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Yemen's political future is at stake- with Saudi Arabia trying to keep control

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A year ago, in September 2014, after a siege that lasted over a month, Yemen's capital Sana'a fell to Houthi militias working with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh's forces. It provided the foundation for the Houthis' wars, which began in al-Bayda and soon spread to Marib, Taiz, and the rest of the cities in the south. A significant presence of Islamists on the battlefronts against the Houthis—including Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and al-Qaeda—has also contributed to the sectarian character of the conflict, threatening to turn it into a purely sectarian one if efforts to reach a political settlement fail.

The Houthi invasion of cities in southern and central Yemen contributed to rising demands for secession, and demands to administratively and politically re-divide Yemen along lines of regional or sectarian identity. Acts of violence against northerners have escalated, and the south now appears to be in a state of de facto separation. Central Yemen is also expressing a wish for an independent sub-identity from the rule of the 'north of the north,' where politics and identity intersect.

Saudi Arabia has with its Operation Decisive Storm worked with a coalition force against Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen, acting as an effective 'mandatory power,' to try and control decision-making in the country. It closed all the borders, air, sea and land points of entry seeking to influence the conflict and political settlement to serve its own interests.

The way forward given this complex situation, is for the United States and the rest of the ten countries supporting the Gulf Initiative since 2011 to play a central role in any settlement, to increase chances for peace. They must push for an Iranian-Saudi agreement on Yemen and integrate emerging political powers previously excluded— such as the Southern Movement and the Tihama Movement—in the negotiations process. The UN must also play a role, leveraging its legitimacy and enforcing sanctions and Security Council resolutions.

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Introduction

After a siege that lasted more than a month, the Yemeni capital of Sana'a, and all state institutions, fell into the hands of Houthi militias on September 21, 2014. The Houthi movement, which had been working with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh's forces, replaced the state's security and military apparatus and placed 'revolutionary' committees in all ministry and government institutions, taking full control of the state. Sana'a fell in less than 24 hours. This was not only a symbolic defeat, but also resulted in political and social repercussions that Yemen will face for years to come.

At the height of the conflict, the Houthi-Saleh alliance laid siege to the home of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, the consensus president. Along with members of the government, formed less than a month earlier with Houthi participation, they placed him under house arrest. But in the first turning point of the conflict, President Hadi escaped custody in Sana'a and fled to Aden, which he declared Yemen's interim capital.

The Houthis and their allies among Saleh's forces then mobilized, heading to Aden to seize control and arrest President Hadi. Hadi fled once again, to Saudi Arabia this time, and Saudi Arabia announced the start of military operation 'Decisive Storm' against what they interpreted as Iranian influence in Yemen. Operation Decisive Storm was a radical shift in Saudi foreign policy - and in its long struggle with Iran for influence in the region - and put Yemen in an unprecedented situation.

Presenting a comprehensive reading of the current conflict in Yemen is a difficult task, as it is a complex conflict with intersecting factions. The situation in Yemen is a mixture of a civil war and regional proxy war. From confrontations between Houthis and Salafis in 2013 to operation Decisive Storm in March 2015, and up through today, the situation is a blend of political conflict and sectarian confrontations.

The war in Yemen may appear to be a domestic power grab, yet the regional dimension of the conflict cannot be ignored. The battle to 'liberate' Aden has shown that the conflict is intimately shaped by domestic factors, yet Yemen's domestic issues are not purely domestic. Foreign powers have played a pivotal role in instigating and spreading the conflict, which can also be seen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This paper will shed light on how both regional elements (Saudi Arabia and Iran) and sectarian elements (the Sunni-Shiite conflict) have shaped the course of events.

Conflict moves from political to social realm

The Houthi movement was founded primarily to defend the Zaidi sect of Islam and rally the Hashemite elite who seek to reclaim the position they lost after the 1962 Revolution. They are regarded by other Yemeni factions as a sectarian movement, despite their nationalist and revolutionary slogans. The Houthis' foundational document clearly states that their ideology

and the movement itself is centered on the idea of the *wilayat al-Bayt*—that the Hashemite lineage has been chosen by God, and has the sole right to lead and rule.

