THE CIVIL WAR IN YEMEN AND SAUDI REGIONAL HEGEMONIC AMBITION

Perang Saudara di Yaman dan Cita-Cita Hegemoni Serantau Saudi

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ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring revolution has forced Yemen’s ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign after 33 years in power. The dispute between Saleh and his successor, Abdurrahub Mansur Hadi has opened a huge opportunity for the Houthis who is backed by Iran to claim their power over Yemen. Saudi Arabia became directly involved in the conflict as Hadi seek assistance from Saudi to reclaim his right to rule but Saudi also has its own agenda. This study examines the implications of Saudi intervention in Yemen on the securitization of its national interests and its sphere of influence in the region. This research considers the changes in Saudi foreign policy towards other states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011. This study also seeks to understand the war by proxy used by Saudi Arabia and Iran to further their agenda in Yemen and MENA as well as the possibility of stabilising Yemen in the event of Saudi withdrawal from Yemen. This study may provide some insights on the effectiveness of foreign intervention in the Middle East taking into account the impacts of the Arab Spring and the COVID-19 pandemic in the region.

KEYWORDS:
Saudi Arabia, Yemen, civil war, Houthis, humanitarian crisis, foreign policy

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1.0 Introduction

Previous studies have identified several factors that drive Saudi intervention in the civil war in Yemen. One of the main contributing factors is the close ties Iran has with the Houthi rebels. Saudi Arabia sees Iran as a threat to its sovereignty if Yemen completely falls into the hands of the Houthis. Therefore, this could be seen as a move to assert itself as the strongman of the region (Darwich, 2020). This in turn made the justification even stronger by using Chapter IV of the United Nations Charter and the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) Resolution 2216. Another factor that justified the intervention is that the Saudis recognized the threat of the Houthis to its border. The capture of Aden by the Houthis was already dangerous to Saudi's trade which led to more efforts in retaking and protecting Aden from the Houthis and later insurgencies such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Amin, 2015).

Another important factor for the intervention can be found by looking through the religious and tribal perspectives. Yemen has fought the Sa'da wars (won by the Houthis) under Ali Abdullah Saleh to eliminate the northern tribal power, the Houthis, from gaining autonomy from the government. Yemen still holds a neopatrimonialism ideology, where the leader is given legitimacy by the tribes in Yemen rather than the office. The existence of such tribal conflicts meant that religion plays a contributing role as well. The Houthis are part of the Zaydi Shia sect while the government is a Sunni majority. When the government lost the wars it waged, the Zaydis saw the opportunity to not only gain autonomy but also to control Yemen in general. This is the main reason Iran saw it fruitful to support their sectarian brethren in Yemen while the Saudis supported the re-instalment of the Sunni government (Salmoni, Loidolt & Wells, 2010).

The civil war has led to a disastrous humanitarian crisis. The United Nation (UN) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have classified the situation in Yemen as the worst humanitarian crisis as 80% of the population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance due to poor sanitation, waterborne diseases and poor access to clean water. The number of civilians displaced is estimated at 3.3 million people, an increase by half from last year's figure according to the...
United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) (United Nations, 2019). A much-needed resolution to the conflict should begin. Yet, with the current situation of political intrigue, peace may seem like a distant dream (Sharp, 2021).

This study examines the implications of Saudi intervention in Yemen and its role in determining the outcome of the conflict. This research considers the changes in Saudi foreign policy towards its middle eastern political and foreign relations with other states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011. This study also seeks to understand the war by proxy used by Saudi Arabia and Iran to further their agenda in Yemen and MENA as well as the possibility of stabilising Yemen in the event of Saudi withdrawal from Yemen. This study employs a qualitative research method. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives or academic scholars specialising in the field to obtain their insights on the topic. This study also collects data from other primary and secondary sources of information such as government official documents or statements as well as journal articles, books, theses, research reports and commentaries.

This study may provide some insights on the effectiveness of foreign intervention in the post-Cold War era and the issues that may affect the national security and sovereignty of a state. While it may depart briefly from the traditional security paradigm, considering the role of non-traditional security actors such as proxies is important to understand the agendas and determinants of a state’s survival and acquisition of power. While Yemen and Saudi Arabia are the main actors in this study, understanding the history of both states and their role in MENA would enhance the understanding of how both states seek each other’s strength despite the power dynamic and history of both states.

