

ONGOING CONFLICT IN YEMEN: A PROXY WAR?¹

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Abstract

It has been almost three years since the eruption of the civil war in Yemen by March 2015, leading to high political instability and severe humanitarian crisis. This article elaborates on the civil war in Yemen by focusing on the interests of main actors, who are involved in the ongoing conflict. The article also evaluates the nature of civil war in Yemen, mainly questioning the liability of describing the tension as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In recent years, there has been a tendency to explain Yemeni conflict through the lens of a religious struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran in order to reinforce their control over the region. It is argued in this study that it would be misleading to call Yemen's ongoing crisis as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The tension did not emerge as a result of clash of interests by these two countries. Rather it would be fair to suggest that involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen's civil war further triggered and complicated the already existing tensions in the country. The outcome is a complex pattern of conflict which the author of this article argues is indeed different from a proxy war.

Keywords: Yemen, Civil War, Proxy War, Saudi Arabia, Iran

1 Makalenin Geliş Tarihi: 15.04.2018

Makalenin Kabul Tarihi: 18.06.2018

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Atıf: Karakır İ.A. (2018). Ongoing conflict in Yemen: A proxy war?. *Tesam Akademi Dergisi*, 5(2), 121- 149. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30626/tesamakademi.456008>

Yemen’de Devam Etmekte Olan Çatışma: Bir Vekalet Savaşı mı?

Öz

Mart 2015’de patlak vermesinin üzerinden yaklaşık üç yıl geçen Yemen’deki iç savaş, yoğun siyasi istikrarsızlık ve vahim insani krize neden olmuştur. Bu makale, Yemen’deki iç savaş, savaşta yer alan aktörler ve çıkarlarına odaklanarak detaylı olarak incelemektedir. Makale ayrıca Yemen’deki iç savaşın doğasını, temel olarak bu gerilimi Suudi Arabistan ve İran arasında bir vekalet savaşı olarak tanımlamanın geçerliliğini sorgulayarak değerlendirmektedir. Son yıllarda, Yemen’deki çatışmayı, bölge üzerinde kontrollerini güçlendirmek amacıyla, Sünni Suudi Arabistan ile Şii İran arasında yaşanmakta olan dini bir mücadele olarak açıklama eğilimi vardır. Çalışma, Yemen’de devam etmekte olan krizi, Suudi Arabistan ile İran arasında bir vekalet savaşı olarak tanımlamanın yanıltıcı olacağını savunmaktadır. Burada; gerilim, söz konusu iki ülkenin çıkarlarının çatışması sonucu ortaya çıkmamıştır. Daha ziyade, Suudi Arabistan ve İran’ın Yemen’in iç savaşında taraf olmaları, ülkede devam etmekte olan gerilimi daha karmaşık hale getirmek suretiyle arttırmıştır. Sonuç karışık yapıda bir çatışma olsa da, bu makalenin yazarı bunun kesin olarak vekalet savaşından farklı olduğu görüşünü savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yemen, İç Savaş, Vekalet Savaşı, Suudi Arabistan, İran

Introduction

It has been almost three years since the eruption of the civil war in Yemen by March 2015, leading to high political instability and severe humanitarian crisis. Until the launch of Saudi-led operation to Yemen supported by the United States (US), the ongoing conflict in the country had not attracted much attention of the international community. With external actors' involvement in the country accompanied with the alarming rise of casualties and epidemic diseases, and famine along with water shortage, the country began to capture the interest of international media. In fact, it is not the first time that Yemen has seen a civil war. Between 1962 and 1970, North Yemen experienced a civil war, whereas 1994 witnessed the first civil war in Yemen after the unification of the North and the South. Besides, a major insurgency occurred in the country by 2004, in which Shi'a Houthis played the leading role.

Yemen is described as a failed state by commentators with its weak state institutions, economic decay, poor infrastructure and great levels of drug addiction. Due to high unemployment rates, many Yemenis have had no choice, but to seek for jobs in other countries in the region. In the meantime, lack of opportunity has pushed some of desperate Yemenis into extremist terrorist groups. Three chronic themes have had their mark on Yemen. First of all, even though Yemen was unified in 1990 under Ali Abdullah Saleh's leadership, it is difficult to suggest that a real unification has occurred in the country either in political level or in societal level. Tribalism and decentralization have remained to be main characteristics of political culture. Saleh, who had remained in power as Yemen's president for 35 years was highly skilled at manipulating the country's tribes and religious groups and external actors, which he referred to as "dancing on the heads of snakes." (Niarchos, 2018, p. 31). Secondly, the country is the poorest country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Revealing a dismal picture, Yemen's economy has highly depended on foreign aid and Yemeni workers' remittances from abroad. Lastly, because of its political vulnerability and fragmented nature, the country has been subject to a number of foreign interventions with Saudi Arabia as the leading interfering external actor.

In recent years, there has been a widespread tendency to explain Yemen's ongoing conflict through the lens of a religious struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran to reinforce their control over the region. Portraying the civil war in Yemen as a proxy war or a shadow war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is indeed an underestimation of the complexity of

conflict in the country. Even though religious differences do play a role in the expansion of the conflict, the underlying causes of the Yemeni crisis are deeper than that of a sectarian Sunni-Shia tension. Involvement of external actors in Yemen's crisis such as Saudi Arabia and Iran just further complicated an already multifaceted crisis. Otherwise, the conflict has not simply grown out of religious sectarianism.

At first sight, the ongoing conflict in Yemen seems to take place between two main blocs. On the one hand, there is internationally recognized president of Yemen, Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi, who is supported by a Saudi-led coalition, whereas on the other hand the second bloc consists of the Houthi rebels claimed to be backed by Iran. Yet, this perception suffers from visible reductionism, since there are a number of other groups with different political agendas to participate in the war including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), secessionists in the south and the Islamic State (Arraf, 2017, p. 2). These non-state actors are not under control of the two main sides in the conflict, as they have acted in accordance with their own interests and have shifted their policies in line with their changing interests and alliances.

Popular pro-reform demonstrations took place in Yemen following a series of widespread uprisings in the Arab world commonly referred as the 'Arab Spring.' Like their counterparts in the region, Yemeni people voiced their demands for more rights and freedoms to be accompanied by serious political and economic reforms. Saleh regime's response to demonstrators was not different from other regimes' responses in the Arab world, as he resorted to force to repress the uprisings. But, it was not the demonstrations of the 2011 by different groups of Yemenis to trigger the civil war in the country. Civil war in the country began in the early 2015, when the Houthis, a Shi'a group, who believed that they had been subject to discrimination by the government, rebelled against the ruling Saleh regime in order to overthrow it. As the Houthis reinforced their power against government, power vacuum in the country was started to be filled not only by the Houthis, but also by other non-state actors. Challenged by the instability in the country, Saudi Arabia-led coalition has then militarily intervened in the country.

