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The Saudi Savior—Justifying Operation Decisive Storm

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that despite the success of Saudi Arabia's use of discourse to legitimize Operation Decisive Storm, their initial bombing and blockade of Yemen, to the United States, ultimately these discourses were problematic. Via analyzing speeches from Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adel Al-Jubeir, and articles from Saudi news website Arab News, this paper traces Saudi propaganda, showing the way in which it was used to justify the extraordinary bombing of Yemen and blockade of Yemeni ports. The paper meaningfully assesses the resonance of their narratives with US audiences through informed analysis. US discourse created a nexus of reciprocal positionality, in which Washington's discourse began to merge with Riyadh's, justifying it yet further. The US had its own reasons for lending support to KSA's war efforts, which encouraged them to adopt core Saudi narratives. This served to justify the two actors' involvement in the Saudi-led intervention. These propagandized narratives had profound humanitarian consequences for the people of Yemen.

1 | Introduction

This paper argues that despite Saudi Arabia's (KSA) state discourse working effectively to justify Operation Decisive Storm (ODS) to the United States, this framing was deeply problematic due to its propagandized nature. It was also problematic because it exacerbated the worst humanitarian crisis of its time (Borger 2015; Human Rights Watch 2017). ODS consisted of a systematic bombing campaign and the blockade of Yemeni ports. 80% of Yemen's 30 million people were dependent on humanitarian aid by June 2015, just 2 months after ODS began (Borger 2015). The United Nations (UN) Development Program estimated that 377,000 people had died because of the conflict by 2021 (Campaign Against the Arms Trade CAAT 2022).

This paper focuses primarily on the legitimization of the military intervention at its onset in March 2015. Providing a full analysis of these processes from 2015 to the present day is beyond the paper's scope. The analysis here sets out the core lines of justification, conveyed to Western audiences by then Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel Al-Jubeir and Saudi news website *Arab News*. As such, the inclusion of data is targeted, specific, and limited. This focus is justified, as understanding the finer detail of these early narratives is essential for conceptualizing the tone of the conflict moving forwards. The paper focuses on ODS based on the consensus amongst human rights and humanitarian organizations that it had severe effects on access to food, fuel, water, and healthcare (Simpson 2020; Médecins Sans Frontiers 2020).

Following a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led process, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi was chosen to stand in a single-candidate election for president of Yemen in 2012. Following the extension of his rule in 2014, the Houthis, a non-state militia group from Saada Governorate, showed their discontent through violence in the northern highlands. By

September 21, they had seized the capital city, Sana'a. Hadi "resigned" in January 2015 and by February the Houthis had established full control over the city. Hadi fled to Aden and rescinded his resignation, but "a Houthi advance forced Hadi to flee Aden for exile in Saudi Arabia" (Global Conflict Tracker 2021). In collaboration with Hadi, the Saudis launched ODS on March 25, 2015, with the aim of removing the Houthis from power and reinstating the "internationally recognized legitimate government."

Through the construction of a grand narrative, KSA provided a tight, moralistic argument, enabling the United States to frame its support for the operation as one of moral and strategic necessity (Gordon and Parkinson 2018). Utilizing Securitization Theory (ST) and a unique form of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) known as Discourse Tracing (DT), this paper argues that the Saudi-led coalition constructed a hero/villain/victim narrative. The Saudi-led coalition and Hadi were the heroes; Iran and the Houthis the villains; and the people of Yemen the victims. Through this artificial, propagandized construction, ODS was justified, creating profound consequences for Yemen. This paper understands propaganda as consisting of "systematic and deliberate attempts to sway mass public opinion in favor of the objectives of the institution sending the propaganda message" (Snow 2010, 66). The central objective of this paper is to analyze Saudi discursive and humanitarian aid efforts at justifying ODS to the United States and, via contrasting these narratives with the deteriorating humanitarian situation on the ground, to provide a detailed analysis of this process and its impact.

Structurally, the paper first conducts a literature review of work covering the Saudi-led intervention, the surrounding discourse, and the use of humanitarian aid. Secondly, the paper outlines its understanding of ST. Next, the paper outlines its methodology. Based on the ethos of CDA (Fairclough 2003), the section outlines the method of DT (LeGreco and Tracy 2009). This approach facilitates an informed analysis of the most prominent frames used in Riyadh's securitization narratives in the early days of ODS.

The results are then presented: the data consists of discourse from a series of speeches and interviews with Saudi Foreign Secretary Adel Al-Jubeir, given to American audiences, and data from Saudi state-ran news website *Arab News*. This is one of many examples that evidences the interconnected web of state propaganda in KSA. Al-Jubeir's speeches are considered, as this paper understands him to be the most important person in the mission to legitimize ODS to the United States. The choice was made to consider *Arab News* because it is an English-language site, targeting international audiences. It specifically targets diplomats, business leaders, politicians, and executives. The website contains news pieces, opinion pieces from Saudi journalists, and summaries of sermons from some Saudi clerics. Word categories which are frequently referred to by Al-Jubeir and *Arab News* have been defined: "Iran," "Internationally Recognized Legitimate Government," "Radical," and "Protecting the People of Yemen."

In the discussion, these frames' legitimization processes will be traced, detailing Saudi narratives, US reciprocity, and demonstrating the securitization process that led to this. Saudi lines of discourse will be discussed within the context of the realities on the ground in Yemen. Within the discussion, the specific subsection "Protecting the People of Yemen" deviates slightly from the focus on 2015, using humanitarian data up until 2022 as a point of contrast to the Saudi claim that their intervention was to "protect the people of Yemen." Quotes from a 2017 Saudi Report from their Washington Embassy are included to demonstrate the recurrence of this narrative, encapsulated in the discourse surrounding the actions of The King Salman Humanitarian and Relief Centre (KSRelief).

