

The Interplay between Global and Regional Actors inside Yemeni Politics at the Time of the 2014-2015 Coup



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REPORT



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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

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In this third article on the findings of the 2020 book I co-edited with Noel Brehony, entitled “Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis,” I will finish analyzing the role of the US government prior to the commencement of international warfare in Yemen. In addition, I will turn attention to the role of other Western states plus Russia, China, and the UN. In doing so, there is an opportunity to begin considering how “global” actors interacted with key “regional” actors, particularly Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel.

Significance of Iran and the JCPOA for America’s Yemen policy

One of the most important international factors behind Yemen’s 2014 coup and 2015 war was that the US government, its allies in the EU, Russia, China, and offices of the UN were simultaneously engaged in negotiations with Iran over its nuclear energy program. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) created a 10-year inspections regime to ensure Iran did not develop nuclear weapons. It started with a preliminary deal in 2013, and concluded in April 2015, a month after the start of Yemen’s war. In exchange, Iran was freed from US, EU, and UN sanctions, recovering as much as \$100 billion in frozen assets.

The JCPOA faced strong objections from Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states, as well as Israel and its supporters inside the US who complained they did not trust Iran to abide by the 10-year inspections regime. Likewise, Saudi Arabia, other Arab Gulf states, and Israel did not want Iran to receive tens of billions of dollars. President Obama supported the JCPOA as a way to avoid war with Iran and begin normalizing relations. His assumption was that it would encourage moderate political forces in Iran, eventually changing the regional status quo.

Saudi and Israeli leaders let President Obama know their strong objections to the JCPOA. In early March 2015, just weeks before the start of international war in Yemen, Israeli prime minister Netanyahu was given the extraordinary opportunity to protest the JCPOA when leaders of Obama's Republican opposition in the US Congress invited him to address a joint session of the Senate and House of Representatives.

It is important to understand the event's unusual nature and political significance because it is very rare for a foreign leader to address both houses of Congress. It never happens outside diplomatic protocol at the State Department, which requires consent of the White House. But neither Obama nor the State Department extended an invitation to Netanyahu to speak at the US Capitol Building on the evening of March 2, 2015.

Speaking over Obama's head to members of the US Congress, Netanyahu delivered a lengthy prime time television address which was promoted in advance to ensure millions of US citizens watched. In his speech, the Israeli prime minister warned about the dangers of the JCPOA. He depicted Iran's government as a grave threat, while criticizing Obama as a president who harmed Israeli and American interests. Throughout the speech Netanyahu received thunderous applause from both Republicans and Democrats who often rose to their feet in standing ovations.

Obama understood the political pressures around him. He knew they were designed to make the JCPOA fail. He also realized Israel's government found common cause with Saudi leaders who relied upon their own set of highly influential lobbyists in Washington. Obama was particularly wary of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf Arab states whom he suspected of sabotaging the JCPOA, possibly by provoking war.

The wariness on Obama's part influenced how he interpreted events in Yemen. As the crisis grew in Sanaa between January and March 2015, the US president tended to view it as a trap designed to draw him into wartime alliance with Saudi Arabia against Iran, thus scuttling the JCPOA at the last minute.

Review of the US Role in Yemen

In the last article, I noted the lack of evidence showing US officials played any direct role in Yemen's slow-motion coup from September 2014 to January 2015. As indicated by my interviews with top officials who served at the US Embassy, the American government worked closely at all times with Yemen's transitional president, Abdurrabo Mansur Hadi, to ensure the latter's success after he entered office in early 2012. Thus, the US hardly would have assisted President Hadi's downfall at the hands of coup forces in late 2014 and early 2015.

The most one can say in critique of American policy is that its overarching focus on counterterrorism policy created sources of instability in Yemen's transition because it caused the US government to prioritize military reform, insisting upon the restructuring of all Yemeni armed forces. For example, as previously explained, Amb. Gerald Feierstein desired between 2011 and 2013 to see the retirement of Gen. Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, and the closure of the latter's army headquarters on the northwest side of Sanaa.

Feierstein's pressure on Gen. al-Ahmar to retire and close his headquarters would inevitably leave the capital vulnerable to Houthi rebel forces approaching from the north in the summer of 2014. Earlier in July, when Houthi rebels overran the provincial capital Amran, US embassy officials criticized Houthi leaders for resorting to deadly armed force.

But they never took firm action to deter the rebels. According to one US embassy official, the main American focus remained on the threat of AQAP south of Sanaa, not Houthi rebels to the north.

Generally speaking, US counterterrorism interests created a permissive environment for Houthi rebels to act between 2013 and 2014. The rebels were natural enemies of AQAP. For this reason, rebel advances brought certain benefits to the American government because it weakened AQAP's base inside the country. The latter point was well understood by all actors inside the country. Once fighting erupted in early 2015, the US fired missiles targeting forces suspected of links to AQAP, which allowed Houthi forces to gain ground near Yemen's southern coast.

