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Yemen: Stalemated, Unstable, and 4 Potential Game Changers

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At the outset of 2021, the situation in Yemen is stalemated and potentially unstable. This article outlines existing trends in the Yemeni theater that may continue for the foreseeable future, as well as potential game changers, which include low-probability high-impact events that could disrupt the ongoing conflict for better or worse. As far as Israel is concerned, a recent *Newsweek* article reported that Iran provided the Houthis with delta-winged explosive drones, which have a range of 2,000-2,200 kilometers; the publication coincided with Israel's deployment of missile defense batteries to Eilat against potential Houthi attacks. While it appears unlikely that the conflict will end in the coming year, it may evolve in significant ways, including with the withdrawal from or entrance into the Yemeni arena by actors of consequence or the reshuffling of alliances.

For over two years, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen has not achieved substantial military or diplomatic gains; the current battle lines roughly resemble coalition control of what was South Yemen prior to 1990 and Houthi control of what was North Yemen prior to 1990. The majority of the ongoing fighting between coalition and Houthi forces is underway in the Marib province, an energy-rich territory and the coalition's last foothold in northern Yemen. However, despite the diminishing returns of its military campaign in recent years, Riyadh remains unwilling to withdraw due to intensifying Houthi attacks on Saudi infrastructure with advanced drones and precision missiles provided by Iran. In an effort to de-escalate the conflict and extricate itself from the fighting, Saudi Arabia has shifted from its initial aggressive bombing campaign in Yemen to one that is largely reactive to Houthi attacks.

Recent progress in implementing the 2019 Riyadh Agreement, which aims to balance the political and military power of the central government vis-à-vis the southern separatists, may stave off the implosion of the Saudi-led anti-Houthi coalition for the time being. However, the inherent tensions between the parties to the agreement have not been resolved, and are liable to resurface sooner or later.

As for north Yemen, the Houthis have grown further entrenched in the Iran-led "axis of resistance." Some indications of this trend include the continued unveiling of new

Iranian-supplied weapons systems, most recently [the Quds-2 missile](#) used to strike an Aramco facility in Jeddah, as well as the arrivals of an Iranian ambassador to the Houthis in Sanaa and a Houthi ambassador in Damascus. In addition, the Houthis displayed interest in playing regional politics on the side of the Iran-led axis when they [offered to free Saudi captives in exchange for the Saudis releasing Hamas prisoners](#). An expanding role in the “axis of resistance” may portend a Houthi shift away from fluid alliances in pursuit of local interests and toward a broader and more ideological approach, which may make a potential political resolution to the conflict more difficult to achieve.

Game Changers

Despite its seeming inertia, the conflict in Yemen remains vulnerable to potential game changers that could shift the dynamics and ultimately alter the trajectory of the civil war. While COVID-19 was predicted to be catastrophic in Yemen, its actual impact was limited due to a variety of factors, including Yemen’s young population (60 percent of the population is under 25 years old) and its more limited commercial ties to the global economy. Overall, existing levels of disease, conflicts, and other hardships overshadow the comparatively minor number of deaths caused by the novel coronavirus. However, the possibility of a Saudi withdrawal from Yemen, a Houthi attack on Israeli targets, the final collapse of the Riyadh Agreement, or increased Turkish involvement in Yemen could reshape the Yemeni civil war in ways that are difficult to predict but potentially significant.

First, given the high costs of the Yemeni conflict in terms of Saudi blood, treasure, and reputation, and the fact that the campaign’s goals still appear unachievable, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) may determine that early 2021 is as good a time as any to drawdown Riyadh’s involvement in Yemen. Rather than taking this step after the Yemen issue has already damaged relations with the Biden administration, Riyadh may decide to preempt the clashes with Washington and instead curry favor with the White House by ending the campaign and offering Biden’s team an early victory. Perhaps the Saudi decision will be made in exchange for an American promise to assist the Saudis in defending against the drone and missile strikes launched by the Houthis. This series of events culminating in Riyadh’s withdrawal would create a power vacuum and is more likely to usher in a new stage of the Yemeni civil war rather than the conflict’s end.