By arming and supporting Shiite minorities, Iranian influence in the region has encouraged sectarian hostility and polarization. Given longstanding relations between Iran and the Houthis, including training and armament, some believe the rise of the Houthis is not simply another Shiite victory in the Arab world. These views were encouraged by Iranian statements that referred to Sana'a as the fourth Arab capital to fall under its influence.

When the Houthi movement began to attack other Yemeni cities, particularly in central Yemen (in al-Bayda, Taiz, Ibb, and al-Hudaydah), these acts were interpreted as part of a sectarian conflict between Zaidism and Shafi'ism. It was considered the latest in a series of wars that have occurred between people of these two regions throughout Islamic history up to 1962. It was only natural for this to result in a more fertile breeding ground for al-Qaeda, as it provided an opportunity for al-Qaeda to present itself as the 'defender of the Sunnis' against a Shiite invasion.

This does not mean the current war in Yemen is a sectarian one; it only indicates that sectarianism is both a strong catalyst and exacerbating factor of the current conflict. Yet there is a risk of this conflict turning into a primarily sectarian one, like that in Syria, although the Yemeni context is quite different.

However, the number of Islamists on most fronts of resistance against the Houthi-Saleh alliance may be the decisive factor that gives the conflict a sectarian character. Islamists—whether they are Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis unconnected to al-Qaeda, or al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Yemen—are involved in most confrontations against Houthis. For them, this is a battle against Shiites.¹

The fact that Yemeni tribes have changed their position towards al-Qaeda represents a second turning point in the conflict. The tribes had previously refused to join an alliance with al-Qaeda, but the Houthi invasion into central and southern Yemen created a mutual interest, and alliances have been formed between Yemeni tribes and al-Qaeda in several locations.² Former United Nations envoy Jamal Benomar confirmed this in a briefing to the UN Security Council, saying it was the first time Yemeni tribes had formed an alliance with al-Qaeda.³ As a result of the Houthis' violent strategy of attacking and destroying cities, the 'Alliance of the Sons of Hadramawt' has emerged as the most prominent alliance between the tribes and al-Qaeda. Its aim is to "counter any domestic or foreign attack—particularly by the Houthis—which threatens the security and safety of Hadramout."⁴ Unprecedented alliances between the

¹ Maria Abi-Habib and Mohammed al-KIBSI, "Al Qaeda Fights on Same Side as Saudi-Backed Militias in Yemen." *Wall Street Journal*, July 16, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/al-qaeda-fights-on-same-side-as-saudi-backed-militias-in-yemen-1437087067>.

² Saeed Al-Batati and Kareem Fahim, "War in Yemen Is Allowing Qaeda Group to Expand." *New York Times*, April 16, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/17/world/middleeast/khaled-bahah-houthi-rebel-yemen-fighting.html?_r=1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Waleed al-'Amri, "Terms of a Proposed Agreement between al-Qaeda and the Hadramout Alliance." Khabar News Agency, April 6, 2014. <http://www.khabaragency.net/news24107.html>

tribes and al-Qaeda have also formed in Shabwah, Abyan, and al-Bayda, each taking different forms depending on the local context.

The Houthis' use of excessive violence against cities and their opponents has contributed to the formation of this alliance to fight their common enemy, even if only temporarily. Another contributing factor is that al-Qaeda's fighters are originally from these tribes. According to an al-Qaeda statement about the death of its leader, Nasir al-Wuyhayshi, al-Qaeda had been fighting the Houthis and Saleh's supporters on more than eleven fronts across the country.⁵ There have also been bombings of mosques in Sana'a, for which the Islamic State has claimed responsibility. These have deepened the conflict, transforming it from a political one to an identity-based one, and moving it away from the political realm and into society. This means the conflict is no longer simply against the Yemeni government—which al-Qaeda has long considered an American puppet—but now a war with other Shiite Muslims, the Islamic State's primary enemy.

