Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment

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For years, mounting instability led many to predict the imminent collapse of Yemen.[1] These forecasts became reality in late 2014 as the country spiralled into civil war. The conflict pits an alliance of the Houthis, a northern socio-political movement that has been fighting against the central government since 2004, alongside troops and militias loyal to a former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, against supporters and allies of the government overthrown by the Houthis in early 2015. The war became regionalized in March 2015 when a coalition of ten mostly Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, launched a campaign of air strikes against the Houthis with the declared objectives of stopping and rolling back their expansion and reinstating the exiled government of President Abd Rabbu Mansour al-Hadi. According to Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-backed Hadi government, the Houthis are an Iranian proxy; they therefore frame the war as an effort to counter Iranian influence in Yemen.[2]

The Houthis, however, are not Iranian proxies; Tehran's influence in Yemen is marginal. The civil war in Yemen is driven first and foremost by local and political factors, and is neither an international proxy war nor a sectarian confrontation. It is primarily a domestic conflict, driven by local grievances and local competition for power and resources. The Houthis and Saleh seek to overturn the political order that emerged after the uprisings of 2011: Saleh wants to return to power, having lost the presidency in the wake of popular protests, while the Houthis want a greater say in national affairs. In other words, the Houthis want in, Saleh wants back in, and members of the Hadi-aligned bloc want to keep them out.

To provide background to the Iran–Houthi relationship, this article starts by laying out the Islamic Republic's *modus operandi* to explain why and how, and with what expected results, it typically develops partnerships with non-state actors. It goes on to provide background information on the situation in Yemen to clarify the context in which the Houthis emerged as prospective partners of Iran. It then shows that even though Iran's support for the Houthis has increased in recent

[1] See e.g. Christopher Boucek, *Yemen: avoiding a downward spiral*, Middle East Program paper no. 102 (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sept. 2009); Thomas Juneau, 'Yemen: prospects for state failure—implications and remedies', *Middle East Policy* 17: 3, Fall 2010, pp. 134–52; Robert Worth, 'Yemen on the brink of hell', *New York Times*, 20 July 2011.

[2] For a clear articulation of how Saudi Arabia frames Iranian regional policies, including in Yemen, see this op-ed by its Foreign Minister: Adel al-Jubeir, 'Can Iran change?', *New York Times*, 19 Jan. 2016.

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years, especially since 2014, it remains limited—crucially, far too limited to have a significant impact on the balance of internal forces in Yemen or to buy Iran more than marginal influence there.

A number of factors explain why Iran's current objectives and its potential ambitions in Yemen are limited. Yemen does not rank high on the Islamic Republic's list of foreign policy priorities. At the same time, Tehran realizes that Yemen is a major source of concern for Saudi Arabia, and calculates that significant and overt support for the Houthis would risk escalation into direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia, an outcome Tehran wants to avoid.[3] Tehran has thus come to judge that while the provision of limited support can yield minor but interesting returns, the costs of a major investment would outweigh the potential benefits.

Iran's *modus operandi* in supporting non-state actors

Iran tends to intervene in national contexts characterized by two features: instability and the presence of dissatisfied actors. Typically, first, it seeks to take advantage of instability. As in Iraq since 2003 or in Lebanon since the 1980s, Iran tries to penetrate states where central authority is weak. It then tries to exploit divided elites by supporting like-minded factions.[4] It will often try to do so outside, but parallel to, state structures, as in Lebanon, where it supports Hezbollah, and in Iraq, where it supports Shi'i militias. Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'i militias are not fully under the state's authority, and therefore undermine it. At the same time, they participate in many of the state's activities, for example by sitting in parliament, and even oppose other actors seeking to overthrow the state.

Within unstable or fragmented states, Iran often seeks to develop partnerships with dissatisfied groups. These are elements that reject or oppose, through violent or non-violent means, the dominant domestic political order in their country or the US-dominated regional order, or both. They are dissatisfied for a variety of reasons, but essentially because they perceive—often rightly—that the constituents they represent are marginalized by a dominant group. In Lebanon, for example, Hezbollah was born in the 1980s to better represent the interests of the Shi'is, who had long been marginalized by the country's Christian and Sunni elite. Dissatisfied groups also often oppose regimes supported by the United States or its regional allies, and repudiate foreign interference in their countries.[5] As will be discussed below, this is the case of the Houthis in Yemen. Such positions are often popular, giving these groups a certain level of support. By extension, Iran gains in soft power by aligning itself with them, allowing it to position itself as the champion of the oppressed and marginalized.[6]

[3] Alex Vatanka, 'Iran's Yemen play: what Tehran wants—and what it doesn't', *Foreign Affairs*, 4 March 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2015-03-04/irans-yemen-play. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 23 Feb. 2016.)

[4] The implication is that the strengthening of central authority would probably come at the expense of Iranian influence, as it would close down space for external penetration.

[5] On the anti-status-quo dimension of Iran's foreign policy, see Shahram Chubin, 'Iran's strategic predicament', *Middle East Journal* 54: 1, Winter 2000, pp. 10–24.

[6] Again, this implies that positive political developments can be detrimental to Iran as they remove the source

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Contrary to a widespread misperception, Iran does not choose its partners on the basis of a common adherence to Shi'i Islam.[7] To enjoy Iranian support, actors must oppose the status quo, defined by the regional order dominated by the United States and its local partners, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia; they do not necessarily have to be Shi'i. That is why Hamas and Islamic Jihad—Sunni nationalist groups opposed to Israel—have been Iran's partners in the Palestinian occupied territories. Iran even provides limited support to the Taliban, an extreme Sunni group in Afghanistan with which it has been in conflict in the past, as will be discussed below. A common opposition to the regional status quo is also the main factor shaping Iran's close relationship with its only state ally in the Middle East, Syria, where the Assad regime is dominated by Alawites, a distant offshoot of Shi'i Islam, but also includes other minorities and some Sunnis.[8]

Iran pursues a range of objectives in choosing to support non-state actors. First, it seeks to gain access to geographic areas that it can use as launching pads to project its influence, to confront its main regional rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia, and to oppose the regional US presence. In particular, Iran has improved its deterrent capability by forging ties with groups that could act against the United States or its regional interests, or against Israel, in the event of a confrontation. A range of militant groups in Iraq, in particular, along with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian occupied territories, could retaliate following an attack on Iran by Israel or America; this possibility severely constrains the latters' margin of manoeuvre, and while it does not rule out an attack by either on Iran, it increases the costs of doing so.

