

POLICY BRIEF 6

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The Geopolitics of Yemen's Civil War



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Iran-backed al-Houthi rebels have pushed the Yemeni civil war into Saudi Arabia with missiles and drones.
- Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have made serious efforts to prevent their disagreements over issues such as the “southern question” from harming their coordination vis-à-vis Yemen.
- The Southern Transition Council (STC) has asserted its power in southern Yemen, yet interactions between the STC and notable factions in Al Mahrah and other southern provinces will influence southern Yemen’s future political landscape.
- Russia’s strategic neutrality positions it to play an important role as a mediator in Yemen, which can help Washington and other capitals pursue a realistic plan for resolving the Yemeni crisis. Russia will continue taking actions in relation to Yemen that challenge U.S. hegemony while exploiting wedges between Washington and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.
- The extent of Abu Dhabi’s willingness to support the STC will have major ramifications not only for Yemen, but also for the UAE’s relations with fellow Arab states and Western powers seeking to preserve Yemen’s north-south unity.

This brief analyzes events in Yemen’s civil war until Dec. 8, 2019.





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INTRODUCTION

Yemen’s multifaceted civil war erupted after al-Houthi rebels usurped control of the capital, Sanaa, in September 2014. Since Yemen’s internationally recognized government lost power to insurgents — led by al-Houthi fighters, who started receiving substantial support from Iran in 2014 — the country has descended into a multifaceted civil war. Yemen is beset by deep divisions and polarizations along ideological, tribal, and religious lines, and the fighting has contributed to the country’s poverty and famine in the interior.

Regional and international state and non-state actors play crucial roles in Yemen’s civil war. These external actors — including Western powers, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Iran, and Russia — complicate the Yemeni situation as they deploy direct military intervention and/or support for various allies and proxies to further their competing agendas.

All of these factors impede efforts to pursue a realistic peace plan that could bring stability, justice, and order to Yemen. Humanitarian disasters including a cholera

outbreak, environmental degradation, and the rise of extremist forces such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS (also known as Daesh or the Islamic State), further dim the prospects for conflict resolution.

This report provides a brief explanation of Yemen’s decline into a chaotic and multidimensional conflict involving multiple civil wars within a larger war, with analysis of major developments in Yemen’s history post-1990. Two centers of gravity in the Yemeni crisis — the struggle for Aden and other parts of southern Yemen between the U.N.-respected government and southern secessionists, and the fighting between the al-Houthi rebels and the Saudi military — are the main focus of this brief. Ultimately, this report argues that despite Washington’s commitment to the parties fighting to preserve Yemen’s post-1990 unity, the odds are dim that this political entity, at least established on paper, can solidify again, given how shattered it has become. This brief ends with policy proposals to consider as outside powers continue working to end the Yemeni conflict.

YEMEN'S DESCENT INTO WAR

In March 2015, an Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) waged “Operation Decisive Storm” (later renamed “Operation Restoring Hope”). This coalition had two main goals: restoring President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi and his U.N.-recognized government to power in Sanaa, which al-Houthi rebels had seized several months before, and stabilizing Yemen as quickly as possible.¹ Yet the coalition has failed to achieve either of these two goals. The rebels maintain power in Sanaa and other parts of northern Yemen and in several areas along the Red Sea coast. Hadi’s government, which has been exiled in Riyadh since 2015, possesses virtually no power on the ground in Yemen. Furthermore, the war has created the world’s worst ongoing humanitarian crisis.

About 18 million Yemeni citizens lack access to drinkable water and sanitation, and

four-fifths of the population needs protection and aid.^{2,3} Furthermore, 70 percent of the population remains food insecure. More than 85,000 Yemeni children died of starvation between April 2015 and October 2018.⁴ The weaponization of famine has been a reality in Yemen, with various actors on different sides of the multifaceted civil war depriving specific civilian population segments and pockets access to food and medical services in order to achieve their own political objectives. The mental health issues alone will be staggering in the future.

The chaos has spread beyond Yemen’s borders in two relatively small, but significant, migrant flows. Violence and refugees have spilled into Saudi Arabia and the Horn of Africa. With help from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Lebanon’s Hezbollah — the al-Houthi fighters’ external sponsors — the rebels have effectively brought the conflict to their Saudi enemies’ territory.