This study aims to elaborate on the civil war in Yemen, which began in March 2015 by focusing on the interests of main actors, who are involved in the current ongoing conflict. In this regard, initially, key developments related with the unfolding of the civil war in Yemen will be addressed. Secondly, actors and their interests will be covered in a detailed way.

Lastly, in the light of the overview of the conflict of Yemen and the actors involved, the study evaluates the nature of civil war in Yemen, mainly questioning the liability of describing the tension as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It is argued that it would be misleading to call Yemen's ongoing crisis as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The tension did not erupt as a result of clash of interests by these two countries. Rather it would be fair to suggest that involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen's civil war further triggered and complicated the already existing tensions in the country. Thus, the outcome is a complex pattern of conflict which the author of this study argues is indeed different from a proxy war.

An Overview of Yemen's Civil War

The Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) was established in 1962 following the overthrow of the Zaydi Imamate and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) was established in 1967 after the departure of colonial Britain (Cordesman, 2017, p. 3). These two different states, a military dictatorship in the North and a Marxist state in the South shared a common characteristic of being weak states. In response to changing international dynamics, mostly due to ending of the Cold War, the Republic of Yemen came into being in May 1990 with the unification of the North Yemen and the South Yemen. Weak central authority which existed in both former North Yemen and South Yemen was also reflected in the Republic of Yemen which suffered from a lack of strong central authority. Central authority in the country has faced permanent opposition by a number of different groups.

Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had served as the president of North Yemen since 1978, became leader of the Republic of Yemen and he continued ruling the country for 34 years until his forced resignation in 2012 (Juneau 2016, p. 651). Saleh managed to rule the country by adopting a cautious balancing policy among different competing groups. The first civil war in the country took place in 1994 following the first multiparty elections conducted in 1994, which resulted in a visible split between southern Yemenis, who voted for the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), and northern Yemenis, who voted for the Islamist Islah party and the General People's Congress (GPC) Party led by President Saleh (Arimatsu & Choudhury, 2014, p. 20). This divergence led South Yemenis to seek for separation from the country leading to widespread clashes in the country, which were then controlled by Saleh's forces. As a result, the civil war ended with the defeat of the south.

Starting with the early 2000s, pressure on the ruling GPC Party and President Saleh's regime for political reforms grew. In 2004, an uprising began in the northern province of Sa'ada among the Zaydi Shi'a Houthis under the leadership of Bakr al-Din al-Houth, owing to their political and economic discontent, which then turned into a violent conflict (Durac, 2011, p. 349). Government's armed struggle against the Houthis continued until January 2010, when Saudi Arabia bordering the Sa'ada province launched a series of air strikes against the Houthis in retaliation to cross-border raids by the Houthis, which caused "the deaths of thousands and the displacement of tens of thousands of people" (Arimatsu & Choudhury, 2014, p. 21).

Inspired by the widespread pro-democracy public demonstrations across the Arab world commonly referred as the 'Arab Spring' and the overthrow of former Egyptian President Husni Mubarak, thousands of Yemenis gathered in the streets of major cities protesting the government and demanding political change. Saleh's regime was faced with a serious pressure from below in favor of a more representative political system and economic reform. The underlying reasons behind this public revolt included poor governance, lack of accountability, extensive corruption, accompanied by low living conditions, chronic unemployment, inadequate social services and frustration with the northern elite domination of political administration (Rugh, 2015, p.145; Durac, 2011, p. 344; Cordesman, 2017, p. 5).

President Saleh responded by using excessive force against the demonstrators through security forces, but was unable to suppress them. Refusing to step down, Saleh organized "massive counter-demonstrations based on tribal loyalties and the entrenched patronage system" in order to strengthen his hand (Arimatsu and Choudhury, 2014, p. 23). As it is pointed out by Arraf (2017, p. 2) on 18 March 2011, pro-Saleh demonstrators opened fire on the crowds in a demonstration in Sana'a, killing at least 45 people and injuring hundreds of people. This incident led to resignation of several officials and army personnel. By May 2011, rising violence and political instability encouraged a number of armed groups in the country including the Houthis to take action. During the summer of 2011, violence in the country reached to a peak with the multiple attacks of AQAP on the Houthis in the north on one hand, and on civilians in the south on the other hand in an attempt to benefit from high instability (Arimatsu and Choudhury, 2014, 24). In the meantime, humanitarian crisis began to intensify leading to expression of concern

by the United Nations (UN) authorities.

By the early June 2011, President Saleh was seriously wounded as a result of a rocket attack by unknown assailants to presidential palace and had to leave the country for medical treatment in Saudi Arabia (Durac, 2011, p. 364). When he returned back to country, he reached an agreement³ with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, consisting of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) representatives on November 2011 supported by the US to restore stability in the country. According to the agreement, Saleh would leave presidency and instead his vice president Abdal Rab Mansour al-Hadi would become the president in an uncontested election to be held by February 2012 (Rugh, 2015, p. 145) The agreement granted Saleh and his family immunity from prosecution and allowed him to preserve chairmanship of his political party. In addition, it was agreed that all political groups in Yemen would meet in a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) to draft a new constitution (Ibid., 145-146; Juneau 2016, p. 653). The agreement however was proved unsuccessful in overcoming ongoing conflict in the country.

Under Hadi's presidency, there was just a relative decrease in the level of violence in the country. President Hadi faced difficulties in addressing the country's problems, both due to his weak leadership skills and former president Saleh's intervention in politics based on his status as the head of the leading political party in Yemen (Arraf, 2017, p. 3). President Hadi largely failed to prevent Saleh's influence and manipulation over politics. Attempts to reach a national consensus for a new political setting through the NDC failed as it came to an end by January 2014 (Sharp 2018, p. 2). In the meantime, disappointed with the failed NDC, armed Houthi forces gained military successes against pro-Hadi Sunni Islamist groups in the northern part of the country. Having the support of pro-Saleh groups, who were discontented with the transition process in the country, the Houthis continued their march into the Sana'a, taking control of the capital by September 2014 (Rugh, 2015, p. 146). Backed by Saleh loyalists, the Houthis then occupied the Presidential Palace, putting President Hadi under house arrest. Being forced to resign from presidency, Hadi managed to escape to Aden, where he declared that he was still the president and that Aden would be the temporary capital of the country. This declaration was not welcomed by the Houthi forces, which then headed towards Aden (Sharp 2018, p. 2).

By March 2015, clashes erupted in Aden between the Houthi forces

³ This agreement is also known as the GCC Initiative.

backed by armed Saleh loyalists and military forces under Hadi's control. Following the intensification of the fighting, President Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia and asked the GCC for an international intervention to save the country from the Houthi forces' invasion. In response to President Hadi's demand, Saudi Arabia-led coalition of mostly Arab states including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates began to launch air strikes and naval blockade against the Houthi forces under the 'Operation Decisive Storm' campaign (Broder, 2017, p. 11). US officials announced their support for the operation while UN Security Council adopted a resolution by mid-April 2015 confirming the legitimacy of Hadi's presidency calling for withdrawal of the Houthis from the occupied areas (Arraf, 2017, p. 5).

