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Iraq and Yemen: The new Iranian proxies?

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Abstract:

Iran projects its influence in the Middle East through what has come to be known as the Axis of Resistance, which includes the Syrian regime, Hizbullah in Lebanon, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian Territories. Over the last decade, two new forces have often been added to the Iranian-led alliance: the Shiite militias in Iraq and the Yemeni Houthis. The two cases are rather different, however. While there is significant evidence that Iran has invested much in Iraq, its efforts in Yemen appear much more modest.

Keywords:

Iran; Iraq; Yemen; Hizbullah; Houthis; Hamas; Axis of Resistance; Gulf Cooperation Council; Saudi Arabia.

* **NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a revisionist power, dissatisfied with the current regional order in the Middle East and seeking opportunities to alter it. It took advantage of the flawed US response to 9/11 to consolidate its narrative around the theme of the Axis of Resistance, and it continued to intervene in weak states through disgruntled actors with similar anti-Western and anti-Israel rhetoric, whatever their political and religious orientation. The outbreak of the Arab Spring gave a temporary boost to the Iranian narrative but prompted a reaction from the Saudi-led GCC which put the Axis of Resistance on the defensive, notably in Syria. However, Iran and its allies succeeded in preventing the collapse of the Assad regime.

Furthermore, the emergence of Daesh has allowed Iran to escalate its presence in Iraq, and the war in Yemen has opened new possibilities in the Arabian Peninsula. As a result of these developments, some analysts have started to argue that Iran's allies in Iraq and Yemen – i.e. the Iraqi Shiite militias and the Houthis – should be included on the list of Iranian proxies. In this article we will assess the merits of that thesis. We will start by exploring the evolution of Iranian foreign policy since 9/11 and the impact of the Arab Spring. We will then examine the situation in Iraq and Yemen, focusing on the extent of Iranian influence and how it is likely to develop.

Iranian foreign policy after 9/11: From conciliation to defiance

The Middle East has witnessed a radical reconfiguration over the last two decades. The US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq encircled Iran, and for a time there was speculation that the Islamic Republic itself would be the next candidate for regime change. After all, George W. Bush included it in the “axis of evil” alongside Iraq and North Korea in his January 2002 State of the Union address. Things have not turned out quite as Bush intended, and the US now stands accused of handing Iraq over to Iran¹ – although the situation is more nuanced than that, as we will see below.

¹ There are multiple examples, e.g. Tim Arango, “Iran Dominates in Iraq After U.S. ‘Handed the Country Over’,” *New York Times*, 15 July 2017, in: www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/world/middleeast/iran-iraq-iranian-power.html; Jonathan Spyer and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “How Iraq Became a Proxy of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *The Tower* 21 (December 2014), in: www.thetower.org/article/how-iraq-became-iranian-proxy

Ironically, the Iranian regime had initially hoped that 9/11 would present an opportunity to improve relations with the US, anticipating that the superpower might turn against its regional rival, Saudi Arabia, which for decades had fostered the ideology of the terrorists. Both president Muhammad Khatami and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei condemned the al-Qaeda attacks amid unprecedented public expressions of condolence.² Tehran assisted in the stabilisation of Afghanistan, using its influence over the Northern Alliance to facilitate the formation of a post-Taliban government under Hamid Karzai, and offering to help the US in creating and training the new Afghan army.³ And shortly after the US-led attack on Iraq, Iran proposed a broad dialogue which could include all issues of contention between the two countries, including cooperation on its nuclear programme, recognition of Israel, and termination of its support to Palestinian armed groups.⁴

These overtures were ignored, and in 2005 conservative populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – the candidate of the hard-line Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – was elected president and pursued a more aggressive foreign policy.⁵ Iran resumed its nuclear programme, defiantly responding to international sanctions by printing the atom symbol on the 50,000 Rial note.⁶ In Iraq it supported Shiite militias, particularly Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi's Army, JAM), which targeted US and British troops. On the other hand, it responded to the "axis of evil" label by describing itself and its allies as an "Axis of Resistance" against Zionism and Western imperialism.

