

The Interminable Yemen Crisis: Saudi-Iranian Regional Conflict and Absence of Cooperation

Malik Waqar Aslam

Lecturer, University of Management and Technology UMT:

waqar.aslam@umt.edu.pk

Dr. Noreen Naz

Visiting Assistant Prof., Department of Islamic Studies, GC Women

University Faisalabad:

Noreenazam313@gmail.com

Imran Ali

M. Phil History, Minhaj University, Lahore:

imranali06899@gmail.com

Abstract

In the region of Middle East, two of the powerful regional states are engaged in a hegemonic power competition which is often referred to as proxy war. Saudi Arabia and Iran both support different states in various conflicts in the Middle East depending upon their interests. The civil war in Yemen was initially a domestic conflict between local actors, but it quickly aggravated and regional powers started to exercise their influence making it another addition in the proxy war. This research paper aims to explore that even after 5 years the crisis is still ongoing and the regional powers, despite the deteriorating humanitarian crisis, have yet to come to cooperative terms. This paper aims to highlight the factors that are hindering cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Keywords: *Middle East, Yemen Crisis, Yemen Civil War, Saudi-Iran Conflict, Proxy War, Offensive Realism*

Introduction

The war in Yemen is regarded as a massive humanitarian crisis of the 21st century¹. And is also known as a forgotten conflict as it didn't get as much media coverage as it deserved. This lack of media attention and international spot light is due to it's complex nature of war. This

¹ UNICEF. (2019, November 30). *Yemeni humanitarian situation report*. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from UNICEF.org:

https://www.unicef.org/appeals/files/UNICEF_Yemen_Humanitarian_Situation_Report_Nov_2019.pdf

The Interminable Yemen Crisis: Saudi-Iranian Regional Conflict and Absence of Cooperation

complexity gave birth to a substandard comprehension of multi-layered conflict by different actors. The constant influence exerted by regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and international community like USA, is often belittled. This lead to a focus that was more inclined towards the domestic variables and actors in this conflict. It is necessary to understand the influence of external and internal variables in the Yemen Crisis to understand the conflict. Only by understanding the different dynamics, then only one can reach towards a concrete solution which will guarantee stability in the Middle Eastern region.

The war in Yemen, which started in 2015 as a civil war, is often portrayed as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia in which the involvement by both these countries is regarded as equal. But a close analysis tells that it is not the case; when compared to Iranian overt military support to Syrian rebels, Iranian support to rebels in Yemen is quite the opposite. But as for Saudi Arabia, Saudis are involved in the affairs of Yemen for the past many years. The ruling family of Saud considered control over Yemen as a matter of honor and prestige². But when compared to Iran, Iranians have a limited interest in Yemen over the years.

The contemporary crisis in Yemen started in 2015 when the President of a transitional government, Abd Rabbu Mansoor Hadi was forced into self-exile by the Northern rebel group known as Houthis. It happened due to a failed negotiation between the Houthi tribal group and the incumbent government President on the matter of future political structure of Yemen. But it is not that simple. The conflict has many complexities attached to it that are often ignored or marginalized. To understand this conflict in its entirety, starting from 2015 would be a reductionist approach³ because that would ignore the years of political developments which lead to civil war plus the interests of two major regional powers in the region, Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia⁴.

Problem Statement this research article poses that the Yemeni crisis started out as a domestic instability, but quickly turned out to be a regional conflict when international actors intervened, making it a multi layered and

² Peter, S. (2019). *Saudi Arabia's Odd-Couple Relationship with Yemen*. Chatham House.

³ Hero.D. (2018). *Cold war in the Islamic World, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the struggle for regional supremacy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Peter, S. (2019). *Saudi Arabia's Odd-Couple Relationship with Yemen*. Chatham House

complex regional challenge. The two major actors; Saudi Arabia and Iran have their own interests vested in the war. This Saudi-Iran factor influences the domestic actors and their stance in the civil war. This multi layered conflict consequently supports the instability in the region and has turned out to be a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran⁵. The Saudis with help of other GCC and US are supporting the armed forces of Yemen, on the contrary, Houthi rebels are supported by the Iranian regime. The tussle between the regional powers has a direct effect on the domestic state and civil war in Yemen. The humanitarian crisis has reached devastating levels and there is no end in sight even after 5 years⁶. If not resolved, proxy war will lead to more challenges and instability for the region and worse, devastation for the people of Yemen. In order to achieve stability and avoid worsening the crisis, Saudi Arabia and Iran should reach a consensus via negotiations.

