

Iran's Role in Yemen's Civil War

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which Iran is contributing to the ongoing civil war in Yemen and what the implications of said contributions are. In order to accomplish this task, this article starts with a brief summary of the socio-economic and political conditions that precipitated Yemen's current civil war, as well as inspired the actors who feature prominently in it. It then discusses the ways in which Iran interacted with Yemen prior to this civil war. Using a variety of sources, this paper then enumerates and examines the types of support that Iran has rendered unto al-Hirak and the Houthis. This work concludes by listing several resultant analytical observations and deduces a couple of policy implications.

Introduction

Although news outlets often report on the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran that is playing out in Yemen, very little detail is ever provided as to what actions Iran is actually taking. Therefore, this paper aims to discern the ways in which Iran is contributing to the ongoing civil war in Yemen and what the implications of said contributions are. In order to accomplish this task, this article will start with a brief summary of the socio-economic and political conditions that precipitated Yemen's current civil war, as well as inspired the actors who feature prominently in it. It will then discuss the ways in which Iran interacted with Yemen prior to this civil war. Using a variety of sources, this paper will then enumerate and examine the types of support that Iran has rendered unto al-Hirak and the Houthis. From this evidence, this work concludes that Iran will likely continue supporting the Houthis for the foreseeable future, that the support that Iran has provided to date has been relatively minimal but highly profitable, and that the current level of support is likely insufficient to do anything more than prolong the war. Lastly, this essay provides two policy suggestions: first, any efforts to change Iran's behavior will require forcing a drastic change to Iran's cost-benefit calculus, and second, any efforts to mitigate the suffering of the Yemeni people should start with a reevaluation of the United States' role in supplying ordinance to Saudi Arabia and its allies that have far greater destructive capability than anything Iran is currently supplying to the Houthis.

Background of Yemen's Civil War

Exploitation of the South and the Houthis

Yemen, as a single geographic entity, has spent more time politically disjointed than unified.¹ During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries alone, it suffered many years of internecine conflict exacerbated by the meddling of foreign powers such as Britain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt,² and the Soviet Union.³ Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, the local Qasimi Imams (who were Zaydi Shiites), the Ottomans, and the British jockeyed for influence and control in Yemen. This competition ultimately led to an agreement establishing North and South Yemen as distinct political entities in 1904.⁴

While the Ottomans ceased being a factor following World War I, the establishment of Saudi Arabia in 1932 heralded a new era of foreign interference, starting with a border dispute that forced North Yemen's Imam to finally confirm the 1904 borders.⁵ In 1962, dissident factions in the Yemeni armed forces, backed by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, declared North Yemen the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and undertook a coup against the Imam, plunging Yemen into civil war. Fearing the spread of Nasser's secular nationalism, Saudi Arabia, along with Jordan, backed the escaped Imam's forces

¹ Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis," 232.

² Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, 44-45.

³ Cleveland and Bunton, *Modern Middle East*, 455.

⁴ Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis," 232-233.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

financially and logistically. Despite this aid and the withdrawal of Egypt's forces after its crushing defeat in the June War, the YAR forces still emerged victorious in 1968.⁶ Additionally, soon after Britain granted independence to South Yemen, in late 1967, local communists established the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). This new state was also hostile to Saudi Arabia, advocating "the overthrow of all the traditional monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula."⁷

Accordingly, Saudi Arabia adopted a foreign policy toward the YAR that was in turns conciliatory and destabilizing, designed to "foment discord between it and the People's Republic of the South."⁸ This policy would prove highly successful during the next couple of decades. Indeed, despite the fact that the YAR and PDRY signed a unity agreement in 1979, Yemen did not coalesce into the modern nation-state of the Republic of Yemen (RoY) until May 1990.⁹

