



“SO NOW THAT THE HOUTHIS HAVE WON...” - Q&A WITH ABDULGHANI AL-IRYANI

By:

Sana'a Center Staff

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COVER PHOTO: Sana'a Center Senior Researcher Abdulghani Al-Iryani. // Photo
Credit: Sala al-Sakkaf



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.

Yemeni analyst and researcher, [Abdulghani Al-Iryani](#), recently joined the Sana'a Center as a senior researcher after postings with the United Nations Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY), the UNDP Mission in Hudaydah and decades of work for international organizations. Drawing on his knowledge, experience and rare vantage point on Yemeni society and political history, Al-Iryani walks us through, among other things, how the Yemen war was launched as part of a domestic dispute in the Saudi royal family, how Riyadh's military intervention fits into a decades-long design to gain direct access to the Indian Ocean, and why most Gulf countries – including the United Arab Emirates – are more worried about Saudi Arabia than Iran.

He also lays out the conflict's roots among the northern Zaidi tribal elite, and how the current UN peace process is simply giving Houthi leaders what they crave – recognition – now that their fighters have already won the battle. This has made the war's continuation “criminal” while also chalking up a win for Tehran.

In his conversation with Sana'a Center staff, Al-Iryani also discusses how southern Yemen marches to its own drum and why the recent Riyadh Agreement is a “powder keg” waiting to blow. He then speaks to how the UAE has behaved like a “kid in a candy shop” in Yemen, lavishing aid and favors upon Salafis who could easily become the next support base for anyone from the Islah party to Al-Qaeda.

Sana'a Center: Why is Yemen at war?

Abdulghani Al-Iryani: Yemenis do not agree on the root cause of conflict, so I can only give you my take on why Yemenis are fighting. The way I see it, this is just one more cycle of competition between northern Zaidi tribal elites and the rest of Yemen over power. This has been a cyclical social negotiation process surfacing throughout the country's history; the 1948 Constitutional Revolution attempt was part of that process, the republican revolution was part of that process – to try and break the monopoly of the Zaidi tribal elites. Yet every time the other constituents of Yemen tried to do this, the Zaidi elites came out on top.

The 2011 revolution was a continuation of this process. The uprising, comprised chiefly of middle class, lower-income groups, southerners and others that were not included in the political deal that governed the system of rule in Yemen, sought to break that monopoly of power. It found brief success in the power-sharing arrangement that lasted for two-and-a-half years. But then, as usual, the northern Zaidi tribal elites regained control. Except this time with the participation of an important component of Northern Zaidi elites that had, since the beginning of the republic, been excluded: the Zaidi demographic of Sa'ada.

As the war progressed, the Houthis came to Sana'a and took the capital by force. They initially aligned themselves with the faction of the General People's Congress

(GPC) party still loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, before slowly sidelining Saleh’s people and eventually killing Saleh himself. Soon after, the Houthis began to reintegrate Saleh’s loyalists and the majority are now part of the Houthi system.

In effect, today, the Houthis have reconstituted Saleh’s regime without Saleh. They took control of state institutions, established alliances with tribal sheikhs and co-opted what is left of the GPC and their power arrangements. So, in short, while on the face of it this conflict is political, at its root it is an identity conflict, with these demographic blocks competing, fighting or making alliances.

The south of Yemen has not really been part of this process of social negotiation. That’s why the south tends to behave in its own way – not quite consistent with the central dynamic of the Yemen conflict. In essence, the conflict in the south is even more identity-based – between what is referred to as the “Bedouins,” represented by President Hadi and his allies, and those tribesmen represented by the Southern Transitional Council (STC).

Then the regional dimension comes in. When the Houthis reached Amran [50 kilometers north of Sana'a] in 2014, Saudi Arabia offered to intervene. Hadi refused, deciding that he wanted the Houthis to march on Sana'a, kill those that were harassing him and then go home. That did not work out as he hoped. Following Houthi takeover and Hadi’s escape from the capital, he asked Saudi Arabia to intervene. Riyadh agreed for two reasons. Firstly, the Saudis were afraid that the Houthis would invite Iranian influence into the country. While there is definitely a link between the Houthis and Iran, it is not as strong or deep as Saudi Arabia presents it to be. When Riyadh entered the conflict, the idea was to reverse intrusion by Iranian proxies. The second and more important reason is that Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) needed to have a significant accomplishment to become crown prince. When he saw after the first few months that this strategy [the intervention in Yemen] did not work, he neglected the Yemen file and instead bickered with his cousins and uncles.

