Leveraging Disaster: Securitization in the Shadow of an Environmental Catastrophe: The Case of the Safer Floating Oil Tanker
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The Case of the *Safer* Floating Oil Tanker

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1. Introduction

Recent scholarship on climate and conflict has increasingly examined the dynamic relationship between environmental scarcities and geopolitical tensions (Homer-Dixon, 2010; King & Burnell, 2017). Overall, climate-related shocks often lead to escalated disputes over natural resources (Dai, 2013; ESCWA, 2015), thus positioning climate hazards not only as an environmental issue but also as a catalyst that intensifies existing geopolitical and social frictions (Mach et al., 2019).

The discourse on climate and conflict has mostly centred on its direct effects on natural resources and environmental conditions. However, its role in precipitating conflicts underscores the critical need to incorporate climate considerations within broader security and policy frameworks (Gemenne et al., 2014). In recent decades, one of the most compelling developments in this field is the inclusion of environmental issues within the security paradigm. Environmental degradation, global warming, and climate change are now recognized as critical threats that transcend national borders, impacting personal, national, and international security (Biswas, 2011). These factors have broadened our comprehension of the relationships among environmental transformation, conflict, and vulnerability, and have highlighted the importance of conservation and sustainable development in fostering peace, stability, and human security (Matthew et al., 2004).

Despite the increased attention on climate in conflict and security studies, the mechanisms through which an environmental catastrophe, or the threat of it, gets securitized in conflict remain under investigated. Understanding how these threats are framed and leveraged by conflicting parties can provide critical insights into the intersection of environmental risks and geopolitical strategies, thereby enriching the discourse on environmental security and conflict dynamics. Most case studies focus on the securitization of natural resources, such as water in the Nile and Indus basins, concentrating on resource scarcity rather than potential catastrophes (Burgess et al., 2016; Siraw, 2023). Additionally, research on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and domestic politics in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands shows how framing environmental threats as national security issues can influence power dynamics and foster global action (Mason, 2013; Warner & Boas, 2019).

However, these cases suggest that previous research has predominantly investigated how states strategically employ environmental narratives within the framework of national security for political and economic advantages, often in contexts removed from direct conflict scenarios (Ajibade & McBean, 2014; Thomas & Warner, 2019; Vuong et al., 2023). Moreover, much of the discussion on environmental securitization has focused on state-centric perspectives and inter-state conflicts.

This emphasis on state actions, both in domestic and international arenas, has left a significant gap concerning the weaponization of environmental threats by non-state actors within ongoing conflicts.

In that sense, the contribution of my thesis is twofold. First, it analyzes the weaponization of a looming environmental catastrophe within a conflict setting. Second, it focuses on a case where non-state actors, specifically the Houthis, are primary securitization actors. More specifically, my thesis addresses the existing gap in the literature by analysing the case of the *FSO Safer*, a deteriorating oil storage tanker moored off the coast of Yemen. Before the United Nations' successful offloading plan, the tanker held over one million barrels of crude oil, posing a significant risk of massive ecological and economic damage due to its poor condition and lack of maintenance since the onset of the Yemeni conflict. Despite the imminent threat of an ecological disaster, the conflicting parties in Yemen – the Houthis and the internationally recognized government – have used the *Safer* as a bargaining chip rather than prioritizing immediate remedial action. This has put the entire region in a state of suspense, with the potential for disastrous oil leakage that could impact the Red Sea's marine ecosystems and the broader geopolitical stability.

The *FSO Safer* crisis has directly inspired the research question of this study, highlighting the need to understand the strategic use of environmental threats in geopolitical conflicts. This crisis vividly illustrates how impending ecological disasters are not solely managed as environmental or humanitarian issues but are intricately woven into the fabric of international security and conflict negotiation strategies. It prompts critical inquiries into how and why such existential threats are leveraged by involved parties to advance their geopolitical agendas. Therefore, the research question formulated for this study is: *How are environmental threats utilized as strategic tools in geopolitical conflicts*?

In addition to its scholarly relevance, this research has significant policy implications. Understanding how environmental threats are securitized by non-state actors can inform international policy frameworks and intervention strategies. Policymakers can benefit from insights into the strategic use of environmental crises to manipulate political outcomes, which is crucial for developing more effective conflict resolution and environmental protection policies. By recognizing the tactics employed by conflicting parties, international organizations and governments can better anticipate and counteract these strategies, ensuring more stable and secure environments. For instance, the use of the *Safer* as a bargaining chip to obtain concessions in exchange for cooperation has repeatedly complicated the UN's efforts to implement a timely intervention plan, delaying critical actions needed to prevent an environmental disaster. This research thus underscores the necessity for integrated approaches that address both environmental and security concerns, highlighting the importance of

timely and coordinated international responses to prevent the exploitation of environmental threats in geopolitical conflicts.

The thesis is organized into several chapters that systematically address the research question. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on climate and conflict, focusing on the securitization of environmental issues. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework, which integrates securitization theory with insights from environmental crisis governance. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology, which employs a combination of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to analyse the *FSO Safer* crisis. Chapter 5 presents the empirical analysis, detailing how the crisis has been framed and managed by the various actors. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the findings, revisits the challenges identified in the study, and provides recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter offers a thorough review of existing literature, elucidating the complex relationship between climate change and conflict and its implications for global security. The first section explores how environmental degradation is framed as a security threat, reflecting on the increasing scholarly attention this area has garnered (Balzacq et al., 2016; Trombetta, 2023). It further examines how environmental degradation and climate-related hazards are historically and currently catalysts for global conflicts. Secondly, the chapter delves into how states and non-state actors use the environment as a strategic tool to advance political, economic, and geopolitical interests. It discusses how the strategic manipulation of climate-related issues extends beyond environmental impact, influencing power dynamics both domestically and internationally. This manipulation, often portrayed as national security or economic policy, underscores the need to perceive ecological disasters not only as an environmental issue but also as a pivotal element in global security.

2.1 Previous Research

The securitization literature has progressively expanded to encompass environmental issues, reflecting a significant shift in how security threats are conceptualized and addressed. Initially, security studies predominantly focused on military threats to state sovereignty, but over time, the concept of securitization has evolved to include non-military threats such as environmental degradation, climate change, and environmental disasters. Scholars like Buzan (1998) have redefined security to include these issues, recognizing that they can pose existential threats that require urgent attention and exceptional measures. This shift has been accompanied by extensive research into how environmental challenges are framed as security threats, exploring the mechanisms and implications of such framing. Studies have examined both state-centric approaches, where national security frameworks are applied to environmental issues (Floyd, 2010; McDonald, 2013), and the role of "securitizing actors" in leveraging environmental threats for strategic gains (Fincham, 2002; Lindseth, 2005; Warner and van Buuren, 2011). The literature also delves into the practical applications of securitization theory, analyzing how different actors employ narrative framing to promote policy initiatives and manage crises.

2.1.1. The Securitization of Environmental Degradation

The weaponization of climate represents a facet of the broader concept of securitization, where environmental degradation and climate-related hazards are increasingly framed as security issues. Although the securitization of environmental concerns began later than in other domains, it has quickly attracted significant scholarly interest, marking the environment as a key area of study within the field of securitization (Balzacq et al., 2016).

In International Relations, the concept of security has traditionally centred on safeguarding the state against external threats, often of a military nature (Trombetta, 2023). Scholars were initially cautious in framing environmental degradation as a security threat as they feared it could trigger nationalistic and militaristic responses counterproductive to cooperation (Deudney, 1990). However, as global collaboration became more complex post-Cold War, environmental degradation and climate change were increasingly linked to global instability and conflicts, legitimizing military involvement under the guise of defense against these non-traditional threats (Kaplan, 1994). This was also accompanied by a shift in the scholarship from a realist to a constructivist approach, emphasizing that security threats are shaped by how policymakers and the public perceive them (Hart, 1993).

When developing the concept of securitization, Buzan et al. (1998) introduced a foundational framework that reimagined how threats, including environmental ones, could be recognized as matters of national security. Building on this framework, securitization scholars have investigated the mechanisms of climate securitization, the actors involved in the process, and the consequences of framing the environment as a security threat (Ide et al., 2023).

Securitization scholars have primarily employed qualitative methods, such as discourse analysis and case studies, to investigate how environmental security threats are constructed (Ide et al., 2023). Early phases of this research shed light on how political figures frame issues such as the scarcity of critical natural resources, environmental decay, or the impact of climate change on migration as matters of security concern (Floyd, 2010; McDonald, 2013). Further studies broadened the scope to examine both the narrative and routine practices of security professionals, including conducting risk assessments and devising strategic plans (Trombetta 2008; Corry 2012; Oels 2012). This wide-ranging research highlights two contrasting approaches to dealing with threats: some argue that environmental changes can destabilize countries or the world by leading to conflict or migration, while others focus on the human security angle, emphasizing the dangers that extreme environmental conditions and degradation pose to people and communities' livelihoods (Ide et al., 2023).

The practical application of the securitization theory within the climate literature also extends into organizational and administrative realms, where its concepts are put into action (Fincham, 2002; Lindseth, 2005; Warner and van Buuren, 2011). Research in these areas illuminates the strategic employment of narrative framing by a variety of stakeholders, including government officials, diplomats, and business leaders, to promote, validate, or clarify policy and management initiatives (Fincham, 2002; Lindseth, 2005; Warner and van Buuren, 2011). By crafting and utilizing specific narratives, these figures engage in a targeted form of 'social marketing' designed to appeal to and persuade distinct groups, aiming for specific reactions or support (Warner & Boas, 2019). The tactical

framing of events as crises serves both to address humanitarian concerns and as a strategic maneuver for political advantage, overcoming existing barriers and activating solutions that are typically out of reach (Boin et al., 2009).

The field of environmental securitization remains relatively under-explored, offering only a few extensive case studies, primarily focusing on the securitization of natural resources like water in regions such as the Nile and Indus Water Basins (Burgess et al., 2016; Siraw, 2023). However, these cases typically concentrate on resource scarcity rather than the environmental risks associated with potential catastrophes. An alternative case study is the Buyat Bay incident in Indonesia, where environmental damage allegations against PT Newmont Minahasa Raya, the Indonesian subsidiary of the Newmont Mining Corporation, led to significant legal and societal reactions, framing the issue within the context of environmental security. This case involved local communities and NGOs who highlighted the pollution caused by the company, leading to a comprehensive securitization and subsequent de-securitization process as the issue moved through various political and legal stages (Septanti, 2013). In domestic politics, Warner and Boas (2019) have analysed the cases of the United Kingdom and the Netherlands to understand how framing climate threats in terms of national security can be used to foster global action and seek domestic consensus. Additionally, among the few case studies on climate securitization in war settings, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands out as an interesting example where climate-related issues are framed as threats, influencing power dynamics, and accentuating existing tensions (Mason, 2013). Together, these studies offer a comprehensive view of how environmental securitization operates across different scenarios, from resource scarcity to corporate pollution and geopolitical conflicts, thereby enriching the theoretical and empirical foundations of the field.

Finally, this thesis aims to contribute a minority of studies that suggest that traditional security discourses can perpetuate colonial tropes, emphasizing the importance of incorporating diverse geopolitical contexts to achieve a more nuanced understanding of how environmental and security issues are interlinked and managed on the ground (Carr 2010; Hartmann, 2014; Selby & Hoffmann, 2014; Verhoeven, 2014). This approach is particularly significant because much of the existing literature on securitization is dominated by Western perspectives, which often prioritize the geopolitical interests and security paradigms of Western powers. These perspectives may not fully capture the diverse dynamics and implications of security practices in non-Western settings, where historical, cultural, and political contexts differ markedly (Selby & Hoffmann, 2014: 751). By focusing on Yemen, this research tries to reveal how local actors utilize environmental threats as strategic tools in ways that might not align with Western securitization practices. This shift in focus can uncover unique securitization mechanisms and strategies that are influenced by regional

geopolitics, local power structures, and cultural and historical experiences (Huysmans, 1998: 501). Additionally, it challenges potentially colonial narratives that often underpin mainstream securitization studies, providing a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how environmental and security issues are interlinked and managed on the ground in non-Western regions.

