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The Yemeni Civil War in Flux: Where is it Headed?

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The Arab Spring reached Yemen in 2011 at a moment when both popular and elite support for Yemen's then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh were low, leading to the disintegration of a triumvirate that had ruled Yemen for decades. Since then, efforts to formulate a new configuration of national governance through dialogue, civil war, external intervention, and negotiations failed to yield results. Although Israel is not an influential player in the theater, it does have interests that could be affected by developments there: containment of the Iran-backed Houthi threat, the extrication of its unofficial Saudi partner in the anti-Iran coalition from the Yemeni quagmire, and prevention of the expansion of radical Sunni jihadist groups. After a recent lull in the fighting between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis followed by a steep escalation, it is worth considering three possible scenarios for how the future might unfold in Yemen.

Keywords: Yemen, Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Houthis

Background

Modern Yemen's numerous tribal, sectarian, ideological, and regional fault lines are exacerbated by the country's dearth of resources, which encourages loyalty to smaller sub-groups to ensure survival. The country's brief experience during the modern era as a formally unified entity, from May 1990 onward, has been punctuated by a civil war between North Yemen and South Yemen in 1994 and numerous instances of unrest in the north in the 2000s. Thus, from a greater historical perspective, it should not have come as a surprise in 2014 that Yemen was once more facing division and civil war.

The long-term domestic causes for the 2011 demise of Ali Abdullah Saleh's government in Yemen are twofold. First, the overall trend of centralization and concentration of Yemen's patronage and privilege in the hands of the elite in Sana'a at the expense of the north and the south of the country aggravated separatist sentiments in the periphery, as evident from the Ansar Allah (Houthi) rebellions in the north from 2004 to 2010 and the establishment of the Hirak southern separatist movement in 2007. Second, the triumvirate of President Saleh, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, and the al-Ahmar family (no direct relation to Ali Mohsen), which had long dominated the country politically, militarily, and economically, was beginning to dissolve. In particular, the President's grooming of his son to take on the premiership caused friction between the head of state and the ruling elite who sought to prevent the establishment of dynastic rule, much like with the Mubarak family in Egypt.

The spark ignited by the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia and Egypt reached Yemen in late January 2011, at a moment when both popular and elite support for the Saleh regime was low. The government response, which ultimately proved ineffective, was to use carrots and sticks to quell opposition to Saleh's continued rule. On the one hand, Saleh conceded that he would not run in the 2013 presidential election and that his son would not succeed him; in parallel, the protestors were violently repressed by regime security forces. After government forces killed dozens of protesters on March 18, 2011, Ali Mohsen and the al-Ahmar family officially defected from the Saleh regime and deprived the President of the tribal and military power that was critical for the continuation of his rule.

As the anti-government protests continued to grow, in April 2011 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) sought to mediate by presenting an agreement facilitating the transition of power from Saleh to his Vice President, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. The agreement stipulated that Saleh would step down and hand power over to his Vice President within 30 days in exchange for immunity from all legal infractions committed during his reign, and then national elections would be held within the next 60 days. But after agreeing in principle to the proposal, Saleh refused to sign the agreement presented to him on at least three occasions over the course of several months, despite pressure from the GCC to do so.

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Then in June 2011, Saleh was badly injured in an assassination attempt that also wounded many other senior officials as they were praying in the mosque of the presidential compound. He reportedly blamed the Ahmar family for the attempt on his life, which took place in the context of his own forces clashing in Sana'a with militias loyal to the Ahmars, though they denied culpability. Eventually, in November 2011, before leaving for New York for medical treatment, Saleh signed the GCC initiative in Riyadh and relinquished power to then-Vice

President Hadi. Three months later, President Hadi, who ran unopposed, was "re-elected" with over 99 percent of the popular vote.