2.0 The Civil War in Yemen

The end of the Cold War in 1991 has allowed an era of political prosperity for authoritarian dictatorships. With the backing of the US and its allies in Europe, the flow of resources and economy towards their states stabilised. The advent of 9/11 saw many states, including Yemen, to be on Washington’s red list as their allegiance to the US’ cause was condemned and their loyalty questioned. The mismanagement of funds and corruption was a consistent issue in the unrest, affecting most of MENA. Incompetent leaders producing unsatisfactory outcomes causing socio-economic instability only heightened the populace’s tension to revolt against their rulers.

During the 2011 Arab Spring, many people in Arab countries saw a need for change and called for demonstrations and protests. Authoritarian dictatorships and absolute monarchies in the region saw themselves either scrambling for reforms as a countermeasure to contain the revolution or befall as a victim to an ever-present escalation of armed civil conflict against the revolution’s tides. Saudi Arabia saw the revolution as a long-awaited opportunity to assert further control in the Arabian Peninsula and MENA, with the Yemen government during the country’s instability allowing the open embrace of the revolution to its capital, Sanaa.

Yemen is one of many Arab countries that encountered major changes due to the domino effect of the Arab Spring revolution. With the support of the international committee of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), Yemen forced its long-time ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh, the then President of the Republic of Yemen, to resign after 33 years in power. However, even though Ali Abdullah Saleh was out of power, he had placed many of his relatives in top positions in both the government and the military. This was done in an effort to stabilize Yemen while he was overseas seeking treatment after a bomb attack (Whitaker, 2011). Consequently, an ultimatum issued by the GCC led him to resign and he was succeeded by his second-in-command, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, a weak successor whose popularity was questionable among the members of parliament and the military (Alkaff, 2015).
The revolution in Sana’a and the massacre of fifty demonstrators signalled the end of Saleh’s regime and the take-over by a transitional government under the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) replacing him in hopes of stabilising Yemen to the status quo it once was before the Arab Spring. The leadership of Abdurrahub Mansur Hadi to federalise Yemen and to reconcile with the tribes that assisted in ousting Saleh was unpopular with the Houthis. The balance of power Saleh held was now in disarray as the Government of Yemen had lesser control of state affairs than the hard power stakeholders of Yemen while calls for more autonomy of regional administration and separation by the Hirak (Southern Movement) was in popular demand (Alley, 2013).

Taking control of Yemen's government is akin to “dancing on the head of snakes” as popularly claimed by Ali Abdullah Saleh. In pushing for stabilization, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi needed to reduce the power of those who were still in support of Saleh by removing many of the latter's family members from the military. This angered Saleh, as he had plans to hand over the power to his son. Thus, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi was a usurper of the zaeem or leader of the tribe. In retaliation, Ali Abdullah Saleh, together with his supporters from the military, aligned himself with the enemy he had tried to destroy previously, the Houthis (Salisbury, 2015).

From 2014 till 2015, a coup d'état, which came to be known as the September 21st Revolution, saw the Houthis capturing Sana’a, the capital of Yemen, and subsequently taking control of the country. This was done with the help of Ali Abdullah Saleh's loyal brigades still stationed either in Sana’a or around it. With the strong backing of the General People's Congress (GPC) who were still loyal to their predecessor, Ali Abdullah Saleh, the coup d'état forced President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to resign, resulting in him fleeing from Yemen to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The situation escalated when the Houthis began their south and westward expansion while fighting off AQAP and tribes loyal to President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi (Reuters, 2014).

The takeover of the Houthis saw the Hadi administration fleeing Yemen, seeking shelter and assistance from Saudi Arabia to reclaim their right to rule (Lackner, 2017). While it may have been a good choice for Hadi, Riyadh had other agendas in mind. The Houthis bordering the Kingdom was a thorn on the latter's side as it was neither a recognised government by any states of the Gulf nor could it be accepted that a sect antagonised by the Salafis for a long time was now controlling Yemen. Saudi Arabia was ready to finally step in after observing the events unfolding against its interest. An intervention was the final solution.

