

# ANALYZING IN TERMS OF GEOPOLITICAL AND POLITICAL ECONOMY ON MIDDLE EAST POLICY: IN THE CONTEXT OF IRAN'S YEMEN POLICY

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## **Abstract**

In this article, Iran's military and political activities in Yemen, which has undergone a major change and transformation process after 2004, will be analyzed. With the analysis to be made here, the political and military activities of Iran in the field of Yemen will be examined, and the importance of Yemen in Iran's foreign policy will be evaluated in terms of geopolitical and political economy. First, the network of relations between Iran and the Houthis, who are one of the most important political, military and social groups in Yemen, and the financial and military resources it transfers to the country through them will be specified. Then, the soft and hard power elements that Iran uses to expand its sphere of influence in Yemen will be discussed. Finally, the size of the economic relations between the two countries will be emphasized and after this geopolitical and political economy evaluation, the question of what kind and how big a profit Iran has made in the Yemen field will be answered.

**Keywords:** Political economy; terms of trade; terms of geopolitical, bilateral treaties; Middle East

## **1. Introduction**

Iran's policy of expanding its sphere of influence in Yemen has become more evident since 2011 (Juneau, 2016). The protests, which started in Yemen with the Arab Spring, spread to the whole country in a short time, and then a civil war began. Along with the civil war, the Tehran administration supported its historical ally Houthi groups with military and financial means and played an important role in capturing the capital Sana'a. Iran's support to the Houthi groups with its soft and hard power elements caused the regional countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, to get involved in the civil war in Yemen, and the country turned into a field of proxy wars. In this article, which will analyze the question of how much benefit Iran, which has entered into a struggle for influence in Yemen after countries such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, has gained from this proxy war, the issue will be evaluated in terms of geopolitical and political economy. First, the historical background of Iran's relations with the Houthis, its ally in Yemen, will be discussed, and what is the ideological motivation behind the interest of the Tehran administration in this country will be emphasized. Then, the soft and hard power elements that Iran has put in place to protect its geopolitical interests in Yemen will be discussed. Finally, by considering the political-economic relations between the two countries, the question of why Iran is a part of the proxy war in Yemen will be answered. As a result of all these evaluations, it will be revealed what kind of gain the Islamic regime is fighting for in Yemen.

## **2. Review of Literature**

Stating that the war in Yemen has turned into an Iran-Houthi partnership, Thomas Juneau argues that the Islamic regime has built an important sphere of influence in Yemen since 2015.

Emphasizing that Iran has an important share in the successes of the Houthi movement in Yemen, Juneau claims that while supporting the Houthis is an attractive policy for the Islamic regime, this attitude has resulted in Saudi Arabia being dragged into a costly war (Thomas Juneau, 2021). Emphasizing that non-state actors have gained significant power in the Middle East in recent years, Keyhan Barzegar states that since 2011, the Islamic Republic of Iran has seriously improved its relations with the Houthi groups, which have an important role in Yemen's domestic policy. Claiming that the Houthis describe themselves as a Shiite, anti-Israeli and anti-American group, Barzegar argues that this group adheres to the values and principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and receives a high level of political, diplomatic, military, and financial support from the Islamic regime (Keyhan Barzegar et al., 2016).

When Houthi rebels took control of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in September 2014, Arabian Gulf officials and Western experts claimed that Iran was aiming to export its revolutionary ideology to Yemen and establish a Shiite empire in the Middle East. In particular, the officials of the Gulf countries claimed that Iran did this by supporting, perhaps even controlling, the Shiite Houthis. When the Houthi administration reached a critical point for the region, Tehran was in the middle of negotiations to resolve the crisis surrounding its nuclear program. Dina Esfandiary argues that the resulting agreement helped ease the sanctions against Tehran, and states that this situation removes some obstacles to Iran's reintegration into the international community. Emphasizing that the negotiations between Iran and the Gulf States over Yemen brought Iran back to the fore as a regional power, Esfandiary states that this situation is effective in easing the isolation against Iran (Dina Esfandiary, et al, 2016). Since 2014, the Western media has portrayed the Houthi groups as an important pawn in Tehran's multifaceted geopolitical struggle against one of its main regional adversaries, Saudi Arabia. Alex Vatanka, who claims the opposite, argues that the Houthis have never been a complete pawn of the Iranian regime and that there is a network of relations based on mutual interests. Alex Vatanka, emphasizing that the Iran-Houthi partnership is demonized by the Saudis and other Gulf countries, states that Iran's investments and influence in Yemen increased as the Houthis consolidated their political and military power. It is emphasized that the Yemen project of the Tehran administration is largely a bargaining chip that they will use in their relations with Iran's biggest regional rival, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries (Alex Vatanka, 2020).

