

Comparing Yemen and Cold War Proxy Wars

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## Introduction

One of the biggest concerns in the current regional politics of the Middle East is the Yemeni civil war. Yemen is a small country on the Arabian peninsula that has been embroiled in a violent civil war since 2011. Normally, this would not attract much international attention. Yemen is a relatively small country with little global influence, and the civil war began during the Arab spring when many Arab countries were going through similar events. However, unlike most other Arab spring movements, the Yemeni conflict has dragged on and gained international attention from the outside influence that quickly installed itself. What began as a civil war has become a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There is an intellectual debate on whether this qualifies as a proxy war based on disagreement on the level of Iran's involvement. This paper will argue that the Yemeni civil war is a proxy war by comparing to the cold war proxy wars in Vietnam and Korea. This is a significant classification because proxy wars can have a much greater impact than a contained conflict might. Recognizing Yemen as being a proxy conflict has significant policy implications, especially for the United States who plays a large role in supporting Saudi Arabia's activity in the country.

There have been widespread and long lasting negative effects of the Korean and Vietnam wars some of which can still be seen today. Hopefully, by understanding the ways in which Yemen is continuing down the same path we can make the decision to end the conflict and put a stop to the suffering that has already occurred.

## Overview of the conflict in Yemen

According to the United Nations, the conflict in Yemen is the worst man-made humanitarian crisis in the world (“Yemen Crisis,” 2018). When former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down in 2011 in response to widespread protests, a power vacuum was created that led to the struggle that continues to this day. After Saleh’s resignation, many factions were jockeying for power which came to a head when Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula seized territory in southern Yemen. This prompted the first wave of international involvement in Yemen by Saudi Arabia and a United States led coalition. They were able to broker a deal where the former Vice President, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, would be the new leader. Unfortunately, this was not the end of the violence. Hadi attempted to bring political reform to Yemen, but was unsuccessful. The major opposition group was a group from northern Yemen known as the Houthis. In 2014, the Houthis were able to take control of Yemen’s capital city, Sana’a. From there they moved south, taking control of many other major cities. This caused President Hadi to leave the country and ask for international assistance in 2015. Saudi Arabia responded and launched a military intervention aimed at reinstalling Hadi’s presidency (Sharp, 2019). The two groups, the Shia Houthis and the Sunni anti-Houthis are still in combat with backing from Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively with the situation is further complicated by the continued presence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

### Components of a Proxy War

In order to make the case for the Yemeni civil war as a proxy war, it is necessary to start by defining and explaining the common components of a proxy war, and then examining the ways that the Vietnam and Korean wars met these criteria and comparing how Yemen does.

There are commonly accepted standards of international law to justify going to war. They are known as the jus ad bellum. The jus ad bellum is comprised of “just cause, proportionality, legitimate authority, public declaration, just intent, last resort, and reasonable chance of success”. When outside nations in a conflict, hereafter referred to as “benefactors,” become involved the jus ad bellum calculations become much more complex, but must still be met. One component of the jus ad bellum that is often missing in proxy conflicts is a public declaration, as one of the reasons many countries choose to support proxy forces is to downplay their involvement.

There are certain attributes common to proxy wars. First is that there is an alignment of the interests of the proxies and the benefactors. Second is the ability for a benefactor to keep its involvement secret or downplay it. Third is that the involvement of the benefactor increases the chances of success for the proxy (Pfaff, 2017). To classify any of the following conflicts as a proxy war they must meet these criteria.

### The Vietnam War

The Vietnam war was an almost 20 year long conflict where the north Vietnamese communists fought against south Vietnam with significant outside influence from the Soviet Union and the United States. After the end of French colonialism in Vietnam the north adopted a government model similar to that of China and the Soviet Union while South Vietnam’s model

was closer to western governments. The United States' involvement in the conflict began by sending advisors to South Vietnam in small numbers. Then the number of military personnel was gradually increased until there were over 500,000 Americans stationed in Vietnam. They remained there until the cost and casualties of the war became too high. At the same time the Soviet Union was sending advisors and supplies to the North Vietnamese to help fuel their invasion into the south (Spector, 2019). Although the Soviet Union did not send troops, they provided nearly half a billion dollars to North Vietnam in addition to 2,000 military personnel and military equipment such as radar and anti aircraft systems (Kimball, 1997).

