War in Yemen: the view from Iran

By Kjetil Selvik

■ Executive summary

In the regional backdrop to the war in Yemen Iran is a pivotal actor. Saudi Arabia has made clear that it sees the conflict in Yemen as the extension of its struggle with the Islamic Republic. This paper analyses the view from Iran as found in Iranian news and political analysis websites. It argues that different political and ideological orientations converge in opposition to the Saudi-led military operation in Yemen, deepening the regional logjam. The study also shows that revolutionary-ideological interpretation frames coexist with legal-democratic suggestions to end the crisis.

Overall, the Iranian debate runs contrary to Saudi Arabia's understanding of the crisis. Saudi Arabia argues that the Huthi takeover in Sanaa represents a 'disruption of normalcy' and a dangerous usurpation of power. From Iran's vantage point, it is the natural consequence of the Yemeni government's repression and external relations. Saudi Arabia justifies its military operation by deposed President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's call for protection of Yemen and its people. Iran contests Mansur Hadi's legitimacy and considers the military intervention arbitrary and illegal. Saudi Arabia sees the Huthis as a proxy of Iran, united by a common Shia identity. Iran perceives the Huthis' Zaydi creed as religiously different but associates their cause with its own political agenda.

Roots of the crisis

When explaining the roots of the crisis, Iranian analysts point to internal strains as well as dysfunctions in the international order. Several blame the "dictatorship" of 'Ali 'Abd Allah Salih for economic failure, unemployment, social gaps and deepening Yemen's tribal fragmentation. They denounce the old regime's response to the 2011 uprisings, faulting Salih for repressing protestors instead of handing over power. The transition agreement brokered by Saudi Arabia in November 2011 is dismissed as the West and the GCC's attempt to "confiscate" the Yemeni revolution. In other words, the Huthi rebellion is portrayed as a response to internal and external blockages.

Iran attributes more weight to international dysfunctions and injustice than is common in Western interpretations. There is frustration with the UN Security Council, which approved the 2011 transition deal and keeps silent in the face of Saudi "aggression". The Security Council is commonly described as a "Western tool" to gain dominance over the region. Some accuse the United States of wanting to control Yemen indirectly through Saudi Arabia. The Yemeni government's relations with the US and Israel are believed to have fueled the Huthi expansion.

The Huthis fit the story that Iran's Leader Ali Khamenei narrate about the Arab uprisings. Khamenei never embraced what he saw as the Western-liberal idea of the "Arab spring". Instead, he described the events of 2011 as an "Islamic awakening". This awakening is said to follow the example of Iran's Islamic revolution and signal the end of Western-dominated client regimes in the Arab world. It will empower Islamist movements. The Huthis' capture of Sanaa appears to vindicate this revolutionary-ideological narrative. Khamenei emphatically states that is not a matter of Shiism versus Sunnism. It is simply the revolt of oppressed Muslim people.

Saudi Arabia's role

However, many Iranian analysts believe that the US and its Middle Eastern allies play the sectarian card in order to contain the Islamic Republic. They read the spread of Salafism, and especially the rise of the Islamic State organization, as intended consequences of state manipulation. Saudi Arabia is perceived to be the forefront of this reactionary movement aimed at subverting the revolutionary momentum. Riyadh is accused of promoting anti-Shia, anti-Iran ideologies to wage proxy war on Iran and sap its soft power.

The centrist forces that used to favor diplomatic engagement have largely fallen into line with the conservatives over Yemen. President Rouhani declared intention to improve ties with Saudi Arabia in 2013 but has emerged as a harsh critic of its military operation. Rouhani lashed out at the Saudi government's "inexperience" and "lacking understanding of regional and global political issues", saying it could not compensate for its failures "by throwing bombs on Yemenis" (Fararu 2015). Reacting to the stampede that occurred in Mina, Mecca, during Hajj, Rouhani denounced Saudi Arabia's "incompetence" and suggested it had diverted vital security forces to Yemen (Farhang 2015).

Some Iranian analysts speculate if Saudi Arabia's military operation was launched to defeat Iran's nuclear talks with the P5+1. Saudi Arabia began its airstrikes in Yemen on 26 March 2015 as diplomats convened for the final negotiations over the 2 April 2015 nuclear deal framework. Iran refutes Saudi Arabia's claim that the intervention in Yemen is legal. The hardline Yalesarat dismisses the reference to Mansur Hadi's call for protection of Yemen and its people, asking; if Mansur Hadi represents the Yemeni people, why did not the army stand behind him and the people support him? If Saudi Arabia defends the authority of a country's internationally recognized government, why does it not support the Syrian government? (Yalesarat 2015)

How to resolve the conflict

Iran has proposed four steps to achieve peace and stability in Yemen. First, ceasefire and stopping all foreign military attacks as soon as possible. Second, sending instant and uninterrupted humanitarian assistance to the people of Yemen. Third, the resumption of national dialogue, led by the Yemeni people, with participation of representatives from all political parties and social groups. Fourth, the formation of an inclusive national unity government. It refers these steps to the framework of the UN Charter and the principles of international human rights (IRNA 2015).

Saudi Arabia snuffs at Iran's suggestion, arguing that the diplomatic track has been exhausted. Military intervention became inevitable, Riyadh maintains, when the Huthis stormed the presidential palace in Sanaa, dissolved Parliament, and issued a constitutional declaration. Nevertheless, Iran is able to tap into two potential sources of legitimacy on Yemen. One the one hand it raises the banner of "resistance", supporting the downtrodden against global injustice. On the other hand, it poses as the internationally responsible actor.

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■ THE AUTHOR

Kjetil Selvik is a senior researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen and an adjunct associate professor in the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo. He holds a PhD in political science from L'Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris and specialises in the comparative politics of the Middle East.

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