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Drivers Contributing to the Ongoing Armed Conflict in Yemen

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We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

Abstract

Ending the armed conflict in Yemen appears far-fetched due to various factors driving its continuation. This research paper will explore and analyze these drivers, starting with the extremist ideology of the Houthi group. Their ideology, rooted in divine selection, aims to control governance and society by fueling armed conflict and seizing leadership positions in civil, security and military institutions. The group is determined to not pursue a comprehensive political settlement until they dominate oil and gas resources, and they rely on Iran for military, political, financial and media support, aligning with Iran's regional dominance strategy.

Another driver is the weakness of the legitimate, internationally recognized authority. This authority has failed to establish good governance in areas under its control, fulfill citizen needs and overcome internal divisions. The Presidential Leadership Council, formed over a year and a half ago, still struggles with division, clashes and weak consensus on critical issues, like Yemen's unity and resource distribution, hindering unity of command over military and security forces.

Iran's strategic vision for Yemen, aiming to dominate the region, is another significant driver. Iran sees Yemen as part of its strategic depth, expanding its influence through the Houthis in vital areas, like the Red Sea coast and Bab al-Mandab. The Houthis have tipped the balance against regional opponents, like Saudi Arabia, prompting Iran to continue supporting the conflict.

Lastly, regional and international competition for dominance over Yemen and its strategic location is a key driver. Yemen's control over the Bab al-Mandab Strait and its proximity to crucial maritime regions attract international and regional powers seeking control. This has led to the involvement of international powers and regional actors on Yemen's coasts and islands, fueling the conflict's continuation.

Introduction

After the Arab Spring in Yemen in February 2011, widespread financial and administrative corruption, along with a struggling economy, led to large protests demanding the removal of the ruling regime. Despite efforts to resolve the conflict through The Gulf Initiative, which led to the transfer of power to Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, the unrest continued. The Houthi group participated in a national dialogue conference but also took military action, expanding from their stronghold in Saada Governorate to neighboring regions, like Al-Jawf and Hajjah. With a weak central state and dissatisfaction with the Government of National Accord and President Hadi, along with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh's ambitions to return to power, the group seized the opportunity to escalate militarily. On September 21, 2014, they stormed the capital, Sana'a, overthrowing government institutions and seizing control of army and security camps. From there, they aimed to conquer other governorates and regions of Yemen.

This event led to a bloody armed conflict, which continues today and has gained significant regional and international attention. Iranian officials claim that Iran now controls four Arab capitals and assert that the Houthis are a product of the Iranian revolution.

On March 12, 2015, the group held a military parade and maneuvers involving thousands of fighters and various weapons, including heavy weaponry seized from Yemeni army camps. These maneuvers occurred in the Al-Baqa' area in Saada Governorate, near the Saudi border. The Houthi militia, along with forces loyal to former President Saleh, also carried out raids on the presidential palace in the city of Aden after President Hadi fled there from Sana'a.

These events and maneuvers prompted the Arab Coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, to intervene on March 26, 2015, announcing the “Decisive Storm” military operation. The intervention was based on President Hadi's request to Gulf Cooperation Council leaders to militarily remove the coup and restore legitimacy. This led President Hadi to flee via the Sultanate of Oman to Riyadh, the Saudi capital, where he established the next headquarters for him and his internationally recognized government.

1. The First Driver – The Extreme Ideology of the Houthi Group and its Aim to Dominate Society:

The Houthi group bases its authority on an extreme ideological framework that claims exclusive rights to power and governance, tracing back to the lineage of Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein, the sons of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, following the Prophet Muhammad's passing. This belief, formalized in a document issued by the Houthi group on February 13, 2012, asserts a divine mandate for their leadership until the Day of Judgment.

This radical ideology is the main reason for the ongoing armed conflict, shaping the foundation of the Houthi group's emergence and influencing its policies in governing the state and society. However, various associated factors also contribute to this situation, including:

- Sectarian political agenda: The group initiates armed conflict using ideological pretexts:

According to the spokesperson of the Yemeni Teachers Syndicate, the Houthis have changed the government curriculum in areas they control, introducing a sectarian bias to perpetuate discrimination. This includes showing favoritism toward the Houthis and their lineage over other Yemenis, ultimately undermining human rights, like freedom, justice and equal citizenship. They have offered sectarian religious justifications that portray war as a holy struggle. Additionally, the Houthis compelled public employees and influential figures to take part in cultural programs where they undergo a process of ideological re-education. These courses indoctrinate them into Houthi beliefs, reshaping their views and urging them to support and spread the group's slogans and ideas.

