

CHAPTER 7

THE UN ROLE IN RESTORING PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE CASE OF YEMEN

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INTRODUCTION

As the Arab world's poorest country, bordering the Saudi Kingdom and occupying much of the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, has become one of the areas where Iranian interests appear to collide with those of the Saudis. Away from their regional battlefield in Syria and Iraq, Yemen turned to be another key frontline for their dominance contest.¹ In fact, Saudi Arabia and Iran are both located in a region witnessing a power vacuum with no super authority to control it. They both look to gain more power in order to secure their interests against each other's continuous threats. Iran's geography, population and economy alongside its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons and technologies make it a rising power that intimidates Saudi Arabian interests in the region. Thus, Saudi Arabia tends to counterbalance Iranian influence and tries to preserve the status quo guaranteeing its national interests in neighboring countries. Due to this constant insecurity, Saudi Arabia and Iran have become more and more involved in a proxy war in Yemen as the collapse of political order in the region has provided the opportunity for these two powers to compete for influence.

Despite ongoing efforts of both the UN and the international community towards creating a peace pact in Yemen since the beginning of the chaos in 2011, the country continues to

1 Heffron, Daniel. *How the Iran Deal will re-shape the balance of power in the Middle East*, London: Centre for Geopolitics & Security in Realism Studies (CGSRS), 2015, p. 1-17.

suffer from a humanitarian crisis - described by the UN as the worst in the world - as a result of the incessant hostility between the Saudi-supported Yemeni government and the Iranian-backed Houthi opposition forces.² The war in Yemen doesn't seem to be narrowing. It caused the death of thousands of Yemenis, including combatants and civilians, and severely destroyed the country's infrastructure. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, since the beginning of the conflict between the GCC coalition and the Houthis in March 2015 until August 2018, the United Nations has documented a total of 17,062 civilian casualties.³

Since being established in 2011, the Office of the Special Envoy for Yemen, has made great efforts with concerned stakeholders in Yemen and the region, to stop the violence and to guide the country towards a peaceful and orderly political process. The office took the necessary actions in support of the implementation of the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative, the outcomes of the National Dialogue, and relevant Security Council resolutions.⁴

This chapter will cover the UN efforts to restore peace and stability in Yemen and the steps taken so far to resolve the ongoing conflict. It will draw the timeline of main events highlighting the Yemeni conflict and in parallel will underline the resolutions adopted by the United Nations Security Council. Furthermore, it will focus the spotlight on the Iranian-Saudi geostrategic rivalry as a main cause of the war in Yemen and will reflect on the UN disregard of this rivalry while dealing with the crisis. Additionally, this chapter will address the constraints holding the UN back from delivering conclusive resolutions. It will discuss the restricted role of the Responsibility to Protect principle and highlight the effect the P5 veto right has on decision making with respect to the Yemeni conflict.

This chapter attempts to answer the questions: How far are the UN member states willing to go while seeking peace in Yemen? What are the efforts implemented so far and why has it been so hard to take the practical and tough political steps that might put an end to the Yemeni conflict?

The aim is to highlight the UN's short term solutions addressing the domestic factors spurring the Yemeni crisis and the lack of concern towards more practical responses to the regional conflict fueling the chaos in Yemen, namely the Saudi-Iranian proxy war in the country.

2 United Nations in Yemen, *UN Strategic Framework for Yemen (2017-2019)*. <http://ye.one.un.org/content/unct/yemen/en/home/publications.html>

3 M. Sharp, Jeremy. (August 24, 2018). *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, Congressional Research Service. 7-5700, www.crs.gov. R43960.

4 United Nations in Yemen. *The Special Envoy to the Secretary-General on Yemen (SESG)*. <http://ye.one.un.org/content/unct/yemen/en/home/about-us/SESG.html>

1. Timeline of UN Peace Efforts in Yemen

After twin revolutions in Northern and Southern Yemen, and the Islamic revolution in Iran, the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) maintained good relations with Saudi Arabia due to their mutual opposition to Iran. At the same time, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), a socialist state that succeeded British rule in the south, became close to Tehran because of their common opposition to Western colonialism and the rule of the Gulf monarchies. After the union, relations with Yemen were established through president Ali Abdullah Saleh who was generally open to maintaining ties with any state that could serve his own interests and who played regional powers off against one another in order to consolidate his own position. Salisbury writes that the real Yemeni Crisis began when the Arab Spring wave hit the country in 2011 ending Saleh's 33 years rule. In fact, Saleh was under Saudi-US pressure to sign an agreement that would cede authority to the Vice President Abed Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.⁵

In May 2011, the main figures of the Yemeni opposition and members of Saleh's General People's Congress party accepted the peace transition process. However, Saleh did not accept being overthrown in this manner and carried on fighting his opposition. In September 2011, the UN Secretary-General issued a statement condemning the violence committed by the Yemeni security forces against its own people and called for the government to protect its unarmed civilians and respect the international law.⁶

On 21 October 2011, a first resolution was made by the UN regarding the situation in Yemen as the Security Council called for implementing a political settlement based upon the GCC initiative for the peaceful transition of political power in Yemen and requested the Secretary-General to continue his good offices under Resolution 2014.⁷

Accordingly, in November 2011, Saleh signed the GCC initiative, thus, handing over power to his deputy, Mansour Hadi who convened a National Dialogue Conference and began the constitution-drafting process. However, the newly assigned president had a hard time in uniting the fractious political landscape of the country and failed to defy threats from both Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Houthi militants that had been waging a

5 Salisbury, Peter. (2015). *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*, Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, p.1-15.