The Houthis' attempt to root out their ideological opponent, the Salafis, has increased the latter's popularity—both in terms of their sectarian identity as Sunnis and their military identity as *mujahideen*.⁶

Those following the current political debate can see how a conflict—even if it remains fundamentally political—can begin to operate under the banner of sectarianism. The conflict in Yemen has gained a sectarian character, even for some international players, who believe that a kind of sectarian division, as was done in Lebanon, is now necessary for conflict resolution.⁷

Diminishing chance of diplomacy and increasing chance of war

The UN failed to hold talks planned for Geneva in June 2015 between different parties to the conflict in Yemen. This has raised considerable debate about the UN's failure to achieve any measure of success in Yemen over the past fifty years.⁸ Starting from the first UN special envoy to Yemen, Ralph Bunche, who was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, up to the fourth and most recent envoy, Walad al-Sheikh, the UN has proven unable to either understand the mechanisms of conflict in Yemen or provide practical solutions to them. Even the Gulf Initiative, which kept Yemen from falling into civil war after the popular uprising of 2011, was more a regional initiative by the Gulf Cooperation Council than a UN one.

Progress towards a solution has faltered, whether through the diplomatic route encouraged by UN envoy Walad el-Sheikh, the regional route led by Oman, or the international diplomatic route that America has secretly conducted with the Houthis and the General People's

⁵ "Statement on the Martyrdom of Sheikh Abu Basir Nasir al- Wuyhayshi." al-Malahem Organization, June 2015. http://ia801500.us.archive.org/11/items/nas_baser/Basir.mp4

⁶ Sami Ghalib. "Point of View: The War Project as Representation is Monopolized in Yemen." *BBC Arabic*, March 10, 2015. http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2015/03/150310_yemen_politics

⁷ Nabeel Khoury. "Lebanonizing Yemen May Save It." *Atlantic Council*, May 28, 2015. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/lebanonizing-yemen-may-save-it>.

⁸ Asher Orkaby. "The UN's Yemen Problem. The International Community and an Elusive Peace." *Foreign Affairs*, May 11, 2015 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2015-05-11/un-s-yemen-problem>.

Congress. This is a clear indication of how difficult it is to resume political negotiations, and how difficult it is to reach a political settlement. Both domestic and foreign factors have kept a political solution out of reach. Domestically, the Houthi-Saleh strategy of seizing territory and imposing de facto control was a central reason it rejected political discussions during the first three months of the war, from March to May 2015. They would not sit down at the table for discussions before completely securing Aden, in order to prevent President Hadi and the government from returning. They also sought to seize as much of the country as possible, to ensure that it would not be used as a base for recruitment, training, and rallying against them.

The situation changed when the Saudi-Emirati force landed on the ground in Aden on July 14, 2015. The Houthis shifted from the offensive onto the defensive, creating a new balance of power on the ground which could have led to renewed political discussions. Yet in the end, the coalition's military victory in Aden only pushed the political process away.⁹

Saudi Arabia needed a quick military victory to counter Iran's success in signing the nuclear agreement with the West, which Saudi Arabia considers a great loss. The landing and military victory came quickly and unexpectedly on the day that the agreement was signed. Saudi Arabia views its war in Yemen as a war against Iranian hegemony, and thus any political settlement guaranteeing the Houthis and Saleh a place of power are considered a defeat, and constant threat to its territory.¹⁰ As for Hadi, and the Yemeni forces allied with him, they view compliance with UN Security Council Resolution No. 2216—which the Houthis still refuse to recognize—as a basic condition for negotiations. For them, there is no point in engaging in negotiations not based on the resolution.¹¹

After their retreat on several fronts, a delegation of Houthis and the General People's Congress (Ali Abdullah Saleh's party, allied with the Houthis) returned to Muscat for the third time on August 8, 2015 to negotiate for a political solution. Yet hawks within the Houthi movement refused to negotiate before achieving certain victory against the coalition forces.¹² The coalition continued to advance in the field in Lahij (with the fall of the Al Anad Air Base) and Taiz, while the Houthis continued to engage in battle with a mentality of 'divine empowerment' instead of pragmatic fighting and negotiations. It appears unlikely that the political process will succeed any time soon.¹³

⁹ Maysaa Shuja al-Deen. "Saudi War Drags on in Yemen." *AlMonitor*, July 30, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/07/saudi-arabia-victory-aden-yemen-scenarios-war.html>.

¹⁰ "Operation Decisive Storm: Shuffling the Deck in the Region." *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, April 2, 2015. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/positionestimate/2015/04/201542165643672231.htm>.

¹¹ "Yemeni President Reiterates Conditions for Participation in Geneva Negotiations." *Al Hurra*, May 23, 2015. <http://www.alhurra.com/content/yemen-clashes-borders-saudi-arabia-/271627.html>.