In 2015, Operations Decisive Storm and Restoring Hope were launched by Saudi Arabia and a coalition of nine countries from the Middle East and Africa to put President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, an internationally recognized pro-Saudi supporter, back to power. Strategic locations of the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh's forces were destroyed via bombing campaigns and naval blockades (Nußberger, 2017).

3.0 Saudi Arabia, The Arab Spring, and Its Involvement in Yemen

After the Arab Spring in 2011, Yemen faced many internal problems from overlapping issues that surfaced. Surprisingly, their neighbour to the North remained fairly stable in their experience of the Arab Spring. The instability in Yemen saw the GCC, whose states came out unscathed by the revolution, pressure Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down. The National Accord Government was formed in December 2011 to take over as the transitional government for Yemen.

Following the take-over, open elections were held in 2012. Negotiations and dialogues with the powerful tribes began with outcomes aiming for reconciliation was signed by all parties (the Houthis
acknowledging the dialogue) to divide Yemen into six regions. However, the Houthis power and influence in military and politics has swept the opposition and captured the province of Amran. In 2014, they effectively backtracked their agreement to the dialogue with the seizure of Sana’a from the government of Yemen, breaking the negotiation accords mediated by the UN (Elayah et al., 2018). The fall of Aden to Houthi authority forced Hadi and his administration to flee to Oman and meet with Riyadh to request assistance to quell the Houthis threat. Intervention by the Saudi-led coalition was the final decision to help Hadi’s loyalist forces to fight off the Houthis in their deep operations into Yemen’s heartlands. 2015 marked the beginning of Saudi Arabia and its allies’ protracted intervention into Yemen as a mission to restore the status quo ante bellum.

The disruption of the national reconciliation process in Yemen from the Houthi-Saleh aggression towards the Government of Yemen indicated that it was only a matter of time that the Saudis would need to intervene in Yemen. This is not because of the alarming rate the Houthis advanced throughout Yemen’s heartlands, but due to the prospect of having a rival-affiliated state in its backyard (Nuruzzaman, 2019; Karim: 2017). In addition, Hadi’s consent gave it the best platform to undermine Iranian influence in the Peninsula (Gause III, 2014; Guidero & Hallward, 2019). The idea that the Houthis would be able to access the Red Sea, would be alarming to the Kingdom and the fall of its long-time client state would be a much harder thing to imagine. However, while there is reasonable success by the anti-Houthi coalition in Yemen, a stalemate has occurred with the warring parties and now with the changing of winds for its allies in the GCC and the US, the Saudi involvement in Yemen for a protracted amount of time would be costly for the Kingdom so much so the accusations of humanitarian and human rights organisations of its misconduct in the conflict (Arestizábal, Benedicto & Rufanges, 2020). The Kingdom stands at the crossroads: to continue the costly war in Yemen or pull out completely and save some face from total failure.

4.0 The Securitization of Saudi Arabia’s National Interests

Realist acquisition of power approach would drive Saudi and its GCC allies to push towards securitization of the interests of their states within their jurisdiction and beyond it pointing mainly towards the areas of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean where maritime security has always been at its peak since the early 21st century. Knights and Nadimi (2018) elaborate the need to secure both the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait from illegal activities ranging from terrorist attacks to arms smuggling by the Houthis. Houthis access to the coastline of Yemen threatened Saudi’s national interests thus Saudi enter into the conflict through its islands of Kamran and Hanish al-Kubra in the Red Sea (Al-Maashi, 2017).

The securitization of Saudi’s national interests could be seen after Houthi’s attacks upon Saudi or other civilian vessels going through the Red Sea. Saudi suspended the transfer of oil barrels amounting to millions of gallons every day which saw congratulatory responses from the late Iranian general Soleimani, though operations would resume later (Abdulla & Singh, 2018). Al-Maashi (2017) adds that Iran's confrontation of marine powers in the Red Sea where ballistic missiles and drone boat technologies were supplied to the Houthi aims to escalate the tension there by not only concerning the directly involved parties of the conflict but also the major powers supporting the parties in the conflict.