6 Genser, Jared. (2018). 'The United Nations Security Council's Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect: A Review of Past Interventions and Recommendations for Improvement'. *The U.N. Security Council's Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect*. Chicago Journal of International Law. Vol. 18, No. 2, p.449-482.

7 UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2014 (2011) [on the situation in Yemen]*, 21 October 2011, S/RES/2014(2011), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4ec4e9742.html> [accessed 19 February 2019].

protracted insurgency in the north for years.⁸

On 26 February 2014, two years after the first resolution and as a result of the ongoing Houthi rebellion against Hadi's government, the UN passed Resolution 2140 to support the implementation of the National Dialogue outcomes, insisting on the need for the implementation of political transition, and establishing a sanctions regime under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.⁹

The Houthis movement has succeeded in transforming itself into a strong militia and expanded its reach to the Yemeni capital in early 2015. The movement took power over Sana'a after pressuring the transitional president Mansour Hadi into submitting his resignation.¹⁰ Within the following months, the Houthis declared themselves in control of the government, dissolved Parliament and installed an interim Revolutionary Committee led by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi. President Hadi had to flee to Aden, where he declared himself the only legitimate president and called upon his loyal government officials and members of the military to rally to him.¹¹

On 15 February 2015, the Security Council condemned the unilateral Houthi decisions to dissolve the Yemeni parliament and take over the government institutions, expressing serious concern over reports of the use of child soldiers, and urged all parties to continue the political transition under Resolution 2201.¹² Additionally, on 24th February, the UN extended the mandate of the Sanctions Panel of Experts to March 2016 under Resolution 2204.¹³

As the Houthi forces advanced from the capital all the way to Aden, President Hadi, who had fled to Saudi Arabia, appealed for international intervention. On 27 March 2015, Saudi Arabia assembled an international coalition and launched military operations with the aim of restoring Hadi's rule and wiping out the Houthi fighters from the capital and other main Yemeni cities.¹⁴

8 Salisbury, Peter. (2015). *Yemen and the Saudi–Iranian 'Cold War'*, Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, p.1-15.

9 UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2140 (2014) [on the Middle East]*, 26 February 2014, S/RES/2140 (2014), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/530ef1fe4.html> [accessed 19 February 2019].

10 Salisbury, Peter. (2015).

11 Roland, Popp. (2015). *War in Yemen: Revolution and Saudi Intervention*. CSS Analyses in Security Policy. ETH Zurich. No.175, p. 2,4.

12 UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2201 (2015) [on the situation in Yemen]*, 15 February 2015, S/RES/2201 (2015), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/54eb58a84.html> [accessed 19 February 2019].

13 UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2204 (2015) [on the situation in Yemen]*, 24 February 2015, S/RES/2204 (2015), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/550aaf834.html> [accessed 19 February 2019]

14 Roland, Popp. (2015), p. 2,4.

In April 2015, the council passed Resolution 2216 demanding that the Yemeni parties fully implement resolution 2201, urging for a peaceful political solution to the conflict and calling for the Houthis to withdraw forces from seized areas and surrender all arms. It also imposed an arms embargo on selected individuals, and redemanded that the Secretary-General intensify his good offices role in order to enable the resumption of the political process.¹⁵ In 2016, on 24th of February, the UNSC passed Resolution 2266 to extend the assets freeze and travel ban imposed by resolution 2140 and to help lessen the crisis in Yemen.¹⁶ Resolution 2342, released a year later on 23 February 2017, renewed and extended an arms embargo, travel ban and assets freeze against individuals and entities designated by the Committee established pursuant to resolution 2140 (2014), until 26 February 2018.¹⁷

In December 2017, the alliance between Saleh and the Houthis fell apart leading to the death of former President and giving an advantage for the Saudi coalition to proceed in military gains. Nevertheless, the Houthi forces still remain in control in the North of Yemen and regardless of the multiple attempts taken by the UN to fulfill a peace agreement, the opposing parties seem to be caught in an endless conflict.¹⁸

Furthermore, the UN attempted to condemn the Iranian support of the Houthi movement in Yemen, as in January 2018, the United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen concluded that Iran was in noncompliance with UNSCR 2216 for failing to avert the transfer of Iranian-made short-range ballistic missiles to Houthi forces. However, on February 26, 2018, Russia intervened to back its Iranian ally and vetoed the U.N. Security Council resolution draft which would have expressed U.N. concern that Iran was in noncompliance with the international arms embargo.¹⁹ Thus, the Security Council issued Resolution 2402 to merely renew a travel ban and insist on the assets freeze and arms embargo against those threatening peace and security in Yemen.²⁰

15 UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2216 (2015) [on cessation of violence in Yemen and the reinforcement of sanctions imposed by resolution 2104 (2014)]*, 14 April 2015, S/RES/2216 (2015), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/553deebc4.html> [accessed 19 February 2019]

16 UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2266 (2016) [on the situation in Yemen]*, 24 February 2016, S/RES/2266 (2016), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/56d549164.html> [accessed 19 February 2019].