Iran's ties to non-state actors in a country also allow it to position itself as an indispensable player with a say in major decisions. To this end, it often hedges its bets by developing ties to many actors, providing them with shifting combinations of political, military and financial support. It tries to identify future winners, supporting a range of small groups with the expectation that at least some of them will eventually emerge as important players. When Iran believes that a partner is distancing itself, it may support the formation of splinter groups, encouraging more like-minded factions to split from the main group and form their own movements. Such smaller new groups are more dependent on Iran for external support, and therefore more likely to act according to Iranian interests. When Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq became an increasingly difficult partner, for example, Iran started supporting breakaway factions from his movement. Two of them, Asa'ib Ahl ul-Haqq and Kata'ib Hezbollah, emerged as particularly important, both for Iran's ability to shape Iraqi politics and as key actors in their own right in Iraq. Both are smaller, and therefore more manageable, than the unwieldy Sadrist movement, and more dependent on Iran. By its support, Iran seeks to position itself as

of dissatisfaction, the common interest with Iran. That is why Iran is often an actual or potential spoiler, as progress would go against its interests.

7 On why Shi'ism is not the dominant factor driving Iran's partnerships, see Sam Razavi, 'Iran's Levantine ambitions', in Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi, eds, *Iranian foreign policy since 2001: alone in the world* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 120–39.

8 Mohsen Milani, 'Why Tehran won't abandon Assad(ism)', *Washington Quarterly* 36: 4, Fall 2013, pp. 79–93.

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the arbiter of the political process in the target country. This has been particularly evident in Iraq, where it has regularly performed a mediatory role in recent years.[9]

Iran also aims to generate pressure points which it can subsequently use—or at least ensure that others know it could use—to counter its rivals, especially the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia. There have been reports, for example, of small-scale Iranian support for the Taliban in Afghanistan.[10] This may seem counter-intuitive, as Tehran and the Taliban have long had a hostile relationship and almost went to war in 1998. Iran, moreover, has no desire to see the Taliban regain power in Kabul.[11] But one of its overarching foreign policy priorities is to counter US influence and increase the cost of the American presence in Afghanistan; and, because the Taliban are still powerful, Iran wants to keep channels of communication open and gain insights into their workings and intentions.[12]

Iran's strategy also aims to safeguard its access to transit points it uses to deliver material support to its partners. Syrian territory, in particular, plays a critical role in allowing Iran to send support to Hezbollah, first by plane to Syria and then overland to Lebanon. That is in part why the potential fall of Assad and his replacement by a hostile regime would significantly hinder Iran's ability to support Hezbollah.[13] Iran could perhaps try to shift to replenishing the Lebanese group by sea, but this would be very difficult, given the likelihood of maritime interdiction by Israeli or other international forces.

In other cases, Iran may be seeking not short-term benefits, which may indeed be limited or even absent, but the establishment of a minimal footprint which creates the option to ramp up its presence in the future. To some extent, this was Iran's approach to the Houthis prior to 2014: its very limited ties to the movement in previous years allowed it to increase its support at an opportune moment—albeit only from marginal to still low levels.

Finally, there are some partners which Iran wants to see grow organically. In many such cases—for example, those of Hezbollah in Lebanon or Asa'ib Ahl ul-Haqq in Iraq—Iran played an active role in supporting the establishment of what were initially small armed militias. In part thanks to Iran's assistance, Hezbollah in particular has steadily become an elite fighting force. At the same time, the Islamic Republic also supported such groups in diversifying their activities beyond the military sphere, helping them build political wings and elaborate networks to provide social services. Iran then encouraged them to join the political process and become fully fledged political actors. Their continued dependence on Iranian support thus provides Iran with opportunities to shape politics in their home countries.

[9] Mohammad Ali Shabani, *Making sense of Iran's Iraq policy*, CARPO Brief no. 1 (Bonn: Centre for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient, 30 Jan. 2015), http://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CARPO-Brief-1-Shabani-print-version.pdf.

[10] Margherita Stancati, 'Iran backs Taliban with cash and arms', *Wall Street Journal*, 11 June 2015.

[11] Javid Ahmad, 'The enemy of Iran's enemy in Afghanistan: Tehran's growing ties with the Taliban', *Foreign Affairs*, 21 June 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2015-06-21/enemy-irans-enemy-afghanistan?cid=nlc-fatoday-20150622&sp_mid=48933265&sp_rid=dGhvbWFzanVuZWF1QGhvdG1haWwuY29tS0.

[12] The growing Islamic State presence in Afghanistan could also be driving Iran and the Taliban to cooperate.

[13] Razavi, 'Iran's Levantine ambitions'.

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The rise of the Houthis

Central authority in contemporary Yemen has never been strong. The Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen), established in 1962 in the wake of the overthrow of the Zaydi imamate which had ruled parts of the area since 897, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), created following the departure of the British colonial power in 1967, were both weak states. The Republic of Yemen, born after unification in 1990, has never had a monopoly on the use of force on its territory.

