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**Yemen War and its Impacts on Pak-Iran
Bilateral Relations: A Way Forward**

Syed Fraz Hussain Naqvi

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Abstract

Yemen War has been defying the territorial boundaries and therefore, is not confined to Yemen only. In its eight years, Yemen crisis has engulfed not only the Middle East but also other states as well either directly or indirectly. The recent attacks of Yemen's Houthis inside the UAE and the killing of a Pakistani national in it, is the latest testimony. However, because of the involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran, Pakistan's inclination towards either side in the Yemen crisis is consequential. If Pakistan chooses to side with Saudi Arabia, its implications on Pak-Iran relations would be inevitable and would be detrimental for Pak-Iran cooperation for instance on Afghanistan. Amid growing speculation that Pakistan's condemnation of Houthis supports Saudi Arabia's stance on Yemen which of course impacts Pak-Iran bilateral relations, Pakistan's principle independent posture on Yemen conflict needs to be reinvigorated through diplomatic means.

Keywords: Yemen War, Pak-Iran Relations, Pak-Saudi Relations, Houthis, Saudi-Iran Proxy Warfare

* The author is the Assistant Research Officer of Iran Program at Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad. He primarily conducts research on the Middle East, Indo Pacific, International Security, Terrorism, Non-State Actors and Foreign Policy.

Introduction

For Pakistan, Yemen war presents the dilemma of foreign policy choice as getting involved in Saudi-Iran conflict could instigate the sectarian crisis domestically while adding to the chances of misbalancing between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Houthis are considered to be an Iranian-backed group that has revolted against the Saudi-backed government in Yemen in order to foster Iranian influence in the region. Furthermore, the direct involvement of Saudi Arabia through the coalition of Arab states and airstrikes, has also intensified the conflict. Yemen War is one of those three Arab Spring events that are marked with incessant large scale violence; the other two are Syrian Civil War and Libyan Civil War. The features of all of these three wars starkly differ from each other. In Syria, the state's authority is currently being reinstated across the country as the network of ISIS has largely collapsed while the militant rebels have been cornered to *Idlib* city. In Libya, the political tussle between the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) and Khalifa Haftar forces have been taking place, yet the direct clashes have died down because of the presence of Turkish and Russian military forces.¹ However, in Yemen the human catastrophe has consistently been taking toll with no end in sight. This is because of certain reasons.

The first reason is the successful takeover of state's apparatus by a non-state actor; a factor that is absent in the case(s) of Syria and Libya. The second reason is the absence of any global arbitrator in Yemen war. In Syria, a troika has been established consisting of Iran, Russia, and Turkey to settle the Syrian crisis. Furthermore, the regional Arab states have also abandoned their opposition to Assad Regime as is evident from the reinvigoration of diplomatic ties. In case of Libya, the EU has

been actively involved in initiating a political settlement (despite differing views from individual European states). That is why despite supporting Haftar and GNA, both France and Turkey, respectively, along with other external actors like Russia, Italy, and the Arabs, emphasise political solution in Libya.² However, in case of Yemen, the absence of any global arbitrator makes the situation more complex. Owing to the economic impoverishment of Yemen, the stakes of global powers are minimum, hence, transferring the responsibility of peace entirely to the regional countries who have been involved in expanding their influence in the war-torn country. The third reason is the nature of war. Both Syrian and Libyan wars have largely been inward and do not pose any direct threat to the neighbouring states. Although the vacuum created by ongoing wars has provided space to certain non-state actors (i.e., Al Qaeda, ISIS) to pose a threat to regional countries, yet on state-to-state level, the threat perception ranges from minimum to absolute zero. In Yemen, nevertheless, the triumph of Houthis presented a direct threat to Saudi Arabian territorial integrity and as the attacks are now cross border in nature, the indigenous people and workers from other states are also at security risk.

Therefore, with the evolving nature of Yemen war, it is imperative to understand Pakistan's stakes in it. It is also essential to first look at the history of Yemen conflict and then outline its solution. Pakistan's role in diffusing this crisis is significant as it directly puts Pakistan in the midst of a geopolitical competition between two Muslim states with which Pakistan shares equally cordial ties. Hence, this study is imperative in analysing the contemporary situation of Yemen war and to understand its implications on Pak-Iran relations.