### **3. Method of Study**

In this study, Iran's relations with Yemen, which has undergone a great change and transformation after 2004, will be analyzed in terms of geopolitical and political economy. Most of Iran's relations with Yemen, which plays an important role in shaping its relations with the Gulf countries, primarily with Saudi Arabia, are shaped through Houthi groups. Iran's relations with the Houthi groups and the political and military support it provided to them played an important role in the capture of the capital Sana'a in 2014 by these groups and led to the start of the military operation called "Decisive Storm" by the Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia. This study aims to analyze how much benefit Iran gains from being involved in certain conflict areas in order to strengthen its sphere of influence in the Middle East, and what the political-economic nature of this interest is over Yemen. For this, first of all, will be discussed methodologically the historical relations that Iran has developed with the Houthi groups, which are the "strike force" in Yemen. Then, the geopolitical presence of Iran, which has strengthened its political and military bargaining power in Yemen through the Houthi groups, will be scrutinized, and the presence of

the Islamic regime in this geography with its hard and soft power elements will be scrutinized in all its dimensions. Later, an investigation will be conducted on whether there is a political economic interest behind the geopolitical ambitions of the Islamic regime in this region. For this, firstly, a research table will be presented by taking into account the economic parameters between the two countries. While the trade relations and foreign investment indicators between the two countries will be mentioned, it will also focus on the assumption that Iran prefers this region for unregistered commercial relations such as money laundering. Finally, in light of all these geopolitical and political economy parameters, the question of how much of an interest the Islamic regime has gained from Yemen and whether this interest is the geopolitical or political economy will be answered.

#### **4. Discussion and Result**

##### **4.1. Houthi Movement: One of Iran's "Long Arms"**

Having land borders with Saudi Arabia to the north and Oman to the east, Yemen is one of the least developed and poorest countries in the Middle East with a population of 29 million and an area of 527,970 km<sup>2</sup>. According to World Bank data, 24.3 million of the country's population are at risk of hunger and disease, and approximately 14.4 million are in need of urgent assistance.<sup>1</sup> Surrounded by the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea from the south and the Red Sea from the west, Yemen has become one of the competitive fields of regional countries in terms of geopolitics due to its control of the northeast coast of the Bab el Mandeb Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, where 8% of the world's oil is transported ( Shirzadnesheli,2020). Shiites make up 35-40% of Yemen's population, which has turned into a military and political arena where Iran and Saudi Arabia have proxy wars. Along with the geopolitical importance of Yemen, sectarian differences are also considered among the causes of the internal conflict environment.<sup>2</sup>

The Houthis in Yemen have maintained their relations with Iran since the first days of the revolution, and many names in the leadership such as Abdul Malik al-Houthi, the current leader of the Houthis, as well as his brother and the founder of the Believing Youth Movement ( Shabab al-Mumanin), Hussein al-Houthi, received training in the city of Qom after the Islamic Revolution. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, the Islamic regime took steps to attract Yemeni students to study at Iranian schools in cities such as Damascus and Beirut, especially in Tehran. In these years, Iran aimed to export its revolutionary model to this country by influencing the Shiite community here through the Houthis (Terril, 2014). With the support of the Yemeni government to Iraq in the Iraq-Iran war, Iran increased its soft power activities and followed policies to increase its activities in the city of Saada, which is the main center of the Houthis' ideological and territorial dominance. From 1979 until 2004, when the civil war broke out with the Houthis and the Yemeni central government, Iran did not have any serious military and financial support for Yemen's internal affairs, apart from soft power activities over the Shiite

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<sup>1</sup>The World Bank, "Yemen", <https://www.worldbank.org/>, (Accessed) <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/yemen/overview>, 22 April 2023