Ali Abdullah Saleh, then an army major, became president of North Yemen in 1978 following the assassinations of his two predecessors. He led the country to unification in 1990 and ruled it until his forced resignation in 2012.[14] Saleh managed the country's affairs for 34 years by maintaining a precarious balance among a range of competing forces, including the military and the security apparatus, tribes, political parties and factions, clerics and businesspeople. By buying loyalty through patronage and ruling through a combination of co-optation, inclusion and coercion, Saleh built an 'administrative feudal system'[15] that evolved into a mix of 'kleptocracy and plutocracy'.[16]

Over the years, the authority of the central government has been opposed—more or less violently—by many groups, including separatists in the south and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the global movement's local franchise. One group, the Houthis, emerged in the country's north in the 1990s and has fought against the government on and off since 2004.[17] The Houthis adhere to the Zaydi branch of Shi'i Islam. The vast majority of Shi'i Muslims are known as Twelvers, as they recognize a line of twelve imams as the rightful successors to the Prophet Muhammad. Zaydis, however, are known as Fivers, or followers of the Fifth Imam.[18] Zaydism is, in many aspects of its doctrine and practice, closer to Sunni Islam than to other branches of Shi'i Islam. Located almost exclusively in north-west Yemen, Zaydis represent 30–35 per cent of the country's population.[19]

The Houthis' grievances were originally primarily local and political. The movement—now led by Abdul Malik al-Houthi, brother of the first leader, killed by Saleh's troops in 2004—initially sought an end to economic underdevelopment, political marginalization and discrimination in Zaydi areas. At this point the Houthis wanted a greater say in national affairs, greater recognition of Zaydi cultural and religious rights, and an end to proselytizing by Saudi-backed

[14] Laura Kasinof, 'Yemen gets new leader as struggle ends calmly', *New York Times*, 24 Feb. 2012.
[15] Paul Dresch, *A history of modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 164.
[16] Robert Burrowes and Catherine Kasper, 'The Salih regime and the need for a credible opposition', *Middle East Journal* 61: 2, Spring 2007, n. 8.
[17] Officially, their name is now Ansar Allah (supporters or partisans of God), though they are widely referred to as the Houthis.
[18] James King, 'Zaydis in a post-Zaydi Yemen: *'ulema* reactions to Zaydism's marginalization in the Republic of Yemen', *Shi'a Affairs Journal* 1: 1, Winter 2008, pp. 61–100.
[19] Cameron Glenn, 'Who are Yemen's Houthis?', *Iran Primer*, 29 April 2015, http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/apr/29/who-are-yemens-houthis.

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Wahhabi institutes in Sa'ada province, their northern stronghold.[20] The Houthis do not seek independence, but they do want more autonomy in areas where they are predominant. Even though some among them call for a return to the rule of the Zaydi Imam and initially criticized the Saleh regime for being pro-US and pro-Israel, their grievances were not primarily religious or international. Their objectives have expanded as their power has increased, but most of their original complaints still stand.[21]

Tension between the Houthis and the central government steadily grew in the 1990s, with war breaking out in 2004. Violence ebbed and flowed through six rounds of fighting until 2010. As the Houthis steadily grew in strength, they expanded their support base and became well armed, both through access to a large black market for weapons and by capturing equipment from the military. The brunt of the fighting for the government eventually fell on the First Armoured Division, led by Major-General Ali Mohsen. A kinsman of Saleh, he was for years the President's closest ally and his right-hand man in the military. But as tension between them grew in the 2000s—especially over the President's efforts to position his son to succeed him—Saleh sent Ali Mohsen to fight the Houthis, in accordance with his usual strategy of setting his rivals against one another to weaken them.

Though it began as a strictly Yemeni affair, the conflict witnessed a steady increase in the involvement of regional powers. After fighting started in 2004, Saleh regularly accused the Houthis of being Iranian proxies, presumably to attract American and Saudi support. At the time, however, these accusations remained unsubstantiated. In November 2009, Saudi Arabia intervened militarily for the first time, alarmed at instability on its southern flank and at the prospect—in its perception—of an Iran-backed movement taking root in northern Yemen. Riyadh attacked Houthi positions with artillery fire and fighter aircraft and imposed a naval blockade on the north-western coast of Yemen to prevent weapons from reaching the Houthis.

By 2011, Saleh's system of governance was under severe strain. Tension had been mounting for years within the elite, especially between Saleh and Ali Mohsen but also between Saleh and Islah, a party regrouping Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood, tribal elements and business leaders. Islah had initially participated in the governance of unified Yemen after 1990 in an alliance with Saleh, but friction grew in the 2000s. At the same time, actors outside the patronage networks centred on Saleh—notably the Houthis, who were steadily strengthening their position in the north—were also growing increasingly frustrated. It was in this volatile context that popular protests spreading across the Arab world reached Yemen in early 2011, with millions taking to the streets to denounce corruption, economic stagnation and Saleh's suffocating rule. Over the course of that year, many of Saleh's allies in the military and the security services, the bureaucracy and among tribes—notably Ali Mohsen and most of Islah—defected to the opposition.

[20] Shelagh Weir, *A clash of fundamentalisms: Wahhabism in Yemen*, Middle East Report no. 204 (Washington DC: Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), 1997).
[21] International Crisis Group, *Yemen: defusing the Saada time bomb*, Middle East Report no. 86 (Brussels: Belgium, ICG, 2009).

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In November 2011, Saleh agreed to leave the presidency in a deal brokered by Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (the GCC, incorporating, alongside Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) and supported by the United States. Saleh, however, did not go into exile nor did he abandon his ambitions. The deal instead guaranteed his immunity from prosecution for any action he committed while in power and allowed him to remain as head of his political party, the General People's Congress (GPC). He also retained the loyalty of many in the military, the security services and the bureaucracy, and in tribal militias. The transition agreement called for Abd Rabbu Mansour al-Hadi, the incumbent Vice-President, to take over as president in February 2012. It also called for the establishment of a national dialogue to lay the groundwork for a new constitution of a democratic and federal state.

The Houthis initially took an active role in the 2011 uprising, participating in the street protests and coordinating with other opposition groups. They then engaged in the national dialogue, often constructively, but remained reluctant to commit themselves fully to the exercise, suspicious of the willingness of the country's Sana'a-based elite to undertake genuine reforms. At the same time, the Houthis took advantage of the growing weakness of the central state after 2011 to consolidate their own power and better organize their military and political wings.

