
The Geopolitics Behind the War in Yemen: The Start of a New Front against Iran

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The United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia became very uneasy when the Yemenese or Yemenite movement of the Houthi or Ansarallah (meaning the supporters of God in Arabic) gained control of Yemen's capital, Sanaa/Sana, in September 2014. The US-supported Yemenite President Abd-Rabbuh Man?our Al-Hadi was humiliatingly forced to share power with the Houthis and the coalition of northern Yemenese tribes that had helped them enter Sana. Al-Hadi declared that negotiations for a Yemeni national unity government would take place and his allies the US and Saudi Arabia tried to use a new national dialogue and mediated talks to co-opt and pacify the Houthis.

The truth has been turned on its head about the war in Yemen. The war and ousting of President Abd-Rabbuh Man?our Al-Hadi in Yemen are not the results of a «Houthi coup» in Yemen. It is the opposite. Al-Hadi was ousted, because with Saudi and US support he tried to backtrack on the power sharing agreements he had made and return Yemen to authoritarian rule. The ousting of President Al-Hadi by the Houthis and their political allies was an unexpected reaction to the takeover Al-Hadi was planning with Washington and the House of Saud.

The Houthis and their allies represent a diverse cross-section of Yemeni society and the majority of Yemenites. The Houthi movement's domestic alliance against Al-Hadi includes Shiite Muslims and Sunni Muslims alike. The US and House of Saud never thought that the Houthis would assert themselves by removing Al-Hadi from power, but this reaction had been a decade in the making. With the House of Saud, Al-Hadi had been involved in the persecution of the Houthis and the manipulation of tribal politics in Yemen even before he became president. When he became Yemeni president he dragged his feet and was working against implement the arrangements that had been arranged through consensus and negotiations in Yemen's National Dialogue, which convened after Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to hand over his powers in 2011.

Coup or Counter-Coup: What Happened in Yemen?

At first, when they took over Sana in late-2014, the Houthis rejected Al-Hadi's proposals and his new offers for a

formal power sharing agreement, calling him a morally bankrupt figure that had actually been reneging previous promises of sharing political power. At that point, President Al-Hadi's pandering to Washington and the House of Saud had made him deeply unpopular in Yemen with the majority of the population. Two months later, on November 8, President Al-Hadi's own party, the Yemenite General People's Congress, would eject Al-Hadi as its leader too.

The Houthis eventually detained President Al-Hadi and seized the presidential palace and other Yemeni government buildings on January 20. With popular support, a little over two weeks later, the Houthis formally formed a Yemense transitional government on February 6. Al-Hadi was forced to resign. The Houthis declared that Al-Hadi, the US, and Saudi Arabia were planning on devastating Yemen on February 26.

Al-Hadi's resignation was a setback for US foreign policy. It resulted in a military and operational retreat for the CIA and the Pentagon, which were forced to remove US military personnel and intelligence operatives from Yemen. *The Los Angeles Times* reported on March 25, citing US officials, that the Houthis had got their hands on numerous secret documents when they seized the Yemeni National Security Bureau, which was working closely with the CIA, that compromised Washington's operations in Yemen.

Al-Hadi fled the Yemeni capital Sana to Aden on February 21 and declared it the temporary capital of Yemen on March 7. The US, France, Turkey, and their Western European allies closed their embassies. Soon afterwards, in what was probably a coordinated move with the US, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates all relocated their embassies to Aden from Sana. Al-Hadi rescinded his letter of resignation as president and declared that he was forming a government-in-exile.

The Houthis and their political allies refused to fall into line with the demands of the US and Saudi Arabia, which were being articulated through Al-Hadi in Aden and by an increasingly hysteric Riyadh. As a result, Al-Hadi's foreign minister, Riyadh Yaseen, called for Saudi Arabia and the Arab petro-sheikdoms to militarily intervene to prevent the Houthis from getting control of Yemen's airspace on March 23. Yaseen told the Saudi mouthpiece *Al-Sharq Al-Awsa* that a bombing campaign was needed and that a no-fly zone had to be imposed over Yemen.

The Houthis realized that a military struggle was going to begin. This is why the Houthis and their allies in the Yemenite military rushed to control as many Yemeni military airfields and airbases, such as Al-Anad, as quickly as possible. They rushed to neutralize Al-Hadi and entered Aden on March 25.

By the time the Houthis and their allies entered Aden, Al-Hadi had fled the Yemeni port city. Al-Hadi would resurface in Saudi Arabia when the House of Saud started attacking Yemen on March 26. From Saudi Arabia, Abd-Rabbuh Man?our Al-Hadi would then fly to Egypt for a meeting of the Arab League to legitimize the war on Yemen.