By March 2013 and in accordance with the GCC initiative, Hadi's transitional government embarked on a process known as the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which sought to address Yemen's key problems and form the basis for drafting a new national constitution. The Conference included non-traditional stakeholders as well as traditional elites in what was described by the US Institute of Peace as "inarguably the most inclusive political negotiation process in Yemen's modern history." Yet it was nonetheless opposed by a number of powerful forces in Yemen who sought to subvert it for their own ends, including Saleh loyalists, southern secessionists, and the Houthis. When the process concluded in January 2014, the recommendations presented by the NDC were not adopted in order to formulate a new constitution. Instead, the decision on how to restructure the Yemeni state was left to a commission appointed by Hadi, which issued a proposal to re-divide Yemen into six provinces (to replace the existing 21 governorates). This was promptly rejected by the Houthis and triggered a political crisis that gave rise to the Houthi offensive in late 2014.

As a result of the support provided to the Houthis by Iran, the military forces loyal to Saleh who defected with him, and Saleh's strong relations with key tribes in Yemen, the Houthi-Saleh alliance enjoyed a great deal of initial military success against Hadi's government.

Initially, the balance of forces between the two sides heavily favored the rebels. Though Saleh had fought against the Houthis in numerous campaigns from 2004 to 2010, after his resignation he assessed that the synergy of their military power could augment their political power, leading the two to launch a joint campaign in 2014 against Hadi's Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG). As a result of the support provided to the Houthis by Iran, the military forces loyal to Saleh who defected with him, and Saleh's strong relations with key tribes in Yemen, the Houthi-Saleh alliance enjoyed a great deal of initial military success against the ROYG. Between late 2014 and early 2015 they advanced from the capital city of Sana'a in central Yemen to the makeshift capital of Hadi's "government-in-exile" in the southern coastal city of Aden.

Saudi Arabia has long sought to retain influence over developments in Yemen, believing that events in Yemen could affect the stability and security of the Kingdom. Yemen, as the more populous southern neighbor, has traditionally posed two varieties of threat to Saudi Arabia. First, if the Yemeni state is weak and fragmented, the country's instability could spread through demographic channels and impact negatively on the Saudi regime's control over its population. Second, if Yemen proves functional enough to build up military power, it would be perceived as a military threat, given its geographic proximity to the Kingdom. The current risk posed by the civil war and the rise of the Houthis in Yemen is a combination of the two, as mass displacement and power vacuums provide fertile breeding ground for extreme ideologies, both Sunni and Shia, while at the same time Iran supplies its Houthi allies with advanced weaponry capable of inflicting precision strikes on Saudi infrastructure.

Considering the intensifying competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the wake of the Arab Spring, particularly in theaters that have been destabilized and contain significant Sunni and Shia populations, it was no surprise that this rivalry bled into Yemen. From the Saudi perspective, however, one of the few possibilities more dangerous than protracted anarchy in Yemen after Saleh's fall was the configuration that actually emerged—the rise of a group backed by Riyadh's archrivals in Tehran. Saudi media in 2015 described the

Houthi enclave as an "Iranian foothold" that the Kingdom could not accept.

The Saudi-led Campaign to Nowhere

By early 2015 the camp that would later be named the Arab Quartet, consisting of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt, believed that the regional momentum was moving in a direction favorable to their interests. Initially, the Arab Spring ushered in a series of developments that upset the status quo and worried leaders who sought to preserve it; regimes were displeased by the unrest sweeping through the region that could potentially spread to their own populations, as well as by the replacement of their longtime partners with unknown entities. But in 2015, the Quartet appeared to have overcome those challenges, first, by engineering a coup d'état in Egypt in 2013 to replace Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohamed Morsi with military strongman Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Second, after winning the 2011 vote, the Islamist Ennahda Party in Tunisia lost the country's 2014 parliamentary elections and peacefully relinquished power. Third, Bahrain withstood popular unrest among its Shia majority through a combination of external assistance and growing domestic repression. In Syria, where the members of the Arab Quartet either supported regime change or did not take a public stance on the matter, it appeared then that President Bashar al-Assad's days were numbered, particularly after his regime lost nearly 20 percent of its territory in the first eight months of 2015.

