

PWP Conflict Studies

Foreign and Domestic Influences in the War in Yemen

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The Proxy Wars Project (PWP) aims to develop new insights for resolving the wars that beset the Arab world. While the conflicts in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq have internal roots, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others have all provided military and economic support to various belligerents. PWP Conflict Studies are papers written by recognized area experts that are designed to elucidate the complex relationship between internal proxies and external sponsors. PWP is jointly directed by Ariel Ahram (Virginia Tech) and Ranj Alaaldin (Brookings Doha Center) and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Cover illustration: A demonstrator raises a flag at a Houthi political rally outside of Sanaa, Yemen. Photo by Adam Baron.

Introduction

Foreign intervention is not new to Yemen. Nonetheless, the country's descent into civil war beginning in 2014 has proven the harbinger for unprecedented foreign intervention in the country. In September 2014 Iranian-aligned Houthi forces captured Sanaa, driving President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, who came to power as part of an internationally backed power transfer agreement in 2011, into exile. As the Houthis advanced southward, Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015, using their own militaries and backing Yemeni forces opposed to the Houthis. The continuing conflict has proven profoundly destructive. The best estimates hold that the conflict has caused more than fifty thousand battle deaths and tens of thousands of fatalities due to starvation and disease.¹ The Stockholm Agreement of December 2018 brought the possibility of progress on the political process, but a solution seems as far away as ever.

Yemen is arguably not a single war as much as it is a mosaic of interlinked conflicts. Just as the conflict defies easy descriptions, so do its actors. Yemen's conflict has its own internal logic. The frequent framings of Yemen as a proxy war may reflect the increasing role of external actors, but they often obscure as much as they elucidate. That said, the role of foreign actors—and its intersection with local Yemeni groups—is crucial for understanding the wider conflict.

Yemen's History of Foreign Intervention

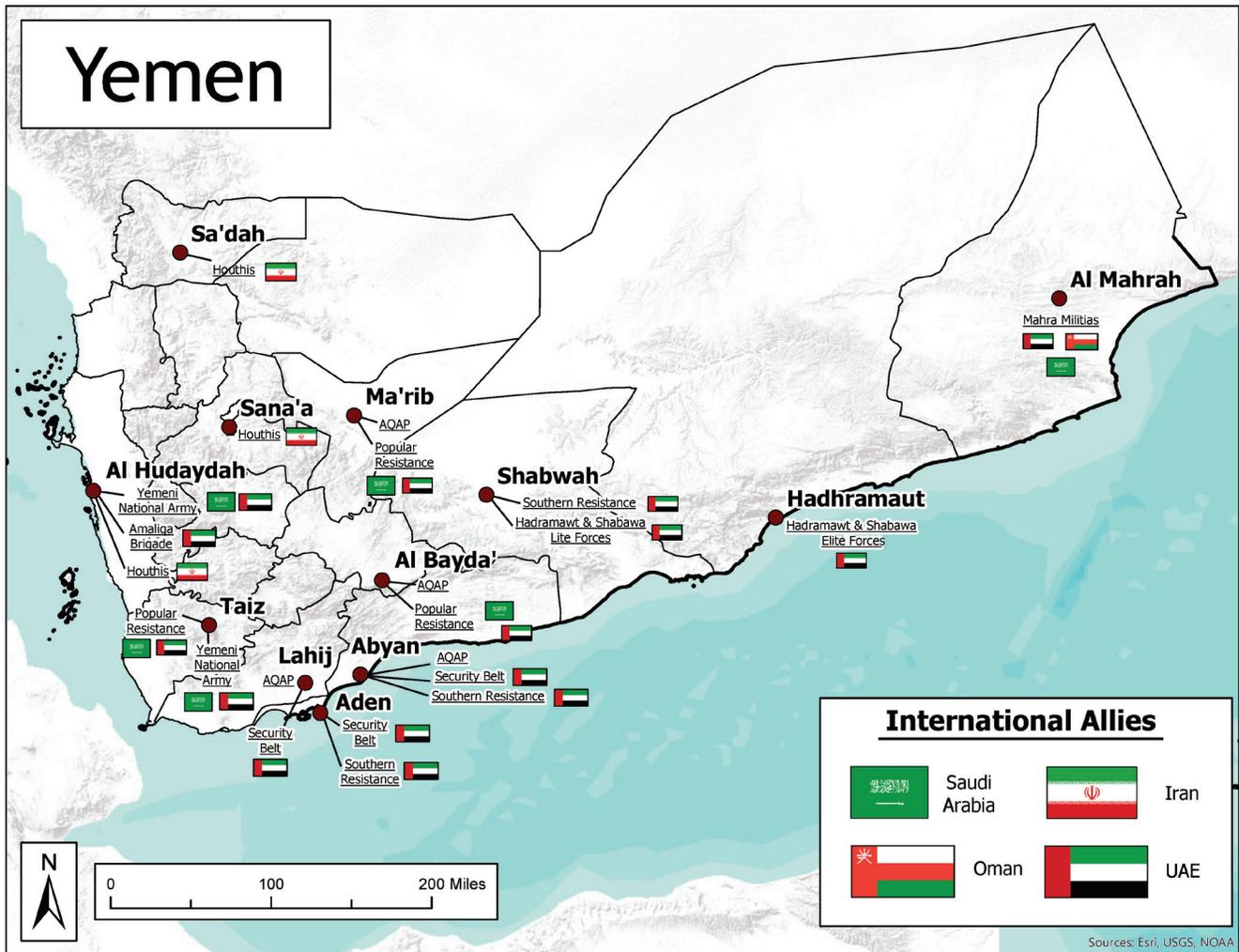
Foreign intervention and involvement shaped the modern history of Yemen. The Ottomans assumed control over Yemen in the seventeenth century, but they largely yielded power to Zaydi imams, leaders of a small Shi'a sect predominant in the northern highlands of Yemen. Southern and central Yemen were largely Shafei Sunni in creed. The British took over Aden and established effective suzerainty over the southern and eastern areas in the nineteenth century, establishing a protectorate driven by alliances between British officials and local partners pulled from the sultanates and sheikhdoms of the south. Yemen's September 26 Republican revolution saw the imam give way to the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), while the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) eventually arose in the wake of the British withdrawal from Aden in 1967.

