

**CRISIS IN YEMEN, CIVIL WAR IN YEMEN, AND YEMEN AS A PROXY:  
HOW A DOMESTIC CONFLICT BECAME EXPLOITED TO BENEFIT FOREIGN  
POWERS**

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This paper aims to explain why the Yemeni Crisis (2011-present) exists and, by extension, why there is a civil war being fought in Yemen. This paper will identify and assess the causes and effects of the civil war in Yemen and assess the involvement and associated interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, namely how Yemen is employed as a proxy in the Iran-Saudi Conflict. This paper asks: why is there a crisis in Yemen and how do Iran and Saudi Arabia play a role in the civil war that resulted from the crisis? This paper argues that the crisis in Yemen is the result of domestic political change that plunged the country into crisis and war, and, by extension, Iran and Saudi Arabia employing Yemen as a proxy to redress their respective grievances, geopolitical grievances in particular, with one another. The parties responsible for atrocities in Yemen resulting from the crisis and the associated civil war include all of the major parties to the conflict; Houthi rebels within Yemen who indirectly advance the interests of Iran, the Saudi-led Coalition fighting in Yemen, and the Yemeni government and military. To a lesser extent, larger world powers such as the United States play a role in the crisis and civil war in Yemen by means of complacency and relationships with Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two of which play a much more significant role in the condition of Yemen.

Beginning in 2011, central governance in Yemen, embodied by the decades-long rule of former President of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh, unraveled when political unrest brought by dissatisfaction with living standards among citizens and perceptions of corruption in government sprung throughout the Arab world, with Yemen not being an exception to the rule.<sup>1</sup> Rights groups made persistent allegations that then-Yemeni President Saleh administered a corrupt and autocratic government. As the protests of the Arab Spring of 2011 reached Yemen, the political and military rivals of President Saleh jockeyed to overthrow him.<sup>2</sup>

An interlocking set of conflictual and cooperative interactions at the domestic, regional, and international levels will continue to characterize developments that began during the Arab Spring, including in Yemen. However, the impact of the Arab Spring, with Yemen included, cannot be completely understood and associated outcomes cannot be predicted in isolation from the larger regional picture and the policies and actions of major regional players in addition to those of external powers such as the United States.<sup>3</sup>

With that being established, in 2012, having been under escalating domestic and international pressure, President Saleh resigned from office. This was after having received a guarantee of immunity from prosecution. His vice president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, assumed office as interim president in a transition brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council, a regional organization based in Saudi Arabia and supported by the United States. In 2013, as part of the timetable for a transition to be administered by the GCC, the National Dialogue Conference, sponsored by the United Nations, organized a convention of 565 delegates to draft a new constitution for Yemen upon which the various factions within the country could concur. However, the conclusion of the NDC was defined by an inability among delegates to resolve disputes with regard to how power should be distributed.<sup>4</sup>

With the support of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Nations Security Council, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, as interim President of Yemen, made attempts to reform the political system in Yemen. Throughout 2013, key players in the National Dialogue Conference sought to achieve a broad national consensus on a new political order. In January 2014, however, this ended without a concurrence. In particular, one anti-government group, the northern Yemeni Houthi movement, a movement of religious Shiites in Sunni-majority Yemen, sought to employ military force to remake the political order of Yemen. Within weeks of the conclusion of the

National Dialogue Conference, the Houthis launched an offensive military campaign against various tribal allies of President Hadi. The Houthis were joined by forces that remained loyal to former President Saleh, forming an alliance that served as a formidable opponent to President Hadi and his allies.<sup>5</sup>

Numerous factors widened political divisions in Yemen and made way for a full-scale military conflict. In 2014, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, which extended a \$550 million loan to Yemen based on promises of economic reforms, the Hadi government lifted fuel subsidies. The Houthi movement, however, which had attracted support beyond its base with criticisms of the United Nations transition, organized protests demanding lower fuel prices and a new government. Supporters of Hadi and the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated party al-Islah held counterrallies.<sup>6</sup>

Since 2014, Yemen has been on a downward spiral. The Houthi rebels, allied with Iran, seized the northwestern part of the country, including the capital, Sanaa, sending the government into exile.<sup>7</sup> This resulted in the beginning of the ongoing civil war.<sup>8</sup> By the end of 2014, the Houthis had consolidated control of the capital and continued their advance southward, reneging on a peace deal produced through the United Nations. In January 2015, under significant pressure based on the crisis and resulting civil war, the Hadi government resigned and President Hadi later fled to Saudi Arabia. Military units loyal to former President Saleh aligned themselves with the Houthis. This contributed to a number of successes by the Houthis on the battlefield. Other militias have mobilized against the united forces of President Saleh and the Houthis. They have aligned with those in the military who had remained loyal to the Hadi government. Southern separatists escalated their calls for secession.<sup>9</sup>