Overconfidence in the ability to influence the outcome of the conflict in Yemen might have been a product of the Quartet's earlier successes in the region. The Saudi-led military campaign Operation Decisive Storm (*Amaliyyat 'Āṣifat al-Ḥazm*) was launched in March 2015[1] with the initial stated aim of eliminating Houthi "air capabilities, their air defence capabilities, to destroy 90% of their missile arsenal" and then push for a political solution favorable to Saudi interests.[2] (A possible unstated motive for launching the anti-Houthi coalition, which nominally included the participation of some countries that did not contribute much to the effort, including Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, and Qatar, might have been to buttress Saudi Arabia's position of leadership in the Sunni Arab world.) However, Riyadh's belief that establishing air superiority would then create a pathway to imposing Saudi interests on the Houthis, and Yemen more broadly, underestimated the complexity of translating airpower into far-reaching strategic goals.

The Saudi-led coalition, with the help of forces from South Yemen that were trained, equipped, and directed by the UAE, managed to push the Houthis back from Aden by June 2015, but the limits of Saudi airpower became apparent early on. According to one *LA Times* article from as early as April 2015:

> Coalition airstrikes have destroyed fighter jets, ballistic missiles, antiaircraft guns and other military hardware held by the Houthis and their allies, who have taken control of large parts of Yemen. However, residents say the strikes have done little to reverse the territorial gains of the insurgents and restore exiled President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi to power in the quickly fragmenting country.

Though the coalition had far greater resources at its disposal than the Houthi-Saleh forces, it suffered from severe weaknesses that made the campaign costly and progress slow.

The primary shortcomings of the coalition and its execution of the campaign were the result of miscalculation. First, the Saudis overestimated the degree of support that their more militarily experienced allies might offer them; in particular, Pakistan refused to deploy forces to Yemen, while the United States and Egypt agreed to play a minimal role only. This, combined with the Saudi and Emirati sensitivity

to casualties and relative inexperience, led the coalition to rely heavily on airpower and foreign mercenaries—neither of which could provide effective or sustainable methods for conquering and holding territory from local populations over the long term. Second, the coalition initially focused on targeting the heavy weapon systems that were in the hands of Ali Abdullah Saleh's forces, and this changed the power balance in the Saleh-Houthi alliance in a manner that increased the dominance of the more hostile and ideological Iran-backed Houthis. Third, the regionalist prism of the Yemeni civil war made it very unlikely that ROYG and southern forces would successfully maintain control of an antagonistic population in the Houthi heartland in north Yemen, especially in the absence of its presentation of any appealing alternative to Houthi governance. In addition, the forces from South Yemen trained by the UAE largely sought greater autonomy or even independence, so from their perspective it would have been useless to embark on a campaign to retake Northern Yemen only to remain largely separate from it.

In late 2019, Netanyahu traded threats with Houthi defense officials. In December of 2019, Houthi Defense Minister Major General Mohammed al-Atefi warned that his forces have a "bank of military and maritime targets of the Zionist enemy…we will not hesitate to attack them if the leadership decides to."

With the conflict stalled since 2018, the Saudi-led coalition activities in Yemen have seen diminishing returns. Houthi missile and drone capabilities have grown more dangerously precise (very clearly with Iranian assistance), as exemplified by the Houthi "airport for airport" policy, which stipulated that so long as the coalition enforces the closure of the Sana'a airport, they would target Saudi and Emirati airports—which they did. The abysmal humanitarian situation in Yemen, which is largely a product of the conflict and has been coined the "worst humanitarian situation in the world," has severely damaged the international reputations of Saudi Arabia and the UAE and undermined their relationships with Washington,[3] perhaps one of their most important strategic assets.