Two aspects of the transition process were particularly problematic for the Houthis. First, it did not fundamentally reform governance but merely perpetuated the pre-2011 system: while redistributing positions, it failed to dismantle longstanding patronage structures and to integrate previously marginalized actors.[22] A more specific point of contention for the Houthis was the proposal to transform the country into a federation of six regions. They agreed with the concept of federalism, which they hoped would grant them more autonomy in managing their own affairs; however, they vigorously opposed the six-region proposal, seeing it (correctly) as a blatant attempt to weaken them by dividing areas under their control between separate regions.[23]

Taking advantage of the government's paralysis and unpopularity, the Houthis seized Sana'a in September 2014.[24] As they continued steadily to extend their influence southwards, Hadi resigned on 22 January 2015. After escaping from Houthi-imposed house arrest, he fled on 21 February to the country's southern commercial hub, Aden, which he declared as the temporary capital and from where he withdrew his resignation. The Houthis, however, continued their advance, driving Hadi to flee in March to Saudi Arabia, and soon thereafter seized most of Aden.[25]

[22] Thomas Juneau, 'Yemen and the Arab Spring', in Mehran Kamrava, ed., *Beyond the Arab Spring: the evolution of the ruling bargain in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 373–96.

[23] Peter Salisbury, *Federalism, conflict, and fragmentation in Yemen* (London: Saferworld, Oct. 2015), http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/1007-federalism-conflict-and-fragmentation-in-yemen.

[24] April Longley Alley, 'Yemen's Houthi takeover', Middle East Institute, 22 Dec. 2014, http://www.mei.edu/content/article/yemens-houthi-takeover.

[25] 'Yemen crisis: President Hadi flees as Houthi rebels advance', BBC News, 25 March 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32048604.

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As the Houthis expanded the areas under their full or partial control, it became increasingly clear that their power grab had been made possible only by their alliance with ex-President Saleh, their former enemy. Military units still loyal to Saleh, in particular, allowed the Houthis to enter Sana'a in September 2014 largely unopposed. Countering this Houthi–Saleh bloc is an even more heterogeneous group comprised of Hadi loyalists, tribes opposed to the Houthis, southern militias committed to autonomy or independence, and AQAP. Importantly, most of those fighting in this bloc—especially the southern militias—feel little loyalty and much suspicion towards Hadi.

On 25 March 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of a coalition of ten mostly Arab states to launch air strikes with the stated objectives of stopping and rolling back the Houthis and reinstating Hadi.[26] The United States backed the coalition politically—albeit cautiously—and provided it with logistical and intelligence support. The following three months witnessed the emergence of a stalemate, as the Houthis for the most part stopped advancing but were not rolled back, even though air strikes destroyed a significant proportion of their heavy equipment. The tide turned in July and August, in large part because of growing support for pro-Hadi forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including through the deployment of several thousand Saudi and Emirati troops, and hundreds from other coalition partners.[27] Pro-Hadi forces took back Aden in July, and started pushing north. Their progress was slow, however, in the face of spirited resistance from the Houthi–Saleh bloc. The coalition managed to expel Houthi–Saleh forces from five southern governorates, but failed to take Taiz, south-central Yemen's main city. The Houthis were overstretched in the deep south, making their defeat in those areas probably inevitable. They are unlikely to be entirely defeated, however, as they are deeply entrenched in the centre and, even more, in the north-west. As a result, by February 2016 the war had reached a stalemate, with neither side strong enough to defeat the other decisively. There was, moreover, growing insecurity in southern areas occupied by the pro-Hadi coalition, with both AQAP and Islamic State's Yemen branch seizing the opportunity to expand their presence in the country.[28] The war had already killed more than 6,000 people, injured more than 30,000 and exacerbated the country's humanitarian crisis, with 80 per cent of the population in need of assistance.[29]

It is in this context that accusations of Iranian support for the Houthis have intensified. Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies, in particular, regularly accuse the

[26] Other participants in the campaign initially included Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates. Interestingly, Oman was the only GCC country to refuse to join the coalition. In doing so, Oman was probably seeking to position itself as a mediator, both within Yemen and regionally between Iran and Saudi Arabia. See Roby Barrett, 'Oman's balancing act in the Yemen conflict', Middle East Institute, 17 June 2015, http://www.mei.edu/content/at/oman%E2%80%99s-balancing-act-yemen-conflict.

[27] Hugh Naylor, 'Yemen is turning into Saudi Arabia's Vietnam', *Washington Post*, 13 Nov. 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-arabia-cant-find-its-way-out-of-yemens-messy-war/2015/11/12/4d70ce26-84e1-11e5-8bd2-680fff868306_story.html.

[28] Adam Baron, 'Power vacuum in Aden will fuel more unrest', European Council on Foreign Relations, 7 Dec. 2015, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_power_vacuum_in_aden_will_fuel_more_unrest5045.

[29] 'The three-way war in Yemen is not going well', *The Economist*, 12 Dec. 2015.

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Houthis of being Iranian proxies and view their rise largely through the prism of Saudi rivalry with the Islamic Republic.[30] Adel al-Jubeir, for example, at that time Saudi ambassador to the United States and now the country's foreign minister, said in March 2015 that his government saw Iran 'playing a large role in supporting the Houthis'.[31] Some American policy-makers make similar claims. Senator John McCain claimed after Hadi's forced resignation in January 2015 that the Iranians 'are on the march', accusing the Obama administration of allowing Iran to take over the Middle East.[32] The same accusation is frequently voiced in the US media; one article in *Foreign Policy* online, for example, argued that the Houthi take-over of Sana'a in September 2014 represented 'a huge victory for Iran'.[33] In Yemen, Hadi has repeatedly accused the Houthis of being 'puppets of the Iranian government'. He has even attributed the chaos in Yemen to 'Iran's hunger for power and its ambition to control the entire region'.[34] These accusations have been given fresh impetus by the oft-repeated claim by an obscure Iranian parliamentarian, Alireza Zakani, that Sana'a has become the fourth Arab capital, after Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus, to fall under Iran's sway.[35]

Iran's support for the Houthis

There has been, over past decades and indeed centuries, very limited contact between Iran and Zaydis in northern Yemen. For the most part, Iran stayed out of the 1962–7 Yemeni civil war, providing only limited support to the recently overthrown and pro-Saudi Zaydi imam, who was struggling against republican forces backed by Egypt. After the republican side's victory in the war, the new Yemen Arab Republic maintained tense and minimal relations with monarchical Iran. After the Iranian Revolution of 1978–9, small numbers of Zaydis started travelling to Iran to study Shi'a Islam in Qom. Among them was the current leader of the Houthis, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, along with his brother Hussein, the late founder of the movement. According to some reports, their sojourn in Iran had some effect in shaping their outlook on politics.[36] Yet despite these occasional contacts, until recently Yemen was simply not on the Islamic Republic's list of foreign policy priorities, and there is no evidence that Iran provided the Houthis with any support prior to the outbreak of war in 2004. It was only after this point that Iran and the Houthis engaged in more sustained contacts, with Tehran eventually starting to

[30] Danya Greenfield and Owen Daniels, 'Reading Saudi tea leaves in Yemen', Atlantic Council, 10 Dec. 2014, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/reading-saudi-tea-leaves-in-yemen.

