

Iran's Indirect Influence in Yemen: Non-State Actors and the Construction of Threat Perceptions in Regional Security Dynamics

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Abstract. The idea of Iran's role in Yemen have generally fallen into two perspectives: one that sees the Houthis as an Iranian proxy in Iran's hands and the other that Iran is purely reactive and opportunistic. The real question for analysis is not where Iran controls the Houthis but how its ambiguous engagement is having a security effect on the country beyond what is on the ground. In this article we address this question rigorously with neorealism, constructivism, and regional security complex theory. The study employs a qualitative explanatory case study design based exclusively on documentary analysis, drawing on peer-reviewed academic literature, official government documents, policy reports and successive United Nations Panel of Experts reports on Yemen. Three findings emerge: first, Iran's approach to Yemen began as an extension of existing indirect involvement to a new situation, rather than as a strategic project. Second, the relationship between Iran and the Houthi movement is better understood as one of strategic support and limited autonomy rather than full operational control. Third, the strategic aspect of Iran's engagement with Yemen is not only about the support it provides but also about the perception of threat that regional actors have of Iranian behavior. The findings carry practical implications for conflict mediation efforts in the region, suggesting that diplomatic initiatives focused exclusively on Iran's material behavior are unlikely to succeed without simultaneously addressing the threat perception frameworks that drive regional escalatory responses.

Keywords Iran; non-state actors; regional security; threat perceptions; Yemen

Introduction

There are three concepts anchor this study: Indirect influence refers to a state's capacity to shape the behavior of foreign actors and alter regional security environments through intermediaries rather than through direct military engagement (Byman 2018; Juneau 2016). Non-state actors are organized groups that operate across or within state borders without being formally part of a government, yet exercise significant political, military or ideological influence within conflict environments (Brandt, 2017). Threat perception denotes the process through which states interpret the capabilities and intentions of adversaries, a process shaped not only by material factors but also by historical experience, identity narratives, and strategic culture (Jervis 1976; Wendt 1999). In this study, these three concepts are understood as interacting variables: Iran's indirect influence operates through non-state actors, and the regional consequences of that influence are substantially determined by the threat perceptions it generates among adversarial states.

Few conflicts in the contemporary Middle East have attracted as much analytical disagreement as Yemen. Since the Houthi movement's seizure of the capital Sanaa in September 2014, and the subsequent Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015, Yemen has been described variously as a civil war, a proxy conflict, an Iranian strategic project, and a humanitarian catastrophe of external manufacture. Each of these framings reflects an important aspect of the conflict but not adequately explains the central puzzle underlying

the conflict's regional trajectory: how a country of limited intrinsic strategic value to Iran became a driver of one of the most significant escalatory cycles in the modern history of the Saudi- Iranian rivalry.

The dominant scholarly frame -proxy warfare- is analytically convenient but empirically contested. It implies a degree of Iranian command and control over the Houthis that the documentary record does not clearly support, while simultaneously obscuring the movement's deep domestic roots in Yemeni political life. At the same time, accounts that minimize Iranian involvement could not explain why Saudi Arabia treats developments in Yemen as an existential security concern or why the conflict has drawn in maritime powers, generated cross-border missile and drone warfare, and threatened vital global shipping lanes. If the mechanisms through which indirect influence generates these disproportionate consequences remain analytically unclear, policymakers and regional actors may continue to respond to symptoms, material Iranian support, rather than to the underlying drivers of escalation. Resulting in perpetuating cycles of conflict that none of the principal actors initially sought.

This article adopts an alternative perspective: rather than asking whether Iran controls the Houthis, it asks how Iran's indirect engagement in Yemen -characterized by advisory relationships, arms supply, and ideological alignment rather than operational command -becomes strategically significant through the perceptions it creates among regional rivals. This reframing employs an integrated theoretical framework combining neorealism's structural analysis of why indirect engagement is a rational strategy with constructivism's account of how such engagement is interpreted through historically shaped threat perceptions situated within Buzan and Wæver's (2003) Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to capture the structural context in which these dynamics unfold.

