

Flashpoint Yemen: How it will all End?

A Conversation with Fatima Alasarar

By Cornelia Björkquist

The conflict in Yemen does not receive the attention it deserves. While there are competing theories for why Yemen is not front-and-centre in the international press, the reality is that the conflict continues to ebb-and-flow and consumes human life, dignity and the future of the nation. Much of the day-to-day suffering of the Yemeni people stems from the manner in which the Houthis emerged, consolidated their power and govern the territories they hold. The idea that insurgents make bad governments is particularly apt in this case. The Houthis have prioritised war-fighting and not sustainable governance in relation to social services and economic affairs. They are locking Yemen into a dependency cycle—forcing swathes of territory holding hundreds of thousands, including tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs), to receive food aid from the United Nations — with the immense support of the Arab Gulf states — in addition to a variety of other support mechanisms. At the same time, the Houthis are proud to receive weapons systems and payments to its fighters, from Iran—creating yet another form of dependence whereby the Islamic Republic keeps the embers in Yemen burning by tying its military-aid to the decision making of the Houthis. In this way, the Houthis themselves need to be understood as an auxiliary of Iranian power in the region. Taken together: the Houthis inability to govern and the role of Iran in destabilising the country, is producing tremendous internal pressure on Yemenis and it is straining all aspects of life in the country and, through it, the region.

What specifically has been damaged in this war? How will it all end and what are the long-term impacts?

Fatima Abo Alasarar argues that the conflict is multilayered and includes many different narratives;

although the conflict started when a non-state actor (re: the Houthis) violently took-over state institutions and sought to overthrow the country's president, Abed Rabbeh Mansour Hadi. The following is an overview of the event which took place on 24 February 2020 at the Euro-Gulf Information Centre facility in Stockholm, Sweden. This short report provides an overview of the complexities of the conflict and then turns to answering some important questions as posed to Ms Alasarar. While the event contextualized the deep history of Yemen, this work begins in 2010 and then proceeds to map-out the main aspects of the conflict over the subsequent decade.

According to Ms **Alasarar**:

‘The Houthis had fought with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh intermittently from 2003 to 2010, but after 2010 they paused their fighting and rode in the Yemen uprising's wave, seeking new alliances and opportunities that would bring them closer to their aims. After Saleh was ousted, a transitional period was headed by the consensus candidate, Abed Rabbeh Mansour Hadi, and a National Dialogue Conference was conducted in March 2013 to chart a path towards Yemen's future. While the Houthis attended the national dialogue they did not seem to believe in its principles and, instead, paid lip service to the whole process. It was almost as if they participated only to study the process and get a deeper insider knowledge about the state, how it functions and runs. They also took the opportunity to search for alliances that would help them reach their goals, which were not that clear at that time.

In September, 2014 Houthis grabbed power with violence and placed President Abed Rabbeh Mansour Hadi under house arrest. After his escape, President Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi asked Saudi Arabia for assistance — complicating an already complicated situation. The Houthis had, by then, allied with Saleh, who ironically had killed their leader in 2004. This unlikely alliance was hard for many to grasp. It was certainly a surprise to many observers to see Saleh, with his access to institutions and the army, cooperate with the Houthis as a non-state actor—. It was an unfortunate yet very powerful union and one which the unarmed civil society could not face and the international community could not confront.

The Saleh-Houthi forces sparked violence nationwide, including an invasion to the South of Yemen where Hadi escaped, and terrorizing of Taiz, Yemen's third largest city. Taiz hosted one of the most pronounced adversaries of the Houthi militia, the Islah party, which is also loosely aligned to the Muslim Brotherhood. Islah was a hub of the revolution. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a key supporter of Islah and who is now serving as a Vice President, had fought the Houthis in all six wars against the government. For this reason, the Houthis blockaded Taiz and, until today, it remains under a partial blockade. The Houthi militias also descended to Aden to hunt for president Hadi, who had escaped a day before their arrival. By this time, street fighting had begun in Aden, Abyan and the South. The Houthis maintained an interest in reaching the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb to eventually control all the ports in Yemen as a strategy to bring the entire country under their reign.

The Saudis led a coalition of other countries to help restore Hadi to power and have Houthi withdraw. They estimated that their involvement would be for a few months, and sought military targets believing that it would be enough to deter the Houthis and bring them to the negotiation table. The South resisted with the assistance from the Arab coalition and Yemen's South was entirely liberated within six months. The Arab Coalition supported (and continues to support) the internationally recognised government of Yemen even

though, as time goes on, that legitimacy is becoming under larger scrutiny.

For many Yemenis, Yemen was a place of hope and a pluralistic society. Now it is ruled by the theocratic vision the Houthis are imposing on the country. While the international community continues to push for some type of a peace agreement, the question of what kind of agreement could be drafted while the Houthis continue to boost their arms and threaten virtually everyone with violence, remains. The life of Yemen's citizens under the Houthis theocratic system is not being addressed.