Furthermore, while the Houthi did withdraw partially from Hodeida and Midi due to military advances of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the Houthi still have access to the coastlines of the Red Sea and with peace talks by the international community breaking down due to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's dissatisfaction of the terms, threats to civilian shipping along the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait would continue. Negotiations to surrender Hodeida, for example, in exchange for lifting the arms embargo on the rebels monitored by UN inspection teams were being delayed by the Houthi despite mounting anger from the Government of Yemen and the coalition (Knights & Nadimi, 2018). Yet, while
the UAE and Saudi Arabia has made great strides to ensure the safety of the Red Sea, the interjection of Oman as the neutral mediator from the GCC has jeopardized its cohesion with accusations of sympathy to Iran, overlooking smuggling of arms and oil, and not being part of the military force in confronting the Houthi (Al-Maashi, 2017).

Other means of securitizing the Kingdom's national interest would be what Machmudi (2020) would call politics of assistance and intervention. One of the new initiatives under King Salman through the Crown Prince, Mohamad Bin Salman (MBS) is Vision 2030, where it aims to reduce the Kingdom's reliance on oil and instead focus on food security. Agricultural investments in Africa and Southeast Asia would secure its food flow externally through Saudi investors as a policy to establish stability in the region as well as to avert unneeded political transitions. Politics of assistance has helped Saudi Arabia survive the Arab Spring through monitoring of dissidents in neighbouring states in MENA such as Egypt and Bahrain where prevention of citizens from alluding to illegal wars reduced the ability to create upheaval and revolution. Balancing other states' foreign policies also guarantees its survival, while committing to US interests in the region through wealth compensation to its neighbouring states.

Further development in Saudi national interests would be the shift of economics relation and trade away from one large state such as the US towards the East with China, India and Japan through the strategy of managed multi-dependence (MMD). The MMD strategy has shown continued progress from King Abdullah to King Salman with oil purchases made by the East has increased to 39% while the purchase of the US has reduced to only 19% (Machmudi, 2020).

5.0 Saudi Arabia's Security Dilemma

The theory of security dilemma rests on the idea of a pursuit for security in an anarchic world system. It would mean that while states may not have any intention to go to war, the distrust of states allows the accumulation of power to have both, a defensive and offensive connotation, to arms build-up, adversarial aggrandizement, and alliance formation. Snyder (1984) explains that alliance formation would depend on the primary objective of a state's security, thus allying themselves with others to increase their security, or due to fear of other states and an alliance is formed to avoid isolation or to prevent a partner from being their adversaries. In a multipolar world system, an alliance is flexible and prone to abandonment i.e., realignment to the opponent or to take any action that would be able to weaken an alliance such as decreasing commitments or de-align from the alliances, making independent decisions (Snyder, 1984).

The Arab Spring has intensified an already complex multipolar, regional power system among MENA states; with axes that revolve around Islamic ideology and beliefs: the Saudi-led Salafist axis, the Turkish-led Brotherhood axis, and finally the Iranian-led Shiite axis. MENA had always had a multipolar system since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, but it intensified further after the fall of the Shah during the Cold War and when the Turks began to look East to restore the glory of the Ottoman Empire. Each has its tools of exerting power in the region: the Saudi through their oil revenues and position in the Islamic world as the protector of the Sunni faith. Turkey, on the other hand, tries to posit itself as a progressive state with a pragmatic face of Islam and the use of military and active diplomacy with the major world powers and Iran. And Iran, as the defender of the Islamic revolution and plays against the Western rules of exerting power in the region (Dehshiri & Shahmoradi, 2020). This interchangeable power play by the regional powers of MENA has forced Saudi Arabia to assert itself as the dominant power in the region as well as to reinforce itself as the true Sunni defender of the faith and to curtail Iran's influence in the region.

While Saudi Arabia made the efforts to securitize its interests and the interests of its main ally, the US seems to have dealt with major setbacks to its proactive foreign policy decisions. Gause III (2011)
highlighted that Saudi Arabia was losing its streaks to Iran in influencing MENA states to be part of its sphere of influence mainly: Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine where Saudi intervention in local politics failed to substantiate into realization due to the strength of Iran's influence rooted deeply through the decades. The main goal of Saudi Arabia in the region is to maintain a stable sphere of influence that would not easily slip away from Iran's dealings since the beginning of the Arab Spring.