The al-Houthi fighters have demonstrated the extent to which their drone and missile capabilities have advanced since 2017, underscored by the rebels’ frequent attacks against strategic targets in Saudi Arabia and allegedly the UAE, too. That Saudi Arabia, for all the money invested in its defense systems, has been unable to thwart such attacks speaks volumes about the capabilities of asymmetric low-tech systems against high-tech air defense. The unprecedented

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missile and drone attacks of Sept. 14, 2019, which struck Saudi Arabia's oil installation at Abqaiq and its oil field at Khurais, exemplified the kingdom's vulnerability to its regional adversaries. Al-Houthi insurgents also took credit for a drone attack targeting Abu Dhabi's international airport, although Emirati officials denied that such an episode occurred. From the al-Houthi perspective, such attacks were necessary for bringing the war into Saudi Arabia proper, thereby raising the stakes internationally while pressuring Riyadh to make painful concessions to the Iran-allied rebels at the negotiating table.

Meanwhile, the Horn of Africa has seen a reversal of refugee movement. Prior to the ongoing Yemeni civil war, African refugees left Somalia and other African countries to enter Yemen. Yemen's crisis has reversed this refugee flow, with Yemenis fleeing their country to take refuge in Djibouti and Somalian refugees who had gone to Yemen crossing the Bab al-Mandeb to return to their country of origin.^{5, 6} This is driving instability in Somalia and other impoverished African countries grappling with their own internal political conflicts.⁷

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fueled by external interference, internal rivalries, and economic devastation against the backdrop of humanitarian crises, the country remains vulnerable to regional geopolitical instability. With Saudi Arabia and Iran backing opposing sides in the conflict — as well as the Saudis and Emiratis having their own conflicting interests in southern Yemen — shifting geopolitical fault lines in the war-torn country have continuously created new layers of conflict and instability. There is no consensus among the state and non-state actors

The only chances Yemen has for peace will come in a political settlement created through dialogue, not continued warfare. Resolving Yemen's multi-sided civil war will require compromise and trust-building initiatives on the part of all major actors in the conflict, including internal and external parties: GCC member states, the United States, Iran, Russia, and the European Union. China, too, is increasing its strategic interests.

(internal and external) fighting over whether the country should be united or split into two (or more) states. Nor is there any agreement regarding whether Yemen should be ruled by a federal or confederal system of government. Moreover, with Yemen's hydrocarbon wealth concentrated in the southern provinces, the country's petroleum sector is likely to be an issue in the struggle between southern secessionists and Yemenis fighting to preserve north-south unity. Until the most powerful factions in Yemen move closer to agreement and compromise on these issues, it will be difficult to imagine peace in Yemen.

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group higher stakes in the success of U.N.-led efforts to end the conflict. A deeper appreciation for Yemeni culture and its drivers can help bring a better understanding to the forefront about identity, agents, and agency for all Yemeni stakeholders. Communities that

were marginalized under Yemen's former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, such as the separatists in the south and the al-Houthi movement in the north, must be incorporated into any negotiations with Yemen's U.N.-recognized government.

SOUTHERN TRANSITIONAL COUNCIL (STC) AND THE 'SOUTHERN QUESTION'

An important element in the Yemeni crisis is the separatist movement seeking to re-establish an independent regime in Aden. Ever since Yemen's reunification in 1990, there has been a common narrative⁸ in southern Yemen about locals suffering under the rule of authorities in Sanaa. Many southern Yemenis have felt economically and politically marginalized by northerners. By 2007, the Southern Movement (*al-Hirak al-Janoubi*) was established to represent the struggle of southern Yemenis. The Southern Transitional Council (STC) was formed 10 years later with the civil war still raging.^{9, 10}

Aidrous al-Zubaydi, head of the STC, announced the creation of the 26-member council on May 11, 2017. This announcement came roughly two weeks after Hadi sacked him from his position as the governor of Aden. Hadi's decision to remove al-Zubaydi was one of the catalysts for the STC's establishment, as it galvanized support in the Aden area for the separatist

struggle.¹¹ The STC's Vice President is Hani bin Breik, who served as minister of state before being sacked along with al-Zubaydi.¹²

Although the STC displayed discipline when fighting the al-Houthi rebels, ultimately preventing the Iran-allied insurgents from usurping control of Aden, the Arab coalition against the al-Houthi fighters considered the council's political objectives problematic. From the outset, it was evident that the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition's different members, in addition to the STC and other actors coordinating with the coalition, were divided. In the case of the STC, its demands for southern independence were incompatible with the desires of Hadi's government and the Saudis. Hadi and the Saudis had stakes in preserving north-south unity and restoring the U.N.-respected government's control over all of Yemen, even if that control was always tenuous at best. Given that Saudi Arabia played an important role in Yemen's re-unification in 1990, which was a major victory for Riyadh, an official split of

Yemen roughly three decades later would mark a major setback for the House of Saud.

