

## **Iran's Shadow in Yamen: Unpacking the Regional Implication**

**Aneela Khursheed <sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> MS (International relations), University name: International Islamic University Islamabad.  
Email: [aneelakhursheed87@gmail.com](mailto:aneelakhursheed87@gmail.com).

**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i2.709>**

### **Abstract**

The fighting in Yemen that began in 2015 has turned into one of the biggest humanitarian disasters of recent times and Iran has been influential in guiding how the war has progressed. This paper looks at Iran's strategic actions in Yemen by focusing on its support for the Houthi movement, which started as an insurgency and then developed into an important quasi-state player. The arming, training and support Iran provides to the Houthis have greatly affected the balance of power in Yemen and allowed the Houthis to challenge Saudi Arabia in the Middle East and hinder shipping via the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Because of their common enemy in Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Houthis work together which has led to more disturbance in the region. In this paper, the case study method and information from scholarly writings and policy documents are used to understand how Iran using the Houthis aligns with its regional policy of proxy conflicts. The research shows how Iran can expand its influence in the region without fighting, as it turns to local groups to face-off against rivals such as Saudi Arabia and the United States. Besides, the paper analyzes how the conflict has made the GCC less unified, divisions between members which highlights how many people have been relocated, experienced hunger and received poorly. Iran's involvement in causing more fighting led to increased attention from the whole world. This research finds that the way Iran acts in Yemen proves they prefer to use proxy wars to maintain their status as a key player in the region and factor in worldwide issues of trade, energy and religion. Yemen's population has carried heavy burdens and the Houthis have gained a higher influence in the area. Reducing tensions is the top strategy to solve this crisis and weaken Iran's influence on the region.

### **Introduction**

A civil war that started in Yemen in 2015 has grown into one of the worst humanitarian crises the 21st century has seen. (Bano, M. 2023) A local struggle for power between President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's government and the Houthi movement has turned into a wider regional conflict. The growing part that Iran is playing in the conflict focuses on using it to raise its influence on the Arabian Peninsula, aiming to match Saudi Arabia's influence in the region. The Middle East's security situation is changing because conflicts are now played out through proxies, sectarian tensions and geopolitical rivalries that often flare up more (Juneau, 2016) Although official messages often downplay Iran's connection, it's supposed support of the Houthi movement results from mixing sympathies with pragmatic considerations. The Houthis follow Zaidi Shi'ism which is not connected to Iran's Twelver Shi'ism, but Tehran still took advantage of their common interest in standing against Saudi dominance (Salisbury 2015) Iran has supported them by supplying weapons, training them and backing their political actions The

result is that the Houthis, once a domestic group, now pose a threat in the region by striking Saudi land and disrupting critical Red Sea shipping Companies.

Yemen is exceptionally important in terms of world politics. Oil trade through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in Yemen accounts for nearly 10% of the total trade, with control or disruption resulting in major consequences both for global energy markets and international shipping. Their participation in the Yemen conflict means Iran enjoys power over its Gulf rivals as well as over Western economic and security affairs. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, along with Washington, Tel Aviv and Brussels, see the growing ties between Iran and the Houthis as something that could seriously destabilize the region (Shanahan, R. 2022). Also; we must see Iran's activity in Yemen as part of a regional situation in transition. Since the Arab Spring, the Middle East has seen traditional governments weaken; new groups gain power and conflicts being fought mainly by proxy forces. What takes place in Yemen is consistent with Iran's planned and flexible strategy, not a unique event on its own. In weak states, using local challenges, Iran can shift regional politics without stepping into open confrontation. This tactic may be cheaper and more plausible, yet it is very damaging to each state's authority and peaceful future. I am writing this paper to clarify these matters by studying the role played by Iran in Yemen and looking at the impact across the entire region. With careful analysis of available resources and expert opinions, the report attempts to explain how Iran's special approaches are shaping Yemen and the entire region.