¹² Ali al-Bukhaiti. "Advice for Ansar Allah: In Muscat Negotiations, Make Concessions for the Homeland and Citizens." Personal blog. August 8, 2015. http://albkyty.blogspot.com/2015/08/8-2015_8.html.

¹³ Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, "Leader of the Revolution, Confirms: Aggression Will Not Succeed in Breaking the Will of the Yemeni People." *September 26 Newspaper*, August 6, 2015. <http://26sept.net/localnews/50388-2015-08-05-21-47-03.html>.

The United States has returned to the negotiations, playing its cards to pressure parties to the conflict. In a volatile situation where the chance of peace grows smaller as time passes, this could be important in moving events away from war and towards political negotiations.¹⁴

The retreat of state influence and rise of regional influence

The conflict in Yemen has revealed Saudi Arabia's near total control of the course of events, particularly after operation Decisive Storm. It has also illuminated the fading role of the UN. The last UN Security Council resolution on Yemen was issued on April 14, 2015, and since then, the Council has not met to investigate how much of the resolution has been implemented, nor to issue new recommendations and resolutions based on the situation on the ground. The UN Security Council no longer plays an active role in the situation; it has issued only one resolution since March 2015, and this was the last tangible instance of international involvement regarding Yemen.

The UN failed to hold planned negotiations in Geneva in June 2015 after threats were exchanged between government and Houthi-Saleh delegates. The UN also failed to approve three humanitarian truces, in May, June, and July 2015. The West's role in Yemen has clearly diminished since the invasion of Sana'a in September 2014. At the time, major powers had no way of putting pressure on the Houthis other than closing the embassies and withdrawing from Sana'a. This was a strategic mistake, which left all of Yemen in the hands of the Houthis, without any diplomatic or international deterrence.¹⁵

Saudi Arabia has monopolized the situation in Yemen since it launched operation Decisive Storm on March 25, 2015. It has successfully isolated Yemen from Iranian influence, preventing Iran from arming the Houthis and providing them with financial and expert support. Saudi Arabia has also disregarded US opposition to a war in Yemen and its preference for a political solution, keeping the US from controlling the situation.¹⁶ Saudi Arabia will likely expand its control over Yemen with what Simon Henderson calls "the full Saudi diplomatic toolbox"—money, arms supplies, and perhaps a blind eye to actions that would be described anywhere else as terrorism.¹⁷

For the Arab coalition, the battle to 'liberate' Aden was not the end game; the fighting moved north to wrest the entire country out of Houthi control. The coalition rapidly advanced in Lahij, Dhale, and even Ibb and Taiz in just days. If a political solution is not reached, fighting will not stop until it reaches the outskirts of Sana'a.¹⁸

¹⁴ Nabeel Khoury. "If at First You Don't Succeed." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, July 30, 2015. <http://journal.georgetown.edu/if-at-first-you-dont-succeed/>.

¹⁵ Nabeel Khoury, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Frank Gardner. "Saudi Arabia flexing its muscles in Middle East." *BBC*, August 8, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33825064>.

¹⁷ Simon Henderson. "The Rising Menace from Disintegrating Yemen." *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/simon-henderson-the-rising-menace-from-disintegrating-yemen-1427153488>.

¹⁸ Abdel Rahman al-Rashid. "After Saudi and Emirati Forces in Aden." *Al-Sharq Al-Wasat*. <http://aawsat.com/home/article/416936/>.

Saudi Arabia has isolated Iran with the siege, and isolated the US with a military coalition and successive military operations. With its complete control over the sea, air, and large swathes of land, Saudi Arabia effectively has mandatory power over political decision-making in Yemen, which is likely to continue even if a political settlement is reached, as a political settlement that does not guarantee continued Saudi hegemony over Yemen will not be possible. Yet the future of Yemen is too important to be left to Saudi Arabia alone.

Division scenarios: north and south, or three sectarian regions

In May 2015, former US deputy ambassador in Yemen Nabeel Khoury wrote an article entitled “Lebanonizing Yemen May Save It,” proposing that Yemen could be divided into three “north, south, and central” regions, using the Lebanon model to resolve the conflict. Dividing Yemen into these regions had been proposed long ago, and officially dates back to the Turkish occupation of Yemen, during which the country was divided into Zaidi Upper Yemen, Shafi’i Lower Yemen, and the south.