Saudi Arabia has long seen Yemen as an Arabian state that must operate within Riyadh's sphere of geopolitical influence. Saudi officials fear that a breakaway state with Aden as its capital could severely undermine the Kingdom's interests and, ultimately, Saudi Arabia's ability to advance hegemonic aims throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Given that South Yemen was the Arab world's most progressive state — measured by women's rights and economic policies — the Saudis naturally have concerns about its potential re-establishment for numerous reasons, including the possibility of such an entity reviving the Marxist politics that shaped South Yemen from 1967-1990.

In August 2019, the conflicting agendas and clashing interests on the part of the Saudi-backed Yemeni government and the UAE-sponsored fighters loyal to the STC came to a head. Violence between Hadi's supporters and armed secessionists broke out in Aden.

Major tensions between the Hadi-led government and STC fighters escalated on Aug. 1, 2019, when a ballistic missile and drone targeted a parade in western Aden. The strike killed dozens, including Munir al-Yafei, also known as Abu al-Yamama, who served as a commander with the Security Belt Forces, a UAE-sponsored separatist and anti-Islamist paramilitary group encompassing multiple factions in southern Yemen.¹³ This paramilitary faction has received support from Abu Dhabi while fighting Hadi's loyalists, and the





group operates under the STC umbrella. It is not clear who was responsible for al-Yafei's death. Although the al-Houthi fighters quickly claimed responsibility, the STC pointed their fingers at Yemen's local Muslim Brotherhood branch, al-Islah. Regardless of which faction killed al-Yafei, violence erupted at his funeral held six days after this death. This fighting triggered a crisis in Aden that became yet another important turning point in the Yemeni civil war. Later in August, during Eid al-Adha, the STC managed to gain control of Aden and other parts of southern Yemen. In the capital, the southern separatists showed their relative strength over Hadi loyalists when the STC captured the presidential palace, military camps, the central bank, and hospitals.¹⁴

A common narrative from STC officials and supporters is that the Hadi government is filled with al-Islah "terrorists." Specifically, they say, the Muslim Brotherhood has infiltrated Hadi's Presidential Guard and other bodies within his administration. Once gunfire targeted those mourning al-Yafei's passing at his funeral, STC fighters fired at Hadi's

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loyalists at the presidential palace, located near Aden's airport. Shortly after, the STC's leadership began making calls for the overthrow of Hadi's "terrorist" government, which it accused of extreme corruption.

From the perspective of Hadi's government and the Saudi leadership, the STC's power grab in August was simply an illegitimate "coup" attempt. Along with UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash, the Saudi ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber called on the various parties in Yemen to exercise restraint in order to restore calm in Aden and other areas in the country's south.

SAUDI-EMIRATI DIVISIONS

The security crisis plaguing Aden illustrates the grander political divisions within the coalition opposing the al-Houthi militia. The coalition is united in the quest to prevent the Iran-allied rebels from achieving their goals,

but it is deeply fragmented by local issues. The differences among these members of the Saudi-led Arab coalition have reached a point where the factions are more worried about intra-camp rivalries than the common

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Notwithstanding much commentary from analysts about a "split" in the Abu Dhabi-Riyadh alliance, the UAE and Saudi Arabia share many interests in Yemen, as they have since the Arab coalition first entered in March 2015. Nonetheless, there are differences in priorities, certain threat perceptions, and tactics that complicate the prospects for long-term cooperation between Abu Dhabi

and Riyadh in relation to Yemen, particularly regarding the "southern question" and the future of political Islam in the country.

Officially, both Hadi loyalists and STC fighters belong to the Saudi- and Emirati-led Arab coalition fighting Iranian-backed al-Houthi insurgents. Forces aligned with Yemen's U.N.-recognized government and those fighting for independence in the south have spent years fighting the al-Houthi movement. Although Riyadh and Abu Dhabi share an interest in seeing the rebels suffer a lasting defeat, the Saudi and Emirati leaders have different views about whether forces loyal to Yemen's internationally recognized administration or the STC make for a sounder ally in the struggle against the al-Houthi rebellion.

