



TURKEY'S POLICY SHIFTS TOWARD YEMEN'S CIVIL WAR, A LOCAL AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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COVER PHOTO: Yemeni President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hold a joint press conference in Ankara on February 16, 2016. (Official website, Presidency of the Republic of Turkiye)



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INTRODUCTION

Turkey might be expected to be involved in the Yemen war for a number of reasons: the Ottoman legacy, regional influence aspirations, the ruling party's ideological ties with the Yemeni Islah party and early backing for the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen in 2015. Yet today, it appears to be absent from the Yemeni equation. The reasons for this are debated from numerous perspectives within and outside of Turkey. Turks attribute their country's non-interventionist policy in Yemen to domestic and regional complications, including the country's economic crisis, Gulf Arab nations' three-year feud with Qatar and Turkey's foreign policy priorities in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean, which led Turkey to step back from the coalition and reconsider its relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran.

In a regional context, Turkey's approach toward Yemen's civil war is confounding, having shifted mainly from bandwagoning to hedging. In contrast to its proactive regional policy, Turkey seems passive in its approach to the Yemen conflict, with implications for itself and the region as a whole, among the foremost of which is leaving Iran unbalanced. Arguably, this does not imply isolation, but Turkey has preferred a non-interventionist approach to avoid potential risks and secure relative gains. Indeed, since the beginning of the conflict, Turkey's Yemen policy has been evolving through three phases: bandwagoning the Saudi-led military coalition; hedging against the influences of Riyadh, Tehran and Abu Dhabi in Yemen; and, finally, restoring ties with the Arab Quartet (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE), some of whose members impact not only how the war plays out but also the polarization of anti-Houthi actors.

TURKEY'S LIMITED INTERVENTION IN YEMEN'S CIVIL WAR

During the first phase, Turkey split its cautious engagement in the Yemeni civil war into two forms. Politically as well as militarily through intelligence and logistical support, Turkey openly backed the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen in mid-2015, a few months after the Houthi seizure of the Yemeni capital, for four reasons. First, Turkey had to demonstrate its commitment to sustaining and preserving the regional status quo. Second, Ankara sought to draw Saudi Arabia into regional anti-Iran measures. Turkey had been losing ground to Iranian proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, feeding into longstanding ideological and security worries about Iran's geopolitical influence among Shia Muslims regionally; in Yemen, for example, the pro-Turkey Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, the Islah party, had lost some footing to the Iranian-backed Houthis. For these reasons, a quarrel between Iran and Turkey raged in March 2015, especially after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan denounced Iran's destructive regional policy with a direct reference to its role in Yemen, saying "Iran and the terrorist groups must withdraw."^[1] Third, Turkey aimed to "encourage Riyadh to take a more positive stance on the Muslim Brotherhood."^[2] Fourth, Turkey sought to rebuke the Houthis, who challenged Islah, the friendliest of Yemeni entities toward Ankara.

Though Turkey has vacillated for so long about stepping into the Yemen fray, undeniably, Ankara has manifested commitment to soft roles in the ongoing Yemen crisis. On the humanitarian front, since the outset of the war in Yemen, Ankara has provided livelihood support and essential health care to Yemenis through its governmental and non-governmental organizations, including the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Organization (IHH). Among its aid contributions, Turkey sent a ship in 2017 carrying nearly US\$9 million in relief supplies, built a small hospital in Aden and provided US\$1 million in support for UNICEF programming.^[3] In addition, Turkey provided hospital treatment to injured anti-Houthi fighters in its domestic

1) Gönül Tol, "Turkey's Balancing Act between Iran and Saudi Arabia," Middle East Institute, April 15, 2015, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-balancing-act-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia>

2) Özlem Tür, "Turkey and Egypt in the Yemen Crisis," *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*, 179–93, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-35578-4_12

3) "Turkey mobilizes for Yemen, collects \$3.8 million in aid," Daily Sabah, December 20, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2018/12/20/turkey-mobilizes-for-yemen-collects-38-million-in-aid>

hospitals^[4] and asylum to Yemeni officials, particularly those from the Islah party, who fled to Turkey once the Houthi rebels overran Yemen's capital in late 2014. Turkish popular donation campaigns for Yemen also were launched in 2018 and 2019, including two famous ones ('Don't remain silent about Yemen' and 'Yemen is waiting for help').^[5]