- Seizing leadership positions within the state's civil, military and security institutions:

The Houthi group uses an exclusionary approach that sidelines qualified individuals not aligned with Hashemites, who are loyal to the group. They appoint replacements based on family connections, followed by loyal supporters from outside the dynasty, ensuring complete control over political and administrative decision-making in Yemen.

Inequality, along with feelings of unfairness and exclusion, serves as a driving force behind the ongoing armed conflict.

- **Expansion and control:** The Houthi group prioritizes seizing Ma'rib Governorate, which houses the Ministry of Defense headquarters, the Chief of Staff's office, and valuable oil and gas fields. Their objective is to extend their influence toward the oil and gas reserves in Shabwa and Hadhramaut. As a result, they are escalating military pressure on Ma'rib, the site of some of Yemen's most intense battles. It appears that the group aims to secure dominance over the oil and gas fields in Ma'rib before engaging in a comprehensive and sustainable political settlement. This strategy would grant them control over the primary sources of power and wealth across many regions of Yemen.

- **Close ties with Iran:** The Houthi group developed complex and close relations with Iran, resulting in a significant dependency on Iran across military, political, financial, media and logistical dimensions. Numerous reports suggest that Iran, through its ambassador Hassan Erloo, has exerted influence over strategic decisions made by the Houthis. The Houthi group openly acknowledges this relationship, using it to justify Iranian intervention and the involvement of Lebanese Hezbollah in the Yemeni conflict.

- **Balance of power in favor of the Houthi group:** Their military strength significantly surpasses that of their adversaries, leading to a sense of arrogance and inflexibility in their actions. Critics point out the group's history of failing to adhere to agreements, making it challenging to reach a political resolution.

Under these circumstances, it's unlikely that the Houthi group's opponents will accept any proposed settlements that could result in a fragile peace. Consequently, any unjust settlement would carry the risk of ongoing armed conflict.

2. The Second Driver – The Weakness of The Legitimate Government and The Contradiction of Its Components:

The weakness of the legitimate government and the contradictions among its components serve as a driver in extending the conflict. While the Houthi group demonstrates strength, unity and territorial gains, the internationally recognized government faces challenges in fulfilling its constitutional obligations.

Following the departure of former President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi from Yemen, a non-combative approach was adopted to restore the state and mostly relied on the intervention of the Arab coalition. However, this approach allowed the expansion of the Houthi control over more territories while weakening the legitimate government's influence, particularly in areas under its authority allowing the Southern Transitional Council, which is supported by the UAE, to actively work toward establishing a separatist state in southern Yemen.

At the same time, state institutions have struggled to meet basic citizen needs, including regular salary payments, essential services, such as electricity, water, healthcare and education, and addressing security concerns, in areas under nominal government control.

As a result, public trust in the legitimate government started to decline, jeopardizing the widespread political support it once enjoyed. The failure to establish effective governance models in its controlled areas has further diminished its credibility among Yemenis, except for limited exceptions in provinces, such as Ma'rib and Hadhramaut. These factors collectively contribute to the perception of the legitimate government as ineffective and make the conflict in Yemen worse.

The legitimacy of the government further weakened as internal divisions widened, giving rise to parallel entities with significant power and influence on the ground. Despite the Riyadh Agreement signed between the legitimate government and the STC on November 5, 2019, which aimed to resolve internal strife and establish a national unified government, the STC consolidated its authority across most cities and governorates in southern Yemen.

Despite the agreement's provisions to end power struggles and unify state institutions, the STC emerged as the de facto authority, especially in Aden, the temporary capital. The STC's aggressive actions against government forces forced many liberated areas in southern Yemen to fall out of the government's control. As a result, the STC assumed sovereign functions typically held by the government and maintained distinct military formations operating independently of the Yemeni armed forces.

These formations openly identify as separatist forces, distinct from the Republic of Yemen, and maintain close ties with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which exercises control over Yemen's ports and coasts, extending from Mukalla in the east to Bab al-Mandab in the west.

