

# Saudi Arabia and the Regionalization of Yemen's Conflict

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## Saudi Arabia and the Regionalization of Yemen's Conflict

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On March 25, 2015 Saudi Arabia (KSA) launched operation "Decisive Storm" in Yemen against the Houthi rebel movement and their allied militias. The Houthis took over Yemen's capital Sana'a in 2014 causing the near collapse of the state. The conflict's turning point occurred on March 19, 2015 when the Houthis seized the port city of Aden, and attacked Yemen's president Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi in his Presidential Palace. Hadi subsequently fled to Riyadh and formed a government in exile. Saudi Arabia stated that the operation's main goal is to defeat the Houthis - whom it views as Iranian proxies- and reinstate the internationally recognized and legitimate Yemeni government headed by Hadi (Abdullah, 2015). The Saudi military intervention has led to the regionalization of the conflict in Yemen, which has further complicated the country's domestic power struggle (Al-Madhaji, Sidahmed, & Al-Muslimi, 2015). Further, Clausen (2015) explains that there have been three narratives to explain the current crisis in Yemen: "the Saudi-Iranian proxy war narrative, the sectarian narrative, or the al-Qaeda/failed state narrative" (p.16). Each narrative only holds one piece of the puzzle, hence it is important to unpack each one to gain a holistic and nuanced understanding of the conflict.

This paper will argue that Saudi Arabia's military intervention has intensified the regionalization of Yemen's conflict causing three main implications. First, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to achieve its goal of restoring Hadi's government, or its goal of containing Iranian influence in the broader context of what Gause III (2014) terms the 'New Middle East Cold War'. Second, the intervention turned an internal power struggle to a regional one. This has further complicated Yemen's civil conflict and prolonged any foreseeable resolution. Third, the intervention is unlikely to yield positive results for Saudi Arabia's national security. Since this is an ongoing conflict, it is difficult to fully account for the regional and global implications of Yemen becoming the newest failed state and political vacuum in the Middle East. However, the fact that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)- which carried out the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack on 7 January 2015- is exploiting the crisis to expand its influence only affirms the unpredictable international implications of continued instability in Yemen.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section will explore what Gause III means by the 'new Middle East Cold War', and how this framework sheds light on Yemen's conflict. The second section will provide some context on Saudi-Yemeni relations. The third section will examine with some detail the Houthi takeover and the composition of local actors in the Yemeni conflict. The fourth section will examine Yemen's transition from a fragile state into a failed one, and how that relates to Saudi Arabia's unattainable goal of restoring Hadi's government. The fifth section will assess Saudi Arabia's foreign policymaking in Yemen before ending with a conclusion.

### The New Middle East Cold War

The regionalization of Yemen's conflict can be understood using the analytical framework of the new Middle East Cold War. Gregory Gause III (2014) defines the new Middle East Cold War as a struggle over the direction of the internal politics of the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia are leading this contest for regional influence, however other regional state and non-state actors are also increasingly shaping the political landscape. Gause III explains that it is called a cold war because the main actors do not engage in a direct military confrontation, rather they compete over influence in the region's weaker states through allies or proxies. Gause III explains that one characteristic of the new

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Middle East cold war is the 'paradox of power' where ideological ties and political capital matters more than military capabilities. For example, Gause III provides a useful comparison between Turkey and Qatar. Turkey is an important regional actor with a large population and a strong military. While Qatar is a much smaller state with a smaller army, however Qatar's transnational connections has allowed it build larger networks of regional allies and have an impact equal to Turkey, if not greater (Gause III, 2014).