Yet, it would seem in recent years after almost half a decade of intervention in Yemen, Saudi Arabia is facing a security dilemma. Members of the coalition had several doubts of the direction the Saudi were leading them to. States such as Qatar withdrew for its personal or political reasons and they also do not have the economic capacity to continue their intervention in Yemen. Other states like Sudan were paid to be present in the conflict, thus, allowing them to retreat out of the conflict fairly unscathed as to them, it was not a matter of national prestige (B. Rich, personal communication, 30 April 2021). The coalition was falling apart from the quagmire of the air campaign. While reconciliation with Qatar in 2020 did bring back GCC cohesion, it was evident that the poorest participants in the regional organizations such as Oman and Qatar may seem to push forth their own foreign policies away from Saudi’s dominance. Oman, for instance, made actions worrying to the Saudis, in their neutral role that enables support for the Houthis and aid Iran's intervention in Yemen (Feierstein, 2017).

The illusion of a sectarian conflict was the few main theories in explaining the new cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia but Gengler's research contrasted that. According to Gengler (2020), while the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran is most definitely a conflict of sects of Islam, many have seen it as more of a political agenda rather than a religious one. It was due to the early dealings of the Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia with the Arab Spring as well as the direct involvement in conflict in Yemen for example. Referencing Al-Rasheed, Gengler also amplifies the fact that the Gulf states have moved away from sectarian propagation to the propagation of state-sponsored and highly militarized hyper-nationalism to rally the people to a cause rather than use religion due to the security of the social and political status quo (Gengler, 2020).

6.0 War by Proxy

Saudi’s intention of maintaining a proactive and aggressive foreign policy can be explained by offensive realism theory. In structural realism or neorealism, states see security in scarcity and, since power is the ends of the means for realism, the acquisition of it - regardless of upsetting the international order - would be important to secure the survival of the state (Lobell, 2017). Maximization of power is what could be interpreted of Saudi's actions in the region and one reason for maximizing power would be the hypothetical use of proxies to maximize its control over a specific region. Proxy wars occurred through the auspices of both regular or irregular forces beyond state control that moves away from the Cold War perspective of insurgencies to trans-national movements beyond the realm of borders due to globalization and involvement of actors besides the state to achieve the aims of its contractors and sponsors (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019).

The use of "limited war" or proxies to achieve a goal is appealing to sponsor states as it allows the projection of power beyond the use of conventional forces while also being able to avoid domestic anger of direct conflict consequences. However, there are limits to the use of proxies. First, it would depend on how a sponsor designates an irregular force as well as the motives in sponsoring these non-state actors. Second, the ability to constrain a proxy from bending international norms and laws in conflict. Finally, the ability to water down the possibility of escalation of the conflict (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019). The limits of using proxies exemplify the ability of proxies to use a sponsor's advantage to further its goals and influence the direction of the conflict, though depending on the freedom they are given by their sponsors.
While the proxy war in Yemen remains generally in the control and grip of their Gulf and Iranian sponsors, Yemen's situation had always seen autonomy from the domestic political actors regardless of the countless foreign interventions in Yemen. The warring parties, too, have their aspirations and end goals for Yemen. For instance, the Houthis - supposedly their main goal is - to restore the Imamate or to establish a theocratic state such as the likes of Iran while the goal of the Government of Yemen is to balance out the interests of the powerful tribes, the STC's demands and the dissolution of AQAP and ISIS in Yemen. At the same time, the STC is pushing for separation and self-determination away from the politicking and influence of their Northern brethren (K. Abdulla, personal communication 20 March 2021). The reality of the conflicts in MENA would be the ability of these proxies to threaten their sponsors, should they find the support inadequate and dubious (Byman, 2018).

