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Source: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 6 (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2017), pp. 93-101

Published by: Council on Foreign Relations

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44823824>

Accessed: 01-04-2022 19:17 UTC

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Yemen's Humanitarian Nightmare

The Real Roots of the Conflict

Asher Orkaby

On February 20, 2015, as the residents of Sanaa prepared for evening prayers, Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi put on a woman's *niqab* and slipped out the back door of his official residence, where a car was waiting for him. For a month, Houthi rebels, who had taken Sanaa in late 2014, had been holding him under house arrest. By the time the guards noticed that he was gone, Hadi had reached the relative safety of the southern port of Aden. A month later, as Houthi forces advanced south, he fled again, this time to Riyadh, where he called on Saudi Arabia to intervene in Yemen's civil war.

Within days, a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states began a campaign of air strikes against Houthi targets that rapidly became a siege of the entire country. Cut off from imports, and under a ceaseless Saudi bombardment, Yemen has turned into one of the worst humanitarian crises of modern times. Seven million Yemenis live in areas that are close to famine, nearly two million children are suffering from acute malnutrition, and an outbreak of cholera has infected over 600,000 people.

The conflict in Yemen is often described as an outgrowth of the Shiite-Sunni rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as Iran has supplied weapons and military advisers to the Houthis. But this misunderstands both the origins of the war and the reason why Saudi Arabia intervened. The war is not about regional interests; it is a continuation of a long-standing conflict between the Yemeni government and marginalized northern tribes, which escalated thanks to a gradual decline in the legitimacy and competence of the central government

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in Sanaa. And Saudi Arabia intervened not to counter Iranian expansionism but to secure its southern border against the Houthi threat. As a result, only an internal Yemeni political settlement can end the war, although Saudi Arabia, the United States, and international humanitarian organizations can do much to improve the situation in the meantime.

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

The modern state of Yemen was born in 1962, when revolutionaries, many of whom had absorbed contemporary ideas of nationalism at foreign universities, deposed Imam Muhammad al-Badr and created the Yemen Arab Republic, or North Yemen. For the next 40 years, the foreign-educated elite who had sparked the revolution occupied some of the most important positions in the new republic, serving as presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers, and chief executives. They based their legitimacy on the roles they had played during the revolution and its aftermath, achieving an almost mythic status in the national imagination. The revolution also transformed the rest of Yemeni society. It empowered Yemen's growing urban population and ended the dominance of those families—known as “sayyids”—who could trace their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad. And it sent Yemen's northern tribes, which had supported the deposed Badr, into the political wilderness. Shut off from government funding, their region stagnated and their problems festered.

After North and South Yemen unified, in 1990, discrimination against the northern tribes gave rise to a protest movement in the north, led in part by the Houthi family, one of the most prominent sayyid dynasties in northern Yemen. Then, in 2004, during early clashes between northern tribes and the government, the Yemeni military killed Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, one of the leaders of the movement. His death marked the beginning of the northern tribes' armed insurgency and gave the rebels their name. For the next seven years, sporadic fighting continued, with neither side gaining a meaningful advantage.

At the same time as the government was fighting the Houthis in the north, its authority in the rest of the country was fading. The greatest challenge for a revolutionary state is maintaining its legitimacy after the founders have died, and half a century after the revolution, few of Yemen's original leaders remained. In June 2011, Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani, one



Critical condition: at a hospital in Al Hudaydah, Yemen, June 2017

of the last of the revolutionary generation, was mortally wounded in an assassination attempt on the country's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, during popular protests that had paralyzed Sanaa. Both sides of the political divide paused the hostilities to mourn. But from that point on, the Yemeni state created by the revolution effectively disappeared.

The passing of Yemen's revolutionary generation created not only a crisis of national identity but also one of governance. Once, Yemeni students who had obtained degrees abroad took pride in returning home as future leaders. But over the last ten years, much of the educated elite has left the country, citing worsening government corruption and ineptitude and a lack of domestic employment opportunities. Political appointments are now granted on the basis of tribal membership rather than training or experience, and technocrats have gradually given way to the beneficiaries of nepotism.

As the central government's legitimacy declined over the last decade, a political void opened. Beginning in 2009, extremist groups, including al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, emerged to fill the gap. But it was the northern Houthi movement, already organized and opposed to the central government, that was positioned to take the fullest advantage of the derelict republic.

ABDULJABBAR ZEYAD / REUTERS

REVOLUTIONS

The Houthis' chance came in early 2011, when revolts in places such as Egypt and Tunisia inspired months of mass protests against the corrupt, autocratic government in Sanaa. That February, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, a northern rebel leader, declared his support for the anti-government demonstrations and sent thousands of his followers to join the rallies in the capital. Some of the most powerful images of the uprising were those of tribesmen in traditional robes demonstrating alongside members of the urban youth movement. Fifty years earlier, these two groups had fought each other for control of Yemen; in 2011, they marched together against a common enemy, Saleh.