Yemen is a critical battlespace in which intra-Sunni differences are allowing Iran and the al-Houthi rebels to further weaken their opponents. At the same time, Riyadh has a stake in defending the legitimacy of Hadi's government and preserving the war-torn country's north-south unity.

The question about al-Islah's role in the coalition aligned against the al-Houthi movement is a sensitive point in Abu Dhabi-Riyadh relations. Although the Emirati leadership is aware of Saudi Arabia's reliance on the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood to unite myriad Sunni actors in Yemen against the threat of the al-Houthi militia and its Iranian backers, Emirati officials are, at best, nervous about this Islamist group and its long-term intentions in the Arabian Peninsula. Abu Dhabi has viewed southern secessionists as a key



bulwark against not only the forces of political Islam in Yemen, which al-Islah embodies, but also more extremist groups such as AQAP and ISIS. Yemen is a critical battlespace in which intra-Sunni differences are allowing Iran and the al-Houthi rebels to further weaken their opponents. At the same time, Riyadh has a stake in defending the legitimacy of Hadi's government and preserving the war-torn country's north-south unity.

These two factors have led the Saudis to view the STC, and the support that it receives

from Abu Dhabi, with displeasure. The Saudi perspective is that the STC's push for the re-creation of South Yemen as an independent nation-state severely undermines the internationally recognized Yemeni government and weakens the Arab coalition's ability to maintain a unified front against the Iranian-backed Yemeni rebels. Yet the STC has sufficient power on the ground in southern Yemen for Riyadh to understand that this group is a force which Saudi Arabia must contend with in order to achieve the Kingdom's objectives.



The situation in Aden and other parts of southern Yemen is in flux, and it is difficult to predict what the political landscape will look like once the dust settles. It seems doubtful that Yemen will reconstitute into the single entity it became in 1990, given the extent to which the state has shattered. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine South Yemen (as it existed from 1967-1990) being reborn. Although the STC is in a strong position to achieve its objectives, countless moving parts keep southern independence from being inevitable. Nevertheless, it is a potential scenario.

The leaderships in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh realize that their alliance is vital to long-term Emirati and Saudi interests, both regionally and globally. A major test for these GCC member states will be how they can manage different priorities regarding southern Yemen. An important variable in this equation is the extent to which Abu Dhabi will go to support the STC in Aden and other areas in the country's south. Are the Emiratis invested enough in the southern separatists to risk confrontation with other GCC member states (including Saudi Arabia) and possibly Western powers, too? Ultimately, Abu Dhabi may attempt to push for a form of *de facto* autonomy in the south that can address southerners' main grievances, albeit short of full independence. If the UAE takes this approach, the Emiratis could advance their strategic interests in the southern provinces and, by extension, throughout the Horn of Africa, Red Sea, and

Gulf of Aden without creating problems in their relationships with the Arab states and Western allies that want to preserve Yemen's post-Cold War unity.

The UAE supported the STC push for Aden, and its success was presented during Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed's visit to Mecca on Aug. 12, at the height of Eid al-Adha. The holiday is worth mentioning because it serves as a symbol of unity and because of the sacrifice that is made. The UAE's *de facto* ruler met with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss the clashes in Aden that pit Hadi's loyalists against Abu Dhabi-sponsored secessionists. Questions arose about whether Abu Dhabi's actions signaled a split in policy with Saudi Arabia. The Emirati government focused on efforts to convince a wider audience beyond that Gulf region that Abu Dhabi and Riyadh are not experiencing any crisis in their relationship because of events in Aden.

One official in the Emirates issued the following statement: "There is no daylight between the UAE and Saudi Arabia when it comes to Yemen. We are completely aligned...We remain deeply concerned over the situation in Aden, and the coalition's engagement on-the-ground is evolving with the aim of establishing conditions for stability, security, and peace."¹⁵

On Nov. 5, the STC and Hadi's government signed the Riyadh Agreement, which has prevented (at least temporarily) the possibility of a full-blown civil war in southern Yemen erupting within a larger civil war. The



agreement paves the way for the anti-Houthi bloc to thwart its own internal divisions over the southern question from further dividing and fragmenting the coalition fighting Iranian-sponsored insurgents.