It was clear that one of the main reasons behind the war in Yemen was related to a Saudi internal affair and when this domestic justification ceased to exist, MBS did not have the time to stop it. Then other things [came into the picture] like the economy of the war. There’s also a wing in Saudi Arabia which to this day is still thinking about [annexing] Hadramawt and Al-Mahra or getting extraterritorial rights in them. Saudi Arabia only put up a serious effort at winning the war until 2016 when the Kuwait peace negotiations started. When these negotiations failed, serious Saudi effort at winning the war was never resumed.

Why did the Kuwait talks fail?

The Kuwait peace negotiations were between two sides: the Houthis and the GPC on one side, Hadi and everyone else on the other. Negotiations took place on two levels. At the formal level were negotiations between Hadi’s internationally recognized government on the one side and Houthi/Saleh on the other. The real negotiations were backroom negotiations between the Saudis and the Houthis. The Saudis offered serious concessions to the Houthis in the hope of bringing the conflict to an end. The understanding that I have is that the two sides agreed that the Houthis would secure the Saudi-Yemeni border, distance themselves from Iran and return to what they had been in recent history – allies of Saudi Arabia. In return, Saudi Arabia would give them the opportunity to have a seat in the government and be a dominant force within the national unity government. To clarify, Sa’ada’s population has always been connected to Saudi Arabia. For generations, Sa’ada has been part of Saudi Arabia’s economy – it imported everything from Saudi Arabia and exported produce there. Many Sa’ada residents had visited Saudi Arabia but never Sana’a. Intermarriages and family links across the borders are common. So the current situation, where they are now enemies of Saudi Arabia, is exceptional and evolved only over the past two decades or so due to the mismanagement of the Sa’ada wars by [former President] Saleh and his nemesis [current Vice President] Ali Mohsen.

In the end, the Kuwait talks failed because Saleh did not get what he wanted. He demanded that sanctions against him be lifted and he wanted a role for his family – his son in particular – in a future government. He did not get that, so he vetoed the agreement and negotiations stopped.

From Kuwait on, it became clear to me that Saudi Arabia was no longer trying to win the war. They kept the conflict at low intensity, a durable and acceptable level of intensity, with a purpose that was then unclear. Over the next few years, it became clear that they [Saudis] were doing this, dragging the war on, until they could have another go at what they tried to do in 1994 – breaking Yemen apart, taking Hadramawt (and Al-Mahra) and gaining access to the Indian Ocean. This has been a standing strategic objective of Saudi Arabia for decades, as a means to no longer be reliant on the Strait of Hormuz chokehold for their exports. I am almost certain that this was the reason Saudi Arabia did not allow Hadi’s forces to advance on any fronts against the Houthis during the period that followed Kuwait. I have spoken with many generals who have said: “Every time we try to advance, the coalition would send their air force to stop us.”

How did the Stockholm Agreement come about and, more than one year on, what's your assessment of its success?

Saudi Arabia was following its script until the murder of Jamal Khashoggi when further international pressure to stop the war was piled on. That is what led to the Stockholm Agreement.

The UN negotiated an agreement that in my view was too ambitious. I think ensuring that the [Hudaydah] ports operate, the roads are clear and the revenue from the ports goes to pay salaries is something that is achievable. But to expect parties to make significant withdrawals – they call it redeployment, so there are no negative connotations – that is ambitious.

I think the Stockholm Agreement is a great success nonetheless. It opened the door for negotiation. I think elements of the agreement that cannot be implemented now will be implemented only as part of a nationwide cessation of hostilities.

What is the current status of peace negotiations?

The UN is now pursuing further negotiations, mostly in connection with the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement. But we have to accept the fact that the UN is a tool: the UN will not make peace, Yemenis will make peace. If the parties are serious about advancing towards peace, then the UN is a useful tool to work out areas of interest for negotiation. If one side is not interested in peace, then no matter how smart the special envoy is, the UN can do nothing. No one can force a peace agreement on anyone.

I think we're now at a point where peace would actually be feasible to pursue. The obstacles that stood in the way of peace are falling one by one. The war economy was one of the key obstacles, but over the past few months, maybe a year, the income from it has been going down. For the Houthis, the main source of income was mark-ups on imported petroleum products. The devaluation of the Yemeni riyal took that income away; people cannot pay more than they are currently paying, so prices could not be increased to make up for the devaluation of the rial.