The influence of external factors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran on Yemen can be understood by various elements. Yemen has a border with Saudi Arabia on the northern side, therefore it has a geographical significance for the Saudis. On the other hand, Iran is supporting the Houthi rebels, located in the northern part of Yemen⁷. It is speculated that Iran is involved in sharing intelligence reports, delivering weapons and ammunition and other military supplies to rebels. Both these states are engaged in power politics and their engagement has impacted the region of Middle East. Regional power supremacy has hampered and complicated the efforts of conflict resolution in Yemen⁸.

As established earlier that Iran has a limited interest in Yemen, when compared to Syrian case. And Saudi Arabia has a much larger interest. In the initial stages of the conflict, Iran recognized that Yemen is of great importance to Saudi Arabia and was willing to negotiate to reach a common ground. But with the passage of time, and increasing deaths and military costs, Iran could have asserted on the negotiations. As was the case in Syria when Iran said that ‘no one can win Syria’, but it wasn’t the

⁵ Feierstein, G. M. (2019). *Yemen: The 60-year war*. Washington DC: Middle East Institute.

⁶ G., H. (2017). *Yemen endures, civil war, Saudi adventurism, and the future of Arabia*. London: Hurst & Company.

⁷ Juneau, T. (2016). *Iran’s policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A limited return on a modest investment*. International Affairs.

⁸ Hokayem, E. &. (2016). *The War in Yemen*. Survival Global Politics and Strategy.,

The Interminable Yemen Crisis: Saudi-Iranian Regional Conflict and Absence of Cooperation

case in Yemen. The conflict in Yemen continued despite all the costs and deaths and it even grew tenser between the two states.

This research article aims to solve this very puzzle. Some of the research questions that come to mind are: What are factors that impeded the cooperation and aggravated the conflict between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with respect to Yemen crisis? The point that creates a puzzle is that given that the interests of both regional powers are not same, expected benefits of war for Iran is not as same as Saudi Arabia, so why didn't they opt for a compromise and backed away. States being the rational actors goes into wars when the benefits from war outweigh the costs of war. The Yemen crisis generated a first opportunity for both Saudi Arabia and Iran to initiate cooperation which could have defused the situation in Yemen. This could have been a feasible opportunity because there were other regional conflicts in which both these states were engaged, and Yemen crisis was not as leveraged as other conflicts. And lastly, how the intervention of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Yemen war is part of a much greater proxy war in the region?

It is necessary for Saudi Arabia and Iran to reach a consensus if the Yemen crisis is to be defused. There are a range of subjects on which both states can reach a conclusion that would be accepted by both states. But cooperation between these two states is the first step. In order to get to this first step of cooperation, the negotiators and facilitators need to understand that what exactly are the factors that are hampering cooperation? It is only through dissection and comprehension of these elements that Iran and Saudi Arabia can negotiate and reach a conclusion. Moreover, when a common ground is established, it would be easier for both states to carry out agreements and reconciliation of other conflicts in the region. This is precisely why the Yemen crisis has significance for both states. Another important aspect is that the Yemen crisis hasn't been able to gather much attention from researchers as well as international media outlets when compared to other regional conflicts such as Israel-Palestinian conflict and Syrian civil war.

Theoretical Framework

Though there are various realist approaches that can explain and answer the puzzle posed earlier. But in my analysis of the Yemen war and Saudi-Iranian power struggle, I will opt Structural Realism and in Structural Realism, the paper applies John Mearshiemer's theory of Offensive Realism. Mearshiemer argues in his theory that great powers constantly

vies for power and hegemony, a similar argument is also made by classical realism⁹. Offensive Realism's five core assumptions are; international system being anarchic, survival is main priority of great powers, great powers are rational and inherently possess certain offensive military capabilities and lastly, the lack of trust is rampant in international system, states can never be certain about other state's intentions¹⁰. In this research article the study will apply these assumptions to unearth the reason or reasons of non-cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Furthermore, the paper will also try to apply the last assumption of lack of trust between these two states which will help answer the research question. Offensive Realism will also help provide a thorough analysis of Yemeni war and its connection with Saudi-Iran proxy war and hegemonic efforts by both states.