Under the Riyadh Agreement, there is to be a 24-member government based in Aden made up of northern and southern ministers and an integration of STC-linked fighters into a national Yemeni state apparatus. Under this agreement between the UAE-backed southern fighters and the Hadi administration, heavy weaponry that has been scattered across parts of southern Yemen is to be removed. Furthermore, the agreement notably requires that the STC be incorporated into any Yemeni government delegations that attend future peace talks under U.N. auspices.¹⁶

Many in the GCC as well as the greater international community welcomed the Riyadh Agreement's signing. The Saudi Crown Prince said the agreement will produce "a new period of stability in Yemen" while the U.N.'s special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, praised it as an "important step for our collective efforts to advance a peaceful settlement to the conflict in Yemen." Regarding the inclusion of the STC into future delegations at U.N.-led talks, Griffiths argued that "listening to southern stakeholders is important to the political efforts to achieve peace in the country."¹⁷

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Riyadh Agreement's implementation. The Kingdom has taken coalition command in the south, which the Emiratis held prior to the UAE withdrawal from Yemen. In practice, this means that Riyadh (more than Abu Dhabi) appears to be at the center of deal-making vis-à-vis Yemen at a time in which the Emiratis seem to be shifting their foreign policy focus somewhat toward the Maghreb and away from Yemen, leaving the job to Saudi Arabia.

Whether the Riyadh Agreement can continue working is an open question. There is a major risk of the agreement failing for numerous reasons; the pact's relatively vague wording does not address all the important questions concerning implementation, such as the order of steps to be taken by the parties. Past agreements have failed throughout Yemen's history for many of the same reasons, which is why some experts are pessimistic about the Riyadh

Agreement and its ability to prevent further Hadi-STC fighting. Ultimately, however, the vague language of the agreement could have been necessary in order to convince the parties to sign even without either completely endorsing the compromise that was reached in Saudi Arabia.¹⁸

Moreover, since the Riyadh Agreement's signing, there have been clashes between the STC and al-Islah forces, underscoring the agreement's vulnerability. Also, the 30-day deadline

for the Riyadh Agreement's implementation passed in early December with the STC and Hadi's government both accusing each other of violating the terms. On Dec. 6, the STC condemned the "continuous military mobilization of [Hadi] government forces towards the south." Yet the U.N.-respected Yemeni government denied these accusations and blamed the STC for problems in the Riyadh Agreement's implementation. Entering 2020, the Yemeni peace process continues its complex process toward its next stage.

SKEPTICISM ABOUT SOUTHERN YEMEN

In the event that the Riyadh Agreement falls apart entirely, the question of southern independence will inevitably return as a major threat to Yemen's territorial integrity. In that event, it appears that the STC will lack much support from abroad. Much regional and global skepticism over the idea of splitting Yemen pertains to the STC itself. Although the force proved capable of usurping control of Aden and other areas in the country, there is much uncertainty about how much longer the STC can retain control of the land it captured in August 2019 without strong and sustained support from Abu Dhabi. Furthermore, even if the STC could maintain its grip, perhaps through forceful means, there are open questions about how well the separatist faction could provide basic services that are so directly related to any governing entity's capacity to secure political legitimacy.

The STC is unquestionably the dominant force throughout the Yemeni territory that belonged to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), or South Yemen. Nonetheless, in August 2019 the STC did not take over all of Yemen's southern provinces. In Al Mahrah, Yemen's easternmost governorate, located along the entire Yemeni-Omani border, the STC is not in control. Other groups with their own agendas and interests hold power in that relatively stable part of the otherwise war-torn country. These factions have interests that do not necessarily align with the STC's agenda of southern independence. Some of these groups in far eastern Yemen are far more culturally, historically, and tribally linked to Oman than to either the Emirates or Saudi Arabia. How these actors in Al Mahrah interact with the STC remains to be seen, yet the odds are good that the Abu Dhabi-backed



separatists will face major challenges if they attempt to seize control of Al Mahrah

as they usurped power elsewhere in the former PDRY.

THE SPILLOVER INTO SAUDI TERRITORY

Despite the intensity of the Arab coalition's campaign in Yemen beginning in 2015, the Iranian-backed al-Houthi rebels have maintained control of Sanaa and other parts of northern Yemen. Moreover, the war has crept into parts of Saudi Arabia. Rebels have launched missile and drone attacks against Saudi targets with increasing distance and accuracy, showing that the al-Houthi fighters'

technological advancements are making them a greater threat to Saudi security with each passing day.