2.1.2. Environmental Disasters and Conflict

Another important aspect that often receives less detailed empirical focus is the "weaponization" of environmental disasters. Environmental disasters provide immediate, acute crises that can be exploited by various stakeholders to advance political or military agendas. For instance, in the context of the *FSO Safer*, the imminent threat of an ecological disaster is leveraged not merely as a potential catastrophe but as a strategic tool manipulated by conflicting parties to further their interests.

This weaponization of climate-related issues refers to a range of tactics and strategies, including the use of propaganda, where actions related to climate and environmental sustainability are utilized to gain political, economic, or geopolitical advantages (Vuong et al., 2023). The strategy of weaponizing ecological disasters can create conditions that escalate disputes over power, potentially exacerbating ongoing conflicts. Such dynamics divert attention from unified global initiatives to address and mitigate the existential risks climate change poses to the earth's ecosystems (Vuong et al., 2023).

Environmental catastrophe, or the threat of it, has been strategically utilized at both the domestic and international levels (Ajibade & McBean, 2014; Thomas & Warner, 2019; UN, 2021). In domestic politics, the manipulation of the climate change agenda is often used to polarize the electorate on climate issues and affect national approaches to mitigation efforts (Stokes et al., 2015). In polarized societies, such as the United States (Stokes, 2015), this politicization of environmental degradation is instrumental in deepening ideological divides, thus hampering collective action against climate change challenges (Kamarck, 2019).

At the international level, such weaponization often serves as a facade for geopolitical maneuvering, with some countries accused of exploiting climate change initiatives to assert dominance or gain strategic advantages. For instance, in 2019, China was accused of using climate change as a cover to enhance its military presence in the Arctic, purportedly for strategic deterrence (Koh, 2020; Mooney et al., 2023). Moreover, countries may use environmental policy initiatives to position themselves as ethical or innovation leaders, influencing global perceptions and securing advantageous roles in international negotiations. In this case, actions aimed at mitigating climate change are perceived more as economic tactics than genuine environmental safeguarding (Vuong et

al., 2023). This is demonstrated by the European Union's adoption of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a price adjustment applied to imports into the EU for designated goods based on their CO2 emissions in the production process outside the EU (European Union, 2023). Despite being considered a necessary measure to reach the EU's CO2 emissions reduction targets, the critiques of the CBAM suggest it functions more as an economic deterrent under the guise of environmental regulation, illustrating how climate policies can be manipulated as "trade weapons" on the global stage (FORESIGHT Climate & Energy, 2023).

Additionally, the weaponization of climate goes beyond the "traditional" strategies as countries may engage in information warfare to spread misinformation and create tension among countries working together on environmental matters. These approaches reveal the challenges inherent in climate change discourses, illustrating how the confluence of environmental objectives with geopolitical ambitions can provoke conflicts and weaken collective endeavors to address climate dangers (Vuong, 2021).

Another stem of the disaster-conflict scholarship investigates the dynamics at play in environmental crisis governance, particularly in contexts marked by internal strife. This body of work, while not extensive, reveals a dichotomy in understanding the impact of disasters on internal conflict. According to researchers like Drury and Olson (1998) and Nel and Righarts (2008), disasters often exacerbate internal conflicts, leading to increased governance challenges. These scholars contend that the inability of governments to manage disaster responses effectively can provide windows of opportunity for opposition groups. These groups might capitalize on the perceived governmental failures to bolster their own agendas, thereby intensifying the risk of escalated conflict. Additionally, those in power may also exploit the chaotic circumstances brought on by disasters to reinforce existing tensions and suppress dissent, further complicating the crisis management efforts (Hollis, 2018).

On the other side of this argument, there exists a significant body of research suggesting that disasters can act as catalysts for reducing conflict levels. This perspective posits that the pressing need for effective disaster response can drive warring parties toward cooperation (Slettebak, 2012). It suggests that disasters might necessitate and even facilitate improved collaboration and governance strategies, offering a unique opportunity to bridge divides and enhance joint efforts in crisis management.

Overall, the existing literature extensively explores how both domestic and international actors leverage environmental issues for political, economic, or geopolitical advantages. However, much of this research focuses broadly on strategies without providing specific, real-world examples.

This lack of detailed empirical evidence leaves a critical gap in understanding the actual impact of these strategies on ongoing conflicts and international policies. Without concrete examples, it is difficult to assess how theoretical concepts of climate weaponization are applied in practice and to evaluate their real-world effectiveness.

My thesis addresses this gap by providing a detailed analysis of the *FSO Safer* crisis in Yemen, offering a timely illustration of how environmental issues can be manipulated by internal factions and influenced by external powers. This case study demonstrates the direct linkage between environmental policy and geopolitical strategies, while also highlighting the practical challenges and outcomes of the crisis. By grounding theoretical discussions of climate weaponization in the concrete realities of the *Safer* crisis, my research offers valuable empirical evidence that enriches academic discourse. It deepens the understanding of how environmental threats are used as negotiation tools in conflicts and explores the interplay between climate issues and global security.

3. Theoretical Framework

To answer my research question, I will employ a combined theoretical framework that integrates securitization theory with insights from environmental crisis governance. Securitization theory is instrumental in dissecting how the environmental threat posed by the *Safer FSO* has been rhetorically framed as a security issue, potentially catalyzing or, conversely, stifling action from the involved parties. By analyzing the speech acts and political maneuvers that elevate the environmental risks to security concerns, I can discern the impact of such framing on policy and action—or the lack thereof. Meanwhile, environmental crisis governance theory illuminates the mechanisms and responses that are, or fail to be, mobilized in reaction to the securitization of environmental threats. This duality of theories allows for an exploration of both the discursive strategies that shape perceptions and the securitization mechanisms within a situation of environmental crisis. By integrating securitization theory with insights from environmental crisis governance, I can examine how environmental threats are framed as security issues and how these frames influence the behavior and decisions of involved actors. By integrating securitization theory with insights from environmental crisis governance, I can thoroughly examine how environmental threats are framed as security issues and the strategic use of these threats by various actors involved in the *FSO Safer* crisis.

3.1. Securitization as a Strategy for Mobilization and Delay

To understand how the environmental threat posed by the *FSO Safer* was securitized, I will refer to the key concepts identified by the Copenhagen School. One primary concept is the referent object, which is the entity to be securitized (Buzan et al., 1998: 36). Identifying the referent object is crucial because it is the essential element for the relevant audience, declared as being under threat and in need of protection. Without determining the referent object, any securitization process will fail (Buzan et al., 1998, p.36). In my study, the *FSO Safer* is the referent object, whose deteriorating condition, carrying over a million barrels of oil, has been framed by conflicting parties as a significant risk to the Red Sea's marine ecosystem and regional stability.

When an issue is securitized, the referent object is addressed using language that repeatedly underscores danger and protection. Such issues are identified by a specific rhetorical style that focuses on the immediacy, survival, and necessity for urgent action (Buzan et al., 1998: 26). For securitization to be effective, three main conditions must be met. First, the communication must adhere to the 'grammar of security,' emphasizing critical elements such as urgency, survival, and immediate action. Second, the actor making the securitization claims needs to hold a position of sufficient authority to persuade and gain the audience's trust. Finally, the nature and specifics of the perceived threats are

pivotal in convincing the audience of the necessity for extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998: 33).

Moreover, the process of securitization must engage the targeted audiences effectively, ensuring they are sufficiently influenced by the securitizing action to take necessary actions (Buzan et al., 1998: 26). Finally, the securitization framework involves the presence of functional actors, i.e., actors who affect the dynamics of a sector. Without being the referent object or the actor calling for security on behalf of the referent object, this is an actor who significantly influences decisions in the field of security (Buzan et al., 1998: 36). Given the global nature of climate-related issues and environmental threats, international entities such as the UN bodies are often dragged into the environmental securitization game because their decisions and actions significantly shape the international security agenda (Scott, 2013: 608). Similarly, in the case of the *FSO Safer* crisis, the Houthi rebels and the internationally recognized government utilized the imminent threat of an environmental disaster to pressure the United Nations to act in ways that could curb their adversaries.

As such, the securitization theory suggests that security is a speech act through which actors can transform any problem into an existential threat that requires exceptional measures (Buzan et al., 1998: 26). Traditionally, political leaders, bureaucrats, and governments are the main actors behind this framing process, but this "political manipulation" can be done by any actor with a position of political and moral authority, including NGOs, political dissidents, and social movements (Paglia, 2018; Wilkinson, 2007). In the case of the *FSO Safer*, it is hypothesized that different actors, particularly the internationally recognized Yemeni government, the Saudi-led coalition, and the Houthis, utilized securitization as a strategy not only to galvanize international attention and increase their legitimacy but also as a tool for political leverage. I expect to find that such securitization efforts may have been employed to delay necessary actions or negotiations when it suited the strategic interests of the parties involved. This will be evident in the rhetoric used in official statements, media coverage, and policy documents, which emphasized the imminent risk of disaster to pressure opponents and sway international opinion.

3.2. Integrating Environmental Crisis Governance with the Securitization Theory

The securitization framework can be enriched by encapsulating it within the context of environmental crises. The framework laid out by the Copenhagen School provides the basic concepts and conditions for a successful securitization, but it is insufficient to analyse the framing of a security threat in times of crisis and conflict. Therefore, integrating environmental crisis governance theory with securitization theory allows for a comprehensive examination of how environmental threats are utilized strategically in geopolitical conflicts.

Environmental catastrophes serve not only as natural events but also as potent social and political phenomena (Hannigan, 2013). They provide various groups with opportunities to push forward their agendas, potentially intensifying or mitigating violent conflicts, sparking protests, or even triggering changes in governance (Birkland, 1997). For instance, large oil spills such as *Torrey Canyon* and *Exxon Valdez* represented such a shock among the public that they profoundly redirected international and domestic environmental agendas (Matejova, 2023).

However, the impact of such disasters is heavily shaped by the existing social fabric—factors like economic disparities, authoritarian governance, or ongoing conflicts play a significant role. Consequently, not all environmental disasters result in societal transformations. The nature of the disaster, its geographical setting, and its intensity are critical factors that can influence how the public responds and how policymakers act (Matejova, 2023; Aklin & Mildenberger, 2020). Therefore, the governance of environmental crises like the *FSO Safer* incident is deeply influenced by domestic political dynamics. Aklin and Mildenberger (2020) emphasize that domestic factors primarily drive governmental initiatives to enact climate policies, often regardless of international pressures or agreements that attempt to curb free-riding behaviors. They note that resistance from influential domestic groups, who might incur losses due to these policies, often leads to inaction or delays in climate policy implementation (Aklin & Mildenberger, 2020: 11).

In Yemen, the ongoing political turmoil significantly hampered effective governance and management of the *FSO Safer* crisis. The internal conflicts and the competition for control among various factions created a fragmented political environment that was ill-equipped to address the looming disaster effectively. This disarray allowed the crisis to escalate as the national capacity to coordinate a response was undermined by competing interests and the lack of a unified political will. Furthermore, the aftermath of environmental disasters can intensify existing conflicts over scarce resources, exacerbating tensions not only within states but also between them. In contexts like Yemen, where the political landscape is already volatile, such crises can amplify the existing conflict dynamics, illustrating the dual role of governance in either mitigating or worsening the impacts of environmental crises on security (Hollis, 2018).