17 UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2342 (2017) [on the situation in the Middle East]*, 23 February 2017, S/RES/2342 (2017), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/58b40d9c4.html> [accessed 19 February 2019].

18 Genser, Jared. (2018). *The United Nations Security Council's Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect: A Review of Past Interventions and Recommendations for Improvement*. *The U.N. Security Council's Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect*. Chicago Journal of International Law. Vol. 18, No. 2, p.449-482.

19 M. Sharp, Jeremy. (August 24, 2018). *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, Congressional Research Service. 7-5700, www.crs.gov. R43960.

20 UN Security Council Report. UN documents for Yemen : Security Council Resolutions, available at : http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2402.pdf. [accessed February 2019]

In June 2018, a multinational coalition of armed forces led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) launched Operation Golden Victory with the aim of regaining the Red Sea port city of Hodeida and continued using air strikes against Yemeni territories in a desperate move to eliminate the Houthi threat. As the different regional groups within Yemen seek to control territory, having the upper hand in the Hodeida is crucial in rebalancing power in the conflict. In fact, Hodeida port is the country's second largest port after Aden and gives the main land-locked northern Houthi-controlled areas access to the Red Sea. Having power over this port is vital for supplying the Houthi-controlled national capital of Sanaa. Adding to that, the port is north of the Bab al Mandab strait; one of the world's maritime chokepoints. Perhaps most importantly, the Houthis use this port as a source of revenue as they demand taxes for imports and control food distribution and fuel leaving the port.²¹

On 04 November 2018, The Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, organized a consultative meeting with a group of independent Yemeni figures in order to discuss the current situation in Yemen, and to recommence the political process. Convened in Amman, this meeting represented the second of its kind that brought independent Yemeni figures and the Special Envoy to the same table of negotiations, as the first meeting took place in Wilton Park-London, in August 2018.²²

Both the Yemeni government and the Houthis have agreed to start talks in Sweden as a result of the UK initiative. In fact, the UK circulated a UN draft resolution to the 10 elected members of the Security Council, after being negotiated by the five permanent members. The draft resolution called for an immediate cessation of hostilities for areas around the port of Hodeida, a cessation of all attacks on populated civilian areas across Yemen, and to cease all missile and UAV attacks against regional countries and maritime areas. It set a two-week deadline for the combatant sides to eliminate blockades against humanitarian aid.²³ However, Saudi Arabia was not happy about the draft resolution as it had fought for months to retake the key port from the Houthi rebels, therefore, along with their ally, the United Arab Emirates, the Saudis attempted to lobby the UN Security Council members to stall a ceasefire resolution.²⁴

21 M. Sharp, Jeremy. (August 24, 2018).

22 UN Department of Political Affairs, The Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General For Yemen (2018). *Martin Griffiths Convenes a Consultative Meeting With Independent Yemeni Figures*. <https://osesg.unmissions.org/martin-griffiths-convenes-consultative-meeting-independent-yemeni-figures>.

23 The StraitsTime. (2018). *UN draft resolution calls for Yemen truce, two weeks to unblock aid*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/un-draft-resolution-calls-for-yemen-truce-two-weeks-to-unblock-aid>

24 Borger, Julian.(2018).*Yemen ceasefire resolution blocked at UN after Saudi and UAE 'blackmail'*.The Guardian,<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/29/un-yemen-ceasefire-resolution-blocked-saudi-uae-blackmail>.

Despite the opposition, Martin Griffiths proceeded the consultations between the two rival parties and stressed the importance of the full implementation of the Hodeida Agreement. The Houthis wanted Hodeida to be declared a neutral zone. However, the head of Hadi's government delegation and the Yemeni Foreign Minister Khaled al-Yamani rejected this idea. The concept of peacekeeping, any sort of permanent UN presence or making the city neutral was not acceptable. The latter saw that the city should be placed under the control of the interior ministry's police forces as a matter of sovereignty. However, his government was willing to accept the deployment of monitors from the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) in the port, the entry point for most of Yemen's commercial goods and aid supplies.²⁵

On 21 December 2018, Resolution 2451 authorized the Stockholm agreement in which all parties had to fully respect the ceasefire in Hodeida. The resolution permitted the Secretary General to create and deploy an advance monitoring team to facilitate the implementation of the Stockholm agreement, for an initial period of 30 days.²⁶ Consequently, under Resolution 2452, on 16 January 2019, the Security Council finally established a Political Mission to support the Hodeida Agreement in Yemen.²⁷

Griffiths believes that the parties can see that a military solution is not available, and that they should consider a political solution as the only priority. For him, the importance of ongoing Track II efforts is complementary to official negotiations in Yemen. Griffiths underlines that it is decisive to work on peace-building in Yemen in parallel to official diplomatic efforts, known as Track I, to end the war.²⁸

Along with the UN agreement on a ceasefire in Hodeida, other measures such as reopening Sanaa airport and prisoner swaps have been discussed. On 17 Jan 2019, the supervisory committee on implementing the prisoner exchange agreement concluded its meetings in Amman. The committee included representatives of the Government of Yemen

25 France 24. (2018). *Yemen's Saudi-backed government rejects UN troops in Hodeida*. France 24 Report, Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20181210-yemen-saudi-backed-government-rejects-un-troops-hodeida-houthis-khashoggi>.