This constitute a clear theoretical and empirical gap: existing scholarship has not adequately explained the mechanisms through which materially limited indirect influence generates perception-amplified strategic consequences of regional scale. This gap is both theoretical: no integrated framework combining neorealism, constructivism, and RSCT has been applied to the Yemen case- and empirical: the interaction between Iranian engagement, threat construction, and regional escalation has not been systematically traced through the documentary record.

This study addresses that gap and makes three contributions to existing knowledge. First, it advances the bounded-autonomy model as a more empirically accurate alternative to the proxy warfare framework. Second, it establishes threat perception as a causally independent variable in regional security dynamics. Third, it demonstrates the explanatory value of integrating neorealism, constructivism, and RSCT as complementary rather than competing frameworks for analysing indirect influence in the Middle East.

The study examines how Iran's engagement developed within the context of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The study adopts three arguments: first, Iran's engagement in Yemen represents a gradual extension of long-established indirect influence practices rather than a deliberately designed long-term strategy. Second, the relationship between Iran and the Houthi movement is more accurately characterized by significant strategic support and bounded autonomy than by comprehensive operational control. Third, the strategic consequences of Iran's engagement derived not only from its material support but also from the threat perceptions through which regional actors interpret Iranian behavior. Hence, the article argues that Yemen is better understood as a theater of perception-driven regional rivalry than as a proxy conflict. Which provides a more comprehensive explanation of how indirect influence shapes regional security dynamics in the Middle East.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Iran's Yemen engagement clusters around three broad positions. The first and dominant strand interprets Iranian involvement through the lens of proxy warfare, documenting weapons transfer and advisory relationships as evidence of a structured patron-client relationship (Byman 2018; Juneau 2016; Salisbury 2015; Ulrichsen 2018). However, more recent scholarship has challenged this position by demonstrating that Iran's inability to fully control Houthi strategic decisions represents a fundamental constraint on the proxy warfare model (Juneau 2021; Lons & Petrini 2025).

A second strand foregrounds Yemeni political agency, tracing the Houthi movement's origins to decades of domestic marginalization, including the suppression of Zaidi identity, economic exclusion, and six military campaigns between 2004 and 2010. Suggesting that Iran capitalized on a domestically constituted force rather than constructing one (Brandt 2017; Philips 2017; Durac 2019; Dadparvar & Patro 2025).

A third strand situates the conflict within the structural logic of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, framing Yemen as valuable to Iran precisely because it imposes costs on Saudi Arabia without requiring large Iranian investment (Gause 2014; Darwich 2019; Gul et al. 2021). Nevertheless, none of these strands adequately explains why materially limited Iranian involvement consistently generates such large regional responses, a gap this study addresses.

This is where constructivist scholarship opens an important analytical space. Drawing on Wendt's (1999) account of how state identities and shared inter subjective meaning shape international behavior, and on Buzan and Wæver's (2003) theorization of how regional security complexes are constituted through patterns of amity and enmity, constructivist scholars argue that Saudi responses to Iranian engagement in Yemen cannot be derived from material calculations alone. They are mediated by threat perceptions shaped by the decades -long history of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, by sectarian identity narratives that frame the conflict in civilizational terms, and by elite political communication that amplifies Iranian agency and intent. Recent scholarship has reinforced this position, demonstrating that both Saudi Arabia and Iran deploy regional confrontation as a mechanism to manage internal ontological insecurities tied to regime narratives, sectarian identity, and civilizational legitimacy (Albarasneh 2025). This literature is quite relevant but often descriptive: it identifies the role of perceptions without fully tracing the mechanisms through which those perceptions produce escalatory outcomes. A notable recent contribution is Divsallar's (2023) analysis of militarization of Iran's threat perception of Saudi Arabia, which demonstrates that adversarial threat construction operates on both sides of the rivalry simultaneously. However, this work focuses primarily on the Iranian side and does not explain how the interaction between competing threat perceptions in the Yemen context produces region-wide escalatory dynamics.

