

# Yemen – A Playing Field for Regional Powers

External powers have a key impact on what is happening in the war in Yemen, making the situation even more complex. Under its new president, Joe Biden, the US is strongly committed to ending the conflict. This remains a difficult task. Even if the external actors were to retreat prematurely, Yemen would remain a divided country where different ethnic groups have a profound mistrust of each other.

By Jeremy Guggenheim

In the Yemeni civil war, the Shiite group *Ansabr Allah* – commonly known as the Houthis – and the internationally recognized central government led by President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi are fighting each other. The Shiite militia is aiming to create an independent imamate in Yemen by means of its military offensive. The Houthis received support from Shia Islamic Iran. Its nemesis – Sunni Saudi Arabia – organized a coalition along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to bring President Hadi and his government back to power after he was ousted by the Houthis. The internal Yemeni conflict escalated into a Saudi-Iranian proxy war following a military intervention led by Saudi Arabia.

However, coalition partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE are pursuing different, somewhat contradictory, goals despite being part of the same coalition. For Riyadh, the priority is to curb Iranian influence and neutralize the threat posed by the Houthi militia. By contrast, the UAE mainly wants to fight a local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood – another party to the conflict in Yemen and the Hadi government's most important ally. When the central government and Saudi Arabia proved unwilling to dissolve the partnership between the Hadi government and the Muslim Brotherhood, the UAE began training rival militias to oppose Hadi's governmental alli-



Houthi troops on the back of a police patrol truck after participating in a gathering in Sanaa, Yemen February 19, 2020. Khaled Abdullah / Reuters

ance. This means that another actor is gaining importance in the Yemeni civil war which is fighting against the Houthi militia but also increasingly attacking government troops.

At the start of the war, former US President Donald Trump refused to participate actively in the Saudi Arabia-led coalition – however, he did pledge support. Now, the

new Biden administration is performing a U-turn, announcing that it will no longer support Saudi Arabia. This change in American strategy increases the already considerable pressure on Saudi Arabia to end its military intervention. However, any withdrawal by the external actors is unlikely to lead to a lasting peace solution, as historical animosities between the local conflicting parties will remain.

## How the Conflict Unfolded

As a result of the so called Arab Spring, the president of Yemen and long-time ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh, stepped down in 2012 in favor of his deputy, Hadi. Boosted by the resulting power vacuum, the Houthi militia began its offensive, quickly capturing large parts of North Yemen and the capital, Sanaa. After close collaboration with former President Saleh – whom they later assassinated – and with the support of the military that was loyal to Saleh, the Houthis were able to advance to the port city of Aden, seizing it in March 2015. President Hadi's government then went into exile in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia subsequently organized a coalition including the UAE, Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, and Bahrain intervening militarily in Yemen in March 2015 with the aim of reinstating Hadi. The plan was to push back the Houthi militia by means of a war conducted mainly from the air. The Saudi-Emirati coalition managed to retake some

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parts of South Yemen, including Aden. A quick victory failed to materialize due to a lack of ground troops, despite the military superiority of the coalition supporting the Hadi government. As a consequence, the Houthi militia managed to consolidate its military position in some areas of Yemen.

The historical antagonism between the formerly divided north and south erupted once again in Aden in August 2019. The secessionists drove out Hadi government troops and mercilessly persecuted their allies, the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood. As the secessionists were trained by the UAE, tensions increased between the UAE and the Hadi government.

### Saudi and Emirati Objectives

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia had been supporting the Yemeni government, led by President Saleh at the time, in the fight the Houthis. During its numerous wars, the Saleh government claimed that the Shiite militia was dependent on Iran. At the same time, the Saudi administration considered the Houthis, whose power base was in North Yemen on the Saudi border, as an association that threatened Saudi Arabia's internal security. The fact that a marginalized and oppressed Shia minority lives in

Saudi Arabia itself, also added to Riyadh's concerns. The Houthi seizure of power fueled the dormant fear of having an Iranian ally on the border, potentially posing a similar threat to the one from Hizbullah that Israel lives with.

Appointed in 2015, Secretary of Defense and current Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman wished to achieve a quick victory with his intervention in Yemen and to reinstate his protégé, Hadi. Saudi Arabia's eternal opponent, Iran, was also to be countered. The aim of the military intervention at the beginning of the war was to disarm the Houthis, demonstrably bring a halt to their relations with Iran, and enforce their participation in a unity government.