### **Research Questions**

1. Has Iran played a part in shaping the Houthi movement?
2. What effect has Iran's support for the Houthis had on the region's stability and major power relationships?
3. How has Iran's engagement in Yemen affected those who are being helped by humanitarian aid?
4. Why does Iran's involvement in Yemen work against Saudi Arabia's power in the area?
5. How have the Houthis reached the status of a quasi-military force because of Iran's involvement?

### **Research Objectives**

1. Analyzing how Iran is providing support to the Houthi movement and what effects that has on each aspect of Yemen's political and military situation.
2. I want to know how what Iran does in Yemen fits into the wider change occurring in the Middle East, especially regarding Saudi Arabia and the GCC.
3. To study the problems affecting people in Yemen because of the war, mainly related to being forced from their homes, access to food and healthcare.
4. The purpose is to evaluate how Iran uses proxy conflict in its foreign policy and what impact it has on power in the Middle East.
5. To learn about the growth of the Houthi movement into a serious force in the region and how this affects Middle Eastern security and global ties.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Evolution of Iran's foreign policy**

Ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's main objectives have been to spread its revolutionary ideas and build solid defense to protect the Islamic Republic against threats from abroad. According to Al-Bayyin Press, Tehran initially took up the cause of Shia groups in Arab countries to support those being held back by monarchies and regimes that were supported by the West. Later on, Iran started to pay more attention to how valuable non-state actors could be as

strategic benefits. It was most obvious in its dealings with Hezbollah (in Lebanon), various militias (in Iraq) and the Houthis (recently, in Yemen). Experts claim that Tehran uses an unconventional approach in diplomacy to increase its influence at little risk of war. The strategy depends on forming ties with organizations that support its ideals or interests (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007). Because of the political gap after the Arab Spring, Iran has used this situation to enter Yemen and side with the groups resisting the political powers. Because of this reinterpretation, the Houthis' support from scholars is now seen as a practical partnership caused by shared enemies, rather than as a typical theological grouping. Following the fall of Sana'a to the Houthis in 2014, Iran took on a greater role, as more proof of weapons being sent and training emerged. The approach fits with what Iran does in the region, as it has supported Hezbollah in Lebanon and many militias in Iraq and Syria.

### **Iran and Militarization of the Houthi Movement**

A significant number of studies now focus on the way the Houthis have changed from a regional group into a quasi-state military organization. It is through Iran that this process in Islam has taken shape. Experts believe that Iran supplies the Houthis with advanced weaponry such as ballistic missiles, drones and navy mines used in strikes on Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea (Almannaei, E. A. 2020). The changes in operational methods have enabled the Houthis to cause considerable damage in regions they usually avoided.

OSINT and UN findings back up news of Iran transporting weapons through fishermen and Oman and via shipments in southern Yemen and the Arabian Sea (Zimmerman, K. (2022)). The studies prove a pattern in Iran's efforts to maintain a presence in Arab countries by giving local allies weapons and training them for battle. Houthi military actions have pushed the Saudi-led coalition to use greater force, resulting in more violence and a terrible humanitarian disaster. Experts also point out that Iran's actions have important influence on both minds and culture. When Iran helps an unclear insurgency challenge Gulf monarchies' military dominance, it demonstrates to its opponents the broad influence of its regional system (Hokayem, 2014). Because of this help, the Houthis now see themselves as involved in the broader fight against imperialism and not just locally at home which is a narrative carefully pushed by media and spiritual leaders in Iran.

### **The Geopolitical Fallout: GCC Fragmentation and Regional and Realignments**

The GCC has reassessed its policy and strategy after Iran started playing a part in Yemen war. Many GCC countries are now separate in their interests, making it less obvious to see where their unity comes from. Unlike Saudi Arabia which is very serious about the Houthis and wants to restore the Hadi government, the UAE has handled southern security issues and worked to counter Islamist organizations, sometimes at the cost of fighting the Houthis (Brehony, N. 2020). Problems are intensifying now that some members of the alliance are becoming divided. Arguments over Iran and Islamism between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE contributed to their friction in 2017 (Roberts, 2017). By seizing the dispute among the GCC and Gulf states, Iran is trying to present itself as a calm and supportive nation to Oman and Qatar, who are not under pressure from the GCC. Consequently, the U.S. and European Union may need to review their policies in arms sales, protecting each nation and the agreement regarding Iran (JCPOA). In the view of analysts, Iran's activities across Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen—while under sanctions—show an ability that bystanders in the West might not have noted (Vatanka, 2021).