This political unity, however, did not translate into religious and socio-economic unity. Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president of both the YAR and, eventually, the RoY, and who retains a tremendous amount of influence in Yemen's current government,¹⁰ established a system of control that relied on this division, which "still endures despite his departure from the presidency."¹¹ This system essentially consisted of "networks of politicians, military officers, tribal leaders and businessmen, many linked to Saleh's family and his Sanhan tribe," and it "embraced local elites and groups willing to support him," while marginalizing "those that refused to be part of it."¹² Additionally, Saleh had further undermined Yemen's ability to effectively unify by using "Sunni and tribal Islamic militias to counter the influence of Marxists" throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.¹³ However, "When these became too powerful in the 1990s," he enabled the political development of "the Believing Youth, which later became the Huthi [*sic*] movement."¹⁴

Beyond this system of "divide and rule," Saleh maintained control over the levers of power and established Yemen as a rentier state.¹⁵ He used Yemen's oil revenues to finance his regime and ensured that Yemen's security and defense forces were firmly in his control by putting them under the command of his close allies and relatives. Therefore, Brehony notes that, "The Saleh regime functioned as long as there was enough money to maintain the patronage networks and provide ordinary Yemenis with the hope, if not reality, of a better life."¹⁶

However, as oil revenues declined sharply following their peak in 2003, so did the already inadequate living standards of the Yemeni citizenry. The people in the northern Sa'ada Governorate, from whom would spring the Houthis, and the people of the former PDRY were hit especially hard. This was particularly galling for the latter, who, under the old PDRY, had been accustomed to "an effective and largely incorrupt administration able

⁶ Cleveland and Bunton, *Modern Middle East*, 314-315.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 455.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 494.

¹⁰ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report*, 19-21.

¹¹ Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis," 234.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

to provide the rule of law and relatively good government services to most parts of the country.”¹⁷ To make matters worse, “Aden was not made the economic capital of Yemen as had been agreed in the unity deals.”¹⁸ Accordingly, not only were their oil and gas resources exploited by the regime’s patronage system,¹⁹ but “tens of thousands of southern military and security personnel were sacked, civil servants forcibly retired, state enterprises privatized and state land given or sold cheaply to regime cronies.”²⁰ As such, many southern Yemenis came to see Saleh’s government not as their own, but as the “northern occupation.”²¹ It was this acute economic and political marginalization that inspired the formation of and protests by the eventually secessionist southern movement al-Hirak.²²

Prelude to the Current Civil War

This lack of national cohesion and political instability made Yemen particularly vulnerable during the Arab Spring. Throughout 2011, mass protests and social unrest continued to spread, making the prospect of another civil war ever more likely. Such a crisis seemed to be averted, however, when on November 23, 2011, Saleh signed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Transition Deal, which stipulated that he would “resign in exchange for immunity for him and his relatives.”²³ Additionally, he would be allowed to stay in Yemen and remain the head of his political party, the General People’s Congress (GPC). This deal further established a transitional government under the presidency of Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, Saleh’s Vice President, as well as a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) designed to make recommendations for a new constitution. It also sought to reorganize the security and military forces in order “to break up the power and the influence of the networks and make them accountable through professional leadership to an elected government.”²⁴ This elected government would consist of equal parts GPC members and Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) members (a coalition formed in opposition to Saleh’s GPC). Unfortunately, as Brehony notes, “The GCC deal was a bargain within the elites of the Saleh regime” that “solved the immediate crisis but proved to be a flawed deal that...marginalise the young activists of the Yemen Spring and gave Saleh the opportunity to undermine the deal.”²⁵ Therefore, while the NDC highlighted many of the problems and contradictions facing Yemen, it did little to actually remedy them. Despite this, Hadi opted to move forward with the federal structure that the NDC outlined in early 2015 even though this model was unacceptable to many southern Yemenis and, particularly, the Houthis. Indeed, the Houthis saw this “as merely the latest effort to marginalise them.”²⁶

The situation in Yemen was further exacerbated by several additional factors. First, the reorganization of the security and military was not entirely successful, and Saleh retained strong allies amongst their ranks.²⁷ Naturally, this diminished Hadi’s influence and

¹⁷ Ibid., 234-235.

¹⁸ Ibid., 237.

¹⁹ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report*, 46.

²⁰ Brehony, “Yemen and the Huthis,” 236-237.

²¹ Ibid., 236.

²² Salisbury, “Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian ‘Cold War,’” 6.

