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The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

INTRODUCTION

As the foreign military intervention in Yemen approaches its fourth year, world events have come together to create a rare window of opportunity to bring the conflict to an end. This, however, will require a powerful global actor to sheppard the process, and the European Union is currently the most well-positioned to take up the role.

The killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October has brought global attention to focus on the conduct of Riyadh's rulers, and in particular the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. The internationally recognized Yemeni government, supported by a coalition of Arab states with Saudi Arabia at the helm, are mired in a veritable stalemate with the armed Houthi movement, which took control of the capital Sana'a in 2014. The toll of the conflict has been shouldered chiefly by civilians, unleashing the world's gravest humanitarian emergency and pushing the country toward what the United Nations predicts could be the "worst famine in living memory." Successive attempts at peace talks have failed and over two years have passed since the warring parties last sat down together at the negotiating table.

Despite this apparent reticence to engage in efforts to find a political solution, the parties to this seemingly intractable conflict are in fact all seeking a route out. They cannot do so however, without a means to save face. The United States' exit from the Iran nuclear deal this year has offered the opportunity for exactly this. With Washington's withdrawal and reimposition of economic sanctions, Saudi Arabia – desperate to walk away from a war that is proving increasingly costly in both reputation and treasure – can claim a victory over its archrival Iran, at a time when its forces also have an upper hand militarily in Yemen. On the other side, Tehran is seeking to forge closer ties with Europe to counterbalance to its souring relationship with Washington. While their ties are often mischaracterized, Iran is the only state actor with the ear of Houthis and can be expected to calculate – given the peripheral importance of Yemen's war for its national interests – that collaboration with Europe to end the war could be an astute move.

The European Union appears to be the only actor that can capitalise on this brief alignment of interests. The US has lost any remaining semblance of an impartial actor in the region and the United Nations' Security Council is hamstrung by fault lines over the war. EU action would need to be complementary to the ongoing mediation efforts by the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, lending its clout, legitimacy and resources in a guarantor-type role. Crucially, the union is held in regard by the conflict's most powerful player, Saudi Arabia, and its leading member states are already in talks with Tehran over the future of the nuclear deal. An activation of these channels within the small window that has presented itself would act as a force-multiplier to UN-led efforts to find a political solution to Yemen's war.

THE IRAN DEAL FOR THE YEMEN WAR

While the signing of the Iran nuclear framework in 2015 was a watershed moment for global diplomacy and a foreign policy legacy marker for United States President Barack Obama, little mentioned at the time was the price of the deal: the war in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia was incensed with the Obama administration for signing up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – which granted Iran sanctions relief in return for capping and accepting international monitoring of its uranium enrichment program – as Riyadh saw the deal bolstering its arch-enemy across the Persian Gulf. The Houthi military expansion in Yemen through 2014 and early 2015 then only fuelled Riyadh's paranoia that an emboldened Tehran was establishing a forward operating base on Saudi Arabia's southern doorstep.

To placate these fears and to stop Riyadh from scuttling the JCPOA, Obama essentially wrote Saudi Arabia and its allies a blank cheque for a military intervention in Yemen. The Obama administration, supported by the United Kingdom, provided the Saudi-led military coalition with warships to help enforce a sea blockade of Yemeni ports, air refuelling support for coalition warplanes, and military and intelligence personnel for the coalition's military command complex in Riyadh. It also expedited sales of advanced weapons to the Saudi and Emirati militaries, and regularly blocked moves at the United Nations to censure or condemn the coalition as civilian casualties in Yemen mounted, the country's economy collapsed and millions of people were driven toward famine. While it has become fashionable today for US Democrats to berate Obama's successor for the free hand he gives the Saudis, what they fail to mention is that the Obama administration was essential to starting and supporting this disastrous Saudi-led military adventure in Yemen.

A WAR OF ATTRITION AND STRAINED ALLIANCES

The Saudi-led military coalition officially launched its campaign to push back Houthi forces and reinstall the internationally recognized Yemeni government in the capital, Sana'a, on March 26, 2015. The effort, dubbed 'Operation Decisive Storm', has been anything but. While seeing some early successes through the summer of 2015 in pushing Houthi fighters out of the port city of Aden and southern governorates, in the three years since the conflict has largely been a grizzly stalemate. The country as a whole has descended into **the world's largest humanitarian crisis**, while some estimates peg the cost of the war to Saudi Arabia alone at **up to \$6 billion per month**.