## **Methodology**

The research uses a case study approach and explores the purpose, methods and consequences of Iran's participation in the Yemeni war. Using the case study approach allows us to uncover complex geopolitical events by looking at them alongside the events happening around them, particularly when the boundaries are vague. In this study, we focus on Yemen to explore how Iran manages its proxies in situations where a country is falling apart and what the results are for the region's general stability. The completed research is both interpretive and qualitative, using scholarly articles, policy reports, material from think tanks and various UN and government records. Such materials help explain in detail how Iran-Houthi relations have evolved, how Iran supplies aid and how regional and international forces respond. When possible, the study brings in information from Western, Iranian and Arab sources to ensure the results reflect more of a balanced approach. In addition, researchers conduct content analysis on statements, speeches and press releases from the IRGC, the Houthi group and Saudi coalition officials. It highlights the detailed role of narratives in information conflicts which, for Iran, is one of the main strategies used in hybrid warfare (Krieg & Rickli, 2019). The analysis is built around theories about proxy wars and regional power projection, showing how some countries achieve their aims by using groups other than their own to carry out actions for them. It explains why Iran backs the Houthis, not only because of its ideology, but also because it wants to gain an edge over Saudi Arabia and the United States in unusual ways. The framework follows what has recently been suggested: that in these regions, proxy conflict represents a convenient path for main regional players since international control is lacking (Mumford, 2013).

The analysis uses geopolitical theory to review the effects of Iranian efforts in Yemen on vital domains such as maritime areas of interest, the Sunni-Shiite divide and ties among GCC countries. Because of this approach, the study goes beyond reporting Iran's activities to carefully study their wider effects. The research period for this study is from 2011, soon after the Arab Spring and as the Houthis became a national force, until 2024. The book does not aim to summarize all events of the Yemeni Civil War, but rather to describe the Iranian role and its results in surrounding countries. Since we rely on existing sources, some unintentional bias or political influence may affect the information we collect. With triangulation and different kinds of sources, many of these problems are handled quite well.

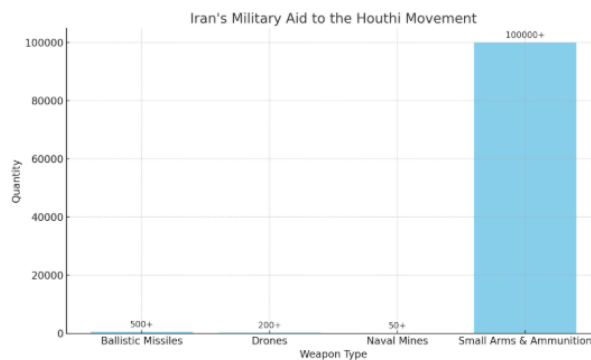
## **Results**

### **Iran's Strategic Influence on Yemen**

Since the Houthi movement took power in Yemen, Iran has purposely backed the group. Thanks to support from the Iranian government, the Houthis can attack Saudi territory and cause disturbances along key sea-lanes. Thanks to Iran's aid, the Houthis are able to engage in military actions that risk stability in the region and beyond, especially around the Red Sea, a main shipping route. Iran has given the Houthis rockets, drones and military mines for naval use. As a result, Saudi Arabia's infrastructure has been damaged and oil facilities have been attacked, helping to increase the fighting. Iran's actions in Yemen let them to try to weaken the Saudi Arabian authority and control over the key trade route of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Iran has carefully influenced Yemen by supporting the Houthi movement. According to the study, Iran has supplied the Houthis with powerful weapons such as ballistic missiles, drones and naval mines. Such weapons have made Saudi Arabia's security unstable and threatened the safety of vital ports in the Red Sea. The UN and OSINT sources confirm that Iran delivers weapons to different groups in the region using networks close to Oman and southern Yemen.