Yemen and the Changing Strategic Equation in the Middle East

The Houthi takeover of Sana took place in the same timeframe as a series of successes or regional victories for Iran, Hezbollah, Syria and the Resistance Bloc that they and other local actors form collectively. In Syria, the Syrian government managed to entrench its position while in Iraq the ISIL/ISIS/Daesh movement was being pushed back by Iraq with the noticeable help of Iran and local Iraqi militias allied to Tehran.

The strategic equation in the Middle East began to shift as it became clear that Iran was becoming central to its security architecture and stability. The House of Saud and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began to whimper and complain that Iran was in control of four regional capitals—Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Sana — and that something had to be done to stop Iranian expansion. As a result of the new strategic equation, the Israelis and the House of Saud became perfectly strategically aligned with the objective of neutralizing Iran and its regional allies. «When the Israelis and Arabs are on the same page, people should pay attention,» Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer told Fox News about the alignment of Israel and Saudi Arabia on March 5.

The Israeli and Saudi fear mongering has not worked. According to Gallup poll, only 9% of US citizens viewed Iran as the greatest enemy of the US at the time that Netanyahu arrived in Washington to speak against a deal between the US and Iran.

The Geo-Strategic Objectives of the US and Saudis Behind the War in Yemen

While the House of Saud has long considered Yemen a subordinate province of some sorts and as a part of Riyadh's sphere of influence, the US wants to make sure that it could control the Bab Al-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, and the Socotra Islands. The Bab Al-Mandeb is an important strategic chokepoint for international maritime trade and energy shipments that connects the Persian Gulf via the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea. It is just as important as the Suez Canal for the maritime shipping lanes and trade between Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Israel was also concerned, because control of Yemen could cut off Israel's access to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea and prevent its submarines from easily deploying to the Persian Gulf to threaten Iran. This is why control of Yemen was actually one of Netanyahu's talking points on Capitol Hill when he spoke to the US Congress about Iran on March 3 in what the *New York Times* of all publications billed as «Mr. Netanyahu's Unconvincing Speech to Congress» on March 4.

Saudi Arabia was visibly afraid that Yemen could become formally aligned to Iran and that the events there could result in new rebellions in the Arabian Peninsula against the House of Saud. The US was just as much concerned about this too, but was also thinking in terms of global rivalries. Preventing Iran, Russia, or China from having a strategic foothold in Yemen, as a means of preventing other powers from overlooking the Gulf of Aden and positioning themselves at the Bab Al-Mandeb, was a major US concern.

Added to the geopolitical importance of Yemen in overseeing strategic maritime corridors is its military's missile arsenal. Yemen's missiles could hit any ships in the Gulf of Aden or Bab Al-Mandeb. In this regard, the Saudi attack on Yemen's strategic missile depots serves both US and Israeli interests. The aim is not only to prevent them from being used to retaliate against exertions of Saudi military force, but to also prevent them from being available to a Yemeni government aligned to either Iran, Russia, or China.

In a public position that totally contradicts Riyadh's Syria policy, the Saudis threatened to take military action if the Houthis and their political allies did not negotiate with Al-Hadi. As a result of the Saudi threats, protests erupted across Yemen against the House of Saud on March 25. Thus, the wheels were set in motion for another Middle Eastern war as the US, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait began to prepare to reinstall Al-Hadi.

The Saudi March to War in Yemen and a New Front against Iran

For all the talk about Saudi Arabia as a regional power, it is too weak to confront Iran alone. The House of Saud's strategy has been to erect or reinforce a regional alliance system for a drawn out confrontation with Iran and the Resistance Bloc. In this regard Saudi Arabia needs Egypt, Turkey, and Pakistan —a misnamed so-called «Sunni» alliance or axis — to help it confront Iran and its regional allies.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the crown prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and deputy supreme commander of the UAE's military, would visit Morocco to talk about a collective military response to Yemen by the Arab petro-sheikhdoms, Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt on March 17. On March 21, Mohammed bin Zayed met Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud to discuss a military response to Yemen. This was while Al-Hadi was calling for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to help him by militarily intervening in Yemen. The meetings were followed by talk about a new regional security pact for the Arab petro-sheikhdoms.

Out of the GCC's five members, the Sultanate of Oman stayed away. Oman refused to join the war on Yemen. Muscat has friendly relations with Tehran. Moreover, the Omanis are weary of the Saudi and GCC project to use sectarianism to ignite confrontation with Iran and its allies. The majority of Omanis are neither Sunni Muslims nor Shiite Muslims; they are Ibadi Muslims, and they fear the fanning of sectarian sedition by the House of Saud and the other Arab petro-sheikhdoms.

Saudi propagandists went into overdrive falsely claiming that the war was a response to Iranian encroachment on the borders of Saudi Arabia. Turkey would announce its support for the war in Yemen too. On the day the war was launched, Turkey's Erdogan claimed that Iran was trying to dominate the region and that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the GCC were getting annoyed.