<sup>2</sup> IISS, "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East", <https://www.iiss.org/>, ( Accessed), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-03-ch-1-tehrans-strategic-intent#yemen>, 16 April 2023

factor.<sup>3</sup>

The Houthi Movement (officially called Ansar Allah), which is Iran's ally in the proxy wars in Yemen, started to take part in political activities with the proclamation of the Republic of Yemen in 1990. Shiites, who make up 35-40% of Yemen's population, define themselves as Zaydis. One of the important points to be made here is the fact that the Houthis do not represent all Yemeni Zaydis and not all Zaydis are members of the Houthi Movement ( Nasr, 2018). The Houthi Movement, which has physical and ideological activity in the northern part of the country, mainly in the city of Saada in Yemen, entered politics for the first time with the Hizb al-Haqq Party, which was founded in 1990 with the participation of influential Zaydi people ( Mousavian et al, 2016 ). In the country's first democratic elections after unification, Hussein al-Houthi was elected as a deputy, who later enabled the movement to expand in political, military, intellectual and social dimensions in 1993. Later, Al-Houthi founded the Believing Youth Movement and concentrated his activities here. After Al-Houthi was killed in the military operations carried out by the Yemeni armed forces against the Houthis in the city of Saada in 2004, the Yemeni civil war, started which continued intermittently until 2010.<sup>4</sup>

With the Arab Spring, Yemen has entered into an unstable process that is still ongoing. Demonstrations against President Abdullah Ali Saleh since 2011 spread to the whole country in a short time and Salih had to leave his seat to his deputy Mansur Al Hadi in 2012. However, these protests, in which the Houthis also participated, continued, and the Houthi militias surrounded the capital of the country, Sana'a, in 2014, and took control of the capital with an internal coup. Turning Yemen into a proxy war zone for regional countries, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia, started with the Houthis' capture of Sana'a. A group of Gulf and regional countries led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched a military operation with broad participation, which they called "Operation Decisive Storm", against the Iranian-backed Houthi expansion (Hokayem et al, 2016). This military operation, which aims to conclude in a short time, did not show the expected success except the withdrawal of the Houthis from the south, including the city of Aden, but caused the humanitarian crises in the country to reach serious dimensions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Hassan Al-Qadhi, "The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security" **Arabian Gulf Centre For Iranian Studies**, 2017, p.25.

<sup>4</sup> The RAND Corporation, "Could the Houthis Be the Next Hizballah ?", Santa Monica, RAND, 2020, p. 54-55.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group, "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East", **Crisis Group**, 2018, Report No: 184, p.18-19.