The fates of both the YAR and the PDRY were similarly shaped by external forces. Soviet aid was essential to the PDRY and its Marxist regime. Yet the Soviets were often unwilling or unable to effectively reckon with the south's often contentious internal politics, most notably during the disastrous civil war of 1986.² The PDRY was also a staging ground for leftist insurgents that operated in the YAR and Oman.

Regional powers similarly shaped the emergence of the YAR. Egypt backed the republican revolutionaries who toppled the Zaydi imam. Saudi Arabia backed the royalists seeking to preserve the Zaydi imam. Although the republicans won the war, the Saudis continued to have substantial influence in the YAR, including providing tribal leaders direct financial support.³ Many Yemenis worked in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, intensifying preexisting cultural, economic, and political connections to Yemen. Ali Abdullah Saleh, president from 1978 to 2012, largely aligned himself with Saudi Arabia. He also capitalized on Cold War tensions before growing close to the United States after the collapse of the USSR.

Saudi Arabia's influence continued through the YAR-PDRY unification of 1990. Scions of key southern tribal families who fled to the Gulf States after the Marxist takeover returned from exile. This influence continued after Yemen's 1994 civil war, which saw Saleh's forces prevail and many of the ex-PDRY leaders arrested or driven into exile. The ensuing marginalization of southerners led eventually to the emergence of the Southern Movement in 2007, a protest movement started by disgruntled military veterans and pensioners that grew to advocate for autonomy if not outright secession from the north.⁴

