



Middle East

# Saudi Arabia's Yemen Offensive, Iran's "Proxy" Strategy, and the Middle East's New "Cold War"

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Convoy crews commonly operate from sunup to sundown during logistics missions through the province's rugged terrain.



IMAGE COURTESY OF US MARINE CORPS  
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**Riyadh's war in Yemen marks a dramatic escalation in its efforts to roll back Iran's rising influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia portrays its Yemen campaign simply as a battle of "good" Arabs and Sunnis supporting Yemen's legitimate government against "evil" Iranians trying to overthrow it via local Shi'a "proxies" - reiterating a generalized Saudi (and Israeli) narrative about Iran's use of proxy allies to consolidate regional "hegemony." More considered analysis shows that Iran's "proxy" ties are part of an effective strategy to expand political participation in contested regional venues. While Saudi Arabia (like Israel) considers this a mortal threat, it is essential to effective conflict resolution. Riyadh's intensely sectarian response - including its Yemen war - now fuels what some call a new Saudi-Iranian/Sunni'-Shi'a "Cold War" in the Middle East.**

**R**iyadh's increasingly destructive war in Yemen has sparked overripe discussion in Western capitals about Iran's use of "proxies" to subvert otherwise "legitimate" Middle Eastern governments. Driving such discussion is a self-serving narrative, promoted by Israel as well as by Saudi Arabia, about Tehran's purported quest to "destabilize" and, ultimately, "take over" the region.

Assessments of this sort have, of course, been invoked to justify - and elicit Western support for - Saudi intervention in Yemen. More broadly, the Israeli-Saudi narrative about Iranian ambitions is framed to prevent the United States from concluding a nuclear deal with Tehran - or, failing that, to keep Washington from using a deal as a springboard for comprehensively realigning U.S. - Iranian relations.

Determination to forestall Iran's international normalization by hyping its "hegemonic" regional agenda was on lurid display in Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's much-watched March 3, 2015 address to the U.S. Congress. As Netanyahu warned his audience,

"Backed by Iran, Shiite militias are rampaging through Iraq. Backed by Iran, Houthis are seizing Yemen, threatening the strategic straits at the mouth of the Red Sea...Iran is busy gobbling up the Middle East."

Two days after Netanyahu spoke in Washington, then-Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al - Faisal offered Riyadh's version of this narrative, stressing Iran's "interference in affairs of Arab countries." With U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry beside him, Saud recapitulated a reading of Tehran's regional strategy regularly expounded by Saudi elites:

"We are, of course, worried about atomic energy and atomic bombs. But we're equally concerned about nature of action and hegemonistic tendencies that Iran has in the region. These elements are the elements of instability in the region. We see Iran involved in Syria and Lebanon and Yemen and Iraq...Iran

is taking over [Iraq]... It promotes terrorism and occupies lands. These are not the features of countries which want peace and seek to improve relations with neighboring countries."

Given all that is at stake in the Middle East, it is important to look soberly at claims by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and their surrogates about Iran "gobbling up" the region. Sober evaluation starts by thinking through, in a fact-based way, how Iranian strategy - including its "proxy" component - actually works. It also entails dispassionate examination of what really concerns Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states about Iran's regional role.

### Playing Defense

Since the 1979 revolution that ended monarchical rule in Iran and created the Islamic Republic, Iranian strategy has been fundamentally defensive. Unlike other Middle Eastern powers - or the United States, for that matter - the Islamic Republic has never attacked another state or even threatened to do so.

### Sober evaluation starts by thinking through, in a fact-based way, how Iranian strategy - including its "proxy" component - actually works.

The revolutionaries who ousted the last shah promised to restore Iran's real sovereignty after a century and a half of rule by puppet regimes beholden to external powers. From the Islamic Republic's founding, its leaders have viewed the United States - the world's superpower, whose ambitions to consolidate a highly militarized, pro-American political and security order in the Middle East, condition it to oppose independent power centers there - as the biggest threat to fulfilling this revolutionary commitment.

After the United States, Iranian policymakers have seen Israel - a U.S. ally with aspirations to military dominance in its neighborhood - as a serious threat to the Islamic Republic's security and strategic position. Tehran has also been deeply concerned about Saudi Arabia leveraging its ties to Washington to advance its intensely anti-Iranian agenda - including the arming and funding of violently anti-Shi'a groups like *al-Qa'ida* and the Taliban.

The Islamic Republic's leaders have designed its foreign policy and national security strategy to preserve Iran's territorial and political integrity in the face of these threats. The aim is not to establish Iran's regional hegemony; it is to prevent any other regional or extra-regional power from attaining hegemony over Iran's strategic environment. Even the U.S. Defense Department acknowledges the defensive character of Iranian strategy; as a recent Pentagon report puts it,

"Iran's military doctrine is defensive. It is designed to deter an attack, survive an initial strike, retaliate against an aggressor, and force a diplomatic solution to hostilities while avoiding any concessions that challenge its core interests."

Leaving aside intentions, there is the more objective matter of the Islamic Republic's capabilities to perpetrate aggression in its regional neighborhood. Simply put, Iran today has effectively no capacity to project significant conventional military power beyond its borders.