#### Alignment of interests

The first component to examine is the alignment of benefactors to the interests of their proxies. The main foreign policy objective for the United States during the cold war was containment. Many Americans were alarmed by the rapid spread of communism through Asia and eastern Europe and wanted to prevent a "domino effect," the idea that one country falling to communism would lead those around it to do the same. The eventual fear was that the United States would lose its power and influence in the international community. Promoting democracy and the American world order through economic stimulus, such as with the Marshall plan, and through military options became a top priority ("American Cold War Policy," n.d.). The United States had already seen communism spreading into Southeast Asia during the Korean war and wanted to stop the same from happening in Vietnam.

The rationale for the Soviet Union's involvement was similar but opposite. While the U.S. wanted to prevent communism from spreading farther into Asia, Russia wanted to protect communist governments. Their involvement in Vietnam was motivated by "communist

solidarity,” the desire to bolster revolutionary regimes in the developing world in order to expand their regional and eventually global influence (Kimball, 1997).

### Level of Involvement

One of the main reasons a benefactor nation chooses to engage in a proxy conflict is the ability to hide or downplay their involvement. In the case of Vietnam it was far from secret that the U.S. was involved. The explanation here is very simple. During the cold war the nuclear threat kept the United States and the Soviet Union from engaging in all out war with each other. However, they still wanted the ability to effect regional outcomes. One of the reasons a country may decide to engage in a proxy war is to prevent the rapid escalation between the two benefactors that would result in an all out war (Byman, 2018). This fits very well for the cold war rationale that would have been on the minds of both the United States and the Soviet Union. The threat of mutually assured destruction in the event of a nuclear war was looming and both countries wanted to avoid this destruction (Sokolski, 2004).

In this instance, the USSR’s rationale was very similar to the United States’. The Soviet Union was just as afraid of a nuclear war as the United States were. Providing support to the communist Viet Cong in North Vietnam was a way for the Soviet Union to attempt to expand communist influence in Asia without engaging in conflict directly with the United States.

### Increasing chances of success

The last criteria is whether the involvement of the benefactor forces would increase the chance of success for the proxies. In the case of Vietnam this is certainly true. At the start of the Vietnam war, Vietnam had only recently escaped colonial rule. The country was fragmented, and the new governments were still solidifying control. The north Vietnamese were mounting a very

successful offensive into South Vietnam. Before the U.S. increased its involvement the Viet Cong were close to completely overtaking the South Vietnamese (Spector, 2019). The United States was unable to decisively win this war despite their extensive involvement. The United States is a global power, their military capacity was unparalleled. If they could not do it with American help it would have been all but impossible for the South Vietnamese forces to have been able to hold off the North Vietnamese without any outside assistance.

The Soviet Union began getting heavily involved in the Vietnam war after the United States did which increased the North's chance of success. Although they already had an upper hand, Russian involvement ensured protection from major U.S. retaliation. Because the Soviet Union also had nuclear weapons this deterred the U.S. from completely invading the North or deploying nuclear weapons against them (Kimball, 1997).

### The Korean War

The Korean war shared a lot of similarities with the Vietnam war. After World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union shared control of the Koreas. North Korea, above the 38th parallel, was under Russian control, while South Korea was occupied by the U.S.. Both installed regimes who claimed to be the true rulers of all of Korea. The war began when North Korea began pushing down into South Korean territory. The Soviet Union backed the north and the United States backed the south. The type of aid was similar to during the Vietnam war. The USSR provided mostly advisors and military equipment while the U.S. also provided troops. The two fought bitterly for three years before declaring a ceasefire with no change in the location of the border. Today, the war has still not technically ended (Stack, 2018).

### Alignment of interests

The Korean war was one of the earliest examples of the United States seeking to stop the spread of communism in Asia. In this conflict, they not only wanted to obstruct Russia's interests in the region, but China's as well. China was also a significant ally of North Korea during the war. They sent forces who fought directly against Americans. As another global communist power the United States wanted to contain them as much as the Soviets (Stack, 2018). After World War II, when Nazi Germany was no longer a threat the U.S. considered the spread of communism the biggest threat to national security. The United States was concerned that the insurgence into South Korea could be a precursor to similar events in West Germany or Iran (Weatherby 1993).

