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OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS: AN ANALYSIS OF IRANIAN ACTIONS IN YEMEN

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Exercise Solo Flight

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran has both rhetorically and practically countered Western and Saudi Arabian influence in the broader Middle East. It has forged an identity as the protector of the Shia faith. This has shaped its foreign policy and amplified regional discord. In spite of this significant opposition, Iran has substantially increased its regional influence in the past two decades. On the surface, the expansion of its regional clout since 2003 is puzzling; the Western world and much of the Sunni Middle East are aligned against it and have spent vast sums of funds to pursue their respective regional agendas. Recently, Iran's activities outside of its borders have raised the ire of its principal international foes; The United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Though the contentious issues among these states vary, all cite Iranian meddling as a significant regional concern.

Iran's foreign ventures have been carefully calculated; precise and limited enough to avoid outright war with any principal adversary since the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. Remarkably, Iran has not initiated any of the events which have precipitated its regional rise; rather, it have shrewdly seized several opportunities afforded to them through failing states or the foreign intervention of one of its adversaries. The opportunities provided by the conflict in Yemen have been brought about by both a failing state, the Arab Spring and the intervention of the Saudi led coalition in 2014.

Understanding the shadowy nature of Iranian involvement in Yemen is particularly difficult, as little open source evidence exists to determine the extent of Iranian military support.

Thus, this paper will ground itself in understanding the historical methods used by the Islamic Republic to export the revolution, particularly since the U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 2003. This will enable a better understanding of how the Islamic Republic operates in the ‘grey zone’ to avoid the ‘redlines’ of adversaries and furthers its foreign policy objectives in Yemen. This paper will argue that despite significant international condemnation, Iran’s actions in Yemen have been relatively modest, yet successful. It will argue that it has succeeded in distracting its regional rivals through the targeted provision of economic, cultural and military support, while attracting ethnically Shia allies to their sphere of influence.

To gain any mature understanding of the Iran’s actions in Yemen it is essential to recognise two important factors: the fragile nature of the Yemeni state and the Saudi-Iranian ‘cold-war.’ This paper will begin by briefly examining the history of Saudi and Iranian relations with Yemen as a means to better understand the current conflict. It will then be essential to briefly discuss the history and nature of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as this is critical in shaping the views of regional power-brokers and drives its actions in Yemen. It will then explore how Iran has successfully distracted Saudi-Arabia and enhanced its credibility amongst the Shia of Yemen.

To foster a better understanding and define the terms that will be leveraged throughout this paper, it is essential to examine the term “grey zone.” While the recent trend of describing “the area of ambiguity that sits uncomfortably between peace and war” as a “grey zone” has gained prominence in recent years, the tactic that it describes is not new.¹ Despite its

¹ Colin P. Clark, “Counteracting Iran's Gray Zone Strategy in Syria,” *RAND Blog*, 26 January 2018. Retrieved on 25 April 2017. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/01/counteracting-irans-gray-zone-strategy-in-syria.html>

prominence, the term “grey zone” itself has not received widespread study.² In an examination on the subject, Dr. Van Jackson a senior fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies, concluded that the “broadest and most consistent use of the term seems to describe what amounts to a realpolitik state of competition short of war (between states).”³ This paper will adopt this definition but also leverage the concept of “redline avoidance” advanced by Jackson in the same study. On “redline avoidance” Jackson wrote:

The most obvious way to pursue an advantage while avoiding war is to avoid challenging any commitment a defender has defined as *casus belli*... this means engaging in only those revisionist actions that sidestep defender redlines, the latter term understood as a commitment threshold for punishment.

Both concepts are useful tools when examining Iranian actions in Yemen and the broader Middle East.

YEMEN: THE STATE DESCENDS AND THE HOTHIS RISE

Though the Arab Spring was seen as a new beginning for many in the Middle East, for Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh it was essentially the last straw. Saleh had been at the helm of the state since unification in 1990. His rule was characterized by civil war, ethnic strife and infighting; he left a legacy of chaos and disorder that made Yemen the poorest country in the Middle East by a significant margin.⁴ Saleh angered both Iran and Saudi Arabia when he backed

² Van Jackson, “Tactics of Strategic Competition: Gray Zones, Redlines, and Conflict before War,” *Naval War College Review*, Summer 2017, Vol. 70, No. 3, pp 39-61, 40

³ Van Jackson, 40.

⁴ “Key Facts About the War in Yemen,” *Al Jazeera*, 25 March 2018. Retrieved on 26 April 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/key-facts-war-yemen-160607112342462.html>

Saddam Hussein in his invasion of Kuwait in 1990.⁵ In the years since the millennium however, he reconciled with Saudi Arabia and retained a cordial relationship with Iran, pursuing a foreign policy that “consisted of mobilizing external backing for the president’s rule against the numerous fissiparous forces that continued to operate within the united country, while preventing outside support for his rivals where possible.”⁶ This policy became more prominent in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the United States by al-Qaida.

