have various conflict areas at the same time. After the revolution, Turkey criticized Iran for "regime exportation" activities via backing extremist groups in Turkey. There was also a rivalry for the "leadership" of in the Caucasus and Central Asia where the former Soviet republics once established.<sup>204</sup>

In addition to this, Turkish security executives obtained various evidence showing Iranian support for the PKK terrorists at the border area. The quest for regime

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<sup>204</sup> Mehran Kamrava, *the Great Game in West Asia*, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016.

export and the leadership in the former Soviet republics has gradually weakened. However, the PKK issue has remained one of the most critical conflicts and security issues between them.

The importance of all these issues between Iran and Turkey wax and wane according to the various turning points especially after the Iranian revolution of 1979. For example, the capture of the PKK leader in 1999 and the founding of PJAK (Partiya Jiyana Azadi Kurdistan) as an offspring of the PKK in 2004 was one of the critical moments to shape the PKK between Iran and Turkey.

The other events that dramatically affect the threat perception of both states and also the PKK issue. Especially with the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the tension between Turkey and Iran on the future of the Syrian regime is considered “the revival of a historical Turkish Iranian rivalry that dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>205</sup> The rivalry between the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the Iranian Safavid Empire symbolized the political, religious and also military competition between the two states.<sup>206</sup>

The rivalry between Turkey and Iran generally cannot be considered as being sectarian in nature; rather it is attributed to the rivalry between the “empire building” state.<sup>207</sup> Currently, the Iranian discourse focuses on blaming “the neo-Ottoman design of Turkish government”<sup>208</sup> beginning in the late 80s and which reached the peak point, especially after the Arab Spring. Iran perceives this model as a “challenge against Iranian Islamist model to the Muslim world.”<sup>209</sup> On the other hand, it is highly argued that Iran’s behavior in the Middle East reflects the “Iranian expansionism” rooted in the early Persian Empire and Safavids.<sup>210</sup> Turkey holds stances that , Iran has regional ambitions and behaves compatible with its quest to become a regional hegemon. Turkey

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<sup>205</sup> Bayram Sinkaya, “Rationalization of Turkey-Iran Relations Prospects and Limits”, *Insight Turkey*, vol.14, No. 2, (2012), p.137-156.

<sup>206</sup> Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It*, New York: IB Tauris, 2006, p. 34, 185-186.

<sup>207</sup> Akbarzadeh and Barry.

<sup>208</sup> “Neo-Ottomanism is a world-view that is constructed on the basis of a selective reading of Ottoman administrative practices as pluralistic. It seeks to highlight those aspects that could be viewed by a modern observer as complementing a pluralist and pragmatic approach to issues of religious, cultural, and ethnic identity.

Neo-Ottomanists hope to construct a new Turkey where loyalty is determined not by any exclusivist form of racial and linguistic characteristics but rather by a shared Ottoman historical experience and a broad and diffuse attachment to Islam. Neo-Ottomanism, as a signifier of a cognitive framework, is a code for evoking rather than denoting a reified identity or a territory”.

See: M. Hakan Yavuz, Turkish identity and foreign policy in flux: The rise of Neo - Ottomanism”, *Critical Middle Critique*, Vol.7, No.12, (1998), p.19-41.

<sup>209</sup> Özüm S. Uzun, “The Arab Spring and Its Effect on Turkish-Iranian Relations”, *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (2013), p.145-164.

<sup>210</sup> See: Michael Axworthy, *Iran Aklın İmparatorluğu*, İstanbul: Say Yayınları, 2016.

perceives itself as an equalizer between Iran and “pro-Western monarchies” of the region instead of being the “constant rival”.<sup>211</sup>

### ***History of the Conflict: Who is the PKK?***

The PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdîstan) was founded in 1978 as a Kurdish secessionist party affiliated to Marxist-Leninist ideology. The movement aims to establish an independent Kurdish state in the Middle East. In the late 80's and early 1990s, the PKK increased rural-based violent activities. From 1987 onwards, the PKK increasingly continued its violent actions within Turkish territories.

