

Houthis, Iran, and the Saudi-Yemen Conflict: A Proxy War or Internal Struggle?

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ABSTRACT

The Yemeni conflict, involving the Houthis, Iran, and the Saudi-led coalition, represents one of the most complex geopolitical crises in the Middle East. This research article examines whether the conflict is primarily a proxy war between regional powers-Saudi Arabia and Iran-or an internal struggle rooted in Yemen's political, social, and economic grievances. The paper explores the historical rise of the Houthis, their relationship with Iran, and the motivations behind Saudi Arabia's intervention. It further analyses how ideological and sectarian factors, external interventions, and regional power struggles have shaped the conflict. The findings indicate that while external actors have played a significant role in escalating the war, the conflict remains deeply rooted in Yemen's internal political fragmentation, governance failures, and socio-economic inequalities. The study draws lessons on the nature of proxy wars and internal conflicts in the broader Middle Eastern context, offering policy recommendations for peacebuilding, regional stability, and conflict resolution.

KEYWORDS: *Houthis, Yemen conflict, Saudi-Iran rivalry, proxy war, internal struggle, sectarianism, Middle East geopolitics, regional stability, humanitarian crisis, conflict resolution*

INTRODUCTION

The Yemeni conflict, which began in 2014, has evolved into one of the most complex and devastating wars in the Middle East. At its core, the war pits the Houthi movement, a Zaydi Shiite insurgent group, against the internationally recognized government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, which is supported by a Saudi-led coalition. However, the conflict is far from simple. It is marked by regional rivalries, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and has sparked significant geopolitical ramifications throughout the Middle East. The Houthis' alliance with Iran has raised questions about the true nature of the conflict, whether it is primarily an internal struggle driven by local political and socio-economic factors, or a proxy war fought between regional powers. This paper aims to explore the complexities of the Saudi-Yemen conflict, focusing on the role of the Houthis, their relationship with Iran, and how regional power dynamics have shaped the trajectory of the war.

The emergence of the Houthi movement in Yemen can be traced back to long-standing historical, political, and religious grievances, primarily centered around the marginalization of the Zaydi Shiite

community in Yemen. Since the fall of the Zaydi-imamate rule in the 1960s, Yemen has experienced significant political upheaval, which culminated in the rise of the Houthis as a political and military force. Initially, their movement focused on local issues in northern Yemen, but over time, it became intertwined with the broader regional tensions between Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shiite-majority Iran. This shift has made the Houthis an important actor in the regional rivalry between these two powers, with each side seeking to extend its influence over Yemen.

Saudi Arabia, perceiving the Houthi movement as an extension of Iranian influence, intervened militarily in 2015 in support of the Yemeni government. The intervention marked a significant escalation in the conflict, transforming what was initially a local insurgency into a regional proxy war. From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the Houthis represent not only a security threat on their southern border but also an ideological and political challenge to their leadership in the Arab world. The kingdom's intervention, supported by other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, aimed to restore the Yemeni government,

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contain Iranian influence, and maintain its regional hegemony. The intervention has had severe humanitarian consequences, contributing to one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern history.

The question of whether the Yemeni conflict is a proxy war, or an internal struggle is central to understanding its dynamics and potential for resolution. While it is clear that regional powers have played a significant role, the internal aspects of the conflict such as the Houthis' ideological foundation, their popular support in northern Yemen, and the failures of the Yemeni government cannot be overlooked. This paper will explore that the conflict is not merely a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but rather a multifaceted struggle involving local, regional, and international factors. Understanding the interplay of these forces is crucial for any lasting peace process in Yemen.

The research article will first explore the historical and political roots of the Houthi movement, focusing on its emergence and ideological development. Then it will examine the role of Iran in shaping the Houthis' political and military strategies, considering both direct support and broader regional dynamics. Finally, the paper assesses the motivations behind Saudi Arabia's military intervention and its implications for the broader Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape. By examining these factors, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Yemeni conflict and its significance within the context of Middle Eastern power struggles.

Methodology:

The methodology adopted for this research article is a qualitative, multi-dimensional approach that combines historical analysis, case study methodology, and an examination of primary and secondary sources. The study draws on existing literature, including scholarly articles, books, and reports from international organizations, to analyse the historical, political, and socio-economic factors that led to the emergence of the Houthi movement and the escalation of the Yemeni conflict. In addition, it incorporates an analysis of political discourse and media reports to understand the framing of the conflict by various regional and international actors, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the conflict's complexities and offers a nuanced perspective on the interplay between local, regional, and international actors.