An alignment of interests of the Soviet Union and the North Koreans is not so straightforward as the examples we have seen so far. Their main concern was not expansionist in terms of spreading communism, but more protectionist. According to an internal document of the Soviet Foreign ministry regarding the Yalta conference, the Soviets were mainly concerned with Korea being a ground for aggression against the USSR (Weatherby, 1993, p. 11.). The North Koreans themselves were fueled by a belief that they were the rightful rulers of the entire peninsula (Stack, 2018). Although their goals were not completely in line, the Korean war was still a way for both parties to try and achieve their objectives. The Soviets could prevent the Americans from gaining too much influence in the region, which would likely lead to "aggression" against them, while helping the North Koreans attempt to conquer the south.

#### Level of involvement

Just as with the Vietnam war the incentive for using proxies in this conflict was the significant threat of an all out war. In the 1950s the Cold War was just beginning. Only a year



before the start of the Korean War, the Soviet Union successfully developed an atomic bomb thus making the threat of war between the two global powers even more dangerous. Although we now know that expansion was not the USSR's goal, at least in Korea, this was what the Americans at the time feared. By supporting Koreans in the South they were able to curtail the expansion of communism in the region by the Soviets without directly attacking them and risking widespread devastation ("US Enters the Korean Conflict," 2016).

The calculation for the Soviet Union was very similar. They had recently seen the destruction that the U.S. had caused in Japan, and they had reason to fear the same thing happening to them if an all out war broke out between the two countries. In fact, it is likely that Soviet involvement in the Korean war would have been even greater if Stalin had not been so fearful of a "direct confrontation with the United States," (Xiaoming, 2002).

#### Increasing chances of success

This case is very similar to the Vietnam war. For both sides the chance of success was dramatically increased by the presence of their benefactors. Both regimes were very young and neither had much experience or military equipment, and were still recovering from World War II. The much more advanced weapons and military expertise of both nations made it much more likely that each side could prevail. In reality the involvement of both benefactors, along with China for North Korea, effectively cancelled each other out resulting in no real resolution (Stack, 2018).

## Yemen

### Saudi Arabia in Yemen: a brief introduction

The Saudi Arabian intervention has led to widespread violence and suffering in Yemen including towards civilians. As part of their intervention, Saudi Arabia created an almost complete blockade of Yemen's ports of entry that makes it incredibly difficult for food and humanitarian supplies to come into the country. As of December 2018, 73,000 Yemeni citizens were facing famine conditions. Although this does not meet the twenty percent threshold necessary to declare a famine for the entire nation, the situation is likely to worsen if the war continues (Gramer, Lynch, 2018).

The humanitarian crisis is also exacerbated by the civilian casualties caused by Saudi Arabia's airstrikes. Over the years of the civil war there has been backlash over Saudi Arabian missiles hitting nonmilitary targets such as weddings, a school bus, and marketplaces killing many civilians (Sharp, 2019). Many also express dissatisfaction with the fact that the United States provides many of the weapons used by Saudi Arabia.

The United States provides logistical support for Saudi Arabia's venture in Yemen mostly consisting of weapons sales and intelligence ("Yemen Crisis," 2018). Recently, there has been significant backlash over the U.S.'s involvement in the civil war. As a part of a larger rebuke over United States policy towards Saudi Arabia the Senate passed a resolution with a margin of 63- 37 to end U.S. support for the war (Gramer, Seligman, 2018). Even more recently, the United State House of Representatives also passed the resolution with bipartisan support after several failed attempts (Desiderio, 2019). On April 16, 2019 President Trump gave his second ever veto on the resolution ending U.S. involvement in Yemen. Because of the President's veto,

policy in Yemen remains unchanged, however, the fact that members of both parties in congress want to end the war show that opinion is changing (Baker, Landler, 2019).

#### Iran in Yemen: a brief introduction

Another important piece of the conflict is Iran's involvement. After Hadi's installation, Iran began their intervention on the opposite side. As Saudi Arabia and a United States led coalition is working towards reinstalling Hadi, Iran is providing support to the Houthi movement in a more indirect way. Iran provides military support to the Houthis. This comes in the form of weapons such as Iranian missiles and drones. Some of these missiles have been used to hit targets in Saudi Arabian territory. There have also been reports of Iran sending officials to advise the Houthi leadership (Georgy, Saul, Hafezi, 2017).