Developments of the 20th Century

Many analysts and scholars tend to frame Yemen's conflict in the light of Arab Spring and more importantly, with the Houthis capture of Sanaa, i.e., Yemen's capital in 2015. However, Yemen conflict precedes decades in its formation. Being a Zaidi Monarchy for over a millennium, Yemen, mainly its northern part, remained an amalgam of royalty and theocracy as the mandate to rule was exclusive to Zaidi Imams who also acted as the spiritual heads. The successive attempts by the Ottomans to capture Yemen also resulted in failure in the 16th, 17th and 18th century. Nevertheless, as the gap between the state and its subjects widened, Ottomans managed to create Yemen Vilayat in 1872. The Ottoman rule in Yemen was a period of contention owing to the periodic rebellions by the Yemeni population. Lastly, after years of negotiation between the Ottomans and the Yemeni Imam, Yemen finally became the vassal state of the Ottoman Empire in 1911 under the Treaty of Daan.³ Following the dissolution of the empire after World War I, Yemeni Imam declared his kingdom in the northern part which lasted from 1918 till 1962 albeit short-lived coups and rebellions.

North Yemen Civil War (1962-1970)

The period of 1962-1970 was highlighted by turmoil and war. The Arab nationalism spearheaded by Gamal Abdel Nasser made its way into Yemen as forces inspired by Nasser's vision successfully orchestrated the coup against the Saudi-backed Zaidi kingdom. The eight years of North Yemen civil war which was the extension of cold war eventually resulted in the triumph of Arab nationalists against the royals, partly because of two regional developments; Egypt-Saudi rapprochement in

Khartoum Conference (1967) which resulted in halting of Saudi sponsorship to royals and Egypt's withdrawal from Yemen in the wake of 1967 Arab-Israel war which gave Saudi Arabia the space to become the sole mediator in the civil war. Eventually, the war ended as Saudi Arabia recognised the nationalist government which led to the transition from Yemeni kingdom to Yemen Arab Republic in 1970.⁴

North-South Rift in Global Cold War

Since the first half of 19th century, the southern part of Yemen had remained under the influence of the British Empire. In fact, the British placed the coastal city of Aden under its protectorate. Afterwards, the southern part of Yemen was divided into two, i.e., Federation of South Arabia (1962) and Protectorate of South Arabia (1963). The main purpose of the British rule over these territories was to secure the sea routes of trade destined towards its Indian colony and passing through the Suez Canal to Red Sea and eventually into the Indian Ocean. However, once the decolonisation began and British predominance in Indian Ocean diminished, the British decision to withdraw from the Persian Gulf led to the unification of FSA and PSA into South Yemen or People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1967. The vacuum left by the British was filled by Soviet Union via its sponsoring of the Marxist faction of National Liberation Front (NLF) – an anti-British militia of Yemen that later became the ruling party – and hence, Yemen became the first and only socialist state of the Arabian Peninsula in 1969/70.

Since the north was supported by Saudi Arabia and the US and south was sponsored by USSR, the rift between the two parts of Yemen was inevitable in the global Cold War environment.

Resultantly, both the North Yemen and South Yemen sponsored insurgencies in each other's territory in order to weaken the other and lay grounds for merger on preferential terms. As a result, war broke out in 1972 between the north and the south as the mercenaries of North Yemen were financed and armed by Saudi Arabia and the US, while the militias of South Yemen were sponsored by the USSR.⁵ Owing to South Yemen revolutionary stance, its relations with the Arab states continued to deteriorate. The political isolation, threat, and concerns for survival provoked South Yemen to call Soviet troops for its security in 1978 through naval presence.⁶ The Soviet security assurances emboldened South Yemen to continue its revolutionary activities by sponsoring the rebellion in North Yemen. As the tensions mounted up, the border war of 1979 broke out between north and south. The Soviet factor and the invasion of North Yemen by South Yemen irked the US to enhance the delivery of military arsenal to North Yemen in order to minimise the Soviet influence as well as to guarantee the security of its ally, i.e., Saudi Arabia.⁷ In both 1972 and 1979 wars, South Yemen remained triumphant, nevertheless, the Arab mediation through Cairo Agreement (1972) and Kuwait Agreement (1979), prevented the domination of south over north.