²³ Brehony, “Yemen and the Huthis,” 238.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 239.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report*, 33.

authority over Yemen's armed forces. Second, fear of misallocation and misuse led to much of the promised foreign economic aid not actually being distributed to the suffering Yemenis for whom it was intended, which allowed the Houthis "to exploit the discontent and claim to stand up for the rights of people against foreign interference that brings little tangible benefit."²⁸ Third, Saleh formed an alliance with the Houthis in order to thwart the NDC and further destabilize the Hadi regime.²⁹

The Houthis

The Houthis are Islamic revivalists who subscribe to the Zaydi branch of Shi'ism and hail from the northern Sa'ada Governorate.³⁰ Named after Badr al-Din al-Houthi, the Houthis grew out of the Believing Youth revivalist movement that was founded by his son, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, in the mid-1990s.³¹ Following the capture and killing of Hussein in 2004 by Saleh's troops, the movement transformed into a guerilla fighting force.³² This insurgency spanned six wars between the years of 2004 and 2010,³³ precipitating the direct military intervention of Saudi Arabia in 2009.³⁴ The Houthis avoided defeat in all six of these wars and instead "gained fighting experience and captured weapons from the Yemeni army."³⁵

Following these wars, the Houthis actively participated in the 2011 uprisings and waited for the opportune time to spring into action. By taking advantage of the increasing instability brought on by al-Hirak's protests, the ongoing mass Yemeni demonstrations, and the anti-government and anti-Shi'ite actions of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the Houthis were able to use "the period between 2011 and 2014 to organise their military and political wings," launching their military campaign in early 2014.³⁶ They quickly conquered several key cities, taking the city of Amran in July³⁷ and Sana'a in September.³⁸ Sana'a remains the base of operations in Yemen's ongoing civil war.³⁹

Despite their religious identification as Shi'ites, their support from Iran, and their *sarkha* (shout or cry) of "Death to America, Death to Israel, Damn the Jews, Victory to Islam,"⁴⁰ the Houthis' focus is largely political⁴¹ and local in scope.⁴² Although the actions and interference of external actors do have an effect on the Houthis' calculations, the "primary drivers of tension and conflict are local."⁴³ It is only recently that the Houthis have morphed "into a broad national political movement."⁴⁴ Since resuming offensive

²⁸ Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis," 240.

²⁹ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report*, 5.

³⁰ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" 2.

³¹ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 6.

³² Hubbard, "Plight of Houthi Rebels," November 26, 2016.

³³ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" 9.

³⁴ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 1.

³⁵ Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis," 238.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

³⁷ Al-Yarisi, "Houthis take control of Amran city," July 10, 2014.

³⁸ "How Yemen's capital seized," September 27, 2014.

³⁹ Hubbard, "Plight of Houthi Rebels," November 26, 2016.

⁴⁰ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" 5.

⁴¹ McGregor, "Shi'ite Insurgency In Yemen."

⁴² Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, xv.

⁴³ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" 2.

⁴⁴ "Who Are the Houthis?," January 20, 2015.

operations in 2014, their political and military formidability has only grown.⁴⁵ They not only drove Hadi from Yemen's capital in January 2015 but also from Yemen itself in March 2015, prompting a Saudi-led coalition to intervene in Yemen militarily. Spending the next six months in exile in Riyadh, Hadi was not able to return to Aden until September 2015, once Saudi forces had secured the city.⁴⁶ The Houthis further demonstrated their political clout on November 28, 2016, when, despite being constantly bombarded by Saudi forces, they formed a new national Yemeni government with their allies, in direct opposition to Hadi's United Nations-recognized, and Saudi Arabia-backed, government.⁴⁷

The History of Iran's Relationship with Yemen

Following its Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran enjoyed friendly relations with the PDRY. North Yemen maintained close ties to Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Saudi Arabia, precluding cordial relations with Iran. Iran then demonstrated a willingness to involve itself in Yemen's politics when it supported a "hard-line Marxist faction" in South Yemen's 1986 civil war, which was ultimately victorious. These friendly relations expanded to encompass all of Yemen once Saleh assumed leadership in 1990 of a unified Yemen.⁴⁸ In June 2009, Yemen and Iran reached an agreement allowing Iran to station six warships along with support vessels at Yemen's port of Aden in order to combat maritime piracy in the region.⁴⁹ Additionally, Iran found a staunch ally in Yemen regarding its nuclear ambitions as Saleh's government voiced its support for Iran's nuclear program no fewer than five times between 2005 and 2008,⁵⁰ with Saleh himself explicitly stating as much in early 2008.⁵¹