#### Alignment of interests

The basis for both Iran and Saudi Arabia's is religious sectarianism. The division and hostility between Sunni and Shia or Shiite muslims in the Middle East is apparent in many conflicts throughout the region and Yemen is no exception. The Houthis, the main anti-government group fighting in the civil war, is a Shia group. Although they are not exactly the same as the Shia denomination that is common in Iran, they share fundamental similarities. The Houthis rose to prominence in Yemen during the 1990s and became radicalized after the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States. They are significantly inspired by Hezbollah, a Shia group in Lebanon that Iran also supports. The Houthis were very unhappy with President Hadi, a Sunni, coming to power (Riedel, 2017).

Iran and Saudi Arabia have been regional rivals for a long time. The reasons for this are complicated, but recently the main sources of contention arise from sectarianism, nationalism, and competition for regional hegemony. As I already discussed, Iran is a Shia nation; one of very few Shia majority countries in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has a primarily Sunni population. As with many countries, this causes animosity (“The Iranian–Saudi Hegemonic Rivalry,” 2017).

The competition for regional dominance between the two countries became very apparent after the Iranian revolution. After the revolutionary government came to power they rejected and wanted to distance themselves from Western influence over the region. Saudi Arabia is one of the United States’ closest allies in the region. The new Iranian government supported a pan-Islamic view as part of their revolutionary worldview that they hoped to export to the rest of the Middle East. The fact that Saudi Arabia was so friendly to the West made them a top rival in this goal. Much of the rivalry between the two countries is framed as a struggle for their outlook to dominate the region (“The Iranian–Saudi Hegemonic Rivalry,” 2017).

There is also a strong nationalist streak in Iranian politics. It is important to make the distinction that Iran is not an Arab country. Many Iranian officials, who are Persian by ethnicity, view ethnic Arabs in a negative light. Saudi Arabia as an Arab country and the most powerful one exacerbates the other factors that lead to their rivalry. I have seen this in my own family. My father, an Iranian immigrant, is very indignant at any implication that our family could have Arab roots. He has proudly proclaimed throughout my life that our family has lived in Iran for hundreds of years. Even more so, he is very resentful over the possibility that our last name might be Arabic. One possible translation of the name “Riazi” is “from Riyadh”. It is impossible to know at this point whether the Arabic or Farsi translation is correct, but it is very telling that

he would be so upset over this possibility. Based on my interactions with other Iranians, it is not at all out of character. Some of this has even passed down to myself. I am very defensive over mischaracterizations of Iran as an Arab nation, and am proud to describe myself as Persian. This is of course anecdotal evidence, but it shows that even today there is an ethnic animosity that still exists.

This comes back to the case of the Houthis in Yemen. The Houthis are staunchly opposed to Hadi's government which was installed and remains heavily backed by Saudi Arabia. Iran supports the Houthis because they have a common enemy in Saudi Arabia. They want to avoid Yemen becoming another ally of Saudi Arabia and the West.

The same can be said of Saudi Arabia with Hadi and the anti-Houthis. They want to avoid a country they share a border with becoming an ally of Iran, and becoming a predominantly Shia country.

#### Level of Involvement

Just as with the cold war conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia does not want an all out war with Iran. However, the analysis is slightly different in this case. The threat of mutually assured destruction is not nearly as prominent. While the United States and the USSR were major nuclear power neither Saudi Arabia or Iran is. Iran's expanding nuclear program was a threat, but the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) more commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal significantly decreased this threat. It is important to note that although the United States is no longer a part of this agreement Iran is still adhering to the regulations stipulated therein (Murphy, 2019).

Iran is also commonly employs what's known as "hybrid war tactics." This includes things such as incremental escalation and nonmilitary coercive acts. Despite all of their posturing they would suffer tremendously from a war with a major power, especially the United States. By employing these tactics they are able to influence events in their favor without a war. One such coercive act is the use of proxy forces. By using proxies they can avoid rapid escalation. It also shields them from a backlash from the international community that might come with outwardly influencing certain events (Dalton, 2017).

It is more complicated to ascertain why Saudi Arabia is using proxies in Yemen. They do not have much to fear from a war with Iran. Although Iran could certainly do them a lot of damage they would likely be able to rely on the support of the United States and Europe as well just as they have relied on that same coalition to support their exploits in Yemen. Additionally, there hasn't seemed to be a need to fear an international backlash which would justify wanting to downplay their involvement. We have seen with the recent international scandal over the killing of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi that Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States is very safe. Although the United States congress seems willing to reassess support on the Yemen issue, there doesn't seem to be a willingness to distance themselves from Saudi Arabia as a whole.