[31] Quoted in Warren Strobell and Mark Hosenball, 'Elite Iranian guards training Yemen's Houthis: US officials', Reuters, 27 March 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/27/us-yemen-security-houthis-iran-idUSKBN0MN2MI20150327.

[32] 'Face the nation', CBS News, 25 Jan. 2015, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/face-the-nation-transcripts-january-25-2015-mcdonough-mccain-feinstein/.

[33] Amal Mudallali, 'The Iranian sphere of influence expands into Yemen', *Foreign Policy*, 8 Oct. 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/08/the-iranian-sphere-of-influence-expands-into-yemen/.

[34] Hadi has repeated this claim on many occasions; most visibly, see 'Yemen's President: the Houthis must be stopped', *New York Times*, 12 April 2015.

[35] John Xenakis, 'Iran brags that Sana'a is the fourth Arab capital they control', *National Yemen*, 27 Sept. 2014, http://nationalyemen.com/2014/09/27/iran-brags-that-sanaa-is-the-fourth-arab-capital-they-control/.

[36] Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, 'Diary in Sanaa', *London Review of Books* 37: 10, May 2015, pp. 42–3.

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provide them with very limited amounts of military, financial and political support.[37] As will be explained below, while the level of Iranian assistance further increased after 2014, there is still no indication that it has reached significant levels.

For many years, former President Saleh had regularly accused Tehran of supporting the Houthis.[38] Yet Saleh never provided definitive proof in support of his claims. In fact, cables revealed by Wikileaks suggest that the American Embassy in Sana'a was initially sceptical about these accusations. One leaked memo from 2009, for example, argues that the Yemeni government 'has yet to produce evidence that Iranians were smuggling arms to the Houthis'.[39] According to another memo, 'most analysts report that the Houthis obtain their weapons from the Yemeni black market and even from the ROYG [Republic of Yemen government] military itself' by buying them from corrupt commanders and soldiers; it added that 'the military covers up its failures by saying the weapons come from Iran'.[40] US officials, in fact, were at the time more concerned that growing American military assistance destined for the fight against AQAP was being diverted by Saleh for his own struggle against the Houthis.[41]

According to an April 2015 report to the UN Security Council's Iran Sanctions Committee, Iran started shipping small amounts of weapons to the Houthis in 2009 (though the report left open the possibility that there might have been even more limited support before). It identified a pattern of arms shipments by sea and detailed seven possible incidents of such deliveries. In one case, in April 2009, an Iranian vessel transferred crates of weapons to Yemeni boats in international waters; in another, in February 2011, an Iranian fishing vessel was seized by Yemeni authorities and found to be carrying 900 Iranian-made anti-tank and anti-helicopter rockets.[42]

It appears that Iran's support for the Houthis increased after 2011.[43] American officials, hitherto dismissive of Yemeni accusations of Iranian support for the Houthis, started to acknowledge that Iran was probably providing very limited assistance, including small numbers of automatic rifles and grenade launchers, bomb-making material and several million dollars in cash.[44] Iran's Arabic-language television channel, Al-Alam, also started broadcasting a daily programme on Yemen, which gained some popularity in the country because of its criticism of Saleh and of American policies. If these reports are accurate, they are indicative of

[37] Andrew Terrill, 'Iranian involvement in Yemen', *Orbis* 58: 3, Summer 2014, pp. 429–40.
[38] 'Sa'ada conflict: a proxy war of words between Iran, Saudi Arabia', US Embassy in Sana'a cable, 2 Sept. 2009, released by Wikileaks.
[39] 'Saudi strikes in Yemen: an invitation to Iran', US Embassy in Sana'a cable, 16 Nov. 2009, released by Wikileaks.
[40] 'Who are the Houthis, part two: how are they fighting?', US Embassy in Sana'a cable, 9 Dec. 2009, released by Wikileaks.
[41] Juliane von Mittelstaedt, 'Operation Scorched Earth: a US hand in Yemen's civil war', *Der Spiegel*, 3 Dec. 2010, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/operation-scorched-earth-a-us-hand-in-yemen-s-civil-war-a-732734.html.
[42] Carole Landry, 'Iran arming Yemen's Houthi rebels since 2009: UN report', *Middle East Eye*, 1 May 2015, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-arming-yemens-huthi-rebels-2009-un-report-1170499355.
[43] Terrill, 'Iranian involvement in Yemen'.
[44] Eric Schmitt and Robert Worth, 'With arms for Yemen rebels, Iran seeks wider Mideast role', *New York Times*, 15 March 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html.

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an Iranian desire to develop its partnership with the Houthis. Support on this scale, however, was far too limited to make an impact on the internal balance of forces in Yemen. From Tehran's perspective, in line with its usual approach to providing support to non-state actors, this was not an effort to gain short-term influence. It was, rather, an indication of an intention to open channels of communication and build trust, creating the opportunity to upgrade relations in the future.

