

ISSUE BRIEF

MANAGING THE WAR IN YEMEN: DIPLOMATIC OPPORTUNITIES IN THE MAYHEM

Thanassis Cambanis | June 16, 2015

The war unfolding in Yemen has created a humanitarian and political catastrophe.¹ Since Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen's civil war at the end of March, the conflict has spiraled into an open, multiplayer regional war that has killed more than 2,000 people. For long stretches, Yemen's seaports have been blockaded, threatening the food supply of an estimated half of the population of 24 million. Meanwhile, the number of displaced has lurched upward to 1 million.²

The conflict in Yemen marks yet another unfortunate escalation in the region that will exacerbate security problems and political divisions. This time around, Arab governments and the United States should do everything they can to calm the conflict before it becomes another intractable killing field. Washington already recognized Yemen's strategic importance and for years has targeted terrorist operatives there with drone strikes. Now, the United States and its allies have the opportunity to learn from recent missteps in the

region and take advantage of the halting negotiations that opened recently in Geneva between the warring parties.³

The next few months offer a narrow window to prioritize diplomacy over military action in a bid to shift worsening dynamics across the Middle East. Regional governments and multilateral organizations ought to take every conceivable diplomatic step available today, even in the face of likely failure or obstruction, to address the Yemen crisis. Otherwise, it could quickly turn into another Syria, an intractable, grinding conflict that destroys one nation, while implicating a raft of others in a conflict that has no good possible outcomes.

This brief will assess the interests of outside powers that are playing a significant role in the Yemeni civil war and try to identify points of entry for diplomacy and de-escalation, with the long-term goal of creating new forums for dialogue between Saudi Arabia, Iran and

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other governments. The riskier internationalized phase of the war in Yemen is only three months old, and it has dragged in many key players in the region, including the United States. Military action is unlikely to resolve the conflict there, but an effective political process—which depends on international support—might reverse a dangerous escalation.

A Complex Conflict—and Its Consequences

In Yemen today, two amorphous and loosely allied coalitions are battling each other, with one roughly grouped behind Saudi Arabia and the other behind Iran. The dynamics and identities of these groupings are fluid and malleable. And as with the three other hot wars currently being fought in the Arab world—in Syria, Iraq, and Libya—the Yemen conflict is marked by a considerable degree of external interference. The stakes are high for the foreign interventionists: Saudi Arabia and its allies believe their stance in Yemen denotes a line of departure in a belated, but essential, campaign to check Iran's influence, while Iran sees Yemen as yet another battleground on which it can pressure its regional rivals while maintaining a plausibly deniable degree of involvement.^{4,5}

Foreign support has emboldened militias on both sides of the conflict, and almost all sides are already pursuing military options.⁶ While Yemen's competing factions fight, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been entirely spared foreign military strikes and is enjoying renewed latitude to operate.⁷

The Yemen crisis poses many dangers. The most obvious lie in Yemen itself, where starvation could become endemic and an avoidable escalation of civil war could lead to a mass humanitarian tragedy. Security blowback is an equally intense strategic concern. AQAP has been one of the most active groups plotting international terrorist attacks, including

against the United States. The disruption of U.S.-allied counterterrorism efforts in Yemen, and now the collapse of any central state authority, directly empower AQAP and increase the threat to the United States.⁸ The coalition led by the Houthis, a group with a distinct tribal and sectarian identity inside Yemen, which is currently supported by Iran and by deposed president Ali Abdullah Saleh, has grievances mostly rooted in the local sharing of power and resources.⁹ It is impossible to assess whether Iran views the interests of the Houthi alliance as close to Iran's core interests, or whether it tactically views the Houthis as another chit to deploy in a region-wide strategy that seeks to maximize Iranian footholds that can be used to project power or can be traded away in negotiations.

The Yemen war also has clear ramifications for its direct neighbors. Rightly or wrongly, Saudi Arabia always has considered Yemen a core national security interest,¹⁰ often trying to manage Yemen's affairs as if it were another Saudi province. The tightly intertwined business elites of the two countries¹¹ and a hard-to-police shared border¹² make it hard for Riyadh to ignore developments to the south. Since March of this year, Saudi Arabia, acting out of genuine fear of Iran's expanding influence, has embarked on a coalition air war that has no discernible end game.¹³ While Saudi perceptions might be exaggerated, developments in Yemen are indeed linked to Iranian efforts to deepen their partnership with the Houthis. Critics paint the Saudi intervention as impulsive and slipshod and point out that King Salman could not persuade long-time Saudi beneficiaries such as Pakistan and Egypt to contribute troops for a potential ground operation.¹⁴ But Saudi Arabia's concerns are real, and they cannot be wished away by governments that do not share them. Any broader strategic rapprochement in the region will require a clear understanding of the concerns of the Arabian Peninsula monarchies and measures to restore their sense of security and confidence.