One consistent source of consternation, however, has been Iran's suspected support for the Houthis. Yemeni press outlets supportive of Saleh's government frequently accused Iran of being "a foreign state sponsor of the Huthi."⁵² Moreover, during this time Yemeni officials frequently complained, privately, about Iran's support for the Houthis, and "in 2007 Yemen withdrew its ambassador from Tehran for consultations, implying Iranian support for the Huthis as the fourth war intensified."⁵³ The Yemeni crimonations of the Iranian government's suspected support relented a little from 2007-2008, only to resurface as the sixth war with the Houthis took off.⁵⁴ This situation was exacerbated when the Yemeni army "discovered six storehouses for weapons that belong to the Huthi rebels and contain some Iranian-made weapons, including machine guns, short-range rockets and ammunition."⁵⁵ Saleh responded to this incident in a television interview in mid-October, claiming that Houthi "finances come from certain Iranian dignitaries," though he added, "But we do not accuse the government."⁵⁶ He pointed out that the Houthis' combat

⁴⁵ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" 2.

⁴⁶ "Yemen crisis," September 22, 2015.

⁴⁷ Almosawa and Gladstone, "Surprise Move," November 28, 2016.

⁴⁸ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" 4.

⁴⁹ "Iran Navy to fight pirates off Yemen," June 27, 2009.

⁵⁰ Fulton and Farrar-Wellman, "Yemen-Iran Foreign Relations," August 10, 2011.

⁵¹ "President Saleh Nuclear Energy," January 31, 2008.

⁵² Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 170.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁵ "Yemen seizes Iranian-made arms," August 22, 2009.

⁵⁶ "Iran funding Shiite rebels," October 19, 2009.

training bore many similarities to that of Lebanon's Hezbollah, noting that he had received reports that trainers from southern Lebanon were present in Houthi territory. Just nine days later, the Yemeni Coast Guard intercepted a ship manned by Iranians and containing anti-tank weaponry.⁵⁷ Needless to say, Iran officially denied having knowledge of or responsibility for any of these payloads.

Iran's Participation in Yemen's Civil War

Iran's Support for al-Hirak

While it seems likely that Iran is providing some support to al-Hirak, the nature and extent of this support remains unclear. Western and Yemeni officials have argued that Iran enjoys a friendly relationship with al-Hirak's leaders.⁵⁸ They have accused "Ali Salem al-Beidh, the former southern president who had backed unification but who then led the 1994 attempt at secession," of maintaining "close ties with Iran."⁵⁹ Furthermore, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote that, "Iran is training militants who are aligned with a separatist movement in southern Yemen, while Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, is providing some funding and media training to the group."⁶⁰ However, other experts on Hiram contend that Iran has limited its aid to only key Hiram leaders, which may explain "why the Houthis have been so successful and Hiram so ineffective."⁶¹

Iran's Support for the Houthis

Iran's support for the Houthis, Tehran's denials notwithstanding, is a bit clearer. During the 2011-2014 break in hostilities, when the Houthis were training and regrouping, they enjoyed "advice and support from Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah."⁶² Indeed, the *Financial Times* confirmed in May 2015 that Hezbollah and Houthi operatives had been training together in Yemen and Lebanon for over ten years.⁶³ Furthermore, in that same month:

[Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps] Qods Force Deputy Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghani stated, 'Each one who is with us comes under the banner of the Islamic Republic, and this is our strength. The defenders of Yemen have been trained under the banner of the Islamic Republic, and the enemies cannot deal with Yemeni fighters.'

This suggests that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was actively training the Houthis in country.⁶⁴ Indeed, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) cited evidence

⁵⁷ "Yemenis intercept Iranian ship," October 27, 2009.

⁵⁸ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁰ Abi-Habib, "Fears Grow over Yemenis' Ties to Iran," June 20, 2013.