Furthermore, unlike the 1960s "Arab Cold War" where Arab socialism presented itself as a progressive ideology against a reactionary status quo, the fault lines of the new Middle East Cold War are "less ideological and more identity-based" (Gause III, 2014, p.3). Exploring the role of heightened sectarian identities is an important component of this cold war, however Gause III argues that sectarianism is the symptom not the cause of the current conflicts in Libya, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Further, using the sectarian lens, which describes the regional proxy wars as a fight between Sunnis versus Shias, oversimplifies the complexity of these conflicts. This is certainly the case in Yemen. Clausen (2015) argues that many mainstream media outlets have framed the Saudi military campaign as 'Saudi Arabia versus Iran's proxy the Houthis'. This may be a valid description, but viewing the Houthis as simply 'Iran's puppets' falls into the trap of giving the conflict a single dimensionality - when it is multidimensional- and denies the Houthis' agency as actors in Yemen's conflict who make decisions based on their own calculations and interests.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Houthis have indeed received some support from Iran, albeit, not to the same extent as Iran's support to the Assad regime in Syria, the Shiite militias in Iraq, or HezboAllah in Lebanon. As Salisbury (2015) argues, taking money from Iran may not necessarily translate to taking orders from it. Further, Salisbury (2015) contends that the Houthis do not necessarily need weapons from Iran because acquiring weapons in Yemen is fairly easy; in 2009, Cordesmans reported that there were about three firearms for every person in Yemen (p.30). Furthermore, the Yemeni government has failed to control the illegal smuggling of weapons. Nevertheless, perception leads to action, and from Saudi Arabia's vantage point, the Houthis are Iran's proxies. Hence any increase in their power is by extension an increase in Iran's reach and a great threat to Saudi Arabia's regional dominance.

If sectarianism is the symptom and not the cause, then what has allowed it to thrive in the region? Gause III explains that sectarian and communal identities have long existed in places like Iraq or Syria but the question is: when do these identities become most salient and privileged over national identity? He argues that the answer is to look at the state, whether it is performing its functions and whether there is a legitimate social contract between the state and its citizens. Some of the state's basic functions include controlling the state's territories and borders, maintaining a monopoly on the use of force and providing a basic level of economic and social opportunity. The collapse of state authority in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen for example has led to the creation of power vacuums where domestic actors and their regional patrons are competing for power. Gause III argues that the first political vacuum started in Iraq, particularly after the 2003 American invasion. As a result of the invasion, the central state along with its basic infrastructure and bureaucracy collapsed, this led communities to hold onto their sectarian identities when they looked for security.

Iran, Saudi Arabia and other state and non-state actors are responding, reacting and capitalizing on these political vacuums to further their interests. It can be argued that Iran's behaviour in Yemen is opportunistic. It is exploiting an opportunity to project influence without committing a large cost. While the Saudis are acting based on what Western analysts have called an exaggerated assessment of Iran's goals and regional reach. This has contributed to heightened sectarian tensions in Yemen, where "a previously absent Shiite-Sunni narrative is creeping into how Yemenis describe their fight" (International Crisis Group, 2015, p.5)

Slevik (2015) conducted a content analysis on Iranian coverage of the war in Yemen. He found that many Iranian news and political analysis websites present an ideologically driven view of the war. He argues that "Iran perceives the Huthis' Zaydi creed as religiously different but associates their cause with its own political agenda" (p.1). Unlike Iran's Twelver Shiism, Zaydis' have five instead of twelve Imams. This is consistent with Lina Khatib's argument (2015) that "Iran's relationship with the Houthis is more pragmatic than ideological" (p.1).

This section has used the framework of a new Middle East Cold War to explain some of the regional dynamics of

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Yemen's conflict. The next section will provide a background on Saudi-Yemeni relations.

## **Saudi- Yemeni Relations**

### **1962**

Birth of Yemen Arab Republic after fall of the Zaydi Imamate (North Yemen)

### **2007**

Formation of al-Hirak al-Janoubi (Southern Secessionist Movement)

### **1967**

Birth of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen after departure of British Colonial power (South Yemen)

### **2009**

Operation Scorched Earth: Saudi Arabia's campaign against the Houthis

### **1990**

Unification of Yemen

### **2011**

Yemen's Uprising

### **1994**

Yemeni Civil War

### **2014**

Houthis take over Yemen's Capital Sana'a

### **2004**

First wave of fighting between Houthis and Yemeni government forces

### **2015**

Operation Decisive Storm launched right after the Houthis took over Aden on March 25th, 2015

Table 1 Timeline of Important Events in Yemen. Sources: (Juneau, 2010) and (Mitreski, 2015)

Al-Rasheed and Vitalis (2004) argue that "the history of Saudi Arabian-Yemeni relations for many is a chronicle of antagonism, conflicts, and border disputes" (p.2). Saudi Arabia has consistently intervened in Yemeni domestic politics under a policy of "containment and maintenance" (Salisbury, 2015, p.3). At the height of Arab Socialism in the 1960s, South Yemen's nationalist and leftist revolution was seen as a national security threat by Saudi Arabia. This led KSA to support the opposing royalist forces against the supporters of South Yemen, which was backed by Egypt and the former Soviet Union (Al-Rasheed & Vitalis, 2004). President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who headed North Yemen since 1978 became Yemen's president when it was formally unified in 1990. Salisbury (2015) explains that

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Saudi Arabia became Yemeni government's patron since the 1980s providing funds to Saleh's regime until Yemen's revolution in 2011. Growing domestic pressure forced Saleh to accept a Gulf Cooperation transition initiative that forced him out of power.

