

Will Yemen Kick Off the “War of the Two Blocs?”

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There is media confusion about what is going on in Yemen and the broader Middle East. Pundits are pointing out that the US is looking schizophrenic with policies that back opposite sides of the fight against al-Qaeda-style extremism in Iraq and in Yemen.

But it isn't that hard to understand the divergent policies once you comprehend the underlying drivers of the fight brewing in the region.

No, it isn't a battle between Shia and Sunni, Iranian and Arab or the much-ballyhooed Iran-Saudi stand-off. Yes, these narratives have played a part in defining 'sides,' but often only in the most simplistic fashion, to rally constituencies behind a policy objective. And they do often reflect some truth.

But the 'sides' demarcated for our consumption do not explain, for instance, why Oman or Algeria refuse to participate, why Turkey is where it is, why Russia, China and the BRICS are participants, why the US is so conflicted in its direction – and why, in a number of regional conflicts, Sunni, Shia, Islamist, secularist, liberal, conservative, Christian, Muslim, Arab and Iranian sometimes find themselves on the same side.

This is not just a regional fight – it is a global one with ramifications that go well beyond the Middle East. The region is quite simply the theatre where it is coming to a head. And Yemen, Syria and Iraq are merely the tinderboxes that may or may not set off the conflagration.

“The battle, at its very essence, in its lowest common denominator, is a war between a colonial past and a post-colonial future.”

For the sake of clarity, let's call these two axes the Neo-Colonial Axis and the Post-Colonial Axis. The former seeks to maintain the status quo of the past century; the latter strives to shrug off old orders and carve out new, independent directions.

If you look at the regional chessboard, the Middle East is plump with governments and monarchies backed to the hilt by the United States, Britain and France. These are the West's "proxies" and they have not advanced their countries in the least – neither in self-sufficiencies nor in genuine democratic or developmental milestones. Indebted to 'Empire's' patronage, these states form the regional arm of the Neo-Colonial Axis.

On the other side of the Mideast's geopolitical fault line, Iran has set the standard for the Post-Colonial Axis – often referred to as the 'Resistance Axis.' Based on the inherent anti-imperialist worldview of the 1979 Islamic revolution, and also as a result of US/UK-driven isolating sanctions and global politics, Tehran has bucked the system by creating an indigenous system of governance, advancing its developmental ambitions and crafting alliances that challenge the status quo.

Iran's staunchest allies have typically included Syria, Hezbollah and a handful of Palestinian resistance groups. But today, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring counter-revolutions – and the sheer havoc these have created – other independent players have discovered commonalities with the Resistance Axis. In the region, these include Iraq, Algeria and Oman. While outside the Mideast, we have seen Russia, China and other non-aligned nations step in to challenge the Neo-Colonial order.

Neo-Colonial Axis hits an Arab Spring wall

Today, the Neo-Colonials simply can't win. They lack two essential components to maintain their hegemony: economy and common objectives.

Nowhere is that more clear than in the Middle East, where numerous initiatives and coalitions have floundered shortly after inception.

Once Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in Libya, all parties went their own way and the country fractured. In Egypt, a power struggle pitted Sunni against Sunni, highlighting the growing schism between two Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) patrons Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In Syria, a heavyweight line-up of Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, France, the US and UK could not pull together a coherent regime-change plan or back the same horse.

In the vacuum created by these competing agendas, highly-organized al-Qaeda-style extremists stepped in to create further divergence among old allies.

Western hegemony – the original colonials and imperialists – grew fatigued, alarmed, and sought a way out of the increasingly dangerous quagmire. To do so, they needed to strike a compromise with the one regional state that enjoyed the necessary stability and military prowess to lead the fight against extremism from [within](#) the region. That would be their old adversary, Iran.

But the West is geographically distant from the Mideast, and can take these losses to a certain extent. For regional hegemony, however, the retreat of their Western patrons was anathema. As we can see, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have recently rushed to resolve their differences so they can continue to design the region's direction in this Western vacuum.

These counter-revolutionary states, however, share grandiose visions of their own regional influence – each ultimately only keen to achieve their own primacy. And the continued ascendance of Iran has really grated: the Islamic Republic seems to have moved from strength to strength during this 'Arab Spring,' picking up new allies – regional and global – and consolidating its gains.



A police trooper walks in a crater caused by an air strike on houses near Sanaa Airport March 31, 2015 (Reuters / Khaled Abdullah)

For Saudi Arabia, in particular, Iran's incremental victories go beyond the pale. Riyadh has, after all, staked its regional leadership role on a sectarian and ethnic divide, representing Arab and Sunni stakeholders against "Iranian" and "Shiite" ones. Now suddenly, not only are the Americans, British and French dallying with the Iranians, but the GCC itself has been split down the center over the issue of 'engagement vs. confrontation' with the Islamic Republic.

Worse yet, the Saudi efforts to participate in the overthrow of Gaddafi, squash uprisings in Bahrain, control political outcomes in Yemen, destabilize Syria, divide Iraq and conquer Egypt seem to have come to naught.