On the Saudi/Hadi side, I think the Saudis are tightening the screws a little on the money that goes to their Yemeni allies. Despite the fact that their monthly expenditure on the Yemen war is still around \$1.85 billion, they do not seem to be spending as much money maintaining their allies/clients in this conflict. On the

political side, I think that when the Saudis decided they could no longer implement their long-held strategic designs on Yemen, they decided that peace was the best option for them. By 2019, the Saudis were clearly ready for peace but one problem stood in their way – they had been humiliated.

They needed to hit the Houthis hard, knock them down a peg or two before they could declare an end to the war. They tried a couple of times, assaulting Sa’ada last August/September. However, that was a massive failure. Instead of them gaining a face-saving victory, they dug themselves deeper into this humiliation. This makes it difficult for them to start serious peace negotiations.

I think the face-saving exit is not going to happen on the battlefield – Saudi Arabia has demonstrated incompetence over and over again. The only way is the political way – some kind of political production to give them a face-saving exit. Without that I think they will keep the conflict going – maybe even increase its intensity, leading to a lot more bloodshed. But there is no way that they can change the outcome – they have shown that they are unable to beat the Houthis militarily.

Which party currently has the upper hand in the war?

I think the Houthis, and by association Iran, have won the war, and their victory is irreversible. Some will disagree but I say that because of the following: They are in full control of Yemeni state institutions. They have reconstituted a political elite deal that has governed Yemen for decades. They control the majority of the population. They are in a position to speak for the people of Yemen, while the internationally recognized government has been displaced and losing credibility over the years. They are now the voice of the northern Zaidi demographic and people turn to them to maintain their interests.

So we have one side that controls the Yemeni state and another side that is unable to implement anything. The internationally recognized government has lost its base in the south and been unable to build institutions to compete with those controlled by the Houthis. It has lost credibility in the eyes of the population, who see the government as a willing participant in the weaponizing of the economy against the population. The government is blamed for not opening Sana'a airport. It is blamed for obstacles placed on the import of petroleum products, food and basic commodities. It is blamed for having transferred the central bank to Aden and promising to pay salaries for all [public sector employees], then not paying salaries. So, the general population will give them no legitimacy. Now the government’s legitimacy comes from the UN Security Council, then the UN Security Council can take it away at any time – and the government will have

have nothing left.

So now that the Houthis have won, the continuation of war is not only unconscionable but also criminal. On Hadi's side, there are a lot of people who know that their careers will end with the end of the war.

The UN continues to pursue the Kuwait formula in negotiations – a general cessation of hostilities, the formation of a government of national unity, security arrangements in Sana'a for the new government and the return of military commanders who fled to the other side in 2014. This formula is simply impossible to implement. It appears that any tinkering with the military is not going to work – there is no way of establishing local security forces acceptable to both sides. The reason for this is that one side, the Houthis, controls everything – so why should they give it up?

Unfortunately, the course of negotiation the special envoy is now pursuing is going to lead to a dead end. I think he, and really all of us, should start thinking of a new modality that is implementable. We need to recognize that the most we can get out of negotiations is to freeze and formalize the existing state of affairs so that every party controls and manages areas and population they are currently controlling. We need to formalize that control, foster coordination between these different groups so that the national institutions that have been divided into two or three pieces can be restored. Once these national institutions are united and reactivated, we can then begin talking about the restoration of the Yemeni state. An approach other than that, I think would be too ambitious and unimplementable. An agreement on a government of national unity with regulatory rather than executive capacity is the option most likely to succeed. That government will work on restoring/re-uniting/revitalizing national state institutions, then have these institutions devolve various competencies to local governments and formalize those that have been already devolved on ad hoc fashion.

Do the parties trust the UN?

The Houthis do not trust the UN. Once I was in a meeting with some Houthi leaders and they accused the UN of being partial to the other side. I had to confess to them that the UN is actually governed by Security Council resolutions, and the views of the permanent members are very influential on the special mission to Yemen. Nevertheless, the Houthis basically want the UN to recognize them as the Yemeni state and given the fact that the Houthis are in control of Yemeni state institutions, the UN has to work with them – thereby giving them that recognition. While they have tried to keep the process as slow as possible, the UN has slowly

given the Houthis what they want – recognition.

The internationally recognized government, on the other hand, has only the UN to give it legitimacy – so of course, they trust the UN. They know the UN is doing its best to help them return to Sana'a. Saudi Arabia can exercise undue influence on what the UN does for a variety of reasons. It has excellent relations with permanent members of the UNSC. It also has various points of leverage: if it wants to harass the UN, it can withhold licenses for UN flights to Sana'a, for example. It can refuse to finance the special mission and other UN activities. There are many ways Saudi Arabia can make life for the UN difficult. These tools are not available to the other side. So the UN is not neutral in this conflict – it cannot be for very pragmatic reasons.