By the second half of 2019, the motivation of the warring parties to continue the conflict appeared to decline for a variety of reasons.

a. The Emiratis announced a withdrawal from Yemen in June 2019, as a possible response to growing criticism of the Yemen campaign in Washington and the desire to end involvement prior to the upcoming 2020 presidential election; fear of escalation on another front, as Iran launched attacks on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf beginning in May 2019; and having accomplished the bulk of what it had sought to achieve vis-à-vis South Yemen.
b. After being pressed by Iran to claim credit for a massive strike (which they did not launch) on Saudi oil production in September 2019, the Houthis declared a unilateral ceasefire in regard to Saudi territory, indicating they wanted to avoid international blowback from claiming responsibility or had reassessed their anti-Saudi alignment with Iran.
c. In response to the Houthi overture and progress in negotiations with them, Saudi airstrikes against Houthis declined considerably as of October 2019.
d. After a brief escalation in Aden regarding control of the Presidential compound in August 2019, the Emirati-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Saudi-backed ROYG reached a power-sharing compromise known as the Riyadh Agreement in November 2019.

While it is true that early 2020 witnessed a slight increase in fighting between the Houthis and Saudi-led coalition, perhaps in an effort to improve their respective negotiating positions, it is premature to dismiss efforts made to wind down the conflict.

In parallel to the general trend of a reduction in fighting, however, the Houthis were reportedly developing capabilities with assistance from Iran to launch strikes on a new front: Israel. During US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin's visit to Israel on October 28, 2019, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu explained to the US delegation [emphasis added]:

> *Iran is seeking to develop now precision-guided munitions*, missiles that can hit any target in the Middle East with a circumference of five to ten meters. They are developing this in Iran. They want to place them in Iraq and in Syria, and to convert Lebanon's arsenal of 130,000 [imprecise] rockets to precision-guided munitions. *They seek also to develop that, and have already begun to put that in Yemen, with the goal of reaching Israel from there too.*

In the weeks and months that followed, Netanyahu traded threats with Houthi defense officials. In December of 2019, Houthi Defense Minister Major General Mohammed al-Atefi warned that his forces have a "bank of military and maritime targets of the Zionist enemy…we will not hesitate to attack them if the leadership decides to."

In light of what appears to be a changing trajectory on the Yemeni battlefield as of the latter half of 2019, it is important to consider how developments might unfold. Israel, because it is not an active or significant player in the Yemeni theater, has limited ability to influence outcomes there, but it must nevertheless monitor them with three desired priorities in mind (in order of importance): preventing Houthi acquisition of the capability to strike Israel or Israeli assets with advanced weapons; ending Riyadh's involvement in the war in Yemen, so Jerusalem's unofficial Saudi partner in the anti-Iran coalition can redirect its resources toward more productive ends; and preventing the expansion of Salafi-jihadi groups such as AQAP that could target Israel's partners, including the US, or even Israel itself.

Future Scenarios

When considering the future of Yemen, it is important to lay out clear guidelines that ground expectations in the existing reality. First, the stakeholders in Yemen who enjoy positions of power and influence today are beneficiaries of the current system and are unlikely to relinquish those advantages quietly, making any serious governmental reform for the sake of greater efficiency or equality extremely difficult, if not impossible. This is exemplified by deposed President Saleh's returning to Yemen after recovering from the assassination attempt, aligning with his former nemeses, and fighting a war against the ROYG in order to retake power. Second, reunifying Yemen in any meaningful way is not a top priority for two of the more significant military powers in the conflict, the Houthis and the STC. Third, President Hadi faces considerable constraints that prevent him from taking material steps to promote a unified Yemen under his control: because he lacks a substantial personal power base, he is dependent politically, financially, and militarily on other actors that often have conflicting agendas, including Saudi Arabia, Ali Mohsen, and the UAE-backed STC forces.

The first scenario, and the most optimistic of the three, is one in which the war in Yemen is resolved and a political settlement is implemented that takes into account the interests of all major stakeholders. This would likely occur in a piecemeal fashion rather than in the form of a grand-bargain involving all of the different actors, and it would probably be facilitated by an Arab head of state whose position in the conflict has not strongly favored any particular side, such as the Emir of Kuwait or the newly anointed Sultan of Oman. The resulting unified Yemeni state would need to be highly decentralized for the powerbrokers who emerged from Yemen's most recent

fragmentation to agree to rather than thwart its establishment. The Saudis would likely provide a significant amount of funding for the government of Yemen in order to influence its policies, and that money would be distributed through patronage networks to ensure their loyalty. However, Riyadh faces a difficult quandary when considering how it might end its active military involvement and blockade of Yemen while ensuring that its Houthi adversaries refrain from exploiting any peace agreement for the purpose of upgrading their capabilities (reminiscent of Israel's dilemmas regarding Hamas).