Historical Contextualization of Yemen Crisis

The official political and governing structure of Yemen was the Imamate until 1962. These imams were Shiites and mostly consisted of Zaydi tribe. They were located in the northern part of Yemen and these imams mostly relied on the Sayyids. The Sayyids claimed that they belonged to the lineage of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. These Sayyids were the officials on top of the imams and were regarded as the de-facto ruler. They also supervised the taxation system and judicial system of the state¹¹. The Sayyids developed a system of oligarchy where they took control of the administration, and other key systems of the country and became the primary and direct beneficiary of the state which resulted in a divide between the north and south of Yemen. Due to the concentration of power in the hands of the Sayyids, nepotism and corruption started to pose threat to the stability and growth of the state. But still the Sayyid's lacked full authority because the military comprised of different tribes that only answered to the imams. This resulted in the lack of coercive powers at their disposal Sayyids. But there were soldiers in the army that belonged to the Zaydi tribes, consequently, the Sayyids in the oligarchy and the Zaydis in

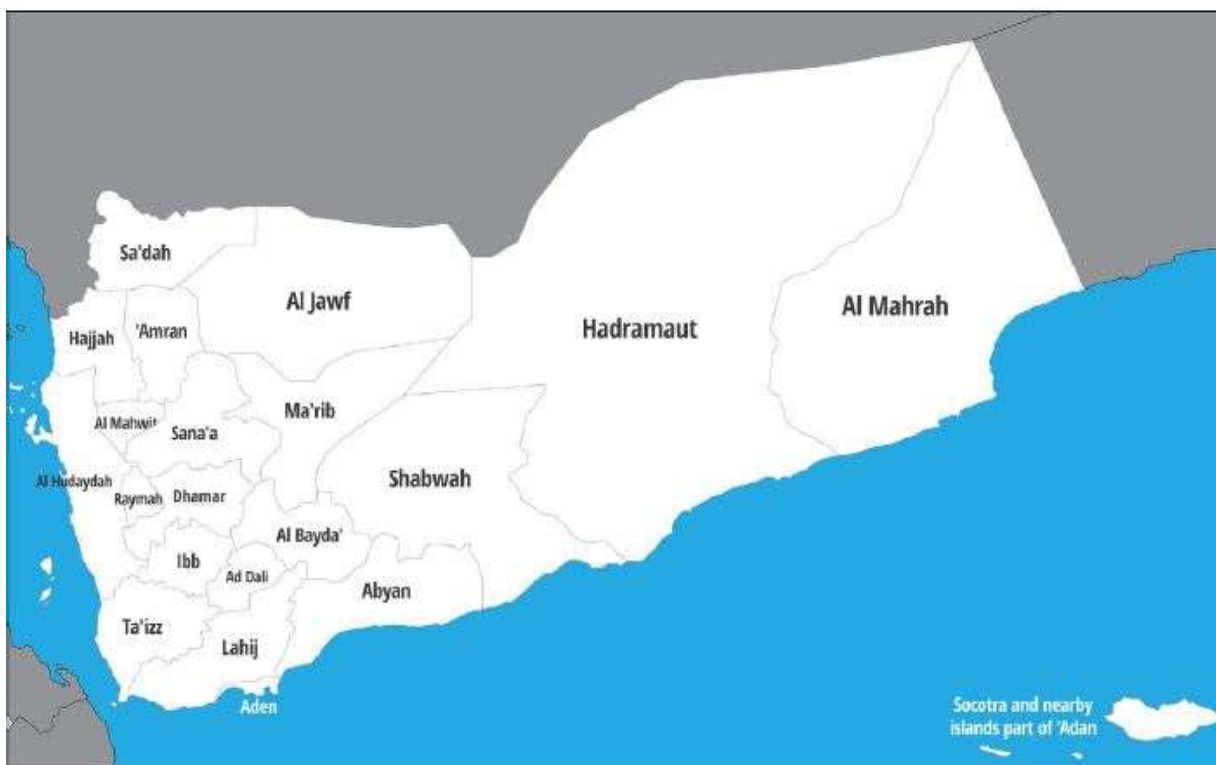
⁹ D., W. P. (2017). *An introduction to International Security*. Routledge.

¹⁰ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York: Norton and Company.

¹¹ Nonneman, G. (1997). *The Yemen Republic: From Unification and Liberalization to Civil War and Beyond*. In *The Middle East in the new world order* (pp. 61-96). London: McMillan Press.

The Interminable Yemen Crisis: Saudi-Iranian Regional Conflict and Absence of Cooperation

the army exploited their power and discriminated against the Sunni Shafi majority in south¹².



