

Conflict in Yemen: Implications for Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations

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Abstract

In contemporary times, when the world is shifting from unipolarity to multipolarity, regional powers seek to gain influence over each other. Yemen's Houthi group is an ally of Iran. Saudi Arabia is involved in countering this alliance by trying to restrain Iran's growing regional outreach. Thus, Saudi involvement aims to maintain its clout and suppress the Iranian role. The conflict in Yemen escalates in an ethnosectarian garb. However, Iran and Saudi Arabia's concern in the Yemen conflict is based on geopolitical and governmental factors. This competition between the two Middle Eastern protagonists to exercise exclusive control in the region contains serious implications for security and stability.

Key Words:

Iran, Saudi Arabia,
Yemen, Sectarian,
Ethnic, Conflict

Introduction

Humans tend to organize themselves in groups to attain security and separate themselves from those not part of their group. Boundary lines are drawn to determine who deserves a share of the group's joint assets. Ethnicity and religion serve the purpose of deciding in-group and out-group. The Middle East contains various schisms, including ethnicity and religion. The Arab-Persian and Shiite-Sunni divides are the most prominent manifestations of these schisms. Saudi Arabia and Iran are part of opposing camps in these divisions and have engaged other actors as well.

The most recent conflicts are the Arab Spring and the conflict in Yemen. The Yemeni conflict is one where regional politics have penetrated the domestic sphere and turned the civil war into an ongoing ethnic and religious conflict. Ethnic conflict, in general, is a conflict in which at least one of the parties considers that it has been discriminated against based on ethnic lines. The parties to the conflict determine their goals and demand a solution along the same ethnic lines. Human beings tend to be divided into Us Vs. Them. They are made to believe their opponents are hostile and threaten their existence. The realistic assumption about the state of affairs is that there is diversity and groups compete. Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry and its impact on the Yemen Civil War is one such case. The conflict was not ethnic but political, yet ethnic and sectarian divides were reflected in the conflict to advance the vested interests of the beneficiaries (Heydarian, 2010).

The territorial area of this research is the Middle East. The study of the ethnosectarian conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is significant as these states have a major influence in the region, and the conflict between the two states in the longer term can significantly impact the region. The region's tribal, sectarian, and ethnic conflicts result from persisting political rivalries, such as the understudied bilateral relationship.

Ginny Hill (2017) covers the various aspects of the war in Yemen. Hill also mentions the ruling system of Yemen, its unification, the conflicts of tribal groups in Yemen, the pattern of hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the large-scale catastrophe in Yemen. Gerald Feierstein (2018) analyzes the historical events that led to the conflict in Yemen, mentioning the causes and effects of the war and the interventions from the neighboring countries. This article also takes into account the role of corruption within the Yemeni government and how Iran and Saudi Arabia's geostrategic and ideological conflict worsened the situation. Andrew Terrill's (2011) analysis of interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia concludes that the major cause of the US attack in Iraq was the ideological competition between these countries. Terrill also opines that the US had exploited Saudi Arabia for its own interests in the region.

The research questions that prompted this study were: Why are Shiite and Sunni facing each other with hostility in Yemen when they have had a history of peaceful coexistence? How has the ethnic and sectarian division concerning Saudi Arabia and Iran been reflected in the Yemen Crisis? What are the stakes of external actors? What are Iran's and Saudi Arabia's domestic conditions and considerations?

The hypothesis of this work is that the recent conflict in Yemen is ethnic and sectarian in appearance. However, over the years, the conflict emerged as the political, economic, and geostrategic competition among Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional influence.

The research methodology is explanatory and deconstructs underlying political, economic, and strategic grievances that resulted in the clash between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The research is based on qualitative data obtained from secondary sources such as books, journals, articles, official websites, and reports. The data was collected using a note-taking technique.

Theoretical Framework

Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT) states that individuals exist in groups competing for goals, power, and resources (Baumeister, 2007). This competition generates prejudices among them and instigates hostility. They draw boundaries to know who is kept in-group and who is out-group and to lay claim over the share of resources that the group holds (Sidanius, 2001). In the case of the conflict in Yemen, it was the competition for political leadership and power consolidation at the domestic level, and this competition made the stakeholders apply Shiite-Sunni labels to self-identify themselves. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for geopolitical dominance caused them to split along ethnosectarian lines.