In all instances, they have yet to see cemented, meaningful gains - and each quagmire threatens to unravel further and deplete ever more Saudi funds

Today, the Saudis find themselves surrounded by the sickly fruits of their various regional interventions. They have endured recent attacks by violent extremists on their Iraqi and Jordanian borders - many of these recipients of past Saudi funding - and now find themselves challenged on a third border, in Yemen, by a determined constituency that seeks to halt Saudi interventions.

Beyond that, Syria and Lebanon have slipped out of Riyadh's grip, little Qatar seeks to usurp the traditional Saudi role in the Persian Gulf, Egypt dallies with Russia and China, and Pakistan and Turkey continue a meaningful engagement with Iran.

Meanwhile, the Iranians don't have to do much of anything to raise the Saudi ire. Iran has stepped up its regional role largely because of the Saudi-led counter-revolution, and has cautiously thwarted Riyadh's onslaughts where it could. It has buoyed allies - much like NATO or the GCC would in similar circumstances - but with considerably less aggression and while cleaving to the letter of international law.

The Saudis see Iranian hands everywhere in the region, but this is a fantasy at best. Iran has simply stepped into an opportunity when it arises, meet the threats coming its way, and utilize all its available channels to blunt the Saudi advances in various military and political theaters.

Even the US intelligence community's annual security [assessment](#) - a report card that

regularly highlights the “Iranian threat” – concludes in 2015 that the Islamic Republic of Iran has “intentions to dampen sectarianism, build responsive partners, and deescalate tensions with Saudi Arabia.”

Yet all we hear these days blaring from Western and Arab media headlines is “Shia sectarianism, Iranian expansionism and Persian Empire.”

Tellingly, the American intelligence assessment launches its section on “terrorism” with the following: “Sunni violent extremists are gaining momentum and the number of Sunni violent extremist groups, members, and safe havens is greater than at any other point in history.”

And US [officials](#) admit: many of these Sunni extremists have been assisted and financed by no other than Washington allies Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar.

The Yemeni theater – a final battleground?

A senior official within a Resistance Axis state tells me: *“The biggest mistake the Saudis made is to attack Yemen. I didn’t think they were that stupid.”*

In the past week, the Saudis have cobbled together yet another Neo-Colonial ‘coalition’ – this time to punish Yemenis for ousting their made-in-Riyadh transitional government and pushing into the southern city of Aden.

The main Saudi adversaries are the [Houthis](#), a group of northern, rural highlanders who have amassed a popular base throughout the north and other parts of Yemen over the course of ten years and six wars.

The Saudis (and the US) identify the Houthis as ‘Shiites’ and ‘Iranian-backed’ in order to galvanize their own bases in the region. But Iran has had little to do with the Houthis since their emergence as a political force in Yemen. And [WikiLeaks](#) showed us that US officials know this too. A 2009 [cable](#) from the US Embassy in Riyadh notes that Yemen’s former Saudi-backed President Ali Abdullah Saleh provided *“false or exaggerated information on Iranian assistance to the Houthis in order to enlist direct Saudi involvement and regionalize the conflict.”*

And allegations that Iran arms the Houthis also fall flat. Another secret cable makes clear: *“Contrary to ROYG (Republic of Yemen Government) claims that Iran is arming the Houthis, most local political analysts report that the Houthis obtain their weapons from the Yemeni black market and even from the ROYG military itself.”*

Saleh was deposed in 2011 as a result of Arab Spring pressures, and in a twist worthy of the complicated Middle East, the wily former president now appears to be backing his former adversaries, the Houthis, against his old patrons, the Saudis.

The Houthis are adherents of the Muslim Zaydi sect – which falls somewhere between Sunnism and Shiism, and is followed by around 40 percent of Yemenis. Saleh, who fought the Houthis in half a dozen wars, is also a Zaydi – evidence that Yemen’s internal strife is anything but sectarian.

In fact, it could be argued that the Houthi – or Ansarallah movement – are a central constituency of Yemen’s ‘Arab Spring.’ Their demands since 2003 have, after all, largely

been about ending disenfranchisement, gaining economic, political and religious rights, eliminating corruption, railing against the twin evils of America and Israel (a popular Post-Colonial Arab sentiment), and becoming stakeholders in the state.

To ensure the balance continued in their favor during the Arab Spring, the Neo-Colonial Axis installed a puppet transitional leader upon Saleh's departure – an unelected president whose term ran out a year ago.



Shi'ite Houthi rebels man a checkpoint at the southern entrance to the city of Sanaa (Reuters / Mohamed al-Sayaghi)

Then a few months ago, the Houthis – allegedly with the support of Saleh and his tens of thousands of followers – ousted their rivals in the puppet regime and took over the Yemeni capital, Sana'a. When the Saudis threatened retaliation, the Houthis pushed further southward...which brings us to the war front amassing against Yemen today.

This is not a battle the Saudis and their Neo-Colonial Axis can win. Airstrikes alone cannot turn this war, and it is unlikely that Riyadh and its coalition partners can expect troops on the ground to be any more successful – if they are even deployed.