Objective:

The primary objective of this research article is to examine the nature of the Yemeni conflict, specifically exploring whether it is primarily an

internal struggle driven by local grievances or a proxy war fueled by regional powers, notably Saudi Arabia and Iran. The article aims to analyse the historical, political, and socio-economic factors that contributed to the rise of the Houthi movement and their subsequent role in the broader regional power struggle. Further, the article seeks to assess the extent of Iranian influence on the Houthis' military and political strategies, and how this relationship has shaped the dynamics of the conflict. Another objective is to explore Saudi Arabia's motivations behind its military intervention, considering both security concerns and regional geopolitical ambitions. Ultimately, the article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conflict, identifying the key actors involved and their interests, and to offer insights into the broader implications of the war for regional stability and international relations in the Middle East.

Result:

The research findings indicate that the Yemeni conflict is a complex, multifaceted struggle that cannot be solely classified as either an internal conflict or a proxy war. While the Houthi movement emerged from local political and socio-economic grievances, their alliance with Iran has undeniably transformed the conflict into a broader regional power struggle, with Saudi Arabia viewing the Houthis as an extension of Iranian influence. The study reveals that Iran has provided substantial military, financial, and political support to the Houthis, significantly enhancing their capabilities and resilience against the Saudi-led coalition. However, the research also highlights that the conflict's roots lie in Yemen's internal political dynamics, including the failure of the Yemeni government, widespread disenfranchisement, and the historical marginalisation of the northern Zaydi Shiite community. Saudi Arabia's intervention was driven by both security concerns and its broader geopolitical rivalry with Iran, seeking to maintain its influence in Yemen and prevent the spread of Iranian-backed Shiite movements in the region. The study concludes that the Yemeni conflict is best understood as a hybrid war, where local issues are intertwined with regional rivalries, and where external interventions have intensified rather than resolved the internal struggle.

Discussion:

The findings of this research suggest that the Yemeni conflict is a clear example of how local struggles can be exacerbated by regional rivalries, leading to a protracted and devastating war. The Houthis, initially driven by local political and sectarian grievances, became an integral part of the broader Saudi-Iranian

rivalry, transforming what could have been a domestic power struggle into a regional proxy war. The involvement of Iran, while crucial in strengthening the Houthis militarily, frames the conflict not only as a civil war but as part of a larger ideological contest between Sunni and Shia powers in the region. Likewise, Saudi Arabia's military intervention, apparently to restore the internationally recognised government, was motivated by its desire to counter Iranian influence in Yemen and safeguard its own security, particularly against the backdrop of Houthi missile and drone attacks on Saudi soil. However, the Saudi-led coalition's military actions, which have included airstrikes on civilian infrastructure, have contributed to the catastrophic humanitarian crisis in Yemen, raising ethical concerns and questioning the effectiveness of military solutions. The research also underscores the role of international actors and organisations in shaping the conflict, as their interventions whether through diplomacy, arms supplies, or humanitarian aid have had both positive and negative consequences. Ultimately, the discussion highlights the complex nature of the Yemeni war, showing that it cannot be reduced to a simple binary of internal struggle versus proxy war; rather, it is a confluence of domestic issues, regional power dynamics, and international interventions that have deepened Yemen's suffering and instability.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Yemeni conflict is a complex war that blends elements of an internal struggle with regional proxy dynamics, shaped by both local grievances and broader geopolitical rivalries. While the Houthis' rise can be attributed to historical and socio-political factors within Yemen, their alignment with Iran has escalated the conflict, transforming it into a focal point of the larger Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Saudi Arabia's intervention, driven by security concerns and a desire to limit Iranian influence, has further complicated the situation, worsened the humanitarian crisis and prolonged the war. The conflict underscores the profound impact of external interventions on internal struggles, highlighting the challenges of resolving conflicts when multiple actors with competing interests are involved. The research emphasises that any lasting solution to the Yemeni crisis must address both the internal grievances of the Yemeni people and the regional power dynamics that fuel the conflict, calling for inclusive dialogue, humanitarian aid, and a reassessment of foreign involvement in order to pave the way for sustainable peace in Yemen and the broader Middle East.