They aim to establish a “united and independent Kurdistan” including Kurdish nationals living in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey.<sup>212</sup> For this aim, they use terrorist methods as a part of so-called “armed propaganda”. The PKK in the founding period took advantage of the relations among the countries in the region. In the first years, a large part of the leader group fled to Syria for leading the training activities in the Syrian camps. In the following period, the PKK expanded its field of activity towards Iraqi and Iranian camps. The most active years of the PKK regarding the terrorist attacks were 1992, 1993 and 2015.<sup>213</sup>

The capture of the leader and the founder of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, in 1999 was a turning point for the organization. Şemdin Sakık, another senior manager of the organization, was also arrested during this period. As of this date, there has been a great deal of decrease in the armed attacks of the PKK.

In January 2000, the PKK announced that they only used political means to reach its public goals in Turkey. In 2002, PKK went further and changed its name as Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK). It was also a declaration of “non-violent activities in support of “Kurdish rights.”<sup>214</sup> Even though the PKK declared that they will terminate their violent activities, they did not disarm for so-called “self-defense” purposes. In addition to the US invasion of Iraq, the regional developments such as the Syrian war are important driving forces for the formation and strategy of

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<sup>211</sup> Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, “Turkey and Iran after the Arab Spring: Finding a Middle Ground”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 21, No. 4, (2014), p. 112-120.

<sup>212</sup> Süha Bölükbaşı, “Ankara, Damascus, Baghdad and the Regionalization of Turkey’s Kurdish Secessionism”, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No.4 (1991), p.15-36.

<sup>213</sup> Demir, p.277.

<sup>214</sup> Cordesman, *Terrorist and Extremist Movements in the Middle East: The Impact on the Regional Military Balance*, p.5.



the PKK. The group initiated urban warfare strategy from 2015 to mid-2016.<sup>215</sup> They used urban warfare by relying on the “building barricades” and “digging trenches” for the physical isolation of urban parts of Turkey from the state authority.<sup>216</sup> During this period, the PKK dramatically increased its violent attacks against the Turkish armed forces and also civilians. However, from mid-2015 onwards, the counterterrorism efforts of the Turkish armed forces is successful in terms of the weakening of the capacity of the PKK.<sup>217</sup> Thus, after 2016, the number of the PKK attacks against Turkish forces and civilians dramatically decreased due to the extensive counterterrorism efforts.

However, the armed wing of the PKK called The People's Defense Forces continued to operate. Since 1978 to today, the PKK named under different names, however, its goals and means to reach this goal never changed. The PKK has continued to perpetrate attacks and rejected disarmament most of the time.

### **3.4.2 Perceived Threat and Comparison of Material Capabilities**

Regarding material power resources, Turkey presents notable threat to Iran. Turkey and Iran are constant competitors of each other since Iran’s size, population and military capability are not able to far surpass those of Turkey. “The topographic and demographic characteristics of the region and the presence of more or less equal military capabilities on both sides of the border have since forced the parties to refrain from confronting each other.”<sup>218</sup>

Even though Turkey had limited military capability likewise Iran, Turkey is a part of the NATO alliance system, which is the most prominent, extensive and militarily powerful defense alliance of the international system. As a member of NATO, Turkish borders defends by acting as a “nuclear umbrella against other states including Iran.”<sup>219</sup> For this reason, Iran often considers Turkey as a “satellite of the United States”.<sup>220</sup> The NATO membership, geographic proximity, aggressive intentions and aggregate power

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<sup>215</sup> Murat Yeşiltaş and Necdet Özcelik, **When Strategy Collapses the PKK’s Urban Terrorist Campaign**, Ankara: SETA Yayınları, 2018, p. 77-81.

Turkey and the PKK experienced a short term peace process from 2013 to July 2015 called “the Solution Process”.  
<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>217</sup> Hüseyin Alptekin, **Etnik Terör ve Terörle Mücadele Stratejileri IRA, ETA, Tamil Kaplanları ve PKK**, SETA Yayınları, 2018, p. 184-185.