The paper argues that KSA used these prominent discourses to justify ODS to the United States. KSA managed to present itself as a "savior" or "hero." However, many of their narratives can meaningfully be contested through reflecting on the empirical nature of ODS. Furthermore, their measures and narratives lacked proportionality and were explicitly political. They led to the justification of extraordinary measures, having profound consequences for the people of Yemen.

2 | Literature Review—The Saudi-Led Intervention, Discursive Strategies, and Aid

There is a strong consensus within the literature that Riyadh saw the intervention in Yemen as an opportunity to reassert their regional status, in the face of an ongoing struggle for supremacy with Iran (Darwich 2018; Dogan-Akkas 2020; Walsh 2023). Following the Arab Spring, protests in the Saudi Eastern Provinces, losses in Syria, and a change in leadership, "the ascendant branch of the Saudi ruling family appear[ed]... to be willing to compensate for what they conceive as Abdullah's failure in acquiring the Kingdom's status" (Darwich 2018, 135). King Salman ascended the throne on January 23, 2015, and immediately appointed his 30-year-old son, Mohammed bin Salman (M.B.S.), as his Minster of Defence. Within 3 months, MBS would be named Crown Prince, following his "success" with ODS. Central to MBS' foreign policy was a militarism that sought to "portray its intervention in Yemen as being at the center of a Sunni regional effort to counter the threat of Iran and the expansion of Shiism in the Gulf" (Darwich 2018, 129). While this paper agrees with this point, it argues that Saudi framing went beyond this sectarian, anti-Iranian lens. It also focuses primarily on Saudi attempts to justify ODS to the United States, not to a wider plethora of regional Sunni actors.

Nevertheless, framing ODS as an existential battle against a radical Iranian proxy on KSA's southern border did feature heavily in Saudi international discourse. Walsh (2023) wrote an entire paper on this specific point, arguing that the Saudi 'the Houthis are an Iranian proxy' narrative equated to a "securitization process," which "proved successful, convincing their western allies of profound Iranian involvement in Yemen... As it became entrenched, discussion of the economic considerations related to the continuation of arms sales to KSA, and the oil and natural gas industries became increasingly scarce" (Walsh 2023, 8). This paper agrees with this point, arguing, as

other scholars (Juneau 2016; Hill 2017), that this narrative engendered a wide and varied base of international support for ODS. As an international pariah, Iran is a very popular enemy. KSA's justification of the conflict in Yemen was part of a wider anti-Iranian regional strategy, in which Riyadh was speaking to "American counterparts... in an effort to derail the diplomatic rapprochement, fearing the consequences of a resurgent Iran" (Mabon 2018, 756). This is even though, in 2015, "Tehran [had] no decisive say over Houthi decision-making, and the relationship between them [was] recent and opportunistic" (Hokayem and Roberts 2016, 163). Contrary to the broader focuses of other scholars, this paper is solely focused on Riyadh's efforts to justify its intervention to the United States, which involved a multiplicity of other narratives.

Key to their justification process was framing their intervention in the language of "international law" and "humanitarianism." This often came in the form of commitments to "protecting the people of Yemen." From March 2015 onwards, KSA consistently invoked these narratives, as well as establishing KSRelief. Bordón and Alrefai (2023) understand "Saudi Arabia's use of foreign aid as an instrument of political ordering and control" (1), arguing that "KSRelief can perform as a tool that at least balances and at most supersedes the possible detrimental effects of the military intervention for KSA's legitimacy and reputation" (10). This paper extends this argument, claiming that KSRelief worked alongside very early securitization narratives pertaining to the stated humanitarian motivation of ODS to "protect the people of Yemen," as part of a grand securitizing narrative.

It does so in response to Bordón and Alrefai (2023, 14) claim that their "analysis has paid attention to the rationales underpinning Saudi foreign aid, rather than centering on the effects on attitudes and behavior. Future research could provide new insights following this line of enquiry." Riyadh's moralistic framing of their use of humanitarian aid under the guise of "protecting the people of Yemen" had the effect of shaping American attitudes and behaviors, to encourage a deep level of support from the Obama Administration. In terms of KSRelief's efforts in Yemen, this paper agrees with Fenton-Harvey's (2019) point that "[w]hile Riyadh conveys this as a benevolent gesture that reflects a desire to help Yemen's humanitarian crisis, critics note that it mainly enables Saudi Arabia to expand its networks of patronage"—both within Yemen and internationally. This paper argues that the various discourses surrounding ODS, including "protecting the people of Yemen," worked as parts of a grand securitization narrative, used to justify the intervention to the United States.

3 | Theoretical Framework—Securitisation Theory

ST (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998; Balzacq 2005) focuses on the concepts of discourse and narrative. Language is imbued with meaning by state actors to construct a threat, and, in turn, to justify extraordinary measures against it. As Buzan puts it, "by saying the words, something is done, like betting, giving a promise, naming a ship" (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998, 26). The theory focuses on the idea of threat, claiming that there is nothing which is, by its very nature, threatening (Wæver 1989). They believe that discourse is used by the powerful to artificially construct certain realities as threats.