In the meantime, benefitting from the large-scale chaos in the country, AQAP managed to seize the fifth largest city of Yemen, Mukalla. By July 2015, Saudi-led coalition was able to retake Aden, but without ground forces they only had limited achievements against the Houthi-Saleh alliance in the western regions and in Sana'a, or against the AQAP in the southern and eastern parts of Yemen (Cordesman, 2017, p. 7). In order to curtail supplies for Houthi-Saleh alliance, Saudi-led coalition launched 'Operation Golden Arrow' in January 2016 to take control of the western coast. By April 2016, Mukalla was taken back from the AQAP (Arraf, 2017, p. 6). Yet, at the time of this writing, it is still difficult to suggest that AQAP is closer to a defeat as it continues its control in southern Yemen.

By the early 2017, Yemen had become the stage of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. In June 2017, in response to Saudi-led coalition's plan to seize the Hodeida port, which receives a significant portion of humanitarian aid, "the UN Security Council adopted a presidential statement on the importance of keeping all Yemen's ports functioning, including Hodeida port" in order to ensure continuation of humanitarian aid to the country (Arraf, 2017, p. 6-7). August 2017 saw the deterioration of the alliance between the Houthis and former President Saleh. In fact, their alliance was a pragmatic one, which was established on the principle of 'enemy of my enemy is my friend'. The two sides cooperated, mainly because of their discontent with President Hadi. Yet, once these two groups of people had problematic relations and through time disagreements again grew among them. The Houthi forces killed a very close aide of Saleh at a check point (Niarchos, 2018, p. 35). Highly frustrated with this development, Saleh brought thousands of his supporters together in Sana'a to demonstrate his power. This rally brought his end as it led to Houthi forces' attacking of Saleh's house in

Sana'a killing him on December 4, 2017 (Sharp, 2018).

After Saleh's death, Saudi-led coalition had some military gains, but the Houthi forces' control in Sana'a and northern Yemen has continued. Attempts of the UN to mediate between the groups to reach a peace agreement so far failed, as the stalemate in the conflict in Yemen remains. Claims on Iran's close contact with the Houthis and Iranian government's military and financial aid have further complicated the dismal picture in Yemen. While Iran's support for the Houthis has remained to be marginal when compared with Saudi Arabia's support for the President Hadi's government, so-called Iranian connection with the Houthis has triggered debates on whether a regional cold war is taking place between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Yemenis continue to face multiple humanitarian crisis including violence, displacement, famine, water shortage and illnesses. Reports by international organizations on Yemen regularly demonstrate the ongoing human tragedy in the country. According to UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner's report on Yemen (2017), "between March 2015 and 30 August 2017, at least 5,144 civilians have been documented as killed and more than 8,749 injured". Calling Yemen's conflict as the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, UN High Commissioner of Refugees (March 2018) points out that there are "2,014,026 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)", "280,692 refugees and asylum seekers", and "22.2 million people in need" in Yemen as of early 2018. On the other hand, World Health Organization (2018, p. 34) attracts attention to the fact that due to problems regarding access to clean water and sanitation, Yemen has been facing the world's largest cholera outbreak leading to 2200 deaths. Diphtheria has also been reported (Ibid., 36) to have reached alarming levels in the country, whose treatment and control is pointed out to be more complex than that of cholera (World Food Programme, 2017).

External Actors Involved in the War

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi leaders have always attracted special attention to Yemen and if their national interests required, they have intervened in Yemen directly or indirectly. Saudi Arabia is the country to have the longest border with Yemen and a number of factors including migratory flows from Yemen to Saudi Arabia, security challenges, economic relations and relations with the tribes have shaped Saudi Arabia's foreign policy making towards Yemen (Hill and Nonneman, 2011, p. 8). Even though Yemen is not rich in

resources, still the House of Saud has viewed Saudi influence over Yemen as prestigious and legitimacy bolstering (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016, p. 155-156). As Hill and Nonneman (2011, p. 1) point out, Saudi leaders have maintained extensive transnational patronage networks in Yemen. Saudi rulers' relations with Yemen's former President Saleh had ups and downs, as the Saudis worked both with him and against him, in accordance with the changing domestic and regional dynamics (Rugh, 2015, p. 151). For instance, in 2009-2010, Saudi military forces crossed the border to fight against the Zaidi Shi'a Houthis, who revolted against President Saleh's government (Cordesman, 2017, p. 4).

Like previous crises, the latest crisis in Yemen led to growing concern among Saudi ruling elites about the developments. They noticed that weakening of central authority in Yemen has contributed to the growing power of the Houthis, who have ties with Iran. In addition, extension of influence in the country by terrorist groups such as AQAP would have negative security consequences for Saudi Arabia. Thus, they have sought for the political stability and territorial integrity of Yemen, which they think would only be possible through a strong central government. For this reason, Saudi Arabia supports President Hadi and aims to restore Hadi to power through its direct military intervention into Yemen (Rugh, 2015, p. 151).

Realizing weakness of President Hadi's bloc, the Kingdom Saudi Arabia decided to actively support him. Backed by other members of the GCC, Saudi Arabia launched an operation in Yemen on the 26th of March 2015 with the campaign of 'Operation Decisive Storm'. The Saudi-led coalition consisted of nine Arab States including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Sudan and Qatar, until Qatar's expulsion from the coalition on June 2017 in the aftermath of the Qatari diplomatic crisis.⁴ The leading aims of the operation were declared as securing stability in Yemen and restoring the legitimate, popularly-elected national government of President Hadi (Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017, p. 13).

According to the national strategic interests of Saudi Arabia, there are four underlying reasons behind its willingness to stabilize Yemen under President Hadi's governance: "securing Saudi Arabia's border, stemming

4 Qatari diplomatic crisis occurred between Qatar and the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE and Bahrain) due to Arab Quartet's accusations against Qatar for supporting Islamist terrorist networks leading to their common decision to cut their diplomatic relations with Qatar and to adopt a sanctions regime against Qatar.

Iran's regional expansionist ambitions, combating terrorist threats and safeguarding regional security" (Ibid.). In this regard, combating against the Houthi bloc,

which is claimed to be supported by Iran is the leading priority of the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia has been subject to attacks by the Houthis. According to Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2017, 9) between May 2015 and January 27, 2017, there were more than 40 missile strikes by the Houthi separatists targeting against Saudi Arabia, among which nine of them struck the Saudi territory. Rising flow of migration from Yemen to Saudi Arabia is another component of Saudi concern on its border security. As a result of the ongoing crisis in Yemen more than a million refugees sought shelter in their northern neighbor (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016, p. 162).