<sup>218</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu and Baris Caglar, “Implications of A Nuclear Iran for Turkey”, **Middle East Policy**, Vol.15, No. 4, (2008), pp.59-80.

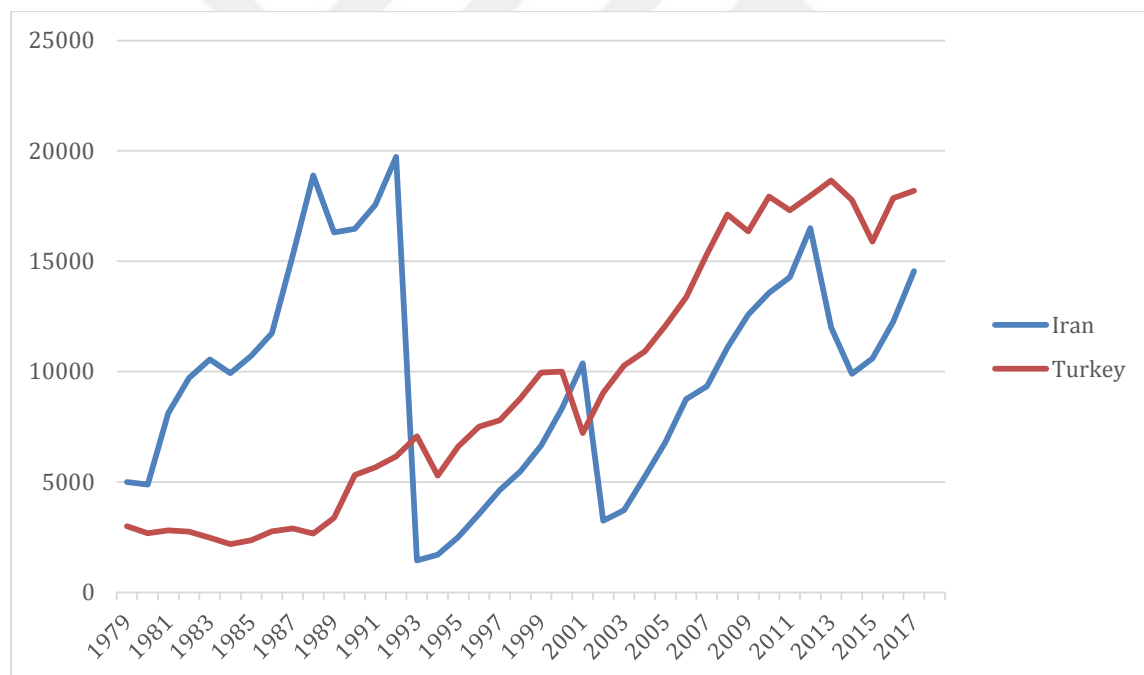
<sup>219</sup> Kibaroglu and Caglar.

<sup>220</sup> Akbarzadeh and Barry, p. 2.

of Turkey including potential allies are considerable source of tension when we carefully look at the relations between Iran and Turkey after 1979.