The presence of ‘terrorist groups,’ particularly the emergence of al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), on Yemeni soil, increased the regional importance of the state to outside actors. Even before 9/11, with the al-Qaida attack on the USS Cole in the Port of Aiden, Yemen became an active front in the ‘War on Terror.’ Saleh’s actions in the post 9/11 period often frustrated his international allies, but “Saudi Arabia, the United States and the United Kingdom each chose to back the president as long as he maintained a commitment to fighting terrorism.”⁷ It is within this context that the Houthi movement, which Iran is alleged to support, emerged.

The Shia of the Saada region of northern Yemen have long proven to be an independent and restive force. The Houthi movement’s founder, Hussein Badr al-Deen al-Houthi (Hussein al-Houthi), was an Al-Haq member of parliament. Hussein’s father, Badr al-Din al-Huthi helped to found the al-Haq party in 1990 as a means to best represent the interest of the Zaydi community. Zaidism is a unique sect of Shia Islam, which believes Zayd bin Ali, a grandson of Hussayn, to be the fifth imam, rather than Muhammad al-Baqir, as the majority of Shia do.⁸ While the

⁵ Peter Salisbury, “Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian ‘Cold War,’” *The Royal Institute of International Affairs: Middle East and North Africa Programme*. London: Chatham House, February 2015, 4.

⁶ Fred Halliday, “The Foreign Policy of Yemen,” Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami eds, *The Foreign Policy of Middle East States*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001, 272.

⁷ Salisbury, 5.

⁸ Barak A Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, “Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: the Houthi Phenomenon,” New York: The RAND Corporation, 2010, 64.

differences in theology are noteworthy, the methods in which Zaydism manifested itself politically, largely through the Houthi movement, are central to the current conflict. Hussein al-Houthi joined al-Haq's youth wing Al Shabbab al-Moumineen, (the Believing Youth, (BY)), which emphasized a revival of Zaydism and expanded grassroots support.⁹ In particular, it stressed the perils of Yemeni modernity and the threat of Wahhabi and Salafist imperialism.¹⁰ Al-Haq and the Zaydis, including the BY, however, held a tenuous alliance with Saleh, keeping a lid on the Zaydi community in exchange for political influence.¹¹ In 1997, Hussein left parliament to travel abroad and pursue a religious education. He returned to Yemen in 2000 and soon found himself within a dramatically shifting political landscape.

Upon his return, Hussein found a lack of enthusiasm amongst the Zaydis and the BY movement. He immediately began to attempt to reinvigorate the cause. He harnessed his allies within the BY movement to influence the educational curriculum and collected funds for social welfare projects to further his aims. Bolstered by his lineage and armed with Yemeni anger at American actions in the region, Hussein began spreading his message. As a *RAND Corporation* study of Northern Yemen notes, "Yemeni unhappiness with the GoY's (Government of Yemen) relationship with the United States thus presented Hussein al-Houthi with a lever to agitate and motivate his audiences – a lever that cut across tribal and socioeconomic lines, just as the original BY had."¹² Al-Houthi's anti-establishment and anti-foreign intervention rhetoric and its ability to mobilize the population brought him into conflict with the Saleh regime.

⁹ Salisbury, 5.

¹⁰ Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 96.

¹¹ Ibid, 96.

¹² Ibid, 115.

In 2004, Hussein Al-Houthi was killed by Yemeni Forces after Saleh ordered his execution.¹³ From this point they became known as the Houthi movement and entered a period of conflict with the GoY and gained significant support, particularly in Northern Yemen. From 2004 in the wake of Hussein's death, the Houthis fought five short wars with the GoY.¹⁴ Throughout this period, the Houthis emerged as a well-organized and credible fighting force. Since 2011 and the Arab Spring, the group, now under the stewardship of Hussein's brother, Abdelmalek al-Houthi, shifted the group's narrative from religion to revolution to gain as wide a support base as possible. Yet much its core leadership remains committed to the revolutionary principles of Hussein, which closely mirror that of the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹⁵

The impacts of the Arab Spring ushered in a new-era of instability for Yemen. The events caused Saleh to resign, leading to increased instability that set conditions for the Houthis to take control of the capital Saana, declaring open war on the ruling Islah Party.¹⁶ This period saw the intensification of regional discord over the crisis in Yemen. Alarmed by the situation on its borders and the loss of an obedient regime in Saana, Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015 to "eliminate the threats facing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."¹⁷ Operation Restore Hope followed, the objective being "to focus on the political process, on the humanitarian process, while at the same time seeking to protect the Yemeni population from Houthi aggression."¹⁸ Yemen has since degraded into a humanitarian catastrophe, replete with

¹³ Mahjoob Zweiri, "Iran and Political Dynamism in the Arab World: The case of Yemen," *Digest of Middle East Studies*. 2016. Volume 25, Number 1, 12.