⁶¹ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" 8.

⁶² Brehony, "Yemen and the Huthis," 241.

⁶³ Solomon, "Lebanon's Hizbollah," May 8, 2015.

⁶⁴ AEI Iran Tracker, "Iran News Round Up," May 26, 2015.

the year before that claimed that the IRGC had been training “Houthi forces on a small island off the Eritrean coast” and that Iran had been “channelling weapons to Sa’ada.”⁶⁵

Also, based on successful interdictions, it is clear that Iran’s arms shipments to the Houthis have continued unabated. In January 2013, the Sa’ada-bound dhow *Jihan* was intercepted “carrying Iranian-made arms and related materiel” that included:

16,723 blocks of C-4 explosives, 133 plastic containers of RDX powder explosives, 10 man-portable air defence system type 9M32M, 62,040 rounds of 12.7-mm ammunition, 316,000 rounds of 7.62-mm ammunition, 100 rocket-propelled grenades, 18 Katyousha rockets (122-mm), 17 aiming equipment, 1,615 boxes connected with improvised explosive devices and relevant electrical equipment, 10 laser rangefinders LH80A, 48 night vision goggles, 5 long range binoculars with mounts, 90 lensatic compasses, 66 silencers and 800 electric detonators.⁶⁶

Four more weapons shipments were intercepted between September 2015 and March 2016 (see Table I). In fact, it is possible that missiles from these shipments were used to fire upon the U.S.S. *Mason* on October 9th and 12th, 2016.⁶⁷ Rear Admiral John Kirby, spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State, stated multiple times that the missiles the Houthis fired on the 9th had been supplied by Iran.⁶⁸ While a senior administration official for the State Department was not able to confirm a few days later that the missiles fired at the USS *Mason* on October 9th and 12th were indeed provided by Iran, the official was able to confirm that the Houthis do normally receive missiles and radars from Iran.⁶⁹

As noted before, Iran has maintained its innocence regarding providing logistical support and materiel to the Houthis. However, “Upon the Houthi takeover of Sana’a on 21 September 2014, all the detainees reportedly related to the [*Jihan*] incident, including eight Yemeni crew members, two Hezbollah members and three IRGC personnel, were released on 25 September from a prison in Sana’a.”⁷⁰ Thus, Iran’s protestations not only rang hollow but also proved inadequate in dissuading Hadi from severing diplomatic ties with Iran in October 2015.⁷¹ Saudi Arabia and many of its coalition allies followed suit shortly thereafter, severing or downgrading their diplomatic relations with Iran.⁷²

Iran’s Motives

Given the cost of Iran’s actions, be it in terms of money, weapons, manpower, or diplomatic relations, it is worthwhile to discuss the reasons that Iran would involve itself at all in Yemen. First and foremost is the threat that Iran perceives from Saudi Arabia. While Iran and Saudi Arabia have, at times, enjoyed friendly relations, this has not been the case as of late. The United States’ War on Terrorism (along with the power vacuum it brought about by removing Iraq as a regional power), the instability caused by the Arab Spring, the

⁶⁵ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report*, 15.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁷ LaGrone, “USS Mason,” October 12, 2016.

⁶⁸ Kirby, *Daily Press Briefing*, October 11, 2016.

⁶⁹ *Senior Administration Officials on Yemen*, October 14, 2016.

⁷⁰ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report*, 38.

⁷¹ Mukhashaf and Aboudi, “Yemen severs diplomatic ties,” October 2, 2015.

⁷² Chappell, “Sudan And Bahrain,” January 4, 2016.