Alongside corruption and nepotism, another source of unrest was brought to Yemen by Yemeni students who were students in foreign universities. They brought new ideas and demanded reforms in the political system of Yemen. The revolutionary ideas aim at the political structure of the Yemen posed a direct threat to the Sayyids and their rule. Consequently, the Sayyids were against these reforms and started to quell the student uprising¹³. They sidelined the students and took steps that made the reforms impossible to imply. This led to a further divide in the societal

¹² Nonneman, G. (1997). *The Yemen Republic: From Unification and Liberalization to Civil War and Beyond*. In *The Middle East in the new world order* (pp. 61-96). London: McMillan Press

¹³ Nonneman, G. (1997). *The Yemen Republic: From Unification and Liberalization to Civil War and Beyond*. In *The Middle East in the new world order* (pp. 61-96). London: McMillan Press

strata between the educated youth and the Sayyids. At that time, students and Sunni Southerners were both at the opposition end and were demanding justice from the Imams and the Sayyids at the North. The students and the Sunnis assembled at Aden, a British protectorate state, far from the Sayyids and the Imams. There they started to operationalize and materialize their resistance movement.

This movement led to the fall of the Imamate system in 1962 ending the rule of the Sayyids and abolishing the Imamate political system. This also led to the collapse of socio economic structure of the state and Yemen started to lose its resources gradually. The high hopes of people associated with the revolution were crushed due to the ground realities of limited resources and lack of seasoned professionals to bring change and prosperity¹⁴. These circumstances led to reliance on the foreign assistance, especially Saudi Arabia. Though this assistance gave a much needed economic and political support but it was not a long term governance solution. Along with economic challenge, the Yemeni society was also facing disunity in their societal fabric due to tribal allegiances and loyalties. The revolution failed to unite the Yemeni people as one nation.

Shortly, after the revolution the northern region decided to unite and made their own state known as Yemeni Arab Republic¹⁵. This initiated a civil war between the young military officials grouped with radical youth against the supporters of the Imams in the northern region. The conflict quickly escalated to full-fledged war and international actors started to intervene and take sides. The Egyptian forces joined hands and supported the revolutionaries. Whereas, the Saudis provided financial assistance to the Imam Royalists extending the war till 1970¹⁶. The revolutionaries demanded to end the divide of north and south via inclusion of Qahtani Zaydi as the rulers. They considered Qahtani Zaydi as the real identity of the Yemen as they were the direct descendants of the people in Yemen even before the advent of Islam. This nationalist narrative also started a war against British in the city of Aden. This war started in 1963, lasted till 1967 and ended on a conclusion and an agreement which established the

¹⁴ Orkaby, A. (2017). *The North Yemen civil war and the failure of the Federation of South Arabia*. Middle Eastern Studies.

¹⁵ Orkaby, A. (2017). *The North Yemen civil war and the failure of the Federation of South Arabia*. Middle Eastern Studies.

¹⁶ Nonneman, G. (1997). *The Yemen Republic: From Unification and Liberalization to Civil War and Beyond*. In *The Middle East in the new world order* (pp. 61-96). London: McMillan Press

The Interminable Yemen Crisis: Saudi-Iranian Regional Conflict and Absence of Cooperation

Democratic Republic of Yemen in the southern region. At this point, Yemen was divided in two states, a state in north and a state in south, but the significant element was the Qahtani nationalist narrative; an idea that was to unite the whole of Yemen into a single identity beyond the tribal loyalties and division.

After the revolutionary wars the socio-economic structure of Yemen got devastated. There was little to no progress and things got deteriorated. Lawlessness and power struggle hampered social welfare. There were various assassinations in 1970s but eventually in 1978 Ali Abdullah Al Saleh took to the office and surprised the whole Yemen. He ruled for 30 years and in his tenure, he revamped the bureaucratic system, and focused on neglected and poor regions of YAR. He also worked on the unification of the society but periodic revolts hindered the process. But the breakthrough eventually came when oil fields were discovered in the bordering region of YAR and PDRY¹⁷. The oil revenue played role in the mitigating tensions between the rival factions. A series of long talks and agreements resulted in the much-awaited unification and Republic of Yemen was established.