South Yemen Civil War and Unification of Yemen

Since the independence of South Yemen, NLF had been the ruling party in essentially one party system state. In 1978, NLF was transformed into Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) with Abdul Fattah Ismail becoming its general secretary and the ruler of South Yemen. His radical pro-Soviet policies led to intra-party struggle which paved the way for his exile after transferring the

power to Ali Nasir Muhammad. Ali Nasir seemingly adopted a more moderate approach by discontinuing the support to North Yemeni and Dhofar (Omani socialist) rebels.⁸ Following the return of Ismail in 1985, the factionalism within the YSP had intensified to firefighting level due to the differences in apparently pro-Soviet and pro-West approaches. In January 1986, civil war broke out between the supporters of Ismail and Nasir which led to the death of the former and fleeing of the latter. Resultantly, it led to two interlinked developments; one was the internal instability and chaos of South Yemen while second was the power transition from Ismail and Nasir to Ali Saleem Al-Beidh (Ismail's ally).⁹ These two developments led to the weakening of South Yemen. Further undermining South Yemen's position was the reduction of Soviet aid after Mikhail Gorbachev took office in 1985 and implemented his policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* aimed at opening up to the outside world (mainly the West), hence, halting the sponsorship of revolutionary movements and radical states across the globe including South Yemen.¹⁰

Aligned to the aforementioned arguments was the change in the international structure. The dismemberment of Soviet Union caused many states to reorient their foreign policy behaviours. Many former USSR states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia redefined their identities by joining the Western-bloc (through NATO and EU) and familiarising themselves with Islamic values, respectively. The effects were also felt elsewhere, like in India which implemented its policy of economic reformation in 1990-1991. Similarly, South Yemen while realising its fragile state of economy and political vulnerability finally decided to unify with North Yemen in 1990 – a policy that was pending since 1972. The unification largely went in North Yemen's favour as the

presidency of united Yemen (officially the Republic of Yemen) along with the membership of President's Council was given to North Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and his ministers.¹¹ Moreover, the oil drilling in the North further strengthened its position vis-à-vis the South. Due to its relatively disadvantageous position and the presence of secessionist elements in YSP, war broke out between the former two Yemens (i.e, the north and south) in April 1994. Because of their relative military advantage and the support of Jihadist groups, North Yemen forces entered Aden (the former capital of South Yemen) in May 1994 which eventually led to the triumph of North over South.

The Rise of Houthis and Saudi Role in Yemen

Since the end of Zaidi Imamate, the community continued to be successively marginalised. From 1972 to 1990, the Yemeni politics remained centred on North versus South issue. Even the economic development of the North followed by the oil profits throughout the 1990 could not bring any significant economic development in the Sa'dah region where the Zaidi community was concentrated. The Houthis clan of Sa'dah region under Badr ud din Houthi, who had assumed the leadership role over the entire Zaidi community by virtue of the legacy of Imamate, eventually grew into a resistive force against the Yemeni government. Through the formation of Shahbab Al Momineen (Youth of the Believers) under the leadership of Badr ud din's son, Hussain Al Houthi, the Houthi clan initiated a wide range of socioeconomic steps across the Sa'dah region and hence, consolidated its influence over the territory. With the inception of the new century, the Houthis transformed into a more assertive and rebellious movement, and changed from socioeconomic

group of *Shahbab Al Momineen* into a political and militant organisation of *Ansar Allah*, i.e., the group which is the face of Houthi movement at present as well.¹² To crush the rebellion, Yemeni government with the air support of Saudi Arabia, undertook 6 military operations from 2004 to 2010 against Houthis which are commonly known as 'Sa'dah Wars'. Instead of crushing the rebellion, these wars backlashed in two interlinked manners; one was the alienation of entire North Yemen's population due to the bombardment over their territory while the second was the increase of Houthis' power who now went beyond the sectarian identity and inculcated the grievances of other Yemeni tribes as well in order to win their support.¹³

The growing unpopularity of Yemeni government under Ali Abdullah Saleh culminated in the wake of Arab Spring when different segments jointly held protests in 2011 and hence, provided Houthis with an opportunity to be inclusive in the mainstream politics. The Arab Spring protests forced Saleh to step down as international actors, i.e., the US, the EU and, the GCC played pivotal parts in transferring the power to vice president, Abd Mansour Al-Hadi in 2012. However, the settlement under which power transition occurred, was marred with two vital flaws. First, Ali Abdullah Saleh was granted amnesty from any persecution which allowed him to remain in power corridors from the sidelines and given that he had ruled for over four decades, his support base within the state institutions was immense. Second, the interim national unity government and subsequently National Dialogue Conference (NDC), both of which were aimed to resolve disputes between various factions and conclude the power sharing agenda, excluded both Houthis and southern movement, *Al-Hirak*.¹⁴ Resultantly, due to governance issue and

internal rift, the government's control over various areas loosened which coincided with Houthis' grip over the northern territories. To pace up their advance towards the Yemeni capital, *Sa'ana*, Houthis joined hands with Saleh who, as mentioned earlier, exercised influence over state institutions and was eager to counterbalance the incumbent Yemeni government. Hence, the Houthis takeover of the capital city led to the new phase of Yemen's history and since then, Houthis are the de-facto rulers of Yemen while the internationally recognised government of Al-Hadi is in exile in Saudi Arabia.