Elsewhere in the country, the fall of the Zaydi imam allowed for the increasing influence of what many saw as foreign, Saudi-influenced ideology in Zaydi strongholds in the far north. Salafists and preachers sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood proselytized among Zaydis, who they often cast as heretical. Around the turn of the new millennium, the Shabab al-Mu'min (Believing Youth) movement emerged, casting itself as a vanguard of the preservation of a Zaydi identity against "foreign" and intolerant brands of Islam. One of the leaders of the movement was charismatic cleric and parliamentarian Hussein



al-Houthi. His name is often associated with the movement itself, which continued to grow after Houthi was killed in a government crackdown in 2004. With backing from the US and Saudi Arabia, Saleh launched a military campaign to suppress the Houthis, whom the Yemeni government and its regional allies frequently cast as Iranian proxies.⁵ With Saleh dominating Yemen's politics through his General People's Congress (GPC) party, the opposition moved to coalesce. The Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), the main opposition arm, was an ideologically diverse grouping that included the Muslim Brotherhood and tribal-backed Islam; leftist parties like the Yemeni Socialist Party, which predominated in the south; and primarily Zaydi parties like Hezb al-Haq.⁶

The 2011 Uprising and State Breakdown

As the Yemeni state weakened and space for political expression tentatively expanded in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, various regional powers

quickly moved in to take advantage. A UN-backed transitional period featuring an ambitious national dialogue conference aimed to rewrite a Yemeni social contract. But the process remained open to foreign influences. Qatar and, to a lesser extent, Turkey backed Sunni Islamist groups aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. Iran moved not only to strengthen ties to the Houthis but also to reach out to figures who felt marginalized in the transitional process, including disaffected leftists and some southerners. And, all the while, other Gulf States like Saudi Arabia and the UAE retained their traditional influence in the country.

The remnants of Saleh's GPC and the main opposition, JMP, dominated the transitional government. They retained close ties to Saudi Arabia, which provided financial backing to the transitional government. Southern secessionists and the Houthis largely agitated from the outside. On September 2014 Houthi fighters took over Sanaa, precipitating a crisis for the transitional govern-

ment. Tensions between Hadi and the Houthis eventually escalated, prompting them to put him under house arrest. Hadi eventually escaped, joining ministers who had also fled to Aden, which he declared the temporary capital, eventually fleeing to Riyadh as the Houthis continued to bear down on the city. The launch of Decisive Storm in March 2015 ushered in the most intensive and direct foreign intervention in Yemen since the 1960s.⁷

The Key Players

The Houthis

With the political opening of 2011, the Houthis gained the ability to operate openly in Sanaa and other areas of the country. Their political wing began to enter mainstream politics. Houthis sent delegates to the National Dialogue Conference. Even during this period of political negotiation, there were growing clashes as the Houthis consolidated their hold over the bulk of Saada and crept closer to Sanaa. Upon taking control of Sanaa in late 2014, the Houthis took over some state institutions and created new ones. The Houthis placed power in the hands of a “Supreme Revolutionary Council” made up of pro-Houthi figures from different societal components and led by veteran Houthi figures like Mohamed Ali al-Houthi. The senior leadership of the Houthi movement remains centered in the Houthi family itself, particularly Abdul-Malek al-Houthi. The Houthis subsumed some elements of the Yemeni army and maintained their own “Popular Committees” and irregular tribal forces. Most importantly, they made an alliance of convenience with the ousted Ali Abdullah Saleh and his GPC, which sought to regain power. The Houthi-Saleh alliance launched an open conflict with the internationally recognized government of Mansour Abd al-Hadi, the Southern Resistance, other resistance groups, and Salafi jihadi militias.

The Houthi-Saleh alliance collapsed in late 2017, erupting into days of fighting that ended with the death of Saleh himself. Some GPC figures remained aligned with the Houthis, including many of the technocratic figures associated with the bin Habor government and a significant portion of its Sanaa-based officials. Still, the split with Saleh opened up another conflict front.

The Houthis have long been viewed through the prism of their relationship with Iran. Western offi-

cial say that Iran has provided increasing military and financial aid to the Houthis since the start of Operation Decisive Storm, particularly since the collapse of the Houthi-Saleh alliance, claiming that several dozen Iranian advisors are on the ground in Yemen, in addition to a few hundred more from Lebanese Hezbollah.⁸ While some hard-line Iranian politicians have bragged about “controlling” Sanaa, Iranian officials have largely publicly denied having a command-and-control relationship with the Houthis. The Houthi leadership similarly insist that they take no directions from abroad and are an indigenously rooted Yemeni group. Beyond ideological affinity, the Houthi relationship with Iran is rooted in mutual convenience.

