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## SAUDI ARABIA'S NATIONAL INTERESTS IN CONFRONTING THE CROSS-BORDER THREAT POSED BY THE HUTHIS, 2019–2024

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### ABSTRACT

This study is motivated by the growing cross-border threats posed by the Iran-backed Houthi group during the 2019–2024 Yemeni conflict, which directly impact Saudi Arabia's national interests. Previous studies have primarily focused on the Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry, and thus have not specifically examined how these cross-border threats affect and are addressed within the framework of Saudi Arabia's national interests. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the nature of the cross-border threats posed by the Houthi group and their impact on Saudi Arabia's national interests, particularly in the areas of defense and energy security. The method used is descriptive qualitative analysis with secondary data from international reports, journals, and media. The data is analyzed using Donald E. Nuechterlein's concept of national interests to identify the affected interests, particularly in the defense and economic sectors. Research findings indicate that the Houthi cross-border threat manifests through ballistic missile and drone attacks targeting Saudi Arabia's border regions and strategic infrastructure. These attacks directly threaten defense interests by undermining territorial security and the safety of the population, as well as economic interests through attacks on energy facilities such as Saudi Aramco, which impact the stability of oil production and distribution. In conclusion, the conflict in Yemen has evolved into a serious threat to Saudi Arabia's domestic security.

**Keywords:** Cross-Border Threat, Houthi Group, Saudi Arabia, National Interest, Energy Security

## ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh meningkatnya ancaman lintas batas dari kelompok Houthi yang didukung Iran dalam konflik Yaman periode 2019–2024, yang secara langsung berdampak terhadap kepentingan nasional Arab Saudi. Studi sebelumnya lebih banyak menyoroti rivalitas Iran–Arab Saudi, sehingga belum secara spesifik mengkaji bagaimana ancaman lintas batas tersebut memengaruhi serta direspons dalam kerangka kepentingan nasional Arab Saudi. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bentuk ancaman lintas batas yang dilakukan oleh kelompok Houthi serta dampaknya terhadap kepentingan nasional Arab Saudi, khususnya dalam aspek pertahanan dan keamanan energi. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan data sekunder dari laporan internasional, jurnal, dan media. Data di analisis menggunakan konsep kepentingan Nasional Donald E. Nuechterlein untuk mengidentifikasi kepentingan yang terdampak, khususnya pada aspek pertahanan dan ekonomi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ancaman lintas batas Houthi terlihat melalui serangan rudal balistik dan drone yang menargetkan wilayah perbatasan serta infrastruktur strategis Arab Saudi. Serangan ini secara langsung mengancam defense interests melalui gangguan terhadap keamanan wilayah dan keselamatan penduduk, serta economic interests melalui penyerangan fasilitas energi seperti Saudi Aramco yang berdampak pada stabilitas produksi dan distribusi minyak. Kesimpulannya, konflik Yaman telah berkembang menjadi ancaman serius bagi keamanan domestik Arab Saudi.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Ancaman Lintas Batas, Kelompok Houthi, Arab Saudi, Kepentingan Nasional, Keamanan Energi.*

## INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Yemen reflects the strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, driven by Sunni–Shia ideological differences and a struggle for geopolitical influence in the Gulf region. Since the Arab Spring, relations between the two have grown increasingly tense, with Saudi Arabia supporting the stability of the regime, while Iran supports opposition actors. Yemen has become a strategic arena because it shares a direct border with Saudi Arabia and is close to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a vital route for global energy trade. Since 2019, the conflict has evolved into a real threat to Saudi Arabia’s domestic security and global energy stability. The Houthi group has intensified missile and drone attacks, including on Saudi Aramco facilities, which temporarily disrupted approximately 5% of the world’s oil supply (Buys & Garwood-Gowers, 2019). This demonstrates the conflict’s transformation from a domestic issue into a regional threat with global economic implications.

Saudi Arabia’s intervention since 2015 has aimed to support the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, maintain regional stability, counter Iranian influence, and protect energy supply routes. However, this intervention triggered Houthi retaliatory attacks that caused military and economic losses and increased pressure on Saudi

Arabia's national security. Iran has strengthened its support for the Houthis through military, financial, and ideological aid to expand its influence and pressure Saudi Arabia. During 2019–2024, Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabian energy facilities posed a serious threat to global energy security, while Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil increased its economic vulnerability (International Crisis Group, 2024). On the other hand, Iran gained strategic advantages despite facing international sanctions and pressure.

The impact of the conflict encompasses security, economic, and defense strategy aspects. Saudi Arabia has begun implementing defense reforms to address asymmetric threats such as drones and missiles, although the effectiveness of interception remains limited. Overall, this conflict highlights the strategic differences between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Houthis. This study aims to analyze how the Houthi cross-border threat during the 2019–2024 period affects Saudi Arabia's domestic security using the concept of National Interest, as well as to contribute to the formulation of defense strategies against non-conventional threats in the Middle East.