The military intervention in Yemen provided a perfect opportunity to promote a new self-image for the UAE. The "Arab Spring" brought about a weakening of the traditional centers of power in the region, such as Syria and Egypt. The emergence of this power vacuum allowed the UAE to break out of its traditional role as Saudi Arabia's junior partner. After a period of domestic consolidation, made possible by greater repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Emirate of Dubai's weakening power in the wake of the financial crisis, the Emirati Crown Prince began to pursue a more assertive foreign policy. The aim of its involvement in various crises (Yemen, Qatar, and Libya) was to emphasize the UAE's new role as a revisionist counterpart to the transformative movement of the "Arab Spring" with the Emirati's goal being to prevent political Islamist from gaining power.

However, the war objectives of the two allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, only coincide superficially. Both countries have different threat perceptions. Emirati policy prioritizes the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood's brand of political Islam, as it sees this group and its potential to mobilize transnational structures as the main threat to the stability of its regime. By contrast, suppressing expansionist Iran is the top priority of Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Emirati leadership sees the military intervention in Yemen as a means of bringing Yemeni ports under its control so that it can expand its room for maneuver in the Gulf of Aden.

### The Houthis and Iran

Contrary to Saudi perceptions, cooperation between the Shiite Houthi militia and Iran

was initially quite limited. However, over the course of the civil war this cooperation has intensified. Houthi cooperation with Tehran is not based on a common pan-Shia ideology, as is often assumed. In fact, they are united by their common interest in weakening Saudi Arabia and consolidating their own power. The Yemeni militia sees itself as a domestic actor pursuing purely domestic political goals (see box). Unlike other Iranian allies, the Houthi militia is a well-established and largely self-sufficient group, making it Iran's most cost-effective ally in the region. Since the militia was already politically, ideologically, and militarily established at the beginning of the civil war, a relationship based on mutual benefits developed with Iran.

Iranian supplies of high-quality weapons systems have allowed the Houthis to expand their threat potential *vis-à-vis* Saudi Arabia. The rebels have been attacking Saudi territory with missiles since the military intervention in 2015. Thanks to Iranian drones and cruise missiles, these attacks have increased in intensity and range over the years, posing a substantial threat to Saudi Arabia's internal security. The Houthis wish to use the shelling to put pressure on Saudi Arabia and force it to the negotiating table, the objective being to make Riyadh accept the new territorial *status quo*. Iran hopes that by tying up Saudi resources in the Yemeni civil war, this will divert its rivals's attention away from its more important strategic ally, Bashar Al-Assad.

Paradoxically, the Saudi intervention increasingly forced the Houthi rebels into Tehran's sphere of influence. While an equal relationship based on common interests developed at the beginning, this has since shifted, to the Houthis' disadvantage. This is the only way to explain the Houthis claiming responsibility for the momentous attack of 14 September 2019 on the Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais. This is despite the fact that – according to US intelligence – this attack originating from Iranian territory halved Saudi oil production. It would seem then that the Houthis have been demoted from an equal partner to an Iranian proxy, which was exactly the kind of situation Saudi Arabia hoped to prevent with its intervention in the conflict.

### Diverging War Aims

The local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood became the most important partner for the internationally recognized Hadi government. However, this partnership was

## The Houthi Movement

The Houthis belong to the Shia branch known as the Zaydis, who only live in barely accessible **north-western Yemen**. They established an imamate there in the ninth Century. This state survived in various forms until Yemen became a Republic in 1962. The Houthi group formed in the 1990s around its namesake, Hussein al-Houthi. Enraged by the rampant corruption of the Saleh government, Houthi founded the movement with the **aim of reviving the imamate**. As a result of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was perceived as neo-colonialist and Islamophobic, the group radicalized and strengthened its anti-Western, anti-Zionist position. The **group is heterogeneous** in its composition. It consists of different tribes and different political factions, representing more radical or more moderate positions. The Zaydist doctrine is very different from the Shia branch that dominates Iran and is similar to the Sunni interpretation of Islam.

categorically rejected by the Emirati leadership. In line with its subjective threat perception, the UAE had presented its operations as a fight against extremist groups since 2016 – according to the UAE, this includes not only the Houthi group, but also the so called Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and especially *al-Isblah*, the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudi government did not agree with this assessment. It saw the partnership as a convenient means of fighting its nemesis, Iran.

Subsequently, the Emirates began to train and arm militias and other actors who shared their assessments of the local ruling coalition – this included the secessionists in South Yemen, who advocated for an independent state, causing a rift between the UAE and Hadi government in 2017. As a result, fighting broke out several times between the central government and its allies and the UAE-backed groups. Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened in order to stop the fighting within the Hadi government coalition between Hadi supporters and secessionists. This led to the “Riyadh Agreement” in 2019, but it was not implemented until December 2020. Among other things, the agreement makes provisions for the quarrelling actors to form a new unity government.

