



Yemen in Crisis



The Roles of Regional Actors in Yemen and Opportunities for Peace

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PREAMBLE:

On the dawn of March 26th, 2015, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm, an internationally backed military campaign against the Houthis, a Zaidi Shi'a led rebel group, and forces allied to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen. The operation has given rise to new roles for new, non-Yemeni actors in the country, leading to an unprecedented regionalization of Yemen's conflict.

The Saudi military intervention, invoking what has since been dubbed the "Salman Doctrine," along with growing Iranian support to the Houthis and the increasing role of Oman in leading reconciliation and mediation efforts, show some critical changes of the politics and roles of regional states, which will likely determine the course of the Yemeni crisis and future of the country.

Even though the active roles of such nations are far from new to Yemen, the growth and changes in involvement from states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Oman necessitate a call for analysis: there is a need to more fully consider the new and emerging roles of the regional countries within the Yemen crisis, the reasons for their changing policies, and the impact they are having on the dynamics within Yemen. Additionally, this brief will explore potential peace-making opportunities that could easily be lost in the flames of the ongoing war in Yemen-and the regional conflict-and, accordingly, make suggestions that could bring Yemen closer to a regionally backed political solution.

This policy brief is the first of a series of policy briefs issued by The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES).

Changing Role of Regional Actors toward Yemen:

For decades, Saudi Arabia dominated Yemen's political landscape through its financial backing of a network of tribal and political parties and leaders. Their influence began to dwindle in 2011 after the Arab Spring transferred some of their networks of influence to Qatar and Iran. By then, it became impossible for Saudi to maintain their traditional patronage system in Yemen: 2011's uprising effectively shook the foundations of Yemen's political structure.

The key manifestation of these changes has been the rise of the Houthis as a powerful political group. Widely seen through the prism of their friendly relations with Iran, the Houthis' growing interest further increased the Islamic Republic's involvement and spheres of influence in Yemen, leading some analysts to go as far as to characterize the conflict in Yemen as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

When analyzed through the lens of a struggle for control between Saudi and Iran, Decisive Storm appears to be an attempt by the kingdom to regain its dominance over Yemen while demonstrating more power in the region in general. Saudi Arabia has traditionally been wary of directly intervening—a wariness that was only deepened following a 2009 intervention against the Houthis along the Saudi border with Saada, which proved to be a significant challenge for the Saudis—and has largely worked indirectly, through tribal and political proxies. Operation Decisive Storm marked a dramatic shift from this policy—spurred by Saudi anxieties over perceptions of a deepening Iranian presence in Yemen. These anxieties were particularly pushed by three events—the inauguration of direct Tehran to Sana'a flights, the Houthis' decision to hold military exercises near the Saudi border and their decision to launch airstrikes against President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi Presidential palace in Aden—which lead the Saudis to believe that they had no choice but to directly intervene.

In 2011, Iran took advantage of the weakening central grip of the government in Sana'a and increased its support for the Houthis. This was largely a matter of convenience: Yemen represented an easy, low cost opportunity for Iran to pressure its Saudi rivals, while offering a new forum for the expansion of Iran's economic and political interests. Iran's regional ally, Hezbollah, provided training, financial and political support and played a big role paving the road between Tehran and Saadah. But it wasn't just about the Houthis: Iran also recruited leftists and political groups who were left behind by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-brokered power transfer deal that removed Saleh from power, particularly in the south. But regardless of the expansion, Iran still spends far less on the Houthis compared to what it spends on allies in Iraq, Syria, and

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Lebanon—even since the start of the war. That being said, Iran’s role has deepened since the launch of Operation Decisive Storm: in the face of increasing isolation, the Houthis have been forced to turn to Iran—their only clear international ally—rendering its role even more important than it was before. This calls into question the viability of Saudi aims of eliminating Iran’s role in Yemen. Owing at least in part to its sustainable, comparatively low-cost strategy, it would appear that—barring some grand bargain between the Iranians and their Saudi Rival—that Iran’s influence in Yemen is here to stay.