Despite its limited military engagement before the 2017 Gulf crisis and subsequent withdrawal of active support for the coalition, Turkey has kept a diplomatic backdoor open on the Yemeni crisis. Ankara has tried to help resolve the conflict, using its international and Islamic weight, and owing to its belief in its role as a mediator. Ankara has hailed all peace efforts, including the December 2018 Stockholm Agreement as well as the 2019 Riyadh Agreement that aimed to end infighting among anti-Houthi actors, in a discursive and diplomatic manner.^[6] Instances of Turkey's mediating role in Yemen include President Erdogan's early 2015 visit to Tehran to explore ways to resolve the Yemeni crisis, among other regional concerns.^[7] In another case, at the outset of the Yemen conflict, Turkey and Pakistan engaged in 'backdoor diplomacy,' seeking to co-opt Saudi Arabia into a political resolution of the conflict.^[8] Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu spoke in January 2019 of prioritizing efforts to bring peace to Yemen, and emphasizing Turkey would "make contributions to ending the war in Yemen."^[9]

4) Ali Bakir and Giorgio Cafiero, "Turkey's Influence in Yemen," *TRT World*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/turkey-s-influence-in-yemen-17126>

5) Atik Jarullah, "Turkish Campaigns to Aid the Yemeni People: Motives and Results [AR]," ORSAM, January 2, 2019, <https://www.orsam.org.tr/ar/--26/>

6) "Ankara Congratulates Newly Formed Yemeni Government," *Daily Sabah*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/ankara-congratulates-newly-formed-yemeni-government>

7) Tim Arango, 'Turkey and Iran Put Tensions Aside, for a Day,' *The New York Times*, April 7, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/world/middleeast/turkey-and-iran-put-tensions-aside-for-a-day.html>

8) Bakir and Cafiero, "Turkey's Influence in Yemen."

9) Diyar Guldogan, "Hand in glove with terror groups, hard for US to pull out from Syria," *Anadolu Agency*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/hand-in-glove-with-terror-groups-hard-for-us-to-pull-out-from-syria/1359800>

TURKEY'S NON-INTERVENTIONIST YEMEN POLICY

In the second phase, Turkey has intentionally opted to hedge against domestic economic concerns and regional rivalries in Yemen by carefully avoiding legal, logistical and ideological risks while strategically dealing with regional agendas, alliances and economic interests. This approach was due to the confluence of regional transformations, including the Qatar issue. In which Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain severed ties with fellow Gulf Cooperation Council member Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of destabilizing the region by supporting terrorism; at the time, they and Egypt specifically called on Qatar to sever ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and evict Turkish troops based in Qatar as part of a bilateral defense agreement. Other factors in Turkey's shift included the unresolved Syrian war and eastern Mediterranean energy and geopolitical interests.^[10] As a result, Turkey has appeared keen to avoid entangling itself in any potential conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Turkey also remains apprehensive about the ideological, legal, logistical/military and geopolitical ramifications of engaging in the conflict. In Yemen, Ankara juggles cooperation and competition to a degree unlike anywhere else given the roles played by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran. This can be seen in the following areas:

Ideationally: During the Arab Spring uprisings, a regional role game pitted Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia against one another, with each having to play specific counter roles against the interests of the other. With Turkey serving as a pro-reform Islamic model and advocating the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia and Iran were forced to play their own self-styled roles. Saudi Arabia sought two counterrevolutionary roles, as an 'Arab leader' and 'defender of the status quo', while Iran pursued its traditional role of resistance axis leader. Despite being challenged by the two regional contenders, Ankara initially supported the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis in part due to a shared assessment of a Shia threat. Yet later, during the Qatar dispute, it stepped back from the coalition to avoid ideological and sectarian entanglement and to benefit from a balancing act between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

10) Aaron Stein, "Turkey's Yemen Dilemma," Foreign Affairs, April 7, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-04-07/turkeys-yemen-dilemma>

While the late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud held an anti-Brotherhood stance, Turkey observed signs of his successor, King Salman's, tolerance for the group in addition to new potential common interests.^[11] Tied with this common ideological factor, the Yemeni Brotherhood-affiliated Islah party received support from Ankara and Riyadh in its fight against the Iranian-backed Houthis. Prior to the Qatar dispute, Turkey's support for the Islah party was acceptable because of Islah's favorable position in the government of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, so any eventual loss by the Houthi rebels would also facilitate some Turkish influence in post-war Yemen.