The conflict in Yemen may not end with the abandonment of Saudi interest in Yemen, rather, the US interest in Yemen. Yemen is placed strategically along the Red Sea and the straits of Bab el-Mandeb. The threat of the Saudi coalition's proxy defeats anywhere along the coastlines of the Red Sea would see a hazard to international trade which translates to the disruption of the major power’s trade. One should understand the role of the Saudis in the conflict. While being a regional power in MENA, the Saudis are also a proxy-ally of the US as the largest weapon supplier to the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia's role in the region is to secure the global transport of oil, the free passage of Bab el-Mandeb at all costs, and to ensure a pro-US government in Sana'a to settle the insurgency issues in the Peninsula (Robinson, 2021). While the US under President Joe Biden has begun to call for a Saudi retreat from Yemen due to international and domestic pressures, efforts to arm Saudi Arabia to repel threats from the Houthis, ISIS and AQAP would continue (Robinson, 2021).

The MENA has a history of superpower proxy conflict, however, the modern use of proxies after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 saw a wider range of capabilities a non-state actor can employ. Due to the empowerment of non-state actors and sponsors seldom wanting to be involved in administering a fragile state, they have become both principals and agents to the sponsorship of other groups while being able to market themselves to potential sponsors (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019). With globalization, powerful domestic political agents could connect with conflicts that would be deemed to be far isolated in the past, as they have become the chess players rather than being the chess pieces. In Yemen, for instance, the Lebanese Hezbollah has posited itself as a trainer, arms supplier, and mediator between the Iranians and the Houthis, expanding its network and influence in the region (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019).

**7.0 The Prospect of Peace in Yemen**

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen had attracted the international community to condemn the Saudis for their human rights violations and the Kingdom is struggling to amend their image on the international stage. However, according to Abdulla (personal communication, 20 March 2021), the scope of peacebuilding efforts in Yemen are too narrow and too Western-oriented in understanding the situation in Yemen. The international community has failed to address the crimes the Houthis has committed and viewed them as the core problem in the peace-making process. The olive branch extended by the UN in the Stockholm Agreement showed the long-term goals of the Houthis in Yemen: a ceasefire as a breather and redirection of forces to expand further into the Government of Yemen's territory and the non-comprisable approach it takes when peace was requested (Abo Alasrar, 2021). The status quo is the Houthis weapon of expansion, and with the international community too distracted with Saudis human rights violations, they were able to expand and control Hodeida as well as taking in the humanitarian supplies that were docked in the port for themselves.

The ideological drive of the Houthis could be considered problematic as well. Following in the footsteps of their Iranian sponsors, the Houthis only plan is to be a revisionist state in the Peninsula like Iran,
thus, any international development affecting the sponsor would affect the proxy. Such is the case of
the Houthis offensive move upon Ma'rib and the death of Iranian General Soleimani have uplifted the
fighting morale of the Houthis in their commitment to achieve total and absolute control over Yemen
(Al-Dawsari, 2021). While many international observers and neutral states to the conflict tried to
convince the Iranians to stop their supporting role in the conflict, the Houthis has continued to escalate
any possible situation it could find. For the Houthis, the only way to end the war in Yemen is the total
withdrawal of coalition forces from Yemen and Saudi Arabia's unconditional surrender.

Hadi's Government of Yemen had managed to secure a compromise with the STC through the Riyadh
Agreement (RA) in 2019 and only began implementing the power-sharing, political annexe in 2020
though mistrust still plagued the success of the agreement. It was a breakthrough coming from months
of skirmishes between the Hadi's government and STC but Hadi's government eventually secured the
recognition it wanted as well as allowing their voice to be heard in UN-sponsored peace talks while still
maintaining their objectives. The influence of Saudi and its coalition in the RA is apparent and they are
able to maintain the harmony of the Government of Yemen and the STC and also fulfill the coalition's
interests in Yemen through its proxies (Jalal, 2021). Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed remains
adamant to strengthen the bargaining position of the Government of Yemen in the peace talks
conducted by the UN to end the war in Yemen.

Both the US and Saudi want to end the conflict in Yemen. The changing of administrations in
Washington has prompted the US to abandon any support for the Saudi coalition to intervene in Yemen,
though counterinsurgency measures were taken to protect their ally. Saudi Arabia has shown signs of
war-weariness in their intervention in Yemen, as their attempts to contain Iranian and Houthis influence
in Yemen only bolstered the latter in their consolidation of the fragile state. There are signs of Saudi
withdrawal from their proactive, offensive realist strategy to contain Iran and moving back towards a
more defensive strategy, parlaying the Iranians to come to the bargaining table (Wolf, 2021).