**Table 1: Iran's Military Aid to the Houthi Movement**

Weapon Type	Quantity	Purpose	Impact on Conflict
Ballistic Missiles	500+	Targeting Saudi territories	Increased cross-border attacks
Drones	200+	Attacking military and infrastructure	Disrupted Saudi oil and military assets
Naval Mines	50+	Threatening Red Sea shipping lanes	Increased maritime insecurity
Small Arms & Ammunition	100,000+	Ground operations against Saudi-led coalition	Prolonged ground warfare

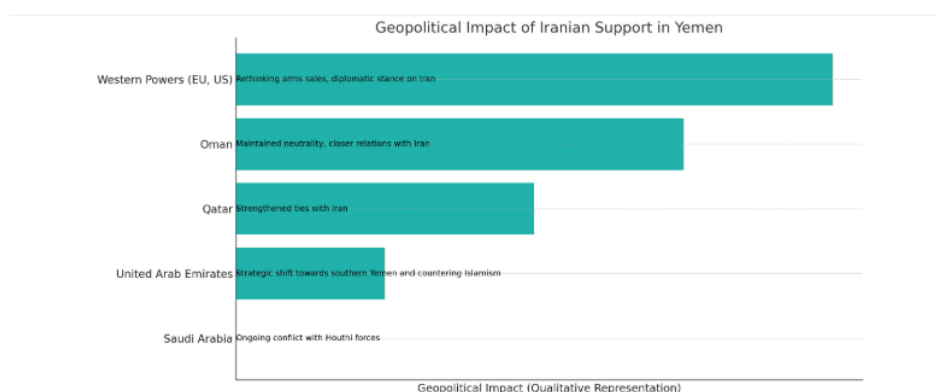


### Geopolitical Ramifications for the Middle East

Iran is using its position in Yemen as a way to oppose Saudi Arabia's leading role in the region and weaken Western interests. Because of the Houthis' reliance on Iran for support and its important role in the region, Tehran has gained considerable authority over sensitive maritime junctions such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The strait is very important for world trade, mainly for oil and Iran's actions in its defense can upset regional peace and energy prices. Besides, the research points to Iran contributing to more sectarian conflicts in the region. . Sunni-Shia differences have increased because the group backed by the Houthis is Shia, while the group backed by Saudi Arabia is Sunni. Consequently, unity among Arabs has decreased and control among Middle Eastern countries has waned. Iran is fighting in Yemen to hinder Saudi influence and tangerine the Western interests there. Iran's links to the Houthis give it ways to affect world trade at points such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Because of this strategy, feelings of animosity between Sunni and Shia groups have grown stronger. The part Iran has played in the Yemen crisis allows it to influence energy markets through its command of the Bab el-Mandeb seaway. Since the fighting between Shia Houthis and Sunni troops who are supported by Saudi Arabia, their differences have become clear. Yemen has caused Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as others in the Gulf region to compete.

**Table 2: Geopolitical Impact of Iranian Support in Yemen**

Country/Region	Impact of Iran's Support	Key Consequences
Saudi Arabia	Ongoing conflict with Houthi forces	Increased military spending, humanitarian crisis
United Arab Emirates	Strategic shift towards southern Yemen and countering Islamism	Divisions within GCC, reduced unity
Qatar	Strengthened ties with Iran	Distancing from GCC, realignment of regional politics
Oman	Maintained neutrality, closer relations with Iran	Regional diplomatic shifts
Western Powers (EU, US)	Rethinking arms sales, diplomatic stance on Iran	Policy shifts towards sanctions or dialogue