Taken together, these four strands reveal a cumulative blind spot in the existing literature. None of the existing literature adequately explains how indirect influence, ambiguous deniable, materially limited, generates strategic consequences that are both large in scale and perception-influenced in nature. To do so, requires an integrated framework that preserves the structural logic of why indirect engagement is a rational Iranian strategy while explaining why it produces escalatory regional effects that exceed its material footprint. To address this gap, the study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining three complementary perspectives. Neorealism explains why Iran relies on indirect engagement through non-state actors within anarchic regional system where direct, confrontation with Saudi Arabia carries prohibitive risks (Waltz 1979). Constructivism explains why such engagement generates disproportionate regional responses- Saudi threat perceptions are constructed through decades of rivalry, sectarian identity narratives, and elite political discourse, rather than neutral capability assessment (Wendt 1999). Regional security Complex Theory provides the structural context explaining how local developments in Yemen rapidly acquire significance across the entire Middle East security complex (Buzan & Wæver 2003). Together, these three frameworks generate a unified analytical proposition: the strategic consequences of Iran's indirect engagement in Yemen reflect not just what Iran does, but what it is seen to be doing, and the gap between these two things is where this study's central argument is located.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative explanatory case study design to examine how Iran's indirect engagement in Yemen has influenced regional security dynamics from the perspective of threat perception and indirect influence. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to explain complex political processes, strategic interactions, and interpretive mechanisms that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone. The single-case design is justified by the distinctive characteristics of the Yemeni

conflict, where indirect external support, non-state actor autonomy, and regional security competition converge within a unique geopolitical setting.

The empirical basis of the study consists exclusively of documentary analysis. The documentary sources include peer-reviewed academic publications, official government statements, reports produced by international policy institutions such as the International Crisis group and Chatham House, publications of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), and successive reports of the United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen (S/2018/68;S/2019/83;S/2020/326;S/2023/833). These sources were selected because they provide the most comprehensive and independently verified evidence concerning Iran's material support to the Houthis, the evolution of the conflict, and its wider regional security implications.

The documentary sample comprises three categories of sources. The first consists of peer-reviewed academic literature published between 2003 and 2025, selected based on relevance to Iran's foreign policy, non-state actor dynamics, and regional security theory. The second consists of official documents and policy reports produced by established international institutions, including the International Crisis Group, Chatham House, SIPRI, and IISS, selected for their independent verification standards and policy relevance. The third consists of the United Nations Panel of Experts reports on Yemen (S/2018/68;S/2019/83;S/2020/326;S/2023/833), which constitute the most systematically verified empirical record of Iranian material involvement in the conflict available in the public domain.

Documents were collected through systematic searches of Google Scholar, JSTOR and institutional repositories, supplemented by direct access to UN Security Council documentation through the UN Digital Library. Sources were screened for credibility, independence, and thematic relevance prior to inclusion. To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, cross-document triangulation was employed by systematically comparing evidence across multiple independent source types. This ensures that key analytical claims were supported by convergent evidence from at least two independent sources, reducing the risk of source bias and strengthening the dependability of the findings.

The documentary evidence was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) organized around four interrelated themes derived from the research objectives and theoretical framework: (1) Iran's mechanisms of indirect engagement in Yemen; (2) the nature of the relationship between Iran and the Houthi movement; (3) the construction of Saudi threat perceptions and their influence on regional responses; and (4) the broader implications of the conflict for regional security dynamics. The coding process focused on identifying recurring patterns, areas of convergence and divergence across sources, and the relationship between empirical evidence and the study's theoretical propositions.

The Findings

Yemen's Peripheral-to-Relevant Trajectory in Iranian Strategic Thinking

A finding that is largely absent from the existing literature concerns the temporal and conditional nature of Yemen's strategic relevance to Iran. Documentary evidence in the broader scholarly literature consistently indicate that Yemen was not a longstanding Iranian foreign policy priority. Prior to the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, Iranian engagement in Yemen was episodic and limited-confined to low-level political contacts and modest material flows that were substantially smaller than Iranian investments in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria (Juneau 2016; Salisbury 2015). Yemen occupied a peripheral position in Iranian strategic thinking, lacking the ideological salience of Lebanon's Hezbollah or the geopolitical centrality of Iraq.