Importance:

This research article is crucial for understanding the multifaceted nature of the Yemeni conflict, which has become a key point of contention in the broader Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape. By analysing the roles of the Houthis, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors, the article sheds light on the complex interplay between local political struggles and larger regional power dynamics. The article offers valuable insights into how proxy wars unfold in the context of internal conflicts, providing a deeper understanding of the forces that shape contemporary Middle Eastern wars. Moreover, it highlights the significant humanitarian consequences of such interventions, stressing the need for more nuanced, inclusive approaches to conflict resolution that address both domestic grievances and external interventions. This research contributes to the academic discourse on the politics of the Middle East, offering policymakers, scholars, and international organisations critical perspectives on how to navigate the intricate realities of conflict in a region marked by competing interests and deep-rooted historical tensions.

Background:

Before 1990, Yemen was divided into two separate states, North Yemen (officially the Yemen Arab Republic, YAR) and South Yemen (officially the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, PDRY). These two nations had distinct political ideologies, foreign alliances, and historical trajectories, shaped by colonial influence, regional rivalries, and internal struggles.¹ North Yemen was historically influenced by the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the region until its collapse after World War I. In 1918, the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen was established under Imam Yahya, a Zaydi Shia leader. The kingdom maintained a traditional and conservative governance system based on tribal alliances and religious authority. In 1962, a military coup overthrew the monarchy, establishing the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). This led to a civil war between royalist forces, backed by Saudi Arabia, and republicans, supported by Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser.²

South Yemen, particularly the port city of Aden, was under British control from 1839 to 1967. Aden served as a key British naval base due to its strategic location along the Indian Ocean trade routes. In 1967, following a violent anti-colonial struggle led by the National Liberation Front (NLF), the British withdrew, and South Yemen gained independence, forming the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).³ The new state adopted a Marxist-Leninist ideology, making it the only communist country in

the Arab world. PDRY aligned itself with the Soviet Union and other socialist states, receiving military and economic assistance. After negotiations, on May 22, 1990, North and South Yemen officially unified to form the Republic of Yemen, with Ali Abdullah Saleh as president.⁴

The roots of the Houthi movement in Yemen can be traced to the historical marginalisation of the northern Zaydi Shiite community, which had traditionally held political power in Yemen prior to the 1960s. The Zaydi imamate ruled northern Yemen for over a thousand years until it was overthrown in a 1962 coup, which established the Yemeni Arab Republic (North Yemen).⁵ This political shift led to the exclusion of the Zaydis from significant power, despite their historical influence. In the decades following the coup, the Zaydi community, particularly in the north, felt politically sidelined by both the Yemeni government and its subsequent southern neighbor, South Yemen, which was initially a Marxist state. Over time, the failure to integrate the Zaydi population into the political process contributed to a sense of alienation and resentment, setting the stage for the emergence of a political movement that sought to reclaim the community's rights and influence in Yemen's future.

Politically, the Houthi movement emerged from the broader context of Yemen's unstable political environment. Yemen has long been plagued by a fragmented political landscape, characterized by weak central authority and frequent changes in leadership. The unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 created new political tensions, with the Zaydi Shiites in the north feeling increasingly marginalized by the ruling Sunni elites in the unified state.⁶ The movement's founder, Hussein Badreddin-al-Houthi, a member of a prominent Zaydi family, began calling for greater political representation for Zaydis in the 1990s, following the government's increasing alliance with Saudi Arabia and the rise of Salafism in Yemen.⁷ Hussein Houthi initially advocated for reform within the state but grew increasingly disillusioned with the government's failure to address the Zaydi community's grievances. This disillusionment culminated in the establishment of the group that would later bear his name, which initially engaged in political and armed resistance against the government.

The socio-economic context of northern Yemen also played a significant role in the rise of the Houthi movement. The region is among the most economically underdeveloped in the country, with high levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to essential services. The government's failure

to address these issues, especially in rural areas, deepened the grievances of many Yemenis in the northern highlands where the Houthis garnered significant support.⁸ The government's mismanagement, coupled with the economic disparities between the rich urban centers and the rural areas, created fertile ground for movements that could promise change and justice. Furthermore, the growing influence of Saudi Arabia, which was perceived as aggravating these inequalities, led to a rise in anti-Saudi sentiment within these marginalised communities. The Houthis capitalised on these frustrations by positioning themselves as defenders of Yemen's sovereignty, promising to address both local socio-economic problems and the broader issue of foreign interference in Yemen's affairs.