With President Hadi in exile, Saudi Arabia launched a military campaign—fought principally from the air—to push back the Houthis and restore the Hadi government to Sanaa.<sup>10</sup> Saudi Arabia and a coalition of regional allies, primarily the United Arab Emirates, intervened in Yemen to push back the Houthis. The battle devolved into a proxy conflict with the Houthis shooting drones and missiles as far as Dubai and the Saudi-led coalition launching thousands of strikes in Yemen, with several of these strikes having targeted civilian infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> With limited support from the United States, the Saudi-led Coalition began a bombing campaign with the goal of defeating the Houthis. However, the war descended into a quagmire, with competing administrations in the north and south of Yemen and attacks frequently killing civilians.<sup>12</sup>

At present, Yemen is experiencing what the United Nations describes as the worst humanitarian disaster in the world.<sup>13</sup> This has been years in the making and has included some very geographically distant actors such as the United States. The United States has been fighting Al Qaeda in Yemen since the September 11 attacks, employing the Authorization of Use of Military Force approved by the United States Congress in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks on the United States as justification for intervention in Yemen and drone strikes against terrorism suspects as its primary tactic given how Al Qaeda, responsible for the September 11th attacks, has members residing in Yemen. However, in 2015 the Houthis overthrew Yemeni President Hadi, an ally of Saudi Arabia and an ally in the War on Terror led by the United States since the September 11th attacks. This resulted in the present Saudi-led Coalition launching the military campaign on display in Yemen at present that has killed tens of thousands of civilians with bombings, cholera, and famine.<sup>14</sup>

In Yemen, deaths caused by starvation have been the primary effect of three categories of events: an economic crisis that resulted from the dismantling of the banking system in Yemen,

armed attacks on agricultural and food production that have destroyed, denied, or rendered unemployable objects indispensable to survival, and blockades of airports and seaports that have served as an obstruction to the arrival of humanitarian aid.<sup>15</sup> Yemen was already the poorest country in the Arab world before the civil war began in 2014. The Saudi-led Coalition joining the battle against the Houthi militia supported by Iran only added to the misery experienced daily by those who live in Yemen.<sup>16</sup> Not only can the present day be seen as a time of turmoil for Yemen, but much of the visible history of Yemen is also being erased as a result of the destruction that has resulted from the war.<sup>17</sup>

Iran and Saudi Arabia have exploited the political upheavals associated with the Arab Spring to expand their respective influence, particularly in Yemen.<sup>18</sup> The Sunni-led, Sunni-majority populated Saudi Arabia and the Shiite-led, Shiite-majority populated Iran each have significant difficulties. Saudi Arabia is experiencing difficulty in the war in Yemen, where there has been an ongoing attempt by their military coalition fighting in that country to have the Hadi government reinstated against the desires of the Houthi rebels who have overtaken much of the western half of Yemen. There is not a sizeable quantity of evidence to support the contention that the Houthis have received invaluable support from Iran at the beginning of the war. However, Saudi Arabia has made a declaration that the Houthis have been supported by Iran all along and that the Houthis have increasingly turned to Iran for assistance as they have come under pressure.<sup>19</sup>

Critics of Iran allege that the country has a goal of being established or having respective proxies established across the Middle East and achieving control of a land corridor stretching to all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. As such, Yemen serves as a valuable pawn to be played by Iran. Largely, Saudi Arabia is fighting a war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, its neighbor, to

curb what it perceives to be the influence of Iran. Iran has denied accusations that it is smuggling weapons to the Houthis. However, reports from a panel of experts at the United Nations have demonstrated significant assistance for the Houthis from Iran in terms of both technology and weaponry.<sup>20</sup>

There is growing tension in the Persian Gulf as Arab adversaries of Iran, Saudi Arabia in particular, prefer an ostracized nuclear Iran to an Iran known as a competitive oil producer and regional power. Iran cites intervention in Yemen against the Houthis by Saudi Arabia in the form of air attacks to, in the hopes of Saudi Arabia, eventually reinstate the Hadi government in Yemen and the execution of Saudi Shia cleric Sheik Nimr al-Nimr, given that Iran is majority-Shiite and led by Shiite Muslims, as causes for the cessation of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia.<sup>21</sup>