26 UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2451 (2018) [on the situation in the Middle East]*, 21 December 2018, S/RES/2451 (2018), Available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2451.pdf, [accessed 19 February 2019].

27 UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2452 (2019) [on the situation in the Middle East]*, 16 January 2019, S/RES/2452 (2019), Available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2452.pdf. [accessed 19 February 2019].

28 Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, News. (2018). *Martin Griffiths: Track II efforts complement official negotiations, and lay the foundation for peace building in Yemen*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/martin-griffiths-track-ii-efforts-complement-official-negotiations-and-lay-foundation>.

and Ansar Allah as well as the Office of the Special Envoy and the International Committee of the Red Cross and discussed the steps to be taken for maintaining progress in fulfilling the provisions of the agreement. It is worth stating that the prisoners deal was the first agreement that had been signed between the two parties since the eruption of the war in Yemen. Therefore, the implementation of this agreement is considered as a first step towards building confidence between the two parties.²⁹

Exceptionally, both sides have largely adhered to the ceasefire in the Hodeida governorate and have significantly decreased hostilities since then. Nevertheless, the violence has not completely ceased. Griffiths believes that this relative calm illustrates the commitment of both parties to making their agreements work. To him, it was unfortunate that they couldn't reach a consensus over the Central Bank of Yemen and over the opening of Sana'a airport during the Sweden consultations. However, the Special Envoy expressed hopes for a new round of talks in order to go beyond humanitarian issues and to begin dealing with the essential elements of a political solution to the war.³⁰ Generally, the Sweden peace talks are regarded by many, and the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, as a breakthrough that could be a starting point for peace and for ending the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.³¹

2. Limitations of the UN peace efforts in Yemen

2.1. The Saudi-Iranian Proxy war in Yemen

The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a multi-faceted struggle for influence and power in the region. This struggle has been ongoing since the Iranian revolution and has seen both sides adding to a long list of historical grudges after each defeat and victory between the two sides. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran worsened as each of them supported opposing sides when dealing with the Arab Spring domino effect.³²

Saudi Arabia's sensitivity towards Iran sparking protests in neighboring countries reached Yemen where Iran supported the Houthis protests against Ali Abdallah Saleh in 2011. Saudi

29 Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, News. (2019). *The supervisory follow up committee on implementing the prisoner exchange agreement concluded its meeting in Amman*. <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/supervisory-follow-committee-implementing-prisoner-exchange-agreement-concludes-its-meetings-amman>.

30 Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen. Report. (2019). *Briefing of the Special Envoy for Yemen to the Security Council*. <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-special-envoy-yemen-security-council>.

31 United Nations Secretary-General. (2018). Secretary-General's remarks at closing of the Intra-Yemeni Consultations [as delivered]. Rimbo, Sweden. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2018-12-13/secretary-generals-remarks-closing-of-the-intra-yemeni-consultations-delivered>.

32 Beauchamp, Zack. (2015). Iran and Saudi Arabia's cold war is making the Middle East even more dangerous, Vox World, <http://www.vox.com/2015/3/30/8314513/saudi-arabia-iran>.

Arabia saw that it was necessary to repress any attempt at spreading the revolution near its southern borders. As a first, Saudi Arabia left its relative passivity in foreign policy to lead an inter-Arab alignment to counter-oppose the perceived Iranian threat in Yemen.³³ For Iran, Yemen was not much of a core security interest; however, Yemen's instability was perceived as an opportunity to acquire additional control against Saudi Arabia.³⁴ Tensions between the two rivals kept escalating in Yemen as it was unclear in whose hands the leadership of the region would fall considering the power vacuum that the revolts had formed.³⁵

In order to answer the question, how can the UN effectively end war in Yemen? It is necessary to address the question, what are the main geostrategic interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen that keep fueling the conflict?

Iran's Winning Card In Yemen

Reardon writes that while it is uncertain as to what extent Iran is involved during the succession of these events and in supporting the Houthi uprisings, the unexpected turn of events on the ground was certainly in its favor. In fact, Iran has a long-term strategic interest in Yemen. Located on the southwestern tip of the Gulf peninsula, Yemen is a poorly governed fractious country neighboring Saudi Arabia's southern border, which can be linked to ancient smuggling routes used by those wanting to covertly enter the kingdom. Moreover, the 35% Shiites in Yemen could serve Tehran as a potentially friendly base of operations in its rivalry against Saudi Arabia. Reardon points out that by playing the Houthi card, Iran would also seek to pressure the Saudis in matters concerning Iraq and Syria or further its efforts to undermine the Kingdom from its southern border.³⁶

Kronenfeld et al. write that Iran's involvement in Yemen is not a new development and that it dates back to Saleh's regime. The latter believe that, while in the past, this involvement was perceived as a minor phenomenon that entailed shipping weapons to insurgents in Yemen, today it seems more of strategic significance that keeps expanding as the central government weakens. Since, 2012, the U.S. security forces have increased their cooperation with the Yemeni government for blocking Iranian weapon shipments to Yemen and in July, 2012, Yemen's Interior Ministry revealed the discovery of an Iranian spy group based in Sana'a and arrested an officer from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards on suspicion of having

33 Friedman, George. (2015). *The Middle Eastern Balance of Power Matures*, Stratfor.

34 Katzman, Kenneth. (2015). Iran's Foreign Policy, Congressional Research Service, p. 8-10.

35 Jahner, Ariel. (2012). *Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf*, International Affairs Review, Vol. XX, No.3, p.37-48.

