



The War in Yemen

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The wider Middle East is caving under the pressure of multiple conflict-points and the effects are being acutely felt in Europe. The Charlie Hebdo and small arms terrorist attacks in Paris, an unfolding immigration and mounting socio-economic crises are reminders of the deep intersection of European and Middle Eastern spaces, interests and peoples. With the Syria-Iraq-ISIS conflict set as the highest priority among EU and NATO members, one of the central lynchpins of local and regional stability – Yemen – is being glossed-over (by some) or erroneously categorised (by others).

Recently, a spate of articles, analyses and official statements by national policy makers, IGO's and NGO's have suggested that the initiation, waging and effects of the conflict in Yemen are primarily the responsibility of Saudi Arabia and the coalition forces it has assembled in that country. Attention is paid to tragic acts of collateral damage (mistaken attacks against civilians) from a decontextualised perspective that looks at the present situation through the actions of a single set of combatants—those associated to Saudi Arabia. This approach has meant that a comprehensive understanding and hence comprehensive settlement remain elusive since it accounts for the behaviours of one side in a multidimensional conflict.

To be clear, Yemen, and the tragedy unfolding there, is largely rooted in a complex inter-state competition between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia and the dynamics at play are of sectarianism, tribalism and geopolitical leverage as Saudi Arabia attempts to stem Iranian projections and Iran continues to inspire and support Shia political movements to expand its revolutionary state. This is reflected in the multitude of actors that have thrown their support behind Saudi Arabia – regarded as a status quo actor – and the few local militias in Yemen that fully rely on Iran – as a revisionist actor – for their military capabilities.

Iran supports an assortment of Houthi fighters (Shia militiamen), a Republican Guard Corp (tribal orientation to the Houthi) and security forces (allies of deposed President Saleh). On the other side, a trans-regional grouping of states has joined the Saudi-led coalition: the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Senegal and Sudan. These are supported on the ground by local fighters such as security forces loyal to President Hadi and tribal groups. In terms of intelligence, the coalition is supported by both the UK and US. It is interesting to note that the situation in Yemen is compounded by an ensuing US-al Qaeda/ISIS conflict though the US has restricted its military activities to fighting those groups.

With Saudi Arabia's execution of Nimr al-Nimr - a prominent, fiery Shia cleric from the eastern provinces - the sacking of Saudi Arabia's Tehran embassy and the suspension of diplomatic ties, it is clear that as the rhetoric is ratcheted-up the threat of an interstate or a series of proxy wars intensifies. This will negatively impact the international economic and political environment and is an outcome that needs to be avoided. Failure to understand the conflict will result in making poor policy choices and poor policy choices has the potential to exacerbate the conflict, bring it to European shores and to affect European interests.

Solving the political impasse over Yemen will require more than finger-pointing and assigning blame for actions committed by the warring parties; it will require an active diplomatic initiative and the EU must belong to that initiative...and quickly. With Houthi fighter-numbers spiking (from a paltry two-thousand in 2004 to an estimated one-hundred thousand in 2014) coupled, as it were, with officers and special advisors from Iran's Quds Force, conflict escalation is likely in both scope and impact.

The EGIC calls on European decision makers to actively work on establishing diplomatic contact points to assist in resolving the crisis in Yemen through active and responsible diplomacy and dialogues. The EGIC stands at the ready to provide both background information about the conflict and the use of its Rome spaces to assist in establishing a more stable and peaceful Yemen and wider Arabian Gulf region.