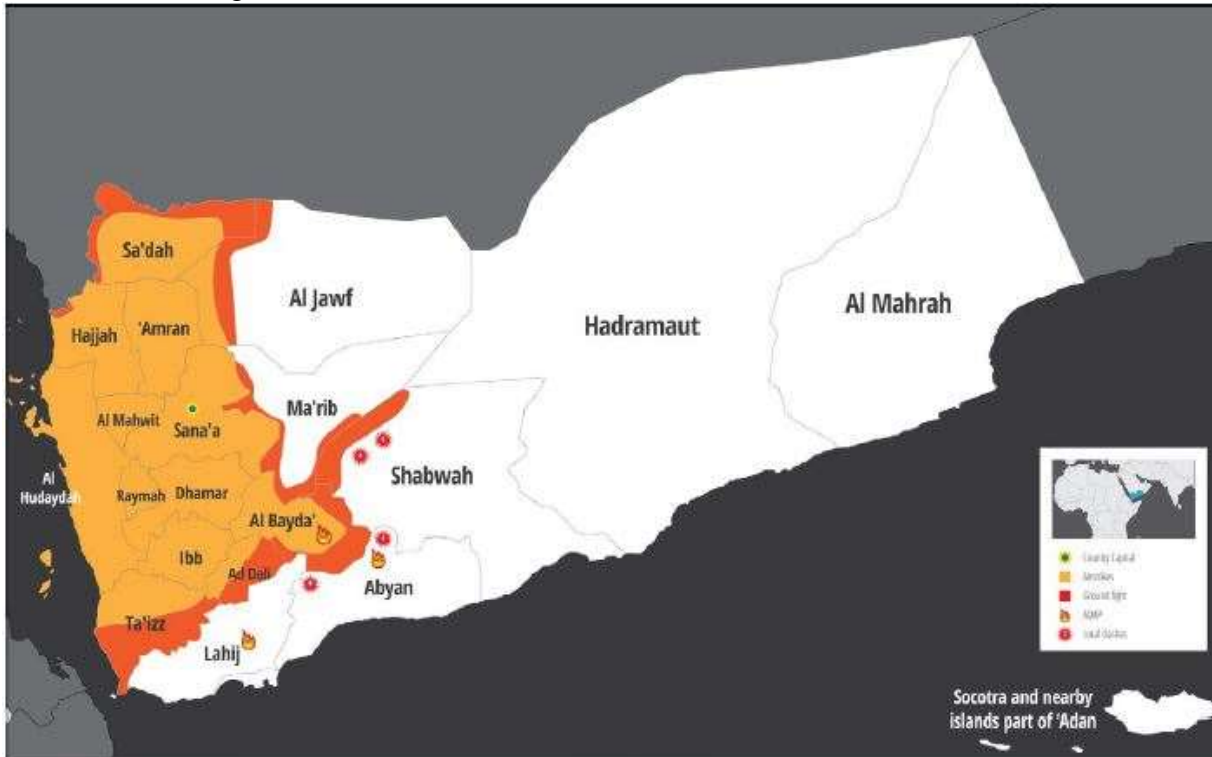
Though unification was widely welcomed but the division wasn't just related to identities, the economic system of both states was different to the core. The former YAR had a more capitalist approach amalgamated with conservative Islamic values. On the contrary, the PDRY had a close contact with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and had a socialist economic system supported by secular values. The unification also posed a threat to Saleh's elitist power; which was expected to dwindle after the unification. The agreement right after the unification focused on equal share of power, an equal share in economic progress and a fair distribution of political offices for both north and south.

As the years went by, corruption and nepotism stick with oil revenues of the state and Saleh strengthened his elite network and consolidated his regime. Meanwhile, in northern Zaydi tribe, Hussain Badr addin al-Houthi, educated in Iran and a cleric by profession, openly criticized Saleh's regime and started a youth movement in the 90s. This movement gained momentum after the US war on terror after 9/11. The Houthi youth started mass protests against the US army involvement in the region. Houthis built their movement systematically and used mass media to attract masses.

¹⁷ Feierstein, G. M. (2019). *Yemen: The 60-year war*. Washington DC: Middle East Institute.

They also started opposing Saleh's regime at massive level. The fear of government overthrow led to the conflicts with the insurgent groups and government forces.

These conflicts carried on and turned into guerilla warfare. But the conflict got attention when the rebels were targeted by the government via air strikes in 2018. The air strikes were carried out in the Sa'ada region, the area bordering Saudi Arabia. Since President Saleh wanted to securitize the issue and pose the Houthis as regional threat, he proclaimed that the Houthi movement was supported by the Iranian regime and the weapons being used by Houthis were delivered by Iran¹⁸. Naturally, Saudi Arabia and other gulf states were alarmed. Moreover, in 2011, the Arab Spring movement also reached Yemen which put a lot of pressure on Saleh, who was already in a compromised position. Protests grew and people lost confidence in the government.



¹⁸ Salisbury, P. (2015). *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*. Chatham House The Royal Institute of International Affairs.