This peripheral position began to shift as regional situations were changed after the 2011 Arab Spring. The weakening of central state authority in the Middle East, the rise of the Houthis as a major territorial actor in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's increased strategic commitment to the country all enabled Iran to deploy its strategic tools to a new field. The documentary evidence indicates that Iran's engagement in Yemen has developed opportunistically as a response to changing regional dynamics and not in order to carry out a strategic plan based on its existing model, a conclusion that is consistent with Juneau's (2016) evaluation.

Iran's involvement with Yemen further grew after the Houthi takeover of Sanaa and Saudi military intervention - and the situation has worsened in the Yemen region.

Bounded Autonomy: Rethinking The Iran-Houthi Relationship

The second cluster of findings concerns the actual character of the relationship between Iran and the Houthi movement, a question that sits at the centre of the proxy warfare debate and on which the empirical record is both rich and frequently misread. The dominant characterization in Saudi official discourse, and significant portions of the academic literature, portrays the Houthis as Iranian proxies operating under Tehran's strategic direction. The documentary evidence warrants a more qualified assessment.

Reports of the United Nations Panel of Experts provide the most systematic and independently verified record of Iranian material involvement in the conflict. These reports document Iranian weapons of Iranian manufacture or design - including ballistic missiles, armed drones, anti-ship munitions, and explosive boat technology- present in Houthi arsenals, in quantities and configurations the Houthis could not have acquired or developed indigenously (United Nations Security Council 2018;2019;2020). Advisory and training relationships between IRGC Quds force personnel and Houthi military structures are similarly documented. This evidence confirms that Iran has provided the Houthis with substantial political, military, technical, and logistical support that has meaningfully enhanced the movement's operational effectiveness and strategic reach.

However, the same reports explicitly declined to establish a formal chain of command through which Iranian authorities direct Houthi military operations or determine the movement's political strategy. The United Nations Panel of Experts identifies Iranian support without concluding that it amounts to comprehensive operational control (United Nations Security Council 2018;2020). This distinction is essential when the scholarly literature on non-state actor partnerships further supports this qualification: the documentary record suggests that many of the Houthi movement's political decisions including positions in ceasefire negotiations, relations with Yemeni rival factions, and domestic governance arrangements - reflect local imperatives and tribal-political calculations that Iranian advisors can influence but cannot override. This interpretation is supported by Brandt (2017) and Phillips (2017).

The Construction of Threat and the Saudi Response

The third, and analytically most significant cluster of findings concerns the mechanisms through which Saudi Arabia and other regional actors construct and respond to Iranian engagement in Yemen. This is where the constructivist dimension of the theoretical framework provides its strongest explanatory power, demonstrating how perceptions of threat function as independent drivers of regional escalation regardless of the actual scale of Iranian involvement.

The documentary evidence and the broader scholarly literature indicate that Saudi threat perceptions regarding Iran and Yemen are not straightforwardly derived from capability assessments. Saudi officials' statements, policy documents, and elite political discourse consistently frame Iranian engagement in Yemen not as a limited in context-specific intervention but as one element of a broader Iranian regional strategy aimed at establishing a Crescent of influence extending from Tehran through Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut to Sanaa (Gause 2014; Darwich 2019). Within this interpretive framework, individual Iranian actions in Yemen are processed not as discrete events, requiring case-specific evaluation but as confirmatory data points for a pre-established threat narrative.

The literature suggests that ambiguity surrounding Iranian behaviour is frequently interpreted through a worst-case framework in Saudi strategic discourse. This pattern corresponds closely to what Darwich (2019) describes as the 'worst-case reading culture' that characterizes the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. This mechanism means that evidence of Iranian weapons transfers or technical assistance is interpreted not merely as material support, but as an indicator of direct Iranian strategic direction-an inferential leap that the United Nations Panel of Experts documentation explicitly declines to make but that Saudi strategic discourse routinely performs. Jervis's (1976) foundational work on misperception and strategic interaction provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how such interpretive frameworks once established, are self-reinforcing:

evidence consistent with the existing threat image is absorbed as confirmation, while disconfirming evidence tends to be discounted or reinterpreted.

The consequences for regional security are substantial and empirically traceable. Saudi Arabia's decision to lead a military coalition in Yemen in March 2015 was driven not primarily by evidence of Iranian operational command but by the perception that continued Houthi expansion under Iranian support would establish a durable Iranian strategic presence on Saudi Arabia's southern border.