Moreover, Clausen (2015) explains that Saudi Arabia's containment policy has traditionally relied on three elements. First, provide funds to Saleh's government and his elites in exchange for political influence. Second, supporting the spread of Wahabbism/Salafism especially in the North where Yemen's Zaydi population is concentrated. Clausen argues that Salafists have been able to reach out to disenfranchised Zaydis. Salafists have also contributed to "stigmatizing the Zaydis as part of a global Shiite, Iranian conspiracy that seeks to divert the Muslim world" (p.21). Indeed, this has contributed to perpetuating the sectarian Sunni versus Shia narrative. The third component of Saudi Arabia's containment policy is the use of force. For example, KSA has consistently increased security along the Saudi-Yemeni border.

## The Houthi Takeover

Alley (2014) explains that Houthis were able to rally support for their takeover due to rising political and economic grievances and their promise to 'correct the wrongs' of the 2011 transition and fight corruption. When Yemen witnessed its wave of protests in 2011, a civil war was temporarily avoided through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative, which essentially preserved the old regime and did a reshuffling of elites. Power was transferred from former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who headed North Yemen since 1978 and unified Yemen in 1990, to his Vice President Hadi. However, Al-Muslimi (2015) explains, "they [Houthis] are establishing the precedent that if you have more guns, you can do whatever you want, and that is very dangerous for Yemen" (p.1). An escalation of violence in Yemen is fairly easy where there are about three firearms for every person (Cordesman, 2009, p.30). Furthermore, on the surface the current political landscape in Yemen seems divided into two camps; the Houthi-Saleh coalition and the Popular Resistance backed by the Saudi-led coalition. However, each side is far from homogenous. Al-Hamdani, Baron, & Al-Madhaji (2015) argue that each armed group has the ability and will to use violence to achieve its goals. The next section will explore the composition of each side.

### *a. The Houthi-Saleh Coalition*

The Houthis are a Zaydi Shiite rebel group that draws its members from Yemen's Zaydi population, which constitutes about 30 percent of Yemen's total population (Al-Hamdani, Baron, & Al-Madhaji, 2015). Salisbury (2015) argues that the Houthis have received some support from Iran, however, not to the same extent as Iran's support to the Assad regime in Syria, the Shiite militias in Iraq, or Hezbollah in Lebanon. In fact, Salisbury argues that the Houthi biggest supporter is former president Saleh, his militias and party, the General People's Congress. Many Yemenis have expressed the irony of Saudi Arabia's strong objections to Iran's interference, when KSA has been supporting Saleh and his authoritarian regime for the past thirty years.

### *b. Popular Resistance backed by Saudi Arabia*

The Saudi-led coalition was joined by its Gulf allies: the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, and other Arab countries including Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and Sudan (Abdullah, 2015). Oman maintained its historical policy of non-interference and refused to participate in the coalition (Abdullah, 2015). The military campaign enforced a ground, air and sea blockade on Yemen. KSA used airstrikes to target the Houthis, and provided weapons and support to the Popular Resistance to carry out ground attacks. Al-Hamdani, Baron, & Al-Madhaji (2015) argue that the only thing that unites the Popular Resistance is its rejection to the Houthi takeover, restoring Hadi's government however, is not necessarily a priority. This means that there is a strong possibility that these factions will clash with each other, or with Hadi's government if their demands for greater self-governance are not met. This is an important observation because it means that if the Saudi-led coalition defeats the Houthis and Hadi's rule is restored, his authority is likely to be challenged. Al-Hamdani, Baron, & Al-Madhaji, 2015 argue that a return to a pre-intervention Hadi era is almost impossible, the status quo was not sustainable to begin with.

The Popular Resistance consists of three groups; the first one is Hiraq or the Southern Secessionist Movement.

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Formed in 2007, HIRAK aims to re-establish South Yemen as a separate country. It is also worthy to note that 80 percent of Yemen's oil resources are located in Southern Yemen (Juneau, 2013). The second group includes a number of Sunni Salafist groups. This includes the newly formed Al Rashad party, and terrorist groups like AQAP and Daesh or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which are mainly driven by ideological motivations. The third group includes different armed tribes and political parties, such as Al-Islah, Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood offshoot. These groups oppose the Houthi takeover and aim for "greater self-governance" (Al-Hamdani, Baron, & Al-Madhaji, 2015, p.4).