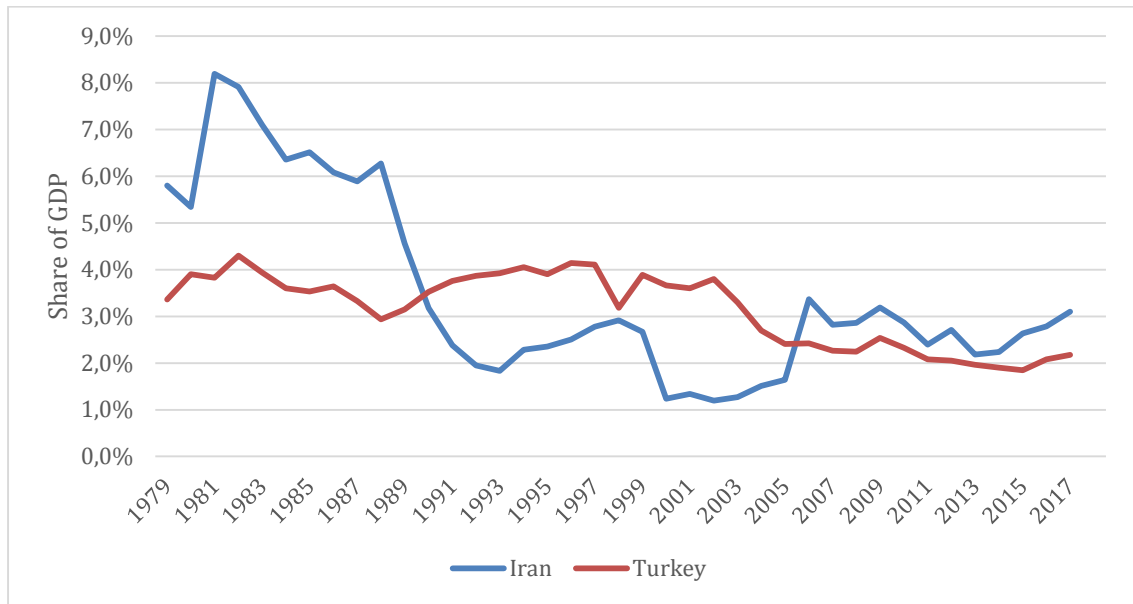
On the contrary of high material power supplies of Turkey such as demography, geographic position, military strength and membership of NATO, Turkey has also faced a significant threat to state security due to ethnic secessionist armed groups. While the Kurdish armed group violently Turkish security forces and civilians inside the country, Turkey's military resources were weakened indispensably by the years of conflict. Since the 1980s, the Kurdish armed group has remained a major threat for Turkey's security. . One of the main reasons why the PKK still continues to constitute a significant threat for Turkey is due to the support that neighboring countries have provided (and continue to provide) to the group. For this reason, the tension between Turkey and some neighbors increased from time to time.

**Figure 4: Turkey-Iran Military Expenditure**



Source: SIPRI, <https://www.sipri.org/> (01.07.2018).

**Figure 5: Turkey-Iran Military Expenditure Share of GDP**



**Source:** SIPRI, <https://www.sipri.org/> (01.07.2018).

The tension between Iran and Turkey increased due to the PKK activities on Turkey and Iranian border in the late 80's. During the first half of the 90's, Iran became a constant provider of safe haven close to the Turkey border. However, Turkey's friendship with the Iraqi Kurdish leader gives Turkey still a relatively strong position. Neither Syria nor Iran were disposed to enter the war with him.

The picture that appeared after the invasion of Iraq has made the security of these countries dependent on each other. The US invasion of Iraq changed the meaning of the Kurdish question in the region. The states, that possess Kurdish populations in their territories, emphasized the territorial integrity of Iraq. Turkey and Iran are the two countries that feel threatened by the Kurdish minorities inside their boundaries. The increases in the Iranian threat perception led Iran to cooperate against a common enemy rather than Turkey.<sup>221</sup>

The Kurdish issue was a less critical security threat for Iran when compared to the international pressure to curb the military and economic development of Iran. Under these conditions, Iran tries to provide its own safety by various means. For example, Iran's determination to obtain nuclear capacity reflects Iran's perceived threat increased by international and regional pressures. Nuclear weapons are defensive

<sup>221</sup> Bülent Aras ve Rabia Karakaya Polat, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 39, No: 5, (2008).

military power aims to deter the adversaries from attacking. Even though nuclear weapons are defensive, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons would threaten the world's nuclear status, impose immunity on the Iranian regime and inevitably create new security dilemmas in the region.<sup>222</sup> This possibility even paves the way for increased international pressure on Iran to halt nuclear activities.

International pressure and interstate rivalry between Iran and her neighbors have pushed Iran into using asymmetrical military means to overcome the national security threats. In addition to conventional military means, it has started to apply unconventional tactics against the competitors and adversaries. On this level, non-state armed groups scattering throughout the Middle East provides Iran a significant maneuvering area for the weakening of its rivals.

