

Appraising the Intricacies in the Saudi Yemen Political Impasse and Its Implication for Security in the Region

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ABSTRACT: *The Yemeni political transition which was to herald a new dawn for the democratic transition of government in the year 2011 dashed the optimism of many when the turmoil in the state led to its collapse in 2014, with the invasion and subsequent occupation of the state capital by forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Drawing from the above this paper makes an assessment of the lingering conflict in Yemen and the intervention of Saudi Arabia and how it has impacted the entire region. The main objective of the paper is to underscore the impact the conflict has on the Middle-Eastern region. The paper adopts the qualitative method of analysis, it finds that the war in Yemen was primarily ignited by the trajectory of domestic instability and further escalated by regional and international interests. It concludes and recommends amongst other that there is the need to halt the altercation and resume political discussions in a bid to reach a dialogue, and that further militarization of the region will bring hardship and suffering to the people.*

KEYWORDS: *Appraising the intricacies, Saudi-Yemeni Political Impasse, implication for the Region.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Yemen's political transition, which began with much hope and optimism in 2011, collapsed by the fall of 2014 when Houthi insurgents occupied Sana'a, the capital, with the support of forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Intervention by a Saudi-led coalition of primarily Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states in March 2015 turned the civil conflict into a broader war, attracting regional and international attention, creating the impression that at its core it is no longer a civil war but a proxy fight. Neither side in the conflict has been able to gain a significant military advantage in the ensuing years while persistent efforts by the international community, under UN leadership, have also been unsuccessful in brokering a sustained return to negotiations and a resumption of the political process, Cunningham (2016).

Most analyses of the Yemen conflict since 2014-15 have focused on the issues and circumstances that led to the fighting in isolation from the larger problems that have long confronted Yemen. But, in my view, the current conflict is more accurately seen as a continuation of over 60 years of failed state formation leading to a cycle of violence, coups, assassinations, and open warfare. The shotgun unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 only served to add a new layer of complexity to the already fraught political, social, and economic environment. This has also been further compounded by the growing influence and interferences by external actors who each have their underlying interest and are using the region to fight proxy wars. This phenomenon has undoubtedly impacted negatively on the entire region from Palestine to Syria and Yemen, and could deal a devastating blow to the political stability and economic prosperity of the region if not checked.

If this perspective is correct, as the writer alludes to, a resolution of the current conflict will be a prelude to the next outbreak of violence and further escalation of conflict. To avoid that outcome, Yemenis not only must agree on steps needed to build sustainable solutions to the country's problems but must also demand that their leaders implement them.

Analysis

As the conflict in Yemen enters its third year, the human toll of the political tragedy continues to mount. Rough estimates of civilian casualties since fighting began in March 2015 may now exceed 10,000 killed with over 40,000 injured, according to press reports. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2016) has reported that over three million of Yemen's 27.5 million citizens have been internally displaced by the conflict, while over half the population is considered food insecure. Famine and epidemics of disease may be on the near horizon. Five years after AbdRabbo Mansour Hadi's election as interim President started the clock on the only negotiated political transition of the Arab Spring, the future survival of Yemen hangs in the balance. The reemergence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its success in

establishing roots with Sunni tribal elements underscores the potential threat to regional and global security and stability should Yemen continue its descent into chaos and anarchy, (Devarajan&Mottaghi, 2017)

Regrettably, the optimism last year that the parties were moving closer to agreement on the outlines of a political deal has faded, despite a months-long, UN-led negotiation in Kuwait, followed by desperate attempts by the international community to broker a ceasefire late in the year. Yet the fighting remains stalemated as neither side appears capable of achieving a military victory. The government, with its coalition allies, is strengthening its hold on the southern part of the country, while the Houthi/Saleh forces are firmly in control of the north, including the capital, Sana'a, and causing devastating effects to the border and economy of Saudi Arabia.