And the star of the Axis of Resistance seemed to be on the rise. In 2005 Hamas took credit for the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, which came after hundreds of Israelis were killed in suicide bombings during the Second Palestinian Intifada. In January 2006 the group won an unexpectedly large majority in the Palestinian parliamentary elections

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² R. K. Ramazani, "US and Iran must work together against Taliban," *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 September 2001, in: www.csmonitor.com/2001/0924/p9s1-coop.html

³ According to James Dobbins, who was US envoy to Afghanistan at the time. See his "Engaging Iran," *The Iran Primer*, 22 October 2013, in: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/engaging-iran>

⁴ Glenn Kessler, "In 2003, U.S. Spurned Iran's Offer of Dialogue," *Washington Post*, 18 June 2006, in: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/17/AR2006061700727.html

⁵ Ahmadinejad's discourse appealed to Iran's disaffected poor, and he also benefited from voter apathy. Iranians gave reformist Khatami a landslide victory in 1999, only to see the unelected and conservative-dominated Guardian Council prevent the wide-ranging reforms Khatami had promised. See Roozbeh Safshekan and Farzan Sabet, "The Ayatollah's Praetorians: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the 2009 Election Crisis," *The Middle East Journal* 64/4 (Autumn 2010), pp. 543-558.

⁶ Many Iranians were dismayed by what they considered an unnecessary provocation. Ramin Mostaguim, "Bank note's atom image stirs furor in Iran," *The Seattle Times*, 12 March 2007, in: www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/bank-notes-atom-image-stirs-furor-in-iran

against a Fatah undermined by the derailment of the peace process and bogged down by corruption. Hamas was not allowed to rule due to its refusal to recognise the state of Israel and renounce terrorism, but in June 2007 it forcibly took over control of the Gaza Strip.

The conflict with Israel also exploded in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, when the Jewish state responded to a Hizbullah border raid by launching an all-out attack. Despite the ensuing death and destruction, the Shiite militia was celebrated in the Arab media for its ability to face up to the most powerful army in the Middle East. Internally, the war took place in the context of a Lebanon divided between the pro-Syrian March 8 Alliance and the pro-Western March 14 Alliance, but most Lebanese rallied around Hizbullah in the face of what was perceived as an unjustified onslaught. Intra-Lebanese tensions resumed shortly afterwards, especially over the issue of Hizbullah's weapons, and culminated in the group's invasion of Sunni West Beirut in May 2008. That same month, a Qatar-brokered deal forestalled future attempts to force the group to disarm by giving the Hizbullah-led opposition a blocking third in the cabinet.⁷

The Arab Spring and the price of the Syrian Civil War

The Arab Spring, which shook pro-Western regimes across the Middle East and brought several Islamist parties to power, further encouraged the Axis of Resistance. The Islamists had not initiated the mobilisations, but they were the force best placed to take advantage of the revolutionary turmoil. They enjoyed wide support due to their decades of grassroots activism and services to the less privileged, they offered a coherent ideological platform, and they were politically organised – unlike the crowds of idealistic youths occupying the public squares. Iran was quick to portray the uprisings as an “Islamic Awakening,” a continuation of its own Islamic Revolution.⁸

However, the Arab Spring turned out to be a bitter disappointment. Dismayed by the Obama administration's willingness to work with the Islamists and negotiate with Iran, Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council took it upon themselves to

⁷ Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, “Deal for Lebanese Factions Leaves Hezbollah Stronger,” *New York Times*, 22 May 2008, in: www.nytimes.com/2008/05/22/world/middleeast/22lebanon.html

⁸ Payam Mohseni, “The Islamic Awakening: Iran's Grand Narrative of the Arab Uprisings,” *Middle East Brief* 71 (April 2013).

take action in order to consolidate their regimes, contain the Islamists, and restore the *status quo ante*. They sent troops into Bahrain, where the Shiite majority had risen against the Sunni House of Al Khalifa. In Yemen they propitiated an agreement whereby the man at the top changed but the regime was preserved. In Egypt they supported the military coup that overthrew Muslim Brother Muhammad Morsi and brought Abdelfattah al-Sisi to power. Furthermore, they backed the Islamist opposition to the Syrian regime, threatening Iran's closest state ally.

Syria did not fit into Iran's "Islamic Awakening" narrative, but Tehran feared that a Sunni-dominated Syria would mean the end of the Axis of Resistance and it had no choice but to support Bashar al-Asad. Hizbullah was even more keen to intervene; in the words of his Secretary General, Hasan Nasrallah, Syria was "the backbone of the resistance."⁹ Both have had to pay a high cost for their involvement in terms of reputation, with their popularity floundering throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds even among Sunni Islamists who used to praise Hizbullah.¹⁰ The conflict also led to tensions within the Axis of Resistance: Hamas distanced itself from Iran and sought reconciliation with the Gulf regimes – only to return to the fold when the rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar wrecked any rapprochement with Riyadh and it became clear that Asad's regime was likely to survive.¹¹

In effect, Iran and Hizbullah were successful in preventing the collapse of the Syrian regime, and the Russian intervention from September 2015 all but guaranteed that it would defeat the opposition. Moreover, the war turned the Axis of Resistance into a more capable and integrated fighting force and allowed Iran to develop its hybrid warfare