The Interminable Yemen Crisis: Saudi-Iranian Regional Conflict and Absence of Cooperation

Assessing the situation in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the GCC reached a decision that Saleh was not capable to ensure stability in Yemen, pressurized Saleh and made him resign from his position. His vice-president Abdo Rabbo Mansur Hadi was elected as the President. His transitional government initiated a National Dialogue Conference which the GCC agreement demanded¹⁹. The NDC objective was to produce certain progressive changes in the constitution which would transform governance system in Yemen. But the NDC failed to deliver and promises made were quickly vanished²⁰. NDC was a poor choice to solve intractable problems. This failure of NDC strengthened the divide in Yemen, the division which was now based not only on tribal basis but also on religiously. Houthis realized that Hadi's government was incapable of achieving any stability, launched an offensive in north which led to the flee of Hadi. In 2015, Saudi-GCC led coalition initiated an operation known as, "Operation Decisive Storm" which included air strikes that targeted Houthi regions.

The conflict that started as domestic instability shaped into a civil war and later evolved into regional conflict involving international actors and regional powers. The involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and their support to respective actors led to a war for power and dominance in the region. As of now the conflict continues and the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran has gained utmost priority in resolving the crisis. Yemen crisis is regarded as one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world where 2.4 million people have been displaced and close to 90% of people are facing water and food shortages and need urgent assistance.

The Power Politics and Saudi-Iran Regional Hegemonic Competition

The Yemen crisis has become a multi-layered conflict consisting of international actors. With the intervention of regional powers as parties to the conflict, Saudi Arabia and Iran have a direct control in prolonging or mitigating the crisis. The Yemen crisis can be resolved with the cooperation and negotiation between both regional powers. But that is not the case. Mearshiemer's theory of offensive realism explains that it is the goal of every state to especially the regional powers to attain power and

¹⁹ Schmitz, C. (2014). *Yemen's National Dialogue*. The Middle East Institute.

²⁰ Salisbury, P. (2015). *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*. Chatham House The Royal Institute of International Affairs.

maximize power to establish dominance over neighboring states²¹. As attaining global hegemony is not possible in contemporary times, regional powers seek to maximize their powers in the region to achieve regional hegemony. In case of Middle East, a continuous effort by Saudi Arabia and Islamic Republic of Iran is seen in consolidating power and hegemony. Though the two states are not engaged in an overt conflict with each other, however, their indirect and covert support to like-minded regimes and rebel groups show their struggle for regional supremacy. Throughout the history their involvement in different Middle Eastern conflicts shows divergent paths, interests and strategic intentions. Their contest often determines the stability of the region especially in the case of Arab Spring. According to John Mearsheimer, in order to attain hegemonic power, a state has to stop the rise of another political hegemon. Saudi Arabia was wary of Iran since the Islamic revolution came in Iran in 1979. Saudi Arabia's main fear was the import of Islamic revolution to other parts of the region via Iran.

The hegemonic power struggle is also evident when we analyze the case of Iraq war in 2003 and Lebanon war in 2006. The states, to gain relative power and expand their dominance, supported different sides, essentially to hinder the each other's influence. They intervened in these wars to gain new alliances and secure allies to cement their position as regional power. Moreover, when the world knew about Iran's nuclear ambitions, Saudi Arabia regarded it as a threat to itself and other GCC states. Then again, according to Mearshiemer's theory, attaining nuclear arsenals means that a state would be more likely to achieve hegemony as it has possess immense power to inflict destruction at massive level. The Saudi fear for Iranian nuclear program gathered momentum and accreditation when Iran refused to comply with the terms and conditions of the IAEA²². Furthermore, Iranian strategic advancement in the region and economic progress was perceived as Saudi's dominating position become more threatened and exposed. The Saudi's realized that Iran's military support and involvement in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon and their unwavering support to Hizbulah were a new way to gain and attain regional hegemony²³. This gain in Iranian

²¹ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York: Norton and Company.

²² Samore, G. A. (2015). *The Iran nuclear deal A definitive guide*. Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

²³ Wehrey, F. K. (2009). *Contention on the Periphery: Saudi-Iranian Relations and the Conflicts in Lebanon and Palestine*. RAND Corporation.

The Interminable Yemen Crisis: Saudi-Iranian Regional Conflict and Absence of Cooperation

power, if seen through the lens of offensive realism, constitutes that Iran has offensive intentions in future and will engage in a power gain competition with Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the Saudi's also identify Iran as a threat to their proxy forces in the region.

