SAUDI ARABIA-IRAN RELATIONS AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN YEMEN

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Abstract: Yemen's instability is almost as old as the country and has been linked by many local and international observers to a long history of political strife, poverty and violence. This study examined Saudi Arabia-Iran relations and political instability in Yemen. The specific objective was to investigate if the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for spheres of influence led to the escalation of the Yemeni conflict. To this end, the zero-sum model of game theory was adopted as our framework of analysis. Data from secondary sources were relied upon for this study and the findings showed that the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for spheres of Influence led to the escalation of the Yemeni conflict. The study recommended that there is need for the United Nations and Arab League to take the lead role in managing the Yemeni civil war and put in deterrent measures to prevent violent escalation of the conflict by external actors, particularly Saudi Arabia, Iran and their allies.

Keyword: Saudi Arabia-Iran Relations, Yemeni Conflict, Proxy War, Game Theory and Political Instability

Introduction

The Yemeni civil war is an ongoing conflict that began in 2015 between two factions: the *Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi*-led Yemeni government and the Houthi armed movement, along with their supporters and allies. The Hadi-led government and the Houthi rebels have both claimed legitimate control over Yemen (CRS, 2019).

The Houthi group has its origins in a moderate theological movement that was founded in the 1990s, and intended to promote a revival of *Zaydi Shia* Islam in northern Yemen. *Zaydi Shia* imams and kings ruled in North Yemen for over 1,000 years, until the monarchy was overthrown in 1962. This group makes up approximately 35 to 40 percent of Yemeni Muslims. The Houthi rebellion began in 2004 when a group of family members clashed with the Yemeni government in an attempt to prevent the arrest of *Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi*, a local religious and political leader and former Member of Parliament. Al-Houthi was killed in the fighting, and his followers took up his name as their own. The Houthis claim their goals are to end religious and political discrimination against the *Zaydi Shia* and protest the Yemeni government's relationship with the United States. The Yemeni government on the other hand has accused the Houthis of trying to establish a revival imamate—a Zaydi version of a Sunni caliphate (Lopour, 2016).

In 2009, the conflict between the Houthis and the government intensified when the Yemeni government launched a large military offensive. Saudi Arabia joined the conflict and conducted airstrikes against the Houthis after Houthi fighters crossed into Saudi territory and killed three Saudi soldiers. All parties eventually reached a ceasefire in 2010. In 2011, the Houthis saw the 'Arab Spring' unrest as an opportunity to expand influence and seize greater territory, eventually gaining control over two (very nearly three) governorates (provinces) in the north. Throughout 2013 and 2014, the Houthis continued to clash with the Yemeni government, despite also participating in

internationally supported political talks that would have provided the group with a role in the government and a say in drafting the new constitution (Lopour, 2016).

The Houthis succeeded in taking over the Yemeni capital of Sana'a in September 2014, but subsequently withdrew after a UN-brokered deal that forced Yemeni President Hadi to name a new, more inclusive government. The Houthis later rejected the new 'unity government', claiming it still did not give the group or Yemen's *Zaydi Shia* population enough influence. The Houthis retook Sana'a in January 2015, forcing President Hadi to flee, and by March 2015, the group had gained control over large swaths of western Yemen, the most populous region of the country (Gardner, 2015 and Lopour, 2016).

On March 26, 2015, Yemen's main ally, Saudi Arabia, in a coalition with Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Senegal and Sudan—began an air campaign against the Houthi rebels. The Saudis feared the rise of a strong Shia influence in their own backyard, especially as it dealt with protests at home by its own oppressed Shia population. Saudi Arabia also views Houthi rebels as potential proxy forces of rival Iran (Gardner, 2015), a claim that the Houthis and Iranian government have denied.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have engaged in multiple military skirmishes, notably in other Arab states, in order to advance their respective interests in the region. Often referred to as the 'Middle East Cold war', the two countries are reputed for providing varying degrees of support to opposing sides in neighbouring conflicts (Gause, 2014 and Rubin, 2016). They have been on the opposing sides of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, with the rivalry also extending to disputes in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Lebanon, Qatar, Pakistan and even West African state like Nigeria (Kenyon, 2017; Panda, 2016 and Sewag, 2015).

The Yemeni civil war has also shown the ideological divide between Saudi Arabia and Iran with the two countries on opposing ends of the conflict. The intervention of regional powers in Yemen's conflict, notably by Iran and Saudi Arabia, has drawn Yemen into the broader Sunni-Shia divide. The on-going civil war also continues to take a heavy toll on Yemeni civilians, making Yemen the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The UN estimates that the civilian casualty toll has exceeded 15,000 killed or injured. Twenty-two million Yemenis remain in need of assistance, eight million are at risk of famine, and a cholera outbreak has affected over one million people. All sides of the conflict are reported to have violated human rights and international humanitarian law (Global Conflict Tracker, 2019).