⁹ "Al-sayyid Nasr Allah li-jumhur al-muqawama: A'idukum bi-l-nasr mujaddadan" [Sayyid Nasrallah to the crowds of the resistance: I promise you victory again], *Al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya – Lubnan [Islamic Resistance, Lebanon (Hizbullah's official website)]*, 27 May 2013, in:

www.mogawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=27814&cid=141

¹⁰ "Poll: Sectarianism, Syria Drive Negative Image of Iran," *Al-Monitor*, 5 March 2013, in:

www.aaiusa.org/poll-sectarianism-syria-drive-negative-image-of-iran-read-more-http-wwwal-; "Arab League brands Hezbollah a terrorist organisation," *BBC News*, 11 March 2016, in:

www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35789303. "Al-Qaradhawi: Al-Shi'a khada'uni.. wa-Hizbullah kidhba kabira" [(MB spiritual leader Yusuf] al-Qaradawi: The Shiites deceived me, and Hizbullah is a big lie]. *Al-Arabiya*, 2 June 2013, in: www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2013/06/02/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%83%D8%B0%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%83%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-.html

¹¹ Ahmad Majidyar, "Iran and Hamas seeking to further boost relations," *Middle East Institute*, 25 January 2018, in: www.mei.edu/content/io/iran-and-hamas-seeking-further-boost-relations

capabilities.¹² The Iranian presence in Syria has never been so important – to Israel's great displeasure¹³ –, Hizbullah's position in Lebanon continues to be unassailable,¹⁴ and Hamas is seeking to recover the upper hand in Gaza.¹⁵ In addition, the advent of Daesh offered Tehran the chance to increase its sway in Iraq, and the breakdown of the GCC-sponsored deal in Yemen provided the occasion to retaliate against Saudi Arabia.

Growing Iranian influence in the post-Saddam period

The toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime and the instauration of a system of government based on representative democracy opened the way for increased Iranian influence in Iraq. The two countries share a long border and over 60% of the Iraqi population follows Twelver Shiism, the official religion of the Islamic Republic. In addition, many in the current Iraqi political leadership spent years of exile in Iran. One of the main political forces in the post-Saddam era, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (now known as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, ISCI), was established in Iran in 1982, and its militia, the Badr Brigade, participated in the Iran-Iraq War on the Iranian side. On the other hand, the Islamic Republic has traditionally had good relationships with the (overwhelmingly Sunni) Iraqi Kurds, who also fought alongside Iran in the Iran-Iraq War.

¹² Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski, "Mosaic Defence: Iran's Hybrid Warfare in Syria 2011-2016." *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 26/3 (2017), pp. 18-67; Jack Khoury, Noa Landau, Amir Tibon, Reuters and DPA, "Syria Strike Destroyed 200 Missiles, Killed 11 Iranians," Source in pro-Assad Alliance Says, *Haaretz*, 30 April 2018, in: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/explosions-reported-in-assad-army-base-north-of-homs-syria-1.6035801>

¹³ As shown by Israel's recent military operations in Syria. "7 Iranians now said killed in attack attributed to Israel." *Times of Israel*, 10 April 2018, in: www.timesofisrael.com/7-iranians-now-said-killed-in-attack-attributed-to-israel/; Jack Khoury, Noa Landau, Amir Tibon, Reuters, and DPA, "Syria Strike Destroyed 200 Missiles, Killed 11 Iranians, Source in pro-Assad Alliance Says," *Haaretz*, 30 April 2018, in: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/explosions-reported-in-assad-army-base-north-of-homs-syria-1.6035801>

¹⁴ In the May 2018 general election, the first since 2009, Hizbullah and its allies of the March 8 Alliance benefited from a more representative electoral system and disillusionment among supporters of March 14 Alliance leader Saad al-Hariri, and they won most of the seats in the new Lebanese parliament. Sam Meredith and Natasha Turak, "Iran 'may no longer feel constrained' against Israel after Hezbollah's election success, analyst says," *CNBC*, 8 May 2018, in: <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/08/lebanon-election-hezbollah-success-may-mean-iran-no-longer-constrained-against-israel.html>

¹⁵ After yet another reconciliation attempt with the Palestinian Authority failed, Hamas threw its weight behind the Great Return March in an effort to seize the initiative. See Ali Adam, "Who's to blame for failed Palestinian reconciliation?", *Al-Monitor*, 5 April 2018, in: www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/palestine-reconciliation-sanctions-abbas-hamas-accusations.html; Shlomi Eldar, "Hamas, Fatah battle over Palestinian public opinion," *Al-Monitor*, 3 April 2018, in: www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/israel-gaza-strip-hamas-fatah-yahya-sinwar-mahmoud-abbas.html

