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The Conflict in Yemen: A Case Study of Iran's Limited Power

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In both the media and the prevalent discourse within the political and security community, Iran commands the image of a strong, unwavering regional power, scoring success after success in its quest for regional hegemony. However, the conflict in Yemen between Saudi Arabian-led forces and the Houthis, supported by Iran, offers a more balanced view of Iran's strengths and weaknesses, i.e., the limits of its power. This understanding is important when trying to assess the implications of the nuclear agreement with Iran and the steps that must be taken to curb the possible negative ramifications of the expected improvement in Iran's economic situation.

Iran naturally identifies with Shiite minorities in the Middle East, feels an affinity for them, and uses them to expand its influence and its image as a formidable power. However, until the start of the Arab Spring, Tehran had little interest in highlighting its support for Shiites fighting Sunnis. The Middle East is primarily Sunni, and any power wanting regional influence needs Sunni support. Therefore, even when Iran was providing massive support for Hizbollah and Syria, Iran framed this as aid to "the resistance" fighting the Zionist entity.

The revolts that broke out in the course of the Arab Spring, however, evolved into civil wars, generally between Sunnis and Shiites or their allies, such as the Alawites in Syria. These conflicts joined the conflict in Iraq between Sunnis and Shiites, presenting the Iranian leadership with a dilemma. It is difficult for the Iranian regime not to support Shiites without damaging its internal legitimacy. On the other hand, an ethnic war between Sunnis and Shiites in which Iran steps up as the leader of the Shiite camp severely damages its ties to the Sunni world. Eventually Iran chose to align itself with the Shiites but it is paying a steep price by more sharply etching the fault lines between it and the other players in the region, deepening its isolation, and expanding its opposing regional coalition.

Iran supported the uprising of the Shiite majority in Bahrain, which sparked the first high signature military intervention on the part of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf states in a neighboring country, under the banner of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Iran continues to support the Shiite majority government and Shiite militias in Iraq in their

conflict with the Sunnis. It is deeply entrenched in Assad's fight for survival in Syria, along with Hizbollah and Shiite volunteers from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. In addition, Iran has supported the Houthis for many years, albeit to a lesser degree, with arms, training, and financial aid. All of this has led to the present situation in which there is a war-by-proxy between a Saudi Arabian-led Sunni coalition and an Iranian-led Shiite coalition.

Until a few months ago, Yemen looked like yet another Iranian success story. More than a decade ago and long before the Arab Spring, the Houthi movement, representing the interests of the Zaydi Shiites (different from the Iranian Twelver Shia), a large minority of the Yemeni population that has suffered economic and political discrimination, established a Hizbollah-style militia that rebelled against the central government. The ouster of Yemeni dictator Ali Abdullah Salah created a political vacuum that was exploited by a coalition of Houthis, probably Salah himself, and army forces still loyal to him, to seize control of Sana'a and eventually most of Yemen's habitable areas. The government that replaced Salah fled to Saudi Arabia, and it seemed that this series of events would be crowned as another Iranian success.

There are two ways to look at Iran's current situation. In the view more widely held, Iran is an expanding entity, broadening its sphere of influence and control over the region. As such, Iran is the de facto ruler of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen; the demonic Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards, serves as Iran's "high commissioner" in these nations. The other way is to see Iran as on the defensive, trying to protect the interest of Shiites, a minority in the Middle East. As a result, Iran is liable to suffer from over-extension of commitments and an inability to fulfill them. Yemen – unlike Syria, Iraq or Lebanon – does not represent an Iranian interest of a high order, although there is some value in having a foothold in Yemen, as it commands the Bab al-Mandeb Straits and borders Saudi Arabia. With Iran's decision to intervene in Yemen on the side of the Shiites, the question is: are Syria and Yemen Iran's Tibet or Vietnam? The truth seems to lie somewhere between the two, and time will tell the final results of Iran's moves in these states. Of course, the results also depend on the actions and failures of the players trying to curb Iran.

Yemen provides an interesting lesson, given the relative success of the coalition of Sunni states led by Saudi Arabia that intervened in the fighting. The initial aerial assistance was followed by limited forces on the ground led by the UAE (whose army acquired much operational experience in Afghanistan and is considered, alongside the Jordanian military, to be the most skilled among the Arab armies), with US and local help. Thus the coalition managed to tip the scales of the war with the Houthis, repel them first from Aden and what used to be South Yemen, and force them to make a quick exit toward Sana'a, which could restore the legitimate government to the Yemeni capital. It became clear that in this situation Iran is helpless, because it cannot assist the Shiite player it

supports. As with Bahrain, the limits of Iranian power were exposed. Four years ago, when the "Arab Spring" came to Bahrain and the primarily Shiite protests against the Sunni House of Khalifa peaked, Iran's efforts to appropriate the achievements of the protests and materially support the rebelling Shiites for the most part failed.

Despite the major reservations of the United States about Saudi Arabia's direct military intervention in Yemen and the heavy humanitarian cost, as well as skepticism regarding the ultimate success of the intervention, the US administration had no choice but to come to the Saudi side, and has provided intelligence and logistical support. The principal assistance, however, is the naval blockade the US imposed on logistical support for the Houthis. At the height of the nuclear talks, at its most critical stage, Iranian ships bearing supplies to the Houthis were forced to turn back after the US threatened to intercept them. It became clear that contrary to various forecasts, the Houthis are incapable of withstanding the aerial force of Saudi Arabia and its allies or the limited UAE and local anti-Iranian ground forces), and Iran is powerless to help them. To be sure, the Yemeni story is not yet over; the country is still in a state of chaos and vulnerable to Iranian exploitation. The Houthi rebellion will continue unless there is a political solution, and al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have an opening under such conditions. Nonetheless, it was a clear demonstration of the limits of Iran's power.

The nuclear agreement with Iran has sparked much concern about the financial resources Iran will have at its disposal once the sanctions are lifted. Most experts agree that the agreement has not prompted Iran to change its fundamental political or ideological approach and that it will continue to support its regional proxies, try to expand its sphere of influence in the Middle East, oppose the influence of the United States and the West in the region, and continue to show extreme hostility toward Israel. Presumably, then, Iran will use its newfound resources to promote these aims. Nonetheless, the case of Yemen shows that the forces opposing Iran – the Sunni coalition, the US and its allies, and even Israel – have the tools to confront the possible ramifications of the nuclear agreement. These reasons make it important to maintain an ongoing, in-depth dialogue about cooperation and coordination to contain Iran and limit its influence.

From Israel's point of view, this understanding should drive it to renew, at the earliest possible opportunity, the close strategic dialogue with the US, and focus on agreements over the steps required to confront Iran and its allies and stop its subversive efforts. This would include US aid to strengthen the capabilities Israel needs to this end. This should be done in tandem with independent US actions to stop Iran's support for its allies, which in many cases – such as Hizbollah – violate UN Security Council resolutions. At the same time, Israel's leadership must acknowledge that it will be impossible to give real meaning to such a dialogue and expand cooperation with the Sunni Arab states without paying a price, both in terms of a new attitude to the agreement with Iran and in terms of dealing with the Palestinian issue.