P5+1/Iran Nuclear Deal, and the ever increasing sectarian divisions have engendered intense suspicion of and competition for influence.⁷³ Accordingly, “The principal sources of friction are rooted in the countries’ national, political, religious, economic, and military concerns.”⁷⁴

Considering the proximity of Yemen to Saudi Arabia, as well as the latter’s history of intervening in the affairs of the former, it makes sense that Saudi Arabia would wield a tremendous amount of influence in Yemen. Part of this influence is military, but part of it is religious, as Saudi Arabia distributed printed materials and funded the proselytization of Wahhabism within Yemen. Furthermore, Saudi clerics engaged in missionary activity in northern Yemen (where most Zaydiis live), and Saudi elites established patronage networks favoring Wahhabis and Salafists.⁷⁵ Indeed, the Houthis’ Zaydi revivalism is a direct response against this proselytization of Wahhabism,⁷⁶ and Houthi representatives regularly “portray the movement as defending Yemeni sovereignty against foreign, Wahhabi-inspired invasion.”⁷⁷

This proliferation of Saudi influence is quite worrisome to Iran. Indeed, “In an exception to the regime elite’s preference for implied criticism, the Iranian Joint Armed Forces Chief of Staff Major General Hassan Firouzabadi referred to the Saudi involvement as ‘state Wahhabi terrorism.’”⁷⁸ Such rhetoric, which is not that uncommon in and of itself, is indicative of Iran’s disdain for Saudi Arabia’s growing influence and power in the region.⁷⁹ Given that “Iran perceives itself as a regional hegemon and leader of the Muslim world” and has long worked to augment its standing by supporting Muslim states and organizations, it makes sense that Iran acknowledges the Houthis as a proxy in its network designed “to ‘resist’ the U.S. and its regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia.”⁸⁰ Additionally, Iran views “the conflict in Yemen as a way to impede Saudi Arabia’s capability to project power to other parts of the region,” thus rendering Saudi Arabia “unable to escalate in Syria.”⁸¹

Iran’s second source of motivation flows somewhat from the first. Because “Iran, being officially a Shia state, safeguards Shia Islam and acts as a reference point to many Shia movements worldwide through funding programs or political support,” support for “the Houthis, who are ideologically close to it,” is a priority for Iran.⁸² While Zaydism remains distinct from Iran’s Twelver Shi’ism, Iran’s contact with and support of the Houthis has led “a number of prominent Houthi supporters” to convert “to Twelver Shia over the past two decades” and visit “Iran for religious instruction.”⁸³ Thus, simply by engaging with the Houthis, Iran is working toward its objective of enlarging the Middle East’s so-called “Shi’ite Crescent.”⁸⁴ To this end, various prominent Iranian figures and

⁷³ Ighani, *Managing the Saudi-Iran Rivalry*, 2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁵ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 89-90.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁸⁰ Bucala et al., “USS Mason,” October 19, 2016.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Hagood, “Tale of Two Media Covering.”

⁸³ Salisbury, “Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian ‘Cold War,’” 6.

⁸⁴ Trofimov, “Shiite Crescent,” September 29, 2016.

officials have voiced diplomatic endorsements for the Houthis; these statements have generally been carefully crafted so as not to admit to anything beyond rhetorical support.⁸⁵

Finally, there are ancillary geopolitical benefits for Iran in supporting the Houthis. Because the Houthis have the aforementioned history and religious affinity with Iran, going all the way back to their movement's founder,⁸⁶ it seems probable that any of the Houthis' foreign policy positions that go beyond simply opposing Saudi ambitions will be sympathetic to Iran's. Salisbury cites a prominent Houthi activist who contended that, as Houthi influence and power to govern in Yemen grows, the country's foreign policy will increasingly dovetail with Iran's, becoming "more focused on the eradication of Sunni extremist movements such as AQAP and IS, and on pushing aggressively for a solution on the issue of Israel and Palestine."⁸⁷

As the Houthis consolidate their power, Iran is likely to enjoy benefits in Yemen as well. The UNSC notes that, "The regional role of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its impact on Yemeni politics cannot be discounted," as demonstrated by the release of the imprisoned crew members of the *Jihan* cited earlier.⁸⁸ Furthermore, "The al Houthi-Saleh forces' positioning on the Red Sea also creates an opportunity for Iran to create or exacerbate disruptive conditions in one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints, as demonstrated by the attacks against the U.S.S. *Mason*."⁸⁹ Now that the Houthis have established a real national government,⁹⁰ the value of having the Houthis as allies has the potential to increase dramatically. Instead of merely having a sympathetic insurgency that can frustrate Iran's rivals' ambitions, this relationship, if properly cultivated, may lead to another Shi'ite state that will eventually be able to wield internationally legitimate support on Iran's behalf.