On the contrary, the feud that arose among GCC member states, including the effort to redefine Qatar's relationship with Turkey, indicated limits to the tolerance. Turkish-Saudi relations hit a low in late 2018, when Ankara very publicly accused Riyadh of killing Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. With political schisms at the local and regional levels, Turkey was compelled to take a new approach toward Yemen. It could either act as a game-changer against all agendas of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran or step back and therefore avoid becoming ideologically aligned with either the Iranian-Houthi front or the nationalist UAE-Southern Transitional Council (STC) front. It chose the latter, weighing security over ideological concerns because any unilateral Turkish intervention in Yemen would have aggravated the crisis and jeopardized Turkey's ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Thus, to Ankara, Yemen can be viewed as a venue for appeasing regional rivals and refuting ideological allegations of Turkish support for political Islamic movements, notably the Muslim Brotherhood.

Legally: Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen with the approval and at the request of the Yemeni government to restore peace and legitimacy, based on the principle of self-defense outlined in Article 51^[12] of the UN charter.^[13] Turkey did the same in Libya, but never considered unilateral intervention in Yemen because it had no legal basis for such action. Despite this, Turkey continues to regard the Houthis and STC as illegitimate, given its history with similar disruptive groups such as the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which Ankara considers a terrorist group and has been fighting for decades in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq.

11) Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabia and Turkey," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, edited by Neil Partrick, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 229–41.

12) "Chapter VII – Action with respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression; Article 51," UN Office of Legal Affairs, Codification Division Publications, 2021, <https://legal.un.org/repertory/art51.shtml>

13) Amanda Guidero and Maia Carter Hallward, *Global Responses to Conflict and Crisis in Syria and Yemen*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02789-6>

Militarily: Turkey has been uneasy about the prospect of wading militarily into Yemen's conflict, being both at the mercy of a domestic economic crisis and currency devaluation since 2018, due to regional politics and the impact of COVID-19, and also wary of the Yemeni multi-actor war.^[14] Unlike Libya, with maritime access and limited actors, local warring parties are polarized alongside foreign allies in Yemen, and the seashores in recent years have largely been controlled by Saudi and Emirati forces and local allies. Until only recently, Turkey had been blocked by two sea fronts. The first remains in place: STC-affiliated southern groups such as the Security Belt forces and the Hadrami and Shabwani Elite forces are assigned to protect the southern and eastern coastal areas and seaports, including Aden and the vital maritime islands of Socotra and Perim.^[15] On the west coast, forces led by late Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's nephew, Tariq, had been stationed just outside the Red Sea city of Hudaydah since 2018, and in the district of Al-Mokha, which would have complicated any Turkish access to Islah-controlled parts of Taiz city. Tariq Saleh's forces only shifted away from Hudaydah city in November, leaving the area to the Houthis.

Regardless of the regional challenges to Turkey's ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, Turkey's scramble to the Horn of Africa manifests the importance of Yemen in the southern pivot,^[16] which would allow Turkey a degree of control over the strategic Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the maritime arc connecting the energy-rich GCC and the Afro-Indian flank. The struggle for the Red Sea already has raised concern in Cairo about whether, given the need for Gulf oil to pass through the strait en route to the Suez Canal, a Turkish presence would pose a security threat to Egypt and Gulf states.^[17]

14) Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The New Wave of Normalization in Turkey's Middle East Foreign Policy," Middle East Institute, April 27, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-wave-normalization-turkeys-middle-east-foreign-policy>

15) Mohammed Alragawi, "UAE's 'Great Game' in the Red Sea Complicates Regional Balance," Anadolu Agency, December 24, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/uae-s-great-game-in-red-sea-complicates-regional-balance/2087001#>; Ammar Al Ashwal, "Yemen and the Curse of Geography: Bab Al-Mandab Disputed by Great Power Rivalries," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/84558>

16) Eyal Pinko, "Turkey's Maritime Strategy Ambitions: The Blue Homeland Doctrine (Mavi Vatan)," April 7, 2020, <https://www.rieas.gr/researchareas/editorial/4456-turkey-s-maritime-strategy-ambitions-the-blue-homeland-doctrine-mavi-vatan>; "Turkey's Maritime Strategy Aspirations: The Blue Homeland Doctrine (Mavi Vatan) in the Eastern Mediterranean," Turkeygazette, September 26, 2020, <https://turkeygazette.com/turkeys-maritime-strategy-aspirations-the-blue-homeland-doctrine-mavi-vatan-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

