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Escalation in Failed Military Interventions: Saudi and Emirati Quagmires in Yemen

May Darwich, University of Birmingham

Abstract

External interventions are an enduring feature of international relationships. While the causes for interventions have been at the heart of studies on interventions, the dynamics of termination versus escalation have received little attention. This article poses the question: why do intervenors persist in failed military interventions despite diminishing prospects of victory? Whereas some scholars adhered to rational choice approaches, others focused on cognitive and emotional psychology to explain seemingly puzzling decisions at the origin of war continuation. This article builds on the emerging literature on status in IR to unravel the escalation of commitment to a failed war. It argues that when leaders engage their own status and that of their countries to an eventual success in a military intervention, persistence in the war becomes the only solution to salvage their status. Through this lens, this article presents an explanation for Saudi and Emirati escalations in what was planned as a brief operation in Yemen since 2015. Understanding the dynamics of persisting in failed wars has clear implications for the development of international relations theory, the conduct of regional powers in military interventions, and the practice of conflict resolution in the Middle East and beyond.

Policy Implications

1. Policymakers should be cognisant that persistence in failed military interventions is not reducible to simple calculations based on military gains. Persistence in wars can be related to symbolic dimensions, such as prestige, status, and reputation.
2. Status dynamics are often at the centre of decisions impacting war continuation and termination, policymakers and mediators should pay more attention to these dynamics as they work on mediation among parties in a conflict.
3. Mediating the Yemen conflict and ending the Yemen conflict is only possible through achieving a compromise that allows the Saudi Kingdom and the UAE to end the war while preserving their status and that of their leaders.
4. As the initiation and persistence in conflict is in some cases motivated by a desire to gain status, the international community should work on how to avoid the escalation to violent conflicts while channelling the desire for greater status toward nonviolent actions.

Introduction:

Military interventions occur when external forces have vested interests in the outcome of an internal conflict in any given state and employ military force to shape this outcome. In the post-Cold War era, both great and regional powers have abundantly used military force to intervene in intrastate conflicts. An overview of international interventions during the post-Cold War era shows that military interventions, regardless of their outcome, often lead prolonged involvement of the intervening power. Upon intervenors' inability to achieve their initial objectives, they rarely terminate their intervention but commit to further escalation. The US war in Vietnam from (1955-73), the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979-89), Egypt's intervention in Yemen (1962-67), are all examples in which external powers found themselves trapped in prolonged, costly wars, and instead of withdrawing they escalated their military commitment. The Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen since 2015 is yet another example of this phenomenon.

Explaining the decisions to intervene (Findley and Teo, 2006; Mullenbach and Matthews, 2008; Saunders, 2011), the causes of success or failure of interventions (Edelstein, 2004; Regan, 1996), and their international and regional implications (Khosla, 1999) have all been at the heart of the International Relations (IR) discipline. A common feature of international interventions is that intervenors often envisage a short-term deployment of military forces and show excessive confidence in the viability of military means in achieving their goals (Johnson and Tierney, 2011). Often underestimating the challenges, anticipated short-term operations transform into lengthy and costly wars. Despite mounting costs, intervenors escalate their commitment. Escalation is understood as an increased level violence that transcends the limits of war set out at the initiation of the conflict (Duyvesteyn, 2012: 603–4). The causes for escalation and continuous commitment are often independent of its initiating causes (Duyvesteyn, 2012: 603, Deutsch 1973: 351). This article poses the question of why intervenors persist in failed military interventions despite diminishing prospects of victory with a particular focus on Saudi and Emirati involvements in the Yemen war since 2015.

On 25 March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched an attack on Yemen under the name 'Operation Decisive Storm', with the announced aim of restoring the legitimate government

of Abd Rabu Hadi after the Houthis and their allies have gradually taken control of the capital Sanaa in a coup d'état between September 2014 and February 2015. Hours later, eight Arab states — Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, Sudan, and Morocco — announced their support and participation in the Saudi-led intervention. The official goal of the intervention was to 'defend the legitimate government in Yemen' and to 'save the Yemeni people from the Houthi aggression'. The Saudi-led coalition expected that its goals will be achieved in a week (Byman, 2018, p. 141). On 21 April 2015, the coalition hastily announced the end of the military operation and the launch of the 'Operation Renewal of Hope', to shift its focus officially from 'military operations to the political process'. Although the coalition has kept the name 'Operation Renewal of Hope' until today, its focus is still on military operations; the Saudi Kingdom and the UAE remain embroiled in the Yemen conflict.