This construction, however, has traditionally been viewed as transactional, with an elite speaking, and an audience accepting. Securitization is thus a self-contained process, analyzable through examination of the speech act alone. Balzacq critiqued this understanding, suggesting that "the assumption of a speech act approach ultimately reduces security to a conventional procedure such as marriage or betting" (2005, 72). Due to the contemporary nature of the exchange of information, this understanding is now unsatisfactory. The narrow focus of traditional ST has meant that the audience has long been under-researched, both empirically and theoretically (Darwich and Fakhoury 2016, 725). This paper argues that the audience is no longer passive, but an active and contributory part of securitization.

Balzacq (2005) correctly identified this issue, before the Internet and social media became the primary vehicles of propaganda. Later, Gaufman (2014) observed this new reality on Twitter, showing that the audience actively participated in the legitimization of policies, through commenting and sharing. These scholars were correct to take the audience seriously. While viewing the securitization process as more interactive, their work is nevertheless guilty of focusing on the discourse of *elites* on the one hand and *non-elite* audiences on the other. However, in the case of ODS, Saudi discourse often took a transnational form (Darwich 2019). Innovatively, understanding foreign national elites as the intended audience of Saudi discourse, across the data considered, this article recalibrates former biases. Saudi propaganda was actualized in the responses and contributions of Riyadh's most powerful international ally—the United States. This reciprocity will form the methodological backbone of this paper. Reciprocal positionality is used throughout the paper to refer to the merging of discourses between distinct actors, in this case KSA and the United States. It can be used to indicate or evidence a successful attempt at securitization, as the target audience's narratives begin to mirror those of the initial securitizing agent. This concept is one of the paper's primary original contributions to the theoretical and methodological literature.

While the audience has been theorized by critical securitization theorists as powerful, complex, and active (Roe 2008; Léonard and Kaunert 2011), an often-assumed reality is the role of "functional actors." Within traditional ST, these actors, such as the media and the religious elite, are seen as parties exhibiting only a partial influence on securitization processes. Conversely, this paper views these actors as inseparable from the securitizing actors themselves. Especially in an autocratic context, there is a specific level of truth to the claim that "the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them" (Herman and Chomsky 1988, xi). In Saudi Arabia, rather than separate actors that exert some small influence on securitization, the mass media are best characterized as intertwined with the state. Thus, a nexus of securitization is the most prudent way to visualize the Saudi propaganda machine. In this case, Al-Jubeir

and *Arab News* used discourse to justify Riyadh's extraordinary behavior in Yemen via constructing KSA as the hero, Iran and the Houthis as the villain, and the people of Yemen as the victims.

4 | Methodology: Discourse Tracing—A Tool for Tracing Riyadh's Securitization Narratives

DT (LeGreco and Tracy 2009) is highly influenced by the ethos of CDA, which in turn is highly compatible with ST. The ethos of CDA underpins this paper's analysis, with the goal of analyzing language surrounding ODS to uncover the hidden power-laden meanings behind elite discourse and to challenge its key assumptions. CDA can be broken down into four key areas: power, audience, context, and ideology. Bouvier and Machin write that the aim of CDA is "to reveal discourses buried in language used to maintain power and sustain existing power relations" (2018, 178). Connecting CDA and ST together is a shared linguistic ontology—that language does not have inherent meaning but is instead imbued with meaning by the powerful.

Unlike ST, CDA cannot be accused of ignoring the active role of the audience. Far from seeing them as passive, CDA views the audience as a fundamental part of the construction of meaning in discourse (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 4). Fairclough (2003) broke discourse down into three key areas: production of text, the text itself, and the reception of text. Reception here does not mean the "signing off" of a speech act, as is the case in traditional ST (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998). Rather, the audience is understood to attribute significant meaning to discourse, framing its character and impact. Furthermore, CDA focuses heavily on context—suiting it well to an analysis of the Yemeni conflict. Here, Fairclough's edict runs true, that "we can attribute causal affects to linguistic forms but only through a careful account of meaning and context" (2003, 13).

Usefully, van Dijk (1993) provides researchers with a shortcut for identifying propaganda. It will overemphasize negative things or underemphasize positive things about "the other"; or overemphasize positive things or underemphasize negative things, about "us." The data shows that when there are military and political incentives to propagandize in this way, the elite will often do so (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Therefore, propaganda is imbued with ideological commitments. The issue with CDA is that "the systematic ways in which the methods unfold are left implicit" (LeGreco and Tracy 2009, 20). For something as sensitive and complex as the case study at hand, a degree of methodological rigidity is preferable. Influenced by the primary goals of CDA, LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) model of DT provides a systematic way of conducting discourse analysis across time.

DT provides a step-by-step guide for analyzing discourse at the micro, macro, and meso-levels. It does this without forgetting the central purpose of critical theory, to uncover the power dynamics in discourse as a form of liberation. DT "not only follows the theoretical process of constituting discursive practices, it does so in a way that also prioritizes transparency" (LeGreco and Tracy 2009, 38). Rather than rigidly sticking to the paradigms of one approach, LeGreco and Tracy (2009) have borrowed ideas from discourse analysis, process tracing, and content analysis. This has resulted in a framework that is theoretically grounded, tightly structured, and that encourages a detailed reading of data. For these reasons, it is well-suited for understanding the development of Saudi discourse surrounding ODS.

The process is as follows:

1. Clearly establish the case study and time period.
2. Put together the micro-data (news, speeches, social media posts), meso-data (e.g., policy documents), and macro-dara (context/historical information). Then, chronically order the data, and find recurrent ideas or themes.
3. Devise a research question around these ideas or themes. Write up the case study in line with the answers to this question.
4. Establish a conclusion.