During these events, Egypt's Sisi stated that the security of Cairo and the security of Saudi Arabia and the Arab petro-sheikhdoms are one. In fact, Egypt said that it would not get involved in a war in Yemen on March 25, but the next day Cairo joined Saudi Arabia in Riyadh's attack on Yemen by sending its jets and ships to Yemen.

In the same vein, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif released a statement on March 26 that any threat to Saudi Arabia would «evoke a strong response» from Pakistan. The message was tacitly directed towards Iran.

The US and Israeli Roles in the War in Yemen

On March 27, it was announced in Yemen that Israel was helping Saudi Arabia attack the Arab country. «This is the first time that the Zionists [Israelis] are conducting a joint operation in collaborations with Arabs,» Hassan Zayd, the head of Yemen's Al-Haq Party, wrote on the internet to point out the convergence of interests between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Israeli-Saudi alliance over Yemen, however, is not new. The Israelis helped the House of Saud during the North Yemen Civil War that started in 1962 by providing Saudi Arabia with weapons to help the royalists against the republicans in North Yemen.

The US is also involved and leading from behind or a distance. While it works to strike a deal with Iran, it also wants to maintain an alliance against Tehran using the Saudis. The Pentagon would provide what it called «intelligence and logistical support» to the House of Saud.

Make no mistakes about it: the war on Yemen is also Washington's war. The GCC has been unleashed on Yemen by the US.

There has long been talk about the formation of a pan-Arab military force, but proposals for creating it were renewed on March 9 by the rubberstamp Arab League. The proposals for a united Arab military serve US, Israeli, and Saudi interests. Talk about a pan-Arab military has been motivated by their preparations to attack Yemen to return Al-Hadi and to regionally confront Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and the Resistance Bloc.

«Battle lines are being drawn in Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country and the Middle East's latest candidate for state failure. If, as looks increasingly probable, open warfare breaks out soon, it will only be made worse by the contest for regional supremacy between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both powers have proven eager to arm groups they believe they can control, despite the legacy this destructive rivalry has already wrought in Syria and Iraq», the magazine *Foreign Policy* claimed on March 6.

The Houthi Alliance with Iran: Pragmatism or Sectarianism?

The Houthis are not Iranian proxies whatsoever. The Houthi movement is an independent political actor that emerged as a result of repression. To call the Houthis Iranian proxies is unempirical and ignores the history and politics of Yemen. «If a war breaks out along sectarian lines, it will not be because that is where historical divisions have lain in Yemen; it will be because the war's foreign funders are inflaming previously unimportant divisions,» *Foreign Policy* even admits.

Houthi leaders have admittedly rejected claims that they take orders from Tehran. This has not stopped Saudi and Khaliji (Gulf) officials and media, who have used and manipulated the statements of Iranian officials, like the comparison of the Houthis to Iran's Basij, from portraying the Houthis as Iranian agents or clients.

Just like how the Houthis are not Iranian proxies, there is no Shia alliance between Tehran and them in Yemen either. Talk that focuses on this simplistic sectarian narrative hides the political nature and motivations of the conflict in Yemen and insultingly obfuscates the struggle of the Houthis against repression. Until the 1970s the House of Saud had actually been a major supporter of the royalist factions in Yemen, which were predominately Shiite Muslims.

Moreover, the Shiite Muslims in Yemen are not Jaffaris (Twelvers) like the majority of Shia Muslims in Iran, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Persian Gulf region. Aside from pockets of Ismaili Shiites – which can arguably be called Seveners – in the governorates of Saada, Hajja, Amran, Al-Mahwit, Sana, Ibb, and Al-Jawf most the Shia Muslims in Yemen are Zaidis/Zaydis. The Ismailis in Yemen are mostly members of the Dawoodi (Davidian) and Sulaimani (Solomonian) sects of Mustali Ismailism that moved away from the larger Nizari Ismailis.

The US and Saudi hostility towards the Houthi movement is what has inadvertently made the Houthis pragmatically turn to Iran for help as a counterbalance. In the words of the *Wall Street Journal*, «Houthi militants controlling Yemen's capital are trying to build ties with Iran, Russia and China to offset Western and Saudi support for the

country's ousted president.» «The Houthis' interim government has sent delegations to Iran in search of fuel supplies and to Russia to look for investment in energy projects, according to two senior Houthi officials. Another delegation is planning to visit China in the coming weeks, they said», the *Wall Street Journal* also reported on March 6.

As a result of the Houthi movement's reaching out, Iran and Yemen announced that daily flights would take place between Tehran and Sana on March 2. This is an important lifeline of support for the Houthi movement.

The Sectarian Narrative and Sectarian Card

The instability in Yemen is being caused not by Iran or the Houthis, but by US and Saudi interference in Yemen — from Saudi Arabia's 2009 invasion to US drone attacks — and the decades of support that Saudi Arabia has provided for authoritarian and unpopular rule in Yemen.