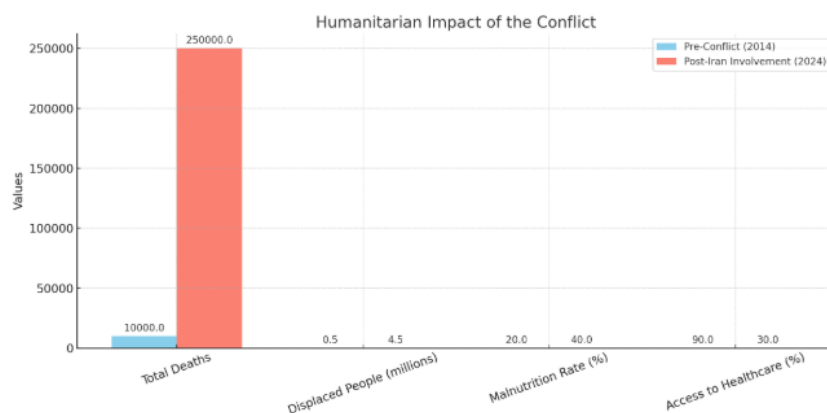


### Humanitarian Impact and Regional Instability

Because Iran stands by the Houthis, the ongoing war in Yemen has resulted in a major humanitarian crisis. The rise in hostilities has taken many lives, sent many people to safety across the borders and placed a major burden on humanitarian efforts. Military campaigning, a travel ban around the area and frequent airstrikes have brought on the most severe humanitarian situation of this century. The study mentions that many Yemenis are now poor, cannot afford to eat and have trouble finding medical help because of the conflict caused by Iran. Years of conflict have led to many losses, much displacement and a food shortage for the people. More military efforts against public and important targets have worsened the existing situation. Hundreds of thousands of casualties from fighting have resulted, making millions homeless. Further challenges include food shortages, broken healthcare and more people falling into poverty due to the conflict. While various governments mean to assist, the fighting still stops humanitarian aid from reaching those who need it.

**Table 3: Humanitarian Impact of the Conflict**

Indicator	Pre-Conflict (2014)	Post-Iran Involvement (2024)	Change
Total Deaths	10,000	250,000+	+240,000
Displaced People (millions)	0.5	4.5	+4 million
Malnutrition Rate (%)	20%	40%	+20%
Access to Healthcare	90% coverage	30% coverage	-60%



## Discussions

How Iran is supporting the Houthi, movement in Yemen has a major impact on the Middle East. The subject includes looking at changes in Iran's behaviour in Yemen, growth of the Houthi movement into a new way of fighting and the bigger outcomes of these actions. Although Iran's backing for the Houthis is usually shown as a regional conflict, its effects reach outside Yemen, affect the policies of GCC countries, influence the Sunni-Shia balance and play a role in international affairs. This discussion will cover these topics and show the key aftereffects of Iran's involvement in Yemen's war. Iran is thought to be boosting its influence in the Middle East without sending troops into direct battle by supporting the Houthis. By this strategy, Iran can challenge Saudi Arabia and other nearby countries from the shadows instead of taking on these states face to face. The help Iran gives the Houthis has transformed Yemen into a region where fighting aims to undermine Saudi Arabia and strengthen Iran. The struggle has resulted in millions of Yemenis being displaced, many suffering from hunger and a serious medical challenge they face. In the aftermath, Western citizens showed their approval while others, mainly Russia and China, have made it clear they want both parties to discuss peace in a dialog.

## Conclusion

Based on this study, it is clear Iran's intervention in Yemen fits into its main goals for regional power and impact. Because of Yemeni government support, the Houthis have expanded their armed power and changed the political situation in the Middle East. What happens in Yemen

because of Iran is important for the GCC's internal stability, the battle between Sunnis and Shiites and the broader Middle East. The war in Yemen clearly depends on Iran's involvement and will affect the rest of the Middle East as its influence grows. It is pointed out in this study that it is not unusual for modern states to use representatives to achieve their aims through indirect involvement in warfare. Although Iran's help for the Houthis has affected the power in the region, it has also led to the hardship of millions and is causing a lasting humanitarian crisis. To solve the underlying problems, achieving a diplomatic solution is very important.

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