By the end of the year, the uprising had achieved its main goal: Saleh agreed to step down and be replaced by his vice president, Hadi. In early 2013, the government and opposition groups began a national dialogue conference that culminated in 2014 with a plan, backed by Hadi, to write a new constitution and divide Yemen into six provinces. At the time, Jamal Benomar, then the UN's special envoy for Yemen, predicted that the agreement would lead to "democratic governance founded on the rule of law, human rights and equal citizenship."

Yet the Houthi opposition rejected the deal, as it would have further weakened the power of the northern tribes. Throughout 2014, antigovernment protests, many of them led by Houthis, continued to rage. In September, Houthi forces captured Sanaa, and then in early 2015, they dissolved parliament, forced Hadi to resign, and installed a revolutionary committee to replace the Yemeni government.

The Houthi advance unnerved Riyadh. Ever since Saudi Arabia was founded, in 1932, its leaders have worried about the security of the country's southern border with Yemen. In 1934, Saudi Arabia fought its first war against the Kingdom of Yemen to secure that border. Under the treaty that ended the war, Saudi Arabia annexed three Yemeni border provinces that it had occupied during the fighting. Since then, Saudi foreign policy toward Yemen has been driven by the need to maintain a weak central government in Sanaa that does not threaten Saudi security. Each time a popular movement or a strong central authority has looked as though it were appearing in Yemen, the Saudi government has responded with military action and financial support for pro-Saudi groups.

The Houthis' rise was the realization of Saudi leaders' worst fears. In 2009 and 2010, cross-border skirmishes between Houthi fighters and

Saudi forces caused the first Saudi casualties along the Saudi-Yemeni border since the 1960s. After taking Sanaa in 2014, the Houthi leadership openly called for war with Saudi Arabia, using demands for the return of the three border provinces as a rallying cry for the movement.

SAUDI ARABIA STEPS IN

As a result, when Hadi requested Saudi help, Riyadh was only too happy to oblige. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia and a coalition of Arab nations from the Gulf Cooperation Council launched a military campaign to push back the Houthis and restore the government. Saudi Arabia presented the intervention as a response to the threat of Iranian expansionism, arguing that the Houthis were effectively an Iranian proxy. This won it the support of other Arab countries and the United States. Yet Saudi rhetoric has grossly misrepresented Iran's role in the conflict. Although some small arms and money have flowed from Iran to the Houthis, the amounts are not large, and there is no real Houthi-Iranian alliance. The northern tribes do not share Iran's desire to challenge Israel and the United States, and they began positioning themselves as an alternative to Yemen's central government long before receiving any Iranian help. The true target of the Saudi campaign was not Iran but the Houthis themselves.

The intervention, which began as a series of air strikes against Houthi military targets, has morphed into an attempt to destroy Yemen's economic infrastructure in order to turn public opinion away from the Houthi movement and its anti-Saudi stance. Hospitals, factories, water mains, sewage facilities, bridges, and roads have all been demolished in bombing raids. The Saudi coalition, with help from the United States, has blockaded Yemen's ports and rendered it dangerous for civilian aircraft to fly over the country, making it difficult for aid agencies or businesses to bring goods into Sanaa's airport and for wounded Yemenis to go abroad for treatment.

Yemen's economy, already weak, has collapsed under the pressure. For many Yemenis, buying food or medicine is now difficult or impossible. According to the UN, two-thirds of Yemen's 28 million people face food shortages and do not have access to clean water. Seven million of them live in areas on the brink of famine, and nearly two million Yemeni children are acutely malnourished. Without working public services, rubbish and sewage have piled up on the streets and leached into drinking wells. Since April, cholera,

which spreads in contaminated water, has infected over 600,000 people, killing more than 2,000.

The UN Human Rights Council, Amnesty International, and other humanitarian organizations have condemned Saudi Arabia's

The Houthis' rise was the realization of Saudi leaders' worst fears.

human rights violations in Yemen. Adama Dieng, the UN's special adviser on the prevention of genocide, has called on the Security Council to investigate possible Saudi crimes against humanity. Yet by portraying its intervention as a conflict with Iran, Saudi

Arabia seems to have convinced much of the world, especially the United States, to ignore the deliberate targeting of Yemeni civilians.

The practical response to the crisis from international aid organizations has been ineffective. In July, the World Health Organization announced that it was suspending its cholera vaccine program in Yemen indefinitely. It cited difficulties delivering the drugs and the fact that the vaccination campaign would have had limited effect as the disease had already infected over 300,000 people. The WHO may well have been right, but it and other international organizations have missed opportunities to help resolve the wider conflict.

Because the international community has officially recognized only the Yemeni government in exile and given the Houthi government scant diplomatic attention, neutral humanitarian organizations are among the few groups that can mediate the conflict without political restraints. This is a role they have played in Yemen before. In the 1960s, the government of the new Yemen Arab Republic fought a six-year civil war with northern tribes loyal to the deposed leader Badr. Back then, as today, the northern tribes were not officially recognized by foreign governments, so the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN were the only groups that had access to them. The UN opened a direct line of communication with their leaders, legitimizing their position in the conflict and encouraging them to participate in a national peace conference. And the Red Cross facilitated several prisoner exchanges, introducing aspects of the Geneva Convention to an area of the world where belligerents had traditionally beheaded captives rather than swapped them.