The core "ideas and themes" are "Iran," "legitimate internationally recognized government," "the Houthis are a radical extremist group," and "protecting the people of Yemen." As such, the case study has been written up to analyse these discursive frames, tracing their development and contrasting them with some of the empirical realities of the period.

5 | Results—Frames of Propaganda

This section presents discourse from Al-Jubeir and *Arab News* between March-May 2015. Five key speeches from Al-Jubeir have been considered, all of which present a version of KSA's motivations for the intervention to US audiences. These have been broken down into four key areas—"Iran," "Internationally Recognized Legitimate government," "Radical," and "Protecting the People of Yemen." They have been separated into three separate tables. Table 1 considers three appearances of Al-Jubeir on US news. Table 2 considers two of his official governmental speeches, both of which were around 40 min;

TABLE 1 | 3 Al-Jubeir TV Interviews.

Type of word	March 29	April 2	April 6
Iran	5	2	2
Internationally Recognized Legitimate government	3	2	2
Radical	4	1	2
Protecting the people of Yemen	2	1	2

TABLE 2 | 2 Speeches from Al-Jubeir and one from Obama.

Type of word	April 15 Al-Jubeir	April 22 Obama	May 8 Al-Jubeir	May 8 Kerry
Iran	14	3	2	4
Internationally Recognized Legitimate government	10			
Radical	5	1	1	1
Protecting the people of Yemen	10	1	4	1

TABLE 3 | 10 Arab News Articles.

Type of word	Number of appearances
Iran	6 (four were not direct mentions but clear allusions)
Internationally Recognized Legitimate government	12
Radical	12
Protecting the people of Yemen	30

the second of which also hosted John Kerry, whose discourse has been recorded to show reciprocity. An interview conducted with Obama on MSNBC on April 22, has also been included in Table 2. These speeches were picked due to their proximity and relevance to the beginning of ODS. Consideration of US reciprocity during this period is limited, due to the Obama administration's focus on "quiet support," purposefully limiting discussions of the conflict for fear of chastisement by the international community (Mazzetti and Schmitt 2016). Table 3 contains data from 10 *Arab News* articles, a Saudi state-ran news platform. These articles come from the first month of the Saudi-led intervention, dating between March 28 and Apri 30. Using DT, these have been ordered chronologically. The case study has been written around the question above, to test the impact of the discourse.

6 | Discussion—Analyzing Saudi Frames

6.1 | Iran

On February 12, 2015, the US Department of State said in a daily press briefing, "we are aware of reports of a variety of support provided by Iran to the Houthis, but we have not seen evidence that Iran is exerting command and control over the Houthis' activities in Yemen" (U.S. Department of State 2015a). However, as KSA began to overexaggerate Iranian involvement, the United States began to reciprocate. They spent concerted effort creating the Iranian-Houthi villain. Al-Jubeir announced ODS in Washington on March 25. US National Security Council Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan signaled US support on the same day:

> *The United States strongly condemns ongoing military actions taken by the Houthis against the elected government of Yemen... The United States coordinates closely with Saudi Arabia and our GCC partners on issues related to their security and our shared interests. In support of GCC actions to defend against Houthi violence, President Obama has authorized the provision of logical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations*
>
> (White House 2015)

On March 26, KSA, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain sent a joint letter addressed to the UN Security Council, outlining their justification for ODS. Here, explicit reference was made to external support for the Houthis, suggesting that they were "supported by regional powers that are seeking to impose their control over the country and turn it into a tool by which they can extend their influence in the region" (Saudi Embassy 2015). The involvement of Iran quickly became central, as "the alleged foreign-backed 'aggression' emerge[d] as the main justification for the intervention" (Ruys and Ferro 2016, 71). Although Iran was not named, the word "puppet" was used to describe the Houthi and "it is clear from... the continued labeling of the Yemeni crisis as a 'proxy war', that references to a 'foreign', 'regional', or 'outside' force allegedly behind the Houthi uprising alluded to... Iran" (Ruys and Ferro 2016, 73–74). In this way, the Saudi grand narrative created its villain.

Researchers are justified in questioning this sudden change of perspective. The change is especially puzzling because the United States had raised their doubts of comprehensive Iranian involvement as recently to ODS as February 2015 (U.S. Department of State 2015a). The Unites States were feeling the "need to placate the Saudis as the administration completed a nuclear deal with Iran" (Mazzetti and Schmitt 2016). Addressing Al-Jubeir on the topic of Yemen, Kerry said that they "will discuss, obviously, the challenge of Iranian support in some of those particular conflicts," adding:

> *So let me be clear. Our effort to find a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue with... Iran does not stem from any*

> *lessening of our concerns about all of these other destabilizing events within the region*
>
> (U.S. Department of State 2015b)

Words directly connected to the Islamic Republic, including "Iran," "Iranians," "Tehran," and "International Revolutionary Guard Corps" were mentioned by Adel Al-Jubeir 25 times across his five appearances. Repetition extends to specific phraseologies, which are consistent throughout Al-Jubeir's discourse. *Arab News* also made reference to this narrative, writing that "the Houthi militants are hand-in-glove with the Iranian government which is definitely using it for their purpose" (Hassan 2015). However, Iran denied material involvement throughout 2015. On March 31, 2015, Marzieh Afkham, from the Iranian Foreign Minister argued that: "the claims about the dispatch of weapons from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Yemen are completely fabricated and sheer lies'" (Taghrib News 2015).