Several years after the launch of what was meant to be a quick military operation, the Houthis became stronger, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) gained more control in Yemen, Yemenis are suffering what maybe the worst humanitarian situation in history, domestic political costs have been rising in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Saudi and Emirati reputations are suffering badly around the world. While some members of the coalition withdrew, such as Morocco (in 2019) and Qatar (in 2017), other states — namely Egypt and Jordan — decreased their military involvement to nominal participation. Yet, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have not altered their policies and instead escalated their military commitments. And while several media outlets reported Emirati reduction in military forces in July 2019 as a sign of withdrawal from Yemen, UAE officials insisted that it is 'part of a strategic redeployment' and that the UAE remains committed to the coalition (Anderson, 2019). This article aims to unravel why Saudi Arabia and the UAE have persisted in the Yemen war despite diminishing prospects of victory.

The existing literature on war termination versus escalation have been divided between several approaches. While some scholars adhered to rational choice approaches, others focused on cognitive and emotional psychology to explain puzzling war decisions. This article focuses on the escalation of commitment to a failing course of action, known as the 'sunk costs' bias, i.e. throwing good money after bad (Goldgeier and Tetlock, 2001; Kahneman and Renshon, 2009). Building on the emerging literature on status in IR, this article argues that fears of status loss provides an appropriate lens to examine Saudi and UAE escalation

beyond what was planned as a brief operation in Yemen. In the post-2011 regional order, both the Saudi Kingdom and the UAE sought opportunities to alter regional beliefs about their standing at regional and international levels. They employed their military capabilities in Bahrain and Libya while using their financial means as an interventionist mechanism in other places, such as Egypt, Sudan, and Syria. The 2015 intervention in Yemen occurred in this context, and Saudi and Emirati leaders engaged their status and that of their countries to success in Yemen. These status dynamics unravel the escalation of commitment to a failed war.

The article is structured as follows. In the following section, I present various explanations to escalations in failed interventions, and I, then, present the theoretical tenets of this article's argument based on status dynamics in IR. Second, I examine the cases of Saudi and Emirati persistence in the Yemen war. While the Saudi Kingdom is concerned with its image and standing as a 'leader' in the region, the UAE has aspirations to present itself as a 'role model' in fighting extremism and playing a leading role in international trade. The withdrawal from the conflict in Yemen could have irreparable costs for the aspirations and efforts of both countries in achieving their desired status. This article aims to contribute to the development of international relations theory, the conduct of regional powers in military interventions, and the practice of conflict resolution in the Middle East and beyond.

Escalation in Failed Intervention: Theoretical Perspectives

Conflict escalation versus termination have received attention from various theoretical approaches within IR. Early realist IR scholars dealing with conflict offered a systemic view of conflict escalation. Neorealist scholars rely on systemic variables related to the distribution of capabilities between states and the dynamics of systemic change to account for conflict escalation (Waltz 1979; Copeland 1996). Based on rational choice approaches, other scholars offered a foreign policy view on conflict escalation in an effort to transcend neorealism's structural determinism and focused instead on the details of specific state behaviour. In this view, decisionmakers rely on objective calculation of gains and costs based on the power distribution, according to which war escalation or termination represents a more or less rational strategy in the repertoire of states' foreign policy (Fearon, 1995). Following a bounded rationality approach, leaders weigh the costs and benefits of withdrawal or

persistence in the war (Wittman, 1979). As Clausewitz (1976, p. 92) states, 'since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced, and peace must follow'. From this foreign policy perspective, one would expect that the decision to end a war is a straightforward one. Yet, in many cases, states often keep fighting for much longer than expected without apparent benefits.

To explain the apparent irrationality of leaders in conflict escalation and termination, an emerging literature within Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) focused on impaired cognitive functioning related to the distribution of information, analogical reasoning, and leaders' longstanding beliefs (Chadefaux, 2018; Taliaferro, 1998, 2004). Other foreign policy scholars paid particular attention to leaders' subjective and perceptual processing of information about states' relative position and the international environment to explain deviations from rationality. Other scholars also focused on emotional psychology to examine how passionate feelings may encourage leaders to keep fighting long wars for dubious reasons at seemingly disproportionate costs (Payne, 2015; Rosen, 2007).