A Tale of Two Conflicts

To understand the state of the conflict in Yemen, it's important to keep in mind that there are actually two parallel wars: 1) a civil war that pits the legitimate government of Yemen against an insurrection led by the Houthis, a small, Zaidi Shia clan based in the far north-western corner of Yemen, supported by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh; and 2) a regional component to the conflict that draws in Saudi Arabia, in support of the government, and Iran, in support of the insurgents.

Civil Insurgency

Although not without shortcomings, the overall implementation of the GCC Transition Agreement and the Implementing Mechanism signed in November 2011 by the parties to the Yemen political crisis, and supported by the US and the international community, was moving toward a successful conclusion by early 2014. That spring, the key step in the transition process; the National Dialogue Conference, was concluded and its final document was signed by all parties, including the Houthis. A constitutional drafting committee was impanelled and worked through the summer of 2014 to complete recommended revisions and amendments to Yemen's Constitution to be submitted to the National Dialogue for final approval. Few steps remained before the Yemeni people would be able to go to the polls and elect a new government, completing a peaceful transition of power, Cunningham (2016).

Frustrated by their inability to achieve their objectives through the political process, however, the Houthis and former President Saleh, placed increasing military pressure on the government through the summer and autumn of 2014, eventually, they were able to take advantage of the weakness of the transitional government and Yemen's security forces to move aggressively into Sana'a and overthrow President AbdRabbo Mansour Hadi and his government.

The international community has sought to mediate the crisis through political dialogue, allowing the parties to return to Sana'a and restoring essential government functions. But the conflict has metastasized and even success in the negotiations will not bring a near-term resolution to the fighting and instability. In the 2011 negotiations between former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his political opponents, Yemen's preeminent statesman and former Prime Minister, the late Abdul Karim al-Iryani, warned the parties that, if their dispute became a fight, armed conflict once started would not be easily stopped. That, indeed, appears to be the case as conflicts around the country increasingly take on the coloration of tribal vendettas and the resurrection of ancient rivalries. Thus, even in the event that the parties agree on a political framework for governance in Sana'a, their capacity to bring a halt to the fighting in the countryside is going to be extremely limited in the near-term.

Moreover, the two Yemeni coalitions that are parties to the conflict are themselves, internally fragile. Support for President Hadi, even among his allies, is weak and there are significant doubts about his ability to re-establish his position as leader of the legitimate government. Meanwhile, the Houthi- Saleh alliance is a marriage of convenience rather than a true partnership and is unlikely to survive in a political arena. Long years of enmity between Saleh and his followers and the Houthis have been papered over, not resolved. And both sides have political aspirations that will be difficult to reconcile when it comes to a real political process. Signs of tension between the two sides abound, (Mundy, 2018).

External Factors in the Conflict

Although often characterized by outside observers as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the critical drivers of the Yemen civil conflict rest entirely within the country's own history. Undoubtedly, Yemen has drawn external actors into its conflicts through the years. Earlier in the 19th and 20th centuries, Britain and the Ottoman Empire competed for influence in Yemen and, together, drew the first boundary between North and South Yemen. In the 1960s, Egypt and Saudi Arabia backed competing forces in the conflict between the Imamate and republican elements. Since 2014, the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry has exacerbated the current conflict and complicated efforts to find a solution. The UAE has also been a significant player in the current conflict, initially in support of the Saudis but increasingly pursuing objectives independent of Saudi policy.

While there are some who maintain that Iranian intervention in the Yemen conflict was provoked by Saudi involvement, the reverse is the more likely explanation: Saudi intervention in March 2015 was a direct result of the perceived threat to Saudi security posed by the growing Houthi Iranian alliance in Yemen, Suter (2018).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE

Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen is long standing and extensive. It dates to the earliest period in modern Saudi history. The kingdom fought a war with the Yemeni Imamate in the 1930s that led to the transfer of three provinces — Jizan, Najran, and Asir (sometimes referred to by Yemenis as the three "lost" provinces) — to Saudi Arabia and established a border between the two countries. (Although the border was not finally demarcated until the Treaty of Jeddah was signed in 2000.)