36 Reardon, Martin. (2015). *Saudi Arabia, Iran and the 'Great Game' in Yemen*. Opinion/ Iran, Al-Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/saudi-arabia-iran-great-game-ye-201492984846324440.html>

been its leader. In addition, a Yemeni court sentenced crew members of a ship that was delivering arms from Iran; after being caught by the Yemeni Coast Guard and the US Navy in a joint operation in January 2013 and charged with collaborating with Iran and weapons smuggling. For Iran, its involvement in Yemen allows it to demonstrate its regional strength and the reach of its military influence. Iranian arms shipments intended for the Houthis; assault rifles, explosives, anti-tank weapons, and large amounts of cash, usually transferred by sea, are insignificant compared to the weapons already flooding in to Yemen, especially from the north, but they do allow Tehran to buy influence in Yemen and challenge Saudi Arabia's hegemony in the peninsula. Not only does Iran assist the Houthis, but it also tries to strengthen its influence over other Yemeni factions, including the southern separatist movement. The Yemeni government claims that Iran has even tried to undermine the National Dialogue Conference; meant to bring a national consensus and solve the Yemeni crisis. In 2013, the Iranian ambassador to Sana'a met with the head of the political branch of the Houthi movement several times to persuade the Houthis to withdraw from the conference.³⁷

For the Saudis, the porous 1,770km southern border it shares with Yemen makes Riyadh's stakes there very high. Saudi Arabia became easy prey for Tehran to penetrate and manipulate. For these reasons, the Saudis have been providing important financial and military support to Yemen's central government and conducting their own ground and air strikes against the Houthis. The Saudis see that the south of their border is under a grave national security threat, particularly now that the future of Yemen is in question. Instability in Yemen would mean giving Iran a solid foothold on the peninsula, a situation that the Saudis cannot afford to happen.³⁸ In fact, as Friedman writes, the possibility of the Houthi's victory in establishing a pro-Iranian Shiite state means the possibility of an Iranian encirclement. However, Saudi financial support combined with its military operations designed to cut off Iranian supplies in Yemen is not to be underestimated either.³⁹

Saudi Arabia's Geopolitical Concerns

Saudi Arabia's geopolitical concerns increased as the Houthis continued gaining control of the Yemeni coast and the surrounding maritime corridor that gives access to the Red Sea. Heffron reveals that, with 4% of global oil, much of it from Saudi Arabia passing through the strait of Bab al-Mandab, the ports located along the strait are of great strategic significance

37 Kronenfeld, Sami and Guzansky, Yoel. (2014). *Yemen: A Mirror to the Future of the Arab Spring*. Military and Strategic Affairs, Vol 6, No: 3, p. 79-99.

38 Martin Reardon. (2015).

39 Friedman, George. (2015). *The Middle Eastern Balance of Power Matures*, Stratfor.

to the Saudis. Whereas it is not as important as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab al-Mandab strait is vital for Saudi Arabia's ability to reach global energy markets.⁴⁰ Kronenfeld et al. explain that for Riyadh, the Houthis grip on Yemen's western coast means giving Iran access to the Red Sea, a fact that could help it continue its regular arms supply to its local allies, maintain a contiguous presence near the Bab el-Mandeb Straits and get access to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean.⁴¹ Bruno points out that the massive Saudi bombing attack launched on Yemen was proof that Al-Saud would do everything to control the city overlooking the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb, the strait being among the most strategically important waterways in the world.⁴²

Viewing the Houthis as mainly Iranian proxies, Saudi Arabia directed all its efforts to isolate them diplomatically, strangle them economically and, now, weaken them militarily. In turn, the Houthis refused to accept the Saudi-set president Hadi. They have conducted military exercises on the Saudi border and will likely harden their stance in response to any Saudi military intervention. They are less dependent on Tehran than Hadi and his allies are on Riyadh, but the country's situation and their relative self-sufficiency have pushed them to solicit Iranian financial and political support.⁴³

Whilst Saudi Arabia justifies its intervention in Yemen for the sake of security, it is clear that the top priority of the alliance is about creating a balance of power between the two adversarial camps in the Yemeni conflict; the Shiite Houthi rebels, who have joined together with former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the Saudi-backed government troops.⁴⁴

McInnis writes that as the war is escalating in Yemen, Iranian rhetoric towards Saudi Arabia and other GCC members has only become more heated. The Brigadier General Gholam Reza Jalali, a leading IRGC strategist said that the Islamic Republic has to be prepared for a new type of conflict with Riyadh which evolved from being a regional rival to a proxy threat.⁴⁵

40 Heffron, Daniel. *How the Iran Deal will re-shape the balance of power in the Middle East*, London: Centre for Geopolitics & Security in Realism Studies (CGSRS), 2015, p. 1-17.