Environmental crisis governance theory further posits that the governance structures in place should ideally lead to swift and effective crisis management practices following the securitization of an environmental issue (Matejova, 2023). However, this study hypothesizes that due to the complex political and military context of Yemen, these governance mechanisms were inadequate or improperly executed. The expected findings would indicate a discrepancy between the urgency communicated through securitization efforts and the lagging or ineffective governance responses, further

complicated by bureaucratic inertia, international diplomatic hesitations, and the logistical challenges of operating in a conflict zone.

Finally, the concept of 'crisification,' emerging from the fusion of securitization theory and crisis studies, offers a nuanced lens through which to view the strategic framing of crises within a security paradigm (Narby, 2010; Paglia, 2018). Adopting this perspective, crises can be interpreted in various ways: as disasters, everyday occurrences, or opportunities for significant change (Boin et al., 2009). This variability in perception is critical during crises, indicating that the framing of a crisis significantly impacts the responses it elicits. These pivotal moments can serve as catalysts, facilitating the rapid implementation of new policies that bypass standard legislative procedures (Birkland, 2009). This approach suggests that crises, traditionally seen as mere emergencies, can be strategically framed to trigger security measures that bypass usual political processes, reflecting a deliberate use of calamity rhetoric to escalate situations to a level demanding urgent and extraordinary responses (Boas, 2015; Warner & Boas, 2019: 1474). Following this approach, I expect the *FSO Safer* crisis to be utilized by both the Houthi rebels and the Yemeni government to manipulate international perceptions and responses. By labeling the deteriorating condition of the *Safer* tanker as a catastrophic threat to regional and global environments, the conflicting parties could have aimed to catalyze immediate international action, potentially favoring their strategic interests.

4. Research Design

This chapter unfolds in four structured sections: First, it explains the selection of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics as the chosen research approaches and how this choice aligns with the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3. Second, it presents the rationale behind the selected case study of the *Safer FSO* crisis. Third, it details the methods and sources of data collection, explaining how each type of source contributes to building a nuanced understanding of how the environmental threat posed by the *Safer FSO* is framed by various actors. Finally, it critically examines the strengths and limitations of my methodology, highlighting the implications of these limitations for the study's contributions to academic debates and policy-making in environmental security.

4.1. Discourse Analysis

While there is discussion in the literature about what is the 'better' way to study securitization processes, discourse analysis remains the dominant method (Balzacq et al., 2016: 519). Recalling the Copenhagen School's position that security threats are constructed through speech acts, such as the public discourse of political elite actors (Buzan et al., 1998), my research will employ discourse analysis to examine security-related speech patterns. Discourse analysis can be described as a research method that spans multiple disciplines, characterized by a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches but united by a common focus on exploring how language relates to power, injustice, and changes within society (Fairclough, 2013:12). This approach will allow me to dissect the dialogues and declarations made by key actors in the *Safer FSO* crisis to assess how the looming environmental threat is framed in the security rhetoric, influencing both policy/decision-making and international response.

4.2. Corpus Linguistics

To investigate the securitization of the *Safer* in the media, I will combine discourse analysis with corpus linguistics methods. According to Hunston (2022: 2), a corpus is an assembly of real language occurrences, which may include anything from brief sentences to extensive collections of texts or recordings, assembled specifically for linguistic research. Corpus linguistics is, therefore, the examination of authentic language use by analyzing practical examples (McEnery, 2019: 1).

Common corpus linguistics techniques that will be used in this study include keywords, concordance, and collocation. Keyword analysis involves identifying the words or phrases that appear statistically more frequently in the corpus (Geluso & Hirch, 2019: 209). This method is particularly relevant for discourse analysis, as it highlights the central themes of a corpus, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the discourse (Baker, 2004; Haider, 2018: 100). In the case of the *FSO*

Safer, keyword analysis helps me uncover the specific terms that are unusually prominent or rare within the corpus of media and official communications. This method provides insights into the prevalent themes and narratives used by the different parties involved in the crisis. By identifying these keywords, I can trace how the *Safer* crisis is framed by various actors, highlighting the terms that are strategically employed to emphasize security concerns, assign blame, or call for international intervention. Therefore, this analytical approach helps delineate the contours of the securitization discourse, revealing how language is used not just to describe the crisis, but to actively construct it as a security issue within political and media narratives.

Concordance analysis, or Key Word In Context (KWIC), scrutinizes specific linguistic items by exploring the words surrounding them, which can range from a few adjacent words to the entirety of the text (McEnery, 2019). This method is essential for discourse analysis because it enables an examination of language features within their contextual environment, which can reveal subtle cues about societal attitudes and behaviors (Sunderland, 2004; Baker, 2004).

The concept of collocation revolves around the idea that the meaning of a word can be understood by the words it frequently associates with (Firth, 1957: 179). Collocation refers to the predictable and habitual pairing of certain words in natural language, suggesting a strong, recurrent relationship between them (Haider, 2018: 102). This method proves invaluable in discourse analysis, particularly because it helps reveal the underlying ideologies by shedding light on the subtle meanings and connotations that words carry (Forest, 2007). By examining how words typically associate with positive, negative, or neutral terms, researchers can determine their discourse tones within a context. This relationship between words is influenced by the context in which they appear, the identities of the text's creators and receivers, and how the audience interprets these pairings. The consistent appearance of certain word pairs across different contexts can profoundly influence perceptions, making it hard for readers to dissociate these terms (Bloor & Bloor, 2013).

The integration of discourse analysis with corpus linguistics techniques enables a robust examination of how language constructs the *FSO Safer* as a security issue within various media and official communications. The former provides the tools to analyze the subtle power dynamics and ideological constructions within texts, while corpus linguistics offers empirical support through quantitative analysis of language patterns. By employing both approaches, the study can systematically identify and interpret the discursive practices that shape the securitization narrative, providing a comprehensive understanding of both the explicit and implicit elements of discourse related to the *FSO Safer* crisis. This combined methodological framework is essential for dissecting the complex layers of meaning and intent in the communications surrounding the *Safer*. In this way,

my thesis aims to clarify how security processes are articulated and managed in conflict zones like Yemen, where environmental risks and geopolitical tensions converge.

4.3. Case Selection

In selecting cases for this research, it is important to note that while there are a few instances of environmental securitization in the existing literature, these typically emphasize the securitization of natural resources, such as water, rather than environmental catastrophes. As discussed in Chapter 2, these studies generally examine the security implications of resource scarcity and its potential to cause conflict, rather than the processes and implications of securitizing environmental risks associated with potential catastrophes. Additionally, many of these cases do not occur in conflict settings, which limits their applicability to understanding the dynamics of environmental securitization in ongoing conflicts.

Therefore, the *FSO Safer* crisis proves instrumental in examining how environmental threats, specifically potential catastrophes, are utilized strategically in geopolitical conflicts, filling a critical gap in the current body of literature. In particular, the manipulation of the *FSO Safer* by the Houthis offers a unique case for studying how non-state actors utilize environmental emergencies as strategic tools in geopolitical negotiations Furthermore, this crisis exemplifies the paradoxical mix of recognition and inaction, underscoring the urgent need for environmental protection compared with the strategic maneuvers in ongoing conflicts.

On a societal level, the immediate risks associated with the *Safer*—potential massive oil spills and ecological destruction— dangerously threatened the marine biodiversity, local economies, and the health of millions living along the Red Sea coastlines. Secondly, the Red Sea region presents a critical arena for exploring the intersections of climate change, environmental degradation, and conflict. In particular, Yemen is extremely vulnerable to environmental deterioration, resulting in heightened competition for resources, displacement, and increased food insecurity (Poornima & Ramesh, 2023:274). Yemen is currently experiencing the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with a staggering 23.4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and 17.4 million facing food insecurity (UNICEF, 2022). Additionally, the region's strategic importance heightens the international stakes, making the crisis not just a local or regional concern but a global one

Furthermore, the protracted nature of the crisis, marked by years of negotiation and stalled interventions, offers a clear illustration of the paradoxical inaction that can occur even when the stakes are universally acknowledged as high. Each conflicting party within Yemen has attempted to exploit the deteriorating condition of the *Safer*, using it as leverage in their respective military and political

strategies. The internationally recognized government, supported by a coalition of countries led by Saudi Arabia, has repeatedly accused the Houthis of leveraging their control over the vessel as a means to exert pressure, essentially treating the tanker as a weapon in the conflict (Tadros, 2020). Saudi Arabia has also attempted to draw global attention to the imminent danger by highlighting the presence of an oil slick near Yemen's coast, aiming to hasten negotiations for a UN-managed offloading operation (Nichols, 2020). Conversely, the Houthis have been criticized for employing the *Safer FSO* crisis as a means to exert influence over the international community, effectively holding it hostage to advance their bargaining position (Hincks, 2021). In retaliation, the Houthi leadership has pointed fingers at the internationally recognized government and its allies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United States, accusing them of enforcing harsh sanctions and obstructing the Houthis' access to potential revenue from the sale of the oil aboard the deteriorating tanker (Tadros, 2020).

Finally, analyzing the *FSO Safer* case allows for a deeper understanding of the broader implications of environmental threats being used as leverage in conflict scenarios. It helps to illustrate the potential consequences of weaponizing environmental issues, providing insights into the efficacy and pitfalls of securitizing environmental threats.

4.4. Data Collection

To examine how the *FSO Safer* crisis has been securitized by warring parties, I primarily utilized articles from Arab news outlets. This approach allowed for an examination of the strategies deployed by different media to influence public perception and political discourse surrounding the crisis. By analyzing the content and language within these articles, insights were gained into the political motivations and tactics used by the warring factions.

I collected 167 articles from 13 Arab media channels. To do that, I visited various media websites and conducted searches using keywords such as "*FSO Safer*", "environmental catastrophe", and "oil tanker" to find relevant articles covering the *Safer* crisis. I specifically selected newspaper articles that focused on the *FSO Safer* crisis and excluded those that contained only audio and video content without transcripts, as well as articles that primarily addressed the broader Yemeni conflict without specific emphasis on the *Safer* crisis. I then translated the news articles into English using *DeepL*, an artificial intelligence translation tool, to ensure accurate translations for analysis. Finally, I utilized the software *Sketch Engine* to compile a dataset of Arabic news articles that covered the *FSO Safer crisis*.

In analyzing the data, I first identified the most frequent keywords in the corpus, such as "*FSO Safer*", "environment", "Houthis", and "United Nations". Then, I used *Sketch Engine*'s linguistic

features, including wordlists, n-grams, and concordance tools, to analyze these keywords and examine the discourse surrounding the *Safer* crisis. Wordlists help identify the most frequently used words, n-grams analyze sequences of words to detect common phrases, and concordance tools provide context by displaying how keywords are used in sentences. Additionally, for more intricate coding and analysis, concordance lines were exported to *Atlas.ti*, a software designed for enhanced qualitative data analysis. In particular, *Atlas.ti* was used for creating word clouds and conducting sentiment analysis.