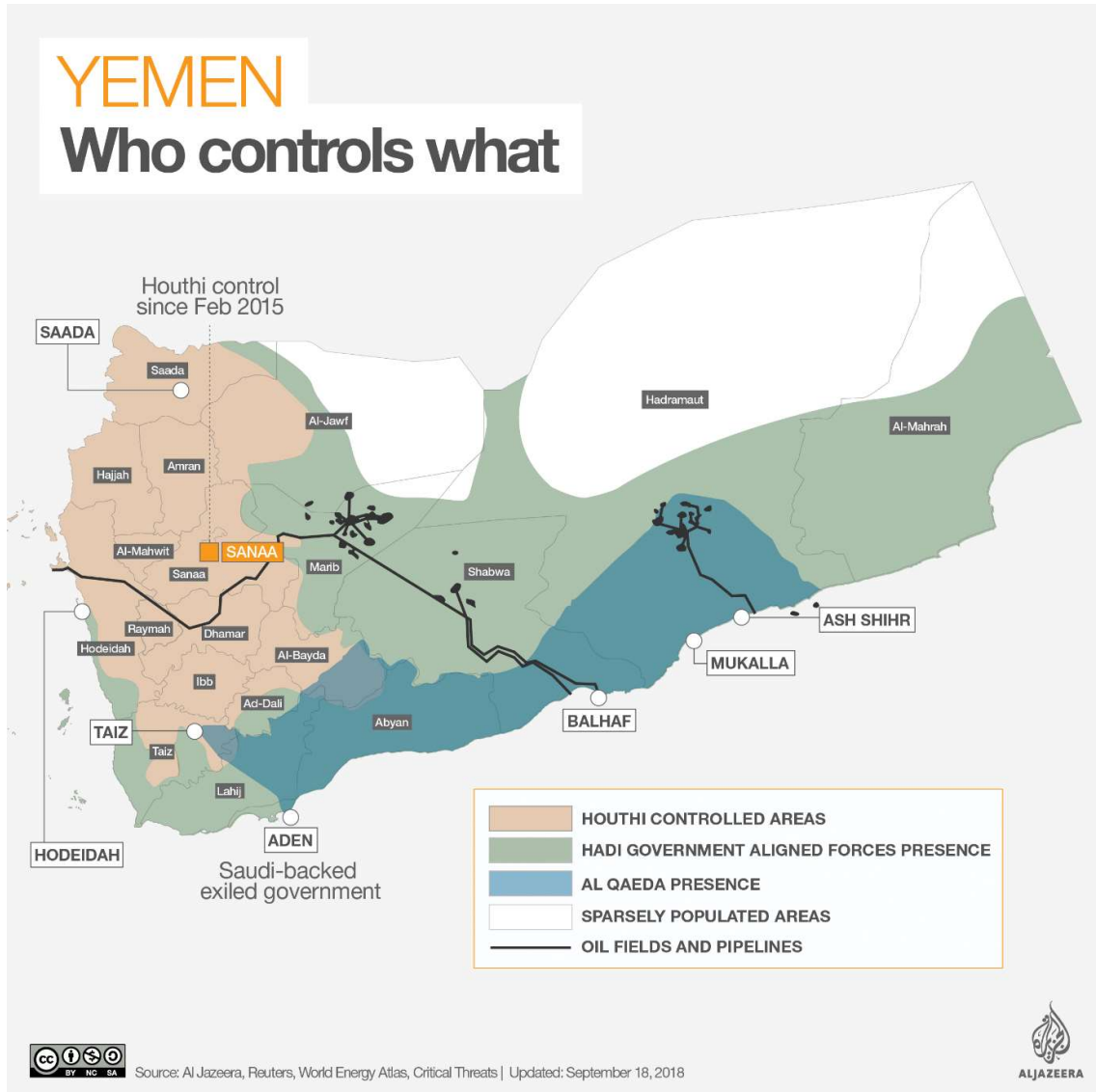


**Map 1:** Map, Showing the Foreign Sides of the Civil War in Yemen

**Source:** <https://line.17qq.com/>,

Iran’s influence began to increase during the period of military conflicts between the Houthis and the Yemeni government between 2004 and 2010 in Yemen. The clarification of this military and political role and its regional visibility started with the protests against the Abdullah Ali Saleh regime with the Arab Spring. Since this date, the chaotic situation in the country, the deadlock in the political transition, and the weakness of the government in dealing with its political, security, economic and social problems have increased the Iranian influence in Yemen through the Houthis (Seche,2015). In this context, Iran strengthened its sectarian and ideological alliance with the Houthi rebels and increased its political, military, financial, and media support for them. Iran expanded its relations not only with the Houthis but also with many former political leaders in South Yemen, such as Ali Salem Beidh, and provided money, media, weapons, and training support to political parties in this region. With all these hard and soft power methods, Iran aimed to increase its influence not only in the northern part of Yemen but also in the southern part.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Hassan Al-Qadhi, “The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security” , Ibid, p.26-27.



**Map 2:** Areas Controlled by Conflict Parties in Yemen

**Source:** <https://line.17qq.com/>

Iran signed a series of agreements with the Houthis, who took control of a significant part of the country after the capital Sana'a was captured by a domestic coup. According to these agreements, Iran promised to supply Yemen with petroleum products for one year, to establish power stations in provinces such as Aden, Hodeida, and Taiz, and to repair the power line between Marib and Sana'a. In addition, Iran promised to expand the port of Hodeida, set a line of credit to Yemen to meet its needs, send Iranian experts in all infrastructure areas to Yemen, and establish a direct air bridge to initiate daily air flights between the two countries. These agreements are considered as a historical moment in the process of transformation from marginal and close supporter to the announcement of Houthis as an ally by Iran. However, the "Operation Decisive Storm" launched by the Saudi Arabian-led military coalition against the Houthi rebels on March 26, 2015, deterred the practical implementation of these agreements and prevented the further penetration of Iranian political economy influence into Yemen.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.27.