Because America was the leading foreign power involved with Yemen's political transition after 2011, its view of key matters like military reform to combat AQAP in Yemen set general conditions upon which all others operated. Thus, as early as 2013, the apparent American ambivalence toward Houthi rebels allowed others to see Houthi leaders playing a part in future Yemeni politics. This was true not least of Houthi leaders themselves. Once they took control of Sanaa in September 2014, they claimed to be invited and welcomed into the city.

US reliance upon other “Global Actors”

It is worth noting that the US government had no direct communication with leaders of the Houthi rebel movement. Across Yemen's transition, Houthi leaders refused all attempted outreach by US embassy officials. The chanted slogan that rebels borrowed from Iran, “Death to America,” proved to be an insurmountable obstacle. Thus, to engage Houthi leaders in dialogue, the US embassy was left to rely on representatives of West European governments, as well as the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar.

French scholar Laurent Bonnefoy showed in Chapter 5 of the book that the Western government most open to Houthi leaders was Germany (pp. 75-76). Its officials clearly welcomed the efforts of Houthi leaders to revive Zaydi religious customs in Sanaa, seeing it as an “authentic” tradition and practice of Yemen. To a lesser extent, British, French, and Dutch officials did the same. In her chapter on the UN, British scholar Helen Lackner confirmed the role Jamal Benomar played when he used his title as UN Special Envoy to conduct talks with Houthi leaders inside their home province of Sada (p. 20). This happened as rebels entered Sanaa on September 16, 2014.

Once the capital fell on September 20, Benomar announced an end to fighting along with a new plan to reform the government with a Houthi advisory role, known as the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA). Many observers speculated the coup followed a preset design because Benomar appeared to have negotiated the plan in advance. Lackner claimed Benomar played no role drafting the PNPA, yet she did not thoroughly investigate his individual responsibilities. This was because she felt Benomar merely served the interests of other actors involved with Yemen’s transition.

Relative to the role of US government officials, Benomar and EU representatives carried greater responsibility for the coup due to their more active outreach to Houthi rebel leaders. Germany’s government appeared particularly eager to see the Houthi become more involved, altering the course of the political transition in Sanaa. This was despite UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting any obstruction of processes launched years earlier, and placing sanctions on Houthi rebel leaders, Pres. Saleh, and his sons and nephews who were suspected of obstructing Yemen’s transition.

In short, the activities of Benomar and EU representatives contradicted rules of the transition itself. The US government could have opposed activities of the UN Special Envoy and EU representatives. But there is further evidence showing the US worked under constraints that diminished its responsibility for what happened in late 2014 and early 2015: namely, the fact that rebel forces treated staff at the US embassy more harshly than Benomar and EU representatives.

Conditions at the US embassy during the fall and winter of 2014-2015

Following the coup's initial phase in September 2014, the US embassy came under greater restrictions because Houthi rebels seized the surrounding streets. This violated previous security arrangements that permitted embassy staff to move freely across a wider public space which took on the features of an exclusive campus, including access to a nearby Sheraton hotel where most Americans lived following a 2008 AQAP terrorist attack at the entrance to the US embassy.

When Houthi rebel forces set up checkpoints outside the US embassy and began stopping cars that passed to and from the hotel, it raised safety concerns. Ambassador Matthew Tueller managed to reach a top Houthi military commander whose cell phone number was then printed on laminated paper for the drivers of embassy cars to use at checkpoints. This helped alleviate American concerns until embassy cars started to be hit by bullets fired from distant rebel positions. In Chapter 4 of the book, I described the worst incident near New Year 2015 when a US embassy car was hit by seventy-five bullets fired from a machine gun (p. 60).

No one was ever hurt by gunfire at embassy vehicles due to their use of protective bulletproof glass and other reinforcements around each vehicle's body. But the attacks offered further proof the Houthi rebel coup did not occur by American design, or with American assistance. Benomar and EU representatives never experienced the same threats from rebel forces. Of course, this did not mean they had favorable relations with coup leaders. There was never reason to assume the Special Envoy and West European ambassadors wanted coup forces to succeed, or harm American interests. Indeed, once the coup reached its final phase, they followed the US lead.

The final phase of the coup came on January 20, 2015, when rebel forces fired on President Hadi's residence in Sanaa, leading to his surrender and temporary resignation. Shortly afterward, the US ambassador decided to close the US embassy and withdrawal all American personnel. Over the next two weeks, every European embassy followed suit, except that of Russia. Europeans viewed America's departure as a sign of pending warfare, and they wanted out. The US ambassador also anticipated war, yet he departed without knowing when the fighting would commence (p. 62).

The interplay of “global” and “regional” actors

Russian and Chinese embassies remained in Sanaa until after international war began. Both governments wanted to retain good relations with Yemen. At the same time, they did not want to jeopardize relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This created political problems for many foreign governments in Yemen.

In the end, China's position was determined by its policy toward the Saudis and Emiratis, as I-wei Jennifer Chang showed in Chapter 7 of the book.

China departed earlier than Russia because it would not risk access to Arab Gulf resources by showing favor to Houthi rebels. Russia was more willing to take risks as a petroleum exporter independent of the Arab Gulf states. Russia was also closer to former Yemeni president Saleh, mistakenly betting upon him to regain ruling authority via alliance with Houthi rebels. As Samuel Ramani showed in Chapter 6, Russia departed after Saleh was killed by Houthi gunmen in late 2017 (p. 90).