Beyond realist and foreign policy approaches, other scholars focused on domestic politics at the origin of escalation in a failing war. Sometimes leaders persist in wars where victory became unlikely to avoid domestic political losses or punishment, in both democratic and autocratic regimes (Cochran, 2017; Croco, 2011; Goemans, 2000). Accordingly, war ends when the domestic coalition that supports the war splits, and a new dominant coalition comes to power and ends the conflict (Iklé, 2005). Moreover, diversionary war theory suggests that while domestic circumstances motivate countries to divert attention from sources of popular discontent by launching a militarised crisis. A similar logic can be used to explain why belligerents escalate the conflict despite negative course of events (Gelpi, 1997). Some scholars also looked at religion and ethnicity in conflicts; when actors either were motivated by religious beliefs or employed religion or ethnicity in justifying behaviour, they kept fighting despite increasing costs (Horowitz, 2009).

In addition to structural realist, foreign policy (both rationalist and cognitive-based) and domestic explanations of conflict escalation, this article belongs to an alternative

perspective drawing on sociological approaches within IR showing that conflict escalation is interwoven with normative structural features and processes of identity formation, norms, roles, and interests, which affect processual elements of a conflict. In particular, this article adheres to the scholarship on status in IR and focuses on one specific type of status dynamic, that is the fear of losing status, as source of conflict escalation. Before outlining my argument, I first provide a conceptual definition of status and then an overview of the trajectory of status research within IR. Status — as a standing in a hierarchy — has been a critical component adopted by several theoretical approaches ranging from realism (Gilpin, 1983; Organski and Kugler, 1981), constructivism (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010), evolutionary theories (Lopez et al., 2011), to international political economy (Simmons and Elkins, 2004). Two works outline the conceptual parameters of status. For Larson et al. (2014, p. 7), status denotes ‘collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes ... In international politics, status manifests itself in two distinct but related ways: as membership in a defined club of actors, and as relative standing within such a club’. Dafoe et al. (2014, p. 374) defines status as an ‘attribute of an individual or social role that refers to position vis-à-vis a comparison group’. Both definitions show that status is reflective of collective beliefs about a state’s positionality or ranking within a given group.

Status has been considered a critical cause for conflict outbreak and escalation, especially in cases of status inconsistencies, that is divergence between status recognised by the international community and what the actor aspires to achieve. This research programme is, however, divided over whether status and conflict dynamics are based on either strategic or psychological mechanisms. On the one hand, power transition theory and hegemonic war theory argue that war is the result of competition between a rising power and another dominant one. The rising power is often denied benefits by the dominant hegemon in a hierarchy of prestige that no longer reflects the material capabilities. Such dynamics, for example, figured prominently in Wohlforth’s (2009) theory of great power status competition. On the other hand, other literature has highlighted the psychological and emotional nature of status in shaping conflict dynamics. Work on foreign policy analysis, social identity theory, and evolutionary approaches illustrate that leaders and policy elites are concerned with their status and these concerns, stemming from cognitive and emotional dynamics, have a critical impact on decision-making processes (Lopez et al., 2011).

Constructivist approaches as well rely on psychological theories of respect and recognition to examine the foundations of status and war in international relations (Lebow, 2008; Wolf, 2011).

This article builds on the argument that status concerns have detrimental effect on decision-making processes and can be a driver for the escalation of commitment to a failed course of action, especially if this action was initially driven by a status-related motive. I rely on Renshon's (2017) status dissatisfaction theory and extend its mechanisms to explain Saudi and Emirati escalations in Yemen. Status dissatisfaction theory argues that 'states seeking to shift their status position will undertake "status-altering events" that are public and dramatic enough to capture the attention of the international community as well as shift its beliefs about where the state "stands"' (Renshon, 2017, pp. 221–22). Status dissatisfaction theory posits that states are likely to use violence and seek opportunities to initiate conflicts in order to shift collective beliefs about their rank and standing in a given hierarchy. The theory argues that when states have concerns for status, actors will be keen to extend resources to increase or save their status. Status concerns 'denotes the level of focus on status-related issue, and the likelihood of acting in order to advance or salvage one's status' (Renshon, 2017, p. 4). Renshon's theory presents two separate mechanisms that illustrate the linkage between status concerns and conflict. The first mechanism shows that states will seek opportunities to initiate conflict to alter collective beliefs about their standing. The second mechanism shows that threats to status can trigger concerns for status which will have implications on decisions related to the escalation of commitment. In this article, I show that these two mechanisms can be interlinked. States that are dissatisfied with a given hierarchy seek opportunities to alter beliefs about their status upward through conflict initiation. In the course of the action to increase status, failure, especially during times of heightened status concerns, can lead to threats to both their existing and aspired status. Hence, they escalate the crisis and increase their commitment. As Smoke (1977, 242) argues, 'the higher the level of violence, the greater the casualties and other costs, the greater the risk of more escalation'. Withdrawing or walking away is tantamount to their effort in altering collective beliefs about their status. In their endeavour to alter status beliefs, leaders target multiple audiences. Status-related behaviour are often processes involving multiple audiences: domestic, regional and international. Leaders often focus on signalling status to their domestic because they are

concerned with internal stability and survival (Fearon 1994). Actors also signal status to external audiences to seek higher standing within both regional and international hierarchies (Pu and Schweller, 2014).