# Saudi-led coalition against Yemeni rebels



Source: al-Arabiya

\*Exact numbers not available

G. Cabrera, 26/3/2015

REUTERS

**Map 3:** Military Support Provided by States Participating in the “Operation Decisive Storm” Led by Saudi Arabia.

**Source:** <https://line.17qq.com/>

## 4.2. Iran’s Priority Goals

Iran's interests and goals towards Yemen can be grouped under four general headings. The first of these is that Yemen has an important place in Iran's policy of expanding its sphere of influence in the Middle East region. Iran believes it can greatly increase its influence and dominance in the region by providing a close foothold in a key international strategic corridor, through its political and military support to consolidate its position at the apex of power in Yemen by allying with the Houthis ( Ricotta, 2018). Thus, Iran aims to control the traffic in the Gulf of Aden and Bab el Mandeb Strait, which connects the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal and is considered the main waterway of world oil, through the Houthis.<sup>8</sup>

The second interest and target is Iran’s desire to put pressure on the regional Gulf states, primarily Saudi Arabia, and to limit their influence. To this end, Iran has set its relations with the Houthis as a military and political goal in order to weaken Yemen’s ties with its neighbours and to limit the influence of the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia. This strategic goal is seen as a much more important goal than pushing Yemen into more conflict, chaos, and fragmentation for Iran. With these tensions, the theocratic regime, which aims to weaken the influence and attention of the Gulf countries in regions such as Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, which are in the Iranian sphere of

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 31-32.

influence, aims to increase their bargaining power with these countries on regional issues.<sup>9</sup>

The third interest and goal intended for Yemen are to oppose and resist US pressure on Iran. Iran aims to expand its influence and intervention area in strategically important regions such as Yemen by adopting active and aggressive foreign policies. Thus, Iran is trying to promote its “vital interests” to the USA and ensure that it is accepted as an important regional actor.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth and final goal is to show the legitimacy and power of the regime to the domestic and foreign public opinion through military and political interventions against the regions in its sphere of influence, which are a reflection of Iran’s general foreign policy. It is aimed to weaken the socio-economic problems, pressures and political legitimacy debates within the regime with political and military interventions in countries where the central authority is weak such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Yemen.<sup>11</sup>

#### **4.3. Iran’s Soft Power Elements in Yemen**

It is seen that Iran uses soft power tools including ideological, cultural, and propaganda activities and hard power tools including military methods simultaneously and effectively in order to achieve the above-mentioned goals for Yemen. Iran attaches great importance to soft power instruments to expand its influence and dominance in the Middle East region ( Ostovar, 2018). For this reason, it makes an intense effort to influence Shiite communities in the region and make them a part of Iran's regional projects by using Shiism and the media. In terms of the Islamic regime, these policies have led to Iran’s effective political presence in regions with large Shiite communities such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen.<sup>12</sup>

Since the 1980s, Iran has started to develop its relations with the Zaydi community in Yemen through Shiism. The Iranian regime, which has established close contacts with the leading cadres of the Zaydi community and the Houthi family, such as Mohammed Azlan, Abdulkarim Jadban, Hussein al-Houthi, Bedr al-Houthi, Abdul Malik Houthi, has succeeded in attracting especially the Houthi family to its side. From the first years of the revolution, the Houthis were influenced by the ideology of the revolution and used its slogans in their political struggles ( Zweiri, 2016). The Iranian regime gives scholarships to thousands of students belonging to the Houthi movement to receive religious education in cities such as Qom and Mashhad. These scholarships are provided by the Iranian embassy in Yemen. In addition, Iran provides scholarships to thousands of Zaidi students in provinces such as Sa’ada and Sana to study in schools where religious education based on the idea of the Twelve Shia Imams is given. It is stated that these Houthi youth, who went to Iran to receive education, were subjected to special programs in camps in cities such as Shiraz, Mashhad and Isfahan under the control of the Revolutionary Guards. Iran provides financial support not only to the Houthi Movement but also to other political parties, non-governmental organizations and associations founded by the Zaydis.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 32-33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Maysaa Shuja, "Iran and Houthis: Between political alliances and sectarian tensions", <https://www.opendemocracy.net>, 15 June 2017 ( Accessed ), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/iran-and-houthis-between-political-alliances-and-sectaria/>, 6 May 2021

<sup>13</sup> The RAND Corporation, “**Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon**”, Santa Monica, RAND, 2010, p. 81-82.