Yemen is not an inherently divided country. Aside from the nurturing of Al-Qaeda by Saudi Arabia and the US, there is no real Shia-Sunni split or tensions. To pre-empt Yemen from being independent, the Saudis and US have supported sectarianism with the hope of creating a Shia-Sunni divide in Yemen.

Unlike the false narrative, Iran's alliances in the Middle East are actually not sectarian. All of Tehran's Palestinian allies are predominately Sunni Muslims while in Iraq and Syria, aside from the governments, Iran supports a cross-section of ethnic and faith groups that include non-Arabs and Christians. This includes the predominately Sunni Muslim Syrian and Iraqi Kurds and the Assyrian Sutoro wing of the Syriac Union Party (SUP) in Syria. In Lebanon, aside from Hezbollah, the Iranians are also allied to Sunni Muslim, Druze, and Christian parties, including Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement—which is the largest Christian party in Lebanon.

If anyone is engaged in sectarianism as a policy, it is the US and its Arab petro-sheikhdom allies. Both the US and Saudi Arabia had engaged the Houthis earlier and used them against the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen. Additionally, during the Cold War both Washington and the House of Saud tried to use the Yemeni Shiites against the republicans in North Yemen and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south. It is when the Houthi movement demonstrated that it was not going to be a client to Washington or Riyadh, that the US and Saudi Arabia became hostile towards it.

Preparing the Invasion of Yemen

On 20 March, suicide bombers attacked the Al-Badr and Al-Hashoosh mosques during asr salat (afternoon prayers). Over three hundred people were killed. Abdul Malik Al-Houthi accused the US and Israel of supporting the terrorist attacks and both the ISIL/ISIS/Daesh and Al-Qaeda in Yemen. Saudi Arabia was also blamed.

While there was silence in Morocco, Jordan, and the Arab petro-sheikhdoms, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Marziyeh Afkham condemned the terrorist attacks in Yemen. In one way or another, Syria, Iraq, Russia, and China all condemned the terrorist attacks in Yemen too. To show Tehran's support for Yemen, two Iranian cargo planes with humanitarian aid were sent to Yemen and the Iranian Red Crescent Society flew over fifty Yemenis victims of the terrorist attacks to hospitals inside Iran for medical treatment.

The House of Saud's Failure in Yemen

The Houthis movement is the result of Saudi Arabia's policies in Yemen and its support for authoritarian rule. In this regard, the Houthis are a reaction to Saudi brutality and the House of Saud's support for Yemeni authoritarianism. They emerged as part of a rebellion that was led by Hussein Badreddin Al-Houthi in 2004 against the Yemenite government.

The Yemeni and Saudi regimes falsely claimed that the Houthis wanted to establish a Zaidi imamate in Arabia as a means of demonizing the movement. This, however, failed to stop them from getting stronger. The Yemeni military could not handle them in 2009, which resulted in a Saudi intervention, called Operation Scorched Earth, being launched on August 11, 2009.

Saudi Arabia failed to defeat the Houthis when it sent its military into Yemen to fight them in 2009 and 2010. It has failed to force Yemen and the Houthi movement to kneel in obedience. When it demanded that the Houthis and Yemeni transitional government [play to the Saudi tune and go to Riyadh for negotiations](#), it was flatly rejected by

the Houthis and Yemen's Revolutionary Committees, because the negotiations and any Saudi-supported power sharing scheme would really sideline the Houthis and other political forces in Yemen. This is why the Popular Forces Union, Al-Hadi's own General People's Congress, and the Baath Party of Yemen have all supported the Houthi position against Saudi Arabia.



Dividing Yemen?

Yemen has seen numerous insurrections, military intervention by the US and Saudi Arabia, and a separatist movement strengthen in its southern governorates. Yemen's military has become fragmented and tribal tensions exist. There has been increasing talk about it becoming an Arab failed state.

In 2013, the *New York Times* proposed that Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen be split. In the case of Yemen, the proposition was that it be divided into two again. *The New York Times* said that this could or would happen following a potential referendum in the southern governorates. *The New York Times* also proposed that «all or part of South Yemen could then become part of Saudi Arabia. Nearly all Saudi commerce is via sea, and direct access to the Arabian Sea would diminish dependence on the Persian Gulf — and fears of Iran's ability to cut off the Strait of Hormuz».

Saudi Arabia and Al-Hadi are now courting the southern separatists in Yemen, which have the support of about one-tenth of the population. The next option for the US and Saudi Arabia may be to divide Yemen as a means of mitigating the strategic shift from a Houthi victory. This would ensure that Saudi Arabia and the GCC have a southern transit point to the Indian Ocean and that the US would maintain a foothold in the Gulf of Aden.