¹⁴ Zweiri, 12.

¹⁵ Salmoni, Loidolt and Wells, 114.

¹⁶ Zweiri, 12.

¹⁷ Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, "Operation Decisive Storm Achieved its Objectives," *The Embassy of the Saudi Arabia to the United States*, 22 April 2015. Retrieved on 24 April, 2018.

<https://www.saudiembassy.net/news/operation-decisive-storm-achieved-its-objectives>

¹⁸ Ibid.

famine and infectious disease. It is within this context that the conflict in Yemen finds itself, providing an ideal ‘grey zone’ landscape for Iran to vie for influence in Yemen.

SHIA MILITIA: IRAN’S ARTISAN EXPORT

The modern rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic is rooted in Ayatollah Khomeini’s condemnation of the monarchies of the Middle East at the outset of the Revolution in 1979. The reverberations of the Islamic Revolution were felt throughout Saudi society as the Kingdom embraced tightening religious control of the country in cooperation with senior Wahhabi clerics. There was widespread fear in Saudi Arabia, that the religious revival experienced in Iran would threaten the Saudi regime. Iran found itself relatively isolated prior to 2003, but it seized opportunities to expand its influence, strengthening ties with Syria and Lebanese Hezbollah and exercising newfound influence in Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen. Echoing a common concern amongst Arab leaders, King Abdullah of Jordan warned of a “Shia crescent” led by Iran, descending on the region.¹⁹ This tension and fight for influence has resulted in a series of proxy wars, and what certain scholars refer to as the “Arab Cold War.”²⁰ Although the conflict has never escalated to outright war between the two states, since 2003 in particular, the states have been engaged in “grey zone” conflict throughout the region.

¹⁹ Fadi A. Haddadin “The ‘Shia Crescent’ and Middle East Geopolitics,” *Foreign Policy Blogs*, 21 January 2017. Retrieved on 24 April 2018. <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2017/01/31/shia-crescent-middle-east-geopolitics/>

²⁰ Zweiri, 5.

Honing Expeditionary Operations in Iraq.

The Iranian model of exporting the revolution has been sharpened in the years since the U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and provides a blueprint for the current involvement in Yemen.

Members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) covertly entered Iraq on the heels of coalition forces and began forging relationships with Shia communities in Iraq. A particular arm of the IRGC known as the “Quds Force” has evolved into the primary tool for the conduct of foreign covert and military operations for the Islamic Republic.²¹ The IRGC is a large multifaceted organization with a broad reach across many sectors of Iranian society. In a study on the IRGC, Dr. Afshon Ostovar, a professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, notes, that the IRGC “is a security service, an intelligence organization, a social and cultural force, and a complex industrial economic conglomerate. It is foremost a military organization.”²² The IRGC has five subordinate branches, which include their own ground forces, air forces (aerospace, including Iran’s ballistic missiles), naval forces, Quds forces and the Basij Mobilization Force. The Basij is largely a sociocultural organization, which the regime has fostered as a means of “creating a religiously orthodox citizenry devoted to the leader and Iran’s theocratic system.”²³ Though the Basij has a militia component, the Quds Force is the most effective arm of the IRGC particularly in expeditionary operations.

The IRGC and Quds Force in particular, honed their craft in Iraq in the wake of the U.S. led invasion and the ensuing insurgency that plagued coalition forces. The effectiveness of their efforts was highlighted by President George W. Bush in a 2007 press conference, stating “I can’t say it more plainly, there are weapons in Iraq that are harming U.S. troops because of the Quds

²¹ Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguards of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Kindle Edition, 244.

²² *Vanguard of the Imam*, 210.

²³ *Vanguard of the Imam*, 233.

Force.”²⁴ This clandestine force aligned itself with several Shia militias, particularly, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (the League of the Righteous) as Muqtada al-Sadr and his powerful Mahdi Army became an increasingly difficult partner.²⁵ Further, it reinforced ties to expatriate entities such as the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Badr Organization to expand their influence amongst the Shia of Iraq.²⁶ Some of the best indications of the groups modus operandi came as a result of a U.S. led raid on a Quds Forces headquarters in Irbil which led to the capture of five suspected members of the group.²⁷ It soon came to light that the IRGC had provided direct support to Shia armed groups for attacks on U.S. and coalition forces and evidence that the Quds Force had been equipping, training and funding the Asaib Ahl Al-Haq militia with between \$750,000 to \$3,000,000 per month to carry out such attacks.²⁸ In addition to providing material support to Shia militias, high ranking Quds commanders overtly acted as a power brokers during the conflict.