The conflict has displaced 2.5 million people — over a tenth of Yemen's population — with figures continuing to rise (UNOCHA, 2015; Lopour, 2016). The rise in IDPs has been exponential, and the conflict has also brought millions in Yemen to the brink of famine, according to the World Food Programme (WFP, 2016) with at least 14.4 million of its population being food insecure, and another 7.6 million people severely food insecure (UNOCHA, 2015).

Ironically, the escalation of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has coincided with partisan foreign interventions in the conflict, most notably by two of the biggest military powers in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran. While Saudi Arabia has been on the side of the ousted President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Iran on the other hand has provided logistic support to Houthi rebels. This has further complicated the relations between the two countries and further threatened regional stability in the Arab world. This paper therefore seeks to explore the connection between such involvement in the Yemeni conflict by Saudi Arabia and Iran and the escalation of the crisis in Yemen.

The Zero-Sum Relations between Saudi-Arabia and Iran and its Impact on the Yemeni Conflict: A Theoretical Understanding

This study adopted the two person's zero-sum model of the game theory as our framework of analysis. Plano and Riggs (1973) defined game theory as a body of thought dealing with rational decision strategies in situations of conflicts and competitions, when participants or players seek to maximize gains and minimize losses. Schelling (1960) also defined game theory as the formal study of the rational, consistent expectations that participants can have about each other's choices. In fact, according to Adibe (2014), the theory is arguably applicable in all situations

where a decision involving others has to be taken, such as generals engaged in battles, diplomats involved in bargaining and negotiations or politicians trying to influence the voters. In the two person's zero-sum model of game theory, there are two players and the gain of one equals the loss of the other. That is, the victory and loss always cancel each other out (Varma, 1975).

Saudi Arabia and Iranian governments represent two rational actors engaged in a game of conflict and cooperation in the Middle East, with Yemen as their present 'battleground'. The zero-sum nature of this conflict emanates from the fact that Saudi Arabia's strategic gains in the Middle East since the Iranian revolution of 1979 usually amount to Iran's loss. For instance, while both countries are rich in oil resources, Saudi Arabia have profited from international sanctions against Iran and prefer restriction on oil production quota to regulate pricing. Iran on the other hand is threatened by Saudi Arabia's good diplomatic ties with western countries, most notably the United States, and has accused Saudi Arabia of being an agent of the US government in the Middle East. Cordial relations with Yemen is important for both countries to strengthen either Sunni governments alliance that will favour Saudi Arabia strategic interest in the Middle East or Shia governments alliance that will favour Iran's strategic interest.

The zero-sum nature of Saudi Arabia-Iran relations makes the possibility of a saddle–point difficult. Both nations have contradictory interests in Yemen and as a result, the success of Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi rebels would favour Saudi Arabia and advance her strategic interest further in the region to the detriment of that of Iran. Also, the success of the Houthi rebels and Pro-Saleh forces in championing Yemen's political transition that will end President Hadi's reign will help advance Iran's strategic interest in the region to the detriment of that of Saudi Arabia. This explains why both countries, despite encouraging the conflicting parties to attend peace talks aimed at finding a resolution to the war in Yemen, continues to fund and arm fighters in the country as part of their numerous proxy wars aimed at extending their spheres of influence in Muslim nations. It is in this context that the zero-sum model of the game theory was applied to our study.

Saudi-Arabia and Iran's Involvement in the Yemen Conflict and Escalation of Humanitarian Crisis

Yemen has historically been a country in crisis and had been under the sphere of Saudi Arabia's influence. Iran's improved relationship with the Houthis in the post-Arab Spring era significantly increased their influence within Yemen and it culminated in early 2015 when the Houthis took over control of the government in Yemen. As a result, Saudi Arabia declared support for the deposed leader of Yemen, President Hadi, and intensified military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. Iran on its part also intensified its support and military assistance to the Houthi fighters, hence, the conflict in Yemen escalated.

Saudi Arabia began military campaign in Yemen at the request of ousted President Hadi in March 2015. It declared that Yemen's airspace was fully under the control of Saudi Arabia's Air Force (RSAF). Saudi Arabia relied on regional allies and United States drone assistance to carry out aerial attacks against Houthi forces in Yemen. Iran on the other hand intensified arms supply to Houthi forces and deployed its Navy to prevent Saudi Arabia from blocking humanitarian aids coming into Yemen. The humanitarian condition in Yemen worsened as a result of both countries involvement in the conflict.

