

The Yemen Conflict: Consequences for the MENA Region

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As the conflict in Yemen enters its third year, the human toll of the political tragedy continues to mount. Rough estimates of civilian casualties since fighting began in March 2015 may now exceed 10,000 killed with over 40,000 injured, according to press reports. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported that over three million of Yemen's 27.5 million citizens have been internally displaced by the conflict, while over half the population is considered food insecure. Famine and epidemics of disease may be on the near horizon. Five years after Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi's election as interim President started the clock on the only negotiated political transition of the Arab Spring, the future survival of Yemen hangs in the balance. The reemergence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its success in establishing roots with Sunni tribal elements underscores the potential threat to regional and global security and stability should Yemen continue its descent into chaos and anarchy.

Regrettably, the optimism last year that the parties were moving closer to agreement on the outlines of a political deal has faded, despite a months-long, UN-led negotiation in Kuwait, followed by desperate attempts by the international community to broker a ceasefire late in the year. Yet the fighting remains stalemated as neither side appears capable of achieving a military victory. The government, with its coalition allies, is strengthening its hold on the southern part of the country, while the Houthi/Saleh forces are firmly in control of the north, in-

cluding the capital, Sana'a, and reaching to the border of Saudi Arabia.

A Tale of Two Conflicts

To understand the state of the conflict in Yemen, it's important to keep in mind that there are actually two parallel wars: 1) a civil war that pits the legitimate government of Yemen against an insurrection led by the Houthis, a small, Zaidi Shia clan based in the far northwestern corner of Yemen, supported by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh; and 2) a regional component to the conflict that draws in Saudi Arabia, in support of the government, and Iran, in support of the insurgents.

Civil Insurgency

Although not without shortcomings, the overall implementation of the GCC Transition Agreement and the Implementing Mechanism signed in November 2011 by the parties to the Yemen political crisis, and supported by the US and the international community, was moving toward a successful conclusion by early 2014. That spring, the key step in the transition process, the National Dialogue Conference, was concluded and its final document was signed by all parties, including the Houthis. A constitutional drafting committee was impanelled and worked through the summer of 2014 to complete recommended revisions and amendments to Yemen's Constitution to be submitted to the National Dialogue for final approval. Few steps remained before the Yemeni people would be able to go to the polls and elect a new government, completing a peaceful transition of power.

Frustrated by their inability to achieve their objectives through the political process, however, the

Houthis and former President Saleh, placed increasing military pressure on the government through the summer and autumn of 2014. Eventually, they were able to take advantage of the weakness of the transitional government and Yemen's security forces to move aggressively into Sana'a and overthrow President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and his government.

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The international community has sought to mediate the crisis through political dialogue, allowing the parties to return to Sana'a and restoring essential government functions. But the conflict has metastasized and even success in the negotiations will not bring a near-term resolution to the fighting and instability. In the 2011 negotiations between former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his political opponents, Yemen's preeminent statesman and former Prime Minister, the late Abdul Karim al-Iryani, warned the parties that, if their dispute became a fight, armed conflict once started would not be easily stopped. That, indeed, appears to be the case as conflicts around the country increasingly take on the coloration of tribal vendettas and the resurrection of ancient rivalries. Thus, even in the event that the parties agree on a political framework for governance in Sana'a, their capacity to bring a halt to the fighting in the countryside is going to be extremely limited in the near-term.

Moreover, the two Yemeni coalitions that are parties to the conflict are, themselves, internally fragile. Support for President Hadi, even among his allies, is weak and there are significant doubts about his ability to re-establish his position as leader of the legitimate government. Meanwhile, the Houthi-Saleh alliance is a marriage of convenience rather than a true partnership and is unlikely to survive in a political arena. Long years of enmity between Saleh and his followers and the Houthis have been pa-

pered over, not resolved. And both sides have political aspirations that will be difficult to reconcile when it comes to a real political process. Signs of tension between the two sides abound.

Saudi-Iranian Competition

The precipitous collapse of the Hadi government in early 2015, and the power grab by a group closely associated with the Government of Iran and hostile to key US goals and objectives, alarmed the Obama Administration as well as its friends and partners in the region. For Saudi Arabia, in particular, developments in Yemen were perceived as an existential threat to its security. Thus, the Saudis, the US, and Yemen's other international partners agreed that intervention in Yemen was both necessary and legitimate, based on achieving four key objectives:

- Restoring the legitimate government in Yemen to complete the implementation of the GCC Initiative and the National Dialogue Conference consistent with UNSCR 2216;
- Preventing a Houthi/Ali Abdullah Saleh takeover of the government through violence;
- Securing the Saudi-Yemeni border; and
- Defeating Iran's efforts to establish a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula threatening Saudi and Gulf security.