According to Tedd Robert Gurr's model of conflict formation, four significant elements of a conflict shape the outcome: shared grievances, mobilization of masses, rebellion, and state repression (Goldstone & Gurr et al., 2000). The shared grievances of the Houthis against the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi for high oil prices seemed a constructed rather than inherent grievance, which was initially not based upon ethnic discrimination. However, the identity of Houthis as a Shiite group rebelling against the Sunni Government drew hard ethno-religious demarcations. Houthis, backed by Iran, had the potential to mobilize themselves as a group, and they manifested it by assaulting the presidential palace. Finally, repression from Saudi Arabia-backed state and air strikes launched by Saudi Arabia added to the already existing inter-group anxiety and grievances, which made Houthis coordinate their efforts and build up resistance. Hence, considering the issue's sensitivity, a solution should be sought through compromise and negotiation; the failure of the attempt by the US government suggests that the challenging group will not accept an asymmetric solution to the problem. A solution should be proposed, considering the demands of the Houthis. A brief ceasefire depicts some thaw, yet the conflict has been fought for victory from both sides, therefore a pluralist solution is required to reach a compromise with a positive-sum end.

Overview of the Conflict

Ali Abdel Saleh held power in Yemen for 30 years but lost to Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in 2012. Saleh led Houthi's rebellion against Hadi's government and asked for his resignation. Later on, in 2016, after Hadi had been in exile and the internationally recognized government had been installed, he formed a political coalition with the Houthis. However, Saleh's struggle for power consolidation made him break away from the Houthis and later led to his assassination. On the other hand, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi was president of Yemen at the time of the rebellion. Hadi was vice president before 2012 when Ali Abdullah Saleh lost political leadership to Hadi, who established his government and was subsequently faced with a rebellion by Houthis led by Ali Abdullah Saleh. The conflict was caused by rebellious opposition against the government. From Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's government to the UN's internationally recognized one, the government has been backed by the Saudi and Gulf Arab governments. There has been US aid and UN support to overcome humanitarian losses caused by the conflict.

Regionally, the Shiite-Sunni rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran dominates the governmental and security dynamics. Both these states have strived for regional dominance and continue to do so. It was the involvement of these regional actors that turned the conflict into an ethnosectarian affair. The Shiite Houthis caused discomfort in Saudi Arabia, and it started supporting the Yemeni government against the Houthis. Saudi Arabia launched air strikes upon Houthis and provided the US with a foothold in the conflict. Whereas Houthis reportedly have had military support from Iran, and they launched counter-missile attacks and drones over Saudi Arabia. These cross-border raids escalated the domestic civil war to the regional level. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's attempts to form a coalition with the Gulf States to isolate Houthis also involved other regional state actors.

History of the Conflict

The Middle East has been dominated by Iran and Saudi Arabia. These states claim hegemony in the Persian Gulf region. Both these countries act in pursuit of power, using religion as a tool to maintain power. After 1979, the new Iranian leadership adopted an anti-Western and anti-Shah strategy.

Moreover, it wanted to reunite the Islamic world against Israel and wanted to stand up for the Palestinian Muslims. This Iranian shift of ideology toward an "axis of resistance" in the Islamic world affected Saudi Arabia's role as an "axis of moderation," even though the two countries advocate different branches of Islam: Sunni and Shiite. Saudi Arabia sees itself as the head of the Islamic world where the two holy cities of Islam are located. The realist "self-help system" leads to the competition of power between states. Anarchy in the international system leads to the arms race and balancing behavior among the states. An increase in the power capabilities of one state leads to distrust in other states and forces them to seek a balance of power. Soon after the 1979 Iranian revolution, Iraq waged war on Iran. Fearful of Iran's regional domination, Saudi Arabia supported Iraq financially and militarily in the eight-year-long war. The US support for Iraq also triggered the Iranian government's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons (Okruhlik, [2003](#)). Between 1978 and 1982, Saudis doubled their military expenditure. In the post-Cold War era, Saudi Arabia's relations with the US became stronger, and the regional balance of power shifted in favor of Saudi Arabia. This alliance between Saudi Arabia and the US posed a threat to Iran.

In 2003, after the collapse of Saddam Hussain's government in Iraq, Saudi Arabia once again boosted its arms purchases. More recently, the Saudi formation of an Islamic military alliance in 2015 against terrorism dominated by Sunni majority governments appeared to be aimed at Iran. Also, in May 2017, the US and Saudi Arabia contracted a 110 billion dollar arms sales agreement. This demonstrated how economic wealth was used as an instrument of power. Soon after the Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia started a defense reliance policy toward the US due to Saudi Arabia's limited military capabilities. Saudi Arabia has been a significant oil exporter to the US in recent years. While the Iran-Iraq War was being waged, Saudi Arabia became a strong ally of Iraq and provided military and financial support to Saddam Hussain's government in Iraq. However, Saudi Arabia and Iraq endeavored to contain Iran's ideological and geopolitical role in the region.