41 Kronenfeld, Sami and Guzansky, Yoel. (2014). Yemen: A Mirror to the Future of the Arab Spring. *Military and Strategic Affairs*, Vol.6, No. 3, p.79-99.

42 Bruno, Alessandro. (2015). *A New Balance of Power in the Middle East*, Geopolitical Monitor, <http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/a-new-balance-of-power-in-the-middle-east/>

43 Yemen at War. (2015). *Crisis Group Middle East Briefing No.45*, Sanaa, Brussels.

44 Dieter Bednarz, Reuter Christoph and Zand Bernhard. (2015). *Proxy War in Yemen: Saudi Arabia and Iran Vie for Regional Supremacy*. DER SPIEGEL, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/saudi-arabia-and-iran-fighting-proxy-war-in-yemen-a-1027056.html>.

45 Salisbury, Peter. (2015). *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*, Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, p. 1-15.

Iranian Military Threat and Maritime Expansion

Iran poses a serious threat to Saudi Arabia because it has an army that surpasses that of all the GCC states put together, with 600,000 troops, 1,700 tanks, around 300 fighter and ground-attack planes, hundreds of surface-to-air and ballistic missile launchers, and a bevy of small, rapid boats that could wreak havoc in the narrow Persian Gulf. Cordesman writes that, after the nuclear deal, regional military confrontation with Iran has been eased, however it did not eliminate the major military risks in terms of Iran's influence over the region. Iran's growing naval to air missile threat to maritime passage and petroleum exports in the gulf still persists. Likewise, Tehran's emergent conventional missile force's objective of having a precise strike ability is a threat for its gulf neighbors. This has, thus, generated an arms race within the region, and a de-facto military alliance between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia that is critical to deterring Iran. In order to support its proxies in Arab states, Iran has, hence, tried to compensate for its limited conventional capabilities by developing its asymmetric warfare, threatening maritime traffic near the Gulf, and posing a ballistic and cruise missile threat to its Gulf neighbors.⁴⁶

In November 2016, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian armed forces announced a plan to build naval bases in Syria and Yemen, a project that could be ten times more efficient than nuclear power. Iran struggles to be a leading regional power and it tries to reach that aim through naval outposts. In fact, this announcement was the first time Tehran officially declared its will to construct bases beyond its own borders.⁴⁷

Iran's maritime project seeks to expand its reach across the region in order to support its proxies, namely in Yemen and Syria. The Islamic Republic of Iran Navy, IRIN, has attempted to expand Iran's regional maritime locations in order to be able to close the Strait of Hormuz and attack shipping in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden in the case of any conflict with the United States or its Arab rivals. Iranians regard the Straits of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb as having a strategic importance because it could be used to exert pressure on the global energy supplies. Any blockade of the straits, limited military disruption or the presence of naval mines could cause major interruption to oil shipments and severely inflate oil prices. Simultaneously, it can politically destabilize the Persian Gulf region.⁴⁸

46 Cordesman, Anthony H. (2016). *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-and-gulf-military-balance-1>

47 Guzansky, Yoel. (2017). *Iran's Growing Naval Ambitions, Why It Wants Naval Bases in Syria and Yemen*, Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-01-01/irans-growing-naval-ambitions>.

48 Fargher, James.A. (2017). *This Presence Will Continue Forever: An Assessment Of Iranian Naval Capabilities In The Red Sea*, Center for International Marime Security CIMSEC. <http://cimsec.org/presence-continue-forever-assessment-iranian-naval-capabilities-red-sea/31593>.

In fact, the Strait of Hormuz alone is the world's most important chokepoint that allows the passage to an oil flow that reached 17 million barrels per day in 2013, about 30% of all seaborne-traded oil, and 30% of the world's exports of liquid natural gas. Additionally, 85% of the crude oil transferred through this strait is delivered to Asian markets whose exports are critical to the global economy.⁴⁹

The Iranian naval doctrine focus was to close the Straits of Hormuz using asymmetric forces; nevertheless, since 2011, Iran has regularly deployed naval forces in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and it has been using the Red Sea as a key route to smuggle weapons to militants in Syria. In February 2011, Iran sent a small flotilla of Iranian warships on a mission to Syria, entering the Red Sea, passing through the Suez Canal for the first time since the 1979 Revolution. In July of the same year, Tehran announced its intention to deploy one of its submarines on a patrol route in the Red Sea. At present, Iran does not possess the same level of naval capability in the Red Sea and the Gulf as it does in its coastal waters in the Strait of Hormuz, however it remains highly important for Iran. Tehran has conducted several naval exercises in the Arabian Sea, with units deployed in the Gulf of Aden near Bab-el-Mandeb Strait in order to show its military prowess and defense capabilities in international waters and to test the newest military equipment. In January 2013, Iran deployed units to the Red Sea once more and announced that it would be sending its 24th Fleet on a three-month patrol of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea before passing through the Suez Canal for the Mediterranean. Fargher sees that the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden are strategically very crucial to Tehran's role in the Yemeni war.⁵⁰

However, it was hard for Iran to access Yemen's shores due to the Saudi-led blockade and the U.S. warships intercepting their shipments of weaponry to the Houthis. To back its Yemeni allies, Iran had to find other smuggling operations routes through Oman. For this reason an Iranian base in Yemen would resolve the problem of reaching its Yemeni allies.⁵¹

The commander of the Iran Navy, Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, announced in 2016 that Iran's Navy had been deployed in the North of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden and this presence in this strategic area would continue with the aim of establishing lasting security.⁵²

49 Cordesman, Anthony H. (2016).

50 Fargher, James.A. (2017).

51 Guzansky, Yoel. (2017).

52 PressTV. (2016). *Iran Navy fleet enters Atlantic Ocean for first time.*
<http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2016/11/21/494550/Iran-Habibollah-Sayyari-Navy-Atlantic-Ocean-fleet>.