If one can ever say there is a honeymoon period in a war, it is now definitively over in Yemen. From a conflict resolution standpoint, this means a window of opportunity. Indeed, the belligerent parties today seem, in many ways, more tired of their allies than they are of their enemies. Throughout 2017, spates of violence regularly broke out between troops loyal to Yemeni President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and United Arab Emirates-backed paramilitary forces in Yemen. In early 2018, **clashes engulfed Aden**, the Yemeni government's functional capital in the country, when forces affiliated with the UAE-backed separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) routed government

troops from the city. While Hadi has since intermittently returned to Aden, tensions have continued to simmer amid growing protests over the country's economic crisis, culminating in a call from the STC for a popular uprising against the government in October.

It is also little secret that both UAE and Saudi officials view President Hadi with contempt, seeing him as a corrupt statesman and an impotent leader with little natural constituency in Yemen. Meanwhile, the Gulf monarchies have faced increasing international criticism and damage to their reputations over mounting evidence of war crimes. This bad press – such as the August 9 coalition airstrike on a school bus in Sa'ada governorate that **killed 40 children** – has seen opposition to the coalition intervention gain momentum in Europe, the US and at the UN. Khashoggi's murder has only bolstered the conception of Saudi Arabia as a reckless actor in the region.

The coalition's current campaign along Yemen's Red Sea coast to take Houthi-held Hudaydah city, launched in June this year, has **displaced nearly half a million people**. Even the coalition's staunchest allies – including **congressional leaders in Washington** – have warned that the campaign will likely fail to achieve its goals while simultaneously unleashing a cascading humanitarian fallout. Hudaydah port is Yemen's busiest and the entry point for most of the country's commercial and humanitarian supplies. Interruptions in cargo ship deliveries would threaten to catapult millions of people into famine.

While the coalition announced a "pause" in the offensive in June – officially to allow time for the UN Special Envoy for Yemen to pursue conflict de-escalation efforts – the first days of November saw the coalition renew the offensive. A coalition victory would landlock the Houthis, though in the process likely instigate mass starvation on a scale unseen in modern times, and without necessarily precipitating an end to the conflict given Houthi forces' demonstrated capacity for protracted guerilla warfare.

That said, however poor the outlook for the coalition, the Houthis are faring worse. In late 2017, their alliance with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh ruptured, leading to clashes in Sana'a in which Saleh was killed. While Houthi forces now exert more authority in territories they previously co-governed with Saleh, intelligence leaks from Saleh's former networks have led to **the assassination of high-ranking Houthi military and political figures**.

Saleh and his General People's Congress party had also maintained extensive diplomatic networks, which provided a valuable link between the Houthis and the West. The loss of these left the Houthi leadership feeling deeply isolated, with Tehran to only remaining option to carry their voice internationally. On the ground, the Houthis have been slowly losing territory for more than a year, and while their ballistic missile launches into Saudi territory or attacks on Red Sea shipping may be headline-grabbing, militarily they are insignificant. Increasingly oppressive governance in territory under Houthi control betrays the extent to which the leadership in Sana'a are feeling the heat. The war for the Houthis has become a test of how much continual punishment they can endure – not just along the frontlines but from relentless coalition bombing across northern Yemen.

All parties to the conflict are exhausted and looking for a way out. And yet, lugged along by the conflict's momentum, the belligerents stand at the crossroads of an even more terrible phase of the war. It is in such moments, however, that the opportunity for a peace broker to intercede appears.

OPPORTUNITIES IN TRUMP'S BELLIGERENCE TOWARDS IRAN

Successful conflict resolution requires that, in silencing the guns, the belligerent parties are able to save face. Whether or not a party to the conflict actually won is less important than whether that party is able to maintain the appearance of victory.

In President Trump's withdrawing from the JCPOA and targeting Iran with new sanctions, the Saudis have in a sense already won, at least in terms of the zero-sum cold war the kingdom sees itself as waging with Iran. From this perspective, the victory Tehran achieved in securing the nuclear deal has become a defeat. Riyadh can now proffer the narrative that it has regained the initiative against its arch foe and the impetus for launching the military intervention in Yemen has receded. Whatever the impact on future Saudi policy choices, the UAE – which entered the Yemen conflict out of solidarity with Riyadh – will follow.