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While there was optimism initially that a Saudi-led coalition could quickly stabilize the situation in Yemen, this has not been the case. Given the Coalition's reluctance to establish a large ground presence in Yemen, the Hadi government and its international partners were in a weak position to contest the Houthi/Saleh forces for control of territory. The coa-

lition found itself in a situation familiar to US forces fighting asymmetric conflicts: confronting a low-tech insurgency where their massive advantage in sophisticated weapons is neutralized. The situation for the insurgents, on the other hand, is entirely different: they are fighting on their own turf; they blend in with the local population, making identification of legitimate targets difficult and the potential for civilian casualties high; and they are willing to pay a heavy price to avoid defeat.

The resolution of the political crisis rests in the hands of the Yemeni parties, but larger regional developments can influence the course of the negotiations

For the government of Iran, the coalition's inability to defeat the insurgents and restore the legitimate government in Yemen is a significant win. Iranian support for the Houthis comes at very little cost. A number of IRGC personnel and their Hezbollah allies have been killed or captured in Yemen but, compared to the toll in Syria, the losses have been negligible. The Iranians have provided primarily low-tech weapons (although there has been a recent increase in the sophistication of Iranian-provided weaponry, including surface-to-surface and anti-ship missiles that have been used successfully against targets in Saudi Arabia and against shipping in the Red Sea). By contrast, the political and financial cost of the conflict has been heavy for the Saudis and their coalition partners. Saudi Arabia's inability to either defeat the Houthi/Saleh forces or adequately defend its borders has been an embarrassment to the Saudi military. Perhaps the greatest, and most unanticipated, benefit of the conflict to Iran has been the strain it has placed on Saudi Arabia's relationships with its key Western partners, principally the US and the UK. The reputational damage to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners is substantial. Accusations of war crimes levelled against Saudi and coalition armed forces and threats to end arms sales to the Saudis have the potential to inflict long-lasting damage to these relationships that go well beyond the scope of the

Yemen conflict and could undermine the international community's resolve in confronting Iran's regional threats.

Is Lowering the Temperature of Saudi-Iranian Competition the Key to Ending the Yemen Conflict?

At this juncture, the political negotiations being managed by UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Chaikh Ahmed offer the only viable prospect for achieving progress in Yemen. There will not be a military conclusion to the Yemen conflict. Only a political arrangement can end the fighting, allow for the re-establishment of a degree of governance in Sana'a, and focus attention on the deepening humanitarian crisis. If successful in achieving that limited objective, priority can be placed on completing the remaining steps of the Yemeni transition plan and enabling elections. Ultimately, only through the establishment of a new, credible government can Yemen begin the process of repairing damaged infrastructure, restarting economic activity, and restoring security and stability, particularly in ending tribal conflicts and pursuing the fight against AQAP.

The resolution of the political crisis rests in the hands of the Yemeni parties, but larger regional developments can influence the course of the negotiations. Specifically, Saudi Arabia and Iran do have the potential to alter the dynamics of the conflict and create an environment more favourable to the UN-led effort. Indeed, both sides have good reason to support an end to the conflict. As long as the Saudis identify a Houthi victory in the armed conflict or its domination of the Yemeni government (with or without Saleh) as a red line that would mean a permanent, pro-Iran security threat on their southern border, they will continue the confrontation and will not press the Hadi government to reach a political agreement. But if they can secure an understanding that the Sana'a government will remain in friendly hands, their border will be secure, and the Iranians will not threaten their interests in Yemen, the Saudis have been clear that they would welcome an exit from the Yemen quagmire. Meanwhile, the Gulf partners in the coalition are even more vocal in pressing for an end to a conflict that they believe is detrimental to their broader interests in regional security and stability.

For Iran, the calculation is different. While it has benefitted from Saudi difficulties, and it does have ideological reasons to support its “Shia brethren” in Yemen, Iran has no significant national security interests there. Therefore, assisting in ending the conflict in Yemen could be a bargaining chip for Iran if it determines that playing it will offer greater benefit on other fronts.

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Iran does, in fact, have good reason to want to lower the temperature in its confrontation with Saudi Arabia and the GCC. By all estimations, the Rouhani government is fearful that a more robust US challenge threatens its regional interests. The prospect of expanded US-Saudi-GCC security cooperation underscores the dimensions of that threat. While ultimate decision-making about Iran’s

relations with its neighbours is in the hands of Ayatollah Khamenei and the hardliners around him, Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif have taken steps recently aimed at softening GCC resolve to confront Iran. Outreach through Kuwait and Oman has signaled to at least some of the GCC partners that Iran is open to reducing tensions. The apparently successful Saudi-Iranian talks to resolve differences over the hajj suggest that even there, there is some prospect for reducing tensions, albeit marginally.

Conclusion

Thus, there is quite possibly a convergence of interests and a growing consensus between Iran and its Gulf Arab neighbours that the time has come to end the conflict and support a return of Yemen’s warring parties to the negotiating table. Even with that convergence, there are undoubtedly going to be, within both camps, hardliners who will prefer to continue the battle in search of complete victory. But it is possible that 2017 will be the year that regional dynamics and internal exhaustion will shift the balance of forces within Yemen towards accommodation rather than confrontation.