Table 1: Saudi Airstrikes in Yemen that Violated International Law

Dates	Location/Governorate	Target(s) Struck	Number of Civilians Deaths	Number of Civilians Injured
11th April, 2015	Amran / Amran	Building in the town	4	1
12th May, 2015	Abs / Hajjah	Abs/Kholan Prison and other buildings in the town	25	18

12th May, 2015	Zabid / Al Hudaydah	Shagia market and lemon grove in the town	60	155
4th July, 2015	Muthalith Ahim / Al Hudaydah	Marketplace in the village	65	105
6th July, 2015	Amran	1. Bawn market between Amran und Raydah; 2. Jawb market outside the town	29	20
12th July, 2015	Sanaʿa-Sawan / Sanaʿa	*Muhamashee* residential neighborhood	23	31
19th July, 2015	Yarim / Ibb	Residential homes and buildings in the town	16	16
24th July, 2015	Mokha / Taiz	Residential compound of Mokha Steam Power Plant	65	55
8th August, 2015	Shara'a / Ibb	Homes in the village (Radhma district)	8	2
30th August, 2015	Abs / Hajjah	Al-Sham Water Bottling Factory in the outskirts of the town	14	11

Source: Human Rights Watch Report of November 26, 2015

Despite international criticism of Saudi Arabia over its lawless airstrikes in Yemen, the country continued its military campaign, emboldened by US government provision of logistical and intelligence assistance, as well as support of military offensives in Yemen. Saudi Arabia's military strikes in Yemen have led to numerous civilian deaths in Yemen.

Unfortunately, Iran has also caused numerous deaths and destructions in Yemen through its support for the Houthis in the conflict. Evidence of Iranian involvement in the Yemeni conflict was established by a United Nations panel and many independent organizational reports that claimed that Iran supplied arms and ammunition to Al Houthi militia which the rebels used on civilians and innocent children. Iranian-manufactured arms, drones, ballistic missiles, land and marine mines are being used in the conflict. Dangerous weapons are being supplied to Al Houthis by Iran. According to the UAE government, which is an ally of Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni conflict, between 20,000 and 30,000 made in Iran mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are being used in combat in Yemen. UAE government also noted that an anti-tank guided missile (Dehlavya) manufactured by Iran in 2015 was found in Yemen and it was used by Houthi militias.

Table 2: Captured Made in Iran Arms used by Houthi Rebels in the Yemeni Conflict

S/N	Weapons
1	Unmanned armed vehicles (UAVs) or drones
2	Variety of landmines

3	Maritime mines
4	Anti-tank guided missiles
5	Sniper rifles
6	Qasef UAV
7	Rased UAV
8	Hudhud UAV
9	IEDs or improvised explosive devices

Source: UNSC Panel of Experts Report on Yemen Civil War

The zero-sum nature of Saudi Arabia and Iran's rivalry means that both countries consider Yemen strategic in their respective pursuit of regional dominance, thus, both are investing militarily in the civil war in Yemen. The zero-sum nature of this rivalry has made international effort to resolve the crisis fruitless to a large extent.

Table 3: Major Disagreements between Saudi Arabia and Iran that Fuel their Proxy War

Energy Policy	Iran and Saudi Arabia consistently disagree on energy policies. While Saudi Arabia favours a moderate and stable price regime due to its large reserves, Iran favours high oil price to meet the demands of catering for a large population.
System of Government	While Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, Iran is a parliamentary state and it considers monarchy anti-Islamic.
Rights of Ethno-Religious Minorities	90% Saudi Arabians are Sunni Muslims while 90% of Iranians are Shia Muslims. Both countries have accused each other of violating minority rights in their respective states.
Relations with the United States	While Saudi Arabia has had good diplomatic ties with the US government for many decades, US-Iran relations since the Iranian revolution of 1979 has been hostile with Iran's economy severely weakened by numerous US government sanctions. Iran has also accused Saudi Arabia of being a puppet government of the US in the Middle East.
Nuclear Programme/Capabilities	Saudi Arabia is threatened by Iran's nuclear programme and capabilities and was also opposed to the Iran nuclear deal of 2015 which the US government under President Trump has abandoned.