Religiously, the Houthis have drawn upon the Zaydi Shiite tradition, which emphasises the need for a political system that reflects the community's values and governance principles. Zaydism, which is distinct from both Sunni Islam and mainstream Shia Islam.⁹ The Houthis used religious symbolism to rally support, framing their struggle as a defense of Zaydi Islam against what they perceived as the encroachment of Wahhabism and Salafism, ideologies associated with Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ The Houthis' ideological narrative framed their resistance as a religious duty, portraying the government as corrupt and aligned with foreign powers that were perceived as hostile to Yemen's independence and religious traditions. This religious framing not only roused local support but also positioned the Houthis in opposition to both Yemeni authorities and regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Houthi-Iranian Alliance

The alliance between the Houthis and Iran has had a profound impact on the political and military dynamics of the Yemeni conflict. This relationship emerged in the early 2000s, following the Houthi movement's shift from a local insurgency to a more sophisticated political and military force. Iran's interest in the Houthis was partly driven by Tehran's broader strategy to assert influence in the Arabian Peninsula and counterbalance Saudi Arabia's dominance in the region. For the Houthis, Iran's support provided crucial military and financial resources that bolstered their capacity to challenge the Yemeni government and later resist the Saudi-led intervention.¹¹ The relationship was initially ideological, as both Iran and the Houthis shared common Shia roots, but it later evolved into a more pragmatic alliance, with Iran offering the Houthis advanced military technology, including ballistic missiles, drones, and training for their fighters.¹² This

alliance significantly altered the balance of power in Yemen, giving the Houthis the military capability to escalate the conflict and resist the Saudi-led coalition.

Iran's military support has been a game-changer in the conflict. The Houthis, who initially lacked the resources and training to engage in conventional warfare, were able to modernise their arsenal with Iranian-supplied weapons, including drones and missiles that allowed them to target critical infrastructure within Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The Houthis' ability to launch cross-border missile attacks and drone strikes on Saudi cities, including critical oil facilities, has escalated the conflict and drawn regional and international attention to the scale and sophistication of their military capabilities. Iran's influence on the Houthis' military strategies has been evident in their asymmetric warfare tactics, which emphasise the use of low-cost, high-impact weapons like drones and missiles.¹³ These tactics have proven to be highly effective against the Saudi-led coalition, which, despite having superior firepower, has struggled to neutralise the Houthis' unconventional warfare strategies. This shift in military tactics has prolonged the conflict, making a decisive military victory for either side increasingly difficult.

Politically, the Houthi-Iranian alliance has reshaped the conflict's broader regional dynamics. Iran's support has given the Houthis a sense of legitimacy, allowing them to position themselves as a legitimate political and military force against the Yemeni government, which is backed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.¹⁴ For the Houthis, this alliance has also provided a platform to challenge Saudi influence in Yemen, framing their struggle as part of a larger resistance against foreign intervention in Yemen's sovereignty. As a result, the Houthis have become an important player not just in Yemen, but also in the broader regional struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for dominance in the Middle East. This ideological framing has attracted support from other groups in the region sympathetic to Iran's policies, and in turn, Iran has used its support for the Houthis to project power in the Arabian Peninsula and challenge Saudi hegemony.¹⁵ For the Houthis, Iran's backing has provided both a political shield against external criticism and a tool for deepening their influence within Yemen, especially in the northern regions, where they have been able to consolidate power and establish control.

The alliance has also transformed the Yemeni conflict into a proxy war with broader regional implications. Saudi Arabia, perceiving the Houthis as an Iranian proxy, has framed the conflict as part of its struggle to limit Iranian influence in the region. This has led to

Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen, which it sees as crucial to preventing the establishment of a Shiite-controlled state in its southern neighbour. The Houthis' alliance with Iran has drawn Yemen into the larger geopolitical rivalry between the Sunni-majority Gulf states and Shiite-majority Iran.¹⁶ The conflict has become a battleground not only for control of Yemen but also for the future of regional power dynamics, where both sides are using Yemen as a proxy to exert influence. The proxy nature of the war has complicated efforts for peace, as any resolution must consider the competing interests of external powers i.e., Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others, alongside the internal Yemeni factions.