How would the Conflict Repercussions Be Reflected on Yemen?

The Saudi-led war on Yemen has had a dramatic effect on Yemen, leaving the country overcome by a storm of humanitarian, economic and societal repercussions.

It is the humanitarian repercussions, perhaps, that are most dramatic. The war has effectively shut off internal and external shipping and distribution routes, leading to fuel and food shortages and leaving an estimated 80% of Yemenis in need of humanitarian assistance. The breakdown of health care systems in some parts of the country—particularly the conflict-wracked southern port of Aden—has led to the resurgence of deadly diseases like dengue fever. And the fighting itself has left over 1500 civilians dead, according to World Health Organization (WHO) estimates.

Even if the war was to end tomorrow, Yemen’s economy would take years to recover. The nation’s already fragile infrastructure has been battered, foreign investors have nearly completely pulled out, while even prominent Yemeni business families have largely done the same. Blockade on imports have further strangled the Yemeni economy, having a trickledown effect on key importers, traders and those who depend on the goods themselves.

Equally dramatic, however, have been the societal fissures in the country. The fighting has left Yemen split on sectarian and geographic lines. The fighting in the south of the country has deepened longstanding tensions between the north and the formerly independent south, calling into question the continued viability of Yemeni unity and demanding the right to self-determination. To an even greater extent, the regionalization of the conflict has fueled an unprecedented rise of sectarian sentiment in Yemen, one that has been echoed by media channels

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which have simplistically—and dangerously—cast the Houthis and Yemenis who support them as heretical, “Safavid” tools of foreign powers. These factors have been epitomized by the growth of Al Qaeda in south Yemen: Al Qaeda, taking a staunchly sectarian tone, has positioned itself as the “protector” of Yemen’s Sunnis, broadening its support and going as far as to take effective control of the eastern port of Mukalla.

Beyond the deepening of these issues, the continuation of the conflict would inevitably deepen the regional involvement in the country, opening it up to new parties. Qatar, to a certain point, has been an increasing player in Yemen’s politics and, despite siding with Saudi Arabia in the current conflict, maintains its own networks of alliances in Yemen. In addition to state actors, there is also the risk of increasing activity by non-state actors. Most notably, Yemen has become home to an increasingly active branch of the Islamic State (IS) group, which has managed to steal recruits from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula AQAP while launching a series of devastating attacks targeting mosques in Sanaa.

On the surface, regardless, there remains an overall Yemeni and international understanding that there needs to be a political resolution to the conflict. That being said, there remains no political resolution on the horizon, as no party is willing to make the necessary concessions. Most significantly, there has yet to be strong pressure against any party by its regional supporters to push for peace and compromises; indeed, at the moment, both Tehran and Riyadh are fueling their proxies in Yemen more than actually pressuring them to stop fighting.

Exploring Peace Opportunities

While Yemen appears to be careening towards the precipice, there still remain opportunities to end the war and prevent the repetition of a Syria scenario. As the conflict deepens, it remains all the more crucial for international actors to pursue these opportunities, in addition to using the deteriorating humanitarian and political situation in Yemen to pressure the warring parties to come to the negotiating table. The supposedly current ceasefire in Yemen as the result of the current negotiations should not only be taken to deliver aid food. More importantly, it should be taken as a golden (perhaps last) chance of creating a sustainable peace in Yemen. If the current chance evaporates in the air, it is more difficult to imagine doors for peace anytime soon in Yemen.

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Oman should be utilized as a mediator

Oman has long played a quiet, if productive, role in Yemen and that role has been deepened by this conflict. Having managed to maintain positive relations with all key sides—internal and external—in Yemen’s ongoing conflict, Oman has proven a remarkably well-placed mediator, particularly considering that it was the sole GCC nation not to join Decisive Storm. More than a 100 days after the war started in Yemen, it has become evident that the road to peace in Yemen goes through Oman. As Oman continues to take a different negotiation facilitation role between different local and external actors, it can use its influence to support current peace efforts of the UN Envoy. After all, Oman has a vested interest in the situation in Yemen, its neighbor to the west, and is deeply concerned with maintaining some modicum of peace in the country to prevent conflict from spilling over into its borders.