Al-Houthi forces remain the dominant power on the ground near the Saudi border. From Riyadh's perspective, the rebels are a replica of Lebanon's Hezbollah (another Iran-supported organization). At little cost



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to Tehran, Iran's leadership is using the situation in Yemen to effectively bog Saudi Arabia down in a conflict that has become an expensive and destabilizing quagmire. The amount of money Iran has pumped into the Yemeni crisis is a small fraction of what the Saudis have spent financing the Arab coalition's operations since 2015.

Almost five years into the Saudi-led coalition's campaign in Yemen, the Riyadh-backed government led by Hadi has lost control of both its original capital of Sanaa and Aden, where the U.N.-recognized government was nominally based after its loss of Yemen's official capital in 2014. (The Hadi government is using the Yemeni city of Ataq as a temporary capital, largely as a symbol of some kind of presence while the government is in exile.) If the al-Houthi militia continues holding

its power in northern Yemen and the STC remains the dominant force in southern Yemen, Hadi's government will have virtually no territory to rule.

The al-Houthi fighters in the north have reacted to the STC's gains by trying to promote some common cause with the southern separatists based on a shared anti-Hadi narrative. The militia's leadership has expressed its interest in working with any Yemeni faction that wants to move past Hadi's "corrupt" government.

There are also important questions about Iran's view of the north-south tensions that could result in the division of Yemen between administrations in Sanaa and Aden. Notwithstanding anti-Iranian rhetoric from the STC, officials in Tehran could consider southern independence to be a boon if for no other reason than it would likely help the al-Houthi insurgents consolidate their gains in northern Yemen. Within this context, Tehran will have a large incentive to try to take further advantage of the rift (real or perceived) in the Saudi Arabia-UAE alliance as events in Yemen highlight the differences between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's interests.

Yet Yemen is not a top priority for Iran. The outcome of conflicts and local tensions in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq are of far greater importance to the Islamic Republic as the system of confessionalism undergoes its ultimate challenge from a Levantine populace tired of Tehran's influence.



Yet Yemen is not a top priority for Iran. The outcome of conflicts and local tensions in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq are of far greater importance to the Islamic Republic as the system of confession-alism undergoes its ultimate challenge from a Levantine populace tired of Tehran's influence. Put simply, Yemen is far more geographically, politically, culturally, and religiously disconnected from Iran than Iraq and the Arab states of the Levant. Because the conflict in Yemen — unlike the violence in Iraq — probably will not spill over into Iranian territory, the Yemeni civil war is less of a pressing security concern for Iranian officials.

The preservation of Yemen's post-1990 unity is also of secondary importance to officials in Tehran. Ultimately, what Iran most wants in Yemen is for the country to be weak and divided. If Yemen remains vulnerable to outside influence, Tehran will continue exploiting opportunities to gain clout. The Iranians have used the al-Houthi militia to do this since 2015, just as in the late 20th century they used other anti-status-quo Yemeni groups, including the Marxist faction that won South Yemen's civil war in 1986. Yemen also represents an opportunity for Iran to exploit an outpost on the Arabian Peninsula in close proximity to Africa, from where Tehran can press Saudi Arabia on its "soft underbelly."

THE RUSSIA FACTOR

Throughout the Yemeni civil war, Russia has preserved favorable relations with all of the conflict-torn country's major actors, carefully balancing ties with different internal and external players while advocating a political (rather than military) solution. Moscow's Yemen policy, based on strategic non-alignment and multi-polarity, is important to the Kremlin's grander vision for Russia's role in the Arab world, especially given Yemen's location at the intersection of the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Russia had Cold War-era links to the PRDY and is interested in capitalizing on those ties. The Kremlin's interest in constructing a military base plus sea access in southern Yemen is an important driver of Moscow's Yemen policy.

Also driving Russia's policy for Yemen are the Kremlin's larger interests in maintaining close relations with both Riyadh and Tehran, even as the two capitals back opposing sides in the Yemeni civil war. By not following the United States' path of taking sides in the Saudi-Iranian geosectarian rivalry, Russia is able to maintain cooperative relations with the al-Houthi militia and other Iranian-backed non-state actors in the Middle East that are on hostile terms with Washington. In the process, by pursuing relatively neutral

positions on the Riyadh-Tehran rivalry and offering to help mediate between the Saudis and Iranians, the Kremlin is somewhat well positioned as an impartial power in the region — particularly in the Persian Gulf, where Russia has deep geopolitical interests.