After decades of hostility from its western neighbour, Iran was glad to see a Shia-dominated Iraq, keen to establish friendly links and offering a large market for Iranian products.¹⁶ Furthermore, the new Iraq was a decentralised federal state, unlikely to re-emerge as a threat or a competitor for regional hegemony. Eager to help expedite the departure of the US-dominated coalition, Iran backed Shiite militias taking part in the insurgency, such as the Badr Brigade; a more radical split thereof, Kata'ib Hizbullah (Hizbullah Brigades); and the largest and most popular among them, Jaysh al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army, JAM), led by fiery young cleric Muqtada al-Sadr – although his unpredictability and Iraqi nationalism did not make him a natural or desirable ally.¹⁷ As a consequence, Tehran encouraged splinter groups from JAM, such as 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (League of the Righteous, AAH).¹⁸

The Iranian presence has become particularly conspicuous in the conservative south of Iraq, where the Shiite holy sanctuaries of Najaf and Karbala are located. Iran-backed militias defend the shrines, which receive millions of Iranian pilgrims each year, and the political parties close to Iran (ISCI and Badr) have large majorities in local councils. In Najaf, an Iranian company is in charge of municipal waste collection.¹⁹ At the central government level, senior Badr official Qasim al-A'raji is interior minister since January 2017; his predecessor, Mohammed al-Ghabban, was also a member of the Badr Organisation. Badr leader Hadi al-'Amiri is a personal friend of Major General Qasem Suleimani, commander of the Quds Force, the IRGC division responsible for external military and clandestine operations.

Conversely, the emergence of an Iranian-style government based on *Wilayat al-Faqih* (the Guardianship of the Jurist) is extremely unlikely because it is opposed by the religious leadership in Najaf, led by Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Of the major parties, only the ISCI advocated such system for Iraq and it changed track in 2007 when, in a bid to increase its popularity, it announced that it would follow the guidance (*marja'iyya*) of

¹⁶ Iranian foodstuffs, household goods, textiles, cars, even illicit drugs, have flooded the market in Iraq, which has become Iran's second largest trading partner. See Arango, op. cit. "Iran, Iraq's 2nd top trade partner," *Mehr News Agency*, 13 January 2018, in: <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/131193/Iran-Iraq-s-2nd-top-trade-partner>

¹⁷ In the words of Kayhan Barzegar, the Sadrist-Iranian alliance lacked "strategic logic." See his "Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Invasion Iraq," *Middle East Policy* 15/4 (December 2008): pp. 47-58.

¹⁸ Michael R. Gordon and Andrew W. Lehren, "Leaked Reports Detail Iran's Aid for Iraqi Militias," *New York Times*, 22 October 2010, in: www.nytimes.com/2010/10/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html

¹⁹ Arango, op. cit.

Sistani instead of Khamenei's – prompting the Badr Brigade to split and set up its own party, the Badr Organisation. In any case, Iran is aware that it has to be cautious about projecting its influence too aggressively to avoid offending Iraqi nationalist sensitivities. It is those sensitivities – and not Iranian pressure, as sometimes claimed – that led to the US withdrawing all its troops in 2011.²⁰

Iran seizes the moment

The advent of Daesh among the disaffected Sunni minority and its dramatic takeover of large swathes of Iraq and Syria in 2014 provided an opportunity for Tehran to escalate its involvement. In June 2014 Grand Ayatollah Sistani issued a fatwa calling on all Iraqi citizens to join the fight against the existential threat posed by Daesh. However, most of the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who answered his call did not enlist in the disgraced security forces that had run away from the jihadis; they chose to join the existing or newly-created militias which formed Wahdat al-Hashd al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilisation Units, PMU).