Conclusions and Implications

There are several interrelated conclusions that can be deduced from all of this. First, given Iran's long and persistent history of shipping weapons to the Houthis and, possibly, al-Hirak, it seems unlikely, barring a drastic alteration of the status quo, that Iran will discontinue this policy any time soon. This procurement of weapons continues despite the consequences Iran has been subjected to date and in light of incidents such as with the U.S.S. *Mason*. Indeed, it is clear that this policy has been immensely profitable for Iran thus far and has the potential to be significantly more so, considering how limited Iran's support has been⁹¹ compared to how much more robust and expensive Saudi Arabia's investment has been.⁹² However, the viability of the Houthis was undoubtedly enhanced by their alliance with Saleh, thus allowing them to take advantage of his vast influence and

⁸⁵ Bucala et al., "USS *Mason*," October 19, 2016.

⁸⁶ Salmoni, Loidolt, and Wells, *Regime and Periphery*, 170-171.

⁸⁷ Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War,'" 11-12.

⁸⁸ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report*, 15.

⁸⁹ Bucala et al., "USS *Mason*," October 19, 2016.

⁹⁰ Almosawa and Gladstone, "Surprise Move," November 28, 2016.

⁹¹ Bucala et al., "USS *Mason*," October 19, 2016.

⁹² Quinlan, "The Yemeni Conundrum."

connections.⁹³ As such, it remains unclear whether Iran's investment in the Houthis would have been as fruitful or even sufficient without Saleh's power. Regardless, if the political prospects of the Houthis continue to improve, the Houthis' value to Iran will only increase while minimum investment required from Iran will only decrease.

Second, considering the relatively limited support Iran is providing to the Houthis, it does appear that up to this point, Yemen has been less of a priority for Iran than other theaters, such as Syria.⁹⁴ Thus far, it seems as though Iran has been willing to commit only as many resources as it takes to disrupt and frustrate Saudi Arabia's designs. As some analysts have surmised, Iran's "limited assistance to the al Houthi-Saleh faction probably reflects the regime's assessment that it does not need to invest heavily to embroil Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni conflict," and thus, "Iran calibrates and times its support for the al Houthi-Saleh faction in order to enable a partner that can threaten and pressure Saudi Arabia."⁹⁵ Of course, as the Houthis' capabilities and prospects increase, Iran may choose to increase its investment. Likewise, if the issue in Syria gets resolved or Iran is able to cleanly disengage, Iran may choose to redirect those newly available resources to Yemen in order to ensure the survival of a Houthi-Saleh regime.

Third, given the success of the Houthis thus far despite being subjected to the punishing, if sometimes indiscriminate, actions of the Saudi-led coalition⁹⁶ and enjoying only limited support from Iran, it seems clear that this war has the potential to drag on. The utter devastation in Yemen⁹⁷ also suggests that any hope for a sustainable solution will require all parties to come to the table, which seems unlikely in the near future.⁹⁸

From these conclusions, one can deduce a couple of policy implications. First, given how profitable the Houthis have been for Iran, it seems clear that the only way to compel Iran to end its support for them would be to ply it with additional, significant inducements (punitive or compensatory). One suspects that the reason Iran insists on its innocence and parses its words so carefully vis-à-vis supporting the Houthis is to avoid greater punitive measures, being forced to directly confront either Saudi Arabia or the United States, or an intensification of the conflict, potentially disrupting the careful cost/benefit balance Iran has struck. Therefore, one may find an effective inducement amongst these scenarios, though all three run the risk of leading to more bloodshed and chaos rather than less.

Second, given how limited Iran's support has been, it is clear that the lion's share of the destruction has been wrought by Saudi Arabia and its allies. Therefore, if there is a desire to minimize the suffering of Yemen's general population in the short term, a reevaluation of the United States' role in supplying weapons to Saudi Arabia and its allies may be in order. Moreover, it seems only prudent that this reassessment precede any meaningful condemnation or censuring of Iran.

⁹³ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report*, 12.