Mearsheimer argues that where there is no authority or supra-national structure, the relations among states are governed by uncertainty and unpredictability²⁴. Saudi Arabia and Iran both are uncertain about each other's intentions and that is further aggravated by the lack of diplomatic ties and communication. This also leads to an assumption that uncertain intentions of one state will lead to another state's offensive stance and power maximization. Every action of state is then calculated through the lens of insecurity and imminent threat. For this reason, an approximate power gain of one state is carefully assessed and determines the action of the competing state. The reaction is often misunderstood and exaggerated due to uncertainty which consequently results in unwanted military confrontations and disasters.

The geopolitical location of Yemen is of utmost priority to Saudi Arabia. It is in the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia to gain influence in the southern Arabian Peninsula in order to counter any threat and to consolidate its regime²⁵. In case of Yemen, any political instability is alarming for Saudis and Saudi armed forces always gets alert when there is any conflict in Yemen. Since the abolition of system of Imamte in Yemen in 1962, constant conflicts and ravaging civil war hardly created any opportunity for a progressive and functioning Yemen. The failed state status of Yemen was perceived as a security threat by the Saudis especially after the six Sa'ada wars from 2004 till 2010. Moreover, the Arab Spring revolution inspired Yemeni youth to take to the streets demanding regime change was also deem as a challenge to the Saudi regime. To maximize power in the region, and counter any security threat to the state, the Saudi regime launched an offensive against the northern insurgents Houthis. The resistance which Saudi armed forces faced through the hand of Houthis caused a fear that

²⁴ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. New York: Norton and Company

²⁵ Seliktar, O. &. (2020). *Proxies in the Gulf and Beyond: Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Principalities, and Yemen*. In &. F. O. Seliktar, Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

these rebels are being supported by the Iranians²⁶. Both presidents of Yemen Saleh and Hadi also asserted this narrative that the Houthis were supported by Iran. The Houthi-Iranian nexus also meant that Iran aimed to counter the power maximization and domination of Saudi Arabia and instead Iran itself wanted to rise in the region.

When we frame the Yemen crisis in the larger proxy war image, couple of regional powers with hegemonic designs is a threat to the very existence of the state. A conflict in Yemen almost always alarms the Saudis and in turn they intervene. Any conflict in southern Arabian Peninsula requires Saudis to intervene via coercive measures. Similarly, during the Iraq war in 2003, Iran's intervention in Iraq was due to its close proximity to the conflict. Furthermore, offensive realism also consolidates the assumption that conflict provides for expansion and pursuance of hegemonic interests to regional powers²⁷. Saudi Arabia and Iran both took conflicts as an opportunity to exert their influence as well as maximize their powers in the region, regardless of their religious identities or goals.

The Lack of Trust Factor in Saudi-Iran Cooperation Predicament

The previous factor illustrated above highlighted the rational of both Saudi Arabia and Iran in maximization of regional power and consolidation of survival and security. This factor deals with the paranoia faced by both Saudi Arabia and Iran related to each other. This will further explain how this lack of trust and paranoia is hampering the cooperation between both states, and that too not only in Yemen but also elsewhere in the region. Kenneth Waltz argued that, "In any closely competitive system, it may seem that one is either paranoid or a loser²⁸." Iran's involvement in various Middle Eastern conflict, for example the Syrian civil war, increases the paranoia of Saudi Arabia of growing Iranian influence and hegemonic power expansion. This suspicion and fear of Saudi Arabia hampers the cooperation process on Yemen. This lack of trust is mutual, fear and

²⁶ Seliktar, O. &. (2020). *Proxies in the Gulf and Beyond: Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Principalities, and Yemen*. In &. F. O. Seliktar, Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁷ Snyder, G. H. (2002). *Mearsheimer's World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay*. International Security.

²⁸ Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

The Interminable Yemen Crisis: Saudi-Iranian Regional Conflict and Absence of Cooperation

uncertain intention is mutual between both states. The conflicts of Syria, Iraq and Yemen grouped together and created a Shiite arc of influence which hampers Saudi design of regional hegemony and also pose a survival threat to Saudi regime. This highlights the factor that geopolitical goals and sectarian politics are not mutually exclusive. This Shiite arc also poses a threat to the allies of Saudi Arabia because of its close geographical proximity. This arc has significance for Iran as it lies close to Iranian borders. Saudi concern over Iran's involvement in Yemen is also backed by Iranian intervention in Syria. Despite the absence of evidence, Saudi Arabia claims that Iran supports the Houthi rebels and provides them with weapons and missiles. The lack of trust is mutual; Iranian officials and media condemns Saudi intervention in Syria. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani openly condemned Saudi intervention and argued that Saudi support of terrorists in Yemen and Syria is the reason in the bellicose relations between Riyadh and Tehran. The lack of trust and suspicion is also highlighted when Saudi Arabia and Iran both supports opposing sides in conflicts. This fear and lack of trust is not only based on regional hegemony but also that of religious dominance as well.