To be sure, the revolutionaries who took power in 1979 inherited the last shah's U.S.-built military. But Washington cut off logistical and technical support shortly after the revolution - a debilitating measure exacerbated by an embargo on military transfers from most other countries as the fledgling Islamic Republic fought off, from 1980 to 1988, a (U.S.- and Saudi-backed) war of aggression by Saddam Husayn's Iraq. After the war, Iran shifted resources from the military into reconstruction and development, reducing its conventional military capabilities to



marginal levels. Today, the United States spends almost seventy times more on its military than Iran does. Saudi Arabia, with one-quarter Iran's population, spends over five times as much; the GCC collectively spends eight times as much.

### Cultivating "Proxies"

Given these realities, assertions that the Islamic Republic poses an offensive threat to its neighbors are baseless; to borrow a phrase from the U.S. Army, Iran won't be parking its tanks in anybody's front yard anytime soon. To protect Iran's territorial and political integrity, the Islamic Republic has developed increasingly robust capabilities for asymmetric defense and deterrence that it can credibly threaten to use in response to aggression against it. Among these capabilities are ballistic missiles armed with conventional explosives and a range of interrelated systems - anti-ship missiles, submarines, mine-laying systems, and large numbers of small "fast attack" boats - to disrupt Persian Gulf shipping, including both U.S. warships and vessels transporting oil.

Even with such capabilities, threats to the Islamic Republic's security and independence are magnified by what military planners call "lack of strategic



depth.” Iran today has land, maritime, and littoral borders with fifteen states. None is a natural ally; most have been hostile to the idea of an Islamic republic in Iran. Many of the Islamic Republic’s neighbors and other states in its regional environment are also susceptible to co-optation as anti-Iranian platforms by America, Israel, and/or Saudi Arabia. To compensate, Tehran has cultivated ties to sympathetic constituencies in other states open to cooperation with the Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Republic has made a point of aligning with constituencies systematically marginalized by their countries’ existing power structures: Shi’a majorities in Iraq and Bahrain; Lebanon’s Shi’a plurality; Shi’a and anti-Taliban Sunnis in Afghanistan; Zaidis in Yemen; Iraqi Kurds; occupied Palestinians. By helping such communities organize to press their grievances more effectively, Tehran creates options for influencing on-the-ground developments in contested venues across the Islamic Republic’s strategic environment.

For more than three decades, Tehran’s proxy partnerships have helped it push back against hostile initiatives – e.g., U.S. military intervention in Lebanon, Israel’s occupation of southern Lebanon, Saudi-backed expansion of Taliban control in Afghanistan, Saddam’s antagonism toward the Islamic Republic, U.S. occupation of Iraq – that threatened Iran’s strategic position. They have also enabled Tehran to reduce the chances that nearby states – Lebanon, Afghanistan, post-Saddam Iraq, Bahrain (where America’s Fifth Fleet is based) – will again be used as platforms to attack the Islamic Republic or otherwise undermine its security and independence.

Over time, these payoffs from the proxy component of the Islamic Republic’s regional strategy are amplified by Iranian allies’ political gains. Given the chance, Iran’s partners have

repeatedly shown themselves capable of winning elections in their local settings, and winning them for the right reasons: because they represent unavoidable constituencies with legitimate grievances. Tehran doesn’t manufacture its partners by paying people as mercenaries. It didn’t create Iraq’s Shi’a majority, or Bahrain’s; it didn’t create Lebanon’s Shi’a plurality, occupied Palestinians, or the Zaidis in Yemen. But Iranian support for these communities means that any expansion in political participation in their countries empowers Tehran’s allies.

### Stoking a New Middle Eastern “Cold War”

It is this aspect of Iranian strategy that most alarms Saudi Arabia, some other GCC states, and Israel. Today, neither Saudi Arabia nor Israel truly represents most of those it governs. Neither can endorse more participatory politics in the region; neither can endorse proliferation of regional states genuinely committed to foreign policy independence. This also means that neither can exercise positive political influence to facilitate conflict resolution in contested regional arenas; on their own, Israel and Saudi Arabia can only make things worse.

This is why, when U.S. forces invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam in 2003, Saudi Arabia played a critical role in funding and organizing Sunni insurgents there, in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to forestall a more representative political order which Iraq’s Shi’a majority would inevitably dominate. This is also why Riyadh viewed the outbreak of the Arab Awakening in late 2010 – which Tehran welcomed – as a mortal threat. The Saudi response has been:

- to undermine Sunni movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood, prepared to compete for power in elections;
- to build up violent *jihadi* groups, including groups that have aligned with *al-Qa’ida* and coalesced into the Islamic State, as alternatives to the Brotherhood; and
- to co-opt popular demands for reform by coercively intervening – including through *jihadi* proxies – in Libya, Syria, and now Yemen, with disastrous humanitarian and political consequences.