The dataset comprises texts from a diverse range of regions and media platforms, reflecting various ideological viewpoints. It includes material from prominent Arab news outlets like *Al Jazeera*, and *Al Arabiya*, as well as from media associated with the conflicting parties. Media channels like *Al-Sahwan*, *Cratar*, and *Yeni Şafak* are ideologically close to the coalition-backed government or based in allied countries, like the Saudi-based newspaper *Okaz*. The Houthis' rhetoric can be analyzed through its official website, *Ansarollah.com*, ministers' websites (e.g., the official website of the Ministry of Transport), and affiliated newspapers such as *Saba*. Finally, the collection of articles also contains content from international media such as *BBC*.
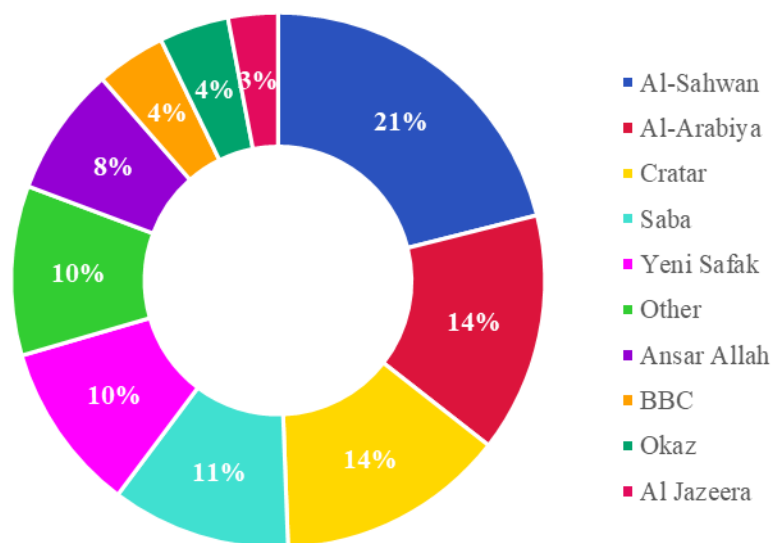
Figure 1: Frequency and names of news outlets

The inclusion of neutral media such as the *BBC* and *Al Jazeera* is crucial in the analysis of the securitization process as they provide a more balanced perspective, focusing on factual reporting and the broader implications of the crisis. This balance is instrumental in identifying deviations in the narratives presented by biased sources and in understanding how each party's framing differs from a

more impartial account. By comparing the securitizing language used in pro-coalition and pro-Houthi media with the more neutral reports, it becomes evident how each faction manipulates the discourse to serve their political agendas, thereby offering a clearer picture of the strategic use of securitization in the *FSO Safer* crisis. **Figure 1** illustrates the breakdown of news articles.

4.5. Strengths and Limitations

This research has several methodological strengths and limitations. One of the primary strengths is the comprehensive approach that integrates discourse analysis with corpus linguistic techniques. As discussed before, this methodological combination allows for a detailed and nuanced analysis of how the *FSO Safer* crisis is framed and discussed in media coverage.

Secondly, focusing on the *Safer FSO* crisis as a single case study enables an in-depth exploration of the specific mechanisms through which environmental risks are managed and manipulated in a conflict-ridden area. This choice underscores the uniqueness of the *Safer FSO* crisis, highlighting its distinct geopolitical, cultural, and environmental conditions. By concentrating on this particular case, the study provides rich, detailed insights into the intricate dynamics of environmental securitization in Yemen, capturing the specific ways in which environmental threats are utilized within this unique conflict setting.

However, this choice undermines the external validity of my research. The focus on a singular, exceptional case means that the findings are deeply contextual and may not be directly applicable to other scenarios of environmental securitization (George & Bennett, 2005:25). While the study offers valuable contributions to understanding the strategic use of environmental issues in the *Safer* crisis, its conclusions are inherently tied to the distinctive characteristics of this case, emphasizing the need for caution when attempting to extrapolate these insights to different contexts.

In addition, the reliance on Arabic media sources introduces potential biases, particularly through the translation process. Subtle nuances and meanings may be lost or altered in translation, which could affect the interpretation of the data. The translation of key terms from Arabic to English can modify or obscure the original meanings, impacting the accuracy of the analysis and potentially introducing bias into the research findings. The use of machine translation, specifically *DeepL*, may further hinder the quality of my research. Despite significant advancements in improving the accuracy and sophistication of machine translation, there are still some decisive disadvantages compared to "traditional" human translation. One of the most severe disadvantages is artificial intelligence lacks the intuitive understanding of language and fails to recognize subtle language nuances, particularly when context is missing (Plenter, 2023: 2). Nevertheless, machine translation has already been

applied in social sciences (e.g., Lucas et al., 2015; de Vries et al., 2018; Düpont and Rachuj, 2022). Moreover, studies have demonstrated that machine translation—and particularly *DeepL*—produces reliable and trustworthy results (de Vries et al., 2018: 418; Plenter, 2023: 7).

Finally, I acknowledge that, like all humans, I am a product of my environment, which inevitably introduces subjective and cultural biases into my work (Savolainen et al., 2023: 1333). While every effort was made to remain objective, the selection and interpretation of data are inherently influenced by my perspectives and background. This could impact the framing and conclusions of the study, potentially skewing the analysis toward certain interpretations. For instance, my Western background may influence my interpretation of the language used by the conflicting parties, potentially leading to misinterpretations or oversimplifications of culturally specific expressions and nuances. Additionally, my personal views on environmental issues and conflict might lead to emphasizing certain aspects of the *Safer FSO* crisis over others, such as focusing more on the geopolitical implications rather than the humanitarian aspects. My perceptions of the conflicting parties might also affect the analysis, possibly leading to biased assessments of their motivations and actions.

5. Empirical Analysis

This empirical analysis chapter delves into the intricacies of the *FSO Safer* crisis within the context of the Yemeni conflict, exploring the various actors and their roles, the catastrophic potential of the crisis, and the political implications that intertwine with environmental concerns. The chapter is structured to first introduce the *FSO Safer*, examining how it became a "ticking environmental time bomb." This section assesses the potential risks and impacts of a disaster, including environmental damage and humanitarian concerns, and discusses the efforts and challenges faced in mitigating these risks through international cooperation and UN interventions. Next, the chapter explores how the crisis has been framed as a security issue by different actors. It examines the strategic use of environmental information to advance political agendas, focusing on how pro-coalition backed government and pro-Houthi media have portrayed the crisis. This demonstrates the transformation of an environmental issue into a security narrative to influence international opinion and justify political actions.

The analysis then delves into the manipulation of information by the conflicting parties, discussing how each side uses the crisis to delegitimize the other and bolster their own positions. This includes evaluating the potential disaster's scale and emphasizing the shared concern among different actors while highlighting the divergent narratives used to frame the crisis. The chapter also analyzes how the UN's role has been securitized. Initially viewed positively by both sides, the UN's involvement later became a point of contention, with each party accusing the UN of bias and leveraging its actions to further their agendas. Finally, the chapter examines how media aligned with the warring factions have portrayed the opposing sides. It reveals the use of wartime-propagandistic language to frame the environmental crisis within the broader conflict, showing how each party pulls the issue into their strategic narratives.

5.2 Introducing the *FSO Safer* Case

5.2.1. *How did the Safer Become a Ticking Environmental Time Bomb?*

362 meters long and 70 meters wide, the *Safer* is one of the largest oil tankers ever constructed (Caesar, 2022). It was built in 1976 and navigated oceans for 11 years before being anchored five miles off the coast of Yemen (**Figure 2**), where it was converted into a storage and offloading unit (*FSO*).

In 2014, the Houthis launched a successful coup in Yemen, triggering the intervention of a Saudi-led coalition with airstrikes to support the government. The Houthis' operation soon precipitated a civil war that continues to this day, resulting in what is often labelled as one of the greatest humanitarian disasters in the world ("Yemen remains "worst humanitarian crisis": UN

office", 2021). The conflict, through both direct and indirect impacts, has already claimed more than a quarter of a million lives ("Yemen war deaths will reach 377,000 by end of the year: UN", 2021).

Figure 2: Geographic location of the *FSO Safer*

Source: (AFP, 2022).

The UNDP projected that if the conflict continues through 2030, approximately 1.3 million people could die, with 70 percent of these deaths attributed to indirect factors such as loss of livelihoods, escalating food prices, and the decline of essential services including healthcare and education (Hanna, Bohl & Moyer, 2021).

In 2015, the Houthis gained control of the area of northwest Yemen where the *Safer* is moored. Since then, the ship has not been inspected or received maintenance. The intense fighting in the area and the potential presence of sea mines around the *Safer* made it impossible to intervene. Given the decaying conditions of the vessel and the presence of inflammable gases rising off the oil tanks, even the smallest spark could cause a massive explosion. Despite the impossibility of intervening in the *Safer*, ecologists and international organizations produced extensive reports on the catastrophic impacts of a spillage or explosion to raise awareness of the decaying status of the *FSO Safer*. Public interest in the mooring vessel sparked in 2018 when the Yemeni government and the Houthi leadership separately demanded the UN's assistance in evaluating the condition of the tanker for maintenance operation to avoid "an imminent environmental and humanitarian catastrophe in the Red Sea" ("Yemen calls UN for help to avoid environmental problem", 2018).

5.2.2. The Risks and Impacts of a Potential Disaster

This call for help prompted a strong interest in the international community to analyze the effects of an oil spillage. The potential for a disaster of such magnitude in a war-torn region with limited resources for cleanup drew the attention of environmental organizations, maritime safety

experts, and governments bordering the Red Sea. Containing over 1.14 million barrels of crude oil, the *Safer* could spill four times the amount of oil the *Exxon Valdez* leaked into Prince William Sound in 1989 (UNEP, 2020). Although it is difficult to estimate the precise impact of a disaster due to seasonal changes in weather and sea conditions, the Geneva-based humanitarian agency *ACAPS*, in collaboration with the companies *Catapult* and *Riskaware*, managed to conduct a risk and impact assessment through oil spill and atmospheric dispersion modelling (ACAPS, 2021).

ACAPS published impact assessments for three quarters: October-December 2020, January-March 2021, and April-June 2021. **Figure 3** illustrates the worst-case model (April-June 2021), which estimated that an oil leak would likely block 50% of the fisheries, putting the livelihoods of 31,500 fishermen and 235,000 workers in fishing-related industries at risk (ACAPS, 2021). Crucial ports such as Hodeidah and Saleef would shut down for weeks, thus limiting food and fuel imports. This, in turn, would tremendously impact the supply of food aid, energy production, and health services to more than eight million people (ACAPS, 2021; Huyn et al., 2021). Additionally, desalination plants in the area could be affected, interrupting the drinking water supply for approximately ten million people (Huyn et al., 2021). According to ACAPS's projections, the cleanup costs could amount to USD20 billion, which is nearly equivalent to Yemen's total GDP in 2018 (World Bank, 2024).

Figure 3: Oil spill thickness from a potential leakage (left) and air pollution (right) from a fire in the *Safer* (April-June 2021)
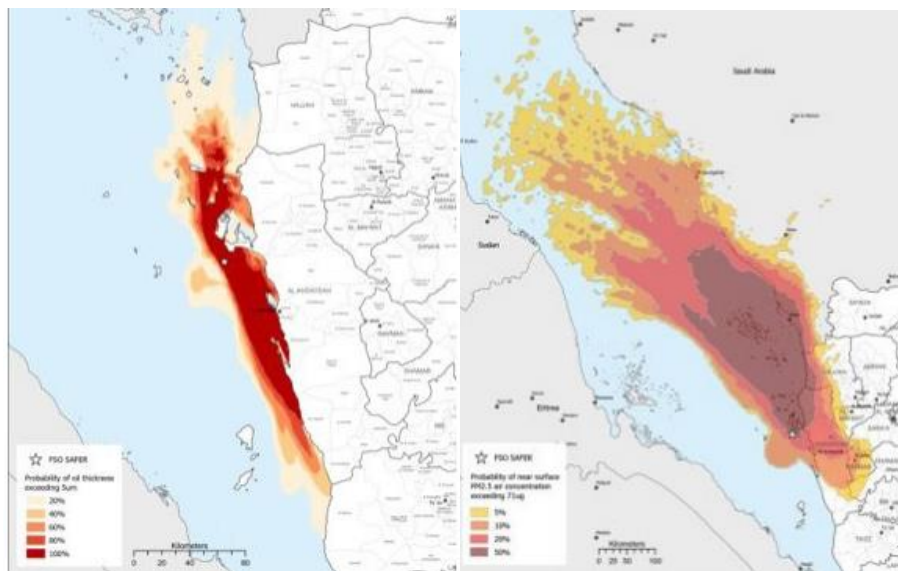
Source: ACAPS (2021).