The second scenario, and perhaps the most realistic, is that of a partially resolved conflict with a general reduction in the intensity of the fighting. Resolving all of the many layers of the Yemeni war may prove too ambitious, but settling particular dimensions of it is certainly achievable. One conceivable configuration that could emerge: the Houthis refrain from attacking external actors, such as the Saudis, Emiratis, and international maritime shipping off the coast of Yemen, while the Saudis withdraw their forces from Yemen and end their air campaign but continue to financially and politically back the ROYG and the forces from South Yemen. This would satisfy Riyadh's aim of exiting the war, but may not prevent Houthi force buildup and would likely fail to secure long term Saudi goals of building durable channels of influence in the Yemeni arena.

A third scenario is that the war remains unresolved or even reignites, following failed efforts to broker agreements. Presumably this could happen under a variety of circumstances: one side escalates in order to gain leverage during the negotiations but miscalculates, there is a failure to reach an agreement after extended talks lead one or more groups to revert to conflict to achieve goals, or external actors like Iran might seek to complicate the Saudi exit from Yemen by prolonging the war. In any event, given the extensive damage already done to Yemeni infrastructure and economy as well as donor fatigue from intractable conflicts, it is likely another round of fighting will have even more severe humanitarian effects than the previous round.[4]

These scenarios present a degree of friction between Israel's interests in Yemen. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia performs an important function by targeting Iran's allies in that theater that might otherwise grow into a more significant threat with its sights set on Israel. On the other hand, the coalition's campaign does not exact a significant price from Iran for its malign activities in the region, as Tehran has little invested in Yemen, but it does distract and arguably weaken Saudi Arabia, an important member of the anti-Iran coalition. These tensions can be neutralized by a Saudi departure from the Yemeni theater on favorable and enforceable terms that limit Iran's ability to operate there, but it remains to be seen whether Saudi Prince Khalid bin Salman can arrange such an agreement with his Houthi interlocutors.

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Notes

1 The then-ongoing negotiations between Washington and Tehran, within the context of P5+1 talks to reach a nuclear deal, may have also alarmed Riyadh and caused it to question the wisdom of continued reliance on the US.to provide for its security.

2 Based on a 2016 statement by then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to *The Economist*, the Saudi-led campaign was intended to prevent the emergence of a Houthi threat on the Saudi-Yemeni border analogous to the Hezbollah threat Iran had created on the Israel-Lebanon border: "I have surface-to-surface missiles right now on my borders, only 30-50 km away from my borders, the range of these missiles could reach 550 km, owned by militia, and militia carrying out exercises on my borders, and militia in control of warplanes, for the first time in history, right on my borders, and these war planes that are controlled by the militia carry out activities against their own people in Aden. Is there any country in the

world who would accept the fact that a militia with this kind of armament should be on their borders?"

3 The erosion of support for the Saudi-US relationship is particularly pronounced among Democrats in Congress, and criticism of the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen became a frequent talking point for Democratic presidential candidates. In late February 2020, all Democratic Party candidates supported "ending military and intelligence assistance for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen." Even some Republicans participated in a September 2019 effort to prohibit logistical support to Saudi military activities in Yemen. Thus the future of broad-based support for the bilateral relationship appears precarious, and some attribute Emirati withdrawal from Yemen in the summer of 2019 to an effort to avoid association with such a divisive issue on the eve of the presidential elections. Yet even a Saudi withdrawal from Yemen would be unlikely to end widespread animosity toward the Kingdom in the US, as incidents like the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi have inspired considerable attention and controversy regarding ties to Saudi Arabia, including among universities and think tanks.

4 Of particular concern is if/when the coronavirus will reach Yemen, as around 70 percent of the country's citizens lack access to basic medical care.