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| <i>The Supreme Dar Al Uloom, Saada</i>        | <i>The Dahyan Center, Saada</i>                            |
| <i>The Ja'fariyah School, Aden</i>            | <i>The Dar Al-Zahraa Cultural Media Foundation, Sana'a</i> |
| <i>The Badr Alami Center, Sana'a</i>          | <i>The Yemeni Islamic Shiite Council, Taiz</i>             |
| <i>The Center for Islamic Studies, Sana'a</i> | <i>The Dar Ahbab Ahl Al Bait, Taiz</i>                     |
| <i>The Al Hadi School, Saada</i>              | <i>Naba'a Charitable Foundation, Jawf</i>                  |
| <i>The Thaqlin Center, Sana'a</i>             | <i>Ali Asghar Ibn Hussain Society, Jawf</i>                |

**Table 1:** List of Religious Schools and Foundations Supported by Iran in Yemen

**Source:** Al-Qadhī, “ **The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security**”, p.39-40.

Iran has directly or indirectly contributed to the establishment of many religious institutes and foundations through the Houthis to spread the Twelve Imams of Shiism among the Zaydis in Yemen. The media field is another soft power tool of Iran in Yemen. The Islamic regime is able to propagate its activities in Yemen with a huge media chain it has established (Monshipouri,2013). This media chain includes TV channels, newspapers, and websites. In addition, influential media organs of Iran such as Al -Alam TV in Arabic, The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and Press TV in English, and Sahar TV in multi-lingual support the propaganda of the Islamic regime against regional countries.<sup>14</sup>

| <b>TV Channels</b>      | <b>Newspapers</b> | <b>Websites</b>         |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Mayadeen Maserah</i> | <i>Al-Masar,</i>  | <i>Ansarullah</i>       |
| <i>Sahat</i>            | <i>Demokrati</i>  | <i>Ofoq News</i>        |
| <i>Aden Live</i>        | <i>Haqeeqah</i>   | <i>Democrat Tribune</i> |
|                         | <i>Balagh</i>     |                         |
|                         | <i>Haweyah</i>    |                         |
|                         | <i>Ummah</i>      |                         |
|                         | <i>Sawt Shura</i> |                         |
|                         | <i>Share</i>      |                         |
|                         | <i>Oulah</i>      |                         |

**Table 2:** List of TV Channels, Newspapers and Internet Sites Supported by Iran in Yemen

**Source:** Al-Qadhī, “ **The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security**”, p.41.

<sup>14</sup> Mohammad Hassan Al-Qadhī, “**The Iranian Role in Yemen and its Implications on the Regional Security**” Ibid., p.41-42.

#### 4.4. Iran's Hard Power Elements in Yemen

Procurement of weapons, military consultancy, and training for the Houthi groups are among the hard power tools used by Iran in Yemen. This support seems to have increased noticeably since 2011 and peaked when the Houthi militias captured the capital Sana'a in 2014. It is known that this support of Iran played a major role in the Houthi militia's reaching the military capacity to clash with the legitimate government forces and seize a significant part of the country, including the capital (Vatanka, 2020). Iran delivers some of this military and logistical support to its Houthi allies through its regional allies, primarily Hezbollah, either through maritime smuggling operations from Iranian ports or indirectly via the Horn of Africa.<sup>15</sup> Hundreds of weapons and types of explosives were detected in Yemeni territorial waters, sent to the Houthi militia on the Iranian ship "Jeehan 1", which was stopped by the US Navy and the Yemeni Coast Guard in January 2013. Yemeni authorities announced that another Iranian weapon ship called "Jeehan 2" was seized on Sawabi Island, near Bab el Mandeb, while loading weapons onto a Yemeni fishing boat to be transferred to the Houthi militias on March 7, 2013.<sup>16</sup>

Iranian-origin shipping ships captured by the Australian Navy in February, the French Navy in March, the US Navy in April, and the Yemeni government forces in July are seen as other examples of the Islamic regime's military support to the Houthis. On the other hand, Iran shows that it is an important actor in the proxy war in this region, with methods such as training Houthi militants by the Revolutionary Guards, using Hezbollah members in critical operations together with the Houthis, and sending Afghan militants to Yemen.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.5. Political Economic Factor

It is estimated that Iran's spending on Yemen is between 50-60 million dollars annually. This expenditure is seen as a very low-cost figure when compared to the monthly expenditures of 5-6 billion dollars in Yemen by Saudi Arabia, the leading country of "Operation Decisive Storm".<sup>18</sup> When we look at the economic-political relations between Iran and Yemen, it is seen that both countries do not have a significant position in each other's export/import indices (Ulrichsen, 2016).