The next sections examine these mechanisms in the cases of Saudi and Emirati escalation and persistence in Yemen. Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, both the Saudi Kingdom and the UAE became status conscious and further dissatisfied with the existing regional hierarchy. Their status concerns grew out of the belief that there is a significant divergence between what they possess in terms of material capabilities and the traditional regional hierarchy, which gave weight to declining traditional powers in the region, such as Egypt and Syria. The military intervention in Yemen in 2015 was seemingly another episode of status-altering event sought by the Saudi Kingdom and the UAE to gain further rank and status in the region through the use of military force. The intervention in Yemen engaged leaders' and their states' status: i.e., the status was part of the motivation for acting and part of the goal. The Yemen war has tied the Saudi Kingdom and UAE's status as well as their leaders' status to an eventual success in Yemen. While the intervention was designed to improve Saudi Arabia and the UAE's international and regional standings, the potential irreparable damage to their status following a withdrawal is at the origin of war persistence and escalation in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia: Saving Face in Yemen

At the outset of the intervention, Saudi officials declared with confidence that the campaign is making progress and that the war will be over soon. As Saudi forces tried to move toward the areas closer to the Houthi heartland, it became clear that a swift victory is unlikely. During the last four years, Saudi airstrikes managed to destroy Yemen's infrastructure and kill thousands of civilians. The intervention bolstered the Houthis and drove them closer to Iran while allowing extremist groups, such as AQAP, to gain control in Yemen (Najjar and Al-Karimi, 2017). Yet, the Saudi Kingdom increasingly escalated its commitment in Yemen as illustrated in the 2018 Hodeidah crisis (McKernan, 2018). From the outset of the intervention, Saudi Ambassador in the US Adel Al-Jubeir summarised the Kingdom's mindset: 'Having Yemen fail cannot be an option' (Al Arabiya English, 2015). Relying on the dissatisfaction status theory, I argue that Saudi persistence in Yemen, despite the lack of prospect for victory,

is driven by fears of losing status and reputation for power, what the Kingdom has been struggling to achieve since 2011. As the Kingdom's status and its leaders' prestige were engaged in the conflict, it became impossible to withdraw without causing unsalvageable damages.

For decades, the Saudi Kingdom abstained from seeking regional leadership despite its increasing financial and military capabilities since the late 1970s. Instead, the Saudi Kingdom conducted a foreign policy based on preserving stability and status quo in the region, while pursuing its interests through financial means, known as *Riyalpolitik* (Gause, 2014). The Saudi Kingdom influenced the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, and Lebanon through a conciliatory, conservative foreign policy. It avoided confrontational policies with its rivals, such as Iran, Syria, and Iraq. Meanwhile, the Kingdom relied on its partnership with the US to guarantee security and stability in the region. The 2011 provided the Saudi Kingdom with opportunities and constraints. While the Kingdom perceived the potential downfall of fellow autocrats as a threat to its own survival, the weakening of other Arab regimes allowed the Saudi Kingdom to assert leadership in the region, and the Kingdom pursued status-altering behaviour. It became evident that the traditional centres of power in the region are shifting. Egypt, undergoing domestic transition, has been focused on domestic economic problems and became dependent on financial support from the Gulf. Syria, often perceived as a pivotal regional actor in Arab politics, became embroiled in a civil war. In the meantime, the change in the US approach to Middle East conflicts under the Obama administration, which showed reluctance to maintain direct involvement in regional conflicts, prompted the Saudi Kingdom to seize the opportunity and claim a higher status in the region. The development of the regional structure alongside the increase in Saudi military and financial capabilities, in addition to its traditional religious status as the guardian of the two Holy Mosques, made Saudi elites more concerned with their status and further dissatisfied with the incongruence between their status and capabilities.