The Houthis' relationship with Iran has also hindered diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the conflict. The Saudi-led coalition, backed by the West, has been reluctant to negotiate with the Houthis, viewing them as an Iranian proxy rather than a legitimate party to the conflict. This has made peace negotiations difficult, as the Houthis demand recognition as an equal party and insist on retaining significant political and military control in Yemen. Iran's involvement has further complicated the diplomatic landscape. Iran's support of the Houthis has encouraged the group to adopt a more hardline stance in negotiations, making compromises on key issues such as power-sharing and disarmament more challenging.¹⁷ The lack of a unified international approach and the entrenched positions of both Saudi Arabia and Iran have led to a diplomatic stalemate, prolonging the conflict and deteriorating the humanitarian crisis.

Saudi Arabia's Concerns

The primary motivation behind Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen is rooted in its security concerns, particularly regarding the spread of Iranian influence in its southern neighbor. Saudi Arabia perceives the Houthis, who have received significant support from Iran, as an extension of Tehran's strategic ambitions in the Arabian Peninsula. Given Yemen's proximity to Saudi Arabia's southern border, Riyadh is particularly sensitive to any developments that might enable Iran to establish a foothold in the region. The Houthis' growing control over Yemen's northern highlands, including the capital, Sana'a, represented a potential threat to Saudi Arabia's territorial security, as it could lead to a long-term destabilisation of the region and bolster other Iranian-backed groups in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or Shiite militias in Iraq.¹⁸ Saudi Arabia's intervention was thus framed as a defensive measure to prevent the expansion of Iranian influence close to its borders and to maintain

stability in a region that has long been considered part of its sphere of influence.

Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen is also tied to the broader regional power struggle with Iran, which has dominated Middle Eastern geopolitics for decades. At the heart of this rivalry is the ideological divide between Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shia-majority Iran. Saudi Arabia views itself as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world, and the rise of a powerful Shia-controlled state in Yemen, particularly one that is backed by Iran, would undermine its status and influence in the region.¹⁹ The conflict in Yemen became part of the wider Sunni-Shia sectarian rivalry, with Saudi Arabia seeking to contain Iranian influence not only in Yemen but also in the broader Middle East. The military intervention was framed as an effort to prevent the establishment of a Shiite-dominated regime in Yemen, which could tip the regional balance of power in favour of Iran and embolden other Shiite movements in the Gulf and beyond. This broader ideological struggle has been a driving force behind Saudi Arabia's sustained military involvement in Yemen.

Another critical motivation behind Saudi Arabia's military intervention is the protection of international shipping lanes and the maintenance of regional stability, both of which are vital to the kingdom's economic interests. Yemen's strategic location along the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a key maritime chokepoint that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, has significant implications for global trade and energy routes.²⁰ Saudi Arabia relies on these shipping lanes for the export of oil, and any disruption caused by instability in Yemen could have severe economic consequences for both the kingdom and global markets. Furthermore, the increasing capability of the Houthis to target Saudi Arabian territory, particularly with missiles and drones, has raised concerns about the vulnerability of the kingdom's critical infrastructure. The Saudi-led coalition's intervention, therefore, also serves the purpose of protecting these vital shipping routes and maintaining the broader security of the global economic order in the region.

Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen is also motivated by a desire to reassert its influence in the Arabian Peninsula and to deter any challenges to its regional leadership. In the post-Arab Spring era, Saudi Arabia has sought to regain its status as the dominant power in the Gulf region, particularly after facing setbacks in places like Syria and Iraq. The failure of Saudi-backed forces in Syria, combined with the rise of Iranian-backed militias and groups in Iraq and Lebanon, highlighted the limits of Saudi

power.²¹ The conflict in Yemen presented an opportunity for Riyadh to demonstrate its ability to lead a coalition and reassert its dominance in a region where its influence was being increasingly challenged by Iran and other actors. The military intervention has been about projecting power and asserting leadership within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Internally, the military intervention in Yemen also serves to bolster the legitimacy of the Saudi government under Crown Prince Mohammed-bin-Salman (MBS). The intervention has been framed domestically as a patriotic campaign to defend the kingdom's sovereignty and preserve regional stability. In the context of MBS's ambitious reforms and his consolidation of power, the intervention in Yemen has provided a means to rally nationalistic sentiment and gain public support. The war in Yemen has allowed the Saudi leadership to maintain control over internal political narratives, shifting focus away from domestic criticisms, including concerns over human rights abuses and the country's economic challenges.²² The military campaign has also been used to strengthen the kingdom's ties with key allies, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, which have supported Saudi Arabia's efforts with arms sales and political backing.