Saudi Arabia's focus has generally been on ensuring the security of its southern border and preventing instability in Yemen from undermining Saudi interests. The Saudis supported the Zaydi Shi'a Imamate primarily because they saw the republican revolution backed by Egypt as a potential threat to their domestic interests. Despite their support for the Imamate, the Saudis reconciled with the YAR once the civil war ended in 1970. They collaborated with the Yemeni authorities and built their own patronage system, particularly for northern tribes under the leadership of the paramount sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, which largely supported the Saleh regime. Historically, millions of Yemeni workers have crossed the border to find jobs in Saudi Arabia, providing remittances to their families that were critical to their economic survival. Most controversially, the Saudis supported southern secessionists in the 1994 civil war, presumably because they saw a united Yemen as a threat to Saudi security, in part due to President Saleh's brief alliance with Saddam Hussein, which was a direct threat to the security of all of the Gulf monarchies. The Saudis were also briefly involved in the sixth Sa'dah war provoked by a Houthi cross-border raid that killed a Saudi border guard in 2009.

During the Arab Spring uprising, the Saudis were engaged mediating among the Yemeni parties and assisting in the drafting of the GCC Initiative and Implementing Mechanism. King Abdullah's personal intervention was key to convincing President Saleh to sign the agreement in November 2011. Afterwards, direct Saudi engagement in Yemen's political transition was reduced until the second half of 2014 when the Houthis, with Iranian encouragement, again threatened Saudi security along its southern border. Saudi military intervention in the Yemen conflict reflected concerns about Iranian intervention and the possibility that a Houthi-dominated Yemen would become a platform for Iranian destabilizing activities, Suter (2018).

Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE played an important role in helping to facilitate the GCC Initiative and Implementing Mechanism, but its active participation diminished after Saleh stepped down from power. In 2015, the UAE joined the Saudi-led coalition largely as a symbol of its support for the Saudis and in recognition of what was a perceived threat that Saudi Arabia faced from Houthi presence on its border associated with the supposed Iranian provocations. Over the course of the conflict, however, the UAE's role in Yemen, especially in support of the STC, has grown more controversial. Possible Emirati support for the STC in its attempt to force Hadi government officials out of Aden in early 2018, comments by senior Emirati officials suggesting that the UAE military presence in Yemen may be extended indefinitely, and its military deployment to the island of Socotra later in the spring have raised questions about Emirati intentions and whether UAE policy remains consistent with the policy of containing the conflict and bringing about lasting peace, Cunningham (2016).

Iranian Involvement

Unlike Saudi Arabia, there is no history of Iranian involvement in Yemen in the modern era. Although President Saleh routinely alleged during the six Sa'dah wars that Iran was actively supporting the Houthis, there was little evidence to support his claims. (Indeed, Saudi frustration over Saleh's exaggeration of the Iranian role in the Sa'dah wars was likely one of the factors that influenced their decision to support the political transition in 2011, (Hill, 2016). Nor did Iran participate in the international community's effort to facilitate the political negotiations leading to Saleh's departure in 2011. But, belying claims that Iran's support to the Houthis was a reaction to Saudi intervention, Iranian training and assistance began to expand in 2012, when the majority of Yemenis were fully committed to the implementation of the GCC Initiative, (Jihan, 2015). Later on, Saleh also actively sought Iranian support in his efforts to regain control, dispatching trusted emissaries to Tehran to meet with the Iranians during this time period.

In the fall of 2014, when the Houthis had established de facto control of Sana'a, Iranian support expanded along with an increase in specific threats by the Houthis to attack Saudi Arabia. Iran's support for the Houthis became more overt following the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in March 2015 as Iran claimed that its intentions were to support the Yemeni people as they resisted outside aggression. Over the course of the conflict, an international coalition of warships patrolling in the Red Sea intercepted a number of Iranian arms shipments claimed to be for the Houthis, (Chivers & Schmitt, 2017).