Doubtless, the humanitarian emergency in Yemen will strain an already bad security climate. But it also provides an opportunity to engage the full array of problematic and recalcitrant regional governments with an eye toward assuaging their insecurities and creating diplomatic avenues through which they can explore more enduring fixes to regional problems. The current historical moment, while high risk, offers an opportunity for outside powers to deploy diplomatic influence in a concerted and sustained manner. It is worthwhile in its own right to try to limit the war in Yemen and to calm tensions between the complex web of combatants. But equally importantly, any well-designed initiative—even one that fails—could amount to a major accomplishment if it began to fill the void of regional mechanisms through which rival states can directly negotiate.

What would such an initiative look like, and why should there be any hope that it will work any better than the plethora of failed diplomatic initiatives around the Syrian civil war?

Formulating a Response

The cascade of events that escalated the civil war in Yemen signals a repositioning by key regional powers. Indeed the conflict brings into sharp relief some of the perceived and actual interests at stake for key players, including the Sunni Arab monarchies in the Arabian Gulf, the rulers of Iran, and outside guarantors like Russia and the United States. But this volatile and vulnerable period has an upside: by laying bare some of the fears and ambitions of key regional actors, the turmoil invites governments with the potential for good offices to organize several different diplomatic initiatives. At worst, they will amount to a little more talk in a region that does not experience enough, at least between adversaries. At best, multilateral and bilateral diplomatic initiatives can serve as life-saving palliatives

for the immediate catastrophe in Yemen and also potentially as vehicles to curtail the conflict and begin a long process (with admittedly long odds) of creating a nonmilitary forum to resolve regional tensions.

Absent a sharp change of direction soon, the war in Yemen risks following the same course as Syria's: devolving into an unwinnable and destabilizing stalemate, shredding national well-being for Yemen and prestige for outsiders who thought they could determine the conflict's course.¹⁵ Because the regional external stakeholders in the Yemen war are concurrently implicated in Syria's, it is worth trying to persuade them to change course in Yemen before it is too late. Paradoxically, some of the same players that have been ineffective or malignant in Syria could play a positive role in calming tensions in Yemen, perhaps because their own prestige is not yet on the line. The United States, Russia, the United Arab Emirates and the United Nations are obvious candidates to serve as early diplomatic brokers.

Existing diplomatic outreach has reaped some benefits. The UN appointed a new envoy on April 25 and helped negotiate a humanitarian ceasefire in May.¹⁶ The United States government has met with both sides of the conflict inside Yemen, and it has been adept at simultaneously managing multiple aspects of the diplomatic crisis. The talks in Geneva that begin on June 14 hold some basic promise but fail to include all the necessary actors.¹⁷ A concerted diplomatic push could be catalyzed by comparatively level-headed players, such as the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and the United Nations, and could make use of problematic but potentially useful forums such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Arab League. The aim would be to begin a diplomatic process that would include, even at a remove, both Saudi Arabia and Iran, and which would have at least a prospect of serving as

an avenue to address the bedrock security concerns undermining regional security and driving the Yemen war. Any diplomatic effort to reduce tension between those two nations must take into account their stakes throughout the region.

Iran

Iran is enjoying a moment of expanding regional influence, but one that it perceives as under constant threat. It has made headway in negotiating a nuclear framework agreement with the United States and Europe, but it has suffered extensive economic isolation under sanctions.¹⁸ Iran has outsized influence over Iraq's government, but that government has porous control over its own territory and can barely maintain a fiction of national sovereignty over Kurdish and Sunni areas.

The Syrian regime has been a tight client of Iran, but at great cost to Tehran—perhaps as much as \$60 billion in financial support and a hard-to-measure, but deep, commitment of military and political resources.¹⁹ Iran and its partner, Hezbollah, have kept the Syrian regime afloat, but they have found the Syrian sponsees brittle and unresponsive to the political requests of their paymasters, who have unsuccessfully counseled the regime to experiment with political conciliation to end the civil war. Meanwhile, the ISIS proto-state in Iraq and Syria entails a direct and violent challenge to Iranian designs, interests, and legitimacy in the Arab and Islamic world.