During the current war, the Red Cross and the UN can repeat that strategy. They should both address the humanitarian crisis and provide

the Houthi tribes with an international platform from which to negotiate with the government in exile.

The UN could also send peacekeepers to secure Saudi Arabia's southern border, alleviating one of the main drivers of the conflict. That tactic worked from 1963 to 1964, when UN personnel patrolled a demilitarized zone between Saudi Arabia and Yemen and mediated cross-border disputes. A similar peacekeeping presence today would give Riyadh enough confidence in the security of the border to cease its aerial campaign and lift its naval blockade, ending the immediate humanitarian crisis.

WASHINGTON'S ROLE

Although the United States is not involved in the fighting in Yemen, it has supported the Saudi-led coalition in several ways. The U.S. military trains Saudi forces and offers its bases to Saudi warplanes for refueling. And the United States has sold Saudi Arabia billions of dollars' worth of weapons, many of which have been used in Yemen.

That means that the United States is well positioned to improve the situation on the ground. Washington should threaten to withdraw its military support in order to pressure Saudi Arabia to end hostilities and accept an international peacekeeping force along the Saudi-Yemeni border. With a buffer against immediate territorial incursions, Saudi Arabia might be more willing to allow Yemenis to adopt their own political solution, even if the Houthi leadership played a significant role in the ensuing government.

Any negotiations between the U.S. government and the Houthis would meet serious opposition in the United States. At every Houthi rally, the protesters chant, "God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse on the Jews! Victory to Islam!" U.S. officials have pointed to this slogan as proof of the movement's anti-American stance and, since the expression is based on an Iranian revolutionary catch phrase, as evidence of Houthi-Iranian cooperation. Hadi has even formally petitioned the UN to brand the Houthis a terrorist organization.

Yet the slogan is misleading. The Houthis are one of the few groups in the Middle East that has little intention or ability to confront the United States or Israel. And far from being aligned with extremists, the Houthi movement has repeatedly clashed with the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. It is Saudi Arabia that has long supported Sunni Islamist groups in Yemen. More-

over, Yemen's northern tribes are willing to accept foreign assistance no matter who gives it. During the 1960s, they even received secret military aid from Israel in their civil war against the new republic.

Abdul-Malik al-Houthi and the rest of the movement's leadership, however, need a crash course in modern diplomacy. Members of the Houthi family have dismissed the group's anti-American slogan as mere words, arguing that it does not reflect actual policy. Yet words can be dangerous. The Houthi leadership needs to distance the Yemeni conflict from the divisions that characterize the rest of the region. It should start by adopting a new slogan.

A PATH TO PEACE

The United States and international organizations should realize that focusing on tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia only distracts from finding a local political settlement to end the fighting. Both of the main causes of the civil war are internal to Yemen: an illegitimate republican government and a Houthi movement that has no intention of retreating to the political obscurity of its northern stronghold. So far, peace talks led by Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the UN's special envoy for Yemen, have missed both of these points and attempted to solve the crisis by demanding Houthi withdrawal and the reinstatement of the deposed republican government.

That must change. Before 1990, Yemen had never existed as a single country. A peaceful solution needs to acknowledge Yemen's internal divisions. The country is made up of three regions. The north, the home of the Houthi movement, contains the great majority of the Shiite population and is dominated by powerful tribal alliances. The south of the country, a British colony from 1839 to 1967 and thereafter an Arab communist state until Yemeni unification, is primarily Sunni, with a weak tribal structure that has been eroded by over a century of imperial dominion and then decades of secular communist ideology. Finally, Yemen's eastern region, known as Hadramawt, is inhabited by a sparse Hadrami population that has traditionally enjoyed significant independence.

None of these regions can or should exercise complete control over the other two. Yet nor would breaking Yemen up into three separate nations solve the problem. A better solution would involve a federal system that maintained a degree of autonomy for each region and established a weak central government to mediate disputes over

territory or resources and to guide foreign policy. As well as keeping the peace within Yemen, the absence of a strong central state would allay Saudi concerns over regional stability.

The greatest threat to Yemen's future, however, is not Saudi Arabia, Iran, or even a renewed civil war, but rather a growing water shortage that threatens the country's major cities. According to projections from the UN, Yemen's major urban areas could run out of water as soon as 2018, a consequence of inefficient irrigation and a growing population. Saudi Arabia has long promised funds to repair Yemen's damaged infrastructure after the war. That money should be used to move major urban populations to areas with more water and invest in massive desalination projects. This need not be a one-sided deal: a stable Yemen could let Saudi Arabia pipe oil from its wells to the refineries and shipping facilities in Aden, giving the Saudi government a new export route that would bypass the Strait of Hormuz, avoiding the perennial danger of an Iranian blockade. If foreign governments and the UN act soon to reduce Yemen's suffering and accept that the civil war needs a local solution, then Yemen can still recover and even add a measure of stability to a volatile region. 🌍