While Iran's exports to Yemen were around 8 million dollars in 2017, this figure decreased to 1 million in 2018. When we look at the import figures of Iran from Yemen, it is seen that an import of only 1 million dollars was realized in 2018.<sup>19</sup>

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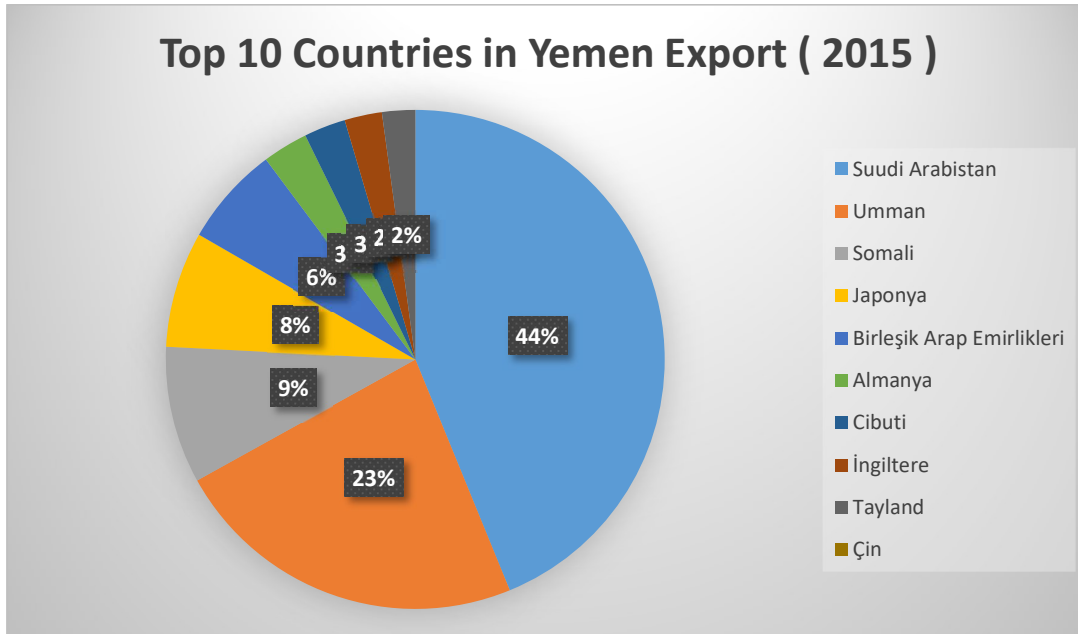
<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> Details about the types and numbers of Iranian weapons seized in Jeehan ship", <https://almasdaronline.com/>, 6 February 2013 (Accessed), <https://almasdaronline.com/article/41340>

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Saul, Parisa Hafezi, Michael Georgy, "Exclusive: Iran steps up support for Houthis in Yemen's war - sources", <https://www.reuters.com/>, March 21 2017 (Accessed), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis-idUSKBN16S22R>, 8 May 2021

<sup>18</sup> Gerald M. Feierstein, "What are the prospects for peace in war-torn Yemen? How important is Iran to the peace process?", <https://www.mei.edu/>, December 6, 2018 (Accessed), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-role-yemen-and-prospects-peace>, 8 May 2021

<sup>19</sup>International Trade Center, "Iran", <https://www.intracen.org/>, (Accessed), <https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>, 8 May 2021



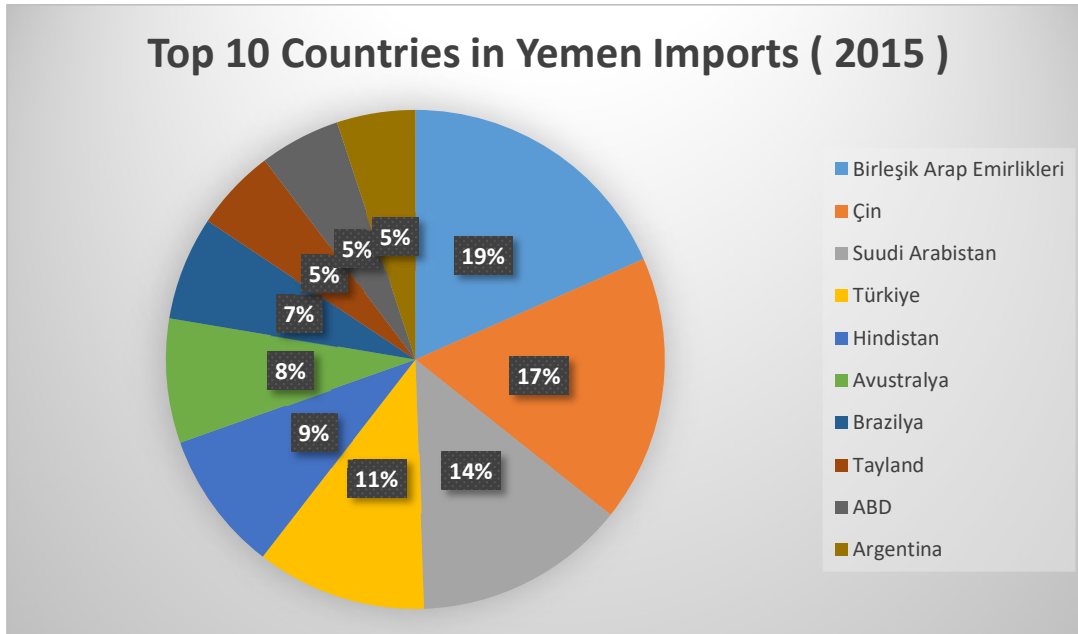
**Graph 1:** List of Top 10 Countries in Yemen Exports