In his interviews, Al-Jubeir is consistently asked about the level of influence Iran has on the Houthis. Every response sounds similar, emphatically claiming Iran to have a profound, wide-reaching relationship with the Yemeni rebels. In the March Face the Nation Interview, Al-Jubeir was asked: "How much did Iran have to do with the Houthis?." To which, he responded:

> *A lot. The Houthis are ideologically affiliated with Iran. The Iranians have provided them with weapons. The Iranians have provided them with advisors. And the Iranians have provided them with money*
>
> (Face the Nation 2015)

In response to virtually the same question in the other four discussions, Al-Jubeir again emphasizes this connection between Iran and the Houthis, focusing on "weapons," "advisors," and "money." On April 6, in an interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, Al-Jubeir was asked: "What is the role of Iran in Yemen right now? I'm getting conflicting information about how significant their role might be—your analysis?." Al-Jubeir responded by overexaggerating the Iranian role:

> *As far as their support from Iran is concerned, we know that Iran has operatives who are working with the Houthis, they have provided them with financial assistance, they've provided them with weapons. Some time not too long ago a ship was interdicted that was carrying weapons from the Iranians to the Houthis*
>
> (CNN 2015)

Similarly exaggerating threat perception around Iran, coalition spokesman Ahmad Asiri stated in April that, "if the ships seek to aid the Houthis, the coalition has the right to choose the proper answer" (Kirkpatrick 2015). In *Arab News* Wahhabi cleric Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais spoke conspiratorially of Iranian adventurism, stating "Yemen has been ravaged by the Houthi militias supported by foreign agencies striving to undermine the Muslim world" (Arab News 2015a). Soon, the Houthis began to see the advantages of emphasizing a connection to Iran. They could see that it was increasing Saudi and US anxiety. On April 20, Abdel Malik Al-Houthi called Iran "a great Islamic country" (BBC 2015). Despite this, there is a scholarly consensus that Iranian involvement in Yemen was minimal in 2015 (Juneau 2016; Hokayem and Roberts 2016; Hill 2017).

Nevertheless, the Saudis and the Americans were spending concerted time and effort raising international fear around Iranian weapons' shipments to the Houthis. In Obama's MSNBC interview on April 22, Obama raised anxiety around Iranian influence, stating:

> *[W]hat we've said to them [the Iranians] is if there are weapons delivered to factions within Yemen... that's a problem*
>
> (MSNBC 2015)

Following the commencement of ODS, it took until September of 2015 for the Saudi coalition to provide evidence of Iranian weapons entering Yemen, when they intercepted a fishing boat 150 miles south of Oman (BBC 2015). The Saudi-led coalition reported that the fishing boat contained "18 anti-armour Concourse shells, 54 anti-tank BGM17 shells, 15 shell battery kits, four firing guidance systems, five binocular batteries, three launchers, one launcher holder and three batteries" (BBC 2015). They managed to convincingly connect the boat to Tehran.

Between 2015 and 2019, KSA spent more than $265 billion on the military intervention in Yemen (Jalal 2020). Allen and Riedel (2020) argue that Iran have paid a "pittance" compared to this, funnelling in only small amounts of support to raise Saudi–US anxiety. Just over a year after the beginning of ODS, when Iranian support was more tangible, Obama appeared in Riyadh. Speaking of the apparent successes of his administration's Middle East policy, Obama said:

> *What we've also seen, what the GCC has seen, is our continued cooperation in... interdicting Iranian efforts to arm the Houthi militias inside of Yemen*
>
> (White House 2016)

Saudi Ambassador to the UK Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud does not speak for the entire Saudi establishment. However, his response to a question posed by the author of this paper in 2021 was telling. When asked about whether KSA overexaggerated Iranian involvement during ODS, he replied: "We may have got it wrong" (Al Saud 2021).

6.2 | Internationally Recognized Legitimate Government

Al-Jubeir repeated the exact term "legitimate government" 17 times. When asked about Saudi motivations for the intervention, he answers with words such as "we are determined to... restore the legitimate government of Yemen" (AP Archive 2021). In the 10 *Arab News* articles considered, there were 12 mentions of the legitimate government. Quoting a Saudi banker, one article writes, "[w]ith the restoration of peace

and order, the legitimate government could continue to function and deliver basic needs and services" (Estimo 2015). Although Kerry did not make specific reference to the concept in the May 8 speech, official government announcements, including those on May 25, refer to the idea of "legitimate government" (White House 2015). This justification was continuously repeated, even though support for Hadi's government was tentative at best. Hadi was previously Saleh's second in command and was chosen by a GCC-backed initiative to stand in a single-candidate election.

The Saudi-led coalition claimed that they were simply coming to the aid of an ally in President Hadi, answering his call to "protect Yemen and its people from the aggression of Houthi militias" (United Nations Security Council 2015b). In this sense, ODS was securitized as a defensive, reactive, measure. The coalition invoked the concept of "intervention by invitation," appealing to the notion that as Hadi was the legitimate government, he "enjoy[ed] the rights inherent in full sovereignty" (UN General Assembly 1970). Thus, in international law, he had the right to invite allies to come to his aid, meaning ODS was justified. There are important debates surrounding legitimacy and its sources in the Middle East, and it is important to avoid orientalist and essentialist assumptions about the concept. However, focusing solely on the "internationally recognized" part of this is essential for understanding how ODS was legitimized to the Western-led international community.