According to Russia's vision for Yemen, the Arab coalition must stop its bombings within Yemen, which Moscow sees as an obstacle to peace. Notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin rejected the Saudi crown prince's efforts in 2015 to garner Russian support for Operation Decisive Storm. Russia has been keen to similarly oppose al-Houthi attacks and efforts to interrupt energy shipments via the Bab al-Mandeb. Moscow's ideas for resolving the Yemeni civil war include international recognition of Iran as a legitimate stakeholder in the war-torn country and inclusion of Tehran in plans for ending the war. Naturally, Russian-Iranian cooperation extends beyond Yemen and into other parts of the Arab world — most notably Syria, where Moscow has seen the Islamic Republic as the only other major state actor willing and able to preserve the Syrian government's rule and ensure the defeat of Sunni Islamist rebels that Russia and Iran both consider terrorist threats.

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The “southern question” is extremely relevant to Moscow’s interests in Yemen. The STC has sought Russia’s support, yet the Kremlin has been careful to not overtly support the southern separatists, since such a move could upset Moscow’s careful balance between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Notably, Russian Special Envoy to the Middle East Mikhail Bogdanov previously served in the Soviet Union’s embassy in the PDRY’s capital.¹⁹ Bogdanov’s role in the current Yemen situation is key to how Russia views Yemen’s immediate future. Russian officials are calling for the inclusion of STC leadership in peace negotiations under U.N. auspices in order to begin addressing the question of southern independence. Notably, in response to the separatist’s seizure of Aden in August, Moscow did not condemn what Hadi’s government called a “coup.”

Moscow will be capitalizing on its warm relations with all actors, including the STC, to strengthen Russia’s position as a peace mediator. Putin wants to regain strategic influence that the Soviet Union had during the Cold War, including the clout that Moscow enjoyed in South Yemen, the only Soviet-aligned Marxist regime to take power in the Arabian Peninsula. Yet Russia’s recognition of Hadi’s administration as Yemen’s legitimate government complicates Moscow’s delicate balancing act and raises questions about whether the Kremlin would adopt a more overtly pro-STC position in the event that the Riyadh Agreement ultimately fails. Moscow will patiently observe how the fighting evolves in Yemen’s southern

provinces and avoid playing a high-profile role in the south until the proper moment.

Furthermore, many experts have posited that Riyadh could turn to Moscow as a diplomatic bridge between the Kingdom and the Iranian-backed insurgents in northern Yemen. If the stalemate between Saudi Arabia and the al-Houthi rebels continues, there are good chances that Moscow will see the potential opportunity to function as the primary peace sponsor in ways that Washington, London, or Paris would not be able to. This opportunity would align with Russia’s grander quest to challenge U.S. hegemony in the Middle East (and elsewhere).

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Russia will probably not play any military role in the Yemeni civil war. Nonetheless, with the violence continuing across Yemen, the Kremlin will remain determined to continue

exercising its diplomatic influence not only via various actors within Yemen, but also through Moscow's positive relations with Yemen's Arab neighbors, the UAE, and Iran.

In addition to Russia, the Sultanate of Oman is an important diplomatic bridge in Yemen. Since shortly after the Saudi-led coalition began operations in Yemen in 2015, the Omanis hosted talks involving a variety of actors including U.S. diplomats and Houthi representatives aimed at resolving the conflict. As the only GCC member-state to have always stayed out of the anti-Houthi coalition, Oman has maintained a neutral foreign policy in Yemen and capitalized on its warm and cordial ties with different parties in the conflict in order to serve as a diplomatic

The aftermath of the strikes on Saudi Arabia's Aramco facilities on Sept. 14, and the al-Houthi actions afterward, are driving Riyadh's attempts to reach a settlement with the rebels.

bridge between them. Within the context of Saudi Arabia's efforts to wind down the war, Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman paid a visit to Muscat to meet with His Majesty Sultan Qaboos on Nov. 11, which illustrated the extent to which Riyadh sees Oman as a platform and channel for establishing a realistic plan for resolving the Yemeni conflict.²⁰

FORECAST

Yemen's immediate future is clouded by multiple variables within the country, the agendas of various regional powers, and the desires of the international community. Although many external players want the country to try to stitch itself back together in a logical and "fair" way, it is difficult to imagine Yemen reconstructing itself.

