

Motives, challenges and implications in ending the war in Yemen

It was no surprise when King Salman stressed the need for a political resolution to the conflict several months ago.

By Ari Heistein, Yoel Guzansky / January 15, 2020

The flurry of diplomatic activity in the final weeks of 2019 and early days of 2020 indicates that the major players in the war in Yemen are interested in, or at least open to, an agreement to end the conflict. The efforts to end war are not motivated by opportunities to achieve strategic goals, but primarily by the desire to mitigate the potential costs of continued conflict. Yet, the challenges of reaching and maintaining an agreement to end the war and unify the country remain considerable.

In early 2019, after assuming the role of deputy defense minister of Saudi Arabia, Khalid bin Salman was tasked with orchestrating a respectable Saudi exit from the conflict in Yemen. Since then the mission has only become more urgent in light of three considerations:

1) UAE forces, the most effective ground force in the Saudi-led coalition, announced their withdrawal from Yemen in July 2019 (conspicuously, after four tankers were attacked by Iran off of the UAE coast). The Saudis understood from this that they were unlikely to make military gains beyond what had been achieved at that point;

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2) The growing threat to Saudi Arabia directly from Iran, demonstrated by the September 14 attack on Aramco facilities, increased Riyadh's motivation to end its role in Yemen so as not to spread its resources too thin by fighting on two fronts;

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