The primary responsibility for the coup leading to Yemen's international war in March 2015 clearly rested with "local" actors, namely Saleh and Houthi rebel leaders. Our 2020 book confirmed the point, yet there are important questions to raise about the roles of "global" and "regional" actors who were present inside the country when the coup began. While China acted carefully, Russia appeared more interested in disrupting the transition underway in Yemen, if not reversing the process.

Among great powers with supervisory duties in Yemen's transition, Russia chose to assist local media coverage and public relations. Between 2012 and 2014, Yemenis were poorly served by media that spread doubts and deep suspicions of the transition process, especially following outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference in February 2014. All of this aided coup leaders in the Houthi and Saleh camps.

Greater questions must be asked about the roles of key "regional" actors who obviously saw higher stakes in Yemen, especially the Saudis and Iranians. What roles did they play between 2012 and 2014? My next article in the series will turn fully to this question in summary of chapters of the book that analyzed "regional" actors. But it is worth summarizing here key points about the interplay between "regional" and "global" actors.

While “Regional” actors were more likely to play a role in Yemen’s coup, given the higher stakes they saw inside the country, they were also more likely to shape the behavior of “global” actors. China’s behavior was strongly shaped by its perception of Saudi and Emirati interests. Knowing Saudis and Emiratis opposed Houthi leaders, Chinese government officials were less willing than Russian officials to take a stand, especially because China sought continued access to Saudi and Emirati petroleum resources.

Iran was the other regional state with an active stake in Yemen because it was the leading supplier of Houthi rebels at the time of the coup. Because China also wanted to maintain friendly relations with the government in Tehran, its officials walked a tightrope in Yemen that spanned the chasm between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Russia sought friendly relations with both governments in Tehran and Riyadh, as did the US government due to the Obama administration’s interest in the JCPOA and normalization of American relations with Iran.

In essence, the interplay between “regional” and “global” actors in Yemen resulted in the “global” actors viewing the country in terms of the Iranian-Saudi divide. All “global” actors involved with Yemen’s transition understood the greater interests at stake for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other neighboring Gulf Arab states, due to their greater significance in world politics and the global economy. Iran’s stakes in Yemen were relatively new, yet growing fast. As a result, the interests of Yemen and its people ended up being cast aside.

Conclusion

The sacrifice of Yemeni interests was painfully on display in Washington, DC, where President Obama prioritized negotiation of the JCPOA with Iran. Prior to full scale war in Yemen, Obama did not want events to disrupt the Iran deal. He and his advisors only supported the Arab Gulf war plan to avoid harming the JCPOA, thus behaving dismissively toward the Yemeni people.

Before the US embassy closed in the middle of February 2015, more than a full month prior to international war in Yemen, there was a clear split between embassy officials and leaders at the White House. In late January and early February, Obama and his advisors asked US embassy officials to continue reaching out to Houthi leaders, hoping to avoid the complete collapse of Yemen's transition. But US Ambassador Tueller had already decided it was pointless to communicate with Houthi leaders, whether directly or indirectly.

Tueller and his staff worked with intermediaries in Sanaa among members of traditional ruling class families who were linked to Houthi leaders in the capital via their shared Zaydi religious identities. The intermediaries pled with US embassy officials not to depart the capital and assured their safety. But Tueller felt the views of the intermediaries did not represent the thinking of top Houthi military commanders who controlled the streets of Sanaa and were responsible for creating a hostile environment for US embassy staff.

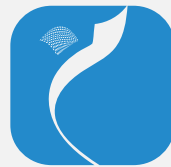
While the White House preferred to avoid war and work with Houthi leaders, Tueller viewed Houthis as hostile actors supported by Iran. This reflected a divide within US foreign policy. As previously shown, Obama faced intense pressures due to the convergence of interests between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

With war looming in Yemen, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saw advantages in pressuring Obama via an alliance with Saudi and Emirati leaders, combined with hostility toward Iran. The US Ambassador to Yemen appeared to share Israeli, Saudi, and Emirati enmity toward Iran.

The spectacle in Washington when Netanyahu attacked Obama during a speech on Capitol Hill in early March 2015 signaled two things about American politics. First, it indicated what many had been saying for decades about the capture of US foreign policy by Israel and its lobbyists in Washington. No other foreign head of state would have been allowed to attack a sitting US president in the way Netanyahu attacked Obama. Second, it was an early indication that Republican party leaders would follow Netanyahu's lead by exploiting enmity with Iran for political advantage.

Netanyahu's speech to Congress reflected interests far beyond his opposition to the JCPOA. Eventually, all of his interests were served by President Trump who pushed a common agenda. Trump announced his candidacy to become president in June 2015, less than three months after war started in Yemen. He immediately campaigned against the JCPOA and adopted other aspects of Netanyahu's playbook. The family of Trump's son-in-law and personal advisor on Middle East affairs, Jared Kushner, was a longtime friend of Netanyahu. Kushner advanced Netanyahu's agenda, while working closely with young leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

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