### **3.4.3 Analysis: Use of a Non-State Armed Group against Turkey**

Relations between Iran and the PKK started in 1984. During the beginning of the 1980s, it is stated that this relationship started with the placement of a group of members of the organization in Urmia by the Iranian intelligence, but they did not have armed activities here.<sup>223</sup> During this period, Turkey and Iran also confronted each other in Northern Iraq because of the PKK issue. Since Iran supported the Kurdish movement against the Iraqi government, Turkey's military actions against PKK camps in Northern Iraq were also a response to increased Iranian activities in the Northern Iraq where Turkey received a direct security threat. For example, during 1987, Turkey made retaliatory strikes against the Iraqi Kurdish region after the occupation of the hills near Hajj Umran-Rawanduz with the help of Iran.<sup>224</sup>

Between 1988 and 1999, we observe that Iran's level of commitment was high since Iran provided the PKK a safe haven. Especially after the Gulf War, it is stated that Iran allowed them to increase the number camps and militants along the border with Turkey.<sup>225</sup> The main camp of the PKK was located in Urmia, and other camps used for training activities. With the help of the newly established camps, the

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<sup>222</sup> Burak Bilgehan Özpek, "En Uzun On yıl: 11 Eylül Sonrası Ortadoğu", *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol.3, No.2 (January 2012), p.183-215; Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran", *Iranian Studies*, Vol.39, No.3 (2006), p.307-327; Erol Kurubaş, *1960'lardan 2000'lere Kürt Sorununun Uluslararası Boyutu ve Türkiye*, Nobel, Ankara, 2004, p.123.

<sup>223</sup> Mehmet Kurum, *Terörist Örgütlerin Güvenli Ortamları ve PKK*, Ankara: Nobel, 2017, p.214.

<sup>224</sup> Bölükbaşı, *ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> Soner Çağaptay, "Can the PKK Renounce Violence?", *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.13, January 1 (Winter 2007), p.45-52.

organization took the opportunity of accessing Turkish territories via the Kars and Agri regions. From 1992 onwards, there has been an increase in PKK attacks in these areas. In summer, the militants committed to attacks in Turkey on behalf of the PKK used Iranian camps as shelters in the winter.<sup>226</sup> So, there may be a direct correlation between the newly opened camps in Iran and the PKK attacks in the eastern border of Turkey.

Kurubas considers the main causes of Iran's support to the PKK as such<sup>227</sup>: the first of these, Iran was opposed to the strengthening of Turkey and the United States in the north of Iraq. The second reason is Iran's concern about a possible rise of Turkey after the post-Soviet period. Especially in the first half the 90's, Turkish- Iranian relations were "on the verge of collapse because of fundamental structural differences extolling incompatible policy orientations."<sup>228</sup> During this period, there was an apparent competition for the leadership role in the region, negatively affect the tension between them.

For this reason, while Turkey has fought against the PKK, Iran exploited the conflict and prevailed a bargaining issue between Turkey and Iran for years. The role of Iran's support for the PKK, which serve as an alternative balancing instrument is explained in this section. The relation between perceived threat and support commitment with the associated armed group is assessed through checking this relationship mechanism.

Providing a safe haven, which is the most crucial type of support for a non-state armed group, facilitates the group's transnational recruitment and training activities. While Iran provided this support to the PKK, in the late 1980's, it also prevented the PKK's separatist propaganda activities among Kurds living in Iran.<sup>229</sup> To do this, Iran firstly took the information from the PKK about the "names and code-names" of the new recruits to control the organization and to ensure that it does not threaten Iran's security through the assistance of Iranian Kurdish KDP (KDPI) party.

Within its territories, Iran strongly opposed the Kurdish autonomy. While Iran remained to suppress the PKK militant aims of its own Kurds, at the same time it continued to manipulate the other Kurdish minorities live in the neighbor countries for years.<sup>230</sup> Even though Iran dislikes its own Kurdish separatists KDPI, it continued to

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<sup>226</sup> Kurubaş, p.123.

<sup>227</sup> Kurubaş, p. 302.

<sup>228</sup> Bayram Sinkaya, p. 138-140.