In April 2022, the Presidential Leadership Council was established to replace former President Hadi and his deputy, aiming to represent the diverse components of legitimacy in Yemen. The council comprised a president and seven representatives from various political and military factions, reflecting the discordant and conflicting interests influenced by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Despite more than a year and a half since its formation, the council remains characterized by division and internal conflict among its members. Each faction within the council holds its authority, leading to a lack of cohesion and a shared strategy on crucial issues, such as Yemen's unity and the management of power and resources, including control over oil, gas, ports, vital facilities and local administration in governorates and cities under its jurisdiction.

Instead of consolidating all military and security forces under the unified command of the Ministry of Defense, the Chief of Staff and the Ministry of Interior, and under the authority of the council president as the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, new military units were established under different names. In January 2023, Dr. Rashad Al-Alimi, chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council (who does not possess his own military forces, unlike other council members), declared the formation of a new military unit named the "Homeland Shield Forces." This unit operates directly under his command and serves as a reserve for the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. In light of the council's inability to achieve unity of command and control over the forces and armed formations of its components, military confrontations will likely erupt between these forces and formations

Additionally, the persistent discord among the components of the Presidential Leadership Council, coupled with its inability to function cohesively, has further undermined the state's authority. This is exemplified by the marginalization of the parliament, the last constitutionally elected popular institution. Instead, a non-elected body, the "Consultation and Reconciliation Commission," was appointed and granted powers that traditionally fall under parliament's purview. As a result, the parliament, marginalized in the past, has now become nearly incapacitated in fulfilling its constitutional duties as outlined in the Republic of Yemen's Constitution.

These developments have collectively weakened the legitimacy of the governing authority — the presidency, the parliament and the government. A significant portion of Yemeni citizens now perceive this government as incapable of ending the coup and restoring legitimacy. Instead, it is perceived as severely deficient in preserving the unity, national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Yemen.

3. The Third Driver: Iran's Strategic Vision for Yemen in its Project of Hegemony Over the Region:

The power that Iran has accumulated over the past decades has enabled it to strengthen its regional intervention tools based on concepts ingrained in its geopolitical framework, namely exporting the revolution and strategic depth. In his speech, which is considered a guiding document for all Iranian foreign policy-making institutions, the Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ali Khamenei, during his meeting with Iranian diplomats, outlined six factors shaping foreign policy in the forthcoming phase. Among these factors is the strength-

ening of the allied and pro-Iranian governments and factions, alongside the expansion of the nation's strategic depth.

In this context, Iranian leaders see Yemen as an essential part of their country's strategic depth. The current Iranian president, Ibrahim Raisi, emphasized this during his election campaign. Ali Reza Zakani, a parliamentarian close to Khamenei, also referred to the Yemeni capital (Sana'a), following its capture by the Houthi group, as the fourth Arab capital linked to Iran. This viewpoint was echoed by former Minister of Intelligence, Haider Moslehi, who described the Houthis in Yemen as a result of the Iranian revolution. Additionally, Deputy Commander of the Revolutionary Guard, General Hussein Salami, stated that "Ansar Allah" in Yemen had become a significant player in the region's dynamics, akin to "Hezbollah" in Lebanon.

Based on this strategic viewpoint, Iran is actively supporting the ongoing conflict in Yemen by providing the Houthi group with diverse forms of military, political, financial, media and logistical aid. This support aims to facilitate the group's control over Yemen and its strategic location and to guide them toward establishing a political governance model aligned with the institutions of the Iranian regime. Furthermore, Iran's strategy aims to promote the Houthi group as a model that inspires and encourages the spread of the revolution to other areas in the region.

The Houthis have effectively demonstrated their important role in advancing Iran's hegemonic strategy. Through their actions, Iranian influence has expanded into crucial new areas, and Iran has established a military presence along the Red Sea coast and near Bab al-Mandab.

This expansion was acknowledged by the current commander of the Revolutionary Guard, General Hussein Salami, who stated, “Today, Iran’s reach extends far beyond what geographical maps depict.”

Additionally, the Houthis have helped shift the balance of power in Iran’s favor against its regional adversaries. During heightened tensions with Saudi Arabia, they carried out hostile attacks targeting Saudi and Emirati infrastructure and oil installations. These attacks resulted in a significant reduction of about 50% in Saudi Aramco’s production and targeted cities and regions deep within Saudi Arabia. These actions aimed to demonstrate Riyadh’s inability to protect its oil facilities and major cities.