Second motivation behind Saudi Arabia's intervention is to prevent the expanding influence of Iran in Yemen. The Saudi leaders have been suspicious that the Shi'a Houthis are proxies of Iran and that together they seek to encircle the Saudis (Rugh, 2015, p. 147-148). The Kingdom has a Shi'a minority and thus Saudi ruling elites are worried about Iranian influence over these Shi'a Saudi citizens (Tzemprin, Jozic, Lambare, 2015, p. 192). Thirdly, the Kingdom has sought to cope with international terrorism with the campaign. AQAP has largely been based in southern regions of Yemen, operating from there posing a considerable threat for Saudi security. In addition, due to AQAP's large base in the country, Yemen has become one of the target countries in the global 'War on Terror'. Lastly, Saudi leaders believe that if the operation will be successful, it would contribute positively to regional security. Yemen's location carries great geostrategic importance next to the Bab al Mandab strait, "through which commercial oil tankers carry an estimated 3.4 million barrels per day (3.5% to 4% of the global oil supply)" (Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017, p. 14).

The leadership transition in Saudi Arabia has also played a critical role in Saudi Arabia's intervention into Yemen. The former ruler of the Kingdom, King Abdullah was known to adopt a cautious, controlled and risk-averse foreign policy (Rugh, 2015, 148). There has been a clear change in Saudi foreign policy with the coming power of King Salman, who appointed his young, ambitious son Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as defense minister, granting him extensive authority. The launch of a military campaign against Yemen just several weeks after the transition of power crosses minds, whether there is any correlation between these two

developments. While it is not the first time that Saudi Arabia intervened into Yemen, the aggressive way of operation's conduct focuses attention on the Saudi Crown Prince. It can be suggested that seriously challenged by the Houthi's missile attacks, Mohammed bin Salman wants to prove himself through demonstrating Saudi power in the Yemen operation (Broder, 2017, p. 12).

Saudi-led military intervention into Yemen was largely supported by the international community. The leading reason for this support arises from international aspiration to fight against terrorism. Particularly, the operation was backed by the US, through logistical and intelligence assistance, whose interests such as encouraging regional stability and containing Iran have demonstrated similarities with that of Saudi Arabia. A clear sign of international support for the operation is the UN Security Council Resolution 2216 (p. 2) which was passed on April 14, 2015 declaring Hadi the legitimate president of Yemen and demanding unilateral withdrawal of the Houthi forces from the territories they had seized. In addition, the resolution (p. 3) adopted arms embargo against a number of individuals, who engaged in acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability in the country including the Houthi leader, Abdul Malik al Houthi and the former President of Yemen, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Among the GCC countries, particularly the UAE and Oman closely cooperated with Saudi Arabia. Due to Yemen's mountainous geography, Saudi-led coalition avoided sending ground troops to Yemen at the early stages of the operation. Instead, they used air power to bomb their targets. However, realizing insufficiency of their air campaign to reach their aims, by mid-July 2015 coalition forces decided to use ground forces to fight against the Houthis in a more efficient way. (Rugh, 2015, p. 148). Landing of Saudi and Emirati troops in Aden then contributed to pro-Hadi forces' retaking of the city from the Houthi forces (Juneau 2016, p. 654). Yet, it is difficult to suggest that coalition forces have yet gained a clear victory against the Houthis.

In the meantime, Saudi-led attacks in Yemen have caused many civilian casualties and severe destruction of the Yemeni infrastructure. Human Rights Watch (2018, p. 1) reported that "the coalition has conducted scores of indiscriminate and disproportionate airstrikes hitting civilian objects that have killed thousands of civilians in violation of the laws of war, with munitions that the US, United Kingdom, and others still supply". The report also pointed out that both sides have illegally impeded the

delivery of desperately needed humanitarian aid (Human Rights Watch, 2018, p. 2). By November 2017, a Houthi missile which is suspected to have Iranian origins hit Saudi Arabia leading to blockade of all Yemen's ports by the Saudi-led coalition (Sharp 2018, p. 3). Such restrictions have been criticized by a number of international organizations as they have worsened the severe humanitarian situation in the country.⁵

The Islamic Republic of Iran

1979 Islamic Revolution constituted a turning point in Iran's foreign policy as Iran shifted from a pro-Western, secular state to an anti-Western, theocratic state. In the aftermath of the revolution, Khomeini's Islamic statements with an emphasis on Shi'a sect and his attempts to export the revolution to other states in the region led to tensions between Iran and regional states leading to the isolation of Iran. Particularly, Arab Gulf states have felt themselves highly challenged by Iran, a Shi'a country with large population, vast energy resources and geographic proximity to the Gulf with a leader calling for the Arab people in these states to revolt against their corrupt ruling regimes. Besides, Arab Gulf states include Shi'a minorities and thus rulers of these states have always been concerned with respect to Iran's influence on their Shi'a minorities. It would be fair to suggest that among them Iran has the most problematic relations with Saudi Arabia in the region most probably because of their competing claims for the leadership in the Muslim world.

In general, Iran has developed its relations with both state and non-state actors to expand its influence in the region. Syria's leader Bashar al-Assad, who belongs to Alawite sect, a Shi'a offshoot, is a well-known ally of Iran. In the process of Assad's country being worn out by the civil war, Iran has consistently supported Assad through sending Hezbollah fighters and Iranian forces to fight against Saudi-backed Sunni opposition groups (Broder, 2017, p. 9-10). In the case of Iraq, Iran has established close relations both with Iraqi Shi'a political elites and the Shi'a armed group, Mahdi Army. Iran also considerably contributed to defeating of the Islamic State (also known as Da'esh, ISIS or ISIL) by forming a strong Shi'a military force of 120,000 soldiers to fight against the militias of the Islamic State (Ibid., p. 10).

In terms of non-states actors, Shi'a Hezbollah in Lebanon has been the most important ally of Iran leading to a widespread perception of Hezbollah as "more an Iranian proxy than a Lebanese party" (Zweiri, 2016, p. 7). On

⁵ For instance see Human Rights Watch's Report on Yemen, 2018, 5.

the one hand, Iran has backed Hezbollah militia in its struggle against the state of Israel through providing arms, military training and financial assistance. On the other hand, Tehran has largely supported Hezbollah's political party in Lebanese domestic politics contributing to its victory against Sunni opposition parties backed by the Saudi Arabia. Iran has also sought to bolster its influence in the region through its ties with non-state actors in Bahrain and Yemen.

According to Juneau (2016, p. 648), Iran tends to intervene in national contexts characterized by instability and discontented internal actors, seeking to penetrate these states as the cases of Iraq since 2003 and Lebanon since the 1980s have demonstrated. Most of the time, the countries where Iran penetrated have include frustrated people with reaction against their ruling regimes and/or the US-dominated regional order and may demonstrate their resentment either through violent or non-violent means (Ibid.). Geographic location of engaged non-state actors also does matter for Iran. Cooperating with strategically located non-state actors helps strengthening Iran's hands in its rivalry with Israel and Saudi Arabia. For instance, Hezbollah in Lebanon is calculated to retaliate, if there is any attack against Iran by Israel, at least it is thought to act as a deterring factor by increasing the costs (Ibid., p. 649).