Quds operatives gained a prominent role in Iraq and were able to influence the country on a multitude of levels. The evolving brashness and magnitude of Quds Force involvement in Iraq is highlighted by the story of the organization’s commander, General Qassem Suleimani, sending an SMS text message to Commander of Multi-national Forces - Iraq, General David Petraeus. It is alleged to have read, "General Petraeus, you should know that I, Qassem Suleimani, control policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan. The ambassador in Baghdad is a Quds force member. The individual who's going to replace him is a Quds force

²⁴ PBS Frontline: Showdown with Iran, produced by Greg Barker, 23 October 2007. Retrieved 06 April 2018, 33:58. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/showdown/>.

²⁵ Thomas Juneau, “Iran’s Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: a Limited Return on a Modest Investment,” *International Affairs*, 92 (2016): 649.

²⁶ Ian Black and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Qassem Suleimani: commander of Quds force, puppeteer of the Middle East,” *The Guardian*, 16 June 2014. Retrieved 01 May 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/16/qassim-suleimani-iraq-iran-syria>.

²⁷ *Vanguard of the Imam*, Ibid, 3849.

²⁸ Ibid, 3874.

member."²⁹ Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki's difficulty in reigning in Shia militias in Basra through March and April 2008 provides another example of Quds Force influence in Iraq. After failing to achieve his goals militarily, Al-Maliki was forced to negotiate a ceasefire with the groups in Qom Iran. The man reportedly behind the deal was General Suleimani. As part of the deal, Maliki agreed to absorb pro-Iranian Badr Organization militants into its security forces. It is clear from these examples that Iran had gained a powerful foothold in Iraqi political and military affairs, its success grounded in its Shia identity. These anecdotes illuminate the methods used by the Islamic Republic to export the Revolution but provide little insight into the operational details of Quds Force activities.

A Rare Glimpse at Quds Force Operations in Syria

Operationally, the Quds Force seems to operate in small-teams, conducting what western militaries routinely refer to as advise and assist operations. Speaking on the current conflict in Syria, a retired IRGC commander and official close to the IRGC reported that "there were a few hundred commanders from the Quds Force... as well as thousands of Basij militiamen involved in training and advising missions in Syria."³⁰ These hundreds of "commanders" operate in dispersed teams, with the Quds Force providing heavy lifting for the most sensitive tasks. Some particularly unique footage of Quds Force operatives in Syria became public after an IRGC videographer's death. Rebels captured and released his footage, which was subsequently broadcast on *the BBC*. The footage follows suspected Quds Force unit commander Taqi Heydari. He outlines their activities in Syria as follows:

²⁹ Black and Dehghan.

³⁰ *Vanguard of Iman*, 4802.

One thing we do is reconnaissance at nighttime. Mainly to gather intelligence on an area. After we've gathered the information we need, there are a few options. Either we target the places the rebels are (located) with artillery, or we target the routes they use, with landmines or roadside bombs. And the third option is to do a commando raid. We do this quite often: we attack an area.³¹

Throughout the video Heydari decries the abuses carried out by Syrian Forces and stresses how the Iranian deployment has ameliorated the situation in the country.

He goes on to provide additional insight into Iran's expeditionary reach. Outlining Hezbollah's cooperation with Iranian objectives, Heydari states, "we're backed by the Supreme Leader and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. On our side are lads from Iran and Hezbollah."³² He goes on to state "many of the guys (Syrian militia) we are working with right now are people who have been trained in Iran." Both of these statements emphasize the regional nature of Iranian reach and provide the basis for understanding how Iran is operating in Yemen.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS: IRAN ENTERS YEMEN

Historically, Iranian involvement in Yemen has been minimal. There is no evidence to suggest that Tehran provided any support to the Houthi movement prior to 2004.³³ From 2004 – 2011, when the Houthi movement cemented itself as a credible militia in the wake of Hussein al-Houthi's death it is suspected that Iran began to "provide them

³¹ Yada Hakim, "Our World: Iran's Secret Army," *BBC News*, 03 November 2013. Retrieved on 22 April 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZI_88ChjQtU, 15:45.

³² Yada Hakim, 11:45.

³³ Juneau, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: a Limited Return on a Modest Investment," 656.