**Source:** International Trade Center, <https://www.trademap.org/>

As can be seen from the chart above, it is seen that Iran is not in the top 10 in the Yemen export list. The Yemeni civil war has also caused a serious decline in the export/import balance of the country. Yemen's foreign trade, whose average export was 10 billion dollars before the civil war, decreased to 7 billion dollars in 2013, 2.5 billion dollars in 2014, and to 500 million dollars in 2015 when the war reached its peak. The civil war and political instability also affected the import balance of the country, and the country's imports, which was 12 billion dollars before the war, decreased to 6.5 billion dollars in 2015.<sup>20</sup> Currently, it is estimated that the country's exports are 24 million dollars and imports are 5 million dollars.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> International Trade Center, "Iran", <https://www.intracen.org/>, (Accessed), 9 May 2021

<sup>21</sup>World Integrated Trade Solution, " Yemen" <https://wits.worldbank.org/>, (Accessed), <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/YEM/textview>, 11 May 2021



**Graph 2:** List of Top 10 Countries in Yemen Imports

**Source:** International Trade Center, <https://www.trademap.org/>

## 5. Findings

In order to achieve its goals to expand Iran's sphere of influence, it simultaneously and effectively uses soft power tools including ideological, cultural, and propaganda activities, and hard power tools including military methods in Yemen. After the analysis, when we look at the network of relations with Yemen, which was chosen as an example in this study, it has been determined that the geopolitical motives are decisive in the relations of the theocratic regime with this field. It has been seen that Yemen, which is one of the areas where the Tehran administration is actively involved in political, military, and cultural terms in order to expand its sphere of influence and gain geopolitical dominance in the Middle East, has an important role in shaping the relations of the Islamic regime with the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia. Within the framework of this importance, Iran's political and military support for the Houthi groups played an important role in the capture of the capital Sana'a in 2014 by these groups and led to the start of the military operation called "Decisive Storm" by the Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia. Despite the fact that Yemen, which is one of the areas where proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia are experienced in the most severe way today, does not make any positive contribution to the Islamic regime in terms of political economy, it has been determined that geopolitical and ideological factors are the main factors in the determination of this policy. In this sense, it is not possible to say that Yemen, which has an annual contribution of 1-2 million dollars in Iran's exports in 2022, is of political economy importance to Iran. As a result of the evaluations, it has been determined that the most important motivation source of Iran's foreign policy implementation towards Yemen is geopolitical ambitions. As a result of the analysis of the Yemeni field, we have come across the fact that when compared to the financial resources that Iran transferred to Syria and Lebanon, Yemen is the region where it has gained more geopolitical superiority for the Tehran administration with less economic cost.

## 6. Conclusion

Eventually, when we look at the export/import figures between the two countries and Iran's general political economy indicators, it is not possible to say that Yemen is an important country for Iran in terms of political economy. As a result of the above evaluations, we can say that the most important motivation source for Iran's foreign policy preference towards Yemen is geopolitical interests. Chief among these geopolitical interests is the desire to expand the sphere of influence in the Middle East, to pressure the regional Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, and to limit their influence. In addition, objectives such as opposing and resisting the pressures of the USA against Iran and showing the legitimacy and power of the regime to the domestic and foreign public opinion through military and political interventions intended for the regions in its sphere of influence are considered among the primary objectives. Compared to the financial resources that Iran transferred to Syria and Lebanon, it is seen that Yemen gains more geopolitical superiority for Iran with less economic cost and is a geostrategically important region.

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