Aden is a case in point. Houthis were defeated in Aden, but there is a huge security vacuum. On December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, ISIL carried out a car bomb attack that targeted Aden's newly appointed Governor Jafaar Mohammed Saad, the governor and six of his bodyguards were killed in the attack (Almasmari & Yan, 2015). De-escalation of violence will be a challenge even if all parties agreed to come to the negotiating table. All actors have the ability and will to use violence to achieve their goals. While Yemen's high level of unemployment provides ample recruits for different armed groups (Al-Hamdani, Baron, & Al-Madhaji, 2015)

## From Fragile to Failed State: The Breakdown of Saleh's System

Analyzing Yemen's transition from a fragile to a failed state adds another dimension to understanding Yemen's conflict that expands beyond the Saudi versus Iran proxy war narrative. State failure happens "when the basic functions of the state provision of security, infrastructure, the rule of law, etc. are no longer performed" (Zartman, 1995, p. 5 as cited in Dingli, 2012, p. 92). Another definition for state failure is when "states fail because they cannot provide positive political goods to their people" such as "security, health, economic opportunity, environmental surveillance and a legal and judicial framework" (Rotberg, 2002, p. 85 as cited in Dingli, 2012, p.92). However, Dingli (2013) questions the analytical usefulness of the 'failed state thesis' because it is based on a "Eurocentric conception of the ideal state" (p.93). Dingli argues that Yemen's state -since 1990- has operated based on two elements: tribalism and patronage networks. She defines tribalism not as a primordial institution, rather as "territorial political arrangements" (p. 97) that can exist in both urban and rural settings. For example members of a village may pledge allegiance to the local tribe leader, who in return provides security, manages conflicts and disputes and provide basic services such as paving roads or electricity.

Al-Dawsari (2012) further argues that Yemen's tribal system was in fact credited for mitigating conflict and preventing Yemen from a full collapse in the absence of legitimate and capable state institutions:

Evidence about the role performed by tribes in Yemen challenges two major assumptions: that Yemen is lawless country and that tribes and the tribal system undermine stability and state building. On the contrary, in a country like Yemen, where the state is weak, the tribal system—especially tribal conflict resolution mechanisms—can help promote national reconciliation, stability, and even state building. As the United Nations and the international community try to help Yemen in its critical transition and state-building process, policymakers and practitioners need to explore ways in which the traditional system can compliment and strengthen this process. Tribes have played an important part in preventing and resolving conflicts, maintaining order, and promoting peace and reconciliation both at the national and local levels. This suggests that, contrary to the mainstream perception, the tribal structure and system has in fact been responsible for holding the country together in recent decades (Al-Dawsari, 2012, p.8).

Saudi Arabia's policy of containment or keeping Yemen "weak but stable"(Clausen, 2015,p. 20)is likely to fail with the current military intervention. This is because the system that has allowed a minimum level of stability in Yemen for the past 30 years collapsed in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising. Saleh was able to maintain control through a delicate governing system that leveraged two things: Yemen's tribal system and patronage links. This delicate system allowed Yemen to remain a fragile, but not a fully-fledged failed state. The 2011 Yemeni uprising and its aftermath constituted a turning point that caused this delicate system to collapse. Saudi Arabia attempted and failed to restore the pre-2011 status quo through the Gulf Initiative, which aimed to control Yemen's transition by replacing Saleh with another pro-Saudi president. Moreover, the Houthi takeover caused a further fragmentation and decentralization of power, and Operation Decisive Storm has only exacerbated it. Al-Rasheed (2015) points to the fact that Saudi Arabia has not yet presented a reconstruction plan for Yemen or a strategy to rebuild its institutions.

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Indeed, destroying state institutions is easy, rebuilding them is not, and the longer the war continues the harder it will be to rebuild Yemen's central government. Cordesmans (2015) argues that "no campaign [in Yemen] can succeed that does not blend military action with some form of effective stability operations bordering on nation building" (p.1). This means that any military victory will be temporary, unless some form of nation-building takes place in Yemen.

## Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy in Yemen: A Strategic Failure?

Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen can be viewed as the latest manifestation of Saudi Arabia's assertive post-2011 foreign policy. The 2011 Arab uprisings resulted in a restructuring of the region's political landscape. The fall of the Pan-Arab dictators of Libya and Egypt for example offered the Gulf regimes an opportunity to "project power" (Legrenzi & Calculli, 2013, p. 213). Furthermore, the response of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to the revolutionary wave included forming a foreign policy that aims to achieve two goals; strengthening regime security and preventing external forces from causing destabilization (Legrenzi & Calculli, 2013). Al-Rasheed (2015) argues that the Saudi-led war is: "not an inevitable war of self-defense forced on the leadership by Houthi expansion inside Saudi Arabia and undermining Saudi national security. Instead, it was a pre-emptive strike to inaugurate an aggressive Saudi regional foreign policy" (p.1).

Hill and Nonneman (2011) argue that " Saudi Arabia's foreign policy system still lacks advanced strategic capacity, operational skills and experience of sustained implementation" ( p.9). One of the fundamental reasons Saudi Arabia's foreign policy lacks a long-term strategy is because foreign policy making is centralized in the hands of a few key royal family members. Due to the "personal nature of diplomacy" foreign policy making is not done in the Ministry of Foreign affairs, rather it is in the hands of a few people in the royal family. Indeed, foreign policy making in Saudi Arabia is personalistic rather than institutionalized.

As Richard Haas puts it "foreign policy begins at home". It is important to explore the internal dynamics of Saudi foreign policy making to understand all the motivations that led Saudi Arabia to intervene in Yemen. When King Salman took power in January 2015, he faced the challenge of consolidating his power and assuring domestic, regional and global observers of his control. Al-Rasheed (2015) argues that waging a war in Yemen helped the new King project power and rally domestic nationalistic support. Further, Abdullah (2015) explains that the timing of the operation had a geostrategic significance for Saudi Arabia. The military operation was launched on March 25<sup>th</sup>, at the same time the European Union and the P5+1 convened from March 26<sup>th</sup> to April 2<sup>nd</sup> in Lausanne, Switzerland to discuss the Iran nuclear deal framework. The Saudis were not included in the negotiations in any way, and they have voiced their criticism that the U.S. and Iran negotiated the terms of the deal isolated from any other issue such as Iran's regional influence and interventions in Iraq or Syria (Abdullah, 2015).

Al-Muslimi (2015) argues that the 2015 Saudi-led intervention is a result of the failure of Saudi and the GCC countries to engage economically and politically with Yemen. As a result, they resorted to a military intervention to change the internal political dynamics of the country. Al-Muslimi (2015) argues that this pattern can be found in the 1990s when Saudi 'punished' Yemen when former president Saleh decided to support Saddam in his decision to invade Kuwait. The exodus of over one million Yemeni workers from the Gulf caused an economic shock to an already weak economy. Further, Al-Muslimi (2015) mentions that Saudi Arabia provided financial, military and economic support to Egypt after its transition of power, but the same was not applied to Yemen after the "Gulf Initiative", even though Yemen desperately needed aid. Al-Muslimi highlights an important aspect of the current conflict, which is the historical 'apathy' from the rich Gulf to its poor, southern neighbour.

Yemen is a poor country with a weak economy, high unemployment, and high illiteracy rates. Illiteracy rates are estimated between 30 and 40 percent, while youth unemployment reached 30 percent in 2013. Yemen is also one of the 50 least developed countries according to the United Nation's designation (UNICEF, 2015). High unemployment provides ample recruits for armed militias and insurgency groups. Patrick (2015) argues that Saudi has no articulated long-term strategy in Yemen. Saudi has not presented a viable political resolution to the conflict, and it continues to bomb different cities in Yemen. A military victory is unlikely as Saudi continues to rely on airstrikes, while its ground forces are no match to the Houthi rebels, who have an advantage of knowing and hiding in Yemen's different mountainous terrains.

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Officially, Operation Decisive Storm has ended, and Operation Restoring Hope was launched to achieve a political solution to Yemen's crisis. However, several reports indicate that Saudi airstrikes have not stopped. Al-Rasheed (2015) argues that if some kind of political solution is not reached soon, then Saudi Arabia's military engagement will likely prolong. This will constitute an increasing cost on the Kingdom's economy as low oil prices have already negatively impacted government revenues (Al-Rasheed, 2015). Indeed, the longer Saudi Arabia's military engagement in Yemen persists, the harder it will become for the regime to rally domestic support for it. The intervention has been called a 'gambit' (Patrick, 2015) and 'impossible to win' (Al-Rasheed, 2015).