Saudi Arabia became a strong US ally (Mahmood, [2016](#)). Iran, in order to counter Saudi Arabia, supported groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Houthis in Yemen. During the Cold War, Saudi Arabia performed an essential role in the international system by joining the US-led capitalist bloc. It joined hands with Pakistan and the US to fight against communism by supporting militant groups against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia funded many of the CIA programs to arm and train the Afghan fighters, i.e., mujahideen. The Saudis also increased oil prices in the latter half of the 1980s to bring the oil-dependent Soviet Union to its knees. Moreover, when in August 1990, Saddam Hussein decided to invade Kuwait, Saudi Arabia sought help from the US, upon which the US sent a coalition force to deter Iraqi forces and expel them from Kuwait.

Recent Events in Yemen

In the Arab Spring of 2011, Iran and Saudi Arabia competed for power and dominance in the region. When the region went through the wave of Arab Spring, local people stood against the authoritarian regimes that were toppling down. The same thing happened in Yemen, where people were already frustrated because of Ali Abdullah Saleh's bad governance. There were popular protests against the rule of Saleh (Salisbury, [2015](#)), who was forced to quit in 2012. After his resignation, his vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, was made the president of Yemen for the transitional period of two years. This occurred through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative of conducting the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). There were 565 delegates from different political and civil society groups (Gaston, [2014](#)). The new government failed to address the issues of the public, and it formed in the same pattern as the Saleh government. The power structures were made up of the same old elites, and attempts at reconciliation were made without catering to the injustices done to the people. This alienated the people, and they rose against the Hadi Government, which led to the armed conflict in Yemen. Iran and Saudi Arabia intervened in view of Yemen's weakened political structure as well as geostrategic and economic importance.

Role of Saudi Arabia

In 2014, the Houthis surged into Yemen and seized the Yemeni capital, Sana. The group demanded lower oil prices and the installation of a new government. However, what stirred ethnic tensions was the fact that the Houthis were perceived to be backed by Shiite Iran and were known for overthrowing the Sunni government. Hence, the conflict, which was otherwise a political struggle, took an ethnic turn when the Iran-backed Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition faced each other with hostility. After the 2014 insurgency, there were rounds of failed negotiations between both parties, and the Houthis left the presidential palace. They forced the resignation of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, who had to rescind his resignation later in December.

Considering the criticality of the situation and perceiving it as a Shiite revolution and expansion, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition together with the Gulf States and declared economic isolation of the Houthis. With the US and Western assistance, Saudi Arabia conducted aerial attacks upon the Houthis. It was after one year of violence that

an internationally recognized government was installed in Yemen, and attempts to reach peace were made. However, in just a few months, a political council was formed between Houthis and ex-leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh. This pattern of political events had an analogy with the Iranian revolution. However, in Yemen, ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh broke away from the Houthis and tried to consolidate power on his own, leading to his assassination. The conflict was like just another civil war, yet the involvement of regional actors along the lines of the ethnosectarian divide penetrated the differences among the masses, and it became a Shiite-Sunni and Persian-Arab conflict. It served as the battleground for external actors, who provided logistic support to turn the internecine differences into a full-fledged conflict that continues to date.

In the post-Second World War era, Yemen was divided into the Yemen Arabic Republic (North) and the People's Democratic Republic (South). After the end of the Cold War, it was reunited in 1990 and formed the Republic of Yemen. The first parliamentary elections were held in 1993, and Ali Abdullah Saleh became the first president of Yemen. Saleh led an autocratic regime. He came to power in North Yemen in 1978 and in United Yemen in 1990. He continued his rule for 33 years. His rule was the worst in its form. Bushra-al-Maqtari terms it as "33 years of injustice, repression, and continuous wars" (Browning, 2017). For such an extended period, he adopted the following practices: To sustain his centralized government, he used the clientelist network of patronage, in which he bought people's loyalty by offering different kinds of benefits. Saleh created an unstable system with an environment of unpredictability, which he utilized to pursue his own interests. He led society into different segments and tribes under the "Divide and Rule policy." He appointed his family members to powerful positions to control oil and gas revenues and foreign aid. His son Ahmed Saleh was made head of the Republican Guard unit of Yemen, commanding 80,000 troops.