Iran's influence in regional politics has increased since the Arab Spring uprisings in the MENA. It would be fair to suggest that post-revolutionary developments in the Middle East have extended Iran's space for maneuver in regional affairs, consolidating its confidence as a regional power. As Broder (2017, p. 9) rightfully mentions, contemporary politics in the region clearly reflects Tehran's weight over a geostrategic area stretching "from Lebanon on the Mediterranean Sea, over the Levantine steppe of Syria and Iraq and down to Yemen". Behind this influence, Shi'a religious rhetoric plays a remarkable mobilizing role.

Iran's relations with the Zaydi Houthis, who belonged to another Shi'a sect, are relatively new when it is compared with other state and non-state allies of Iran in the region. The contact between Iran and the Houthis has been limited prior to the latest civil war in Yemen. Iran did not interfere in Yemeni civil war in 1962-1967, while Egypt was supporting the republican forces. Contact between the Iranian State and the Houthis began following the Iranian revolution, when a small group of Zaydis came to study Shi'a Islam in Qom (Juneau, 2016, p. 655). However, it is difficult to suggest that any special relationship existed between Iran and the Houthis at least before the recent conflict in Yemen. Yemen has not

been a prioritized issue for Iranian foreign policy-makers. It was only with the latest tension in Yemen that Iran began to support the Houthis in a limited way.

According to the New York Times (2012), there is evidence that Iran provided the Houthis military and financial aid albeit in small quantities. However, a number of commentators suggest that Iranian support for the Houthis is limited to rhetorical support and claims on Iranian military support for the Houthi forces are exaggerated and unfounded. For instance, Cockburn (2017) suggests that “there is little evidence that the Houthis get more than rhetorical support from Iran” and that it is mainly the Saudi propaganda, which is shaping the view that Houthis are Iran-backed. In addition, he points out that Saudi ground, air and sea forces have entirely cut Yemen off from the outside world making it almost impossible for Iran to provide military aid to the Houthis (Ibid.). Mousavian (2015) also argues that Iranian support for the Houthis is an exaggeration and attributing Houthis’ gains to supposed Iranian support is a misinterpretation of the conflict in Yemen. In the meantime, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif rejects the claims that Iran is arming the Houthis, pointing out that the so-called evidence, the Iranian logo found on a Houthi missile, originally belongs to the Standard Institute of Iran to signify the quality of a consumer good and that particular logo is “used on ‘cheese puffs’ not on military hardware” (Haaretz, 2018).

The Houthis’ takeover of Sana’a and increased Houthi missile attacks targeting Saudi Arabia have led to an intensive debate among the scholars and commentators about the extent of Iranian involvement in the Yemeni conflict and its support for the Houthis. Saudi authorities have regularly accused Iran for the prolonged Yemeni conflict, pointing out the extensive support of Iran for the Houthis (Sharp, 2018, p. 5). Saudi-led coalition, President Hadi-government and the US have also condemned Iran for violating the UN arms embargo on the Houthis, but Iran has continuously denied this charge (Broder, 2017, p. 11). Following the November 4, 2017 missile attack against Saudi Arabia’s King Khalid International Airport by the Houthis, Saudi claims of missiles in attack being supplied by Iran reached to a peak (Ibid.). Yet, so far there has been no official evidence that Iran provided the missiles to the Houthis, which were used to attack the Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, many analysts find the claims by Saudi-led coalition, Hadi-government and the US about Iran’s influence in Yemen as exaggerated (Arraf, 2017, p. 10; Rugh, 2015, p. 149; Juneau 2016, p. 657; Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016, p. 167). While Iran supplies political

and material support to the Houthis, it remains to be marginal to make a meaningful difference in the Yemeni political context, when it is compared with that of Iran's support to Hezbollah or Assad's regime. At the same time, the Houthis did not revolt against the central government due to any pressure or encouragement by Tehran. Their revolt and armed resistance to Hadi-government is based on long-time resentment.

In fact, the overreaction of Saudi Arabia to Iran's support for the Houthis has ironically presented Iran an opportunity to show itself in Yemen. While still it is not the Iran to shape the Houthis' actions, its rhetorical and humanitarian support for the Houthis has seen considerable increase in recent years in line with growing Saudi accusations. Iranian officials' verbal support for the Houthis in the initial stages of the conflict has turned out to be greater material support through time as the Saudis have become more aggressive through time. As Esfandiary and Tabatabai (2016, p. 167) suggest, Yemen's conflict provided Iran a valuable chance to present itself in the region as the defender of oppressed groups with similar ideology to "further assert itself as a force to be reckoned with in the Middle East, with the collateral benefit of poking Riyadh in the eye".

The United States

The US involvement in Yemen has largely been shaped by its 'war on terror'. Due to high political instability, Yemen has offered the AQAP an ideal training base and safe haven constituting a considerable challenge to American interests (Arimatsu & Choudhury, 2014, p. 31). As it is mentioned by Scahill (2011, p. 13), President Obama and his counter-terrorism advisors placed Yemen on the top of priority list in combating against the Al Qaeda. The US began to conduct a military operation against the AQAP in 2011 with the approval of former President Saleh. US operation against the AQAP targets in Yemen included both bombings of AQAP camps by drones and unilateral ground operations (Ibid.). In addition, the US helped training Yemen's military forces and provided them military materials. American campaign against the AQAP has continued under President Hadi's government in an intensified way. Other than AQAP, activities of the Islamic State operating in Yemen have also caused concerns in Washington. Although, the Islamic State is not as strong as the AQAP, claimed responsibility for several suicide bombings in Sana'a have also raised worries among American officials (Rugh, 2015, p. 150). Enduring political instability and chaos in the country have led the US to intensify the strikes in southern parts of the country.

Other than combating radical terrorist network, the US has supported the operation led by Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Washington was uncomfortable with Houthi forces' toppling of the President Hadi-government, which was a US-friendly regime. Similar to Saudi-led coalition forces, Washington recognized the President Hadi's government as legitimate in contrast to armed opposition groups in the country. In order to support the Saudi-led operation, the US provided military logistical and intelligence help, and deployed American warships in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea to deter Iran from any direct involvement in the conflict (Rugh, 2015, p. 150). Since the 1979 revolution, problematic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the one hand and the US and Iran on the other hand have played a positive role on the long-lasting alliance between the US and the Saudi Arabia. Yet, divergence of opinion regarding Iran has also existed in this alliance. For instance, the Kingdom criticized Obama Administration's negotiations with Iran which led to the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the international community (Calabresi, 2015, p. 26).

This resentment of the Kingdom was short-lived, since with the coming power of Donald Trump to American presidency, ties between Washington and Riyadh has regained importance as Trump's first foreign visit in May 2017 was to Saudi Arabia, which witnessed a \$ 110 billion arms deal between the two countries (Niarchos, 2018, p. 34). Saudi Arabia has been one of the most important customers of American arms industry. Arms sales to Saudi Arabia has been viewed by American foreign policy-makers as a good strategy both to support Kingdom's campaign against terrorist groups in Yemen and to counter Iran's influence in the region (Ibid.) Thus, even though from time to time American officials have voiced their concerns on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, putting pressure on the Kingdom to ease the blockade on Yemen, considerable extent of arms sales to the Saudis have continued.