The constitution should form the new deals

The only legitimate document in Yemen now is the constitution from before GCC deal was imposed. The constitution must therefore form the basis of any new political deals. The Peace and National Partnership agreement also shouldn’t be ignored. The outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference must be taken into consideration and implemented, even though flexibly. This is of special importance when it comes to the division of regions, which has been a sticking point for the Houthis. Similarly, the new constitution draft which was completed earlier this year and contributed to the outbreak of violence must be revised prior to being voted on in a referendum in the future. The mechanisms for such a revision must be included in any future deal.

Creating a common ground for negotiations

Before any steps forward, the current hostilities need to end. Finding a military common ground, such as a gradual withdrawal of Houthis from the south along with ending the shipping blockade would be a good start. In order for that to happen, Iran and the Saudis need to be convinced that the current war is not in their best interests—and Saudi Arabia must be given a face saving solution. For the Saudis, this largely falls

in relation to their goals of “restoring Yemen’s legitimate government,” a consensus agreement allowing for Hadi’s exit—and the accession of Vice President Khaled Bahah to the presidency—would be able to provide for rhetorical fulfillment of the goal. The current nuclear deal happening with Iran can be the window for the international community to pressure Iranians who in turn can exert influence over the Houthis. The very same western actors have the ability to push Saudi Arabia towards accepting a peace.

The Yemeni government must go ahead with serious negotiations. Currently it refuses to enter negotiations unless Resolution 2216, which conditions Houthis to withdraw from cities, is fully implemented. Equally, the Houthis needs to hold up to their commitments under Peace and National Partnership Agreement, drafted in September of last year, which they have largely violated.

The former ruling party, GPC, can still be brought to the table and is not fully under the control of former president Saleh. When the coalition countries decided to go to war in Yemen, their political and non-violent tools were still not completely consumed. If they are convinced that there is a viable future for them, many of Saleh’s allies will actually defect from him.

Regional countries, however, need to keep Yemen away from other regional proxy wars. For peace to exist in Yemen, it should not be used as a proxy for any other regional reasons by any regional power. To show that, they need to keep their connection with Yemen exclusive to state channels and representations. When regional countries reach that conviction, then the architecture of a new transition deal in Yemen can be determined, being sure to avoid the mistakes of the previous GCC deal, specifically with regards to maintaining a realistic time frame stressing inclusivity, and not neglecting non-political and issues like the economy, developmental projects and foreign aid. One of the main issues made the GCC initiative ultimately collapse was that it was not accompanied with a quick economic and aid Plan. Needless to say that any political deal that doesn’t make economy and aid delivery its priority before addressing any political issue will ultimately fail, again.■

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ABOUT "YEMEN IN CRISIS" PROJECT

The 'Yemen in Crisis' Project is one of Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies programs. It aims at exploring peace opportunities in Yemen and providing local, regional and international decision-makers with the needed knowledge to contribute towards more sustainable peace in Yemen. The center specialized researchers and analysts issue a monthly policy briefs that address Yemen various issues as part of the center message to provide new approaches for issues related to Yemen and the region.

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Note: The information and views set out in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views and positions of Sanaa Center, Friedrich-Ebert or Saferworld

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Sana'a Center:

Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies is a youth-led research center established in ٢٠١٤. It aims at providing new approaches to Yemeni and regional issues. The center team and its researcher are well-connected with various local regional and international political and social actors that qualifies them to easily access to information as well as communicating it to decision-makers. They also enjoy in-depth experience in conducting research and writing policy briefs.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a private, non-profit organization committed to the values of Social Democracy. FES works towards the realization of these values by offering political education, promoting and deepening democracy, defending freedom and human rights, facilitating development and social justice, promoting security and gender equality and contributing to international dialogue both in Germany and internationally.

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