Al-Hadi's government was fragile and operated through foreign-supported actors. It worked for the interests of the Saudi Arabian Government and thus termed as a puppet regime of Saudi Arabia. The Hadi administration was reliant on the technical, military, monetary, and political support of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition. Its interests were to curb the opposition groups of Yemen, e.g., Houthis and Al-Qaeda, and hence defeat the rebellion. The Saudi-led coalition of UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, the US, France, and the UK supported the government.

The US invasion of Iraq, as well as the Arab Spring, had an effect on the Yemen conflict. These events led to the strengthening of Houthis, Hamas, and al-Qaeda, which further led to the escalation of conflict.

Role of Iran

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, two things overwhelmingly shaped its collective identity viz. religion and history. These two factors have influenced how Iranians perceive themselves, their place in the world, and threats from others. Iran's history has been wrought with foreign powers' interference. The arrival of extra-regional powers weakened Iran and strengthened its regional rivals. The Iran-Russia wars during Qajar rule, which brought about the disintegration of Iran, deepened Iran's distrust of foreign powers. Moreover, the division of Iran as a sphere of influence between Russia and Britain and the subsequent exploitation and weakening of the Qajar dynasty fortified the deep-rooted hatred of foreign interference in Iran's national subconscious.

A more recent instance of history was the Iran-Iraq War. The coming together of all of Iran's regional rivals under a superpower patron bent on destroying the Islamic Republic's revolutionary fervor was an eye-opening event. The blatant use of chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein in explicit violation of international arms control treaties and the abysmal response of the international community to chemical weapons being used on civilians inflicted a deep wound on the Iranian national psyche. The war compellingly shaped Iran's strategies and threat perception. Most prominently, the war was a turning point for Iran's ballistic missile program (BMP). Iranian cities were showered with missiles. So, BMP became closely connected with the Iranian sense of self-reliance and distrust of the West.

Religion has also played a role in Iran's perception of self and others. Iranians look towards Imam Hussein bin Ali and his Battle of Karbala against the unjust Yazid. Imam Hussein encapsulated martyrdom and resistance as virtues of victory. He embraced martyrdom while fighting for what he believed was just and proper. The Iranians, too, share this standard of victory and defeat. Victory does not mean defeating the enemy in battle but fighting in the way of God against His enemies, regardless of the outcome. Ayatollah Khomeini put forth ideas about *Mustakberin* and *Mustazafin*. *Mustakberin* is the Arabic term for the haughty and arrogant. Khomeini states that the *Mustakberin*— who refuse to submit to God out of their pride — are held by God as enemies and so, by extension, are the enemies of all Muslims (Taremi, 2014). In Arabic, *mustazafin* is the term for the oppressed and powerless. Khomeini used this term to refer to the weak masses who lived in the Third World. Khomeini's role perception of Iran is thus that of the leader of the *Mustazafin*, who is leading in the battle against the *Mustakberin*.

These factors combine to shape Iran's domestic policies and, subsequently, its foreign policy behavior. These are mentioned below. Firstly, the principle of *maslahat-e-nizam*, or expediency of the regime, was established by Ayatollah Khomeini. It is the ultimate precept guiding Iran's foreign policy. In letters to then-President Ali Khamenei and the Council of Guardians, Khomeini stated that in case of a conflict between the Sharia and government, the latter would take precedence over the former because unless the regime survives, the Sharia cannot be implemented (Eisenstadt, 2015). Therefore, even though the regime may seem ideological in its orientation, its foreign policy is ultimately driven by realpolitik – preservation and survival of the system and *raison d'etat*. We have seen that, through history, in many instances, Iran avoided risky adventures and left Shiite groups to their fates, like during the capture of the Afghan city Mazar-i-Sharif by the Taliban, who then massacred thousands of Shiites.

Similarly, during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, Iran did not intervene in favor of its allies, neither did it allow Iranian volunteers to go. Furthermore, this cost-benefit analysis has also led Iran to make temporary alliances with strategic enemies. For example, it worked with Sunni Salafi-jihadist groups like Ansar al-Islam to gain leverage over the Kurds and worked with al-Qaeda in Iraq against the US.