Engaging Iran on the issue of Yemen while all these factors are in play could yield multiple benefits. Internal competition inside Iran between the military-revolutionary guard complex and the clerical-merchant elite raises the possibility of exploitable differences of opinion within the Iranian government. Yemen talks might also be an avenue to gauge whether Iran has changed its position on other issues in the wake of the nuclear framework accord negotiations. It is also

possible that Iran does not see Yemen as a core interest and might even desire a de-escalation there, even as it appears to ramp up its military commitment in Syria. All these factors suggest that, while Iran seems ascendant, its concerns and internal dynamics open the possibility for a wider spectrum of diplomatic engagement.²⁰

Yemen talks allow for a narrow focus, but all the players are aware of the wider context. Iran and the United States are on the verge of a major shift as a result of the nuclear negotiations. Arab governments are nervous that Washington will tilt away from them and toward Iran. It is important to manage the exaggerated fears and expectations; any U.S. shift on Iran is likely to be incremental, and a diplomatic process can help calm insecurities that can produce destabilizing violence like the war in Yemen. There is also an economic component to discussions with Iran that could provide significant leverage to increase security. If and when sanctions on Iran are loosened, the Western sponsors of the nuclear talks could wisely direct a sizable share of their proceeds from the resulting economic boom to the very same Sunni Arab countries most worried about Iran. If Arabian Peninsula economies profit from Iran's opening—through trade, the funneling of Western investment via Arab entrepôts in the Gulf, or even through direct investments of their own—the long-term prospects for peace and stability increase.²¹

The mechanics of such an economic windfall might be complicated. New private investment in Iran will not be driven by the diplomatic priorities of Western governments. But it is very possible that some of the biggest new, or renewed, foreign economic partnerships with Iran will come from companies that are traditional partners of government policy, like U.S. defense contractors and engineering conglomerates or European chemical and automobile manufacturers.²² The goal for diplomats would be to encourage investors to allow some of the post-sanctions Iran bonanza to

pass through the Arab world, perhaps through creative partnerships between Western corporations and financial and technical partners in the Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. An imperfect but useful analogy can be found in Iraq's Kurdish north, where the Kurdistan Regional Government and its predecessors opened the borders to massive, profitable Turkish investments. The Turkish stake (and profits) in Kurdish Iraq have created enduring shared interests and reduced long-running tensions, despite real political disagreements.²³

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia in March used the Arab League to launch its entrance into the Yemen war, and it has tried to rally pan-Arab support against what it describes as foreign Iranian aggression.²⁴ The rhetoric of the March summit had overtones of Sunni Arab Nationalist grievance against a Shia and Persian-inflected conspiracy.²⁵ There were also overt notes of triumphalist return of the established conservative political order after a period of experimentation ushered in by the period of popular uprisings.

Any sense of a restoration, or a new Pax Arabicus, is premature, however, and will quickly fade. Saudi Arabia already is seeing the difficulty of imposing a clean solution on Yemen and is reportedly considering a partition of the country.²⁶ Riyadh is also well aware of the intractability of the Syria conflict, and it has begun to see the drawbacks of the ally it enlisted by helping install Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as Egypt's ruler.

King Salman is experienced, but he is new in his role as king and is heavily reliant on his approximately thirty-year-old son to shape policy.²⁷ Transition periods allow for flux and also for adaptation. If Salman can be persuaded that it will protect Saudi's core security interests, he could probably accept some shifts in policy on Yemen, or perhaps even on the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

The new administration in Saudi Arabia is experimenting with a new approach to foreign policy. It is a ripe moment to establish new mechanisms with Saudi Arabia because the kingdom's top officials, and its policy orientations, are changing. King Salman has openly reconsidered the kingdom's outright hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood;²⁸ he has taken a step back from his predecessor's tight embrace of the dictator Saudi helped install in Egypt;²⁹ he has taken new initiative to invigorate Sunni rebels in Syria,³⁰ and he has suggested in a range of leaks and public statements that Riyadh is willing to strike out on a policy course independent from Washington.³¹ However, that last position might be bluster, since Saudi and the United States have close, intertwined policy interests, including limiting the reach of Al Qaeda, maintaining a free flow of oil to global energy markets, and trying to check Iranian regional hegemony. Saudi Arabia depends on the U.S. security umbrella, and the United States depends on Saudi's willingness to adjust the amount of oil it pumps to maintain world supplies in the face of geopolitical disruptions caused by events like the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the embargo on Iranian oil, and the sporadic disruption of Libyan oil supplies since 2011. There is not likely to be a divorce, but Saudi Arabia is looking for supplementary partners and has made clear that it feels the U.S. is inadequately committed to Arab regional security.³² Regional discussions might offer an opportunity for Washington to emphasize its long-term investments in the region and its commitment to stability.