<sup>229</sup> Aliza Marcus, **Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence**, New York: New York University Press, (2007), p.121-122.

<sup>230</sup> Edgar O'Ballance, **The Kurdish Struggle 1920-1994**, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, p.234.

support PKK leaders and militants to a large extent. For example, during the 90's, it is highly claimed that Osman Ocalan who is the brother of Abdullah Ocalan was living in Iran and had constant contact with the Iranian authorities.<sup>231</sup> Turkish media gave a wide range of press coverage on the PKK militants admitting they had been trained in the Iranian territories.<sup>232</sup>

On the other hand, due to the alignment between two parties, the PKK publicly praised the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1990, in the Newroz (New Year) message of Ocalan, there was a positive reference to the accomplishments of the regime by addressing "Iran's struggle against imperialism and Zionism" for the first time.<sup>233</sup>

Iran's other step was staying away from the PKK from launching attack to Turkey from the Iranian borders. In this way, during the period of high commitment, 1989-1999, Iran continually rejected its commitment with the PKK. Iran's denial was a strategy to reduce the risk of Turkish retaliation.<sup>234</sup>

1998 is also a beginning of the declining period for the PKK. When Turkish authorities captured Ocalan in 1999, Turkey ensured the disaffiliation of countries like Syria, Greece, and Iran who provide the PKK safe haven and other kinds of support.<sup>235</sup> Turkish counterterrorism efforts by military means seemed successful during this period as well.<sup>236</sup> In addition to this achievement, the interstate conciliation and rapprochement processes caused Iran's abandonment from supporting the PKK. Iran expelled the PKK from its territory on the occasion of the rapprochement with Turkey after 1999.

The American invasion of Iraq was also a turning point for the merge of the political stances of two countries that resulted in a short period of rapprochement and upgrading bilateral ties.<sup>237</sup> "The vagueness of American intentions" regarding the future of Iraq increased security concern of both Iran and Turkey.<sup>238</sup> Safe havens in Iraq due to the overthrow of the Saddam regime facilitated PKK attacks against Turkey. On the other hand, Iran has confronted with a new challenge in 2004 called PJAK has

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<sup>231</sup> Bölükbaşı, *ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> Robert Olson, "Turkey - Iran relations, 1997 to 2000: The Kurdish and Islamist questions", **Third World Quarterly**, (2000) Vol.21, No.5, p. 871-890.

<sup>233</sup> Bölükbaşı, *ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> Marcus, p.122.

<sup>235</sup> International Crisis Group, **Türkiye: Kürt Sorununun Çözümü ve PKK**, Avrupa Raporu, No: 219, September 11, 2012, p.7.

<sup>236</sup> Olson, "Turkey - Iran relations, 1997 to 2000: The Kurdish and Islamist questions".

<sup>237</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu and Baris Caglar.

<sup>238</sup> Sinkaya, p.142.

established as the PKK offspring.<sup>239</sup> A common threat and also the American political stance that affect adversely the position of Iran and Turkey paved the way for converging the security interest in the short term.

However, the PKK has managed the current change in the security environment of the Middle East. The ongoing tensions between Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran since 2011 has opened the way for the revival of the Iranian relations with the PKK. Turkey and Iran have different stances on the Syrian War. Shortly after this political difference, Turkey and Iran faced another conflict concerning the PKK. Turkish authorities reportedly informed the Iranian authorities about the location of the PKK leader Murat Karayılan and its militants staying in the Iranian part of the Qandil Mountains.<sup>240</sup> The Turkish authorities requested the organization of the operation at 20 points given to Iran's part of Qandil as soon as possible.<sup>241</sup> However, the cooperation request for the operation towards the PKK camps in the Qandil region was declined by Iran.