A portion of the Houthi leadership is based in Muscat, which has become a point of focus for diplomatic outreach to key international stakeholders. Despite deep distrust of Western actors, they have engaged in meetings with European, UN, and American diplomats, in addition to liaising with international aid organizations, the bulk of which continue to make their main offices in Sanaa.

The Yemeni National Army

Upon taking control of Sanaa, the Houthis immediately moved to purge their rivals from the chain of command in the Yemeni army. Many of Yemen’s key military leaders refused to submit to the Houthis and, in numerous cases, opted to continue the fight.

These anti-Houthi forces eventually reconstituted themselves in the Marib province, rebranding themselves “the National Army” under the leadership of then chief of staff Mohammed al-Maqdishi, who is now the acting defense minister. This force pulled in a grouping of different military leaders and units, including Hadi-aligned southerners and figures historically close to Islah. Some had fought against the Houthis since the early 2000s.

The YNA casts itself as the army of the Yemeni republic. Its mission is to restore Yemen’s internationally recognized government to full sovereignty. As president, Hadi is commander in chief and controls military appointments. Vice President Ali Mohsen and General Mohammed al-Maqdishi are among the most influential YNA commanders.

But the YNA is also a key element of the Saudi-led coalition and remains reliant on external support for its equipment, training, intelligence, and operations. The coalition maintains bases on Yemeni soil, where they provide direct coordination and supervision of ongoing military operations.

The Southern Resistance and the Southern Transitional Council

The Southern Resistance (SR) and Southern Transitional Council (STC) represent the coalescence of the military and political wings of a number of factions within the Southern Movement. The Southern Movement originated in the fallout of Yemen's unification and consists of holdovers from the military of the PDRY. Pensioners also launched a series of protests in 2007. The Southern Movement coalesced as an amorphous grouping of political factions aiming to restore autonomy to the formerly independent south. Initially, these groupings relied on the donations of private businessmen, including members of the diaspora based in the Gulf. Iran also provided support to some Southern Movement factions.

Southern secessionist fighters took up arms to repel the Houthis and their allies as they invaded the south in March of 2015. The Houthis tried to take over Aden and al-Dhale, historical strongholds of the southern separatist movement. The Saudis and later the UAE saw the separatists as suitable allies because of their common opposition to the Houthis and the Muslim Brotherhood. The leadership and rank and file of the secessionists viewed the UAE as politically and socially palatable allies, with many southerners feeling stronger kinship with Emiratis owing to shared religion and similar cultures.

Alongside the military arm of the SR is the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The STC provides a wider umbrella group to consolidate pro-secession forces. Former Aden governor and ex-PDRY officer Aiderous al-Zubaidi heads both groups.⁹ But the STC's components are far more diverse, including a variety of tribal figures, Salafi leaders, and former officials with little history of involvement with secessionist politics—most notably its deputy leader, Security Belt (see below) leader Hani bin Brayk.

The Popular Resistance

Local notables launched irregular forces to push back against the Houthis as the Yemeni army splintered in 2011 and Houthis expanded from the zone of control from the far north. They've been given significant support from the coalition and the internationally recognized government, particularly since the launch of Decisive Storm. They constitute a complementary partner to the YNA and other regular forces. The PR is a loose grouping of forces that share a common opposition to the Houthis, rather than a coherent outlook or ideology.

In the northern fronts in al-Jawf, Marib, Midi, and Damt, the resistance and standard army forces have largely coordinated operations. Many militia leaders have positive relations with local military leaders. Some militia leaders are former military officers. But the relationships have not always been easy or even peaceful. In the central city of Taiz, for example, ideological, divergent funding and strategic factors divide the resistance forces, fueling often fierce infighting.

The coalition offers money, equipment, and intelligence support to anti-Houthi resistance fighters. They also facilitate media platforms. But coalition support is not unconditional. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have pushed out some resistance leaders after they fell afoul of the coalition leaders because of corruption, military ineffectiveness, or neglect of their patron's political objectives.