A potential fire aboard the vessel could lead to even more catastrophic consequences. It is estimated that up to 5.9 million people in Yemen and an additional one million in Saudi Arabia could face extremely high levels of air pollution, severely aggravating the health risk of adults and children with pre-existing lung and heart problems (ACAPS, 2021). Furthermore, around 500 square

kilometres of Yemeni farmland could be blanketed in soot, resulting in significant crop losses for nearly ten million Yemenis and 1.5 million Saudis (ACAPS, 2021).

In the event of a spill, the immediate environmental damage could be catastrophic. The marine ecosystems at risk include the diverse flora and fauna of the Red Sea, such as coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrasses, all of which are crucial for marine biodiversity (Kleinhaus et al., 2020). The toxicity of the oil would pose immediate threats to marine life, including plankton, fish, invertebrates, and mammals, potentially leading to disease, reproductive issues, slowed growth, or death (Berenshtein et al., 2020).

However, the long-term consequences of an oil spill could be much more severe and extensive across the entire Red Sea region. The spread of oil could affect a vast area due to the Red Sea's circulatory patterns, impacting coastal and marine environments far beyond the immediate vicinity of the spill (Greenpeace, 2021). This could lead to prolonged contamination of beaches and marine habitats, with oil residues persisting in the marine environment, causing long-term ecological damage.

5.2.3. Negotiations and Intervention: The Stockholm Agreement and its Aftermath

The international community, represented by the United Nations, has been actively engaging in Yemen since the onset of the crisis in 2011. The UN Security Council (UNSC) first responded to the uprising on October 21, 2011, by adopting Resolution 2014, which endorsed a political solution proposed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (UNSC, 2011) but primarily focused on regional security, with minimal emphasis on Yemen's economic and social issues (Al Dosari & George, 2020: 60). It was only on 26 February 2014 that the UNSC started taking action through Resolution 2140, which authorized coercive force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (UNSC, 2014). In 2015, Resolution 2216 was passed, supporting the Saudi-led coalition's efforts to restore President Hadi's government, and demanding a Houthi withdrawal from captured areas (UNSC, 2015).

Between 2015 and 2018, UN actions largely revolved around maintaining sanctions, such as travel bans and arms embargoes, against those destabilizing Yemen (Younes, 2019: 147). A significant milestone was reached in December 2018 with the Stockholm Agreement, facilitated by the UN, which resulted in partial ceasefire agreements and measures to exchange prisoners and reduce hostilities around critical ports like Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Issa (OSESGY, 2018). Of the three documents constituting the Stockholm Agreement, the UN invested the greatest attention to the Hodeidah document, as only relative peace in that area surrounding the *FSO Safer* could allow the UN to initiate operations on the vessel (Lackner, 2020: 28). To that end, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2452 on January 2019 authorizing the establishment of a Special Political Mission – the United Nations Mission to support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) (UNSC, 2019a). UNMHA's

mandate focused on leading the UN-led Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC), monitoring compliance of parties, verifying redeployment and takeover of local security forces in Hodeidah, and, more broadly, supporting UN work in the city (UNSC, 2019a).

Several factors, however, hindered UNMHA's effectiveness in promoting an equitable and sustainable peace process. First, the Hodeidah Agreement was the result of the UN's heavy reliance on strategic ambiguity and external pressure (Fakirah, 2020: 272). This resulted in vague language, allowing for multiple, competing interpretations of key provisions and complicating UNMHA's mission (Palik, 2021: 455). Although mediation was not part of its official mandate, RCC dedicated significant efforts to mediation with the UN Special Envoy to restore confidence (UNSC, 2019b). Consequently, UNMHA's credibility was undermined, as RCC had to frequently mediate between conflicting parties to reach a mutually acceptable interpretation of the agreement (Fakirah, 2020: 274). Secondly, the UNMHA had to operate in a territory where the Houthis managed to install their own security system (ACAPS, 2020). Therefore, the monitors' freedom of movement and the possibility to collect information from the locals were often hindered by the Houthis' repressive security measures. Finally, from the moment the mission arrived, the conflicting parties have consistently obstructed its efforts (Palik, 2021: 461). Although no public reports are available, a member of the mission estimated that from March to April 2019, there were approximately 180 ceasefire violations each day. However, they were unable to determine responsibility for these violations, preventing full verification of which party was accountable for each incident (Palik, 2021: 462). For these reasons, the Stockholm Agreement represented a milestone in the Yemeni peace process by bringing the warring parties to the negotiating table and allowing some humanitarian relief; however, it did not establish a durable ceasefire or a comprehensive political solution (Younes, 2019: 159).

The UN and the Houthis began negotiations on political and technical details to organize an inspection of the *Safer*. After months of talks, the UN managed to assemble a team in Djibouti, ready to cross the Red Sea and investigate the *FSO Safer*. However, the Houthis withdrew permission the night before the inspection claiming that they were not satisfied with the concessions offered by the UN. In the following years, the UN held several negotiations, but the Houthis continuously impeded every effort to assess and repair the vessel. This dangerous stalemate and the ensuing delays have alarmingly escalated the risk of a catastrophe. For instance, the vessel was on the verge of sinking in 2020 after a burst pipe led to significant flooding in the engine room. Although the leak was temporarily fixed, the incident served as a grim reminder of the potential disaster looming over the Red Sea. The near-sinking of the ship dramatically increased public awareness of the risk of an environmental catastrophe, to the point that the UN Security Council began holding special sessions

to highlight the need to resolve the issue ("Yemen: Briefing and Consultations on the *FSO Safer* Oil Tanker", 2021).

Throughout 2021 and 2022, the UN continued talks and fundraising efforts, including a crowdfunding campaign, to address the *Safer* crisis. Despite the looming humanitarian, economic, and humanitarian catastrophe, negotiations for access to the *FSO Safer* have repeatedly stalled (Hincks, 2021). Following consultations with pertinent parties, the United Nations developed a strategy aimed at averting an oil spill by relocating the oil to a secure vessel and establishing a sustainable alternative to replace the *FSO Safer* (UN, 2022). On 5 March 2022, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, head of the Houthi supreme revolutionary committee, tweeted that the Houthis reached an agreement with the UN to deal with the *Safer* tanker ("Yemen's Houthis agree UN proposal to offload decaying oil tanker", 2022).

Despite challenges in securing funds, the UN successfully conducted the oil transfer operation. Between the end of July and mid-August 2023, over 1.1 million barrels of oil were moved from the ageing *Safer* tanker to a new vessel, averting an imminent environmental disaster (UN, 2023). Although this operation prevented a massive oil spill, the *Safer* still poses an ongoing environmental risk due to the remaining oil sludge and sediment that requires thorough cleaning in the operation's next phase (UN, 2022). This subsequent stage will also see the implementation of a mooring system for the replacement vessel, the *Yemen*, to ensure its stability (UN, 2023). Ultimately, the *FSO Safer* will be slated for dismantling at a shipyard.

5.3. The Securitization of an Environmental Threat

The first step of my research is assessing how the environmental issue linked to the *Safer* had been presented in the media. To do that, I used the operator [*environment*] in *Sketch Engine*, locating both the nominal ("environment") and adjectival ("environmental") forms. As **Figure 4** shows, such environment-related words are quite frequent across the selected articles, with 480 hits in the dataset.
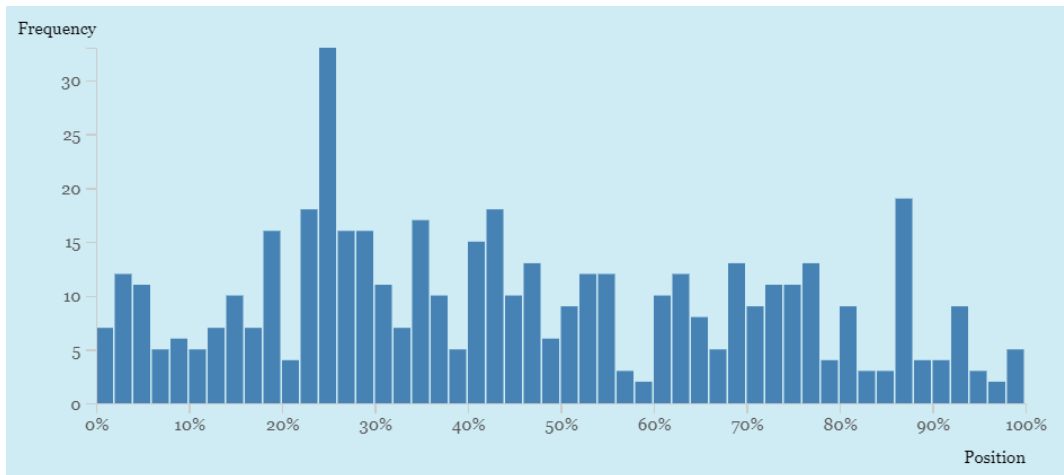

Figure 4: Frequency of environment-related words. *Note*: The x-axis represents the position within the documents, ranging from 0% to 100%, indicating where KWIC instances were found. The y-axis shows the frequency of KWIC instances at each position, illustrating how often they appear in different parts of the corpus.

Moreover, all the sentences containing "environment" and "environmental" were exported to *Atlas.ti* to visualize the words that are most frequently used in the corpus when describing the environmental aspect of the crisis (**Figure 5**). Both the Arab media associated with the conflicting parties, as well as more neutral channels focused on informing the audiences about the *FSO Safer* and the related crisis. Terms like "leak", "spill", and "oil" are prominently featured, underscoring the widespread concern for environmental dangers, consistent across media outlets linked to conflicting parties as well as neutral platforms. While Arab media outlets have actively reported on the imminent dangers associated with the *FSO Safer* and the key actors involved, their coverage also reflects the narratives of the warring parties engaged in the Yemen conflict. This approach suggests that the media not only serves as a channel for disseminating information about environmental risks but also as a platform for the conflicting parties to propagate their perspectives and political agenda. For instance, *Step Agency* (a pro-government news channel) claimed that "The Yemeni Mine Observatory reported on Monday that the Houthi militia had deployed sea mines in the vicinity of the *Safer* oil tank" (Step Agency, 2022). On the contrary, pro-Houthi media like *Ansarollah.com* hold the Saudi-led coalition

("aggression coalition") responsible for any environmental repercussions in the Red Sea (Ansar Allah, 2020a).

Figure 5: Cloud map of environment-related words in Arab media.

5.3.1. The Weaponization of Environmental Information

The previous section introduced how environmental concerns regarding the *Safer*'s degradation were often accompanied by the strategic framing of the crisis by various media outlets. In this section, I will analyze the extent and methods through which these outlets securitize the *Safer* by manipulating the narrative around the oil tanker. By doing so, they aim to shape the audience's understanding of the causes of the crisis and the responsible parties, thus steering the discourse toward their respective political agendas and enhancing their standing both domestically and internationally.