A (Limited) U.S. Role

Somewhat by accident, the United States has found itself in a position where it can negotiate along a complimentary line of diplomatic inducements. And Washington has taken this opportunity with more alacrity than it has at other junctures since the Arab uprisings began.

While finalizing the nuclear framework agreement with Iran, the United States simultaneously signed on to an explicitly anti-Iran war in Yemen³³ and withheld military support in Iraq until Iran-backed militias took a backseat in the battle for Tikrit.³⁴ The United States showed that it could keep its eyes on many parts of the map at the same time and that it would play hardball with Iran on other issues, even while making compromises in the interest of limiting its nuclear program.

The United States can do the same with its allies as well. It can assist the Saudi campaign in Yemen in the short-term, while counseling the development of an exit strategy. It can also volunteer to coordinate complementary, if not identical, positions for Egypt, Iran, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Riyadh is unlikely to embrace a U.S.-Iran nuclear deal, but it might effectively shelf its opposition in exchange for a symbolic increase in U.S. security guarantees for the Arabian Peninsula.

Creative diplomacy can explore other pathways to reassure allies and convince them to accept otherwise unpalatable tradeoffs. An example of the kind of innovative, small-scale problem solving that could evolve in the framework of regional talks involves nuclear power. Arab states are dissatisfied that they lack nuclear programs while Israel maintains an undeclared nuclear arsenal and Iran appears to be on the verge of winning international approval for a robust research program that will leave it only a few steps away from a weapons program. The United States could look for ways to alleviate this dissatisfaction, for example by taking the lead in sponsoring nuclear power plants in the Gulf and its Arab allies, such as Egypt and Jordan. U.S. companies have already been making inroads—Westinghouse is part of the coalition that is currently building nuclear reactors in the United Arab Emirates. Official backing behind such a strategy, however, would also signal commitment and perhaps act as a salve for local energy problems and symbolic compensation for a

perceived technology and support gap. Nuclear power is just one example of a secondary area that could be channeled in the Yemen talks to prompt progress on a wider scale.

Enabling Regional Dialogue

At the moment, there is no forum in which Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia regularly sit together to air regional concerns. Nor is there a meaningful forum where the full range of regional actors who actually affect developments on the ground regularly meet. If regional dialogue is to have a place in cooling down Yemen—as well as the other wars in the Arab world at the moment—such a forum would have to include the Arab States, Iran, Turkey, and probably Russia, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations. The path to such a structure is long and would probably have to begin piecemeal, but a genuine Yemen contact group would be a fine place to start.

The crisis in Yemen is in early enough stages to enjoy the potential for amelioration. Furthermore, all the key players have in front of them Libya and Syria, vivid examples of what happens in an entrenched war zone in which the combatants and sponsors refuse to engage in diplomacy. The first step would require the United States and Russia to set an example and show that, even while confronting one another over the crisis in Ukraine, they can agree to support a dialogue, even a tense one, over a second issue, in this case Yemen. The United Nations talks in Geneva could be expanded upon, or even moved to a neutral location closer to the region like Nairobi, Athens, or Istanbul. The first agenda could focus simply on humanitarian relief and access, but all players would have to be invited, including Iran.

Hopes for a diplomatic initiative on Yemen should be muted. The habits of bluster, confrontation, and proxy warfare are deeply engrained, and normalized relations

have eluded key Middle East actors for nearly half a century. The United States has contributed to this culture by its support for an often moribund Israel-Palestine negotiating framework and by regularly backing diplomatic initiatives, like the Geneva process on Syria, that are meaningless from the start because they exclude key actors in the conflict.

In the event of a strong push from international and regional diplomats, key actors, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, might respond with recalcitrance or even outright rejectionism. But if the initial agenda focuses on humanitarian matters and battlefield access for neutral parties, and possibly on communications channels for battlefield deconfliction that could prove useful to all parties, it will be easier over time to persuade Tehran and Riyadh to take part.

The key is to attract the full range of players. The initial agenda can revolve around comparatively easy matters, such as opening ports to more regular food deliveries, increasing battlefield access for internationally recognized humanitarian aid workers, and the creation of some kind of emergency communications channel to reduce the risk of an unintentional international escalation of the war. Little is lost if the entire process amounts to a failed diplomatic initiative. Any resulting political embarrassment for supporting governments can be managed. The conflict in Yemen, however, is too important to simply be allowed to unfold at the mercies of regional powers acting in the grip of uncertainty and perceived threat. And a new diplomatic approach carries the possibility, however slim, of creating a useful new forum where adversaries can talk to each other in a conflict-ridden region that sorely lacks one.

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