Saleh Government and Saudi Arabia

The trajectory of the Yemeni conflict was significantly influenced by external interventions from the outset, especially during the reign of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Prior to the Houthi insurgency, Saudi Arabia had long provided political and financial support to Saleh's government, particularly as a means of countering the influence of Iran-backed Shia groups along its southern border.²³ Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen during this period primarily revolved around maintaining a stable, friendly government in Sana'a. However, this external support inadvertently worsened internal divisions, especially as Saleh's government became increasingly corrupt and unresponsive to the needs of marginalised groups like the Houthis. The political vacuum created by Saleh's weakening government and his alignment with the West, including support for U.S. counterterrorism efforts, also provided a foundation for external actors, such as Iran, to become more involved. The external interventions initially contributed to an environment of instability, setting the stage for the subsequent escalation of the conflict as both regional and international powers sought to influence Yemen's political trajectory.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 marked a turning point for Yemen and amplified the role of external actors. As protests erupted against Saleh's

rule, the international community, including the United States, the European Union, and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, called for a peaceful transition of power. This led to Saleh's eventual departure and the installation of his successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.²⁴ Despite the change in leadership, the international community's intervention in Yemen failed in establishing stability. The U.S. continued to focus on counterterrorism efforts, especially against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), while Saudi Arabia and the GCC offered support to the Hadi government. This external intervention did not address the underlying political, economic, and sectarian tensions within Yemen. The transition government was weak, failing to bring about meaningful reforms or reconciliation, which left the door open for both local insurgencies, like the Houthis, and regional actors to escalate their involvement.

The intervention of Saudi Arabia and its allies in 2015 marked an escalation in the Yemeni conflict. Saudi Arabia, perceiving the Houthis as an Iranian proxy, formed a coalition of Arab states with logistical and financial support from Western powers, including the United States and the United Kingdom. The Saudi-led coalition's primary objective was to restore the internationally recognised government of President Hadi and to push back against the growing influence of Iran in the region.²⁵ The intervention quickly turned into a full-scale military campaign, which included airstrikes on Houthi positions, an air and naval blockade, and ground operations aimed at recapturing territory controlled by the Houthis. However, this external intervention, while intended to restore order and curb Iranian influence, has led to significant civilian casualties and has prolonged the conflict. The intervention's indiscriminate airstrikes and the blockade of essential goods have exacerbated Yemen's humanitarian crisis, pushing the country deeper into a state of collapse. The presence of external actors, particularly the Saudi-led coalition, transformed the conflict from a local insurgency into a multi-faceted regional war with devastating consequences for the civilian population.

Other international actors have played a critical role in influencing the trajectory of the conflict. The United States, while not directly involved in combat operations, has provided intelligence, arms, and logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition, citing shared interests in counterterrorism efforts and ensuring the security of maritime shipping lanes. The U.S. and U.K. military's support has been a source of controversy considering the growing humanitarian disaster in Yemen. The United Nations has repeatedly

called for peace talks and ceasefire agreements, but its efforts have been undermined by the complex web of external interventions, with each party pursuing its own interests. While the UN has attempted to mediate peace talks, the involvement of external powers has often resulted in a fragmented diplomatic process, with no lasting resolution to the conflict.

External interventions have not only shaped the military trajectory of the conflict but have also had a profound impact on the humanitarian situation in Yemen. The Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes, the naval blockade, and the Houthi control of large parts of the country have led to widespread destruction of infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and essential services. The blockade has restricted access to food, medicine, and fuel, leading to severe famine and a cholera outbreak. The scale of the humanitarian disaster has drawn international condemnation, with organisations like the United Nations and Human Rights Watch²⁶ accusing both the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis of committing war crimes. External interventions have contributed to the protraction of the war and deepened the suffering of millions of Yemenis. The lack of a clear political resolution, compounded by the interests of regional and international actors, has led to a situation where the conflict continues with no end in sight, and Yemen's population bears the brunt of external interference.