Non-State Actors Involved in the War

The Houthis (Ansar Allah)

The Houthis is a Zaydi tribe in the north of Yemen, which began to operate as a movement by the early 1990s. Constituting one-third of the Yemeni population, Zaydism is a distinct version of Shi'a Islam, which is quite different from the 'Twelver Shi'a' tradition predominant in Iran, as it shares common characteristics with Sunni Islam in terms of practice (Hill and Nonneman, 2011, p. 6). While the well-known informal name of the

group comes from their first leader's name Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, original formal name of the movement is 'Ansar Allah' which means the followers of God (Rugh, 2015, p. 143).

The underlying reasons behind the resistance of Houthis include political, economic and cultural grievances such as political marginalization, economic underdevelopment and governmental discrimination in the Zaydi regions (Juneau, 2016, p. 651). In this regard, the Houthis demanded more political representation, economic welfare and cultural rights. They have not sought for political independence, rather they wanted greater autonomy in the regions, where they are predominant (Ibid., 652). In the 1990s there was not much tension between the movement and the government as President Saleh views the Houthis as a counterweight to other opposition groups in the country such as the Salafi groups (Rugh, 2015, p. 143). However, starting with the early 2000s tensions grew between the government and the Houthi movement, which then was transformed into an armed organization.

With the strengthening of the group, President Saleh began to see the group as a serious challenge to his rule which had to be eliminated. Between 2004 and 2010 six rounds of fighting occurred between the President Saleh's regime and the Houthis. Houthi leader, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was killed by Yemeni army in September 2004 during the first round of clashes, which occurred following demonstrations by the Houthis in front of the Great Mosque in Sana'a (Arraf, 2017, p. 8). Since the death of the first leader of the movement, the movement has been led Abdul Malik al-Houthi, brother of the first leader and the movement has remarkably expanded its support base with an access to a black market of weapons (Juneau, 2016, p. 651-652). In the meantime, President Saleh raised regular accusations against the group for being an Iranian proxy. By November 2009, being alarmed by an armed group close to its southern border Saudi Arabia conducted its first military intervention against the Houthis (Ibid., p. 652).

Along with other Yemeni opposition groups, the Houthis actively participated in the pro-reform uprisings in Yemen by the early 2011. Following the clashes between the Houthis and pro-government armed forces in March 2011, the Houthis took control of Sa'ada installing their own governor in the city (Arimatsu and Choudhury, 2014, p. 25). They took place in the national dialogue to govern the transitional period in the country, but were not convinced by the offers of the President Hadi's government (Cordesman, 2017, p. 7). At the same time, weak

central government and power vacuum in the country provided a fertile environment for the Houthis to strengthen the movement's military wing. It was in that political atmosphere that the Houthis entered into an alliance with their former enemy, ex-President Saleh and his followers against President Hadi and pro-Hadi groups. Thanks to this alliance, the Houthis managed to take control of the capital, Sana'a by September 2014. After forced resignation of President Hadi and his fleeing to southern city Aden, where he withdrew his resignation from presidency, the Houthi armed militias marched to the south as well (Juneau, 2016, p. 653).

Currently, important parts of northern Yemen and Sana'a are still under control of the Houthis. According to some analysts, the growth in the political and military power of the Houthis in recent years is closely related with Iranian and Hezbollah support for the group (Zweiri, 2016, p. 13). There are also arguments that the real aim of the group is to replace the republic in Yemen with an Imamate (Hill and Nonneman, 2011, p. 15). In fact, the Houthi movement is not religiously-oriented and their grievances are very much real and local, mostly related with a demand for better living conditions, proportional representation and protection of their minority rights (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016, p. 157). The arguments viewing rise of the Houthis mainly as a result of Iranian support are also problematic because of a number of reasons. First of all, Houthi leadership has clearly mentioned that they want Yemen to be independent from any foreign influence, including Iran and despite the movement welcomes Iran's assistance in the later stages of the conflict, still they have been very careful to maintain a certain distance between Iran and themselves (Ibid.). Secondly, even though Iran has supported the group rhetorically and materially, material support remained to be largely marginal. As Arimatsu and Choudhury, (2014, p. 26) state there is little evidence that Iran has provided the group with weapons. Thirdly, the rise of Houthis was materialized due to a combination of factors including high regional political fragmentation, tribalism, lack of a central authority and general distrust for political authority in the country.

Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP)

Radical Islamist Al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen began by the early 1990s following the settlement of a number of Osama bin Laden's associates in the country after returning from Afghanistan (Hill and Nonneman, 2011, 15). Al-Qaeda launched a series of attacks on Western targets from its base in Yemen such as the bombing of the USS Cole in Aden in 2000 (Arimatsu and Choudhury, 2014, p. 22). In the aftermath of the 9/11

terrorist attacks against the US, Saudi Arabia launched an efficient attack on Al-Qaeda cells in its country in 2005, which then led to relocating of some remaining Al-Qaeda militants from Saudi Arabia to Yemen (Rugh, 2015, p. 144). With the merging of Saudi and Yemeni branches of Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in Yemen became the AQAP by 2009.

Combating AQAP was not regarded as a priority by the President Saleh's regime until the early 2006. In February 2006, a prison break of 23 top jihadi activists occurred, who joined the AQAP. (Hill and Nonneman, 2011, p. 15). This development attracted attention of the American officials, who then put pressure on President Saleh to take action against the organization. In the meantime, Yemen was experiencing an economic crisis and President Saleh was highly in need of financial aid. It was in that political context that the US and Yemeni governments began to cooperate in fighting against the AQAP. President Saleh allowed the US to conduct drone strikes against the AQAP bases in the south of the country. Intensive American air campaign in the southern parts of the country and growing discontent with the Saleh's regime had contributed to AQAP's extension of its influence in Yemen.

Benefitting from the political chaos during the 2011 uprisings in the country, the AQAP sought to establish greater territorial control in the south. In April 2015, it seized the significant town of Mukalla, "opening its jail and freeing about 300 prisoners" (Rugh, 2015, p. 150). While the organization lost its control over Mukalla in 2016, a number of governorates in the south continue to be under AQAP's rule including Hadhramaut, Shabwa and Abyan (Arraf, 2017, p. 9). Despite the fact that AQAP's ideology has not been attractive for the Yemeni society, the organization has been able to consolidate itself due to the lack of central authority and the widespread frustration with the ruling regime. AQAP's role in the ongoing conflict in Yemen has also been influential in leading western powers' support for the Saudi-led coalition's operations in the country including the US, Britain and France. While it's the Houthis rather than the AQAP which constituted the main target of the Saudi-led operation, western powers supported the operation with the rationale that Houthis's defeat and strengthening of central authority in the country would limit AQAP's room for maneuver.