⁹⁴ Blair, "Preserve Bashar al-Assad," May 10, 2016.

⁹⁵ Bucala et al., "USS Mason," October 19, 2016.

⁹⁶ Hubbard, "U.S. Fingerprints," November 13, 2016.

⁹⁷ "Yemen conflict: humanitarian crisis?," December 6, 2016.

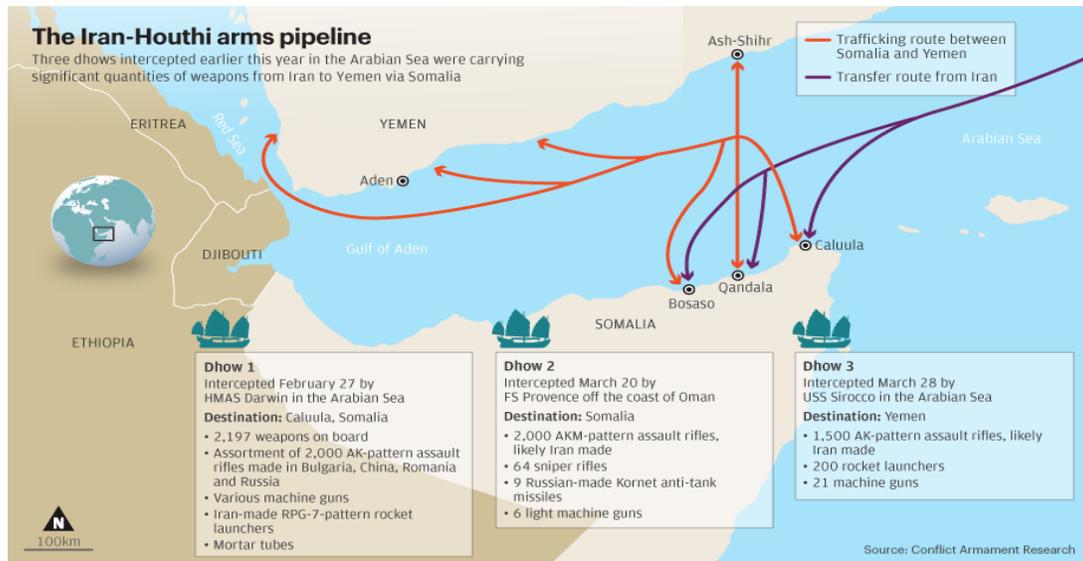
⁹⁸ Farrukh and Fayed, *Yemen Crisis Situation Report*, November 22, 2016.

APPENDIX A: Table I

TABLE I. WEAPONS SMUGGLING INTERDICTIONS IN THE GULF OF ADEN SEPTEMBER 2015 – MARCH 2016 ⁹⁹				
	Crew Number and Nationality	Origin	Destination*	Weapons
September 25, 2015	14 Iranian	Iran	Yemen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 18 anti-armor Concourse shells ○ 54 anti-tank BGM17 shells ○ 15 shell battery kits ○ 4 firing guidance systems ○ 5 binocular batteries ○ 3 launchers ○ 1 launcher holder ○ 3 batteries
February 27, 2016	18 “various” U.S. Navy assessed in email to NBC that the crew were Iranian.	Iran	Yemen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 1989 AK-47 assault rifles ○ 100 rocket-propelled grenade launchers ○ 49 PKM general purpose machine guns ○ 39 PKM spare barrels ○ 20 60mm mortar tubes
March 20, 2016	10 (nationality not released)	Iran	Yemen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Almost 2,000 AK-47 assault rifles ○ 64 Dragunov sniper rifles ○ 9 anti-tank missiles
March 28, 2016	(not released)	Iran	Yemen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 1,500 AK-47 assault rifles ○ 200 rocket-propelled grenade launchers ○ 21 .50 caliber machine guns
<i>* Assessment reported by U.S. navy officials.</i>				

⁹⁹ Zimmerman, “Signaling Saudi Arabia,” April 15, 2016.

APPENDIX B: Map I – Suspected Materiel Shipping Routes



Source: <http://www.thenational.ae/assets/multimedia/interactives/flat-graphics/houthi-arms-pipeline.png>

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