As it has done these things, Riyadh has reframed political struggles around the region in starkly sectarian, anti-Iranian/anti-Shi’a terms. This is especially striking *vis-à-vis* the Syrian conflict. Saudi intervention in Syria ensured that *jihadis* – many non-Syrian – dominate opposition ranks, killing any potential Brotherhood role in leading anti-Assad forces. It also turned what began as indigenous protests over particular grievances into a heavily militarized (and illegal) campaign against a UN member state’s recognized government – but with a popular base too small either to bring down that government or to negotiate a settlement with it.

In the process, Saudi Arabia has exploited Tehran’s support for Syria’s government to swing the balance of opinion in Sunni publics – which had increasingly seen the Islamic Republic as



championing more participatory politics and resistance to U.S. and Israeli hegemony – against Iran. The turn in Sunni attitudes gives Riyadh political cover to double down on supporting violent *ihadis* – as with Saudi backing for a new “Conflict Army,” organized around the *al-Qa’ida*-affiliated *Jabhat an-Nusra*, that recently captured a major Syrian city.

### Deconstructing the Yemen War

These dynamics are fueling a new Saudi-Iranian/Sunni-Shi’a “Cold War” in the Middle East; Saudi military action has made Yemen an important battleground in this wider contest. In Yemen, Tehran has followed its established strategic template of helping an unavoidable constituency with legitimate grievances – the Houthis and Ansar Allah, based in the country’s non-Sunni Zaidi community – organize to press for a meaningful share of power. And the roots of Riyadh’s current campaign against the Houthis go back to the Arab Awakening’s early days.

Following the ouster of Tunisian’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, peaceful mass protests calling for the removal of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh broke out in Sana’a and other Yemeni cities. Ansar Allah – which had been prosecuting a relatively successful revolt in north Yemen against Saleh’s rule before agreeing to a ceasefire in 2010 – endorsed the demonstrations; it also joined other anti-Saleh groups in a so-called National Dialogue, set up to lay the foundations for a more representative and regionally federalized political order.


As pressure for change mounted, Saudi Arabia – determined to perpetuate the Zaidis’ marginalization – set out to thwart Yemenis’ manifest desire to replace Saleh’s autocracy with more representative and participatory political structures. In particular, Riyadh worked to block implementation of the National Dialogue agenda by engineering Saleh’s replacement by his then-vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. To this end, the Saudis upped financial support to intensely sectarian Sunni *salafi* groups while undercutting the more moderate, Muslim Brotherhood-related *Islah* party – including by designating *Islah* as a terrorist group. These steps ensured that no Sunni party was empowered to work with Ansar Allah and the Houthis to stand up a new, more representative political order; in the end, Hadi was the only candidate on the ballot for Yemen’s February 2012 presidential election. Riyadh also worked to exclude Iran from the group of regional states ostensibly set up to help Yemen chart its political future.

Faced with these provocations, Ansar Allah and the Houthis renewed their military campaign against the central government in late 2011; their military gains accelerated over the next two and a half years. Hadi’s provisional term expired in 2014, two years after his February 2012 election. By that point, support for Hadi had crumbled – in no small part because of popular perceptions that he was a U.S. puppet collaborating with

America’s ongoing “counter-terrorism” campaign in Yemen, including high-profile drone strikes killing large numbers of civilians. In early 2015, Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia. Left with no political options for imposing its preferences on Yemen, Riyadh launched military operations in March 2015, appealing not only to its Western backers for support but also to Sunni publics to back its leadership of a millennial holy war against infidel Shi’a.

### Defusing Crises

Ansar Allah says it wants to realize the vision of the National Dialogue, but lacks sufficient support across Yemen to do this on its own. Tehran, for its part, has long recognized that there ultimately has to be a political solution in Yemen, based on a negotiated settlement among the country’s disparate regional, tribal, and sectarian elements. Since the start of the Saudi military campaign, the Islamic Republic has stressed the need for a negotiated resolution to the conflict – just as it has consistently held that a political settlement is the only way to end the conflict in Syria. It is Riyadh that rejects negotiation – regarding Yemen or Syria – unless it can, in effect, dictate outcomes in advance. In Yemen, as in Syria, Saudi actions are now enabling *al-Qa’ida* to make territorial gains.

Looking ahead, creating a genuinely more stable Middle East will require wider recognition of how dangerous the Saudi-stoked “Cold War” really is, and how much more damage it could do to an already severely stressed region. It will also require deeper appreciation of Iran’s regional importance, and of the indispensability of its influence to putting the Middle East on a more positive long-term trajectory. 

### About the Authors



**Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett** are authors of *Going to Tehran: Why America Must Accept the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: Metropolitan, 2013), now in paperback with a new Afterword. They had

distinguished careers in the U.S. government before leaving their positions on the National Security Council in March 2003, in disagreement with Middle East policy and the conduct of the war on terror. Flynt teaches international affairs at Penn State; Hillary is a visiting scholar at Georgetown University.



“There is a whole slew of highly dubious assumptions and narratives about Iran and the US’s relationship to it that are rarely challenged in any meaningful way in standard media circles. The Leveretts and *Going to Tehran* are vital to thinking critically about these claims...Both because of their expertise and their long immersion in these issues, they (and their data-filled book) deserve a prominent voice in all serious debates about Iran.”

– Glenn Greenwald, *The Guardian*