Iran rushed to send funds, weapons and advisors to Iraq, offering direct support to many of the 50 or so militias within the PMU. These vary in size from a few hundred to tens of thousands and divide their loyalties between Sistani (Al-Abbas Combat Division, Imam Ali al-Akbar Brigade...); Sadr, who has become more conciliatory over the years (JAM is now called Saraya al-Salam, "Peace Squads"); and Khamenei – or, rather, his charismatic man on the ground, Qasem Suleimani (Badr Organisation, Hizbullah Brigades, AAH, Imam Ali Brigades... – some of the latter have fought in Syria on the side of the Asad regime).²¹ In addition, the PMU deputy commander, Hizbullah Brigades leader – and US-

²⁰ The withdrawal of US troops negotiated with then-prime minister Nouri al-Maliki has often been portrayed as an Iranian triumph in Iran and even in the US, but the pressure came from the Iraqis themselves. They resented the military occupation and were eager to see the departure of an occupier which had so badly mismanaged the post-Saddam period. See Brett McGurk, "Not an end, but a beginning, in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 4 November 2011, in: www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/not-an-end-but-a-beginning-in-iraq/2011/11/03/gIQA1jBqjM_story.html?utm_term=.5a62882de4e5; Jonathan Steele, "Iraq's own Arab Spring," *The Guardian*, 25 April 2011, in: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/apr/25/united-states-troop-presence-iraq-long-term

²¹ Renad Mansour and Faleh Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 28 April 2017. In: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

designated terrorist – Jamal Ja‘far al-Ibrahimi, was put in charge of distributing the PMU budget (\$1.63 million in 2017 alone), which allowed him to favour pro-Iranian factions.²²

The future of the PMU militias is unclear at this point. In March 2018 prime minister Haider al-Abadi issued a decree formalising their inclusion into the security forces, but several PMU commanders close to Iran stressed that they would remain a separate military entity.²³ It is apparent that they will try to capitalise politically on the military triumph over Daesh. AAH leader Qais Khaza‘li declared in an interview with the Iranian news agency Tasnim that the coalition of PMU groups known as the Victory Alliance (I‘tilaf al-Fath) would do well in the upcoming elections, due in May, and he hinted that they would use their power in the next parliament to expedite the withdrawal of the US troops that arrived to fight Daesh.²⁴ They will no doubt profit from the unpopularity of the Iraqi political class, widely discredited due to widespread corruption under the sectarian quota system known as *muhāsasa ta‘ifiyya*.²⁵

However, the US is working behind the scenes to foster a rapprochement between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In February 2017 Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir travelled to Baghdad in the first visit by a Saudi high official since 1991. Prime minister Abadi returned the visit in June and, again, in October. In July it was the turn of interior minister Qasim al-A‘raji to travel to Saudi Arabia, despite his close relationship to Iran. Later that same month Muqtada al-Sadr was feted in Riyadh, where he was received by both King Salman and powerful crown prince Muhammad bin Salman. The latter is expected in Iraq in the near future.²⁶

²² Hamdi Malik, “The Future of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 September 2017, in: <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/73186>. Ibrahimi, aka Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, is on the US terrorist list for its activities in Kuwait in the 1980s, including the bombings of the US and French embassies in 1983, which killed six people and for which he was sentenced to death in absentia in 2007. See “Jamal Jaafar Ibrahimi a.k.a. Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes,” *Counter Extremism Project* (undated), in: www.counterextremism.com/extremists/jamal-jaafar-ibrahimi-aka-abu-mahdi-al-mohandes

²³ Ahmad Majidyar, “Iran’s Iraqi militia allies eye next elections to consolidate gains, expel US,” *Middle East Institute*, 20 March 2018, in: www.mei.edu/content/io/irans-iraqi-militia-allies-eye-next-elections-consolidate-gains-expel-us

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Mieczysław P. Boduszyński, “Iraq’s year of rage,” *Journal of Democracy* 27/4 (October 2016), pp. 110-124.

²⁶ Fanar Haddad, “Why a controversial Iraqi Shiite cleric visited Saudi Arabia,” *Washington Post*, 10 August 2017, in: www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/10/why-a-controversial-iraqi-shiite-cleric-visited-saudi-arabia/; Ali Mamouri, “Saudi Arabia looks to expand its footprint in Iraq,” *Al-Monitor*, 20 March 2018, in: www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/iraq-saudi-basra-najaf.html

In contrast, Iran has suffered several setbacks in a context of nationalist fervour and disaffection towards the religious parties.²⁷ ISCI leader Ammar al-Hakim, nephew of historic founder Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim and son of previous leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, announced in July 2017 that he was leaving the party to set up “a nationalist, not Islamic movement.”²⁸ There is no question that his many devotees will follow him. And in September, both Sistani and Sadr refused to meet Khamenei’s envoy. Commenting on Sadr’s refusal, a representative of the Sadrist movement explained that Iran’s interference foments sectarianism and is not in the interest of the Iraqi people.²⁹ Despite alarmist rhetoric from some quarters, it seems unlikely that Iraq will become a satellite of Iran any time soon.