Reciprocal Dynamics and the Regionalization of the Conflict

The fourth cluster of findings addresses the feedback mechanisms through which Iranian indirect engagement, Saudi threat perception, and Houthi military action interact to produce escalatory regional dynamics that none of the principal actors initially sought or deliberately designed. This is where Regional Security Complex Theory provides its most direct analytical contribution, explaining how the conflict's dynamics extend beyond Yemen's borders to reshape the security environment of the broader Middle East.

The documentary record suggests that the Yemeni conflict escalated and regionalized through a self-reinforcing cycle rather than through a sequence of deliberate strategic choices. Iranian advisory support enhanced Houthi military capabilities; enhanced capabilities were interpreted in Riyadh as evidence of deepening Iranian strategic commitment; that interpretation drove Saudi military escalation; Saudi escalation in turn reinforced Iranian political incentives to demonstrate solidarity with the Houthi and that demonstration further consolidated Saudi threat perceptions. Each iteration of this cycle was individually rational from the perspective of the actor taking it, but the aggregate outcome- sustained regional conflict of increasing scope and intensity- reflected the interaction of all three sets of actors rather than the strategic design of any single one. This essentially resembles the security spiral Jervis (1976) discussed, where each side reacts in a way that makes sense in its own terms, yet those reactions feed off one another until they arrive at exactly the kind of conflict no one set out to create.

Within the framework of Buzan and Wæver's (2003) RSCT, Yemen functions as a sub-complex arena in which the structuring dynamics of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry are expressed and amplified. The conflict does not remain contained within Yemeni borders because the regional security complex ensures that developments in one arena are rapidly interpreted through the lens of region-wide competitive dynamics. This is most clearly illustrated by the maritime dimension of the conflict's escalation. Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb corridor- drawing on ballistic missiles and naval drone systems whose development drew on Iranian technical assistance- as documented by the United Nations Panel of Experts (2020; 2023)- transformed Yemen from a landlocked civil conflict into a threat to one of the world's most critical maritime trade corridors. The involvement of United States and European naval forces in response, and the broader disruption of global shipping patterns, represents a strategic consequence bearing no proportionate relationship to Iran's original material investment in the conflict.

Discussion

The findings presented above carry significant analytical implications that extend beyond the documentary record and speak directly to the theoretical framework and research objectives of this study. Regarding Iran's strategic trajectory toward Yemen, the finding that Iranian engagement developed reactively rather than as a premeditated project both confirms and extends existing scholarship. While Juneau (2016) and Salisbury (2015) have previously suggested that Iran's Yemen involvement was limited and opportunistic, the present study advances this argument by demonstrating that the reactive nature of Iranian engagement has direct implications for how deterrence strategies should be calibrated -a dimension that neither study systematically addressed. If Iran's Yemen policy developed reactively as an adaptive extension of established and direct engagement -applied to an arena that became relevant due to external developments -rather than as a deliberate long-term campaign, the implications for understanding Iranian regional behavior are significant. Deterrent strategies premised on the assumption of Iranian premeditation will be calibrated differently from those

designed to manage reactive strategic opportunism. The documentary record supports the latter characterization more consistently than the former.

Turning to the nature of Iran-Houthi relationship, the finding that bounded autonomy better characterizes the partnership than proxy control confirms and extends recent scholarship. Juneau (2021) and Lons and Petrini (2025) have similarly identified Iran's inability to fully control Houthi strategic decisions as a fundamental constraint on the proxy warfare model. The Iran-Houthi relationship is therefore more accurately characterized as bounded autonomy; a partnership of mutual strategic utility in which Iran provides capabilities the Houthis need and the Houthis provide Iran with regional presence and leverage that would otherwise be unavailable, but in which neither party exercises comprehensive control over the other. This characterization is more consistent with evidence than either the proxy-control model or accounts that minimize Iranian involvement, and it generates more accurate predictions about how the relationship behaves under conditions of stress, negotiation, or shifting regional incentives.