The American intelligence firm Stratfor reports that Iran's navy power is not strong enough to control key shipping ways, but its presence near Bab-el-Mandeb is a means of disrupting global trade and a key position for negotiations in the future. The Syrian base would also provide Iran with a strategic position to send support to Hezbollah and Bashar in Lebanon and Syria without having to go through Iraq or Turkey. This base would also stop Iran's dependence on Sudan, which turned its back on Tehran previously to support the Saudi Arabia diplomatic cut with Iran after the Embassy attack. Sudan has long been a port for the entry of Iranian weapons to the Mediterranean, but once the base is built, Iran will not need it anymore. In addition to using Sudan to supply weapons to its proxies, Iran has also been trying to establish good relations with Eritrea, which controls the two remaining large ports in the Red Sea.⁵³ However, Saudi Arabia is one step ahead in the regional conflict over the control of the Red Sea through maritime bases in Eritrea and Djibouti. Through building a base in Yemen and thus Syria, Iran could also reshape this power balance.⁵⁴

UN Passivity towards Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

While dealing with the Yemeni crisis, the UN does recognize the role that Iran and Saudi Arabia play in supporting and even deploying their allies in Yemen and how important this role is to define the outcomes of the conflict. However, the UN restricted the Stockholm negotiations table to Yemeni counterparts, excluding the two major operators in the conflict. Martin Griffiths himself expressed that the conflict is strategic and that resolving the crisis in Yemen is not only important for Yemenis but for everyone else who has interests in the region, which is not shocking because the shipping lanes and the trade routes come through the red sea. Member states in the region and beyond the region are obviously concerned with stability in Yemen. While the UN must take these interests and concerns into consideration, Griffith believes that his role is to solely involve Yemenis at the negotiation table. Griffith sees that foreigners should not be involved in the decision making. The latter contradicts his own words as he admits to the role played by regional states in fueling the conflict in Yemen, but he sees the need to exclude them from the decision-making table.⁵⁵

Prior to the UK draft resolution, on 19 November, the UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt paid a visit to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran where he encouraged all parties to accelerate efforts to resolve the Yemen crisis. Hunt asked Tehran to push the Houthis to the negotiating

53 Fargher, James.A. (2017).

54 Guzansky, Yoel. (2017).

55 Hassan, Mehdi. (2018). [interview with Martin Griffiths, UN special envoy for Yemen]. Up Front, *Yemen: 'Parties decide to resolve a conflict, not UN'*. Retrieved from Al Jazeera-English AI <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/>

table. As a response, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, expressed that all the Yemenis were prepared to come to the negotiating table if the coalition led by Saudi Arabia enabled them to do so.⁵⁶ This reflects the extent into which the UN sees the war in Yemen as a clear conflict between proxies, however, the UN still deals with it as mere civil war.

On November 2018, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, Michelle Bachelet urged all states with power and influence to end conflict in Yemen and showed indignation at the escalation of hostilities. Bachelet asked the Saudi-led Coalition, the Houthi forces and all sides supplying arms to the parties of the conflict to immediately end the suffering of the Yemeni civilians, pointing out that violations by one party to the conflict do not give carte blanche to the others to fight back at all costs.⁵⁷ Again, another UN official underlined that the cause of the suffering of the Yemeni people was mainly due to opposing sides fueling the civil war from within and outside Yemen.

At this point, it is necessary to highlight that unless this rivalry is addressed, the proxy war in Yemen will persist. For the UN to restore peace in Yemen, it has first to restore peace between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen.

2.2. The Restraints of the Responsibility to Protect Principle

According to the UN office for Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, the principle represents a political obligation to end violence and persecution in their worst forms. It seeks to reduce the gap between state obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law and the reality faced by populations facing the risk of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. It supports states' sovereignty by guiding them to see their responsibilities. Likewise, it allows the United Nations system to assist states in preventing listed crimes and violations and in protecting affected populations through capacity building, early warning, and other preventive and protective procedures, instead of merely responding after the damage is done.⁵⁸

The 2015 military coalition of the Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia was launched mainly to intervene in Yemen's civil war under the pretext of fulfilling its responsibility to defend the Yemeni people and the legitimate transitional government. Hitherto, the intervention engaged

56 Ensor, Josie. (2018). Britain draws up draft UN resolution on Yemen ceasefire. The Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/19/britain-draws-draft-un-resolution-yemen-ceasefire/>

57 UN News. (2018). Human Rights. *States with power and influence to end suffering of Yemenis must take action 'immediately' – UN rights chief*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/11/1025431>.