The interception in January 2013 of the *Jihan I*, an Iranian vessel, in Yemeni territorial waters in a joint operation by the US Navy and the Yemeni coastguard provided further indication of the emerging relationship between Iran and the Houthis. A report by a UN panel of experts concluded, albeit with some doubts, that the weapons on board came from Iran and were destined for the Houthis. According to the panel, the 'seized items consisted of ammunition, weapons and other military and non-military items and materials, including man-portable air defence systems, 122 mm rockets, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, C-4 plastic explosive blocks and electrical equipment that can be used to manufacture improvised explosive devices'. Another ship carrying a similar load was intercepted in March 2013.[45]

The chain of events starting in September 2014 with the Houthi take-over of Sana'a apparently led Iran to raise its support further. There have been numerous media reports since mid-2014, in particular, quoting US and western officials recognizing an increased level of Iranian assistance to the Houthis. Media reports have, for example, quoted US intelligence officials stating that units from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were 'training and equipping' Houthi troops, though insisting that such support remained limited and was not decisive.[46] According to these reports, IRGC advisers in Yemen may amount to dozens or hundreds (though the higher end of the range seems excessive).[47] In addition, Houthi fighters have reportedly travelled to Iran and Lebanon for training, with Hezbollah playing a key facilitation role.[48]

There have also been reports of denser patterns of shipping activity between Iran and Yemen since the first months of 2015. A *Financial Times* article, in particular, claimed that at least four large cargo ships made 'a series of highly unusual and undeclared trips between Iran and Yemeni ports controlled by the Houthis'. During their voyages between Bandar Abbas in Iran and Hodeida, a Yemeni port on the Red Sea, the ships 'changed their ensigns, turned off their tracking devices at key points, registered false information in international shipping logs and met unidentified crafts mid-ocean'.[49]

Around this time Iran also began to be more open about its role in Yemen. President Hassan Rouhani, for example, described the Houthi take-over of Sana'a

[45] UN sanctions committee panel of experts report, 5 June 2013, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2013/331.

[46] Strobell and Hosenball, 'Elite Iranian guards training Yemen's Houthis'.

[47] Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, 'Confirmed: Iran's foreign military arm is backing Yemeni rebels who took control of the country', Reuters, 15 Dec. 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/r-iranian-support-seen-crucial-for-yemens-houthis-2014-12?IR=T.

[48] Strobell and Hosenball, 'Elite Iranian guards training Yemen's Houthis'.

[49] Sam Jones and Simeon Kerr, 'Mystery deepens over Iranian cargo ships en route to Yemen', *Financial Times*, 22 May 2015, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/120e161c-ff1d-11e4-8dd4-00144feabdc0.html.

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in 2014 as a 'brilliant and resounding victory', a comment an Iranian official would have been unlikely to make in the past.[50] Then, in February 2015, Iran's deputy Foreign Minister publicly pledged political support for the Houthis and for Yemeni unity, and described the Houthis as having 'taken major steps to restore domestic peace and stability'.[51] Soon after, in March, a delegation of Houthi officials returning from Tehran announced that Iran had promised to provide Yemen with a package of economic support, including help to expand Yemeni ports and build power plants, and one year's worth of oil supplies.[52] Iran and the Houthis also announced in March 2015 the establishment of two daily flights between Tehran and Sana'a.[53] Yet soon thereafter the difficulty of actually implementing pledges of cooperation was vividly illustrated when Sana'a airport was shut down because of the war, preventing the flights from being introduced. Iran has, however, consistently denied providing the Houthis with weapons. On 31 March 2015, for example, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Marziyeh Afkham said that 'the claims about the dispatch of weapons from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Yemen are completely fabricated and sheer lies'.[54]

As this overview of Iran's ties to the Houthis shows, there is limited hard evidence that Tehran has provided them with material support. Nevertheless, the accumulation of anecdotal reports and circumstantial evidence, in combination with the work of the UN panel of experts, does support the assessment that Iran started providing the Houthis with very limited amounts of military and financial support some time in 2009 and has probably increased this assistance in recent years, especially after 2014. Yet whatever the precise nature of Iran's budding relationship with the Houthis, by all indications its support remains limited and unlikely to buy Iran more than marginal influence. There is no evidence, in particular, suggesting that the Houthis have become dependent on Iranian assistance, or in any way fallen under Tehran's authority.[55]

Why Iran provides only limited support for the Houthis

There are important factors that constrain Iran's ability to increase its involvement in Yemen and explain why its support for the Houthis remains relatively low, even though it has increased steadily over the years, especially since mid-2014. First, high levels of instability in Yemen imply that a major commitment of resources

[50] 'Iranian President: recent events in Yemen are part of the brilliant and resounding victory', *Aden Al-Ghad* (in Arabic), 25 Sept. 2014, http://adenghad.net/news/124484/#.VZ6SA_3bKM-.

[51] 'Iran reiterates support for restoration of political tranquility to Yemen', *Fars News*, 23 Feb. 2015, http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13931204000524.

[52] 'Houthis say they have secured aid package from Iran', Al Jazeera, 14 March 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/houthis-secured-aid-package-iran-150314123957118.html.

[53] 'First Iran flight lands in Shiite-held Yemen capital', Al Arabiya, 1 March 2015, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/01/First-Iran-flight-lands-in-Shiite-held-Yemen-capital-.html.

[54] 'Iran brushes off claims of arms flow to Yemen', Press TV, 31 March 2015, http://217.218.67.231/Detail/2015/03/31/404064/Iran-rejects-claims-of-arms-flow-to-Yemen.

[55] See e.g. Gregory Viscusi, Patrick Donahue and John Walcott, 'Saudi claims on Iran's role in Yemen face skepticism in West', Bloomberg, 16 April 2015, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-04-16/u-s-europe-back-saudis-in-yemen-while-skeptical-of-iran-role.

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would be required for Iran to gain the ability to shape events more than marginally. Second, Iran's interests in Yemen are limited: the country is not a priority for the Islamic Republic in the same way that Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are. Third, for Iran to become strongly involved in Yemen would raise a high risk of overstretch, given its investments elsewhere, especially in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Finally, Iran recognizes that Yemen is a major priority for Saudi Arabia; in consequence, stronger and more overt Iranian involvement would risk an uncontrolled escalation of tensions with Riyadh, an outcome Tehran wants to avoid. In sum, the costs of greater involvement would most likely outweigh the limited benefits.