Rethinking the Nature of Civil War in Yemen

As the region's two leading powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran have had problematic relations since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. While the

Saudis consider themselves as the leaders of Islam's Sunni sect, Iranians see themselves as the leaders of Islam's Shi'a sect. As a result, there has been an enduring rivalry between the two countries for the leadership of the Islamic world. In recent years, this visible rivalry has triggered a widespread scholarly debate about whether the ongoing civil war in Yemen, which began in March 2015, is a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. A number of scholars have also argued that since the beginning of Arab Spring-related pro-reform uprisings in the Middle East, a new 'cold war' has occurred between Saudi Arabia and Iran. For instance, Powel (2016, p. 26) suggests that cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been defining the Middle East in the 21st century. On the other hand, Zweiri (2016, p. 4) underlines that the regional cold war taking place between Saudi Arabia and Iran is not a military confrontation, but more of a political one, where each actor is trying to widen its influence in the region. The countries which have been subject to a proxy war between these two regional powers are pointed out to include Iraq, Syria and Yemen. For instance, in the case of Syria's ongoing civil war, Iran has supported the ruling Alawite Bashar al-Assad regime, whereas the Saudi Arabia backed Sunni opposition groups (Calabresi, 2015, p. 27).

In order to evaluate whether the Yemeni civil war can be described as a proxy war between the Saudi Arabia and Iran, it would be helpful at first to focus on the meaning of a proxy war. Mumford (2013, p. 40) defines proxy war as "the product of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and the chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor's weapons, training and funding". Likewise, Birchall (2018) briefly defines proxy war as "an armed conflict between two parties, either countries or factions, which is taking place on behalf of parties not directly involved". For Cragin (2015, p. 312) proxy war "refers to a conflict in which countries oppose each other indirectly, through the use of surrogates, typically in a third country". Lastly, according to Krieg (2016, p. 98-99), proxy war (surrogate war) "describes a patron's externalization, partially or wholly, of the strategic, operational and tactical burden of warfare to a human or technological surrogate with the principal intent of minimizing the burden of warfare for its own taxpayers, policy-makers and military". In line with these above-mentioned definitions, a proxy war can be defined as an armed conflict, in which an external actor (state or non-state actor), not directly involved in the conflict, extends material support for its proxy or proxies, that are directly involved in the conflict.

The underlying reason behind the tendency to view the Yemeni civil war as a proxy war is that it includes military operations conducted by Sunni Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces aimed at combating the Shi'a Houthis, who are claimed to be associated with Iran. Besides, so-called Tehran-backed Houthis have conducted missile strikes against the Saudi Arabia. The connection between the Houthis and the Iranian state seem to be an annoying fact for the Saudi Arabia, as it meant greater Iranian influence in its southern border. While at first sight, it seems simple to describe the ongoing conflict in Yemen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, following a detailed analysis of the conflict, it is fair to suggest that proxy war is a deceiving and reductionist definition for the Yemeni case, due to a number of reasons.

First of all, a proxy war requires external, state or non-state actors influencing the behavior of internal, state or non-state actors. In the Yemeni case, it would be highly misleading to see the Houthi movement as an Iranian agent that is directed by Iran behind the scenes. As a Yemeni discontented indigenous tribe, armed resistance of the Houthis arose from their local interest for more political, economic and culture rights by the central government. Like other opposition groups in the country, the Houthis have been frustrated by corrupt policies of the ruling regime. They were neither mobilized by Iran nor fully depended on Iran's assistance. Their resentment for the Saudi Arabia does not have any religious roots. Instead, the conflict mainly arose from Saudi Arabia's support for the former President Saleh and President Hadi, and a series of military interventions by the Saudis into Yemen. In addition, originally, the Saudis did not start fighting against the Houthis purely viewing it as an Iranian proxy. Saudis' combat against the Houthis dated back to 2009, when Saudi military forces conducted cross border operations against the Houthis, who rebelled against President Saleh's regime. Therefore, it has to be highlighted that Saudi Arabia is not fighting an Iranian associate in Yemen, rather they are fighting a local Yemeni force which receives some support from Tehran (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016, p. 169).

Secondly, the conflict in Yemen did not occur as the outcome of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. There are many actors in this conflict including President Hadi-supporters, the Houthis, AQAP and various tribes each with their own interests and agendas. Yemeni political scene was dominated by a strong, authoritarian leader, former President Saleh for 34 years. Saleh managed to hold the country together for a long time at the expense of growing resentment of various groups and weakening of

the country (Cordesman, 2017, p. 2). The latest civil war is not the first in the country, which suffered a number of earlier ones most probably due to lack of national unity, functioning economy and effective governance in the country. In this sense, rather than a war of regional interests, current civil war in Yemen is “a continuation of a long-standing conflict between the Yemeni government and marginalized” groups (Orkaby, 2017, p. 93-94). Therefore, it is not simply an extension of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry to Yemeni stage.

Thirdly, proxy war by definition is about indirect involvement of an external actor in a conflict outside its border through the support of its proxy or proxies, which are state and non-state actors, who are directly involved in the war. In the Yemeni conflict, Saudi Arabia has actively supported President Hadi’s bloc in accordance with its strategic interests. Riyadh was directly influenced by growing instability in Yemen accommodating the longest border with the country. Particularly, insurgency of the Houthis, who are predominant in northern Yemen close to Saudi Arabia’s southern border has raised Saudis’ security concerns. Instability in Yemen also paved the way to strengthening of the AQAP, which constitutes another security challenge for the Kingdom. Therefore, through a series of military operations, Saudi Arabia has been directly involved in the conflict becoming an actor in the conflict. Military intervention of Saudi Arabia has continued since March 2015, leading to massive casualties. Recently, together with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia attacked Yemen’s port city of Hudaida, known as the largest military involvement by the Saudi-led forces in three years (Al Jazeera 2018). According to Larison (2018), the Saudi-led coalition has committed “one of the largest crimes against humanity in decades” in Yemen and the coalition’s blockade over the country threatens millions of Yemenis. He describes this blockade as “the deliberate, knowing starvation of a civilian population in a desperate attempt to advance an unjustified, aggressive military campaign” (Ibid.).

Fourthly, a proxy war includes corresponding if not exactly the same extent of commitments of external actors to the conflict. Saudi Arabia regards Yemen as its backyard, whereas Yemen occupies a far lower place in Iran’s priority list. Yemen has always been a prioritized issue for Saudi foreign policy. As Esfandiary and Tabatabai (2016, p. 155) indicate, the Kingdom has been involved in Yemen’s affairs, “influencing various communities for its own leverage” for decades. However, the same cannot be suggested with respect to Iran’s perception of Yemen and developments with respect to Yemen. When compared with its interest and commitment to Lebanon,

Syria or Iraq, Iran's interest in Yemen has remained to be insignificant and thus it does not intend to allocate many resources for Yemen. While Iran has provided support to the Houthis in the ongoing conflict in Yemen, this has been marginal with just limited financial and military assistance.