Iran has been accused of providing more sophisticated weapons, extended-range Scuds, and anti-ship missiles to the Houthis. Although the Iranians deny the allegations, substantial evidence exists to support the claims and also the claim that the Saudis have not only been militarizing the country through the support of the United States but have also been directly involved in the escalation of the conflict, (Majidyar, 2017).

Saudi-Iranian Competition

The precipitous collapse of the Hadi government in early 2015, and the power grab by a group closely associated with the Government of Iran and hostile to key US goals and objectives, alarmed the United States government as well as its allies in the region. For Saudi Arabia, in particular, developments in Yemen were perceived as an existential threat to its security. Thus, the Saudis, the US, and Yemen's other international partners agreed that intervention in Yemen was both necessary and legitimate, based on achieving four key objectives:

- Restoring the legitimate government in Yemen to complete the implementation of the GCC Initiative and the National Dialogue Conference consistent with UNSCR 2216;
- Preventing a Houthi/Ali Abdullah Saleh takeover of the government through violence;
- Securing the Saudi-Yemeni border; and
- Defeating Iran's efforts to establish a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula threatening Saudi and Gulf security.

While there was optimism initially that a Saudi-led coalition could quickly stabilize the situation in Yemen, through military intervention and the constant bombardment, this has not been the case. Given the Coalition's reluctance to establish a large ground presence in Yemen and its preference for aerial attacks and strikes, the Hadi government and its international partners were in a weak position to contest the Houthi/Saleh forces for control of territory. The coalition found itself in a situation familiar to US forces fighting asymmetric conflicts: confronting what they perceived as an insurgency. The situation for the insurgents, on the other hand, is entirely different: they are fighting on their own turf; they blend in with the local population, making identification of legitimate targets difficult and the potential for civilian casualties high as there have been reports of aerial attacks by the Saudi supported forces, (Federspiel& Ali, 2018).

For the government of Iran, the coalition's inability to defeat the insurgents and restore the legitimate government in Yemen is a significant win. Iranian support for the Houthis comes at very little cost. A number of IRGC personnel and their Hezbollah allies have been killed or captured in Yemen but, compared to the toll in Syria, the losses have been negligible. The Iranians have provided primarily tech weapons. By contrast, the political and financial cost of the conflict has been heavy for the Saudis and their coalition partners. Saudi Arabia's inability to either defeat the Houthi/Saleh forces or adequately defend its borders has been an embarrassment to the Saudi military. Perhaps the greatest, and most unanticipated, benefit of the conflict to Iran has been the strain it has placed on Saudi Arabia's relationships with its key Western partners, principally the US and the UK. The reputational damage to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners is substantial. Accusations of war crimes levelled against Saudi and coalition armed forces and threats to end arms sales to the Saudis have the potential to inflict long-lasting damage to these relationships that go well beyond the scope of the Yemen conflict and could undermine the international community's resolve in confronting Iran's regional threats, (Federspiel& Ali, 2018).

Russia and the United States

The Soviet Union historically tried to balance its relations between North and South Yemen. The closer relationship, of course, was with the South. The actual level of assistance to the PDRY is unclear. One assessment suggested it was about \$30 million a year, so not a massive amount of aid, and it was part in loans and part in grants. Military assistance started in 1968 and the two sides signed an Economic and Technical Assistance Agreement in 1969. At its peak, there appeared to be about 2,500 Russian military advisers in the PDRY. East Germans and Cubans also provided support: The East Germans aided the development of PDRY security services and the Cubans provided medical assistance as well as subsidized sugar. The Soviets also did a lot on the education side and even at the time the author was ambassador, some 20 years after the end of the Soviet Union and the PDRY, there were a number of Russian-speaking Yemenis scattered around (and Russian spouses as well), (Chivers& Schmitt, 2017)

The Soviet military used Aden, particularly operating out of the airbase at Khormakser and conducting ship visits to the port. PDRY-Soviet relations reached their peak in 1978-80, when a pro-Moscow president, Abd al-Fattah Ismail, ruled in Aden. The Russians signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in November 1979. In 1980, Ismail was overthrown by the more moderate Ali Nasser Mohammed, who was reportedly more interested in rebuilding relations with the West, although he wanted to preserve relations with Moscow as well. At the same time, the Soviets were also interested in maintaining their ties with North Yemen, especially as an entree to relations with Saudi Arabia. The Soviets aided the development of Hodeida port and provided military

assistance as well, delivering MiG-21 aircraft to the YAR when the Saudis and U.S. balked at building Yemeni military capabilities.