Coalition-backed forces have quickly swept up Yemen's western coast and made advances from the Saudi border into the Houthi heartland of Sa'ada governorate. Such gains, while still far from a decisive military victory, have given the coalition the initiative and would allow Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to enter peace negotiations from a position of strength – the only position that would be palatable to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, widely seen as the architect of the coalition intervention in Yemen. International pressure following the killing of Khashoggi at the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul in October may also make the conditions more amenable to a political solution. While Riyadh fervently denies allegations of a state-sanctioned operation, concrete signals of its commitment to a peaceful resolution to the Yemen war would help rehabilitate the kingdom's beleaguered public image.

Across the Gulf, the JCPOA and the reelection of pragmatist President Hassan Rouhani in 2017 enabled a gradual, modest economic opening and took Iran out of its international isolation, boosting diplomatic relations with Western countries. Among the headline-grabbing deals following the JCPOA's signing were the nearly \$40 billion in aircraft sales with US-based Boeing and France-based Airbus, and a 20-year, five billion-dollar contract with French oil and gas major Total and China's state-owned CNPC to develop phase 11 of Iran's South Pars gas field.

With the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in May this year – and many multinational companies' subsequently cancelling newly inked deals with Tehran – Iran's hopes for an economic lift fell to earth. While hardliners in Tehran have since trumpeted that the US cannot be trusted and issued bellicose dictates directed at Washington, the government has signalled that it seeks to keep as much of the JCPOA alive as possible. With inflation soaring, the currency tanking and socioeconomic protests rattling the country, Iran can hardly afford going back to complete isolation and sanctions. Leaders from the UK, France, Germany and the European Union – all signatories to the JCPOA – have in public and behind the scenes shown their intent to try and uphold the deal as well, in spite of US threats to sanction European businesses doing trade with Iran.

Since the US re-imposed sanctions on Iran on November 5, Europe has stepped up efforts to establish a clearing house designed to circumvent the US-dominated banking system and enable firms to continue conducting business with Iran. While its details remain vague and feasibility dubious, such moves illustrate Europe's calculation that the JCPOA must be somehow preserved and Tehran kept on side.

At the same time, while Iran has regularly offered public support for the Houthis in Yemen, it has actually invested little of its political, military or economic capital in the conflict. This is unlike Iraq, Syria and southern Lebanon, which Tehran views as crucial to its geopolitical positioning and security, and thus in which it has invested heavily to maintain its interests. The Houthis have been incredibly convenient for bleeding Saudi Arabia of treasure and reputation and the Iranians have in return been happy to offer piecemeal support as the opportunities have presented themselves. However, in the unlikely circumstance that Houthi forces folded tomorrow and the coalition "won," Tehran would lose little. Indeed, Houthi officials make no secret of their viewpoint that, given the right assurances, they would be open to being long-term strategic partners with Saudi Arabia in Yemen.

This is where the opportunity arises to set the conditions for conflict resolution in Yemen: Riyadh's ability to save face and Tehran's desire to forge deeper ties with Europe open the door to effectively neutralizing the regional drivers of the Yemen conflict.

Why the US is Unable, and UN Insufficient, to Facilitate Peace in Yemen

It is widely agreed that there is no military solution to the Yemen conflict, only a political one. Among the world powers however, the US is not in a position to play the role of peace broker in Yemen. With a series of inflammatory moves in the region, including the withdrawal from the Iran deal and recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, Washington has lost under the Trump presidency what had arguably been its greatest capital in the Middle East: the assumption — valid or not — that it could be part of the solution.

While the US has rarely been viewed as an impartial regional mediator, there has existed an implicit regard for the potential for American dynamism. This facilitated previous historic Washington-led diplomatic efforts in the region — among them the Camp David and Oslo Accords — whether or not these agreements met their stated goals, or were practical to begin with. Today, there is no longer the illusion of depth or altruism in US foreign policy. Neither is there much regard for Washington's resolve to the hold to the commitments it makes.