If Saudi Arabia were to fully withdraw from the conflict in Yemen, it would deal a serious blow to any
regional power that seek to contain Iranian influence. One such state is Israel. Fearing abandonment,
the Abraham Accords between the UAE and Israel was seen as a new formula to contain Iran. Yet, the
Israeli security apparatus depends on the position their indirect ally, the Saudis, have in the region.
Iranian-Saudi detente would collapse the security apparatus of containing Iran and would push Israel
to further normalize ties with other MENA regional powers (Wolf, 2021).

The Biden administration now would have to decide on their support of the Saudis. Al-Dawsari (2021)
advised that the US approach to Yemen should be one of caution and to fully understand that the US
position in Yemen would not be to solve the conflict but to help mitigate the humanitarian situation in
Yemen as well as help the Saudis to stabilize the Government of Yemen in terms of economy,
governance, and security. Furthermore, the US must understand the predicament and dilemma of
Saudi, specifically on the issue of oil. The Iranian capability to hit Saudi oil reserves in the east of the
Kingdom as well as the incursions by the Houthis could give the Iranians significant leverage and a
bargaining chip holding the US and other major powers oil supply hostage (Jaffe, 2019).

The prospect of peace is beyond local or regional, as the international dimension includes the resolution
of the US-China rivalry in the region. Only after the international dimension of the conflict is resolved,
so will the resolution on the regional and local level (S. Obeid, personal communication, 28 March
2021). The approach the international community needs to take would be to understand the nature of
the conflict among the parties and not simply finding common grounds for reconciliation as was done
in Iraq, and as a domestic political actor to the conflict, the international community's actions towards
the Houthis must be on equal ground as they have committed several human rights violations as well (K. Abdulla, personal communication, 20 March 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic had clamped down on the coalition’s will to continue their intervention in Yemen. Saudi Arabia was affected by the surge of COVID-19 cases and would see an opportunity for a ceasefire in Yemen as a mean to recuperate their losses economically and domestically. The COVID-19 pandemic has decimated Saudi oil prices and efforts to resuscitate the oil industry and they need to use other means of funding their annual budget through austerity measures, cutting subsidies, spending its reserves and tripling value-added taxes (Riedel, 2019). The disproportionate effects of the pandemic on the Kingdom’s economy have also halted its plan to achieve Vision 2030 and disrupted the progress of building NEOM city. Furthermore, the quagmire in Yemen would see the Saudis cutting back on their huge military spending.

The UN reported that the health system in Yemen has collapsed. The war has caused the displacement of Yemenis inside the state as well as forced healthcare workers to flee from Yemen. The lack of medical supplies also limited the health care capability in Yemen. Karasapan (2020) states that the UN determining Yemen as the worst humanitarian crisis was justified. The collapse of the health system since the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Yemen as the UN too found itself lacking funds to support any major programmes in Yemen, stating that 30 out of the 41 UN programmes would halt and payments to the doctors working under the UN would default as well. The abuse of human rights seems to not be of concern to the warring parties as the Houthis has severely hampered and diverted international aid in the areas under their control. In addition, the warring parties have also used starvation as a weapon of war (Nasser, 2020). The announcement of Saudi ceasefire would see a 14-day window of supply to enter into Yemen beginning April 9, 2020, and the Secretary-General of the UN, Mr Antonio Guterres, has urged the Houthis to hold up their end to the ceasefire (United Nations, 2020).
Nevertheless, prolonging any friction between the regional powers would cripple any chance for peace and aggravate the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

8.0 Conclusion

The conflict in Yemen is a vicious cycle of untenable and unresolved issues that dragged on through the decades under the leadership of President Saleh after the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. The fault lines and flashpoints to the neopatrimonialism government of President Saleh saw its peak after the Arab Spring in 2011, when regime forces began firing unto the demonstrators and the defection of prominent figures of the Saleh regime to the side of the demonstrators. An important factor of the instability and fragility of Yemen is the tribal power in influencing the decisions of Yemen’s domestic politics. The loyalty and self-interest of tribal leaders for prestige and financial gains helped Saleh tighten the noose on those opposing him. Moreover, the tribes in Yemen hold significant power in Yemen’s military affairs with the al-Ahmars of the Hashid and Bakil tribal confederation being one instance of tribal influence in Yemen’s politics. It also did not help that Saleh was not fulfilling the demands and needs of the STC that had merged with its Northern brethren in 1990 and only began cracking down upon them in 2007.