You referred there to UN Security Council Resolution 2216 – adopted in 2015 – which essentially enshrines the legitimacy of the Hadi government. Does the resolution still have a role to play?

Resolution 2216 was issued after the Houthis took control of Sana'a. Its purpose was to deter them, force them to back down following the coup and make them return to the political process. It did not achieve this desired purpose and after a few months it lost its utility, so there is a need for a new, more balanced and more realistic resolution to deal with the Houthis.

Since then and until this day, Resolution 2216 was negatively used. The Saudis used it to prolong the war. When the international community pressured Saudi Arabia to stop the war, it would say “we are ready [to do so], but the Houthis must implement Resolution 2216,” i.e. withdraw from Sana'a, hand over weapons and return to Sa'ada, then agreements can then be reached.

These impossible conditions were [applied] and used to prolong the war for years. Despite that, the main beneficiary from Resolution 2216 was the most competent party: the Houthis. Resolution 2216's validity ended four years ago, and the international community is still thinking of issuing a new resolution. Look, it's true that the [UN special] envoy has a role but, in the end, the Americans and British decide everything. They make the decisions with their eye on Saudi Arabia. They decide on [the] condition [that] they do not upset Saudi Arabia. And in the end, Saudi desire is what directs international decisions pertaining to Yemen. Meaning, no one is willing to make a decision that may cause Boeing to lose a \$20 billion deal to Airbus.

Let's turn to some of the other players in the conflict. Looking to the south – do you think the Riyadh Agreement can engender a lasting understanding between the internationally recognized government and the STC?

Unfortunately, the Jeddah negotiations were cut and paste from UN-mediated negotiations for the national cessation of hostilities. It had the same formula: a powder keg for a future explosion.

In the same way that it is assumed possible to bring government forces back to Sana'a and everyone will live in peace and harmony, they are talking about Hadi's people living in peace and harmony with the STC. This is a formula for another round of conflict. I do not think it will contribute to a national peacemaking process.

The only good part of it is that the STC is now recognized as a party to the conflict and will have a seat at national-level negotiations. Marginalizing STC was one of the obstacles to peace in Yemen; representation of the south was skewed in favor of one side of the conflict, making that part now represented by STC a potential spoiler. I think that the STC is no longer serious about secession – they realize this will be difficult. But they want enough power and autonomy and to have a seat at the table and negotiate as representatives of most of the south. I think people recognize that this is a positive thing; the south needs to be represented by all components, not just [President] Hadi.

There's also been increasing attention paid to Salafism in Yemen. Can you briefly explain their role?

The Salafis are the base of all bases, i.e. they are the popular base of religious parties. Islah takes from them, Al-Qaeda takes from them, Daesh takes from them: they are the base. It was a historical mistake when the Emiratis bet on the Salafis.

But didn't their bet turn out to be well-placed?

When I sat with the Emiratis, I asked them, “do you know what you’re doing in Yemen?” This was in 2015. “You are using the Salafists to harm Islah.” Before 1991, Islah spoke the Salafis’ language and there were no differences [between the two]. Then in 1991, they [Islah] were allowed to become a party and they became moderate and tolerant of others and willing to participate in the political process. They still have the extremist wing which is purely Salafi and which rejects all of

this, but participates for maneuvering [purposes]. But there is a large part of Islah that was moderate [in terms of] participation and cooperation with others and now you [the UAE] are using the Salafis against Islah. In 10 or 15 years, the worst-case scenario is that those Salafis will become AQAP or ISIS. The best-case scenario is that they will become Islah. Okay, so why wait 10 or 15 years to deal with Islah? Deal with it now.

A possible explanation of UAE behavior is that since their business model is so antithetical to Islamists that the only acceptable option for UAE is to eradicate them; they target moderate Islamists who are likely to be accepted by the international community. [By] pushing the moderate popular base of Islamists to the side of radical groups such as AQAP, they know the international community will join [them] in attacking and eradicating them.

Tell us more about Islah. What is it?