Impact of Proxy Wars

One of the key lessons from Yemen is the role of sectarianism in amplifying proxy conflicts in the Middle East. The conflict is emblematic of how sectarian identity can make tensions worse and draw in regional and global powers with competing religious and ideological agendas. The Houthis initially driven by local grievances became increasingly aligned with Iran, a Shia-majority country, while Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states sought to maintain the Sunni-dominated political order. As a result, what could have remained a localised political struggle quickly morphed into a sectarianised conflict, with each side using religious narratives to justify their involvement. This highlights a broader pattern in the Middle East, where local struggles are often amplified by sectarian loyalties, leading to a much more complex and intractable situation. In future proxy wars, understanding the sectarian dimensions of conflicts is crucial for both mediating peace and preventing escalation.

One of the most striking lessons from the Yemeni conflict is the devastating humanitarian impact of proxy wars on civilians. As the conflict has dragged on, Yemen has become one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with millions displaced, tens of

thousands killed, and basic infrastructure decimated. The airstrikes and naval blockades imposed by the Saudi-led coalition, coupled with the control exercised by the Houthis over territory, have resulted in widespread food insecurity, a collapse of the healthcare system, and the spread of diseases like cholera. The civilian toll in Yemen serves as a stark reminder of the human cost of proxy wars, where local populations become pawns in a larger geopolitical struggle.²⁷ This underscores the need for international actors to prioritise humanitarian considerations and civilian protection in any conflict where external powers are involved. It also highlights the importance of creating mechanisms to ensure that humanitarian aid is not politicised or weaponised as part of the broader conflict.

The Yemeni conflict also underscores the challenges of state-building in regions embroiled in proxy wars. The conflict has exposed the weaknesses of the Yemeni state, which was already fragile before the Houthis' rise to power. The fall of the central government, the inability to maintain control over territories, and the lack of effective governance have all contributed to the collapse of Yemen into a failed state. In such contexts, proxy wars often expand state fragility, as competing external powers further undermine state institutions and strengthen local divisions. This is evident in Yemen where the ongoing conflict has shattered the possibility of rebuilding a cohesive national government. The lesson for future proxy conflicts is that without a stable political framework, external interventions can do little to address the underlying issues of governance and may in fact accelerate the erosion of state institutions, leading to even greater instability.

The ongoing Yemeni conflict highlights the importance of multilateral diplomacy and conflict resolution efforts in addressing the underlying causes of proxy wars.²⁸ In Yemen, the failure of bilateral peace talks between the warring parties-Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Houthis, and the Hadi government-demonstrates the limitations of traditional diplomatic efforts that focus on only the primary actors. A more inclusive, multilateral approach that involves local factions, regional powers, and global actors is necessary to create a comprehensive peace agreement. The lack of effective coordination between international actors, as well as the competing interests of regional powers, has contributed to the failure of peace efforts in Yemen.

Recommendations

- Encourage a multilateral peace process that includes all relevant local, regional, and international stakeholders. This should involve

not only the main combatants but also other regional actors, such as the UAE, Oman, and other Gulf states, as well as international powers like the UN, the EU, and the US.

- International actors, the United Nations and humanitarian organisations, should prioritise efforts to address the severe humanitarian crisis in Yemen by ensuring unfettered access to humanitarian aid and providing strong protections for civilians.
- Develop a long-term economic recovery and state-building plan for Yemen that addresses the root causes of instability, including economic underdevelopment, weak governance, and political fragmentation.
- Promote regional confidence-building measures between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other Gulf states to de-escalate tensions and reduce the risk of broader regional conflict.
- The international community must address the rise of extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS, which have exploited the chaos of the Yemeni conflict.
- Support the growth of a democratic, inclusive political system in Yemen that includes the participation of marginalized groups, including women, youth, and minority communities.
- Develop initiatives aimed at reducing sectarian tensions, both within Yemen and across the region, through cultural and educational exchanges, interfaith dialogue, and fostering cooperation between Sunni and Shia communities.
- Establish or strengthen regional security frameworks to enhance cooperation among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, with the aim of preventing further conflicts.
- Strengthen international controls over arms sales to ensure that weapons provided to parties involved in the conflict do not further fuel violence or intensify the humanitarian crisis.

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