Since 2011, the Saudi Kingdom relinquished its conciliatory foreign policy and embraced an assertive foreign policy revealing an emboldened actor aiming to claim higher status in the region. Saudi status-seeking behaviour was manifest in several instances. In 2011, the Saudi Kingdom led a GCC force into Bahrain to support the ruling family against protestors. Furthermore, it strived to play a leading role in overthrowing al-Assad regime in

Syria by supporting the opposition and pressuring for an international military coalition to depose al-Assad (Darwich, 2019). Also, the Kingdom attempted to establish its leadership and gain regional status through building alliances and coalitions in the region. This attempt is illustrated by an effort to build a regional coalition against Iran (Gause, 2017), the formation of a 34-country Islamic military alliance against terrorism (Jenkins, 2016), and leading region-wide repressive policies against the Muslim Brotherhood (Darwich, 2017). Saudi bid for higher status was evident in significant increases in military spending after 2011 despite falling oil prices and growing budget deficit. In 2017, Saudi Arabia is estimated to be the largest military spender in the world and the largest spender in the Middle East (Wezeman, 2018).

Military spending and attempts of leadership were paralleled with a campaign in Saudi state-led media promoting the Kingdom's leading role in the region. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, a daily newspaper, regularly published pieces promoting the image of the Kingdom as a regional leader. The following journalist's description of the Saudi role illustrates Saudi concern for status:

No one expected Saudi Arabia to play a leading role, not short of capabilities, but because the Kingdom—despite its economic and military capabilities along with its religious, political and geographic weight—restrained itself from playing a leading role for decades and left it to Egypt. Even when other countries, such as Iraq and Libya, attempted to play this role following Egypt's exit following the Camp David accords, Saudi Arabia did not compete. Nevertheless, leadership is now a fate and a responsibility imposed [on the Kingdom] and it has to assume it (Al-Shaer, 2016).

The Yemen war has been an important episode of this bid for leadership (Darwich, 2018; Sunik, 2018). As the Saudi Kingdom aspired to establish its leadership in the region, its attempt has been challenged and defied by several actors. Furthermore, efforts of building a regional coalition against Iran floundered as some Gulf countries did not follow its lead; Oman hosted the US-Iranian dialogue for the nuclear deal. In addition, the Kingdom's policies against the Brotherhood were challenged by Qatar. Furthermore, its effort to grow influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon were a failure. The Houthi take-over Sanaa in late 2014 constituted another challenge for the Saudi bid for a higher status at the regional level. Following the 2011 uprisings in Yemen against the rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Saudi Kingdom designed a transition to ensure the advent of a friendly regime in Yemen under the leadership of Abd

Rabu Hadi (former vice president of Ali Abdullah Saleh). At the same time, changes in the Saudi leadership occurred with the death of King Abdullah and the ascendance of King Salman to the throne, who then appointed his son Mohammed Bin Salman (known as MBS) as deputy crown prince and minister of defence (and then crown prince in July 2017). This change in leadership was accompanied with a change in the decision-making process, which shifted from a consultative system to a more centralised process in the hands of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and his deputy Mohammed bin Salman (Karim, 2017). The emergence of MBS in Saudi royal hierarchy revealed a prince attempting to establish his own personal status along with the image of a Kingdom as a leading regional power (Salisbury, 2018). In other words, Saudi elites have concerns for status, and their keenness to increase status was evident in official documents. Since the advent of King Salman to power, MBS has associated his status to that of the Kingdom at international and regional levels (Nuruzzaman, 2018). In 2016, Mohammed bin Salman announced vision 2030, which states that:

The first pillar of our vision is our status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds. We recognize that Allah the Almighty has bestowed on our lands a gift more precious than oil. Our Kingdom is the Land of the Two Holy Mosques, the most sacred sites on earth, and the direction of the Kaaba (Qibla) to which more than a billion Muslims turn at prayer (Saudi vision 2030, 2016).

In this context, the developments in Yemen constituted a threat squandering Saudi ongoing efforts since 2011 to achieve a higher status in the region. The Houthi take-over of Sanaa triggered a reaction from the Saudi elite using extreme violence to assert the Kingdom's status as a regional power taking control of the region. In other words, the coup d'état in Yemen was an opportunity for Saudi elites to initiate a conflict and thereby alter collective beliefs about their standing in the region. This intent was particularly obvious in the disproportionate use of violence. The Saudi Kingdom used air power as a coercive strategy and a punishment mechanism against Yemeni people (Shield, 2018). Mohammed bin Salman was presented as the main orchestrator of the war on Yemen (Henderson, 2015), henceforth tying his own status within the Kingdom and career as a future king to victory in Yemen.