Legal scholar Doswald-Beck claimed that to exercise such power and be recognized on the international stage, the state must (1) maintain full control over state territory, and (2) have international recognition (1985, 199–200). The second part of this was certainly the case for Hadi. However, his "territorial control" was open to doubt:

> *Given that President Hadi and his government were engaged in a non-international armed conflict with the Houthi rebels and lacked effective control over significant parts of the territory at the moment the letter was sent, it can be questioned whether they still had that authority*
>
> (Ruys and Ferro 2016, 72)

Nevertheless, his status as the "internationally recognized government" helped to encourage UNSC Resolution 2216, which re-emphasized support for Hadi, criticized the Houthis, and helped to justify actions taken against them (United Nations Security Council 2015a).

Hadi was KSA's preferred choice, having been selected by a GCC-led initiative to run in an election, in which he was the only candidate in 2012. By 2014, when his rule was extended, "Hadi was deeply unpopular and seen as a Saudi stooge" (Riedel 2017). The reality stands in stark contrast to the framing of the Saudi propaganda network. In one article, *Arab News* quotes Al-Sudais, who asserted "[w]e call on this transgressing group [the Houthis] to return to its senses and understand the welfare of the people can be secured by... accepting the legitimate choices of the Yemeni nation [Hadi]" (Arab News 2015a). There is no choice to be made in a single-candidate election. The wider Hadi family was also accused of deep corruption. His son Jal was allegedly the "man to contact and essentially pay off in order to obtain... fuel import permits"; "Jalal reportedly not only demanded commission for fuel imports, but for all imports entering Hudaydah" (Sana's Center 2018, 35). Deeply corrupt, the Hadis were making money from the Saudi-led blockade of Yemen's harbors, through the selective granting of important licenses to commercial enterprises. Nevertheless, the tentative notion of "internationally recognized government" stood firm. For Riyadh, "Hadi's value as president [was] solely in the cover he provide[d] for the continued implementation of Security Council Resolution 2216" (Al-Deen 2022). His status allowed them to continually justify their intervention to the international community.

However, "international recognition is a fickle barometer and inevitably introduces an element of subjectivity in the application of the legal framework" (Ruys and Ferro 2016, 97). Furthermore, focusing on international recognition severely undermines domestic factors, and ignores Yemeni voices. It opens up the United States to the allegation of choosing to recognize governments that are pliant to their interests, no matter their domestic support or their democratic credentials. However, this narrative worked very effectively as a tool of international securitization for the Saudis.

6.3 | Radical

Words within the semantic field of "radical" were used 13 times by Al-Jubeir, once by Obama, and once by Kerry. They were used 12 times by *Arab News*. These words included: "extremist," "terrorist," "militia," and "militant." Furthermore, Al-Jubeir connected the Houthis to Lebanon's Hezbollah. *Arab News* extended this fear, using sectarian language to discredit the Houthis, paraphrasing Wahhabi cleric Sheikh Abdul Bari Al-Thobaity:

> *The sheikh also lauded the decisiveness displayed by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman in launching Decisive Storm to support Islam... and to establish the rights of Muslims in Yemen when a group of people started spreading bidaa (prohibited innovations in religious matters) and undertaking misleading acts by rebelling against their ruler and killing people, and destroying mosques and homes under false slogans*
>
> (Arab News 2015b)

Such representations were used to construct the Houthis as the "villain," in turn, justifying the actions of ODS. Words such as "radical" and "extreme" have two meanings within the context they are used here. The first is an association with so-called 'Islamist terrorism,' "as the term 'radical Islam' becomes equivalently used and understood with terrorism" (Hoewe and Bowe 2018, 15). KSA is connecting them specifically to the network of Iranian proxies, regarded by many as terrorist organizations. The second denotes extremities in the suppression of human rights and the use of violence. According to both

of these definitions, Riyadh's line of justification here has some merit, with the important caveat that the Houthis are not a classic Iranian proxy.

The Houthis have indeed engaged in several damaging and extreme behaviors since the start of the conflict. While human rights organizations are right to point to the Saudi-led coalition as the primary obstructers of aid, they are also prudent in observing the damage the Houthis have caused (Simpson 2020). Organizations are doing their best, but they are being forced to tread "that blurry, but very real line, beyond which assistance for victims imperceptibly turns into support for their tormenters" (Brauman 1987). In Yemen, humanitarian aid has been obstructed by the Houthis. Based on a series of interviews with humanitarian workers, HRW concluded that the Houthis have fallen foul of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Simpson 2020). One aid worker demonstrated the negative impact of the Houthis, stating that their obstructions have meant that "we can't reach communities where people are dying" (Simpson 2020). Not only this, but the Houthis can reliably be regarded as "radical" due to their use of child soldiers (Becker 2022) and the way in which they suppress freedom of speech.

A good portion of the Houthi establishment follow a form of Zaydism, believing that Hussein al-Houthi had, and his descendants now have, a religious right to rule Yemen. They are members of a noble class called *Sada*. Some Houthis want an "Imamate with the political form of a republic, in similarity to the Iranian sample" (Alziady 2021, 812). This greatly worries both Hadi and the Saudis as "a group who believe that non-sada are illegitimate rulers is a challenge to the al-Saud rulers' claim to legitimacy" (Lackner 2017, 148). While this may look similar to the Iranian model, it actually distinguishes them from Iran in a significant way. Unlike classic Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah, they do not believe in the Iranian notion of Vilayat-e Faqih [Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist]. Thus, Ayatollah Khamenei is neither their political nor spiritual leader. However, there is a strong Zaydi fundamentalism present within the Houthi leadership, desiring their own form of an Islamic state. They also have strong anti-Saudi, anti-Western, and anti-Israeli views. Thus, Riyadh's securitization of the Houthis as a radical group certainly appealed to Western actors, with John Kerry grouping them together with other "terrorist" concerns in the region when he met with Adel al-Jubeir in April 2015. He stated:

> *We have a broad array of concerns, which we will be expressing in the context of Camp David, which relate to destabilizing efforts by anybody in the region, which relate to terrorist organizations that are spreading in the region. You have, obviously, al-Shabaab in Somalia; you've had Boko Haram in Mali; you have Daesh in Libya; you have al-Nusrah and al-Qaida and ISIL and others all through. I mean, those are the concerns: the destabilization of the region by a number of different entities, and obviously we all know that Iran has supported Hizballah and has supported Houthis and other efforts*
>
> (U.S. Department of State 2015b)

7 | Protecting the People of Yemen

This section includes both analysis of Al-Jubeir and *Arab News'* claims of "protecting the people of Yemen" in 2015, as well as Saudi and United States claims about the humanitarian achievements of KSRelief in 2017. The frame of "protecting the people of Yemen" was essential for portraying the Yemeni people as the "victims," which the Saudi-led coalition of "heroes" was helping to protect. This may suggest why Al-Jubeir referred to it 19 times across the five speeches considered and *Arab News* 30 times across just 10 articles. To fully account for the impact of the Saudi-led intervention, this section considers humanitarian data up to 2022. A series of quotes from Saudi, US, and UN actors show that KSRelief's efforts encapsulated the four key framings, present within Al-Jubeir's discourse upon the commencement of ODS. It shows how these four frames were mutually reinforcing, within a grand narrative. The frames worked in tandem.

There is a constant line from KSA about its prominent role in financial contributions to the humanitarian relief effort. However, their appeals to "protecting the people of Yemen" are undermined by the fact that the alleged $18 billion spent on humanitarian aid is significantly outweighed by the death toll and that, by 2020, KSA had spent at least $265 billion on the military campaign (Jalal 2020). The puzzle, then, is understanding how KSA managed to justify causing such harm and spending so much money. KSA stated that they were protecting the legitimate government, the people of Yemen, and its own borders from an Iran-backed radical militia group. Following their logic, this notion of a "moral," "defensive," and "necessary" mission meant that "collateral damage" and heavy expenditure were unfortunate but justifiable. The narrative continues that, while there may be some Yemeni suffering in the process, the Saudis are trying their best to alleviate this through KSRelief.

In 2015, KSA's attempts to justify ODS centered, partially, around "protecting the people of Yemen." Across the five discussions, Al-Jubeir referred to this 19 times. Speaking of the virtues of ODS, Al-Sudais was quoted by *Arab News*, stating "[t]he Kingdom has embarked on an initiative that will be written in history as a move to champion the cause of the oppressed in Yemen" (Arab News 2015c). This declaration stands in stark contradiction to the humanitarian impact of ODS, making it problematic. The blockade had a significant impact, in that it "severely restricted the flow of food, fuel, and medicine that the vast majority of the civilian population depended on, in violation of the laws of war" (Simpson 2020). This is in line with the wording of the San Remo Manual's stance on proportionality, an international legal document surrounding blockades, humanitarian aid, and humanitarian law, as "the damage to the civilian population is... excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated from the blockade" (Doswald-Beck 1995).

Based on statistics from the UN, *The Guardian* reported that, by June 2015, 80% of Yemen's nearly 30 million people were in direct need of urgent humanitarian aid (Borger 2015). HRW and MSF agreed with the UN in stating that the Saudi blockade was the primary catalyst for this (Simpson 2020; Médecins Sans

Frontiers 2020). This is not to say that the Saudi blockade created a new humanitarian crisis. In 2013, the OCHA reported that up to 58% of the Yemeni population were dependent upon humanitarian aid (ReliefWeb 2013). Nevertheless, the blockade exacerbated pre-existing issues, and made it far more difficult for those people to be reached. Before the conflict "[a]bout 90 percent of Yemen's basic food intake... came from imports, with only 15 percent of prewar imports reaching the country as of June 2015" (Borger 2015). By 2020, The OCHA claimed that 131,000 civilians had died from "indirect causes such as lack of food, health services and infrastructure" (UN News 2020).

The people of Yemen were not a priority for the Saudi–US alliance, with Al-Jubeir referring to casualties as "collateral damage" during his interview on April 2 (AP Archive 2021). In his April 15 address, Al-Jubeir said:

> *We are working with international humanitarian assistance in order to... bring badly needed humanitarian assistance to the people of Yemen*
>
> (Saudiembassyusa 2015)

Data from OCHA (UN News 2020), HRW (Simpson 2020), and Médecins Sans Frontiers 2020 (2020) tells the opposite story. They argue that the blockades, and the fact that they were responsible for the starvation of civilians, meant that not only were KSA uncooperative with human rights organizations, but also that the blockades were "disproportionate in that the expected harm to the civilian population exceeded any apparent military benefit" (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Many of KSRelief's aid plans "effectively choked the supply of aid to populations in the Houthi-controlled areas, in particular the Hajjah, Hudaydah, Sa'ada and Ta'izz governorates, which today host the people facing the greatest threat of starvation" (Armed Conflict Survey 2019, 16). The blockade was supposedly established to choke the Houthis. However, it had severe implications on innocent Yemeni civilians. By 2020, Kimball and Jumaan (2020) put the death toll of the Yemen war at around 250,000. By 2022, The Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) reported UN estimations of 377,000 (Campaign Against the Arms Trade [CAAT] 2022). They agree with the notion that the Saudi-led blockade was a key contributor to this. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the United States were a collaborative part of this process (Simpson 2020). These realities undermine all four OCHA principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (United Nations 2012), as well as proportionality. The securitization narratives surrounding KSRelief's aid to Yemen were an attempt to undermine these drealities.