Among all the actors interacting in the crisis, the main connections can be established between the *FSO Safer* itself, the Houthis, the Yemeni government, and the UN. Reports describe the interactions involving the *Safer* as environmentally harmful, particularly when linked to either the Houthis or the coalition-backed government. On the other hand, actions associated with the UN are depicted as peaceful and aimed at saving lives. Although the participants in the crisis are mostly the same, they are described using diverse labels that reflect different ideological stances. For example, the Houthis are frequently labelled as "terrorists" (60 mentions), accused of exploiting the oil tanker for political gain and extortion. Such over-lexicalization suggests an ideological bias, emphasizing the intense worry about the Houthis' actions and intentions, thus framing them as a significant threat in the discourse (Tawffeek, 2023: 133).

Early linguistic analysis found the study of "nominalization" particularly intriguing. Classic works on discourse analysis demonstrated that opting for noun phrases instead of verbs was often influenced by ideological motives (Fowler et al., 1979; Fowler, 1991). This practice has been commonly found in both English and Arabic political discourse, suggesting a universal tendency (Fakhri, 2012). Similarly, in the discourse surrounding the *FSO Safer* in Arab media, actions have

often been transformed into nouns, presenting them as static entities. Such use of normalization techniques, though common in media, can serve manipulative purposes by distancing readers from the reality of the events described. Nominalization may obscure the agents involved in the narratives, conceal causality, or eliminate the timing of events, thus abstracting and detaching the audience from the immediacy and implications of the actions taking place (Halliday, 1992: 62).

For example, neutral media often describe the state of the *FSO Safer* with phrases like "the ship has not undergone maintenance since 2015", without specifying responsibility. Similarly, coverage of delays in the UN's mission frequently omits clear attribution of blame, with statements such as "the war in Yemen has hampered efforts to empty the tank," reported by outlets like the *BBC*, which leave the identity of the obstructing parties ambiguous. In contrast, media outlets aligned with the Houthis or the coalition make deliberate use of nominalization to clarify agency and causality. Houthi-aligned media often accuse the coalition of obstructing the unloading operations, whereas pro-coalition channels claim that the "ongoing potential disaster is a result of Houthi obstinacy, despite government efforts".

Both sides in the crisis have employed the tactic of selectively omitting crucial information, thereby potentially preventing readers from forming informed opinions or understanding certain facts (Blass, 2005:173). Despite the widely acknowledged imminent danger, pro-government media consistently called for an end to what they describe as the Houthis' "political blackmail" and "terrorist behavior", yet often failed to substantiate these claims with clear evidence of direct actions linked to the *Safer* crisis. For instance, numerous reports claim the Houthis have mined the waters near the *Safer* and have threatened to destroy it if the Saudi-led coalition did not halt its operations in Hodeidah (**Figure 6**). However, these reports typically lacked concrete proof of such threats. In one notable instance, the Saudi ambassador to Yemen alleged that the Houthis planned to target 19 vessels, potentially causing a massive environmental disaster in the Red Sea ("Saudi ambassador to Yemen confirms Houthis detaining 19 oil vessels", 2018). Yet, this claim was quickly countered by TankerTrackers.com, an independent online service that uses open-source data to track oil shipments, which found no evidence to support his assertions (TankerTrackers.com, 2018).
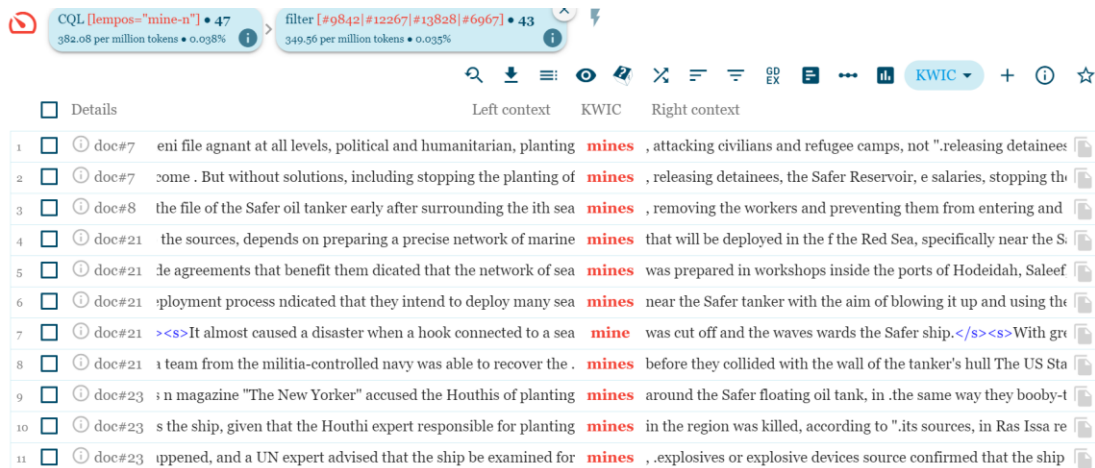
Figure 6: Concordance lines for "mine(s)" in the dataset.

Similarly, pro-Houthi media persistently argued that the coalition was exacerbating the crisis by blocking the export of oil from the *Safer*, which could have financed humanitarian needs and civil salaries in Yemen. However, these outlets frequently overlooked or failed to mention statements from UN officials that criticized the Houthis for not providing security guarantees to UN teams and for obstructing efforts to maintain the *Safer*. This selective reporting highlights their strategy to shape public perception by omitting significant aspects of the narrative that could undermine their position.

Both factions frequently employed hyperbole to emphasize their narratives and persuade their audience (Blass, 2005:173). Analysis of the dataset reveals both explicit and implicit examples where language and exaggerations were strategically used to provide more emphasis than necessary. The media often portrayed the Houthis not just as "militias" or "rebels," but also accused them of committing "terrorist crimes" against the environment of Yemen. Similarly, the Public Authority for Environmental Protection of the Houthi government stated that "the aggressor nations continue to devastate the marine ecosystem and breach international laws and agreements meant to protect the seas, leveraging the tanker as a bargaining chip amid the international community's silence" (Ansar Allah, 2020b).

Manipulation in the discourse can also manifest subtly through implications, such as the repeated use of charged words that evoke strong emotions (Blass, 2005). The analysis of the dataset shows how both sides in the conflict utilized emotional language to amplify their viewpoints and provoke reactions from their audiences. For instance, the critical nature of the situation was communicated using words like "disaster" (381 hits), "catastrophe" (119 hits), "explosion" (133 hits), and "oil leak" (68 hits), underscoring the urgency and potential devastation. Terms such as "militia" (362 hits) and "terrorist" (60 hits) were frequently used to depict the Houthis as the instigators of the crisis. Conversely, the Houthis portrayed the coalition-backed government as the antagonist

responsible for the impending disaster, often repeating terms such as "aggression" (245 times), "coalition" (85 times), and "aggression coalition" (44 times) to frame their narrative.

As an additional step in this discourse analysis regarding the *FSO Safer*, it is pertinent to acknowledge the sentiments expressed through the language used by the media outlets of the conflicting factions. The discourse is heavily loaded with terms that evoke negative emotions. For instance, the Houthis describe the government as a mercenary of the aggressor coalition, accusing it of systematically damaging Yemen's marine environment (Saba, 2021). Conversely, the coalition-backed government urges international and regional forces to exert pressure on the Houthis, criticizing them for their repeated threats to detonate the tanker. There is also a palpable sense of dissatisfaction on both sides. The coalition and government express frustration with what they describe as the manipulative actions of a "terrorist militia", accusing them of using the tanker for political extortion. Meanwhile, the Houthis express their grievances against what they call the "aggressor countries and their mercenaries", who they allege are deliberately blocking the export of the *Safer*'s stock to undermine the Houthis' legitimacy.

The following sections will further investigate how the securitization process enfolded in the context of the *Safer* by looking at the three themes most frequently recurring in the dataset: the environmental disaster, the UN's unloading plan, and the portrayal of the opposing party by both the Houthis and the coalition-backed government.

5.3.2. The Scale of the Catastrophe

As **Figure 7** illustrates, the *FSO Safer* was described as a ticking time bomb in many contexts of the dataset, with 58 hits of the lemma "time bomb" across news articles.
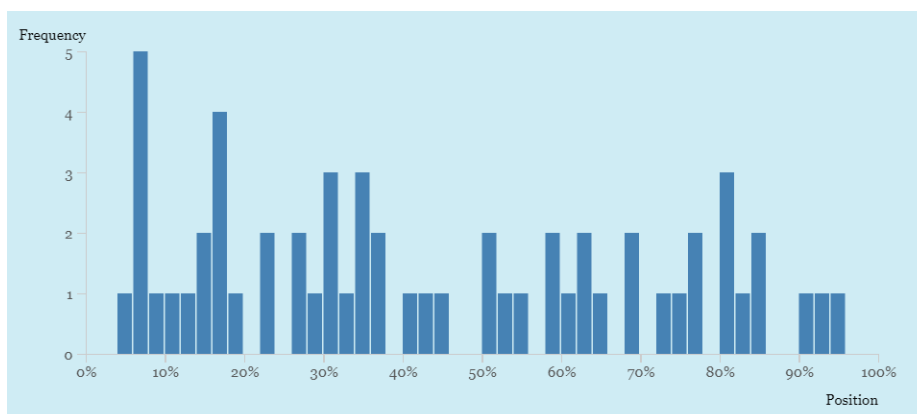

Figure 7: Distribution of "time bomb" in the dataset. *Note*: The x-axis represents the position within the documents, ranging from 0% to 100%, indicating where KWIC instances were found. The y-axis shows the frequency of KWIC instances at each position, illustrating how often they appear in different parts of the corpus.

Media sources across different alignments—pro-Houthi, pro-coalition, and neutral—all recognize the *FSO Safer* as a "ticking time bomb" that may explode at any moment, unleashing catastrophic environmental damage on the Yemeni coastline and beyond. By describing the oil tanker as a ticking bomb, media channels highlight the immediate danger and the pressing need for action, framing the situation as an existential threat that demands urgent attention and response. Both pro-Houthi and pro-government media use the term "ticking time bomb" to elevate the *FSO Safer* issue to a critical security concern, but they do so in distinct ways. Reports from media supporting the Yemeni government describe the vessel's decay as a calculated strategy by the Houthis to use the ship as leverage, potentially threatening to detonate it to stop Saudi-led military advances in Hodeidah (Yeni Şafak, 2022). Conversely, Houthi-affiliated outlets stressed the catastrophic repercussions of a potential spill or explosion, warning that any major damage to the ship would have killed the marine ecosystem, which has been present for thousands of years in the waters of the Red Sea (Minister of Transport, 2022). Meanwhile, global channels like *BBC* and *Al Jazeera* presented the *Safer* as a severe risk, emphasizing the widespread repercussions that an oil spill would have across the region. This narrative is supported by the frequent mention of an 'environmental disaster' in the media, with the term appearing in 133 instances, underscoring the potential scale of the catastrophe (**Figure 8**).
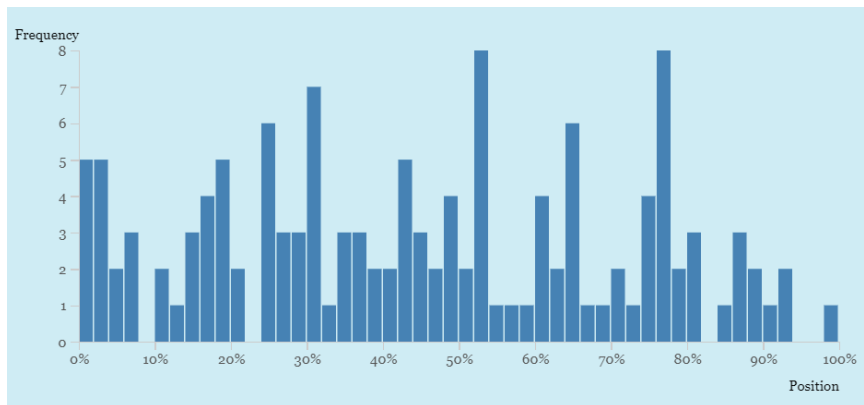

Figure 8: Frequency of "environmental disaster" in the dataset. *Note*: The x-axis represents the position within the documents, ranging from 0% to 100%, indicating where KWIC instances were found. The y-axis shows the frequency of KWIC instances at each position, illustrating how often they appear in different parts of the corpus.