In 2016, at the Iranian part of the Qandil Mountains<sup>242</sup>, the PKK opened new camps for the leading cadres of the organization after they suppressed from the Iraqi side of the mountains.<sup>243</sup> Since the terrorist camps within the borders of Iraq were being hit by Turkish air forces, the PKK's executive board were conducting their activities from "Martyr Aaron (Şehit Harun)," "Kuran" and "Piran" camps within the Iranian borders. It is reported that there are approximately five or seven thousands of the militants by the year of 2006.<sup>244</sup> In addition to these camps, there are also other camps used by the PKK militants in Iran such as "Şehidan", "Danbat", "Türeş" and "Kozareş".<sup>245</sup> Many times, Turkish media has also presented much evidence about the PKK and Iran relationship by showing the actively used PKK camps in Iran.<sup>246</sup> It is reported that some of them were used for the smuggling to increase the PKK funding

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<sup>239</sup> International Crisis Group, *Türkiye: Kürt Sorununun Çözümü ve PKK*, p.15; Sinkaya, p.143.

<sup>240</sup> Sinkaya, p.152.

<sup>241</sup> "Karayılan'ı İran kurtardı", Sabah, 20 August, 2011, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2011/08/20/karayilani-iran-kurtardi>, (21 June 2018).

<sup>242</sup> Qandil Mountains are located Turkey-Iran-Iraq borders in northern Iraq. They serve as a safe haven for the leaders of the PKK separatists.

<sup>243</sup> Sabah, "İran'dan Terör Örgütü PKK'ya 3 Kamp", November 3, 2016, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2016/11/03/irandan-teror-orgutu-pkky-3-kamp>, (21 June 2018).

<sup>244</sup> Hürriyet, "PKK 3 Kampını İran'a Taşdı", November 3, 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/pkk-3-kampini-irana-tasidi-40266894>, (8 May 2018).

<sup>245</sup> Nevin Yazıcı, *PKK'nın Hakkari Projesi 1984-2013*, Ankara: Alibi Yayıncılık, 2016, p.494.

**Camp Şehidan** is located on the Iranian border of Semdinli. This camp is the center of smuggling of diesel and cigarettes made in the name of the PKK. **Camp Piran** is 10 km from Salmas city of Iran and generally used for transit. Camp Kozareş is a two-hour walk to Baskale district of Van.

<sup>246</sup> "İşte PKK'nın barındığı kamplar", Habertürk, November 12, 2007, <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/44051-iste-pkknin-barindigi-kamplar> (10 June 2018).

resources, some of them were used for training activities of the militants and also some of them hosted the names from the leadership cadre of the PKK.

However, the change in the level of relationship between Iran and Turkey also changes Iran's support commitment to the PKK. For example, one year after the opening of the new camps in Iran, Iran cooperate with Turkey to fight against the PKK and its Iranian wing PJAK.<sup>247</sup> However, this decision is a reflection of Iran's threat perception and search for allies to deal with bigger competitors than Turkey. When we look at the security environment of the Middle East, in this period, the United States decided to support the PKK/YPG armed groups in Syria. Iran cooperates with Turkey against the PKK who is heavily armed by the US in order to control the strengthening of the group against Iran and Turkey. In this scenario, align with Turkey against the PKK is more reasonable policy than the aligning with the PKK which is currently supported by the US against Turkey. In this case, the United States backed the PKK is more threatening than Turkey.

Iran and Turkey are two neighbors that sometimes share the same interests and also enemies, even though they belong to the different camps in the international system. However, within the limits of their military capabilities, the interests of the two countries are in conflict with each other. Iran minds the pragmatic considerations in Iran-Turkey relations. Along with the improvement of relations with the Western camp, Turkey's periodical rise has pushed Iran to search for new foreign policy and war-making tools: support for non-state armed groups.

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<sup>247</sup> "Terör Örgütü PKK Üç Koldan Çökertilecek", **Aksam**, September 4, 2017, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/guncel/teror-orgutu-pkky-uc-koldan-cokertilecek/haber-657336>, (15 June 2018).



## 4 CONCLUSION

The relation between state and non-state armed actors challenges regional security in the Middle East. The current tension in the Middle East makes the problem of non-state armed actors and their support by states more crucial. Power vacuums were given by weak regimes whether through domestic reasons or foreign intervention cause an escalation in the number of armed groups. In order to explain how states influence NAGs ability to act and how this involvement affects the political and military activities of the supporting state, it is essential to think about how these groups are operationalized against opponents and the implications this has for the region.