The United Nations also faces a crisis of credibility in Yemen. Jamal Benomar, the UN Secretary-General's first Special Envoy for Yemen following the 2011 uprising, oversaw the country's transitional phase, and its dissolution. While officially a mediator and facilitator between political parties, Benomar was widely seen as going beyond this role to become a central figure in decision making himself — a position from which he increasingly provided political cover for President Hadi as the latter's failures as transitional head-of-state mounted. Benomar resigned shortly after the Saudi-led military coalition launched its initial foray to dislodge Houthi forces from Aden in March 2015. He was replaced by Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, who over his tenure oversaw three rounds of failed peace talks and was banned from Houthi-held areas for the last year at his post due to accusations of bias. Meanwhile, as the war and economic crisis drove

millions of Yemenis toward starvation and their country into ruin, the UN Security Council remained virtually silent – at one point going more than 14 months without issuing a council decision related to the conflict.

This is not to discount the efforts of Martin Griffiths, who took over as the new UN Special Envoy for Yemen in March 2018 and since has engaged with and been well received by all relevant stakeholders to the conflict. The cancellation of peace consultations between the warring parties in September, which were scuppered at the eleventh hour, owed to a logistical dispute over the Houthi delegation’s transportation to and from Geneva and did not represent a terminal blow to Griffiths’ mediation efforts. However, as Griffiths himself said to UN Security Council member states during his first council briefing on April 17: “Mediation without the backing of diplomacy will fail. We will do whatever we can to find agreements that work between Yemenis. But it is for the members of this Council, and other Member States, from time to time, to put the force of international opinion behind these agreements. Your unity and your resolve will be decisive.”

Plainly speaking, the UNSC is far from united regarding Yemen. Indeed, as in Syria, Ukraine, Palestine and Israel, the war in Yemen has made it painfully apparent that permanent UNSC member states prioritize their vested geopolitical interests over international harmony and conflict resolution, regardless of the humanitarian cost. Specifically, the US and UK have an established track record of defending the position of the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen-related UNSC discussions and decisions. As Griffiths said during his April briefing, successful peace negotiations will require compromises from all sides; however, it is likely that the US and UK will derail any process which Riyadh finds objectionable. Regardless of Griffiths’ mediation skills, any UN-led process will ultimately be held hostage to the conflict’s most powerful player: Saudi Arabia. Diplomatic backing for mediation thus requires a powerful international player that is also able to act independently of the belligerent parties’ vested interests.

THE OPPORTUNITY AND IMPERATIVE FOR EUROPE TO STEP UP

Talks between Iran, the UK, France and Germany regarding the Yemen conflict have been underway since February, with all sides noting progress and an Iranian willingness to facilitate talks with or regarding the Houthis. The European and Iranian delegations said following the most recent meeting in September that talks would continue. The Europeans have multiple motivations for pursuing this track. There are Europe-Iran business interests, while limited, that relate to the JCPOA and which the Europeans have an interest in maintaining. More importantly, it is a security interest for Europe to preserve the dialogue with Iran that was institutionalized by the JCPOA. Through this dialogue Europe has an avenue to push for wider de-escalation, and specifically de-escalating Saudi-Iranian rivalry that has been rapidly destabilizing much of the Middle East since the Arab Spring uprisings upended the regional status quo in 2011. Since then, waves of refugees and sporadic terrorist attacks across Europe have helped inflame latent nationalist populist movements that are now threatening the EU’s very unity. A

stable Middle East would help remove much tinder from this fire, with a Saudi-Iranian de-escalation being key to regional stabilization. And of all the region's conflict's, the Yemen war is perhaps where the EU is best positioned to help end the violence.

Until recently, Antonia Calvo-Puerta, head of the EU delegation to Yemen, was the only Western diplomat to have been granted an audience with the Houthi leadership. Indeed, the only other Western diplomat granted access to Houthi leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi in recent years has been Griffiths. Calvo-Puerta has also led the EU's Track II efforts involving tribal leaders from across Yemen. This saw more than 30 tribal leaders flown to Belgium for talks in September 2017, with another meeting with tribal leaders held during the EU delegation's visit to Sana'a earlier this year.