Amidst this crisis, Saudi Arabia is the only pivotal international actor which has been actively participating in the Yemen conflict since its outbreak after the Houthis takeover. As discussed earlier, Saudi Arabia has the legacy of participating in the Yemeni affairs since its establishment. In fact, the aforementioned NDC was formed mainly through Saudi Arabia's mediation.

Saudi motivation to intervene in Yemen militarily is mainly threefold. One is the Houthis problem which Saudi Arabia fears that it could be spilled over inside its own southern territory. Although Saudi Arabia supported the Zaidi Kingdom in 1960s against the republican or nationalist forces, however, over time, its support to Zaidi community not only diminished but it also acted otherwise by launching the military operation against Houthis in 2009.¹⁵ Second is the southern movement issue which seeks succession from Yemen as it was the case before the Yemeni unification in 1990. Saudi Arabia fears that if the central government in Sa'ana becomes weak, its own security would be threatened as it has always perceived the erstwhile North Yemen's territory as a buffer between itself and the socialist south.

Now as the central government in Yemen is controlled by Houthis and the southern secessionist movement, *Al-Hirak* and now Southern Transition Council (STC), is more assertive in its claims of succession, it creates a dilemma for Saudi Arabia. This is to say that if STC succeeds in breaking the Yemen into two, it would have negative implications for the Saudi influence and the leadership status in the Arab World. Finally, the third motivational factor for Saudi Arabia is the geopolitical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia views Houthis as an Iranian proxy and to curtail the Houthis rise is vital for the regional policy of Saudi Arabia. Since the inception of Arab Spring in 2011, although the Gulf countries have managed to thwart the threat of uprisings in their respective countries, yet the overall influence of Saudi Arabia in the larger Arab region has minimised. In Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, the geopolitical rival of Saudi Arabia, i.e., Iran has dominated the security and political sphere due to its network of proxy groups. Likewise, in Libya and Qatar, Turkey has been maximising its sway. Both these states pose a serious threat to Saudi Arabia's traditional leadership role in the Arab region. To counter that, military operation in Yemen is deemed as a vital interest for Saudi Arabia to reinvigorate its leadership status.¹⁶

Iran's Relations with Houthis

Despite widespread claims, Iranian military support to Houthis is not proven. Instead, it is speculated that a major chunk of Houthis arsenal has come from Saleh's stockpiles of weapons which he accumulated during his tenure.¹⁷ However, evidences and reports shared by the UN Security Council's Iran Sanctions Committee, UN Panel of Experts on Yemen and Conflict Armament Research (CAR) highlighted the growing supplies of

weaponries by Iran to Houthis after 2015; although its quantification is not possible.¹⁸ Furthermore, the UN Panel also identified three routes for arms smuggle to Houthis through either trans-shipment or small boats, i.e., coastline of Oman, Yemen, and Somalia.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the official standing of Iran on Yemen is that it only provides diplomatic, political, and moral support to Houthi government and 'condemn the Saudi airstrikes on Yemeni population'.²⁰ Still, the close association between Iran and Houthis is beneficial for the former in two different aspects. First, Houthis provide the space to Iran to expand the latter's ideological outreach, i.e., the so-called 'Shia Crescent'. Although Houthis and Iran, both practice two distinct features of Shi'ite Islam, i.e., Houthis are Fivers (*Zaidis*) and majority of Iran is Twelvers (*Isna Ash'aris*), still in geopolitical terms, both support Palestinian struggle and condemn Israel by labelling it as 'Zionist'. Moreover, Houthis also chant similar anti-American slogans which are the hallmark of post-revolutionary Iran. Second, the strengthening of Houthis inside Yemen vis-à-vis Saudi-led coalition has weakened Iran's rivals like Saudi Arabia and has paved the way for regional reconciliation. As is evident from the secret talks held between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Iraq in April 2021, Iran seemingly feels more confident in rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, and is hence, developing regional security consensus over it. This could provide Iran with the leverage that it seeks at the international level, i.e., vis-à-vis the US, especially on the issues of proxy groups and nuclear program.