This research finds that the level of commitment and scope of support chiefly depends on the perceived threat and external security conditions of the supporting state. International pressure and the lack of reliable state allies have a multiplier impact on the assistance commitment of the supporter states. If there is an increase in perceived threat from a competitor, the state's need for balancing increases. Then, states resort to using NAGs as a means of counterbalancing its enemies. This counterbalancing tool functions as war-making and destabilizing means against adversaries.

Both state and non-state armed groups intentionally and rationally admit the commitment. Like in inter-state relations, the nature of the relation between state and NAGs is not necessarily asymmetrical. Most NAGs have some degree of autonomy instead of being entirely dependent entities to states. If the support commitment is unimportant or harms state interests, then states abandon their support for NAGs even if the rivalry continues. For the same reason, non-state groups may abandon the alignment with states in order to escape from the conflict escalation or the retaliation of targeted states.

Among numerous NAGs and state supporters, Iran provides us different tantamount cases to explain the cause of state support for NAGs. Iran today is accepted the country most in associate with non-state armed groups (NAGs) in the Middle East. Various non-state armed groups have been affiliated with Iran for years. Alliances between Iran and non-state actors as a part of foreign policy and war-making means have challenged the security and stability of other countries for decades.

States like Iran, which have limited military and economic capability, prefer to collaborate with local NAGs to push their political agenda. In this alignment process, NAGs serves as substitutes for states in the alliance formations. Iran has mostly tried

to benefit from these groups. This alliance provides short-term deterrence against adversaries, but political and economic sanctions are very restricting factors for countries longer-term benefits.<sup>248</sup> However, if it is compulsory to take short-term benefits, then Iran needs of use the same strategy against regional rivals. Still, Iran has enormous diplomatic and economic pressure mainly from the United States; it is still on the list of terrorist sponsorship. This pressure also leads Iran to lean on asymmetric warfare in the region mainly, via non-state armed groups.

Iran pursued support for non-state armed groups as part of the irregular warfare. Thus, it takes advantage of the manpower mobilization capacity, while “trying to increase the costs to its opponents through attrition and unconventional warfare, including terrorist tactics against an opponent’s interests anywhere in the world.”<sup>249</sup> NAGs, on the other hand, may depend on the military, financial and political support contributed by Iran since they also aim to secure its interest on the ground. What we observe in the last decade is Iran's effort to shift the balance of power in the region by using non-state armed groups and militias all over the world.

The policy that Iran follows in the Middle East is not the result of “Iranian expansionism”. Iran has various objectives in pursuing to support non-state actors. First, it confronts its regional rivals such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and previously the Iraq of Saddam Hussein. From 1979 to today, confronting with Turkey and Saudi Arabia was also a crucial part of opposing US presence in the Middle East. Through using NAGs, Iran intends to form “pressure points” that weaken and exhaust the power of its competitors despite the power asymmetries and limited military capacity vis-à-vis competitor states.

The imbalance of power between the adversaries increased Iran’s threat perception vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and Turkey. When we compared the ally capacities of Saudi Arabia and Iran, Saudi Arabia has the United States and the Gulf States as allies. On the other hand, when we compare Iran and Turkey, Turkey is a part of the NATO alliance. However, Iran has a limited ally capacity mainly based on the Syrian regime and non-state armed groups scattered throughout the Middle East. We can observe that there is a power gap between Iran and other camps. In the case of Iran, the perceived threat that relies on offensive and aggregate power plays a crucial role on

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<sup>248</sup> Dalton, p.312-315.

<sup>249</sup> Ward, p.559-576.

Iran's support commitment to NAGs in addition to constant factors proximity and sense of rivalry within the cases.

This research has some limitations for several reasons. Since this study only focuses on the Iranian support commitment to NAGs, there needs to be further comparative cases focusing on different states in order to generalize factors that dominate support behavior of states. The integration of realist alliance theory models to the relationship between states and NAGs needs further investigation in order to check the applicability of theory in this area.



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