Despite these constraints, Tehran has come to assess that a limited investment could bring minor but interesting returns. This has been enabled by key developments. First, increasing disorder in Yemen has led to a greater opening for involvement by external actors, including Iran. Second, the growing dissatisfaction of the Houthis with the political order in Yemen has made them an increasingly attractive partner for the Islamic Republic. The Houthis believe that the Sana'a-based elite has long excluded them and has no interest in giving them a greater say in the state's affairs. In their view, the 2011 transition agreement that led to Hadi's accession to the presidency merely reshuffled the balance of power among the elite, without offering genuine prospects of integration for marginalized actors such as themselves. Furthermore, this domestic order is backed by Saudi Arabia and the United States, Iran's main rivals.

It is these common anti-status quo interests that are bringing the Houthis and Iran together, not a shared Shi'i faith. Many, including in the western media, label the Houthis as 'Shi'i', implicitly or explicitly arguing that this explains their partnership with Iran.[56] This is not, in a narrow sense, inaccurate, but it is misleading. As mentioned above, their Shi'i commonality is limited as the Houthis are not Twelver Shi'is but Zaydis. The Zaydis, moreover, are not monolithically united behind the Houthis.[57] During the six rounds of fighting between 2004 and 2010, for example, some Zaydi tribal militias fought alongside the government against the Houthis, while many government officials and troops—including Saleh—are Zaydi. Similarly, when the Houthis approached Sana'a in 2014, they faced resistance from some Zaydi tribes.

The Yemeni conflict is therefore first and foremost about access to power and the spoils of conflict. It is at its root a civil war, driven by local competition for power, and not a regional, sectarian or proxy war.[58] The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry has superimposed itself over this domestic conflict and has inflamed it, but it does not drive it.[59] Iran opposes the existing order in the Middle East, dominated by the United States and its regional partners. This pushes it towards alignment with the

[56] See e.g. Ian Black, 'Saudis strike in response to Houthi Scud attack as forgotten war rages on', *Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/15/saudi-arabia-strike-response-houthi-scud-attack-forgotten-war.

[57] Charles Schmitz, 'Yemen's Ansar Allah: causes and effects of its pursuit of power', Middle East Institute, 14 Feb. 2015, http://www.mei.edu/content/at/yemens-ansar-allah-causes-and-effects-its-pursuit-power.

[58] For a similar analysis, see Adam Baron, 'Unraveling Yemen's civil war', *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 5 Nov. 2015.

[59] James Brandon and Nicholas Heras, 'Saudi Arabia's Yemen intervention: a high-risk gamble?', *Terrorism Monitor* 13: 20, 2 Oct. 2015.

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Houthis, who also oppose the status quo. At the same time, one rationale behind the Saudi campaign has been to protect the post-2011 status quo and the elites that dominated it. Saudi interests were threatened by the rise of the Houthis, who defeated Saudi allies, notably Islah and Ali Mohsen. The Saudi intervention can therefore be seen through the prism of Riyadh's efforts to restore the balance of power in Yemen in favour of the status quo forces with which it is aligned.

It is also useful to view the Houthi–Saleh alliance through the prism of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Since 2012 the two parties have found common ground, despite their past animosity. Both now oppose the post-2012 domestic order, initially dominated by the Saudi-backed Islah party and Ali Mohsen. Saleh has been marginalized; he wants to reclaim his former place at the top of the country's political structure and position his son as the next president. He also holds a deep grudge against Islah and Ali Mohsen, viewing them as responsible for his losing the presidency. A common opposition to Ali Mohsen and Islah—with which the Houthis have a hostile relationship—has thus brought the Houthis and Saleh together since 2014. At the same time, Islah has been over the decades one of the main vehicles for Saudi influence in Yemen. There is, in sum, a convergence of interest between the Houthis, Saleh and Iran in opposing, directly or indirectly, the Islah–Ali Mohsen–Saudi Arabia axis.

It would be inaccurate to conclude that after years of being accused of supporting the Houthis, Tehran was dragged, against its will, into backing a new partner in Yemen. A multitude of drivers steadily pushed Iran to increase its support to the Houthis, albeit only to modest levels. Nevertheless, a dynamic of self-fulfilling prophecy can be included as one of the factors explaining the evolving relationship between Iran and the Houthis. As the then American Ambassador to Yemen wrote in 2009: 'We can think of few ways to more effectively encourage Iranian meddling in the Houthi rebellion than to have all of Yemen's Sunni neighbours line up to finance and outfit' Saleh's most recent campaign against the Houthis.[60] This did contribute to pushing the Houthis to seek external support—which they originally neither needed nor sought—and to obtain it from the only feasible source, Iran.

The Saudi-led strikes launched in March 2015 intensified these pre-existing dynamics. Paradoxically, one of Riyadh's objectives was to diminish Tehran's influence in Yemen, but the intervention is instead resulting in a growing Iranian presence. Saudi Arabia's fears of growing Iranian regional influence are widely exaggerated: Iran is not a rising regional hegemon, but rather a middle-sized regional power with limited sway in Yemen.[61] Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia's efforts to push back Iranian influence are inviting counter-responses from Tehran. External attack is indeed pushing the Houthis to seek Iranian support: as a relatively small non-state actor attacked by a regional power with deep pockets and advanced weaponry, it is unsurprising that the Houthis should seek additional external assistance; and only Iran is willing and able to provide some.

[60] 'Saudi strikes in Yemen: an invitation to Iran', US Embassy in Sana'a cable, 16 Nov. 2009, released by Wikileaks.
[61] Thomas Juneau, *Iran's failed foreign policy: dealing from a position of weakness*, Middle East Institute policy paper 2015-1, April 2015, http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Juneau%20Iran.pdf.

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What is Iran achieving?

Iran's limited support for the Houthis has brought limited gains in terms of influence on the ground. Tehran has made a small investment in Yemen, in other words, which has allowed it to reap no more than a small return.