### **The Concept of National Interest**

According to Donald E. Nuechterlein, the concept of national interest is defined as the needs and desires of a state as perceived by its elite in the face of the external environment. Thus, threats are not objective but are shaped by political perceptions. In the context of this study, Houthi missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabian territory and energy facilities are understood as external factors that shape the perception of strategic threats. The military responses and defense policies adopted reflect the government's rational calculations in determining national security priorities.

Nuechterlein classifies national interests into four dimensions: defense, economic, world order, and ideological interests. In this study, the Houthi threat is primarily related to defense and economic interests. Attacks on the regions of Jizan, Asir, and Najran, as well as energy facilities such as Abqaiq and Khurais, pose a direct threat to territorial security and economic stability. Furthermore, these threats also impact regional stability and rivalry with Iran, thereby touching upon the dimensions of world order and ideological interests related to the balance of power and political influence in the Middle East.

Nuechterlein classifies levels of national interest into survival, vital, major, and peripheral. The Houthi threat in this study is categorized as a vital interest because it has a significant impact on Saudi Arabia's security and economic stability, even though it does not directly threaten the state's existence. Attacks on energy infrastructure—the primary source of state revenue—demonstrate the potential for significant losses if left unaddressed. Therefore, enhancing defense capabilities, protecting strategic infrastructure, and strengthening security cooperation can be understood as rational steps in safeguarding national interests.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the nature and dynamics of the cross-border threats posed by the Houthi group in the Yemeni conflict (2019–2024) and their implications for Saudi Arabia's domestic security. These threats are not limited to security aspects but also encompass energy security, economic stability, and the protection of strategic infrastructure. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a deep understanding of the conflict context, the relationships among actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Houthis, as well as the complexity of the security policies and strategies adopted in response to these threats.

The research focuses on the forms of cross-border attacks, Iran's support for the Houthis, and their impact on strategic energy facilities such as oil refineries, distribution pipelines, and energy ports.

This study utilizes secondary data obtained from various credible sources, such as official reports from the Saudi Arabian government, reports from international organizations (UN, IEA), think tank publications (RUSI, Sana'a Center), academic journals, and international media. Data collection was conducted through a literature review, examining policy documents, security reports, and publications addressing the Yemeni conflict and its impact on Saudi Arabia. The researcher also utilized digital sources to obtain relevant and up-to-date information regarding attack patterns, conflict escalation, and policy responses.

The collected data was then analyzed using Creswell's approach by grouping the data based on key variables, such as the nature of cross-border threats, external support from Iran, Saudi Arabia's defense response, and the impact on energy security. Subsequently, the data is presented in the form of an analytical narrative to describe how these threats have evolved, which actors are involved, and how Saudi Arabia's strategies and policies aim to protect its national interests, particularly in safeguarding regional security and strategic energy infrastructure.

## DISCUSSION

The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia represents a form of geopolitical competition between two major regional powers in the Middle East that has intensified since the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. This rivalry is fueled by Sunni-Shia sectarian differences as well as both countries' efforts to establish a balance of power through proxy actors rather than direct confrontation. The momentum of the 2011 Arab Spring exacerbated the situation when political instability in Yemen created an opening for the Houthi group to seize control of Sana'a. Saudi Arabia viewed this as a threat to its national security and regional influence, while Iran exploited the situation by providing support to the Houthis to expand its influence (Albasoos & Al Hinai, 2020). On the other hand, the Yemeni conflict is also influenced by domestic factors such as the weakness of the government following the fall of Ali Abdullah Saleh, economic inequality, and political fragmentation among various factions, including the official government, the Houthis, and southern separatist groups. This combination of internal and external factors has made the Yemeni conflict a complex and protracted proxy war.

Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Yemeni conflict aims to protect its survival and vital interests, particularly regarding territorial security, domestic stability, and the protection of strategic infrastructure such as energy routes and the Bab el-Mandeb



Strait. Cross-border attacks involving missiles and drones by the Houthis indicate that the conflict has evolved into a tangible external threat to Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Iran is exploiting this conflict to advance its major interests, namely expanding its geopolitical influence by supporting non-state actors without directly engaging in open warfare. This strategy not only strengthens Iran's bargaining position in the region but also creates strategic pressure on Saudi Arabia.

