



Saudi Arabia and America Are Responsible for the ‘Houthi Threat’ in Yemen

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America’s post-9/11 wars have had disastrous consequences. They have been a geopolitical bust, fragmenting rather than eliminating terrorist groups, enhancing Iran’s influence, and destabilizing the Middle East. The humanitarian consequences have been even worse: thousands of Americans killed, tens of thousands wounded, hundreds of thousands of civilians killed, millions of people displaced, al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State loosed, and entire nations ravaged.

Perhaps the most scandalous war is Yemen. This tragic country, which started as two states, has been at war with itself for most of six decades. Both Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in its early years. More recently, the Saudi royals foisted their radically fundamentalist Wahhabism on Yemenis. In 2014 the latest round of never-ending strife in what even then was one of the world’s poorest nations led to the ouster of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. His predecessor, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled for 1990 until 2012, when he was ousted and succeeded by Hadi, joined with the Houthi movement, which a decade before had risen against the Saleh government, to seize power.

Yemen’s political pirouettes often have been dizzying, and the KSA was not threatened. The Saudis had worked with Saleh before. The Houthis, named after the founder of the movement Ansar Allah ("Supporters of God"), while a form of Shia, were independent of Iran and made their own decisions, including marching on the capital of Sanaa, against Tehran’s advice, and ousting Hadi.

However, the spoiled Saudis felt entitled to have "their" man in Sanaa and created a "coalition" with United Arab Emirates; Kuwait, unwilling to buck its powerful royal neighbor; Qatar, not yet treated as an enemy; and an amalgam of the bought and paid for, most notably Sudan, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt. This assemblage then attacked the Houthi-dominated Yemeni government and expected an easy victory within weeks.

Five and a half years later the Saudi royals have learned that money cannot buy everything. The UAE has largely abandoned the war after supporting Yemeni separatists who opposed Hadi as well as the Houthis, Kuwait has sought to promote a negotiated settlement, Qatar was expelled by the Saudis and Emiratis, and post-revolutionary Sudan has withdrawn its forces. Now the war

is almost entirely the Kingdom's problem – backed, shockingly, by the U.S., which is helping the KSA slaughter Yemeni civilians.

Arguments for American involvement are risible. Yemen does not matter to the US, other than the presence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, thought to be the most dangerous national affiliate. The Houthis are focused inward, with no interest in normal times of interdicting oil traffic or threatening Saudi Arabia. They have no desire to be pawns of Iran or otherwise surrender their independence, which they are defending against Riyadh.

The Saudi royals' desire for a puppet regime is unsurprising: after all, the KSA expects foreigners to do all the hard work, including Americans to act as the royals' Praetorian Guard. However, contrary to President Trump's view – his lips appear to be permanently attached to the derriere of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman – Washington has no reason to turn the Saudis into defense dependents. There certainly is no reason to let Riyadh set American Middle Eastern policy.

However, the Obama administration, apparently desperate to placate the Kingdom after striking the nuclear deal with Iran, signed onto Riyadh's dirty war. The US provided aircraft and bombs. Serviced the planes. Provided intelligence for targeting. And initially refueled Saudi aircraft as well. Alas, it turns out that the Saudis pilots were good at little more than bombing weddings, funerals, school buses, apartments, and other civilian targets, killing thousands of Yemenis. The destruction of civilian infrastructure and naval blockade resulted in tens of thousands of additional civilian deaths, mass starvation, and health care crises, including a massive cholera epidemic. Washington has made the American people accomplices in multiple war crimes.

Perhaps the most ironic impact of the coalition's aggressive war was to make the Houthis dependent on Iran. Before 2011 the connection was limited. A new Rand Corporation study found: "While there is no consensus on the extent to which Iran provided assistance to the Houthis prior to 2011, such support was likely limited to low-cost, low-risk measures that enhanced Iranian access and intelligence."

However, when attacked by the Saudis, who in recent years have had the world's third largest military budget, after only the US and China, and UAE, called "little Sparta" by American officials, backed by the US, the Houthis had little choice but to look to Tehran for assistance. The Rand study points to the Saudi invasion as the event which pushed the Iranians and Houthis closer together: "Since 2015, Iran has dramatically increased its investment in the Houthi movement, raising speculation that the Houthis will evolve into another regional proxy that serves to protect and promote Iranian interests."

Nevertheless, the relationship between Iran and the Houthi Yemenis was never an easy one. Observed Rand: "There are natural impediments to the Houthi-Iran partnership, such as differences in the form of Shiism that they practice. Prior to 2014, Iran explored relationships with other potential partners, such as the southern secessionist movement, so as to diversify its portfolio of proxy reports."

Although the Houthis became the only viable option for Tehran, the movement has retained its independence. Explained Rand: "The Houthis are not solely dependent on Iranian support, having created their own sources of revenue by taxing shipments through the Yemeni city of Al-Hudaydah's port, rent extraction, and smuggling activities. These independent revenue streams provide the Houthis with some degree of leverage or at least autonomy when accepting Iranian offers of support. More important, the interests and goals of Houthi and Iranian leadership do not necessarily align on all issues. Although the two share a common enemy (the Saudis), the Houthis have traditionally focused on their domestic interests. Compared with Iran's other proxies, the Houthis are less inclined to export revolutionary ideology. Similarly, for all of Iran's rhetoric supporting marginalized groups, it remains a pragmatic self-interested state. This relationship remains largely transactional."

Nevertheless, the war became the great opportunity for cooperation between Iranians and Houthis. Indeed, the Saudis and Emiratis handed Iran the perfect chance to bleed them in a losing war. Reported Rand: "The cost and risk of physical supply are low for Iran so long as the Houthis can maintain good relations with the tribes and other actors along the resupply line to Oman – relations that are likely bought – and hold territory along the coast."

Where Iranian-Houthi cooperation goes from here depends critically on the outcome of the war. UAE has largely bowed out. The Saudis appear to want a deal. The Trump administration continues its role as the royals' handmaiden, sacrificing US interests for Saudi desires. But even the administration's slavish devotion to Mohammed bin Salman might not be enough to keep him fighting what appears to be a hopeless war.

The most important long-term impact of the U.S.-backed war against Yemen might be to create a closer Iranian-Houthi relationship. Observed Rand: "At the beginning of the war, it seemed unlikely that the Houthis could ever become Hizballah 2.0; the prospects that Iran could develop them into a real proxy seemed small. But after nearly three years of war, this outcome appears far more likely than it once did. And policymakers would be wise to note the history of Hizballah when evaluating the possible future of the Houthi-Iran relationship; Hizballah, too,

was once underestimated and has since grown from a proxy militia to become Iran's greatest partner."

If there is one common lesson to learn from the last two decades worth of endless wars it is the law of unintended consequences. Virtually nothing has worked out as it was supposed to. In the case of Yemen, Riyadh's brutal aggression to prevent the Iranian-backed Houthis from dominating Yemen may end up cementing a close Iranian-Houthi alliance that dominates Yemen. That is yet another reason for America to end its shameful participation in Riyadh's murderous war against its impoverished neighbor.

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