Despite the initial endeavour to heighten Saudi status through using military power in Yemen, the war has been a failure, which constituted further threat to Saudi aspired status.

The Kingdom suffered several setbacks on the ground. It was unable to achieve its goal of defeating the Houthis. Furthermore, the costs of the war have been significantly increasing, estimated at US\$ 100 million per day. While the Saudi Kingdom is launching the war through its air campaign, it became evident over time that this strategy will not defeat the Houthis or destabilise their foothold in Yemen. Instead, by focusing on the intense aerial campaign throughout the country, the Houthis' stronghold has strengthened and started retaliating back over Saudi borders. While the Houthis' relations with Iran before the war was very limited, and any evidence of Iran's support of the coup was dubious, there is no doubt that the war led the Houthis to move closer toward Iran and rely on its support (Juneau 2016; Reuters 2017). This relationship between the Houthis and Iran, despite its insignificance in changing the balance of power in Yemen, ignited Saudi status concerns, as growing Iranian influence in their backyard can be a sign of weakness to control yet another part of the region. This complicated situation led to an added layer of fear and status concerns for the Saudis. Withdrawing from Yemen without defeating the Houthis (supported by Iran) can cause reputational and material damage to the Kingdom's status and security, especially in its rivalry with Iran. In other words, status concerns here converged with concerns for security. Henceforth, the Kingdom remains embroiled in Yemen and refuses to end the war despite the lack of any prospect for victory especially that the Kingdom's status and that of its future leader Mohamed bin Salman became tied to victory in Yemen and fending off Iranian encroachment in the region.

The United Arab Emirates: Salvaging Newfound Status

The UAE is the second most active actor of the intervention in Yemen. The UAE's announced aims are to defeat extremism in Yemen, namely the AQAP, and fend off Iranian influence by defeating the Houthis. Beyond these official goals, the UAE's intervention in Yemen revealed this small state's aspirations in establishing itself as one of the major players of international trade through controlling ports in the Red Sea and projecting its power toward the African continent (Fuller and D'Hauthuille, 2018). The status dissatisfaction theory sheds light on Emirati escalation and persistence in Yemen. For what precisely impelled the UAE to intervene in Yemen — and later escalate its commitment—one must go back to the UAE's history of state formation, which reveal the sheikhdom's status concerns. The 2011 Arab uprisings appear to be a 'status altering event', as the UAE seized the opportunity to change

the beliefs about its standing in the regional hierarchy. As status dissatisfaction theory predicts, the UAE sought opportunities to use its military power in an effort to alter public beliefs about where it stands in the regional hierarchy. As the intervention tied the UAE's status and that of its leadership to the success in using military means at the regional level, withdrawal from the Yemen could pose damages to its achieved and aspired status. This damage can be illustrated by the partial withdrawal of the UAE from Yemen in early July 2019. As Emirati forces partially withdrew for 'strategic redeployment', international and Arab media accused the UAE for evading its responsibility and escaping the consequences after having destroyed and created chaos in Yemen (Alalam TV, 2019; Al-Bakiri, 2019). In response, UAE officials promptly insisted in several international outlets that the withdrawal is only 'partial' and that their commitment to Yemen remains (Wintour and McKernan, 2019).

The UAE, a small state established in 1971, has survived despite initial expectations of its quick demise. A quick review of UAE foreign policy in the three decades following its establishment showed that the leaders of this small states had concerns for status. The UAE's strategy in achieving higher status was twofold. The first dimension was based on diplomatic immersion into the international system through pursuing peaceful settlements of disputes involving neighbouring countries and coordination of policies with other states in addressing Arab issues, what Al-Mashat (2008) calls 'the politics of constructive engagement'. This policy of engagement was evident when Sheikh Zayed, the founder of the country, preferred dialogue with Iran over the three occupied islands, the Tunbs and Abu Mousa. Although Iran was perceived as the most serious threat, the UAE chose to deal with the issue through international courts and the United Nations without direct confrontation with Iran. The second dimension was based on a complex aid programme, which allowed this small country to construct an image of financial generosity at regional and international levels (Almezaini, 2012; Heard-Bey, 2004: 380–5). These policies were successful in building up Emirati self-confidence and international standing.