*Figure 1. Smoke following a fire at the Aramco facility in the city of Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia, on September 14, 2019. Sumber: Kalin et al., 2019*

The Yemen–Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict during the 2019–2024 period demonstrated a gradual escalation from a domestic conflict into a cross-border threat that directly impacted Saudi Arabia's security. A turning point occurred with the September 14, 2019, attacks on Saudi Aramco oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais using drones and cruise missiles, which disrupted global oil production and signaled an increase in the complexity of the attacks. Although the Houthis claimed responsibility, indications of technical support from Iran revealed the conflict's transformation into part of a regional geopolitical rivalry. During the 2020–2022 period, the intensity of attacks increased through the use of drones and ballistic missiles targeting border areas and energy infrastructure, including an attack on Aramco facilities in Jeddah in 2022. Entering 2023–2024, the conflict expanded into the maritime domain in the Red Sea, with the Houthis attacking international shipping lanes, thereby reinforcing the regional and global dimensions of the conflict and increasing Saudi Arabia's economic security vulnerabilities.

Iran's role in this conflict is evident through its strategy of proxy warfare, utilizing the Houthis as a non-state actor to pressure Saudi Arabia. Iran's support is not merely ideological but also includes logistical aid, military technology, and training that enhance the Houthis' offensive capabilities. The transfer of ballistic missile and drone technology, along with intelligence support and weapons smuggling networks, enables the Houthis to carry out cross-border attacks with high range and precision. This strengthens the Houthis' asymmetric warfare capabilities while prolonging the Yemeni conflict. Iran's involvement reflects efforts to expand regional influence and counterbalance Saudi Arabia's power, while turning the Yemeni conflict into a broader arena of geopolitical competition.

### **Cross-Border Security Threats: Houthi Missiles and Drones**

Cross-border threats in the Yemeni conflict refer to threats originating outside Saudi Arabia's territory but having a direct impact on its domestic security. Attacks by the Houthi group from Yemen, which is indirectly supported by Iran, represent a form of non-conventional threat that is difficult to address through traditional security mechanisms. These threats fall under the category of vital interests as they concern the protection of territorial integrity, the safety of the population, and the sustainability of energy infrastructure—which forms the foundation of the nation's economy. The Yemeni conflict is no longer merely an external issue but has evolved into a strategic threat affecting Saudi Arabia's national stability and international standing.

The most tangible form of this threat is the consistent targeting of border regions such as Jizan, Najran, and Asir, as well as other strategic infrastructure, by ballistic missiles and armed drones. These attacks demonstrate an increase in Houthi military

capabilities that exceed Yemen's domestic capacity, suggesting technical and logistical support from Iran. The use of asymmetric weapons allows the Houthis to challenge Saudi Arabia's conventional military superiority, while simultaneously creating military, economic, and psychological pressure. The impact is not only on military installations but also on the sense of security among the civilian population and the rising cost of national defense, thereby reinforcing the nature of the conflict as a regional threat that directly impacts Saudi Arabia's internal stability.

### **Threats to Saudi Arabia's Energy Infrastructure**

The conflict in Yemen has evolved into a cross-border threat to Saudi Arabia's domestic security, particularly through attacks on strategic energy infrastructure owned by Saudi Aramco, such as Abqaiq, Khurais, and Jeddah. These facilities play a vital role in supporting the national economy; therefore, attacks on them not only disrupt oil production and distribution but also impact economic stability and global investor confidence (IEA, 2019).

Since 2019, the Houthi group has consistently targeted Saudi Arabia's energy sector with increasingly complex and coordinated attacks. This reached its peak on September 14, 2019, with drone and missile attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais facilities, disrupting production by approximately 5.7 million barrels per day (Basundoro, 2020; Gul & Haider, 2021). These attacks marked a shift in the conflict toward a form of hybrid and asymmetric warfare, in which low-cost technology is capable of producing significant strategic impacts and exposing the limitations of conventional defense systems.

During the 2020–2022 period, attacks expanded to include various targets such as refineries, fuel depots, and distribution networks in strategic regions, indicating a systematic effort to create long-term security uncertainty while expanding the scope of the threat to the regional and global levels. Attacks on energy infrastructure are not only aimed at undermining Saudi Arabia's economic capacity but also serve as a tool of pressure within the dynamics of the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran (CSIS, 2021). The Houthi group exploits these attacks to enhance its political leverage while weakening Saudi Arabia's position in the Middle East.

### **Attacks on Saudi Arabia's Strategic Border Regions: Jizan, Asir, and Najran**

The regions of Jizan, Asir, and Najran hold strategic importance in the Yemeni conflict due to their proximity to Houthi-controlled areas in northern Yemen. This situation makes Saudi Arabia's southern border the most vulnerable zone to cross-border attacks and serves as the frontline of domestic security. From 2019 to 2024, these regions have consistently been targeted by drone attacks, short-range ballistic missiles, and artillery (Abdulla, 2019). The topographical features of mountains and highlands provide tactical advantages for the Houthis in launching asymmetric attacks and complicate Saudi Arabia's detection and surveillance systems, making the emerging threat structural and persistent.

