

The Yemen Conflict and Its Elusive Political Solution

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Overshadowed by the conflict in Syria, Yemen continues to suffer from an internal civil war, a regional proxy war, and a grave humanitarian crisis. Unfortunately, this situation is unlikely to end anytime soon, as the principal players have an interest in keeping it going for their own purposes. As for Washington, it seems torn between supporting a more aggressive Saudi Arabia in its regional struggle against Iran, of which Yemen is a part, and wanting the conflict to end through a political solution so that Yemen does not remain a haven for terrorist groups like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In the meantime, the Yemeni people continue to pay the price for the political machinations of internal and regional powers.

An Already Troubled Country

Yemen has long been the poorest country in the Arab world, with limited arable land and water resources. Although it has some oil, this resource never made the country rich and is likely to be depleted in the near future. Corruption was rife under the strongman president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and he and his cronies reportedly siphoned away millions of dollars from government coffers. Saleh, who ruled for more than thirty years, was particularly adept at playing various tribes and political factions against one another to maintain power.

In addition, Yemen has suffered from regionalism, with the southern part of the country—an independent state for 23 years—

never very happy with its 1990 union with the north, which even led to a short-lived civil war in 1994. In addition, the Houthis, who hail from the far northern province and follow the Zaydi branch of Shi'i Islam, have sparked periodic rebellions against the central government in Sanaa.

Yemen was also affected by the so-called “Arab Spring” in 2011. Demonstrations initially led by university students in February 2011 were soon joined by opposition party activists. When Saleh used violence against the protestors in March 2011, the Yemeni military split, with one faction staying loyal to Saleh and the other siding with the opposition. Soon the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states got involved and, with the support of the United States and the European Union, presented Saleh with an exit strategy—relinquishing power as president with the promise of immunity from prosecution for any crimes. For Washington, Saleh had become a liability even though he allowed US Special Forces to be deployed in Yemen in the fight against AQAP.

For many months, Saleh acted like an unwelcome house guest who never leaves. He promised to sign the exit document but reneged several times. He finally did so in November 2011, paving the way for his vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, to take power in early 2012.

Saleh, however, kept his position as head of his political party, the General People's Congress, and retained the loyalty of key military units

despite Hadi's efforts to purge them of Saleh loyalists.

When the Houthis moved south to take over Sanaa in September 2014 (in large part because they believed the Hadi government was not responsive to their grievances), some of the pro-Saleh units facilitated their entry into the capital. Although Saleh and the Houthis clashed several times when the former was president, they put aside their differences in 2014 to oppose the Hadi government. Hadi and some of his cabinet members were detained by the Houthis in January 2015 but managed to escape a month later to the southern port city of Aden.

The Houthi takeover of Sanaa and large parts of Yemen prompted the Saudis to take action by mustering a group of Sunni Muslim countries to join in an anti-Houthi (and by extension, anti-Iran) coalition in March 2015, dubbed Operation Decisive Storm.

In Saudi eyes, the Houthis were Iranian proxies that had to be defeated. The young Saudi defense minister, Mohammed bin Salman (recently promoted to crown prince), mounted an aggressive campaign against the Houthis, joined by the United Arab Emirates and some other Arab countries.

The Saudi Role in the Conflict

Although the Saudis have supported Hadi (for a time he even had to flee to Saudi Arabia) and brought him back to Yemen, where he is ensconced in Aden with his cabinet, the Houthis

and their pro-Saleh allies have proven to be stubborn fighters and still control northern, western, and parts of central Yemen.

Much of the Saudi military campaign has been from the air, but with disastrous results.

Many nonmilitary areas have been bombed, such as hospitals, a market, and a funeral, leading to countless civilian casualties. The United Nations estimates that about 10,000 Yemenis have been killed in the conflict since 2015, most of whom have been civilians, including an unknown number of children. Although the Saudis say that such targets have been unintended, and the Houthis have also been responsible for some civilian deaths, the errant Saudi attacks have underscored problematic aspects of the Saudi air force.

These Saudi actions put the Obama Administration in a quandary. The latter believed a war against the Houthis would allow AQAP and ISIS to take advantage of the chaos in the country to make further gains. However, President Obama decided to support the Saudi effort with refueling, logistics, and intelligence support in 2015 in part to show solidarity with a longstanding ally and to reassure Riyadh in the wake of the Iran nuclear deal, which the Saudis had opposed, that Washington would still assist and support them.

But when Yemeni civilian casualties started to mount, which both the United Nations and the human rights community sharply criticized, the Obama Administration had second thoughts about this unqualified support. In the summer

of 2016, it decided to scale back a US support unit in Saudi Arabia that had been aiding the Saudi bombing campaign, and in December 2016, it blocked the sale of 16,000 guided munitions kits to the Saudi Air Force because it believed such kits, designed to make so-called dumb bombs into smart bombs, would not help if the Saudis did not choose their targets properly. The Obama Administration also worried that their support for Saudi Arabia in this conflict was diminishing whatever limited pro-US sentiment was left in Yemen.