Yemen: A conflict with domestic roots

The Ansar Allah (Supporters of God) movement – the official name of the Houthis – has its origins in Saada, a Zaidi-majority Yemeni governorate which borders Saudi Arabia. Zaidism branched off Shia Islam in the VIII century and survived in that mountainous

²⁷ An indicator of the current mood is the unlikely electoral alliance between Sadr and the communists. See Mustafa Habib, “Al-Sadr yatamarrad ‘ala al-ahzab al-shi’iyya wa-yatahalif ma’ al-shiyu’iyyin” [Al-Sadr rebels against the Shiite parties and forms an alliance with the communists], *Niqash*, 8 febrero 2018, in: <http://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/5829/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86.htm>

²⁸ “Ammar al-Hakim yu’lin al-qati’a ma’ irth Al-Majlis al-Islami al-A’la” [Ammar al-Hakim announces a break with the legacy of the Islamic Supreme Council], *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 16 July 2017, in: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/982756/%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D8%B1%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89>

²⁹ “Ba’d al-Sistani.. Muqtada al-Sadr yasdım mab’uth Khamini’i ila al-‘Iraq wa-yarfudh istiqbala-hu wa-l-asbab?!” [After Sistani, Muqtada al-Sadr shocked Khamenei’s envoy to Iraq by refusing to meet him. Why?], *Babil 24*, 6 September 2017, in: <https://babil24.com/ar/details.aspx?id=62346&page=%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%AF%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AB-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A6%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%B6-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8>

region, where Zaidi imams ruled since the late IX century until the 1962 republican revolution.³⁰ Zaidis make up a third of the Yemeni population, but their doctrine and practice are very close to those of the Sunni Shafi'i majority and inter-sectarian relations have customarily been cordial.³¹ In the 1990s Hussein al-Houthi, scion of a respected Saada family, came into prominence by giving expression to local grievances, particularly economic and political marginalisation and the spread of Wahhabi-inspired, Saudi-sponsored Salafism. In 1992 he established Muntada al-Shabab al-Mu'min (Believing Youth Forum), which organised clubs and summer camps for the young and aimed at bringing about a "Zaidi revival."

Houthi became increasingly vocal, demanding greater autonomy for the Saada region and denouncing the long-ruling regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh as repressive and corrupt. This criticism grew louder after Saleh became a partner in the US-led "war on terror" due to al-Qaeda activity in Yemen, which was not a popular move in the country.³² Tensions came to a head in 2004, when the government's attempt to arrest Houthi triggered an insurgency during which he was killed. The movement adopted his name to honour him, and leadership passed on to his family, especially his brother Abdel Malik. Between 2004 and 2010 the Houthis fought half a dozen wars against Saleh – himself a Zaidi from the mighty Hashid tribal confederation. The president tried to rally external support by linking the conflict to the international fight against terrorism, implausibly claiming that the Houthis were variously backed by Libya, al-Qaeda, Hizbollah and Iran.³³ They were even accused of abandoning Zaidism in favour of Twelver Shiism.³⁴

Much has been made of the Houthis adopting rhetoric usually associated with revolutionary Iran, e.g. referring to the US as "the Great Satan" and using as their slogan

³⁰ The coup by Nasserist army officers in September 1962 led to a civil war between royalists, supported by Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and republicans, backed by Egypt, and resulted in the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic in the north of the country.

³¹ The Shafi'i is one of the four *madhhab*-s (schools of Islamic law) of Sunni Islam. Throughout history Zaidis and Shafi'is prayed in each other's mosques, intermarriage was common, and Zaidis often considered themselves "the fifth Sunni *madhhab*."

³² Al-Qaeda was responsible for the bombing of USS Cole at the port of Aden in 2000, which left 17 American sailors dead, and several of the 9/11 hijackers were born in Yemen. U.S. military assistance to Yemen reached \$176 million in 2010, although it dropped to \$30 million in 2011 after Saleh violently repressed revolutionary protestors. See Karen DeYoung, "Executive order aims to aid Yemen," *Washington Post*, 16 May 2012.

³³ Christopher Boucek, "War in Saada. From Local Insurrection to National Challenge," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Middle East Program* 110 (April 2010), p. 2.

³⁴ Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), pp. 171-174.