There are two factors, which have limited Iran's capacity to engage in Yemen. Firstly, high degree of instability and extension of the civil war require Iran to allocate a greater extent of resources to that country in order to have a meaningful influence on the developments, but given its high commitment to its proxies in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, Iran is left with limited resources to use in Yemen. Secondly, Iran is aware that Yemen is a highly prioritized issue for Saudi Arabia and thus greater involvement in Yemen would "risk an uncontrolled escalation of tensions" with Saudi Arabia (Juneau, 2016, p. 659). Iranian foreign policy-makers do not want to take risk, especially as the case in question is not among their core priorities.

Lastly, by labeling the Houthis as a Shia's group and agent of Iran, it is the Saudi Arabia itself that has triggered a rapprochement between the Houthis and Iran. While Iranian authorities have rejected the accusations that they are offering direct support for the Houthis, they have taken possession of the Houthis' victories in a way which Sharp (2018, p. 5) defines as "a relatively low-cost way of countering Saudi influence in Yemen". In the meantime, portrayal of an Iranian enemy has helped the Saudi ruling elites to both preserve their legitimacy at home and to secure the support of their fellow Arab states and the US abroad.

Conclusion

With the ending of the Cold War in 1990, North Yemen and South Yemen were unified under the leadership of President Saleh. However, unification remained short of eliminating internal divisions and tensions in the country. Since its coming into existence as a unified state by the early 1990s, Yemen has seen tensions, crises, clashes and civil wars, which have been exacerbated by the involvement of external powers. Approximately 27 million Yemeni people belonging to various ethnic groups have competed for limited resources in the country. In addition to socio-economic grievances, resentment with ruling regime's corrupt policies have led the Yemenis to fill the streets chanting anti-regime slogans in the early 2011. It took four more years for these grievances and fragmentation to turn into a violent civil war in March 2015. Three years have passed since the latest civil war began in Yemen by 2015, leading to

a severe humanitarian crisis. Divergent internal and external actors have involved in the war with their own interests and agendas, contributing to the complexity of violence in the country. Similar to the Syrian case, Arab Spring-affiliated uprisings in the country have led to growing violence between the ruling regime and the opposition groups paving the way for a civil war. The beginning of the civil war dated back to March 2015, when the Houthis restarted an uprising against the government, due to their growing frustration.

There has been a tendency in the academic circles to describe the ongoing conflict in Yemen as an outgrowth of the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as Saudis have engaged in an operation against the Houthis, who are claimed to be supported by Iran. Likewise, there has been much speculation about whether a proxy war is taking place between Riyadh and Tehran in Yemen. However, these assumptions remain short of understanding the origins of the war and the reason why Saudi Arabia intervened. The Yemeni conflict is mainly a complicated local struggle about access to power which is further complicated by external actors' engagement. While Yemeni conflict has been a prioritized issue for Saudi ruling elites, Saudi intervention in Yemen largely occurred in order to secure its southern borders. On the other hand, Yemeni conflict has not been a prioritized issue for Iran, which prefers to focus its attention on Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. The Houthis, another component of the complex equation, are not proxies of Iran to follow its policies without questioning. Thus, Iran's influence in Yemen continues to be limited when compared with that of Saudi Arabia. In the meantime, Saudi Arabia, the Houthis and Iran are not the only actors to be involved in the Yemen's ongoing conflict. President Hadi's bloc, former President Saleh's supporters, AQAP, the GCC states and the US are other actors to have involved in the conflict.

Overall, Yemen is passing through a very critical time. It seems unlikely that the civil war in Yemen would end unless a combination of confidence-building and nation-building takes place among the different local sides involved in the conflict. Policy-makers and international organizations can not contribute to the settlement of this conflict by portraying it purely as a rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Such a tendency just blurs the already complicated picture in Yemen. The stalemate in the Yemeni civil war only serves to interests of radical terrorist organizations in the country offering a fertile ground for jihadism. In the meantime, the Yemeni people continue to suffer the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

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Özet

Mayıs 1990'da Kuzey Yemen ve Güney Yemen'in birleşmesiyle oluşan Yemen Arap Cumhuriyeti'nde merkezi otorite yıllar boyunca çeşitli grupların yoğun muhalefetiyle karşılaşmıştır. Ülkede yaşanan gerilimler ve krizler dış güçlerin de müdahalesiyle daha da şiddetlenmiştir. Yemen halkının kötü ekonomik koşullara ve yönetimdeki rejimin yolsuz politikalarına karşı duyduğu memnuniyetsizlik, diğer Arap ülkelerinde olduğu gibi Yemen halkının da Arap Baharı olarak adlandırılan reform yanlısı ayaklanmalarda sokağa dökülmesine neden olmuştur. Bu ayaklanmalar sonrasında, Yemen toplumunda yönetime duyulan tepki ve bölünmüşlük dört yıl sonra iç savaşa dönüşmüştür.

Mart 2015'de patlak vermesinin üzerinden yaklaşık üç yıl geçen Yemen'deki iç savaş, yoğun siyasi istikrarsızlık ve vahim insani krize neden olmuştur. Bu makale, Yemen'deki iç savaş, savaşta yer alan aktörler ve çıkarlarına odaklanarak, detaylı olarak incelemektedir. İlk bakışta, Yemen iç savaşında iki temel blok olduğu görülmektedir. Bir yanda, uluslararası toplum tarafından meşru olarak kabul gören ve Suudi Arabistan önderliğindeki koalisyon güçleri tarafından desteklenmekte olan Hadi hükümeti ile Yemen güvenlik güçleri vardır. Diğer tarafta ise İran tarafından desteklendiği iddia edilen Şii Husiler yer almaktadır. Ancak, detaylı olarak bakıldığında savaşta farklı çıkar ve gündemlere sahip olan Arap Yarımadası el Kaidesi, İslam Devleti ve çeşitli savaşçı aşiret gruplarının da yer aldığı görülmektedir. Bu devlet-dışı aktörler, iki temel bloğun kontrolü dışında, kendi çıkarları ve değişen konjonktürel dinamikler doğrultusunda hareket etmektedirler.

Son yıllarda, Yemen'deki çatışmayı, bölge üzerinde kontrollerini güçlendirmek amacıyla, Sünni Suudi Arabistan ile Şii İran arasında yaşanmakta olan dini bir mücadele olarak açıklama eğilimi vardır. Çalışma, Yemen'de devam etmekte olan krizi, Suudi Arabistan ile İran arasında bir vekalet savaşı olarak tanımlamanın yanıtıcı olacağını savunmaktadır. Burada; gerilim, söz konusu iki ülkenin çıkarlarının çatışması sonucu ortaya çıkmamıştır. Daha ziyade, Suudi Arabistan ve İran'ın Yemen'in iç savaşında taraf olmaları, ülkede devam etmekte olan gerilimi daha karmaşık hale getirmek suretiyle arttırmıştır. Sonuç karışık yapıda bir çatışma olsa da, bu makalenin yazarı bunun kesin olarak vekalet savaşından farklı olduğu görüşünü savunmaktadır.