In view of the aforementioned discussion, the following section offers a discussion on Pakistan's foreign policy approach towards the Yemen crisis.

Foreign Policy of Pakistan towards Yemen

In 2015, Saudi Arabia demanded Pakistan to join the coalition against Yemen, however, Pakistan's parliament turned down this request considering the vulnerability of sectarian issue inside the country and crucial balancing between Saudi Arabia (strategic partner) and Iran (i.e., its next door neighbour). In this way, Pakistan projected and subsequently maintained its neutral foreign policy towards conflicts between Muslim states. Previously, Pakistan had also adopted the neutral stance on Syrian Civil War; in fact, it opposed any forceful regime change in Syria.²¹ Keeping in view Pakistan's policy of maintaining territorial integrity and opposing forceful regime change, Pakistan continues to practice similar tradition on Yemen, i.e., maintaining diplomatic ties with the internationally recognised Yemeni government in exile in Saudi Arabia. However, while comparatively analysing Pakistan's foreign policy towards Syria and Yemen, there lie certain discrepancies. While Pakistan maintained its wholesome neutral stance on Syria, in case of Yemen, Pakistan periodically swung away from its neutral policy and inclined towards Saudi Arabia. This is reflected through three developments. Primary among these reflections is Pakistan's participation in the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition in 2017. Although Pakistan categorically stated that its participation is not against any country yet the exclusion of Iran from this coalition depicted Pakistan's tacit approach towards Saudi Arabia.²² Second reflection lies in Pakistan's condemnation of frequent Houthi attacks over Saudi Arabia while choosing to remain silent on Saudi military operation inside Yemen. And finally, third is the deployment of more troops in 2018 to safeguard Saudi territory.²³ Although none of these policies

contradicted with Pakistan's refusal of joining the Saudi coalition on Yemen war, yet in the geopolitical terms, it led to friction between Pakistan and Iran.

The relations between Pakistan and Iran have always remained as a 'cold friendship' due to Pakistan's strategic alignment with Saudi Arabia and Iran's economic and energy relations with India. Furthermore, both the states have previously conveyed their reservations to each other regarding the presence of militant factions in other's territory.²⁴ However, the regional interests of both Pakistan and Iran have now converged due to US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the participation of other external stakeholders like China and Russia which share a close association with both the countries. Hence, Pakistan needs to re-evaluate its position on Yemen, i.e., by opting not to project its overwhelming association with any actor involved in Yemen War.

A Way Forward

In January 2022, the Houthis expanded the scope of their cross border attacks to UAE after attacking oil tankers and Abu Dhabi International Airport that resulted in the killing of 3 people including a Pakistan national. The attacks drew condemnation not only from the regional and international states but also from the UN. Similarly, given the loss of a Pakistani human asset in the attack, Pakistan also condemned escalation of the conflict. However, Pakistan must not let this attack serve as a negative factor in its relations with Iran. This is because of two pertinent reasons. First is the statement by Iranian foreign ministry which, with high caution, disassociates Iran from the Houthi attack by rejecting any military action as a part of solution.²⁵ Such a statement reflects the limits of Iranian influence over the Houthis.

Second reason are the negotiations and peace talks in which Iran is involved with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to diffuse the tensions regarding Yemen. Both of these developments reiterated the argument outlined in this study that Iranian sponsorship of Houthis is limited and that regional states have been in talks to negotiate on Yemen. Furthermore, past experiences illustrate that Pak-Iran ties deteriorated due to the activities of non-state actors present in the remote areas of both the states. Therefore, both Pakistan and Iran must not let Yemen issue become a new bone of contention between them. Instead, as demonstrated previously through the consensus on establishing 'joint border force', Pakistan can also play its part in Yemen crisis as well. This is to say that since the negotiations between the warring parties are already taking place, Pakistan can assert its position as a facilitator in mediation, especially after its stakes are raised in the wake of Houthi attacks on UAE. Conclusively, choosing sides or moving away from its neutral stance on Yemen conflict would be consequential for Pakistan. Pakistan's ties with Saudi Arabia are of strategic nature while for ensuring stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan requires the support of regional states, especially Iran. Therefore, any such attempt by any non-state actor to sabotage Pak-Iran relations must be tackled vigilantly and in collaboration with each other.

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