Official government documents equally expressed status concerns for this small state since the early days of its formation. The 1971 constitution expressed an initially modest self-image and status:

Whereas it is our desire and the desire of the people of our Emirates to establish a Union between these Emirates, to promote a better life, more enduring stability and a higher international status for the Emirates and their people; Desiring to create closer links between the Arab Emirates in the form of an independent, sovereign, federal state, capable of protecting its existence and the existence of its members, in cooperation with the sister Arab states and with all other friendly states which are members of the United Nations Organisation and members of the family of nations in general, on a basis of mutual respect and reciprocal interests and advantage (Preamble, UAE Constitution).

This strategy of building a self-image through financial generosity and political moderation in regional affairs was accompanied by efforts to foster a distinct identity for the state. National identity construction revolved around the return to the indigenous roots of culture and religion. This was translated into the Islamisation of laws since 1978 and increased adherence to Islamic credentials. Returning to Islam became a mean to regain Emirati true identity along a gradual increase towards cultural authenticity based on heritage and tradition (Ledstrup, 2018). The government has, henceforth, invested in heritage revival policies to promote traditional and Emirati grass-root values (Lawson and al-Naboodah, 2012).

As the state survived and its identity evolved over time, the UAE has aspired to hold a higher status in the region. While the UAE was initially aiming at creating an international image that would guarantee national survival, the 2011 Arab uprisings provided the UAE with new opportunities to play an assertive role in regional affairs. With the decline of traditional centres of powers in the Middle East, the UAE seized this opportunity and undertook 'status-altering events' to capture the attention of regional and international audiences. Following the 2011 uprisings, the UAE relied on its financial resources and used its aid programme as an interventionist strategy to shape transitions in the region (Young, 2017). Furthermore, it started adopting military means to achieve its foreign policy goals. In 2011, the UAE participated in the Peninsula Shield operation in Bahrain, and it was the second Arab country after Qatar to participate in the NATO operation in Libya. At the domestic level, this assertive foreign policy has been paralleled with a policy aiming at enhancing Emirati national identity through a military lens by introducing conscription for male nationals in 2013, fostering the conception martyrdom in public discourses, and celebrating National day through military demonstrations, which all points to the rise of Emirati 'militarised nationalism' (Ardemagni,

2019a, 2019b). These tendencies were accompanied by a steep rise in defence spending and weapon procurement after 2011 to enable the UAE to pursue its agenda in altering collective beliefs about its standing in regional affairs (Wezeman and Kuimova, 2019).

This pursuit of higher status was evident in the UAE vision 2021 (published in 2014), which illustrates Emirati self-confidence in playing a leading role in the region. This newfound status was expressed as follow: 'The UAE's international standing will continue to grow as its success highlights its prestige as a regional and international role model, developing sectors of excellence and national champions ... the UAE will enhance its pivotal role as a regional business hub whose essential infrastructure and institutions provide a gateway linking our neighbourhood to the world, serving as a role model for the region' (UAE Government, 2014). In the vision 2021, the UAE presents itself as a 'role model' in the region for combining adherence to tradition while achieving economic and political success in an era of globalisation. The government emphasises the country's standing as 'a model for an open society based on its historic roots, belief, and heritage' (Pinto, 2014, p. 239). In addition, the UAE Vision 2021 document shapes the definition of UAE national identity around these values. The document defines an Emirati as an individual who has strong family ties, adheres to Islamic values, and upholds tradition. In the meantime, the UAE presents itself to the international community as a reliable and responsible partner for security and stability in the Middle East, by using its participation in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2002 as an example (Mason, 2018, pp. 102–3; Pinto, 2014, pp. 214–2).

In 2015, this newfound Emirati status in the region aligned with Saudi Arabia's neighbourhood policy of greater assertiveness under King Salman. The UAE framed their effort in Yemen, in line with the Saudi agenda, as an attempt to prevent Iranian influence in Yemen through their Houthi ally while fighting Islamic extremism promoted by the AQAP. While their agenda is officially congruent with that of Saudi Arabia, it seems that the UAE has developed its own agenda in Yemen in pursuit of higher standing in regional affairs. The UAE increasingly supported different local militias, tribes and security forces in the south of Yemen. Such focus on the south of Yemen illustrates the UAE's agenda to establish itself as a regional player around the coast of the Red Sea and the corridor of the Horn of Africa. The UAE has consolidated its nascent East African naval presence in Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somaliland. UAE military presence on the Yemeni island of Socotra, while controlling the port

of Mukalla in the south of Yemen, contributes to this Emirati aspiration to control the vital Bab al-Mandab waterway linking the Red Sea with the Arabian Sea (Cafiero, 2019).