Amid international sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program and aggressive rhetoric by former President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, concerns had by Saudi Arabia related to Iran resumed. Iran and Saudi Arabia each support opposite sides in the conflict in Yemen. Saudi Arabia also had heightened suspicions of Iran with regard to its nuclear deal with various world powers.<sup>22</sup> A number of analysts have implied that the battle for Yemen may further complicate the sensitive politics of a deal with Western powers to restrain the Iranian nuclear program. However, others contend that the deal has actually emboldened Iran to flex its muscles against Saudi Arabia.<sup>23</sup>

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has been the most longstanding adversary of the United States. However, on a recurring basis, the U.S. has served as an aide, by coincidence, to Iran. Following the September 11 attacks on the United States, although Iran is not known for having played a role in the attacks in spite of being a state sponsor of terrorism according to the

U.S. Government, Washington has partaken in acts that have advanced the interests of Iran. The United States overthrew the Taliban in Afghanistan, toppled Saddam Hussein in Iraq, suppressed the caliphate orchestrated by ISIS, withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, assassinated Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, and supported intervention in Yemen by Saudi Arabia. Washington has not set out to aid Iran. Rather, Washington has advanced Iranian interests by having created power vacuums in which Iran fills the voids. This has made for power surges, or coercive campaigns, against Iran. These have a tendency to backfire, with Iran forming closer bonds with third parties.<sup>24</sup>

From the beginning, the United States supported Saudi Arabia in its intervention in Yemen. The Obama Administration armed the Saudis and afforded targeting information and refueling for Saudi jets. In Washington, this was viewed by many as a strategic trade-off for the nuclear deal made with Iran in 2015. The Saudis view the Houthis as proxies for Iran as a victory by the Shiite Houthis would be in the interests of Shiite-led Iran against Sunni-led Saudi Arabia.<sup>25</sup>

Although both the Obama and Trump Administrations made calls for a political, diplomatic solution to the conflict in Yemen, the combatants of the civil war in Yemen appear determined to pursue a solution in the form of a military victory. The combatants also appear to disagree fundamentally on the framework for a political solution. The Saudi-led Coalition of regional partners, the United Arab Emirates in particular, demands that the Houthi militia disarm, relinquish their heavy weaponry of ballistic missiles and rockets, and return control of Sanaa to the internationally recognized government of President Hadi.<sup>26</sup> Saudi aircraft continue to play a major role in the military campaign in Yemen. Saudi operations have inhibited Houthi forces from taking important territory and have encumbered Houthi drones and missiles from striking



Saudi Arabia. However, Saudi airstrikes, not uncommonly conducted with U.S. support, continue to kill civilians.<sup>27</sup> As the United States plays a limited role in the conflict in Yemen, the powers otherwise at play, Iran and Saudi Arabia in this case, both can and will do as they please in the Yemeni Civil War.<sup>28</sup>

In 2021, Iran and Saudi Arabia began talks in Iraq in an effort to repair relations that have frayed over conflicts such as the conflict in Yemen.<sup>29</sup> The Saudi-led Coalition is struggling to keep the Houthi rebels in Yemen from seizing full control of the northern half of the country.<sup>30</sup> Saudi Arabia pushed Yemeni President Hadi to step down in 2022, and Saudi authorities have largely confined Hadi to his home in Riyadh and restricted communications with him in the days since then.<sup>31</sup> Houthi forces allied with Iran have gained important new ground in the years-long war in Yemen as Saudi Arabia has struggled to defend a strategic, oil-rich city in Yemen and efforts by the United States to broker peace in Yemen have stagnated.<sup>32</sup> Recent steps, including the resignation of President Hadi, have increased hopes, albeit with caution, for progress toward ending the civil war.<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, there is a crisis in Yemen, and Iran and Saudi Arabia play a role in the civil war associated with the crisis. This paper argues that the crisis in Yemen is the result of domestic political change that plunged the country into crisis and war, and, by extension, Iran and Saudi Arabia employing Yemen as a proxy to redress their respective grievances, geopolitical grievances in particular, with one another. The parties responsible for atrocities in Yemen resulting from the crisis and the associated civil war include all of the major parties to the conflict; Houthi rebels within Yemen who indirectly advance the interests of Iran, the Saudi-led Coalition fighting in Yemen, and the Yemeni government and military. To a lesser extent, larger world powers such as the United States play a role in the crisis and civil war in Yemen by means

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