(Houthis) with very limited amounts of military, financial and political support.”³⁴

Previously skeptical of Yemeni accusations of Iranian support to the Houthis, in 2011 American officials began to acknowledge that Iran was likely providing limited assistance including “automatic rifles and grenade-launchers, bomb-making material and several million dollars in cash.”³⁵ The interception of the Iranian vessel *Jihan I* by a joint U.S. Navy/Yemeni Coast Guard operation in January 2013 led to the seizure of a significant weapons cache allegedly headed for Houthi fighters. According to the UN Panel of Experts Report, the cache consisted of: 16,723 blocks of C-4 explosives, 133 plastic containers of RDX powder explosives, 1,615 boxes of improvised explosive device components, 800 electric detonators, 10 man-portable air defence systems, 100 rocket-propelled grenades, 18 Katyousha rockets (122-mm), 48 night vision goggles, 10 laser range finders and hundreds of thousands of rounds of small arms ammunition.³⁶ The volume and nature of arms in the shipment would have considerably empowered its beneficiaries, yet confirmation of the recipient of the weapons could not be verified, though it was widely believed to be the Houthis.³⁷ Several similar seizures have occurred by forces hostile to Iran in the Arabian Peninsula, however reports are almost always cloaked in imprecise language such as “believed to have originated in Iran and

³⁴ Juneau, 655.

³⁵ Juneau, 656.

³⁶ Alma Abdul-Hadi Jadallah, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council Committee resolution 2140,” 38, <https://www.scribd.com/document/256789321/UN-Panel-Of-Experts-Report-on-Security-Council-Sanctions-Yemen>

³⁷ Ibid.

bound for Houthis in Yemen,” or “assessed to have originated in Iran,” leaving authenticity in doubt.³⁸

A confidential report prepared by United Nations sanctions observers said that the remnants of four ballistic missiles launched by Yemen’s Houthis towards Saudi Arabia this year appear Iranian made.³⁹ Evidence to support this claim has come from a variety of sources, yet the direct trail to Iran is not concrete. The UN panel of expert report concluded that “design characteristics and dimensions of the components inspected by the panel are consistent with those reported for the Iranian designed and manufactured Qiam-1 missile.”⁴⁰ The Qiam-1 is only one variant of missile that the Houthis have used to fire at Saudi Arabia. The Houthis have often countered the claims of the international community by stating they are capable of designing and manufacturing their own weapons systems.

While it is true that Yemen has long had an inventory and expertise in ballistic missiles, in January 2017, the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen concluded that the Houthi-led alliance's claims of manufacturing new missile types locally "are highly unlikely."⁴¹ Iran has also denied reports of supplying arms, particularly missiles to the Houthis. A spokesman for the IRGC denied claims that Iran is supplying the Houthis with weapons, stating, "the aim of such claims by Saudi Arabia is to divert public

³⁸ Sam Lagrone, “U.S. Navy Seizes Suspected Iranian Arms Shipment Bound for Yemen,” *U.S. Naval Institute*, 04 October 2016. Retrieved on 02 May 2018. <https://news.usni.org/2016/04/04/u-s-navy-seizes-suspected-iranian-arms-shipment-bound-for-yemen>

³⁹ Reuters, “UN: Houthi Rockets Fired at Saudi Arabia Appear Iranian,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 01 December, 2017. Retrieved on 20 April 2018. <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1100336/un-houthi-rockets-fired-saudi-arabia-appear-iranian>

⁴⁰ Reuters, “UN: Houthi Rockets Fired at Saudi Arabia Appear Iranian.”

⁴¹ Michael Knights, “Countering Iran's Missile Proliferation in Yemen,” *The Washington Institute*, 08 November 2017. Retrieved on 24 April 2017. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/countering-irans-missile-proliferation-in-yemen>

opinion from the atrocities [they] are committing in Yemen.”⁴² Iranian denials and a lack of a clear trail directly tracing weapons from Iran to Yemen, despite significant evidence to the contrary, demonstrate Iran’s desire to maintain the conflict in the ‘grey zone.’ Indeed, aside from the evidence related to the provision of missile technology and the intercepted Iranian weapons cache in 2013 described earlier, little other direct evidence can be found to link Iran to the arming of Houthi Rebels.