Iran has not acquired the ability to shape events in Yemen. The conclusion that *because* Iran has increased its support for the Houthis, then *necessarily* Houthi successes must be attributable to Tehran's enhanced backing would be erroneous; there is a correlation, but not a causal link. First, Iran's support has gone from nothing to modest. There is no indication that Iran's assistance has had more than a marginal impact on the internal balance of forces in Yemen; it is far from a game-changer. Nor is there any evidence that Iran has developed any measure of command and control over the Houthis.[62] There are even indications that it does *not* have influence over important Houthi decisions: for example, according to media reports, Iran encouraged the Houthis earlier in 2014 not to seize Sana'a, but its advice was ignored.[63] This assessment is supported by frequent statements by the Obama administration emphasizing its view 'that Iran does not exercise command and control over the Houthis'.[64]

It is also important to distinguish between Tehran's support for the Houthis and what has been a favourable turn of events for Iran. The marginalization of pro-Saudi actors in Yemen—especially Ali Mohsen and Islah—is a positive development from Tehran's point of view. In the regional balance of power, losses for Saudi Arabia represent gains for Iran, as Tehran benefits from Riyadh's being bogged down in a difficult and costly conflict while insecurity spreads in its soft underbelly. Also, Syria and Iraq represent far greater preoccupations for Iran, and so seeing Saudi Arabia's attention pulled away from those two countries and towards Yemen, even if only partly, represents a modest gain.

Even though these favourable events in Yemen are not of its making, it is normal that Iran should seek to entrench and consolidate new trends that have led to a decrease in the influence of its Saudi rival. In this sense, Iran's support for the Houthis is more reactive than proactive. That is, as it saw a rival of Saudi Arabia, the Houthis, rise and Riyadh experiencing difficulties, Iran, to some extent, bandwagoned on Houthi successes. It did not cause them, but decided to play its part to entrench them.

It is also essential to situate Iran's support for the Houthis in the broader context of its regional policy. Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the nuclear issue and relations with the United States are much more important for Iran; in those areas, it is willing to invest significant resources and to tolerate a higher level of risk. But Iran realizes that, by contrast, the situation in Yemen represents a major priority for Saudi Arabia. By leading a broad coalition to confront the Houthis, Saudi

[62] William Rugh, 'Problems in Yemen, domestic and foreign', *Middle East Policy* 22: 4, Winter 2015, p. 149.
[63] Ali Watkins, Ryan Grim and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, 'Iran warned Houthis against Yemen takeover', *Huffington Post*, 20 April 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen_n_7101456.html?utm_hp_ref=tw.
[64] The quotation is from Bernadette Meehan, spokeswoman for the National Security Council, in Watkins et al., 'Iran warned Houthis'.

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Arabia wants to demonstrate—to the region as a whole, to the United States, and specifically to Iran—that it is the dominant power on the Arabian peninsula. Riyadh wants to send the message to Iran that under King Salman, who acceded to the throne in early 2015, it intends to play an active role in managing regional security.[65] For Iran to gain significant influence in Yemen and for the Houthis to become more responsive to its requests, the Islamic Republic would need to inject massive resources; it has neither the ambition nor the will to do so. In sum, so far as the Saudi Arabia–Iran rivalry is concerned, the balance of interests in Yemen is heavily skewed in favour of Riyadh.

Iran's involvement in Yemen, moreover, pales in comparison to Saudi Arabia's. Whatever the precise amount of support Iran has given the Houthis, it represents a fraction of what Saudi Arabia has provided, over the years, to its preferred factions, whether in the government, the armed forces, the bureaucracy, the security services or non-state entities such as Wahhabi institutions and tribal militias. Saudi Arabia more recently also reportedly began funding tribal militias opposed to the Houthis, notably in central Ma'rib Province.[66] More broadly, Saudi financial support—to the tune of at least $4 billion since 2012—has been essential to keep Yemen's economy afloat after the instability caused by the 2011 uprising.[67] Remittances from Yemenis working in Saudi Arabia also play a major role in Yemen's economy: in recent years, one million Yemenis have sent back about $4 billion in annual remittances.[68]

The provision of aid on this scale is normal: Yemen is Saudi Arabia's soft underbelly, and instability on this southern flank represents an important threat to Saudi security. This is far from the case for Iran. In sum, what happens in Yemen concerns Saudi Arabia's vital interests, but not Iran's; for Iran, Yemen represents opportunities, not threats. The Houthis are as a result much less dependent on Iranian support than pro-Saudi factions, including Hadi and his allies, are on Saudi support. Without Iranian assistance, the Houthis would remain a dominant actor; without Saudi support, Hadi would be significantly weaker.

Concluding remarks

Iran has limited interests in Yemen, its presence has a marginal impact on the domestic balance of power, and its support is puny compared to the resources Saudi Arabia has poured into the country. Yemen is, quite simply, much less of a priority for Iran than it is for Saudi Arabia. Tehran understands that its interests are limited and that enhanced investment would be unlikely to generate important gains, and could on the contrary lead to important losses. In this context, Tehran's

[65] David Ottaway, *Saudi Arabia's Yemeni quagmire* (Washington DC: Wilson Center, 15 Dec. 2015), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/saudi-arabias-yemeni-quagmire.

[66] Adam Baron, 'Civil war in Yemen: imminent and avoidable', European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2015, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/civil_war_in_yemen_imminent_and_avoidable31144.

[67] 'Yemen faces economic crisis as Saudi mulls pulling the plug', IRIN, 1 Dec. 2014, http://www.irinnews.org/report/100901/yemen-faces-economic-crisis-as-saudi-mulls-pulling-plug.

[68] Mohammed Alyahya, 'Why did Saudi Arabia intervene in Yemen?', *Al-Monitor*, 3 June 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/yemen-saudi-arabia-iran-houthis-support-military.html.

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influence in Yemen is limited, and heavily constrained; any modest support it provides the Houthis is far from a game-changer, while the Houthis are neither a proxy nor a pawn of Tehran.

Looking ahead, it will remain highly unlikely that Iran will emerge as an important player in Yemeni affairs. Iran's fundamental interests are relatively stable, and the constraints on its ability to project power in Yemen are unlikely to be lifted. Tehran saw with the rise of the Houthis an opportunity to gain some leverage in Yemen at relatively low cost. It is and will remain unwilling to invest much larger amounts of resources. There is, as a result, only a limited potential space for Iran to penetrate Yemen further in the years ahead.

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