Brussels' ability to step up its engagement in the Yemen conflict has in many ways been freed up by London's imminent departure from the union. As a diplomatic and military ally of Saudi Arabia, the UK would have been able to curtail deeper EU engagement in the Yemen conflict had it maintained its voting power. The importance of the EU's relative independence from the conflict's belligerent parties thus becomes apparent. Despite the Saudi leadership's disagreements with the EU their continued regard for Brussels is apparent. Criticism of coalition actions in Yemen has been audible in many European capitals, and in the EU parliament itself, while the Saudi response to such has been relatively muted. Compare this to Riyadh's scorched-earth response toward Ottawa in August after the Canadian embassy in Saudi Arabia issued a tweet calling for the release of imprisoned Saudi civil rights activists.

However, the EU's real geopolitical and diplomatic potential to contribute to conflict resolution in Yemen will only come to bear when it becomes official EU policy. This requires EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, to be willing to leverage the current circumstances to help champion the process, in collaboration with the UN Special Envoy. Should Iran's support for a peace process in Yemen be packaged into the Europeans' discussions for maintaining the JCPOA, the choice for Tehran would be obvious. Yemen is the most peripheral arena for Iran, important only as a card in the game; if Tehran saw benefit coming from playing that card, it would do so. Riyadh, meanwhile, could use the EU as cover to finally end its disastrous military intervention in Yemen with a veneer of victory.

In addition to coordinating with tribal factions in Yemen, the EU could also bring its weight to bear in support of the UN Special Envoy's mediation efforts relating to Hudaydah port and Sana'a International Airport. Both are essential to the humanitarian relief effort and restarting normal economic activity, and in both cases it is Houthi control of these transport hubs that has the coalition either seeking their capture (in the case of Hudaydah port) or forcing their closure (in the case of Sana'a airport). The EU, with its experience in South Sudan, the Balkans, Serbia, and elsewhere, has demonstrated that it has the human and financial resources necessary to effectively oversee this type of major infrastructure in unstable environments. Relative to the UN, it has fewer bureaucratic obstacles to deploying the necessary manpower and finances, and most importantly the EU has enough credibility with both the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition to take up this role. Another area for EU intervention would be in helping, via its connections with tribal networks, to arrange for prisoner exchanges and the release of journalists, activists and other civilians held by the various parties. This should be part of larger UN de-escalation and demobilization efforts.

All of the above should be seen as confidence-building measures between the warring parties en route to a final peace agreement, with the EU's efforts dovetailing with, and supporting of, the UN Special Envoy's mediation. Where Griffiths can lay out the roadmap and bring internationally legitimacy to the peace process, the EU can bring the clout and leverage necessary to act as a guarantor, keeping the belligerent parties to their commitments on the ground and facilitating the de-escalation of hostilities.

WHY THE MOMENT IS OF THE ESSENCE

With all parties to the conflict searching for an exit route, now is the moment for the EU to champion peace in Yemen. The Khashoggi affair has also refocused world attention Saudi conduct, with even the US and UK now demanding that Riyadh's end the war – the recent US move to end in-flight refueling for Saudi warplanes was a welcome step in this regard.

Through its access to the warring parties and legitimacy in the eyes of major stakeholders, Brussels is almost uniquely placed to play this role in the absence of alternative peace brokers. Leveraging Iran as the only remaining state actor with clout among the Houthis will be imperative to this effort. Already, regional security matters have been packaged in with talks to save the JCPOA, and Yemen's war is the most likely front on which Tehran would show flexibility.

Yet here too, time is of the essence: for the moment, **Iran says it remains willing to engage with Europe as counterweight to Washington's punitive moves**, but reformist voices advocating such a position will face further domestic pressure as sanctions start to bite. In August, Iran's parliament impeached Masoud Karbasian, the country's finance minister, citing the economic crisis that earlier this year spurred the country's biggest protests since 2012. The supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – in whose hands political power in the Islamic Republic ultimately lies – has laid the blame for these economic woes firmly at Rouhani's door and cast doubt on Europe's ability to save the nuclear deal. France's Total has already pulled out of the South Pars project and even if Europe establishes a mechanism to bypass the US banking system, businesses will still be wary of falling foul of new sanctions.

Most indicative of this urgency however, is the situation on the ground in Yemen. After more than three years of blood, disease and hunger, the renewed offensive on Hudaydah city and looming famine risks tipping the conflict in a new, even more devastating phase.



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