The Houthis on the other hand, is a strong political entity in Yemen’s domestic affairs which became mature under the repressive rule of Saleh in his consolidation of power over the Northern territories of Yemen, Sa’da to be specific. With a different ideology from their Zaydi political counterpart in the government, the Houthis belief of establishing the Imamate and the end of the republic as the end goal of the movement and the Sa’da Wars solidified their resolve to pursue their goals. It shows that the conflict in Yemen, though conflated by religious propaganda, has been political in nature.
The interest of Saudi Arabia goes beyond its borders to gain political clout from fragile states in MENA. Yemen’s security could be considered its top priority to secure itself in the region. The constant meddling in the domestic politics of Yemen that could be traced as far back as the Cold War would evidently show that Saudi national interests would not be fulfilled if their southern neighbour could not get their act together. The Arab Spring brought about the worst-case scenario to the Kingdom as the transition from Saleh to Hadi only gave opportunity for the Houthis to make a comeback to seize Sana’a and establish itself as the new ruler of Yemen. It would also mean that the security apparatus of Saudi Arabia was compromised as reports of Iranian support for the Houthis meant that there was a dire need to expel the Iranian proxy from its backyard.

Saudi intervention in Yemen has brought more devastation than benefits. The protracted air campaign by the Saudi-led coalition was a failure perceived as a success, due to the inability to weaken the morale of the Houthis from moving South to Aden and the restoration of Hadi’s Government of Yemen back to power in Sana’a. While it is evident that there were some progresses made by the anti-Houthi coalition to thwart and repel any offensives made by the Houthis, the main goal of the intervention requested by President Hadi was not fulfilled. The COVID-19 pandemic saw the exit of many coalition members and the Saudis may unilaterally call for a ceasefire in Yemen to allow it to settle the chaos left by the pandemic in the Kingdom. Talks between Riyadh and Tehran as a détente to the heightened tensions between both states would entail the endangerment of Israeli plans in containing Iran. Riyadh’s move to return back to the status quo, would see Israel trying to convince the Gulf states to join in on the containment of Iran.

The impacts to the quagmire would be calamitous for the belligerents in the conflict. For one, the Saudi-led coalition as well as the GCC would now have to heighten its presence in the Red Sea to ensure the Houthis do no interrupt international trade. Second, the new administration in Washington has made attempts to exclude itself from being a directly involved party in the conflict. In addition, the failed political investments in MENA by the Saudis would bring the Levant ever closer to Tehran’s jurisdiction. Further weakening the GCC’s cohesion would be the will of the alliance to participate in the conflict. Qatar’s brief expulsion from the GCC and Oman’s neutrality to the conflict compromised the efforts conducted by Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to secure the Peninsula from Iranian influence. The appearance of AQAP, ISIS and Hezbollah in Yemen only jeopardized the security and interests of not only the Saudis but also the US in the region.

The prospect of peace in Yemen is catastrophic, as the anti-Houthi coalition did try to bring the Houthis to the negotiation table, but the Houthis are determined to stay in their course. The only peace the Houthis would want is a peace with them as the main and sole ruler in Yemen. The Stockholm Agreement fulfils the Houthi agenda and the cracks found between the anti-Houthi coalition was only resolved partially in late 2020. While the international community condemn all parties involved in the conflict for their human rights violations in Yemen, the only solution for Yemen would be the mitigation of Houthis expansion and the strengthening of the Government of Yemen and STC government. A peaceful settlement between the domestic actors in Yemen would not come towards the reconciliation of all parties rather a need to understand the background, bargaining power, and compromise each faction is willing to sacrifice.

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