Look, Islah is a tribe before it's anything else – it was a Zaidi tribe. Notice how all of Islah's main leaders have Zaidi origins and a Zaidi identity – the identity which I call the northern Zaidi tribal identity. Zaidiyah as a [social] identity and not a [religious] sect. The aim of the uprising in 2011 was to end the northern Zaidi tribal monopoly of power. They [Islah] came and hijacked this revolution, and they were practically trying to turn the matter into [a question of] who will replace Ali Abdullah Saleh. [For Islah] this was to be Hamid al-Ahmar [a senior Islah MP, powerful businessman and sheikh from the highly influential Hashid tribal federation], recycling the northern tribal elite instead of including the rest of the society.

This is why they lost their popular base, and the people, whether the Zaidi street or the rest of Yemen, viewed them as [hijackers] who are removing Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime and replacing it with the ugly side of Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime. Al-Ahmar and [Vice President] Ali Mohsen people were the other face of Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime; therefore, they [hijacked] the revolution and turned it from a social revolution into a power play among northern tribal Zaidi elites. Those who took to the streets to demand power-sharing were completely excluded. The Islah party, which is supposed to be a Muslim Brotherhood Wahhabi party, was controlled by the northern tribal Zaidi elites and this became a conflict within the same elite [group]. So it's inaccurate to say that the revolution was aborted in 2012 when the GCC initiative was signed. The revolution was aborted when Ali Mohsen joined it and when Hamid al-Ahmar funded it. The revolution actually ended then, and what followed was merely a conflict among the same elite, the ruling elite.

Is there a sense of identity-driven hatred in Yemen?

Divisions are identity-based and politically expressed, but this is not hatred. The divisions are based on interests rather than animosity. It used to be that northern Zaidi tribesman monopolized most government positions before the revolution. The tax collectors, military and security figures and judges came mainly from the northern Zaidi demographic. There is a vested interest to maintain that and others are challenging it, but I don't think Yemenis hate each other enough to fight. Rather, the fight is a process of social negotiation over economic interests.

We've seen a growing rivalry between Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Daesh in Yemen. How do you assess each group's chances?

Daesh is just a brand, and the number of its members who are organizationally linked together is very little and does not exceed, perhaps, a few dozen. There is no doubt that Al-Qaeda too is a brand, but the members linked to it organizationally are [in the] thousands.

It's true when they say Al-Qaeda in Yemen is one of the most important Al-Qaeda branches in the world, but it's still a small organization and most of those who raise the Al-Qaeda flag are not members. They are not true Al-Qaeda [members] and eliminating them [cannot be achieved] via drones but via social specialists and development projects.

Turning back to the prospects for a political settlement. Why did the Saudis restart talks with the Houthis last year? And why are the Houthis interested in stopping the conflict now if they have effectively won?

As far as the Houthis' proposal for a cease-fire, the Saudis keep surprising us in many ways. The Houthis claim the [September 2019] attack on Aramco, which was a huge blow to Saudis. Then Houthis said, “we will now stop here.” Amazingly, the Saudis said yes. They said that they are considering whether they will agree to a cease-fire, which is a strange political situation – there is some internal dynamic we are not aware of. In my view, the Saudis cannot stop the fighting while they are on the losing side. What they are doing now is an indicator that they still want to do something on the military side to save face, but my prediction is that they cannot, that they will fail.

The Houthis are very pragmatic. If you present them with a peace deal today, they will take it. They know the time to end the war is while they are still on top. While they are militarily quite capable, they are struggling economically – not paying salaries, people are starving. They cannot maintain control for long without being able to at least pay salaries. So they are giving every indication that they want peace. But they want a victor’s peace – which no one wants to give them at this time. I think maybe six months ago it was too ambitious to seek a victor’s peace, but today I think it is quite reasonable. Tomorrow they may demand more.

The divisions within the Houthi movement are extreme, the politicians and military men are at odds. However, they are a highly disciplined organization and their loyalty to their leader is absolute. If it weren’t for that, they would have clashed amongst themselves. But this loyalty is keeping them together and disciplined. They are the only side in Yemen that when they promise to commit to an agreement, can keep that promise. We can’t say that for Hadi or the STC or any of the other active participants in the conflict. [Their] loyalty is to the office of the paramount religious leader. If the leader is taken out, someone else will fill the position and enjoy the same kind of loyalty and discipline.

Given the Houthis’ economic difficulties couldn’t the Hadi government just sit and wait?

The problem is that the government side is decaying – its durability is even worse than the Houthis’ situation. So I don’t think that option is reasonable, despite the fact that the government will try to do that. But to be reasonable, we should accept that the leverage of an internationally recognized government hosted in hotel rooms in another country is very limited.

What about the relationship between Iran and the Houthis? How do we square this with the Saudi-Houthi talks?