This tripartite division has nearly been achieved in reality, as a result of the Houthi-Saleh alliance’s armed attacks since September 2014. The Houthi-Saleh forces’ invasion of cities in the south, and the extensive killing and destruction that resulted, led to increased demands for separation. It highlighted an unprecedented campaign of hatred—not just against any relation with the north, but with anything to do with the north. Hostility against unity and northerners is not a new phenomenon in the south. 2007 was a pivotal year, where hostility developed into an organized movement and identity-based demands. Founded in 2007, the Southern Movement proposed restoring the country of Southern Yemen as it was before 1990, and Southern self-determination, through a referendum to establish an independent state. Feelings of southern identity have grown so much that al-Qaeda itself declared its support for the Southern Movement in a statement by Nasir al-Wuyhayshi, as did jihadist tribal leader Tariq al-Fadhli.¹⁹ For some factions of the Southern Movement, southern Yemeni identity is being denied.²⁰

The rapid formation of an angry southern identity led to a de facto separation, by transforming the south into a place where no northerner was welcome, particularly after a rise in the number of attacks and murders of northerners working or living in the south. Something similar began to occur in central Yemen—Lower Yemen—as a result of Houthi expansion there. A new kind of hate speech against ‘the north of the north’ emerged, characterizing the north as a longstanding source of invasions and wars against central Yemen throughout Islamic and modern history. The number of Islamists, from al-Qaeda, the Salafis, and al-Islah (the Yemeni Congregation for Reform), on the fronts of resistance against the Houthis in central Yemen also threatens to give the conflict a sectarian aspect, the longer it goes on and the more the political solution fails.

During the National Dialogue Conference, bringing all Yemeni political groupings together from March 2013 to January 2014, including the Houthis, two possibilities for the

¹⁹ Stephen Day. “The Political Challenge of Yemen’s Southern Movement.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. March 2010. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen_south_movement.pdf.

²⁰ Mohamed Haidara Masdoss. “Anticipating Misunderstanding.” *Shibam News*, March 27, 2014. <http://shibamnews.com/article/details.php?aid=3613#axzz3i7hvlI2U>.

administrative and political re-division of Yemen were raised during discussions. The first option entails dividing the country into two regions, North Yemen and South Yemen, using the pre-1990 borders of the two countries. The second option entails dividing the country into six administrative and political regions, four in the north and two in the south. Recent confrontations, however, indicate a propensity towards a tripartite division: Upper Yemen, Lower Yemen, and the South. This division could solidify current reality before an official agreement on the final administrative and political division is made.

Recommendations:

- It is very important for the United States and the ten countries supporting the Gulf Initiative to play an active role in negotiations and push for a political settlement. Currently, Saudi Arabia dominates decision-making on Yemen and the balance of power on the ground. The issue of Yemen is too important to be left to Saudi Arabia alone.
- Major world powers must take advantage of the changed relations connected with the Iran nuclear deal to reach a joint Saudi-Iranian agreement on Yemen. Such an agreement must deal with Saudi concerns and Iranian aspirations, thus enhancing chances for peace in Yemen. Any political negotiations between Yemeni powers not preceded by a preliminary agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the basis of a political settlement will be no more than empty words.
- The UN must be involved in the negotiations process. UN resolution 2216 must be revisited, and there must be sustained support for UN involvement in Yemen. The importance of complying with UN resolutions must be emphasized; implementation must be taken seriously, and further sanctions must be imposed on violators.
- Negotiations should not be limited to traditional powers—the Joint Meeting Parties and General People’s Congress and the Houthis. Emerging political powers such as the Southern Movement and the Tihama Movement should be heard as well. The conflict has resulted in most of these powers being armed and gaining solid combat experience; to continue to sideline them in the negotiations process will only sow seeds of future conflict.
- The sectarian aspect of the conflict must not be entrenched, and it must not be portrayed as a conflict between sectarian or regional identities. Thus far, the conflict is still a political one. Any solution that ignores the deep political causes of the conflict, and simply proposes sectarian solutions, has no chance at creating peace and justice in Yemen.

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