Emirati assertiveness at the regional level was constantly tied to the image of Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), crown prince of Abu Dhabi, as the main orchestrator behind the UAE's assertiveness in regional politics. At the beginning of the war, MBZ stated that 'our only option is victory in Yemen' (Skynews Arabic, 2019). State-led media constantly depicted him as the leader who established a leading status for the UAE, and newspaper headlines constantly depicted his endeavour in Yemen as heroic. In an opinion article, a journalist described MBZ as 'the man of achievements' and narrated his endeavor as follows:

Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed could have spared his country all these regional instabilities while focusing on building the civilization of the UAE, but Sheikh Zayed with his vision instilled in his sons the values of compassion ... therefore, the UAE participated with its sister Saudi Arabia in the decisive storm to salvage Yemen and its people for the sectarian cleansing. As Abdullah bin Zayed the foreign minister stated, 'we cannot enjoy stability inside while fire is around us' (Al-Bashari, 2018).

As the war started, costs for the UAE increased. In September 2015, 45 Emirati soldiers were killed in combat, which was considered the highest number of combat casualties since the federation was founded in 1971 (AP, 2015). This number of casualties only kept increasing since then. In June 2016, the UAE Armed Forces suffered two separate fatal aircraft crashes. Two days later, Minister of state for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash declared that 'the war in Yemen is over', thereby announcing that the UAE has completed its mission in Yemen and is withdrawing. MBZ announced on Twitter: 'war is over for our troops; we're monitoring political arrangements, empowering Yemenis in liberated areas' (Al-Sakkaf, 2016). These statements were quickly withdrawn, and the UAE instead escalated its commitment. The domestic costs of the war increased tensions among the different emirates that form this small federal state, illustrated in resentments over Abu Dhabi's leadership of the UAE's decision to intervene in the Yemen war. In July 2018, the prince, Sheikh Rashid bin Hamad al-Sharqi, son of the emir of Al-Fujayrah, one of the small emirates that form the UAE, has defected to Qatar and provided a glimpse into this tension (Kirkpatrick, 2018). In addition to these domestic costs, the UAE has been challenged in Yemen. The Yemeni government, the

main Saudi ally and considered to be at the heart of the legitimacy of this intervention, has appealed to end the alliance with the UAE considering it to be a neo-colonial power in Yemen (*Middle East Monitor*, 2019), especially after it has taken control over Socotra island and its plan to transform it into a permanent military base. Furthermore, constant protests from Yemeni people in the South challenged the UAE presence. At the international level, the UAE's image has suffered due to accusation of war crimes in Yemen.

Conclusion

Status research has largely focused on great powers and often neglected status dynamics at regional levels. This article contributes to understanding status dynamics at the regional level with a particular focus on the puzzle of escalation in failing wars. The article argues that when leaders engage their status and tie it to victory in the war, the value of status is increasing, and actors are willing to extend their resources to salvage their status when their war effort is failing. This argument was illustrated through the cases of Saudi and Emirati persistence in the Yemen war despite failure, mounting costs, and lack of prospect for victory. While both Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced that their agenda is to defeat the Houthis, prevent Iranian encroachment in Yemen, and reinstall the control of the Hadi government in Yemen, their status and that of their leaders was engaged and tied to 'victory' in Yemen. Both Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed saw in the Yemen war an opportunity to establish their own status as assertive leaders and alter collective beliefs at regional and international levels about the status of their own countries as leading players in the post-2011 Arab order. While Saudi Kingdom is showing intent on achieving the status of a 'regional power' in the Middle East, the UAE has broader agenda of diffusing power and expanding its economic power globally. Both states have significantly increased their military spending and sought opportunities to deploy it through military interventions in Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen. Saudi and Emirati leaders' concern for status led them to extend resources and expenditures to increase and save their status despite failure in Yemen. The recent attempt at Emirati withdrawal illustrates these dynamics. As the UAE attempted to reduce its involvement in Yemen in July 2019, media outlets diffused a narrative that the UAE is withdrawing due to failure. Following public shaming and criticism, the UAE very promptly insisted that these actions are mere 'redeployment' and it will remain involved in Yemen. Status dynamics provide a crucial lens to examine these shifts in Middle East

international relations. Beyond rationalist explanations that predominate our understanding of conflicts in the region, symbolic dimensions, such as status, have detrimental effect on conflict initiation as well as the prospects for war termination and conflict resolution in the region.

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