The resistance militias are active in local governance. They often engage with international humanitarian actors, particularly the Red Cross and other INGOs, in conflict zones, often in an informal capacity. Some senior figures continue to maintain formal political portfolios alongside their roles in the resistance.

Hadramawt and Shabwa Elite Forces

The Hadramawt and Shabwa Elite Forces formed during the battle against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the coastal regions of Shabwa and Hadramawt. They include Yemeni army soldiers, local tribesmen, and returning Yemeni expatriates from the Gulf. The Elite Forces receive funding, training, and military support from the UAE.

The Security Belt

The Security Belt is a militia force operating in Lahj, Aden, and Abyan. Its leader, Hani bin Brayk, is deputy secretary of the STC. The Security Belt forces have come to serve as a key force for the UAE's campaign against the Houthis and AQAP in southwestern Yemen, particularly in the city of Aden.¹⁰

The Security Belt forces are dominated by Salafi fighters, though many recruits hail from tribal or nonideological backgrounds. Moreover, some Security Belt units have considerable autonomy and have been courted by key parties with adversarial relations to the Security Belt leadership.

The Amaliqa Brigade

Like the Security Belt, the Amaliqa brigade is an Emirati-backed, Salafist-led organization. Today the Amaliqa play a key role in the fight against the Houthis in Hudayda and the Red Sea coast. Most of the Amaliqa forces are from southwestern Yemen, particularly the Subayha tribe. While Salafis predominate, some of the rank and file include less ideologically motivated recruits. Even allies of the Amaliqa who share its antipathy toward the Houthis view the group with anxiety because of its leaders' hardline ideology.

Saleh Regime Remnants

As president for more than three decades, Ali Abdullah Saleh had political, tribal, and military levers to consolidate his hold on power. Even after Saleh formally handed over power in November 2011, his networks remained intact through branches of the military and the GPC. Saleh initially operated in an alliance of convenience with the Houthis to oppose the transitional government. The alliance broke down definitively at the end of December 2017. The Houthis purged Saleh's power structures from Sanaa and northern Yemen. Saleh was killed, and many of his key allies and family members were captured.

Tareq Mohamed Saleh, Saleh's nephew and the former head of the Presidential Guard, regrouped Saleh's network in Aden and shifted his focus to the fight for Hudayda, reactivating and building upon historical ties to Abu Dhabi and, in the aftermath, garnering significant military, financial, and logistical support from the Emiratis. This represented a return to form for the Saleh networks,

which had historically opposed the Houthis and maintained close ties to the Gulf. Tareq and other leaders of the Saleh network spend significant time in UAE-backed military bases and travel frequently to Abu Dhabi.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Ansar al-Sharia

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its affiliate Ansar al-Sharia are the paramount jihadi groups in Yemen. AQAP was formed out of a 2009 merger between Al Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni franchises.

AQAP capitalized on the chaos that ensued in the wake of the Houthis' takeover of Sanaa in 2014, seizing the southern port of Mukalla. AQAP and its allies also joined the fight against the Houthis. The UAE eventually helped stand up the Hadrami and Shabwani Elite Forces and the Security Belt to counter AQAP in the south. But AQAP continues to have a presence in many areas of the country, including Hadramawt, Marib, al-Bayda, Abyan, Lahj, and Shabwa.

The Islamic State

The Islamic State (IS) in Yemen numbers a mere few hundred fighters. Many were defectors from AQAP or returnees from Syria and Iraq. It is most active in the al-Bayda province, though it has been responsible for attacks in various areas of southern Yemen as well. Nearly every other faction in Yemen sees IS as an enemy, and it has not integrated itself into the fabric of Yemen like other groups.

Conclusion

Discourses on Yemen often seem to come in two forms. The first emphasizes the role of foreign powers, casting the conflict as a proxy war; the second highlights the local roots of the conflict while ignoring external interventions. But in many regards the key to understanding the Yemen conflict is to examine the intersection of regional and internal politics. Yemen has served as a virtual petri dish of foreign intervention. Any steps toward conflict resolution require stakeholders to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of proxy-sponsor relationships that will shape the country for decades to come.

Endnotes

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10. Personal Interviews.