The intervention illustrates a strategic failure to plan and implement a coherent long-term national security strategy. In addition to the large expenses of the war, direct military and civilian casualties, the Kingdom will need to equip itself for possible future terrorist attacks on its soil. Daesh or ISIL has already carried out two deadly suicide attacks with over 20 casualties in May in the eastern provinces of KSA where its Shia population is concentrated (The Guardian, 2015). The most recent ISIL attack in Saudi Arabia occurred on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015 in Najran where Saudi Arabia's Isma'ili minority resides (AlJazeera, 2015).

A full-fledged failed state in Yemen is both a national and global security threat. In addition to international terror groups like AQAP and ISIL, maritime security is a major security concern. About four percent of global oil production flows through Bab al-Mandab, the strait that connects the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea (Juneau, 2013). Yemen is also geographically close to Somalia, another failed state. The "Yemen-Somalia nexus", which links the Arabian Peninsula and Horn of Africa, may face an increase in piracy, illegal smuggling of weapons, drugs and human trafficking.

## *A Possible Political Solution?*

The humanitarian cost of Yemen's conflict is deepening. Since March, 2015, civilian casualties have reached over 5,800 and over 27,000 injuries (Middle East Eye, 2015). When the UN appealed for \$274 in emergency relief, Saudi Arabia pledged to pay the entire amount. However, the UN is yet to confirm whether or not those funds have been received (Mitreski, 2015). Further, since Saudi Arabia is enforcing a ground, sea and air blockade, aid is only going through Aden, and barely reaching other areas in Yemen. Mitreski (2015) explains that such actions can be seen as 'collective punishment' and it is not a sustainable strategy.

There have been a number of UN sponsored talks, however they have failed because it has been hard to maintain a ceasefire even when all parties have agreed to it. The most recent example is a planned ceasefire starting from December 14<sup>th</sup> to mark a new round of peace talks in Geneva. However, it is unclear whether the ceasefire will be honored because fighting intensified two days before the planned truce (Middle East Eye, 2015).

Al-Madhaji, Sidahmed, & Al-Muslimi (2015) recommend the role of Oman as a viable mediator since it is Yemen's neighbor, and the only GCC country that declined to join the Saudi-led coalition. Oman has already attempted to negotiate with the Houthis and presented a seven-point peace plan, but their negotiation efforts have failed so far. It also stressed the importance of forming a new constitution draft as a cornerstone to any political solution. Al-Madhaji, Sidahmed, & Al-Muslimi (2015) also affirm that "one of the main issues made the Gulf Initiative ultimately collapse was that it was not accompanied with a quick economic and aid Plan" (p.7), hence any solution in the future must include economic aid.

Al-Hamdani, Baron and Al-Madhaji (2015) argue that even if some level of agreement was reached among local actors, if Saudi Arabia and Iran wanted the conflict to continue, then it would. Hence, regional will to de-escalate the conflict will be a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition for a political settlement. The fundamental question of the basis and legitimacy of the nation state has not been answered in Yemen. Is the country heading towards secession? Is it possible to form a centralized government? Or will federalism be the country's best option? These are the questions Yemen will be facing in the short and long-term.

## **Conclusion**

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This essay has argued that Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen has led to the regionalization of Yemen's war resulting in significant implications for the region as a whole. The Saudi intervention will likely fail to achieve its goal of containing and controlling Yemen's politics by restoring Hadi's government. This reflects a failure in Saudi foreign policy making, because it has not come up with a long-term effective strategy to deal with Yemen. Yemen has joined Iraq, Syria and Libya where the political vacuums in these countries have become a theatre for regional contestation. Indeed, this is an alarming sign to the direction of the new cold war in the region. There have been three narratives to describe Yemen's conflict: a Saudi-Iranian proxy war, a sectarian war, and a failed state/safe haven for terrorists. Even though each framework is useful, it is also important to investigate the limits of each one. One limit is ignoring the complex internal dynamics of Yemen's domestic power struggle.

At this point it is unclear how long Saudi Arabia will remain engaged militarily in Yemen. But it is clear that the longer it takes to settle the conflict politically, the more difficult it will become to face national, regional, and global security threats originating from Yemen. In sum, Yemen was a fragile state with an internal power struggle, and the Saudi intervention turned it into a regional one. This has resulted in state failure, and a civil war that could continue for decades.

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