Second, the Houthis may determine that because they cannot provide good governance, significant patronage to retain loyalty, or an end to the coalition’s blockade, they will reinvigorate their *raison d’être* and seek to raise sagging popularity through an attack on Israeli assets or on Israel itself. The Houthis have not yet proved that they possess weapons capable of reaching Israeli territory (approximately 1,800 kilometers from Yemen), though they have successfully hit the Dubai Airport with an explosive drone,

which demonstrated the capability to hit a target approximately 1,450 kilometers away. In addition, a recent [Newsweek report](#) alleged that Iran provided the Houthis with delta-winged explosive drones, resembling those used in [the September 2019 Iranian attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities in Khurais and Abqaiq](#), which have a range of 2,000-2,200 kilometers; the publication coincided with [Israel's deployment of missile defense batteries to Eilat](#) to defend against potential Houthi attacks. While targeting maritime traffic to or from Israel along the Bab al-Mandeb straits might appear simpler, the Houthis may be restrained by their Iranian patrons, since excessive interference with maritime trade could complicate Tehran's relations with Beijing. As the Houthis attempt to amass advanced capabilities or even try to use them against Israel, Jerusalem will be faced with a difficult question: how to disrupt the covert Iran-Houthi materiel supply line, deter the Houthis, and protect against potential strikes without being dragged into the Yemeni morass?

Third, the Riyadh Agreement, a power-sharing deal within the coalition between the central government and southern separatist organization known as the Southern Transitional Council could collapse, with the two sides then reverting to armed conflict. In that case, we could see a fluid reconfiguration of the web of alliances and enmities within Yemen. Although some realignments might seem inconceivable now, the same might have been said for the cooperation of the late deposed President Ali Abdullah Saleh with the Houthis after he was forced out of office in 2012, despite having fought six campaigns against them from 2004 to 2010.

Fourth, after enjoying considerable military success through the effective use of UAVs, from Libya, to Syria, to Azerbaijan, Turkey may determine that greater involvement in Yemen could provide it with the leverage it desires vis-à-vis the Gulf states as well as opportunities to expand its presence around the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. This would entail minimal risk, as Turkey could deliver support to Islamist affiliate al-Islah in Yemen under the guise of humanitarian aid; as is evident from social media, [Turkish charities are already fairly active in Yemen](#). This development could make the central government of Yemen, which includes figures affiliated with al-Islah such as Vice President Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, a significantly greater irritant in UAE-Saudi relations.

Conclusion

The primary ramifications of any of these game changers would be the shifting alliances and/or balances of power in Yemen. How precisely they would play out is difficult to envision given the fluid nature of relationships in Yemen, but in the scenarios that involve the weakening of the Saudi-led coalition (either due to internal divisions or withdrawal of support), then presumably the chief beneficiary would be the Iran-backed Houthi forces. Nor are these game changers mutually exclusive: for example, a Saudi

withdrawal could cause the Houthis to search for new enemies in order to continue “resistance,” and Israel would certainly appear to be one of the more likely candidates.

Israel is not an active player in the Yemeni arena, but it does have interests there. Its primary concern is the prevention of the Houthis from striking Israel or Israeli assets. The Houthis have shown an ability to integrate precision guided munitions and real-time intelligence in several recent assassination attempts, including an attack in late December 2020 that nearly wiped out the entire Cabinet of the newly formed government of Yemen. Jerusalem should seek to leverage its relationships with Gulf partners in order to closely monitor and assess the Houthi threat. Doing so effectively may allow Israel to thwart potential attacks earlier in its multilayered approach to missile defense (disrupt supply, deter use, defend against strike) and reduce the likelihood that it will be drawn into the conflict as an active participant to the fighting.

While the coming months may appear poised to deliver more continuity than change for Yemen, it is worth recalling the words of futurist Herman Kahn that “the most likely future isn’t.” While the United States is not a direct participant in the Yemeni civil war, the change of administrations will likely influence the conflict. The Biden administration is expected to withdraw US support for the Saudi campaign and intensify pressure on Riyadh to end it; it is not yet clear whether that will ultimately compel the Saudis to withdraw or cause them to hedge further toward alternative security guarantors (or both).

The dismal humanitarian situation in Yemen and the conflict between the warring factions may persist for years to come, but some of the conflict’s defining characteristics could very well change. Thinking about the future in the Middle East, where reality often surpasses imagination, may seem like a fool’s errand, but failing to do so raises the risks of being caught flat-footed by an ever-changing reality.