The Houthi presence is extremely intrusive through both soft and hard tactics. The soft tactics start at school by changing the education system to align with their theocratical system. They have something called the *Cultural and Ideological Document*, which states that because the Houthis are descendants of the Prophet's bloodline they have the right to govern Yemen. It is a class and religious based system in which Houthis, as the elites of the society, obtain certain privileges and exemptions. People affiliated with them receive more respect and material gains.

Unfortunately, this narrative that Houthis are spreading is not taken seriously by policymakers who are attempting to find a peace agreement for Yemen.

Most damaging too is the cultural and religious indoctrination. School curricula is changing to become more and more aligned with the Houthi ideology.

Houthi hard tactics include recruitment and forcing women to control other women. Intimidation is used to teach lessons to women who play activist roles—by arresting women who speak up and accuse them of prostitution. The use of heavy weapons such as drones and ballistic missiles inside Yemen has also intimidated people. The attacks stoke violence between communities and adds to the state's weakness of being unable to protect its citizens. Their use of landmines was described as the largest landmine operation since WWI and over a million landmines are planted in Yemen. Casualties mount on a daily basis. Many journalists, political activists and religious minorities

have been imprisoned and tortured by the Houthis. The issue of child soldiers is also left out of the discussion but may be further explored [here](#).’

Mitchell Belfer (EGIC President, moderator): We never really hear about the role Iran is playing in relation to the Houthis. Perhaps you can reflect on what Iran’s role is and what its interests are in the conflict in Yemen?

Alasarar: Iran’s role is really complicated, actually even more complicated than the role of Saudi Arabia. At the end we can talk to the Saudis about their role and intervention, but with Iran there is a complete denial of their role in Yemen even as they continue to be found in violation of the weapon embargo to the Houthis. Earlier this month, four Hezbollah operatives were killed in Yemen. Earlier this year, Abdul Reza Shahlai, a leader in Iran’s Al Quds force, was targeted by a US strike in Yemen. Iran maintains a system of covert operations in Yemen hiding behind the Houthis as it works at achieving its grand aims.

Aside from supplying the Houthis with weapons, training them and helping them become the movement that it is today, the most destructive role for Iran is their stifling of peace agreements in Yemen. This has happened throughout the years, for example the UN-backed Kuwait Peace Talks— where there was an agreement between Houthis and the Yemeni government — when it came to the time of signing, the Houthis, under directives from Iran, were not able to sign. This was the first sign of failure and Iran’s use of Yemen as basically a card in its hand. Throughout the years we have seen many inconsistencies between what Houthis say and do. The reason why, is that the political wing of the Houthis wants to maintain power and to find a resolution to the conflict, but ultimately things are driven militarily. Given the cumulative evidence — such as the role of Hezbollah — we know that Iran is involved and its denial continues to be a problem. Iran is taking a clear side in this conflict which is the side of a non-state actor. What does a non-state actor do in this case? It acts on their behalf to expand their own

interests. So this is why the Houthis have no real say or interest in deescalating which is a worrying sign.

Belfer: Given the complexity of the conflict in Yemen, what are the hurdles to peace and what can we in Europe do that is not being done to help this process along?

Alasarar: One of the hurdles to peace is the way the peace talks are being discussed at the moment. The UN envoy to Yemen, Mr Martin Griffith, is trying his best to do something with this peace process. He spends the majority of his time shuttling between the government of Yemen and the Houthis trying to reach an agreement. The support of the UN, Saudi Arabia and the UAE is already there. He could easily talk to them. What is more difficult and could put him in a bad situation is the Houthis. If the Houthis are saying no to him, he has failed. His focus is on getting an agreement with the Houthis, even if that agreement is mere lip service, which can be very dangerous.

The same amount of pressure that was put on Saudi Arabia to stop its aerial bombardment needs to also be put on Iran to stop its support for the Houthis militia. Also, there needs to be more increasing awareness about this in the international community. We need to focus in the west on the role of Saudis in killing Yemeni children by western-made weapons, which we should be always questioning, but when children die by Houthi landmines or Iranian-sponsored weapons, it rarely makes the news.

We should also realise that there are liberated areas that need to be preserved with both economic and humanitarian plans. One of the narratives that completely disappeared in this conflict is human rights. Where are the people who cared about corruption, governance and democracy? The priority shifted from a human rights perspective to simply attempting to reach an agreement with a non-state actor, even if that means that you settle with the ones that have the guns who can terrorise you at any point.

For more information about Yemen please note the following works by Alasra

- <https://www.mei.edu/publications/houthis-cover-iran-here-why>
- <https://www.mei.edu/blog/rise-non-state-actors-yemen>
- <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-escalating-us-not-saudi>
- <https://www.arabnews.com/authors/fatima-abo-alasrar>
- <https://insidearabia.com/iran-backed-yemeni-houthis-abuse-women-to-silence-opposition>