An increase in attacks is clearly evident in Jizan, a strategic region due to its energy facilities, ports, and oil and gas distribution routes. The attacks not only damage infrastructure but also exert psychological pressure on the population. In Asir, the attack on Abha Airport demonstrates the Houthis' efforts to paralyze both civilian and military mobility while exploiting the symbolic value of civilian targets. Meanwhile, Najran, as a military logistics route, has been the target of repeated attacks aimed at depleting Saudi Arabia's defense capabilities (Putra et al., 2020). The pattern of attacks shows an escalation from the use of simple weapons to more precise drones and guided missiles, reflecting an increase in the Houthis' military capabilities.

In addition to the military impact, the attacks in Jizan, Asir, and Najran have also had significant social and economic consequences. Disruptions to economic activity, airport closures, and the evacuation of residents indicate that the civilian population has also been directly affected. Saudi Arabia's response, through increased militarization of the borders and defense systems, is an effort to maintain the country's integrity while addressing increasingly complex cross-border threats (Gul & Haider, 2021; Hakiki & Sari, 2022).

### **Saudi Arabia's National Interests in Confronting the Houthi Threat**

The threat analysis in this study employs Donald E. Nuechterlein's concept of national interests, which divides a state's interests into four dimensions: defense, economic, world order, and ideological interests. This framework is used to understand that the threat is not merely military in nature but also encompasses economic aspects, the stability of the international system, and ideological values. Using this approach, the study highlights how the threat posed by the Houthi group affects Saudi Arabia's strategic interests and drives its security and foreign policy responses

#### *1. Defense Interests*

The Houthi threat is evident in the missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabian territory, targeting areas along the border as well as vital infrastructure. These attacks signal a shift in the Yemeni conflict toward a cross-border threat that directly impacts national security. In response, Saudi Arabia has enhanced its air defense capabilities, modernized its military, and strengthened its military presence in the southern region. These measures reflect the top priority of safeguarding territorial sovereignty and protecting the population from external threats.

#### *2. Economic Interests*

The Houthi threat has had a significant impact on the energy sector, which serves as the backbone of Saudi Arabia's economy. Attacks on oil facilities such as Abqaiq and Khurais highlight the vulnerability of energy infrastructure to asymmetric threats. Disruptions to oil production and distribution have the potential to reduce government revenue, increase volatility in energy markets, and erode investor confidence. Furthermore, increased defense spending is narrowing fiscal space, thereby creating pressure on national economic stability.

#### *3. World Order Interests*

The conflict in Yemen affects the stability of the Middle East and the security of the international system, particularly with regard to global energy distribution routes. Attacks on Saudi Arabia's territory and strategic infrastructure have the potential to trigger an escalation of regional conflict and disrupt the stability of the global energy supply. These conditions make Saudi Arabia's involvement an effort to maintain regional balance and ensure that the international environment remains stable in its own interests.

#### *4. Ideological Interests*

The Houthi threat stems from the ideological rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Houthis' close ties to Iran are perceived as an attempt to expand political and ideological influence in the region. This has prompted Saudi Arabia to respond not only for security reasons, but also to preserve its legitimacy, identity, and influence in the Middle East.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that the cross-border threat posed by the Houthi group in the 2019–2024 Yemeni conflict has evolved from a domestic conflict into a tangible

threat to Saudi Arabia's national interests. Missile and drone attacks demonstrate the conflict's transformation into a regional threat that impacts domestic stability. Iran's support has further strengthened the Houthis' capabilities, making the Yemeni conflict a strategic variable in Saudi Arabia's defense policy. From Donald E. Nuechterlein's perspective, this threat relates to Defense Interests, Economic Interests, World Order Interests, and Ideological Interests.

In the defense dimension, attacks on regions such as Jizan, Asir, and Najran represent a direct threat to the sovereignty and safety of citizens. Meanwhile, in the economic dimension, attacks on energy facilities such as Abqaiq and Khurais highlight the vulnerability of vital sectors that underpin the national economy. Disruptions to oil production impact state revenue, fiscal stability, and global market confidence. Based on Nuechterlein's classification, these threats fall under the "vital interest" category because they have the potential to cause significant harm to national stability.

The conflict in Yemen cannot be understood as merely a local conflict, but rather as part of the region's complex security dynamics. Iran's involvement expands the conflict's scope and influences Saudi Arabia's perception of the threat. The state's response is not only military in nature but also encompasses defense modernization, security cooperation, and the protection of critical infrastructure. Thus, the Houthi threat drives Saudi Arabia's comprehensive strategy to maintain territorial, economic, and political legitimacy amid regional geopolitical rivalries.

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