KSRelief's involvement was primarily about the preservation of the image of KSA on the world stage. KSRelief is "under the direct influence of the Saudi government and operate[s] as the humanitarian and social arm... of the executive, limiting their capacity to provide neutral and impartial assistance to all the parties and regions affected" (Coppi 2018, 22). A report from the Saudi Embassy in Washington in 2017, quoting Saudi, United States, and international actors, provided key insight into their international propaganda network. For them to post this in English, from their Washington embassy, demonstrated the internationalized focus of justifying the Saudi war effort. It also shows that reciprocal positionality remained a key part of the securitization process. The following are quotes from that report.

UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien said in October 2017:

> *Its [KSRelief's] generosity has made a real impact in Yemen and elsewhere*
>
> (Saudi Embassy 2017)

US Secretary of Defence James Mattis spoke of the Houthis as an Iranian proxy, stating:

> *We'll have to overcome Iran's efforts to destabilize yet another country [Yemen] and create another militia in their image of Lebanese Hezbollah. But the bottom line is we're on the right path forward*
>
> (Saudi Embassy 2017)

The most telling quotes, evidencing the continuation and triangulation of overlapping discourses from the onset of the conflict, came from Supervisor General of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, Abdullah Al Rabeeah, who stated:

> *The conflict is evidence that the militias did not want to see the will of the Yemeni people. They violated their decision by going against the government democratically elected by the Yemeni people. They also violated international law and the GCC initiative. Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries are trying to provide food, development and safety to Yemen*
>
> (Saudi Embassy 2017)

The most controversial quote, which stands in stark contrast to the counter-narratives of humanitarian organizations in Yemen, came on April 27, when Al Rabeeah said:

> *Our programs have been reaching all regions of Yemen, I want to emphasize all regions, irrespective of who controls it... If you look at what we do as a humanitarian agency, I think it's way beyond any damage that is caused by any attacks*
>
> (Saudi Embassy 2017)

The idea of aid "reaching all regions" has been proven to be inaccurate (Armed Conflict Survey 2019). Furthermore, these arguments stand in stark contradiction with the realities of the bombing campaign, started under ODS. According to the Yemen Data Project, Saudi "attacks" eventually amounted to 25,054 airstrikes, only 32.4% of which hit military targets (YDP 2022). Saudi airstrikes have destroyed 430 educational facilities, 94 healthcare buildings, killed 8983, and injured 10,243 civilians (YDP 2022). The peaks of this destruction were between 2015 and 2017, the period to which Al Rabeeah refers.

The Saudis continue to portray themselves as heroes and saviors. This paper's researcher was able to put concerns about the accuracy of this framing to Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud in 2021. He defended KSA, stating "Not everyone died from bombings. They died from other things", adding, "we give more food aid than the Yemeni people can eat" (Al-Saud, 2021). These narratives are propagandized and problematic. They have been used as a tool to securitise the Saudi war effort as moral, humanitarian, and balanced to the United States—when the evidence suggests otherwise.

8 | Conclusion

This paper has identified the core ways in which KSA justified ODS to the United States, through narratives pertaining to "Iran," "the legitimate internationally recognized government," "the Houthis as a radical, extremist, group," and "protecting the people of Yemen." Their discourse surrounding the contributions of KSRelief acted as a part of the latter securitization narrative, to offset the negative consequences of their blockade and bombing campaign. This point extends Bordón and Alrefai's (2023, 2) contention that "the case of Saudi foreign aid in Yemen is perhaps the most representative instance of how aid in the Middle East is dictated by political objectives and concerns that revolve around control and influence." Through discourse, KSA worked to securitise ODS to the United States, framing itself as the hero, Iran and the Houthis as the villains, and the people of Yemen as the victims.

Despite the Houthis having a somewhat 'radical' nature, their connection to Iran was greatly overexaggerated by KSA to facilitate greater support from their American allies (Juneau 2016; Hill 2017; Walsh 2023). Whilst they were technically correct that Hadi's government was the "internationally recognized" one, there were meaningful doubts about its "legitimacy" (Ruys and Ferro 2016). In this sense, Riyadh obscured the troubling complexity of Hadi's leadership in exchange for a technical legal justification. Humanitarian data from 2015 to 2022 (Human Rights Watch 2017; YDP 2022) shows that KSA and their allies' claims to have been 'protecting the people of Yemen' were highly questionable. Overall, their justifications were problematic due to their propagandized, political nature and their role in exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

Through these narratives, Riyadh was able to present a clean, legally framed, moralistic, set of justifications to the United States. Through this framing, they sought to provide a succinct moralistic narrative for the intervention. This paper concludes that these problematic narratives played a role in facilitating ODS and engendering support from the United States. Whilst this paper cannot conclusively state that this was entirely effective, US reciprocal positionality suggests that elements of the Saudi securitization narrative were adopted by US policymakers. It makes a lasting contribution to the literature in that it shows the way in which these four narratives worked to create a grand securitizing narrative, justifying ODS to the United States. Whilst beyond the scope of this paper, future research should investigate the other, unstated, reasons behind the Saud-led, US-backed, intervention. Research should also conduct analyses of the Houthis' use of propaganda, which is becoming increasingly important due to their attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea, as the war in Gaza escalates.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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