Despite their long history of engagement in Yemen, the Russians were initially reluctant to become involved in the international mediation effort in 2011, preferring to observe from a distance. But their position changed when President Saleh opened the door for their engagement. To Saleh's surprise, rather than presenting a counter-balance to the U.S. and the West, which were pressing for a political transition, the Russians joined the larger international effort and were full partners in the transition. Since the outbreak of the conflict, however, the Russians have once again avoided playing an active role in efforts to bring it to an end.

In contrast to the Russians, U.S. involvement in Yemen was generally a subset of U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia until 2001, when concerns about the rise of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula became the driving force in U.S.-Yemeni relations. In the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy directed that the U.S. support Saudi backing of the Imamate in its resistance to the Egyptian-backed republican forces. Subsequently, the U.S. viewed North Yemen as a bulwark preventing Communist expansion from the PDRY into the Arabian Peninsula and threatening Saudi stability. The PDRY broke relations with the U.S. in October 1969 and did not re-establish them until April 1990, just weeks before the announcement of the YAR-PDRY unification agreement. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia jointly formed a military assistance mission for North Yemen, including the eventual sale of F-5 fighter aircraft. When the author was in charge of U.S.-Saudi politico-military relations at Embassy Riyadh, he visited Sana'a and observed South Korean trainers working with Yemeni Air Force pilots on F-5s in the morning and Cuban trainers working with them on MiG-21s in the afternoon. But the Saudi-Yemeni military relationship has been frost with controversies, Salisbury (2017).

The Growth of a War Economy and its Impact on the Region

War profiteering has been a persistent factor in Yemen's cyclical conflicts. Smuggling, corruption from bloated military budgets, and arms trafficking were common features throughout the six Sa'dah wars. Marieke Brandt noted the impact of the rise of the war economy in the early 2000s: "Many stakeholders profited from the war and, over time, the conflict became a permanent tool for generating personal wealth. By perpetuating the war and artificially controlling its intensity, they could provide themselves with an almost infinite source of income." (Brandt 2002).

The significance of the war economy over the course of the current conflict has grown exponentially, negatively affecting the entire region through militarization and the creation of instability, this has seen the legitimate Yemen economy ground to a near halt. Yemen's GDP declined by nearly 42% between 2015 and 2017 while the 25% of Yemenis who received government payments – both civil service employees and those dependent on social welfare payments – went unpaid for more than a year and private sector unemployment reached 50%, (UNOCHA 2017). Nevertheless, evidence of economic activity based heavily on smuggling and the black market persists. Yemeni markets, at least in major urban centers, remain well-supplied with basic necessities. Even perishables like fruit and yoghurt and luxury items like consumer electronics are readily available for those who can afford the price. The growth of a thriving war economy, according to Peter Salisbury, has once again created perverse incentives to prolong the conflict and obstruct the peace process, Salisbury (2017). Much of the smuggling comes from overland trade, particularly crossing into Yemen from Oman, but even Saudi crossing points are involved. Various militias man as many as 15-25 checkpoints charging fees that add 10-15% to the cost of goods once they reach the market. Control of Yemen's seaports is also a profit center.

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh visits the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg at the start of his visit to Russia on April 5, 2004. Salisbury notes that customs fees and taxes provide the bulk of the income for the Houthis, who may collect as much as \$30 million a month from their now-contested control of the port at Hodeida, Salisbury (2017). Control of Yemen's marginal oil and gas production and export facilities, now largely held by various tribal elements and local militias, remains a major objective for the various factions, including the Hadi government.