With respect to threat construction and Saudi responses, the findings confirm Darwich's (2019) worst-case reading culture argument while extending it in an important direction. Divsallar (2023) has demonstrated that adversarial threat construction operates on both sides of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry simultaneously, and Albarasneh (2025) has shown that both states deploy regional confrontation to manage internal ontological insecurities. The present study builds on these contributions by demonstrating specifically how Saudi threat perceptions regarding Yemen translate into material escalatory decisions. Establishing threat perception not merely as contextual factor but as a causally independent variable in regional security dynamics, consistent with Wendt's (1999) constructivist framework. From a constructivist perspective, the proportionality of this response to Iran's actual capabilities and intentions is analytically less important than the fact that it was genuinely held, institutionally endorsed, and politically significant. Perceptions constructed through historical experience, sectarian identity narratives, and competitive elite discourse can produce material policy decisions and set in motion processes of regional escalation that developed their own momentum independently of the original precipitating actions.

Finally, the regionalization of the conflict through reciprocal escalatory dynamics illustrates the broader theoretical proposition at the core of this study and demonstrates the complementary explanatory value of combining neorealism, constructivism and RSCT. Neorealism explains why Iran adopted indirect engagement as a structural imperative (Waltz 1979). Constructivism explains why that engagement generated disproportionate Saudi responses through threat perception (Wendt 1999); and RSCT explains how local Yemeni dynamics were rapidly absorbed into region-wide competitive patterns (Buzan & Wæver 2003). This amplification-the product of the interaction between Iranian material support, Houthi operational agency, adversarial threat construction, and regional security interdependence- is the clearest empirical illustration of the article's central argument.

In a nutshell, these four findings support the article's central argument that the strategic consequences of Iran's indirect engagement in Yemen reflect not just what Iran does, but what it is seen to be doing. Hence, it is in the gap between these two things that the most consequential regional security dynamics are produced.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine three interrelated objectives: to explain how Iran's indirect engagement in Yemen developed historically; to analyze the nature of Iran-Houthi relationship and the degree of Houthi operational autonomy. In addition, to demonstrate how threat perceptions among regional actors translate Iran's indirect engagement into escalatory regional security consequences.

The article began with a puzzle: how does Iran's indirect engagement in Yemen -materially limited, operationally ambiguous, and shaped by a non-state partner with substantial autonomy - generate strategic consequences that have reshaped regional security dynamics across the Middle East? The puzzle dissolves once the assumption of proportionality between material input and strategic outcome is abandoned. Yemen demonstrates that indirect influence, exercised through bounded-autonomy partnerships in a fragmented regional environment, results in consequences that are substantially perception-driven: what Iran provides to

the Houthis matters less than what regional adversaries believe this involvement signifies about Iranian intentions and ambitions. Threat perceptions constructed through historical experience, identity narratives, and political discourse drive escalatory responses that frequently exceed what Iran's material involvement alone would predict, transforming what might otherwise remain a localized conflict into a driver of escalation across multiple regional arenas and maritime insecurity.

This study is not without limitations. The reliance on documentary analysis means that the findings reflect interpretations embedded in official documents and academic literature rather than direct access to decision making processes with Iranian, Saudi or Houthi institutions. Future research employing elite interviews or process-tracing methods could further validate and refine the bounded-autonomy model advanced here.

The article makes three contributions: first, the bounded-autonomy model offers a more empirically grounded account of state-non-state partnerships than either the conventional proxy warfare model or accounts that minimize Iranian involvement, with different implications for how such partnerships evolve under pressure. Second, it establishes threat perception as a causally significant variable in regional security dynamics, with the practical implication that diplomatic initiatives focused solely on Iran's material behavior are unlikely to succeed without addressing the threat-perception patterns that shape regional responses. Third, it demonstrates the value of integrating neorealism, constructivism, and Regional Security Complex Theory, as complementary rather than competing explanations. This framework is not confined to Yemen: similar configurations of indirect support, bounded non-state autonomy, and threat construction are observable in cases such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iraq's popular mobilization units, offering a clear agenda for future comparative research.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that in the contemporary Middle East, the most consequential drivers of regional insecurity are not always the most visible. Also, understanding what states believe their adversaries are doing may matter more than what those adversaries are actually doing.

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