Iran sends the Houthis regular shipments of petroleum products – the estimated value of that is maybe \$200-250 million a year. But this is only a small contribution to the Houthis’ total revenue. Iran also gives the Houthis political advice, military training, and there are at least 5,000 students studying in Iran at any one time. We know they occasionally send missile parts or missiles – but the type of weaponry they use is actually available on the black market. If Iran doesn’t want to get implicated then they don’t need to send missiles. One of the members of the Houthi cabinet is a famous arms dealer named on a UN list – he has the network to provide weapons from anywhere in the world.

The ideological link is very difficult to estimate but it is there. There is co-dependence and mutual interest. The Houthis are not proxy of Iran or a pawn – they have their own agenda. They are a local force with a local agenda. They are allied with Iran but not subject to its influence the way that is advertised. Iran does not actually have the kind of leverage over the Houthis that everyone talks about.

Iran cannot stop the Houthis from making a deal with the Saudis, and there is no way the Saudis will allow the war to end without making a deal with the Houthis that they can live with. I think [the] Kuwait [talks] indicate that they can make a deal. Iran is doing its best to trade Yemen for something more durable, for example, in Syria. Iran has been telling everyone, “why don’t you include us, we can help make peace.” The Yemen card fell in Iran’s lap without much effort and they know that they can’t sustain it – that they will lose it if they don’t use it. So they are trying to use it now to get concessions in another area of interest.

What is your assessment of the relationship between the two coalition leaders – Saudi Arabia and the UAE – following the latter’s withdrawal from Yemen?

First, we must explain why the two are at cross purposes. Saudi Arabia is an expansionist state that has taken a bite out of every neighboring country except for Israel. Saudi Arabia – not Iran – is the key existential threat to smaller states in the Arab region. All sides understand that if Iran tries to grab Qatar or the Emirates, they can’t get away with it. But if Saudi Arabia did the same it would have a reasonable chance of doing it and getting away with it. This needs to be taken into account, to understand why the UAE engaged in Yemen.

I think the UAE’s main objective is to make sure Saudi Arabia doesn’t get a corridor to the Indian Ocean. The UAE took the entire south very quickly – it was militarily effective and did all that needed to be done to create a southern force.

The UAE’s withdrawal is influenced by many aspects – one is the threat that Iran is getting more involved, which could cause serious damage to the UAE. There is also the increase in the Houthis’ airstrike capabilities. But I think the key factor is the fact that the UAE mission has been accomplished: they have formed a military force that can frustrate any Saudi designs on southern Yemeni territory. So they can go home and rely on their allies to do their bidding.

Often people accuse the UAE of trying to control Yemeni ports and islands. Consider this: DPI [Dubai Ports International] had a 25-year concession to

operate the container terminal and the Free Zone in Aden Port. In 2013, it was required to invest around \$85 million in upgrades. It rejected that as economically unfeasible. The Yemeni government had to annul the agreement for non-compliance. Aden was not worth \$85 million in 2013, but has become worth billions of dollars in 2015? The UAE came to Yemen with a single strategic objective, to frustrate Saudi designs to have access to the Arabian Sea. When UAE found itself in control of southern Yemen, it started behaving like a kid in a candy store – grabbing ports and islands here and there with no realistic prospects [and] no path in international law to be able to keep them.

Is Oman still a mediator, given concerns about Saudi presence in Al-Mahra governorate on the Omani-Yemeni border?

Oman is becoming more involved in the Yemen conflict – it is now accused of supporting missile smuggling and hosting anyone standing against Saudi Arabia. They are afraid of Saudi Arabia [taking over the region] and are doing what they can to prevent that. If Oman’s relationship with the UAE was better, they probably would have coordinated their efforts against Saudi Arabia. But because the UAE messed up its relationship with Oman, Oman seems to be standing alone.

What is Qatar doing in Yemen?

Qatar is defending itself, it’s a matter of life or death. It tries to create problems for Saudi Arabia everywhere in order to decrease what it views as an existential threat posed by Saudi Arabia.

Recently you said Iran has won in Yemen?

They won because they did not lose. Imagine that you invested between \$50 million to \$60 million over the years – from the 1980s until 2014 – versus the tens of billions invested by Saudi Arabia. And now your group is winning while Saudi Arabia’s group is in hotels? What’s a [better] victory than this?

Abdulghani Al-Iryani is a senior researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies where he focuses on the peace process, conflict analysis and transformations of the Yemeni state. Al-Iryani has more than three decades of experience as a political and development consultant. He tweets @AbdulGhani1959.



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