Source: Authors' Compilation

Table 4: Active Proxy Wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East

Conflict	Saudi Arabia's Ally in the Conflict	Iran's Ally in the Conflict

Syrian Civil War	Rebel forces fighting Shia-led government of President Bashir al-Assad	Syrian government
Iraqi War	Iraqi Kurdistan seeking independence	Iraqi government
Bahraini Uprising	Minority Sunni-led government	Mass protesters who are predominantly Shia Muslims
Lebanese Civil Unrest	Forced the resignation of President Hariri for a pro-Sunni leader	Supports Shia-dominated Hezbollah group (the Hezbollah have been accused of doing Iran's 'dirty' jobs in the region
War in Afghanistan	Aligns with US government in the war in Afghanistan	Though not a supporter of the Taliban, Iran provides them with limited support as a means of increasing its leverage with the government in power
Pakistan Sectarian Violence	Supports the Sunni-led Pakistani government	Covertly sponsors minority Shia adherents to carry out sectarian violence against the government

Source: Authors' Compilation

Tables 3 and 4 above shows how Saudi Arabia and Iran's strategic interests come into conflict an active proxy wars being fought by the two countries in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Iran's struggle for spheres of influence also extend to Central Asia and countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with large Muslim population like Nigeria and Sudan. Although both Iran and Saudi Arabia signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 1970 and 1988 respectively, Saudi Arabia considers Iran's aggressive nuclear enrichment programme as a threat to regional stability and the balance of power between them. In fact, the Kingdom has considered numerous options to countering that including acquiring its own nuclear capabilities or entering into alliance with an existing nuclear power. In 2003, it was reported that Saudi Arabia had taken the strategic decision to acquire 'off-the-shelf' atomic weapons from Pakistan. Thus, the allegation that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had entered a secret agreement on nuclear cooperation to provide the Saudis with nuclear weapons technology in return for access to cheap oil for Pakistan (Washington Post, 2003).

Following several years of negotiations for a nuclear deal framework between Iran and the P5+1 countries, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in 2015. The deal raised concerns for Saudi Arabia, which saw it as a step toward reducing Iran's international isolation and potentially exacerbating the proxy conflict. In 2018, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman stated that Saudi Arabia would move to obtain nuclear weapons if Iran's programme is successful. He led a delegation to the United States to meet with Trump administration officials to discuss mutual concerns, including a potential US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement.

The humanitarian implication of the conflict in Yemen is devastating. Starting from July 1, 2015, UN declared for Yemen for a period of six months, a 'level-three' emergency, which is the highest UN emergency level.

Yemen's humanitarian situation is arguably the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. The United Nations reports that Yemen has more people —over 21.2 million —in need of humanitarian aid. That is more than any other country in the world, including Syria. Yemen is in the midst of a civil war and reports of human rights violations are frequent. Millions are on the brink of famine, the country's health system has collapsed and thousands of civilians have been killed or injured by fighting. Yemen's humanitarian crisis is multi-faceted, and the outlook is grim. Since March 2015, fighting between the government and the Houthi rebels has killed and injured almost hundreds of thousands of people, and devastated the country's infrastructure. In fact, Yemen is wracked by high levels of food insecurity, and much of the population lacks basic health care, clean water and adequate sanitation services (UN OCHA, 2016).

Table 5: Yemen's Humanitarian Catastrophe in Millions (People in Need)

Total Population	25
Population in Need of Aid	21.2
Population Lacking Safe Water	19.4
Population Food Insecure	14.4
Population Requiring Health Care	14.1
Population Severely Food Insecure	7.6
Population Displaced	2.5

Source: UN OCHA, 2016

Food scarcity has resulted in steadily rising prices that are beyond the means of the average Yemeni consumer. According to UNOCHA, the average cost of a food basket containing one person's daily caloric needs went 170 percent higher within the first 11 months of the conflict from what it was before the crisis began. Yemen's food shortage is closely related to the country's fuel shortages. Yemen relies on imports for 70 percent of its fuel needs, and prices have continuously skyrocketed while imports have decreased since the crisis started. The World Food Programme (WFP), in September 2015, reported that fuel on average had jumped 250 percent from pre-crisis levels. Yemen's health care crisis is equally as grim as its food crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) as far back as December 2015 had noted that the country's health system has 'collapsed' and reached 'catastrophic levels'. Sadly, the condition has not improved over four years after that damning report. The escalation of humanitarian crisis in Yemen coincided with the involvement of proxy actors in the conflict.

Conclusion

The study examined Saudi Arabia-Iran relations and political instability in Yemen and contended that the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for spheres of influence in the Middle East led to the escalation of the Yemeni conflict. The study argued that this struggle for spheres of influence manifest mostly in the form of proxy war between the Saudi Arabia and Iran in some Middle East countries and involves provision of strategic support to rival groups contesting for political supremacy in their respective countries. The findings indicate that the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for spheres of Influence led to the escalation of the Yemeni conflict. Data showing nature and extent of Saudi Arabia and Iran involvement in Yemen's crisis were presented. Data also showing the extent of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen as a result of the involvement of proxy actors were presented. In view of the foregoing, we put forward the recommendation that there is need for the United Nations and Arab League to take the lead role in managing the Yemeni civil war and put in deterrent measures to prevent violent escalation of the conflict by external actors, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran with their allies.

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