17) Amr Emam, "Growing Turkish Interference in Yemen Stirs Concern in Cairo," *The Arab Weekly*, April 12, 2020, <https://theArabweekly.com/growing-turkish-interference-yemen-stirs-concern-cairo>

Geopolitically: The likelihood of Turkey approaching Yemen through Islah without coordinating with coalition members is widely debated, though, if true, it would allow Ankara to play an offsetting role against the UAE's agenda in south Yemen. The UAE and the STC allege, among other things, that the Islah party intends to use the recently finished Qana seaport in gas-rich Shabwa governorate to smuggle Turkish and Qatari arms through the Arabian Sea.^[18]

Because it is not a strategic priority for Ankara, Yemen might serve as a chessboard to accomplish two gains at once. On the one hand, if the Saudi-led military coalition defeats the Iranian-backed Houthis, Turkey would have a relative regional privilege over Iran. On the other hand, Ankara (and Doha) benefit, at least temporarily and especially during periods of stormy relations with Riyadh, when the Houthis exert some pressure on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This Turkish rationale allows for a settling of scores for the Saudi-UAE hostility toward Qatar and Turkey; it is based on the prospect that an unstable Yemen in Saudi Arabia's southern backyard would provide the Turkey-Qatar axis with relative power credit, and be "a stone in the shoe in the Middle East region for Saudi Arabia and its partners."^[19]

Turkey's backsliding stance on the anti-Houthi, Saudi-led military coalition is not only about potential risks to be avoided, it is also geopolitically justifiable. In a tit-for-tat game, Turkey justifies its exit move by pointing to the softening stances of Saudi Arabia and the UAE toward the Assad regime in Syria, which left Turkey alone to counterbalance three powers, Iran, Russia and the United States, as well as to continue its offensive against the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD)/Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). With fewer options, Turkey has pragmatically considered improving ties with Iran and Russia to try to encourage them to toughen their stances against the PYD/YPG in northern Syria, even to the detriment of its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. By deferring influence in Yemen for the time being, Turkey also could be better placed to benefit elsewhere, including later in Yemen, if post-war events transpire to create political and economic incentives for Turkish reengagement.

18) "Signing on the Establishment of a Port; Politicians Consider it a Guarantee of Support for Turkey and Qatar [AR]," Al-Ayyam, November 9, 2020, <https://www.alayyam.info/news/8ECRWFC4-Y08E14-5C62>; Raúl Redondo, "Turkey Sets Its Sights on Yemen," Atalayar, June 22, 2020, <https://atalayar.com/en/content/turkey-sets-its-sights-yemen>; Raiman Al-Hamdani and Helen Lackner, "War and Pieces: Political Divides in Southern Yemen," European Council on Foreign Relations, January 22, 2020, https://ecfr.eu/publication/war_and_pieces_political_divides_in_southern_yemen/

19) Redondo, "Turkey Sets Its Sights on Yemen."

With the Qatar feud resolved, the Arab Quartet's recent mending of relations with Turkey and Qatar, and a rising shared uneasiness about the Biden administration's attention to human rights issues, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have kept their diplomatic channels open. Regional trends herald a likelihood Turkey will take the initiative to prove itself a trustworthy security ally for Riyadh at a time when Saudi Arabia confronts significant security challenges, including Houthi attacks and the Iranian nuclear threat. To make this a reality, Ankara could entice Riyadh into defense industry collaboration and drone deals in exchange for allowing Turkish goods access to the Saudi market. For Turkey, improving this partnership in the post-Qatar crisis era may be "key to breaking its regional isolation and allowing [Ankara] to exercise influence over regional events."^[20] And for Saudi Arabia, a mended relationship would, at the least in the short term, help Riyadh reorder its regional priorities and reinstate its anti-Iran friendships and alliances.

20) Gönül Tol, "Turkey Should Avoid Getting Involved in the Saudi-Iran Row," Middle East Institute, January 12, 2016, <https://mei.edu/publications/turkey-should-avoid-getting-involved-saudi-iran-row>

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This analysis is part of a series of publications by the Sana'a Center examining the roles of state and non-state foreign actors in Yemen.



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