Secondly, Iran's domestic environment is characterized by a heightened anti-US sentiment. The West was actively involved in overthrowing the government of Iran's legitimately elected prime minister, Muhammad Mossadeq, to bring the Shah back to power. Moreover, the US' steadfast support of Saddam Hussein was seen by Tehran as conclusive evidence of the US commitment to destroy Iran. That is why Khomeini's foreign policy was to push the US out of the Middle East physically, politically, and diplomatically. This pillar continues to provide a foundation for Iranian foreign policy. It views Europe and America with mistrust and suspicion and is openly hostile towards them. Iran aims to bring back its glorious past and restore its rightful position in the world, and it sees the US and Europe as a hindrance and at war with Iran ever since the revolution. Iran views the US as the embodiment of forces of "global arrogance."

Moreover, it also has a profound distrust of international organizations, including the UN and IAEA, and does not regard international treaties concluded with or by the West. This is because international treaties were not able to stop Iraq from showering chemical missiles on Iranian cities. However, the decision to start nuclear negotiations with the US and P5+1 was seen as the leadership following in the footsteps of the pragmatism of Imam Hasan bin Ali, who signed a treaty with Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan to avoid bloodshed among Muslims.

Thirdly, the Iranian military and nuclear doctrine is characterized by strategic ambiguity. The Iranian leadership uses strategic ambiguity to confuse its enemies. Strategic ambiguity is especially adopted when unveiling a new weapon. Iran exploited ambiguity in its past nuclear negotiations with the EU-3 for a unilateral advantage. After some time, the EU-3 diplomats made sure that if Iran was trying not to be specific about a certain point, that particular point be made explicitly clear to stop Iran from later taking advantage of it. Furthermore, a desire to preserve ambiguity was why Iran strongly rejected the US' suggestion of establishing a hotline between the two countries' commanders. Uncertainty enhanced Iran's leverage while confidence-building measures only held up the secular status quo.

Fourthly, Iran's "way of war" is through proxy warfare. This method minimizes risks vis-a-vis the adversaries and gives Iran plausible deniability. The central reason why Iran adopted proxy warfare is the deep wound it still nurses from the Iran-Iraq War, where the human cost paid by Iran was tremendous. Therefore, now, Iran will fight to the last of its regional proxies rather than committing its troops to battle. Also, these proxies enhance Iran's ability to shape regional dynamics and expand its influence. They play a significant deterrence and retaliatory function in the strategic calculations of the Iranian leadership. Hezbollah, for example, is critical to Iran's regional deterrence posture. It is also imperative in any retaliation that Iran plans against US or Israeli strikes.

Lastly, Iran adopts strategic patience instead of immediate, head-on confrontations. It induces indirection and attrition in its behavior and often takes time to retaliate to acts of aggression at a place and time of its choosing. This strategy is also in line with Iran's political culture, which likes to operate over an extended period since senior political and military leadership positions are characterized by continuity and are not affected by Iranian elections, most eminently the Supreme Leader. Therefore, Iran takes on the US only indirectly through proxies. We saw how when the US authorized covert operations to destabilize Iran, Saudi Hezbollah retaliated six months later, in June 1996, by carrying out the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia (Pollack, 2005). Conclusively, religion and history i.e., ethno-sectarianism, provide some fundamental principles like *maslahat-e-nizam*, strategic ambiguity, anti-West sentiment, proxy warfare, and strategic patience. Throughout the post-revolutionary period, these elements have been most prominent in Iran's strategic thought and threat perception and, thus, provide a reasonable chance of success in predictions about Iran's future foreign policy behavior.

Conclusion

The US has been present in the region, apparently for counter-terrorism. The Houthi attacks do not directly threaten the US, but the US has shown concerns for its ally, Saudi Arabia. The US designated Houthis as terrorists, however, the designation was later lifted. The UN intervened in the conflict in 2016 when it installed an internationally recognized government in the state and tried to broker peace. Throughout the conflict, it kept raising its voice for the civilians caught in it. The UN highlighted that designating Houthis as terrorists will, on the one hand, further fuel up the conflict, while on the other hand, cutting off aid and supplies to those terrorists will affect the working of the UN and other NGOs in the region. The ultimate sufferers would be the ordinary citizens.

Since 2014, Yemen has been under a constant barrage of ongoing strikes from both sides. It is reported that four million people have been displaced, and 100,000 have lost their lives. Saudi Arabia and Iran have always appeared as influential actors in the Middle East. Still, neither state has overcome its religious and ethnic differences for regional harmony and security interests. The focused research and historical events prove that to become a regional hegemon and gain autonomy in the region, it would become necessary to pacify Yemen as the conflict in Yemen was along the Shiite-Sunni and Persian-Arab divide. However, over the years, geopolitical and geostrategic competition has emerged between the two leading regional protagonists.

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