The operations of the Quds Force have been equally difficult to trace, enabling the Islamic Republic to maintain plausible deniability. The Iranian pattern of exporting the revolution in the years since 2003, suggests that the Quds Force is likely Iran’s primary tool for influencing events in Yemen. On 23 May 2015, in a rare public acknowledgement of their military relationship with the Houthis, IRGC Quds Force Deputy Commander stated, “those defending Yemen have been trained under the flag of the Islamic Republic.”⁴³ *Reuters* has also reported that Quds Force leadership recently strategized about their operations in Yemen, reporting that “Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force... met top IRGC officials in Tehran last month (February 2017) to look at ways to empower the Houthis. At this meeting, they agreed to increase the amount of help, through training, arms and financial support.”⁴⁴ Given the evidence provided and understanding Iranian methodology, there is little doubt that the Quds Force is deployed and providing the Houthis with similar

⁴² Associated Free Press and Reuters, “Iran Denies Supplying Missiles Used By Yemeni Rebels To Strike Saudi Arabia,” *Radio Free Europe*, 28 March 2018. Retrieved 01 May 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-denies-supplying-missiles-used-yemeni-huthi-rebels-strike-saudi-arabia/29129483.html>

⁴³ Knights, “Countering Iran's Missile Proliferation in Yemen,”

⁴⁴ Jonathan Saul, Parisa Hafezi, Michael Georgy, “Exclusive: Iran steps up support for Houthis in Yemen's war – sources,” *Reuters*, 21 March 2017. Retrieved 01 May 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R>

operational support to the conflict in Syria, though in all probability on a much smaller scale.

Aside from the patterns provided by Iranian involvement elsewhere, a few key deductions can be made that suggest Quds to be active in Iran. The first is the nature of the weapons seized by U.S. authorities. Of particular interest is the mixture of sophisticated military technology, including night vision equipment, man portable air-defence systems, and equipment more associated with insurgency tactics, namely, the that necessary for manufacturing improvised explosive devices. The use of this equipment necessitates a broad spectrum of military knowledge and is in line with Quds Force operations in other theatres.

The military equipment Iran is suspected of providing and seized during the January 2013 U.S./Yemeni Coast Guard operation, would be critical on many of the operations described by Quds Force commander Taqi Heydarri and his troops in Syria. In particular, the night vision goggles and laser range finders, would assist in the conduct of nighttime reconnaissance and artillery strikes described by Heydarri; the explosives and improvised explosive device component are likely used in the manufacturing and planting of roadside bombs as outlined by Heydarri as a Quds Force activity in Syria. It is likely that much of the work done by the Quds Force in Yemen is focused on advise and assist based missions, in addition to the provision of funding and material support.

In analyzing the deployment of Iranian Forces in 2015, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimated that there were around two thousand Iranian troops in

Iraq and less than 1000 in Syria.⁴⁵ While it is unreasonable to believe that the Quds Force represents the preponderance of that figure; it is however likely that Quds is advising Houthi rebels directly engaged in fighting in small dispersed teams. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Quds Force deploys in groups of 150 and then likely operates in small teams like that of Heydari in Syria, whose teams appears to be twelve strong.⁴⁶ This rough deployment figure is bolstered by Yemeni Army claims through UAE based *Al Arabiya*, which outline that the Army has monitored around 100 “Iranian experts providing logistical and technical support to the Houthi militias, and an arsenal of medium and heavy weapons, such as ballistic missiles deployed in the city of Saada and inside its caves.”⁴⁷ Given that Yemen is a less vital security concern for Iran than either Iraq or Syria due to the longstanding relationships forged in those countries, it is probable that Iran has devoted less resources to this conflict, including the numbers of military personnel. While this follows a typical pattern of Iranian foreign meddling, the Islamic Republic appears more cautious in Yemen than it has been in its other theatres of operation in the past fifteen years.

The lack of significant irrefutable direct evidence of Iranian involvement in Yemen suggest a more cautious approach. Claims of their involvement while often credible are rarely certain. The lack of clarity resulting from the January 2018 *Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen* looking into violations of the arms embargo against Huthis initiated in 2015 (UNSCR 2216), provides an interesting example. Just

⁴⁵ *Vanguard of the Imam*, 5251.

⁴⁶ Hugh Tomlinson, “Iran’s special forces rush in to help floundering ally,” *The Times*, 12 June 2014. Retrieved on 01 May 2018. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/irans-special-forces-rush-in-to-help-floundering-ally-g5lw3hsfcxb>

⁴⁷ Al Arabiya English. “Yemeni army spots 100 Iranian experts providing support for Houthis in Saada” *Al Arabiya*. 03 May 2018. Retrieved on 04 May 2018. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2018/05/03/Yemeni-army-spots-100-Iranian-experts-providing-support-for-Houthis-in-Saada.html>