But there is much more ground to cover. The aftermath of the strikes on Saudi Arabia's Aramco facilities on Sept. 14, and the al-Houthi actions afterward, are driving Riyadh's attempts to reach a settlement with the rebels. The al-Houthi fighters are using their media resources to shape narratives and, given the hostility to

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Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Western capitals, the narrative that Saudis must come to the negotiating table with the rebels is gaining popularity. By Oct. 12, *The Financial Times* reported that the Saudis and the Iranian-backed rebels entered into talks via a “back-channel.” The article cited a Western diplomat who claimed that the Aramco attacks of Sept. 14 were the main variable prompting Riyadh to begin engaging the al-Houthi rebels in negotiations.

Although such talks have yet to achieve a deal, the fact that they have been talking with the al-Houthi insurgents strongly suggests that following the September attacks, the Saudi leaders have accepted that no military solution can bring peace to Yemen.²¹

Discussions of a peace deal have occurred already, of course, but a formalized process could take shape. Washington wants Riyadh to back away from the Saudi-led coalition’s

initial goals and enter into a new status quo. Whether this status quo lasts long enough for meaningful dialogue to occur depends on conditions on the ground and, in particular, personal politics in Sanaa and Riyadh. Simultaneously, the UAE is likely to continue its disengagement from Yemen through negotiation and the use of the STC. Although the UAE's support for the STC is

wavering because of emerging disagreements among senior Emirati leaders, Abu Dhabi's desire to ease tensions appears to have surpassed the idea of pushing for an independent southern Yemen for now. Still, the STC's campaign, which Abu Dhabi strongly supported, complicates Aden's — and Yemen's — political future.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Given the complexities of the Yemen situation, below are key policy recommendations:

- In the interest of preventing a major resurgence of violent clashes between the STC and Hadi's loyalists in southern Yemen, the United Nations and other actors must address the legitimate grievances of millions of Yemenis in the southern governorates. The STC's growing popularity has been a result of years of political and economic problems fueling local tensions. Policymakers need to be aware of how the STC's political narratives and actions resonate among the Yemenis in the country's southern provinces.
- In the shorter term, the U.N. Special Envoy for Yemen must coordinate with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to enact plans aimed at calming tensions in the former PDRY. The international community must prioritize the cessation of hostilities in southern

Yemen through a cease-fire that gives the parties a chance to hold roundtable talks. If Abu Dhabi is going to be the center of international negotiations regarding Yemen, then the Emirates need to be more transparent in their negotiations and perceived intentions. U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths has been using the Emirati capital as a negotiating center. Yet despite the UAE's geopolitical interests, Abu Dhabi is competing with other cities such as Geneva, where the United Nations has hosted talks on the Yemen crisis.

- Dialogue between the U.N.-endorsed Hadi government, the STC, and various stakeholders with influence in Al Mahrah needs to address fundamental questions about the Yemeni state's future structure in the former PDRY. If the STC is not included in talks under U.N. auspices, the secessionists will believe they have no incentive to invest in U.N.-led efforts



to end the civil war. This is where the idea of a federal model for a Yemen come into play, though that option is made more difficult with the STC's possible actions increasing the possibility of a north-south split.

- It is imperative to bring together all the foreign governments that are directly involved in Yemen's internal conflict with the aim of addressing root causes of the civil war, rather than merely dealing with its symptoms. Realistically, players such as Russia and Oman that have influence over multiple groups on various sides of Yemen's conflicts will be better positioned to broker between rivals than external actors that have been more one-sided in their interventions, like the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran. Russia, in order to prove its weight, should use its influence to force the al-Houthi militia to stop launching missiles and drones at GCC member states. For the United States, this will mean rethinking its approach to Yemen by becoming more granular in understanding the complexities of the country and its place in the region's emerging architecture. If Washington wants to keep Russia's influence out of

Yemen's future, it needs to act quickly, decisively, and coherently by articulating the consequences of such actions to its Arab partners. Russia should not be underestimated in this arena.

- A new, serious SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis of current policy initiatives is necessary to restructure humanitarian aid capacity, given the dramatic shifts on the ground in Yemen. Older topographical and mapping exercises including elements of Human Terrain Mapping have already occurred, but changes in the socio-political space, in conjunction with requirements for humanitarian aid delivery, mean that new metrics are needed. Delivery of aid to pre-famine zones needs to continue apace, and if the situation on the ground has changed enough, a review of capacity and delivery needs to be evaluated closely. How quickly stakeholders and policymakers grasp the forces driving Yemen's complex dynamics without interruption to food and medical aid capacity will matter significantly to the Yemenis, in terms of both the wider political picture and the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

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