Media sources unanimously acknowledge that a potential leak from the *FSO Safer* would cause a severe humanitarian and environmental crisis. Both pro-Houthi and pro-coalition outlets used information from NGO and UN reports to describe the scale of the disaster. Referring to local and international reports, the Houthi Minister of Transport, Abdul Wahab Al-Durra, warned about the

disastrous repercussions on coral reefs, mangroves, migrating birds, and the whole Red Sea's biodiversity (Minister of Transport, 2022b). Other media channels associated with the Saudi-backed government added that the toxic gases resulting from a fire would have dramatic consequences on the health of local communities, with 3 million people in Hodeidah estimated to suffer from respiratory diseases (Cratar, 2022).

Pro-Houthi outlets reported that the decaying of the *Safer* would exacerbate the current humanitarian crisis in Yemen. However, pro-coalition media went into more detail indicating that the disaster would endanger the life of 8.4 million people. Moreover, desalination plants would stop their activities due to the pollution of the waters, cutting off the supply to around 10 million people (Cratar, 2022). Most importantly, the potential closure of key seaports like Hodeidah and Saleef for up to six months would compound the disaster. Hodeidah, in particular, is vital for the importation of food, fuel, and medical supplies into a country where 80% of the population of millions of people depend on aid.

Finally, another way to securitize the issue was by presenting the catastrophic financial impact of an oil spill on Yemen's already fragile economy. The word "economic" is repeated 89 times in the dataset, underscoring its importance in the discourse surrounding the *Safer* crisis. Moreover, media sources often compared the potential ship's sinking to historical disasters like the *Exxon Valdez* (19 hits) to emphasize the scale of the catastrophe. Certain news media further highlighted the financial burden of a potential spill by informing the audience about the substantial economic losses in key sectors such as fishery, fuel prices, and agriculture (Cratar, 2022).

Whether through the lens of pro-Houthi, pro-coalition, or neutral outlets, the depiction of the *Safer* as a "ticking time bomb" underscores a shared perception of imminent danger, yet the motivations and implications attributed to this risk diverge significantly depending on the source. While all parties recognize the catastrophic potential of the *Safer*'s condition, the framing of the narrative varies, with pro-coalition outlets often substantiating their viewpoints with international reports, whereas Houthi-affiliated media emphasize the existential threat to local ecosystems and communities.

This difference in framing can be attributed to distinct strategic objectives. Pro-coalition outlets may rely on international reports to lend credibility to their narrative and appeal to the global community for support, seeking to frame the Houthis as irresponsible and dangerous actors on the international stage. Conversely, Houthi-affiliated media might focus on local ecological and community threats to resonate with domestic audiences, emphasizing the immediate and personal impacts of the crisis to garner local support and justify their control over the region.

These initial findings suggest that the *FSO Safer* crisis is not only a potential environmental disaster but also a strategic element in the broader geopolitical conflict. The distinct narrative framing by pro-Houthi and pro-coalition media highlights how each side uses the crisis to advance their political agendas. Pro-coalition outlets, by substantiating their reports with international findings, aim to gain global support and depict the Houthis as reckless actors. In contrast, Houthi-affiliated media focus on the immediate ecological and community threats to rally local support and legitimize their control. The use of *Safer*'s deteriorating state as a point of leverage in media discourses aligns with securitization theory, which posits that actors transform subjects into matters of security to achieve specific political objectives (Buzan et al., 1998: 27). In this case, the looming ecological catastrophe is securitized by various stakeholders to mobilize international support, draw attention to their adversaries' culpabilities, or justify military and political actions under the guise of preemptive defence against environmental destruction

5.3.3. Politicizing the UN's Involvement

The United Nations intervention in the *FSO Safer* crisis has progressed through several key stages, reflecting growing international concern and efforts to prevent an environmental disaster. Initially, the UN's involvement was limited to diplomatic appeals for access to the tanker. As the *Safer*'s condition deteriorated, the UN organized technical missions in 2020 and, by mid-2023, successfully negotiated emergency interventions to transfer the oil and mitigate the immediate threat. Despite intervening as a neutral actor to mitigate the threat, the UN soon became part of this "war of words" as both the Houthis and the Yemeni government strategically used the UN's involvement in the crisis to influence international opinion and bolster their political positions.
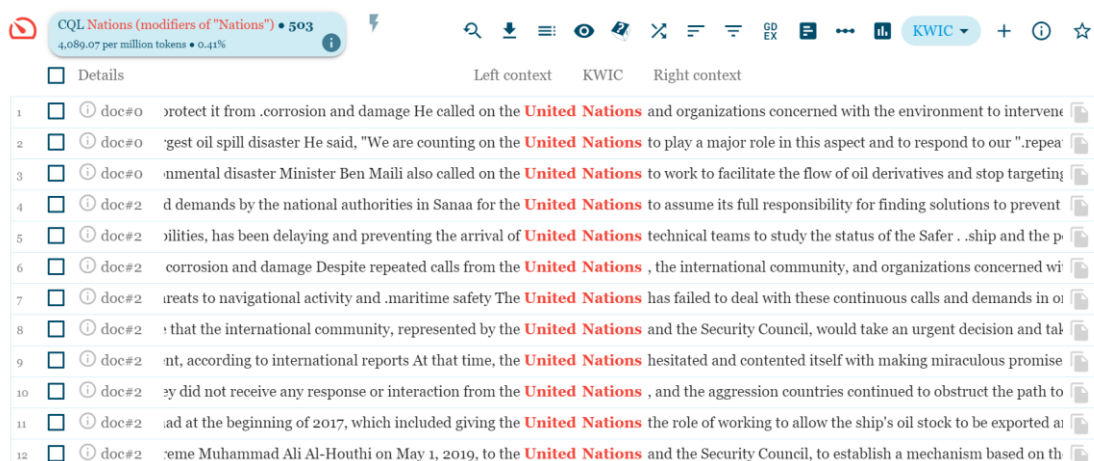

Figure 9: Concordance lines for "United Nations" in the dataset.

The word "United Nations" was mentioned more than 500 times in the dataset. The concordance lines in **Figure 9** reflect a dynamic and often contradictory perception of the United Nations' involvement in the *FSO Safer* crisis by the conflicting parties in Yemen. Initially, both the

Houthis and the Yemeni government expressed gratitude towards the United Nations when the first reports on the *FSO Safer* emerged. These early interactions are characterized by a reliance on the UN to provide not just technical assistance but also to play a major role in preventing an environmental disaster, highlighting the trust and expectations placed on international intervention. In a statement to the Yemeni News Agency (*Saba*), the Minister of Oil and Minerals in the Houthi government encapsulated this sentiment by saying "We are counting on the United Nations to play a major role in this aspect and to respond to our repeated calls to avoid the explosion of the floating tank, which will have catastrophic effects on everyone" (Saba, 2017). Likewise, the Yemeni government also acknowledged the UN's leadership in solving the crisis, affirming their continued support to ensure the safety and security of the marine environment of Yemen (26 September News, 2020). Keywords like "welcomes the UN" (11 hits) and "appreciates the UN's efforts" (6 hits) were prevalent in this phase, highlighting both parties' reliance on the UN to manage the deteriorating situation and prevent an environmental disaster.

Similarly, as the salvation plan was coming to an end, both the Houthis and the Yemeni government expressed their gratitude to the international community for their help in mitigating the threat. In a meeting with the UN Resident Representative and Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen, the Houthi Minister of Transport expressed gratitude for the UN's active engagement in resolving the *Safer* Reservoir issue, emphasizing their commitment to preventing a potential disaster that could impact the Red Sea (Minister of Transport, 2022a). In a similar vein, the Yemeni Prime Minister at the time, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, expressed in an interview the government's full support for the UN plan to offload the *Safer* and avoid the catastrophe (Al-Arabiya, 2022).

However, when the crisis reached its peak, the UN was pulled into the securitization efforts of both parties. Focusing on the news articles dated between 2020 and mid-2023, I frequently found keywords indicative of frustration and criticism, such as "United Nations' continued neglect", "United Nations' failure", "blames the UN", and "accuses the international community". The Houthis and the Yemeni government strategically framed the UN's involvement by accusing it of bias and siding with the opposing party.

Houthi-affiliated media highlighted that the indifference of the international community and the sanctions imposed on the Houthis hindered the timely resolution of the crisis (Ansar Allah, 2021). The Houthis voiced their displeasure, criticizing the UN for neglecting its duties regarding the *Safer* and not executing the agreed-upon urgent maintenance, warning of an impending environmental disaster in the Red Sea (Al Mayadeen, 2022). Additionally, a report from *Saba* claimed that the initiation and progress of the UN's emergency mission were influenced by what they called "the

American-Saudi-Emirati aggression coalition" (Saba, 2023), casting doubts on the legitimacy and neutrality of the UN's emergency mission.

Conversely, the Yemeni government called for the Security Council to intervene militarily to neutralize the threat from the decaying vessel, attributing the ongoing risk to "the continued intransigence of the Houthi militia" (Al-Sahwa, 2020b). While the Houthis accused the UN of siding with the Saudi-led coalition, the Yemeni government employed terms like "UN's appeasement" and "facilitating the Houthis' obstruction" to argue that the UN's actions, or lack thereof, were enabling the Houthis' detrimental strategies (Yeni Şafak, 2021).

Moreover, both parties adopted clauses that evoked urgency such as "calls on" (83 hits) and "immediate/urgent action" (16 hits) to put pressure on the UN and mobilize a more prompt and forceful response from the international community. On the one hand, the Houthis urged the UN's involvement to prevent a local and regional catastrophe, emphasizing the potential environmental disaster and the need for immediate international intervention to mitigate the threat. Conversely, the Yemeni government pointed to what they called "the Houthi militia's manipulation of the *FSO Safer*" (Al-Sahwa, 2020a; Al-Arabiya, 2022), framing it as a security threat that extends beyond Yemen's borders. In particular, the government highlighted the urgency of addressing the Houthis' actions, portraying them as not merely an environmental concern but also a significant risk to regional stability due to their "blackmailing strategy".

Figure 10: Collocates of "United Nations" in pro-Houthi media.

Overall, criticism to the UN, the Houthis' criticism of the UN appears harsher, as indicated by the frequent use of terms like "disavow", "accuse", "urge", and "ask" (**Figure 10**). These terms

suggest a strong dissatisfaction and a push for accountability, reflecting their frustration with what they perceive as the UN's failure to act effectively or impartially.

This harsher criticism from the Houthis can be attributed to several factors. First, the Houthis may feel marginalized and believe that the UN is biased towards the coalition-backed government, leading them to use stronger language to voice their grievances. Second, the Houthis' reliance on the UN for critical interventions might have heightened their disappointment when the UN did not meet their expectations promptly. Lastly, the ongoing conflict and the Houthis' strategic need to project themselves as defenders of Yemeni sovereignty could have driven them to adopt a more accusatory tone towards international actors perceived as not fully supporting their cause.

Figure 11: Collocates of "United Nations" in pro-government media.

Conversely, the Yemeni government, while also critical, appears to use a broader range of terms, including "announce", "address", "urge" and "aware", suggesting a more varied interaction with the UN (**Figure 11**). This could indicate a more diplomatic approach, aiming to maintain international support and legitimacy. The government's use of terms like "urge" and "address" reflects their attempts to compel the UN into action while still engaging in diplomatic discourse.