“God is Great. Death to America. Death to Israel. Curse upon the Jews. Victory for Islam.” However, such rhetoric is not uncommon among Islamist movements, and the intention of Houthi leaders was to build on widespread anti-US and anti-Israel sentiment and denounce US allies in the region – first and foremost, the Yemeni regime. Hussein al-Houthi praised Iran and Hizbullah in his sermons not their Shiite character, but for their stand against “the enemies of Islam.”³⁵

The Houthis stood their ground against the Yemeni army, although the latter had modern US-supplied weapons and was supported by Saudi Arabia, which became progressively involved in the conflict. In late 2009 Riyadh sent ground troops into Saada in an escalation religiously legitimised by Saudi Grand Mufti Abdelaziz ibn Abdullah Al Sheikh, who promptly issued a fatwa declaring the Houthis’ doctrine, “corrupted,” and fighting them, a jihad.³⁶ According to UN experts, it was around this time that Iran started to send the Houthis small shipments of weapons.³⁷ In any case, Yemen’s tribal social structure and troubled recent history meant that the country was awash with weapons, which could also be bought from corrupt army officers and demoralised conscripts.

In 2011 the Houthis took part in the Yemen Revolution alongside a wide range of parties and interests with little in common apart from their opposition to Saleh’s three-decade-long rule. They included the youth, frustrated by the lack of political freedom and economic opportunities; the Southern Movement, heir to the failed 1994 attempt to secede³⁸; the Muslim Brotherhood faction within the Islah Party, led by Tawakkol Karman³⁹; Saleh’s own Hashid tribal confederation, which suddenly turned against him; disaffected sectors of the army... The Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council

³⁵ Salmoni et al, op. cit., pp. 119-121.

³⁶ Hashim Muhammad al-Bajji, *Al-Huthiyyun* [The Houthis] (Najaf: Al-Markaz al-Islami li-l-Dirasat al-Istratijiyya, 2015), pp. 49-50.

³⁷ Thomas Juneau, “Iran’s policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment,” *International Affairs* 92/3 (2016), pp. 647-663.

³⁸ Many southern Yemenis felt that the 1990 reunification of the country had left them politically marginalised and economically exploited. Their May 1994 attempt at secession was defeated by Saleh within a few weeks at the cost of thousands of lives. However, southern grievances were never properly addressed, and in 2007 the Southern Movement (al-Hirak al-Janubi) emerged to demand secession.

³⁹ The Islah party (in Arabic, Al-Tajammu’ al-Yamani li-l-Islah, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform) was founded in 1990 by Abdullah al-Ahmar, leader of the Hashid tribal confederacy, and includes both Muslim Brothers and Salafis. Islah supported Saleh, governing in coalition with his General People’s Congress, but over the second half of the 1990s Muslim Brotherhood elements within the party became increasingly critical of the president. In 2002 they established the Joint Meeting Parties Group (Takattul Ahzab al-Liqā’ al-Mushtarak) alongside nationalist and leftist opposition groups. For more on Islah and its participation in the Yemeni Revolution, see Stacey Philbrick Yakav, “Yemen,” in Shadi Hamid and William McCants (eds.), *Rethinking Political Islam*, (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 88-100.

brokered a deal whereby Saleh was replaced by his vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, and power was redistributed among the elites, favouring especially the Sunni Islamists of Islah. However, the deal did not address the underlying causes of the Revolution, and it left out the Houthis, the southerners and the revolutionary youth.

Nevertheless, the Houthis agreed to participate in the National Dialogue Conference set up to manage the post-Saleh transition – only to be alienated by the January 2014 NDC Document, which proposed a federation plan they considered unfair.⁴⁰ They took arms again, expanding well beyond their homeland with help from their former enemy, Saleh, who was hoping to recover the presidency. He still commanded significant loyalty among tribesmen and army commanders – many of the, Zaidis like him and unlike Hadi, a Sunni from Aden – and had access to the well-stocked Yemeni arsenal. In September 2014 the Houthis captured Sanaa, encountering virtually no resistance. They tried to form a government which included the forces left out by the GCC-promoted deal, but it soon floundered and the Houthis continued their military takeover of Yemeni territory. In January 2015 Hadi resigned, and on 25 March the Houthi advance on Aden prompted him to flee to Riyadh.

Escalating foreign involvement

Saudi Arabia was extremely concerned by developments in Yemen, which it considers its backyard. In addition, it feared that the Houthi presence on the Bab al-Mandab strait might threaten traffic through the Suez Canal. As a response, King Salman, who had only been on the throne for a few weeks, and his inexperienced defence minister and son, Muhammad bin Salman, organised the anti-Houthi coalition which launched Operation Decisive Storm on 25 March 2015.