The Houthis have learned over the past decade to fight both conventional and guerilla wars. This relatively small band of highlanders managed in 2009 to push 30 kilometers into Saudi territory and take over several dozen Saudi towns. When coalition-partner Egypt last fought a war with ground troops in Yemen, it became Gamal Abdel Nasser's 'Vietnam' and nearly bankrupted the state.

Even majority-Sunni Pakistan, a traditional pipeline for staffing GCC armies, seems wary about this conflict. It too is fighting elsewhere on the same side as the Houthis, Iranians, Syrians, Iraqis – against violent Sunni extremists inside its borders and from their bases in neighboring Afghanistan. No amount of Saudi money will quench the anger of militant-weary Pakistanis if their government commits to this Yemeni fight – against the very groups (Houthis) that are battling al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

And, yes, it is ironic that the United States is now providing assistance and intelligence for the Saudi-led coalition – against the Houthis, who are fighting al-Qaeda.

But as mentioned earlier, this is not Washington's neighborhood, and it does not approach this fight with the same goals of its close ally, Saudi Arabia.

The Resistance Axis official explains:

“The Americans see all outcomes as good: If the Houthis win, they will help get rid of al-Qaeda in Yemen. If the Saudis win, well, these are still the US’s allies. And if both sides enter a protracted war, that is “not a problem either,” referring to the ever-present US interest of selling weapons in conflict zones.

Despite a global ban, the United States has sold the Saudis \$640 million worth of cluster bombs over the past two years, some of which have been used to carpet bomb parts of Yemen in the past few days. The cluster munitions were part of an overall \$67 billion worth of arm deals with Saudi Arabia since the Arab uprisings kicked off in 2011.

The Iranians, meanwhile, are not doing much of anything, except insisting – like the Russians and others – that the bombardment of Yemen is criminal and that Yemenis need to solve their own problems via an internal dialogue.

And why should they make any moves? The Saudis are digging their own graves right now – and hastening the demise of the entire Neo-Colonial project in the Middle East, to boot.

“Tehran realizes that the fact that Riyadh had to bring together a major coalition to fight a group that is only on the outskirts of Iranian influence is a victory in itself,” says the US-based, conservative risk-analysis group, [Stratfor](#).

Riyadh’s move to attack Yemen has just dragged the not-so-financially-flush Kingdom into yet another military quagmire, and this time directly, bypassing proxies altogether. Every airstrike in Yemen – and it is clear in the first few days that dozens of civilians, including children, have been killed – threatens to draw more adherents to the Houthi cause.

And every day that the Houthis are tied up in this battle, AQAP gets an opportunity to cement its hold elsewhere in the country. The net winner in this conflict is unlikely to be Saudi Arabia, but it may just be al-Qaeda – which is guaranteed to draw the Post-Colonial Axis into the strategically vital waterways surrounding Yemen.

The Arab League, under Saudi Arabia’s arm-twisting, just upped the ante by demanding that only a complete Houthi surrender (laying down weapons and withdrawing) would end the airstrikes. This ultimatum leaves very little room to jumpstart dialogue, and shows shocking disregard for the normal goals of military engagement, which try to leave ‘negotiation windows’ open.

It may be that the Saudis, who have rapidly lost influence and control in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman, and other states in the past few years, have decided to go to the wall in Yemen.

Or it may just be some posturing to create momentum and bolster bruised egos.

But conflict has a way of balancing itself out – as in Syria and Iraq – by drawing other, unforeseen elements into the fray. With all the conflicts raging in the Middle East and encroaching on their borders, the Post-Colonial Axis has been forced to take a stand. And they bring to the field something their adversaries lack: common objectives and efficiency.

This is possibly the first time in the modern Mideast we have seen this kind of efficiency from within. And I speak specifically of Iran and its allies, both regional and external. They cannot ignore the threats that emanate from conflict, any more than the west can ignore the jihadi genie that threatens from thousands of miles away. So this Post-Colonial Axis moves further into the region to protect itself, bringing with it lessons learned and laser-focused common goals.

The Neo-Colonials will hit a wall in Yemen, just as they have in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. Their disparate objectives will ensure that. The main concern as we enter yet another storm in Yemen is whether a flailing Empire will turn ugly at the eleventh hour and launch a direct war against its actual adversary, the Post-Colonial Axis. The Saudis are a real wild card – as are the Israelis – and may try to light that fuse. When the threat is existential, anything goes.

Yes, a regional war is as much a possibility over Yemen as it was over Syria. But this battle lies on a direct border of Saudi Arabia – ground zero for both violent extremism and the most virulently sectarian and ethnocentric elements of the anti-Resistance crowd – and so promises to deliver yet another decisive geopolitical shift in the Mideast. From Yemen, as from any confrontation between the two global blocs, a new regional reality is likely to emerge: what the Americans might call “the birth pangs of a new Middle East.”

And Yemen may yet become the next Arab state to enter a Post-Colonial order.

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