The data shows that the United Nations' involvement in the *FSO Safer* crisis was strategically utilized by both the Houthis and the Yemeni government to advance their political agendas through securitization. In particular, as the crisis intensified, their narratives were characterized by critical tones. The Houthis harshly criticized the UN, reflecting their frustration and portraying the UN as complicit in exacerbating the situation. On the other hand, the Yemeni government adopted a more diplomatic yet urgent approach, aiming to compel UN action while maintaining international support.

Both parties strategically framed the UN's involvement, alternating between appreciation and criticism, to pressure the UN and influence international opinion.

5.3.4. Politicization of the Opposing Parties

Finally, the securitization of the *FSO Safer* crisis also happens through the strategic portrayal of the opposing parties in media outlets aligned with the warring factions. Despite widespread agreement on the catastrophic consequences of a spill, both sides have heavily politicized the issue, using negative and positive connotations to shape public perception, as illustrated by the Houthis case in **Figure 12**. This section will delve into how this politicization is manifested in the media representations of these parties.

Figure 12: Collocates of "Houthi" in the dataset.

The term "Houthis" is mentioned 207 times across the collected data. Media outlets associated with the government portray the Houthis as a militia leveraging the imminent threat of an ecological disaster, characterizing them as "blackmailing the world with a time bomb" (Cratar, 2022) and consistently impeding the UN's efforts to manage the tanker (Al-Arabiya, 2022). They are further criticized for using political and military tactics to hinder maintenance efforts on the *Safer*. Reports from several outlets aligned with the Saudi-led coalition, such as *Step Agency*, *Crater*, *Yeni Safak*, and *Okaz*, suggest that the Houthis have placed sea mines near the *Safer*, attributing to them the potential environmental and humanitarian repercussions of a disaster. Furthermore, these reports often label the Houthis as "Iran's arm" and claim they are "supported by Iran", suggesting a strong connection with Tehran. That is why publications like *Crater* and *Okaz* emphasize the critical need for swift international intervention to apply greater pressure on the Houthi militia to cease its tactical exploitation and political blackmail.

Neutral media outlets, like *Al Jazeera* and *BBC*, primarily focus on documenting key developments in the crisis and informing their audience about the severe consequences of an oil leak. They employ impartial terms like "Houthis", "the Houthi group", or "Ansar Allah" (the official name of the Houthi movement) to maintain objectivity. In stark contrast, pro-Houthi media vehemently deny all allegations made by the coalition-backed Yemeni government and its allied media, presenting an alternative narrative. While media opposing the Houthis frequently label them as "rebels," "terrorist group," and "militia," the official Houthi channel, *Ansarollah.com*, refers to their leadership as "the Supreme Political Council" and "the Salvation Government," highlighting a more formal and governmental image, as illustrated in **Figure 13**.
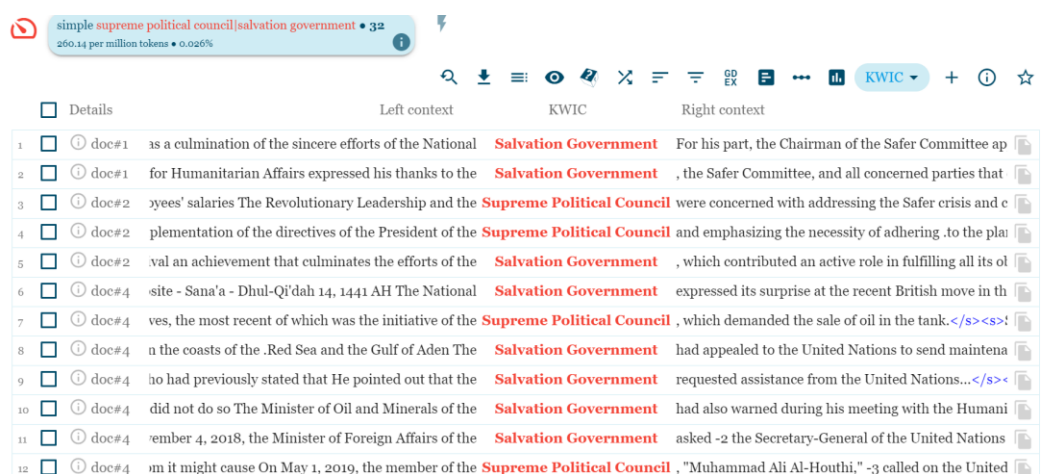

Figure 13: Collocates of "Salvation Government" and "Supreme Political Council" in the dataset.

On the other hand, pro-Houthis media describe the coalition and the coalition-backed government of Yemen as an "aggression coalition", "aggressor countries", "the American-Saudi-Emirati aggression", and the "hotel government", among others.

The strategic framing of the crisis by each party not only portrays the opposing side negatively but also securitizes the *FSO Safer* situation. By using wartime-propagandistic language in the context of the *Safer* crisis, each party is pulling the environmental issue into the broader Yemeni conflict. The depiction of the Houthis as a militia leveraging the potential for disaster to manipulate global powers exemplifies the transformation of an environmental crisis into a security narrative. This is paralleled by the depiction of the coalition forces in equally stark terms, characterizing them as aggressors perpetuating the conflict. Such narratives serve the dual purpose of legitimizing each party's actions and policies while delegitimizing their opponents.

6. Conclusion

In recent years, the linkages between climate and security have gained significant attention. The first step in that direction has been recognizing climate change and environmental disasters as global security issues (Goldstein, 2016), emphasizing the need to understand how they are framed and addressed in security discourses. However, it is also crucial to understand the role of environmental threats in conflict scenarios – not just as passive backdrops or catalysts for conflict but as active elements within strategic maneuvers in geopolitical disputes. In that sense, this thesis contributes to the existing literature by examining the securitization of an environmental catastrophe in conflict, which is an area that has been largely ignored. While previous studies have investigated the framing of climate change in domestic politics (e.g., Rothe, 2015; Diez et al., 2016; Warner & Boas, 2019), my study analyses the securitization process within a conflict zone, specifically examining how environmental threats are used as leverage in ongoing disputes. This gap in the literature prompted the formulation of the research question: *How are environmental threats utilized as strategic tools in geopolitical conflicts?*

To address this question, I analysed the *FSO Safer* crisis, wherein the risk of an ecological catastrophe was manipulated by both the Houthis and the coalition-backed government, highlighting the complex interplay between environmental risk and security strategy in a high-stakes conflict setting. My analysis was based on a theoretical framework combining securitization and environmental crisis governance to understand the interplay between discourse and action in the context of environmental security. This dual-framework approach enriched the analysis, enabling a thorough exploration of both the construction and management of environmental threats within the realms of security and crisis management, thus deepening the overall understanding of the subject Additionally, the study employed a combination of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to analyse the discourse surrounding the *FSO Safer* crisis. This methodological approach allowed for a detailed examination of how the crisis was framed as a security issue by the various actors, particularly focusing on the language and rhetoric used in media and official statements.

My findings in Chapter 5 reveal a nuanced picture of how the internationally recognized government and the Houthis have strategically utilized the environmental threat posed by the deteriorating oil tanker to advance their geopolitical and strategic interests. This crisis has not only been an environmental concern but has also served as a significant bargaining chip in the ongoing conflict, illustrating the complex dynamics of security, politics, and environmental risk. The analysis suggests that the warring parties adopted rhetoric and strategies that make it evident the securitization of the *FSO Safer* within the Yemeni conflict.

First, both parties instrumentally framed the environmental threat to underscore their political narratives and justify their actions. Pro-Houthi media described the "aggression coalition" and the "mercenary government" as the primary reasons behind the potential destruction of the Red Sea's marine ecosystem, reinforcing their anti-coalition stance. Conversely, media aligned with the internationally recognized government labeled the Houthis as a "terrorist militia", accusing them of exploiting the tanker crisis to blackmail the international community.

Secondly, each side shifted responsibility for the crisis onto the opposing party to delegitimize them and gain a moral high ground. By blaming the other for the impending environmental disaster, both parties aimed to deflect criticism and rally both domestic and international support by portraying the opposing faction as irresponsible and hazardous to regional stability.

Lastly, both sides also sought to garner international attention and support by highlighting the global implications of the environmental threat. Neutral media outlets focused on the history of the *Safer*, the potential impacts of a disaster, and the UN's intervention plan, which both sides leveraged to appeal to international audiences. The Houthis framed the crisis to elicit sympathy and support against the "aggression coalition", while the internationally recognized government attempted to secure backing by framing the Houthis' actions as a threat to global maritime security and environmental sustainability.

In addition to the methodological limitations discussed in Chapter 4.5, there are two main shortcomings to this research. First, relying solely on traditional media sources is a significant limitation. While the study provides detailed insights into how the *FSO Safer* crisis is portrayed in traditional news outlets, it does not account for the narratives and discussions occurring on social media platforms. Social media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and political discourse, often providing real-time reactions and grassroots perspectives that are not captured by traditional media (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017: 504; Weeks et al., 2017: 215). Therefore, the exclusion of social media data may overlook critical aspects of the securitization process, such as the influence of online activism, the spread of misinformation, and the role of social networks in mobilizing public sentiment.

Second, the study's extensive focus on media discourse means that it may not fully capture the broader socio-political and economic factors influencing the securitization process. Media reports often simplify complex issues, potentially omitting important details about the underlying motivations and strategies of key actors involved in the crisis. For instance, understanding how Saudi Arabia's security concerns and economic interests in the Red Sea influence its stance on the *FSO Safer* would provide a more comprehensive view of the crisis. Similarly, examining how external relations, such as those between Iran and the Houthi movement, shape the narratives and actions of

involved parties is crucial. Without considering these broader factors, the analysis may provide an incomplete picture of the securitization dynamics at play.

Because of these limitations, this study provides several opportunities for future research. First, my thesis has focused on the dynamics through which environmental issues get securitized in conflict. This topic is highly relevant today and the pressing challenges of climate change suggest that its significance will only grow in the years to come. Moreover, the strategic use of environmental threats within geopolitical conflicts has profound implications for global security and environmental sustainability. A deeper understanding of how environmental disasters are exploited as bargaining tools in geopolitical negotiations is essential for shaping effective international policies and response mechanisms. This is particularly critical in an era where environmental and security issues are increasingly intertwined, necessitating proactive approaches to crisis management and conflict resolution.

Secondly, this research showcases the promise of integrating securitization theory with insights from environmental crisis governance. Such a combination allows for a more nuanced understanding of how environmental issues are constructed and managed as security threats within the complex frameworks of international relations and domestic policies. By applying securitization theory, the study explored the rhetorical and strategic dimensions of how environmental threats are framed in conflict scenarios. Simultaneously, incorporating principles from environmental crisis governance provided a lens to examine the practical responses and policy actions triggered by these securitizations. This interdisciplinary approach enriches the analytical depth of the study, uncovering the complex interplay among discourse, policy, and action within the domain of environmental securitization.

Regarding the crisis in Yemen, the United Nations intervention plan successfully averted the worst-case scenario of a catastrophic oil spill in the Red Sea through the timely and strategic management of the *FSO Safer*. However, the study highlights how the environmental threat posed by the *Safer* was not only an ecological concern but also a strategic tool manipulated by both the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Houthis to further their geopolitical interests. By examining the securitization of this crisis in the Arab media, the research provides deeper insights into the complex interplay between environmental risks and political strategies in conflict zones. Future research should explore the impact of social media on the securitization process and how these platforms can both exacerbate and mitigate environmental threats. Additionally, investigating the potential of integrating securitization theory with environmental crisis governance could provide valuable insights into managing environmental threats in conflict settings.

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