58 United Nation Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect: Responsibility to Protect. <http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.html>

against the Houthis not only failed to protect civilians, but also, over a third of the coalition's airstrikes were launched on civilian sites. The Responsibility to Protect principle was invoked to justify a military intervention with further purposes. It goes without saying that the Saudi-led intervention was not a Responsibility to Protect operation in the first place, since it was not concluded or assigned by a formal authorization of the Security Council. This highlights a deep lacuna in the way the United Nations has implemented this principle as it does not prevent distrustful invocations nor evoke the possibility that interventions could possibly do more harm than good.⁵⁹

Bearing that in mind, the P5 veto is another constraining condition that has prohibited the Security Council from effectively implementing its responsibility to protect mission, since all practical resolutions presented to the Council could be vetoed and canceled by any of the P5 member states. The Security Council thus remains paralyzed when it comes to proceeding in its decisions fully.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the Security Council has failed to completely engage with the principle as while appealing for resolutions, the Council has presented the conflict in Yemen as merely a civil war regardless of the brutality of the mass crimes committed against Yemeni citizens. The Security Council called for the respect of international human rights and humanitarian laws but did not appeal Pillar II or Pillar III of the principle since any further step to implement it would be vetoed by the P5 countries involved in the Saudi-led military operations. In fact, despite the increasing UN reports of violent attacks against civilians in Yemen, the US and UK back the Saudi-led coalition and numerous weapons used by coalition forces can be traced back to the U.S and U.K. Realizing that two P5 members are thus aligned with the forces responsible for these violent acts against civilians, it is unsurprising that the Security Council's only action to implement the Responsibility to Protect program in Yemen since 2015 has been to renew already existing sanctions.⁶¹

During the Stockholm negotiations, the U.S threatened to veto the British resolution if the humanitarian language was not pruned and if it did not condemn Iran's role in backing the

59 Thompson, Drew. (2017). *Responsibility While Protecting (RwP) and the Intervention in Yemen*. EIA Ethics and International Affairs. Carnegie Council. <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2017/responsibility-protecting-intervention-yemen>.

60 UN Security Council Report. (2015). Security Council Working Methods: *The Veto*. available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-security-council-working-methods/the-veto.php>

61 Genser, Jared. (2018). 'The United Nations Security Council's Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect: A Review of Past Interventions and Recommendations for Improvement'. *The U.N. Security Council's Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect*. Chicago Journal of International Law. Vol. 18, No. 2, p.449-482.

Houthi rebels.⁶² As mentioned earlier, this insertion was blocked in return by Russia to protect its Iranian ally. This reflects the divide between the P5 states and shows that their conflicting regional interests and biased support of different allies would definitely not solve the crisis, and potentially make it worse. Thus, the Responsibility to Protect principle serves the political interests of its executors rather than responding to righteous decisions concerning the severity of a conflict.

CONCLUSION

The UN's latest distinguished achievement was the Stockholm resolution as it succeeded in bringing the Yemeni rival groups to the negotiation table and to implement the necessary steps towards cessation of violence, trust building and humanitarian aids to the Yemeni people. However, it is important to stress that these steps alone are not enough for a sustainable peace in Yemen. A constant ceasefire and political stability remain intangible to our current day.

The UN have to reconsider the conflict on two levels: domestic and regional. Locally, there is no clear strong Yemeni rival to challenge Houthi rule in northern Yemen which keeps the prospects of a unified Yemen blurry and unattainable in the long run. So, unless a firm political resolution is taken beyond mere sanctions and travel bans, the civil war will not be solved in the near future. Yemen has become a weak state, if not a failed one. None of the rivals will accept sacrificing their leadership of this country to fall under the control of the other. In view of that, strengthening local government and enforcing democracy in its institutions would likely decrease foreign intervention and include all domestic parties in power. Stability and a strong grip on power in Yemen would also mean that neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia would have to fear losing their allies and to feel insecure about their borders.

Additionally, the UN needs to take measures to reassure both Iran and Saudi Arabia of the improbable intervention of the rival party, thus, reducing the likelihood of offenses and diminishing the prevailing security dilemma.

As a regional power that has shared interests with both states, Turkey can play a mediator role in easing the conflict. Likewise, U.S policies in the region too play a crucial role in addressing the divergence. Adopting a biased policy with one state against the other will only provoke more resistance from the left out state. America's continual promises for future defense capabilities and security agreements with Saudi Arabia does certainly provoke an

62 Borger, Julian.(2018). *UN agrees Yemen ceasefire resolution after fraught talks and US veto threat*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/21/un-yemen-ceasfire-stockholm-resolution-us>

Iranian need for a defensive regional policy and vice versa. Significantly, a firm condemnation to both states for their regional interventions is needed. This is no small task, but the first step is taking a neutral stance towards both Iran and the Saudi-led coalition.

Due to constraints limiting the Responsibility to Protect principle discussed earlier, the Stockholm agreement does not go far enough in challenging violations committed against international humanitarian law. Last but not least, as long as the Security Council fails to act heedless of the political interests of its permanent members and in accordance with the predefined principles, the UN protective and preventive actions will remain on hold and under the double-standards of its members.

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