4. The Fourth Driver: Regional and International Rivalry over Yemen and its Strategic Location:

Yemen’s strategic location places it at the center of international and regional strategies, overlooking four crucial maritime regions: the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean (via the Socotra Archipelago). Additionally, its many islands further enhance its strategic importance, offering opportunities for establishing naval and air bases, as well as constructing commercial ports, facilitating global trade distribution.

Control over the Bab al-Mandab Strait, one of the world’s most significant waterways and the shortest sea route linking East and West, underscores Yemen’s strategic importance. This strait serves as a vital hub for international trade, facilitating the transfer of goods between the European Union and countries, such as China, Japan, India and Southeast Asia. It also serves as a crucial artery for transporting oil and gas from the Arabian Gulf to Europe and the United States. Geographical-

ly, the strait regulates access to and from the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Gulf, ranking third globally after the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz. Approximately 3.3 million barrels of oil pass through it daily, accounting for 4% of global demand, and it sees the passage of 21,000 commercial ships annually.

The ongoing conflict in Yemen has resulted in international and regional powers asserting control over most of Yemen's coasts and islands. Internationally, the territorial waters and corridors overlooking Yemen are dominated by the American, British and European navies, along with those of other allied countries. Regionally, the UAE exercises military and political control, both directly and through affiliated local forces, over most of Yemen's coasts and ports in the Arabian Sea, from Hadhramaut in the east to beyond Bab al-Mandab in the west on the Red Sea, including the Socotra Archipelago. Meanwhile, Iran, through its support for the Houthi group, controls much of Yemen's western coast, extending from the vicinity of Bab al-Mandab in the south to the Saudi border in the north.

In our view, the desire to control this strategic location has been a driving force behind the ongoing conflict in Yemen. The Iranian presence through the Houthi group in the vicinity of Bab al-Mandab, including the coasts and islands, is a significant security concern for major Western countries and Arab Gulf nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, whose oil exports rely on the strait. The Houthi group's increased attacks using explosive boats and drones on ships near Saudi oil facilities in the Red Sea have heightened security apprehensions. Additionally, the UAE is increasingly worried about the impact on commercial maritime shipping traffic linked to the port of Dubai.

Iran, on the other hand, sees the need to adopt a political and military approach, leveraging its direct and indirect naval presence along Yemen's coasts to address issues crucial to its national security and interests. These include its nuclear program, sanctions, missile industry, the Syrian conflict and asserting its influence in Iraq and Lebanon. This explains Iran's patient approach toward finding a political settlement to the armed conflict in Yemen and its reluctance to rush into agreements with Saudi Arabia, even within the framework of efforts to restore relations mediated by China. It appears that Iran will pursue a policy aimed at reducing conflict rather than seeking a definitive resolution.

While Iran sought to reduce tensions with Saudi Arabia in Yemen, it heightened tensions with the American military presence by supporting the Houthi group. Despite this presence being long-standing, the Houthi group intensified their rhetoric regarding the capabilities and advancements of their naval forces, suggesting that they could target any objectives in Yemeni waters and islands. This culminated in their Deputy Foreign Minister warning American forces to steer clear of Yemeni territorial waters, cautioning that any intrusion could spark the longest and most expensive battle in human history.

Summary

The prolonged conflict in Yemen has shown that lasting peace will be achieved only when all Yemeni parties involved in the conflict prioritize the interests of the Yemeni people and commit to finding a fair political solution.

The Yemeni population is weary of war, and the country's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity have been threatened by regional and international interference.

From a strategic standpoint, continuing the conflict is not beneficial for any Yemeni faction seeking to promote national political progress. It is evident that achieving peace and stability in Yemen, as well as in the broader region, requires regional and international actors to cease supporting the continuation of the war and instead assist the conflicting parties in pursuing a genuine peace process

This process should culminate in a true democratic transition where Yemenis can freely elect their leaders, including the presidency, the House of Representatives, the government and local authorities. It should also involve establishing a just state that safeguards the rights of all citizens, prohibits the monopolization of medium and heavy weapons, and ensures Yemen's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. Such efforts will contribute to achieving an enduring, stable and peace in Yemen, fostering positive relations with neighboring countries and promoting regional peace as a whole.

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