The UAE had secretly begun to withdraw large numbers of its troops from the conflict area at the beginning of 2019. Small contingents of special forces remained behind for anti-terror-missions. The Saudi leadership realized that the war could not be won on the military front when the most important coalition partner withdrew its troops and there was a renewed outbreak of fighting between the Hadi government and UAE backed secessionists in the year 2019. The result was the resumption of direct negotiations between Riyadh and the Houthis. However, this move has failed to bring about results thus far.

### Saudi Arabia – Quo Vadis?

Under the former US president, Donald Trump, the Washington had helped Saudi Arabia logistically with air force maintenance, intelligence gathering on targets, and procuring war materials, for instance. However, the Biden administration announced in February that it intends to withdraw its support for Saudi Arabia. The classification of the Houthis as a terrorist organization is also to be reviewed. Designating the Houthis as a terrorist organization would further complicate the work of international aid agencies and exacerbate the already catastrophic humanitarian situation, though. In order to give resolving the matter the diplomatic weight required, the new US administration appointed for the first time a special envoy for Yemen, indicating a desire to give more diplomatic attention to the conflict. This change in policy increases the already considerable pressure on Saudi Arabia to end its military intervention as an air war is not operationally feasible without American expertise and precision missiles.

It seems clear that Saudi Arabia will not be able to win the war militarily now that its closest ally has withdrawn and with the anticipated end of American support. During the past six years of war, the wider picture has also changed. Saudi Arabia's reputation has been seriously damaged by the murder of Jamal Kashoggi and allegations of war crimes. On the domestic front, the huge costs of war are a heavy burden especially at a time when oil prices are low and with the expected consequential costs of the coronavirus pandemic. In terms of its war objectives, Riyadh seems to have fallen short. The dissolution of the relationship between the Houthis and Iran has not been achieved. In fact, it is stronger today than ever before. For their part, the Houthis used the war to consolidate their positions

in north-western Yemen and they now control 70–80 per cent of Yemen's population. For this reason, it seems wishful thinking to expect them to renounce their arms and join a unity government. Riyadh also failed to achieve the main goal of securing the common border and protecting Saudi territory.

At the very least, the UAE partially achieved its war aims – unlike Saudi Arabia – and has, therefore, shown that it is capable of pursuing an independent policy. The UAE has freed itself from the role of the Saudi junior partner and remains a major player in Yemen despite the troop withdrawal due to its allied militias. It has succeeded in capturing all major ports except Hodaidah, either by itself or through its allies. These strategic bases enable the UAE to intervene in Yemen again at any time

### Cooperation between the Houthis and Iran was initially quite limited.

and complement its existing ports and military bases in Africa. The medium- and long-term consequences of geostrategic positioning around the Bab al-Mandeb Strait cannot be predicted yet, though. However, the Emirati reputation has been damaged by the war effort in the same way as Saudi Arabia has and on the home front, the military deployment has led to increased tensions between the different emirates in the federal system.

The low-cost / high-reward-strategy has worked for Iran. With few resources, Tehran was able to build up a persistent threat potential on the Saudi border, even threatening the Saudi interior. Absorbed by the protracted war, the coalition forces could not have seriously considered getting directly involved in Syria, and this was Tehran's main objective. As a result, the consequences of the war, the damage to the reputation of the coalition partners, and the imminent cooling of relations with the US can only benefit Iran.

The diplomatic and military failures had raised fears in the Hadi government of being excluded from any negotiated Saudi-Houthi settlement. However, President Hadi was able to strengthen his negotiating position again with the Riyadh Agreement, which was partially implemented as of December 2020 through the formation of a unity government. However, other

elements of the Riyadh Agreement including territorial issues or disarmament are not fulfilled yet. Furthermore, the unity

## Saudi Arabia will not be able to win the war militarily without American support.

government is built on shaky foundations. One important reason for this is the underlying mistrust that continues to exist between the government partners, the separatists and the Muslim Brotherhood,

among others. This means that Hadi only has limited discretion when making decisions as he has to take into account the interests of his local and international partners, because even if Saudi Arabia and the UAE withdraw from Yemen, they will want to influence future decisions. There is still a long way to a stable peace process.

Above all, the dogged historical antagonism between the Central Government and the Houthis must be overcome. The numerous actors who have come to power in subregions as a result of the civil war

and who are likely to have an interest in preserving the *status quo* have not been taken into account.

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