Lowering the Saudi-Iranian Competition and Ending the Yemen Conflict

At this juncture, the political negotiations being managed by UN Special Envoy Ismail OuldChaikh Ahmed offer the only viable prospect for achieving progress in Yemen. There will not be a military conclusion to the Yemen conflict. Only a political arrangement can end the fighting, allow for the re-establishment of a degree of governance in Sana'a, and focus attention on the deepening humanitarian crisis. If successful in achieving that limited objective, priority can be placed on completing the remaining steps of the Yemeni transition plan and enabling elections. Ultimately, only through the establishment of a new, credible government can Yemen begin the process of repairing damaged infrastructure, restarting economic activity, and restoring security and stability, particularly in ending tribal conflicts and pursuing the fight against AQAP.

The resolution of the political crisis rests in the hands of the Yemeni parties, but larger regional developments can influence the course of the negotiations. Specifically, Saudi Arabia and Iran do have the potential to alter the dynamics of the conflict and create an environment more favourable to the UN-led effort. Indeed, both sides have good reason to support an end to the conflict. As long as the Saudis identify a Houthi victory in the armed conflict or its domination of the Yemeni government (with or without Saleh) as a red line that would mean a permanent, pro-Iran security threat on their southern border, they will continue the confrontation and will not press the Hadi government to reach a political agreement. But if they can secure an understanding that the Sana'a government will remain in friendly hands, their border will be secure, and the Iranians will not threaten their interests in Yemen, the Saudis have been clear that they would welcome an exit from the Yemen quagmire. Meanwhile, the Gulf partners in the coalition are even more vocal in pressing for an end to a conflict that they believe is detrimental to their broader interests in regional security and stability.

For Iran, the calculation is different. While it has benefitted from Saudi difficulties, and it does have ideological reasons to support its "Shia brethren" in Yemen, Iran has no significant national security interests there. Therefore, assisting in ending the conflict in Yemen could be a bargaining chip for Iran if it determines that playing it will offer greater benefit on other fronts. Iran does, in fact, have good reason to want to lower the temperature in its confrontation with Saudi Arabia and the GCC. By all estimations, the Rouhani government is fearful that a more robust US challenge threatens its regional interests. The prospect of expanded US-Saudi-GCC security cooperation underscores the dimensions of that threat. While ultimate decision-making about Iran's relations with its neighbours is in the hands of Ayatollah Khamenei and the hardliners around him, Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif have taken steps recently aimed at softening GCC resolve to confront Iran. Outreach through Kuwait and Oman has signaled to at least some of the GCC partners that Iran is open to reducing tensions. The apparently successful Saudi-Iranian talks to resolve differences over the hajj suggest that even there, there is some prospect for reducing tensions, albeit marginally, (Federspiel & Ali, 2018).

II. CONCLUSION

Thus, as a consequence of the continued killings and destructions the persistent war has created there is quite possibly the need for convergence of interests and a formation of consensus between Iran and its Gulf Arab neighbours to come to the realization that the time has come to end the conflict and support a return of Yemen's warring parties to the negotiating table. Even with that convergence, there are undoubtedly going to be, within both camps, hardliners who will prefer to continue the battle in search of complete victory. But with the lingering of the current imbroglio it is undeniable that regional dynamics and internal exhaustion will need to shift the balance of forces within Yemen towards accommodation rather than continued confrontation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ The Yemenis must be allowed to determine their own political future with little interferences from external actors.
- ✓ The continued militarization of the Yemen will further degenerate into regional tussle that will lead to further loss of lives and destruction of properties and infrastructure in a region already plagued by domestic and political crisis with its attendant consequences of famine, hunger and the epidemic of diseases.
- ✓ The direct involvement and aerial bombardment of Yemen by the Saudi Supported government and its soldiers must be restrained in order for a political solution to be attained.
- ✓ All parties including the external actors must restrain from further attacks and maintain status quo as the deepening of the conflict will bring negative impact to the economies of all parties involved. This is so because when a war ends in the short run the country that wages is victorious but where it lingers and there is no victor then the economies of all parties involved will suffer gravely.

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