Controversy over Iran's Role

From the perspective of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, Iran has long given substantial assistance to the Houthis and this has compelled the rebels to keep on fighting. However, scholars who have examined this issue have concluded that Iran's military assistance to the Houthis, minimal prior to 2011, has since increased—though much of the military hardware the Houthis are using is from Yemeni military stocks rather than from Tehran.

Nonetheless, there have been enough instances of captured Iranian arms, headed for the Houthis, for the Saudis and others to claim that Iran is fomenting a war in their backyard.

While there is certainly a sectarian dimension to this conflict (though the Iranians and the Houthis practice different forms of Shi'i Islam), Iran sees the Yemen conflict as a way of preoccupying Saudi Arabia and depleting its

resources. Some estimates put the war as costing the Saudis about \$675 million a month to prosecute.

Although former Secretary of State John Kerry took time out from the Iran nuclear negotiations in 2015 to criticize Iran's attempt to deliver weapons to the Houthis, and the Obama Administration in October 2016 took out three Houthi-controlled radar sites after a Houthi military unit fired missiles at a US Navy ship, the Obama team never saw the Houthis in such stark terms as the Saudis do.

Indeed, the Obama Administration, in cooperation with the Omanis, did attempt peace talks between the Houthis and the Hadi government, but these came to naught. That such talks, if successful, would presumably lead to a Houthi role in a new government did not seem to bother the Obama team. Their chief priority was to end the civil war and the humanitarian crisis that ensued from it and to have the country stable enough to resume operations against AQAP and ISIL (in 2015 the United States had to withdraw its Special Forces from Yemen because of the closure of the US Embassy and departure of support personnel).

The Trump Administration's Conflicting Goals

At first glance, the Trump Administration seems to be taking the opposite approach from that taken by Obama. Trump's close embrace of the Saudi leadership and his antipathy toward Iran (both on display during the president's

visit to Riyadh in May 2017), plus the decision this past spring to reverse the Obama hold on the guided munitions kits, would all suggest that Trump is in lockstep with the Saudis on Yemen. On the other hand, Defense Secretary James Mattis, during a visit to Riyadh in April 2017, stated publicly that the Yemeni conflict needed a "political solution".

Mattis, who has been given much leeway by Trump to chart the US security role in the Middle East, certainly holds a very negative view of Iran and is determined to roll back Iranian influence in the Arab world. But as a former military commander, he seems to have concluded that the Hadi government, backed by the Saudis, Emiratis, and others, simply cannot achieve a military victory against the well-entrenched Houthis backed by pro-Saleh forces.

Mattis may indulge the Saudis and the Emiratis with additional US military assistance, and such assistance may lead to more gains on the ground, but ultimately, he knows that neither side in this conflict is capable of a knockout blow. In fact, Mattis has not spelled out—at least not publicly—the details of a political solution for Yemen. And a Saudi and Emirati plan to squeeze the Houthis—such as the seizure of the western Yemeni port of Hodeida—may not work and could exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in the country by blocking relief supplies. Media reports indicate that US military experts who have watched Emirati troops training for this operation in Eritrea have concluded that such forces are far

from ready to launch a successful operation on Hodeida.

More Interest in War than Peace

A large part of the problem that Mattis faces to get to a political solution is the fact that the parties to the conflict all seem to want the war to continue. The Saudis, now that Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman has accrued even more power of late by becoming Saudi Arabia's crown prince, seem to believe that a military solution is still possible. Bin Salman, like the ill-fated US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara during the Vietnam War, is so personally invested in this conflict that he cannot see any other option but the illusory victory. And he probably believes that anything less than a military victory would be a plus for Iran.

For their part, the Houthis and Saleh and his loyalists understand that they cannot take the entire country, but they have little incentive to enter into peace talks if the Hadi government does not give them a substantial share of power. Given the bad blood between Hadi and these elements, it is hard to imagine that the two sides can be reconciled. As the 2011 period demonstrated, Saleh is keen to retain as much power as he can, and the Houthis distrust Hadi in large part because of his dependence on Saudi Arabia. This antipathy toward the Saudis is so strong that a UN envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, was forced to leave Sanaa because the Houthis saw him as pro-Saudi (his motorcade was pelted with rocks and shoes).

Although the Houthis may ultimately enter into peace talks again, they will probably only do so if Hadi and the Saudis change their current posture, and that could take some time. As mentioned earlier, the Iranians see their support for the Houthis as a relatively low-cost way to keep the Saudis tied down and busy on their southwestern flank.

The Yemeni Population Continues to Suffer

The human cost of the Yemen conflict is appalling. According to the United Nations, about one-quarter of the population is experiencing near famine conditions, and there is also an acute shortage of medicine. In addition, there is now a severe cholera epidemic in the country, with 200,000 suspected cases and 5,000 new ones expected every day. According

to the head of UNICEF, some 1,300 Yemenis, one quarter of them children, have already died from this disease, and the death toll is expected to rise. With 10,000 Yemeni casualties so far from the conflict, the death toll could easily double in the very near future.

The only way for this terrible conflict to end is if the international community brings all the parties to the conflict to the negotiating table and compels them to hammer out a political deal. But the regional proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran has exacerbated the internal civil war, and until such external pressures diminish, Yemen is sadly in store for more tragedy.

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