prior to public release of the document, American Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley delivered a dramatic press conference in front of what was claimed to be remnants Iranian made missiles fired by Houthis at Saudi Arabia. Many observers and international actors though, have remained skeptical. Despite authoring a rather damning report, the United Nations panel of experts who examined the issue made clear that it “has no evidence as to the identity of the broker or supplier.”⁴⁸ The report led the Security Council to differing conclusions. Nikki Haley stated that the report “provides devastating evidence of missiles, conventional arms, and explosives, and “explosive boats” of Iranian origin used by the rebels in Yemen — all of which violate UN resolutions.”⁴⁹ Sweden as a non-permanent member of the Security Council drew a different conclusion, stating through their Ambassador Olof Skoog, that Haley “may be in possession of evidence I have not seen. The information I have up to now is less clear that Iran is the culprit.”⁵⁰ When pressed by *New York Times* reporter and former U.S. naval explosive ordnance disposal specialist, John Ismay on certain issues pertaining to the report, the “experts” were unable to provide key details relating to the weapons. Experts admitted they did not visit the blast site of alleged missile strikes, nor were they able to determine when the missiles were received by Houthis. Lastly and perhaps most problematically, the weapons components provided as “props” for the press conference were often not collected by the investigators but provided directly from the Saudis.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer, “Haley’s ‘Smoking Gun’ on Iran Met With Skepticism at UN” *Foreign Policy*, 14 December 2017. Retrieved on 29 April 2018. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/14/nikki-haley-yemen-houthi-rebels-iran-missiles-press-conference-pentagon-skepticism-united-nations-trump-nuclear-deal-diplomacy/>

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ John Ismay and Helene Cooper, “U.S. Accuses Iran of UN Violation, but Evidence Falls Short,” *The New York Times*, 14 December 2017. Retrieved on 23 April 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/14/world/middleeast/nikki-haley-iran-weapons-yemen.html>

Given the lack of clarity over Iranian support to the Houthis in Yemen, it is clear that the Islamic Republic has been remarkably successful at maintain the conflict in the ‘grey zone.’

A SAUDI QUAGMIRE

Saudi Arabia’s interest and involvement in Yemen has been far easier to trace. As a neighbouring state, Saudi Arabia has a vested interest in ensuring stability in Yemen. Their security concerns have been compounded by the Houthi attacks on their own soil with increasingly sophisticated weapons. It stands to reason then for Saudi Arabia to use force to stabilize the security situation in Yemen. Yet the Houthis have remained a stubborn and potent force, maintaining control of Saana in spite of the Saudi led military intervention. Meanwhile, Saudi actions in Yemen have earned the condemnation of many international actors. The 2017 UN Panel of Experts Final Report concluded that it “has sufficient grounds to believe that the coalition led by Saudi Arabia did not comply with international humanitarian law in at least 10 air strikes that targeted houses, markets, factories and a hospital.”⁵² Prince Muhammad bin Salman was forced on the defensive regarding Saudi actions in Yemen during a recent *60 Minutes* interview, Norah O’Donnell asked the Prince if he “acknowledged that there has been a humanitarian catastrophe, 5000 civilians killed, children starving there?” To which he replied, “it is truly very painful and I hope that this militia ceases using the humanitarian

⁵² Ahmed Himmiche, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen,” 27 January 2017, New York: United Nations Security Council. Retrieved on 20 April 2018.
http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2017_81.pdf

situation to their advantage in order to draw sympathy from the international community.”⁵³ The segment goes on to describe that his “fixation on Iran has led him into a quagmire in neighbouring Yemen.”⁵⁴ In an equally stinging indictment General Ahmed Asiri was interviewed in early 2018, by PBS reporter Martin Smith. During the interview, Smith asked “People say the Saudis have not complied with generally accepted rules of warfare in terms of protecting civilian populations. The question is, why do these persist?” To which he had no satisfactory answer.⁵⁵ Thus Iran has benefited in multiple ways from the Saudi intervention in Yemen. Not only is the international condemnation of Saudi actions beneficial to Iran in the information operations domain, their limited support to the Houthis has ensured the Saudis have had to maintain a costly and divisive military campaign in the country.

Though Iran’s material and military support to Yemen has operated in the ‘grey zone,’ they have waged a significant public relations campaign against Saudi actions in Yemen. The success of their campaign is highlighted by Prince Muhammad bin Salman’s admission that the “Iranian ideology has penetrated some parts of Yemen.”⁵⁶ The Iranians have taken the rhetorical offensive against the Saudis. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei took to *Twitter* to address Saudi actions in Yemen tweeting that “Aggression on #Yemen & nonstop bombing of ‘houses, hospitals & schools’ &

⁵³ Norah O’Donnell, “60 Minutes: Saudi Arabia’s heir to the throne talks to 60 Minutes,” *CBS News*, 19 March 2019. Retrieved on 30 April 2018, 29:00, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-talks-to-60-minutes/>

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 27:45.