An Analysis of Mediation and Cooperation Failure between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Mediatory efforts from other states to bring Saudi Arabia and Iran to talking terms also weren't able to yield much result. These efforts gained momentum after series of offensive attacks in Persian Gulf. The proxy war between both states looked to aggravate but international actors intervened to mitigate the tensions and initiate an environment of cooperation. But a significant fact is that both Saudi and Iranian governments didn't want to cooperate in the first place. States such as Pakistan, US and Japan intervened and supported bi-lateral talks but it served to alleviate the tensions but has yet to yield cooperation²⁹.

There is empirical evidence which shows that offensive realist ideas are creating hurdles in initiating confidence building measures as well cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. There are also various evidences that highlights the ideological competition between both states. And in case of Yemen, these evidences are not exclusive. Yemen crisis

²⁹ Keynouth, B. (2020, January 27). Iran Source. Retrieved June 10, 2020, from Atlantic Council.org: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/why-mediation-between-saudi-arabia-and-iran-keeps-failing/>

further illustrates that pursuit of regional hegemony and Sunni Shiite divide is hampering the peace process. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and Iran also boasted about their military might on multiple occasions since 2015 which further shows the application of offensive realism. This approach has created Yemen as a battlefield for a wider proxy war between two regional powers. In light of Mearshiemer's lack of trust assumption; Saudi Arabia would likely presuppose that Iran is not only supporting the rebels in Saudi backyard but also expanding and exporting their revisionist ideological agenda in line with their Shiite arc.

Conclusion

The financial aid given by Saudi Arabia to Saleh's regime was intended to stabilize Yemen but conversely it played part in consolidating the corrupt regime. This led to a direct Saudi involvement with coercive means against the Houthi rebels in the northern Yemen. The Houthi, though not initially but eventually developed into Iranian proxy, resulted in a presence of a regional hegemonic contender; a threat to Saudi hegemony. Iranian involvement in the region and Saudi paranoia led to another offensive military intervention in Yemen that started and prolonged the current conflict. The conflict which was domestic in nature, quickly turned out to be a regional contest between two regional powers.

John Mearshiemer's offensive realism offers a great way to comprehend the ongoing Yemen crisis and Iran-Saudi non-cooperation. It also gives a clear explanation of how regional hegemonic passions, expansion and power maximization creates hurdles in the way of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both Saudis and Iranians exploit threat and seek opportunities in conflicts to attain regional hegemony. Both these states are engaged in indirect conflicts by supporting rebels and governments against each other. However, both these states avoid engaging in open conflicts. Another important assumption in the case of Yemen war is assessed that states tend to get more offensive when there is a direct and immanent threat to their survival, as is the case with Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the Houthi-Iran nexus is becoming more apparent with passing time when assessed via strategical view point. Tehran has got to a position so close to their regional competitor that it has never achieved before.

Saudi Arabia is also skeptical about the geographical expansion of the Houthi rebels and continued exclusion of transitional institutions from the hands of rebels. Both regional powers and external actors are willing to transform their offensive stance to more balanced and alleviated stance.

The Interminable Yemen Crisis: Saudi-Iranian Regional Conflict and Absence of Cooperation

But Saudi Arabia is facing a paranoia that should the Houthis consolidate their control and governance in Yemen for a long period of time, Houthis can further expand to Saudi Arabia's northern neighbor and that too with Iranian support. Regardless of Saudi paranoia, if Yemen is to be stabilized and unified, an agreement is to be reached where the stakeholders need to be satisfied according to their demands.

As of current developments while writing this paper, Iran has a strategic position that invites it to continue the offense in the region. Houthis are now commanding and governing a major part of Yemen, and it also includes the area bordering Saudi Arabia. And on the other hand, the Southern Traditional Council has taken the southern area. In the meantime Hadi's forces hold on to a much smaller area. Iranian backed Houthis in a more prominent position will looking forward to further consolidate their position in Yemen. What is unlikely in the whole scenario is the partition because it will further plunge Yemen in instability and security issues.

A suggestion from this research paper is that a political settlement can be reached between the regional powers but it can only be attained via balance of power and maintenance of the status quo. Peace talks between international actors in Stockholm and upcoming peace talks in Munich this year demands that the mediators and facilitators should first understand the reasons that are hindering the cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Islamic Republic of Iran and then should provide for a solution that should focus on the ground realities and provide for a stable and progressive Yemen.