Ironically, the intervention to curtail Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula has had the opposite effect. Threatened by an enemy with immense financial resources and a technologically advanced military, the Houthis became more reliant on Iranian support. This now includes funds, advisors, and weapons which were not in the Yemeni arsenal, e.g. the Burkan-2H missiles which have been used to hit Saudi cities, or the ‘kamikaze’

⁴⁰ “Yemen Al Houthi rebels slam federation plan as unfair,” *Gulf News*, 11 February 2014, in: <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/yemen/yemen-al-houthi-rebels-slam-federation-plan-as-unfair-1.1289512>

drones that target the coalition's sophisticated materiel.⁴¹ However, Yemen remains a low priority for Tehran, which has invested limited resources in the Houthis but is happy to maintain the Saudis bogged down in a very expensive quagmire: It is estimated that Iran is spending a few million dollars a year on the war in Yemen, whereas it is costing Saudi Arabia at least \$5 billion a month.⁴²

Three years into the war, the Houthis have come to identify themselves more closely with the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. It has been remarked that Abdel Malik al-Houthi's speeches purposely imitate the rhetoric, the aesthetics, even the gestures of Hasan Nasrallah.⁴³ The group has started to display an emblem featuring a hand holding a rifle which is very similar to that of Hizbullah's – itself a copy of the IRGC's. And although the conflict does not have religious roots and the religious identity of the actors is not the most relevant factor in determining where they stand, the constant conjuring of sectarianism has generated unprecedented tensions between Sunnis and Zaidis.

The war is above all over the distribution of scarce resources in a country which already relied heavily on foreign aid. The consequences have been catastrophic: Yemen's infrastructures have been devastated, more than 10,000 people have been killed, over a million have been affected by cholera, and eight million (almost a third of the population) are threatened with starvation. And any political solution has to take into account identitarian grievances other than the Houthis': In 2015 the separatist Southern Movement decided to side with president Hadi, but the flare-up in Aden last January exposed the fragility of that alliance, and the Movement now effectively rules most of southern Yemen.⁴⁴ Moreover, al-Qaeda in the Arabia Peninsula continues to control territory in the southeast of the country, and Daesh cells operate since 2015.

⁴¹ Jonathan Saul, Parisa Hafezi, and Michael Georgy, "Iran steps up support for Houthis," *Reuters*, 21 March 2017, in: www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R

⁴² Bruce Riedel, "In Yemen, Iran outsmarts Saudi Arabia again," *Brookings Institution*, 6 December 2017, in: www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/06/in-yemen-iran-outsmarts-saudi-arabia-again.

⁴³ Abdulilah Taqi, "Alat al-i'lam al-huthiyya: 'Hizbullah' marra min huna" [The Houthis' media machine: Hizbullah came this way], *Al-'Arabi*, 11 April 2015, in:

www.alaraby.co.uk/medianews/2015/4/11/%D8%A2%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%86%D8%A7.

According to Taqi, Hizbullah provided invaluable assistance to the Houthis in the development of their propaganda apparatus.

⁴⁴ The Southern Movement had rejected the Saudi-sponsored transition plan in 2012 and refused to participate in the 2013-14 National Dialogue Conference. The January 2018 clashes were the culmination

Conclusion

As a revisionist power, Iran is opposed to the existence of the state of Israel; feels threatened by US involvement in the Middle East; and competes for regional leadership with Saudi Arabia – which happens to be an important US ally. Its Axis of Resistance is based not on a common identity or political project, but above all on shared enemies. The Islamic Republic is opportunistic, seeking influence in countries where the grip of the state is loose and cultivating local actors looking for outside support in ongoing reconfigurations of power. In that regard, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab Spring presented new opportunities and new challenges.

Both the Shiite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen are good candidates for Iranian largesse. However, Iran's resources are limited. Its economy was dealt a serious blow by the Islamic Revolution, mismanagement and years of sanctions took a heavy toll, the promised economic bonanza after the signature of the nuclear deal has failed to materialise, and Syria will remain a significant burden for years to come. Neighbouring Iraq is a priority, although Iraqi nationalism constitutes a major obstacle to Iran's clout. Yemen has less strategic importance and, consequently, receives less attention and far fewer resources, but it offers the chance to importune Saudi Arabia – and at the propaganda level, it feeds the impression that Iran is winning in the battle for regional hegemony.

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* **NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

of rising tensions between the UAE-backed Southern Movement and the Saudi-backed Yemeni army. See Alexander Harper, "The spectre of a divided Yemen," *The Interpreter*, 8 February 2018, in: www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/spectre-divided-yemen; "Saudi Arabia-West Backed Coalition Disintegrating in Yemen?," *The Citizen*, 8 February 2018, in: www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/newsdetail/index/6/12961/saudi-arabia-west-backed-coalition-disintegrating-in-yemen. The clashes between Hadi's government and the Southern Movement came only weeks after the collapse of the Saleh-Houthi alliance and the killing of the former president while trying to flee Sanaa.