⁵⁵ *PBS Frontline: Bitter Rivals*, Produced by David Fanning, Martin Smith and Linda Hirsch, 20 and 27 February 2017. 40:00. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/bitter-rivals-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>

⁵⁶ *PBS Frontline: Bitter Rivals..*

continuous infanticide are other big crimes of Saudi government.”⁵⁷ The Saudi government also leveraged the Saudi blockade of Yemeni ports to attempt to improve their image in relation to the Saudi Kingdom. Iran complained loudly and publicly when an Iranian International Red Crescent Society plane allegedly carrying pharmaceuticals and medical aid was intercepted by Saudi warplanes and unable to enter Yemeni airspace.⁵⁸ The sentiment was further echoed by the Houthi parallel government with former Prime Minister Yemeni Abdel-Aziz bin Habtour stating “Iran sends us humanitarian aid, but anything from the IRGC that was sent to the Houthis, only God would know.”⁵⁹ Iranian actions have thus been carefully crafted to avoid any redline while exploiting the opportunities afforded to them by their adversaries.

International condemnation of Saudi Arabia and Iran’s maintenance of plausible deniability as well as ‘grey zone’ operations have successfully avoided the crossing of any Saudi redline. It is due to this fact that Iran is unlikely to significantly increase its support to the Houthis. While the exportation of the revolution is certainly important and a significant reason for Iranian involvement in Yemen, Iran also recognized that it to be a major priority for Saudi Arabia. Deeper or more overt involvement may risk an unpredictable escalation with Riyadh that Iran can not control.⁶⁰ Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif summed up Iran’s primary interest in Yemen, when asked by PBS’ Martin Smith “What is your strategic interest in Yemen?” Zarif replied “It’s not.

⁵⁷ Ayatollah Khamenei, Twitter post, 01 August 2016, Retrieved on 04 May 2018. https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/760081042808139776

⁵⁸ Shiite News. “Iran summons Saudi Envoy over blocking Tehran’s Humanitarian Aid,” *Shiite News*, 25 April 2015, <http://sneng.shiiteneews.org/shiiteneews/iran-shiiteneews/item/15565-iran-summons-saudi-envoy-over-blocking-tehran-s-humanitarian-aid-to-yemen/>

⁵⁹ *PBS Frontline: Bitter Rivals*, Produced by David Fanning, Martin Smith and Linda Hirsch, 20 and 27 February 2017. 45:00. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/bitter-rivals-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>

⁶⁰ Juneau, 659.

(sic) We know that Yemen is important for Saudi Arabia, and we never want to stab Saudi Arabia in the back.”⁶¹ This statement is illuminating in many respects. Yemen being important to Saudi Arabia is exactly why it is important to Iran. The sentiment that they do not want to stab the Saudis in the back is largely a reflection of the desire to keep the conflict in the ‘grey zone’ and avoid overt actions which could cross a Saudi redline. As with many of the regional conflict of the past two decades, Iran has leveraged a military blunder by one of its opponents to exacerbate their struggles, focus their attention while increasing the influence of the Islamic Republic.

CONCLUSION

Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia were the impetus behind the Civil War in Yemen; the state of Yemen failed on its own. Yet, what was a liability for Saudi Arabia provided an opportunity for Iran. The Islamic Republic’s actions in Yemen have remained shadowy, difficult to trace while remaining below the threshold for real retaliatory action. The Houthis are a natural ally of Iran; anti-Western, anti-Salafi, anti-Israel and militant. In a clear display of their respective alignment, the Houthi movement have embraced the Iranian Revolutionary mantra “death to America, death to Israel, damn the Jews, victory to Islam.”⁶² Though the Houthi community may not prove to be an extension of Iranian policy as many view Lebanese Hezbollah, their long-stated purpose of resisting the Salafi and Wahabbi movement represented by Saudi Arabia may prove useful in the years to come. Iran’s ability to develop and maintaining long lasting relationships in the

⁶¹ PBS Frontline: Bitter Rivals, 41:20.

⁶² Julie Lenarz, “Who Are the Houthis and Why Do They Shout “Death to America?”” *The Tower*, Issue 51, August – September 2017. Retrieved on 30 April 2018. <http://www.thetower.org/article/houthis/>

region foreshadow an enduring relationship between Iran and the Houthis. This relationship will continue to be cultivated through the IRGC and the Quds Force in particular. Moving forward, Iranian support to the Houthis may be used as leverage, tailored to counter Saudi actions elsewhere in the region. Whatever the outcome of the ‘quagmire’ in Yemen, it is doubtful that the Houthis will disappear as a political force. For the foreseeable future the Saudis will have yet another security concern on their borders. In current context, the conflict in Yemen has embarrassed Saudi Arabia on the world stage, prompted questions of violations of international law, and bogged them down in a protracted military campaign. With a relatively modest investment, Iran has emerged relatively unscathed. With the Houthis and their associated Zaydi community, Iran, has generated goodwill amongst a militant Shia population in region with a long memory.

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