Public opinion is also something to consider for Saudi Arabia. Polling in the Arab world can be difficult, but there are resources to draw from. In the long running polling described in the book *The World Through Arab Eyes* by Dr. Shibley Telhami, countries are asked which country they perceive to be the biggest threat between Israel, the United States, and Iran. Aggregately throughout the Arab world, Iran has consistently been considered a much lower threat than the

United States. When the Yemeni civil war started, 59% of the Arab population considered the United States their biggest threat while only 18% considered Iran the biggest threat. This is likely caused by the fear of imperialism into the Middle East caused mainly by the United States' engagement in Iraq. Despite many disagreements with Iran, they have remained relatively isolated. While they would very much like to expand their influence in the region they do not employ the vast military action that the United States has. Leadership in Saudi Arabia, especially crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, justifies their involvement in Yemen by saying they must fight an Iranian threat. Even if that threat does exist to some extent, to counter it they ally themselves with a country that most of their population considers to be a larger threat. Since Saudi Arabia is not a democracy they are not beholden to public what the population thinks of the government's actions, but it is still another layer to dissect in terms of Saudi Arabia's motivations (Telhami, 2013).

Without other options, this leaves cost as the most likely cause. Engaging in wars, especially with another major power, is extremely expensive. Although proxy wars are also costly, they are significantly less costly than a traditional war (Byman, 2018).

#### Increasing chances of success

In the case of Yemen both sides have an increased chance of success based on the involvement of the benefactors. The Houthis are an anti-government militia force that has been able to take control of many major cities throughout Yemen. They have been able to do this despite the much greater involvement of the Saudi Arabian military (Riedel, 2017). It is unlikely they could do this without Iranian aid.

The situation is similar in the case of the anti-Houthis. Saudi Arabia played a major role in installing Hadi, the current president. Based on the success that the Houthis have had it is unlikely if not certain that Hadi would not be the current president without Saudi Arabia's involvement nor would they have been able to regain territory from the Houthis (Riedel, 2017).

### Drawing Comparisons

From these overviews some trends are immediately apparent. The first is that the predominant factor in all three cases was the alignment of interests between the groups. With the cold war cases it was about political ideology. There was an existential struggle between democratic and communist countries that was headed by the United States and Russia, two global powers. Although both countries would be considered global powers, they were fighting for regional dominance in southeast Asia. Southeast Asia was one of the main regions, along with eastern Europe, where the communist versus democratic struggle was playing out. Both countries wanted to cement their power in the region. The proxy groups in both Vietnam and Korea were following the same ideological struggle just on a smaller scale.

In the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia they are global powers competing for regional hegemony in the Middle East. The situation differs slightly in that they have competing religious ideologies rather than political ideology. However, it the same as the cold war conflicts in that the proxies are fighting a battle for similar ideas on a smaller scale.

Second, there is a lot of overlap in terms of the benefactor nations wanting to keep their level of involvement in these conflicts low. During the cold war, the United States and the Soviet Union wanted to promote their interests internationally without risking the devastation that an all



out war between the two would be. In Yemen the countries want to downplay their involvement even though the rationals are more ambiguous.

Again, the situation with Saudi Arabia and Iran is the same, but on a smaller scale. Since they aren't nuclear powers a war between the two countries wouldn't be as devastating, but it is still undesirable. There is also a difference worth noting between the cold war conflicts and the Yemeni civil war. Saudi Arabia and Iran seem also to be acting partly out of a desire to avoid an international backlash. This was not a concern for the US or the USSR.

Lastly, in all three wars we see the chances of success for the proxy forces greatly increase as soon as the benefactors become involved. In these conflicts the proxy forces are inexperienced or nongovernmental militias. Getting support from countries with highly sophisticated militaries and weapons makes it significantly more likely that they will be able to achieve their goals. In the end this effect is always cancelled out because both sides receive support from similarly abled nations.

### Discussion

Despite differences in these conflicts in the scale of intervention and the motivations for entering the conflict, this conflict can easily still be described as a proxy war. Clearly, both sides have met the prerequisites for the classification. Classifying the Yemeni civil war as a proxy war is not a meaningless classification. When powerful countries use proxy forces to advance their interests in a conflict it exacerbates the conflict, and increases the negative consequences.

Throughout modern history we have seen how destructive proxy wars can be. Small, isolated conflicts become longer and more deadly when great powers get involved. When benefactor nations get involved they increase instability in their region, and affect outcomes for

the worst. After having established the similarities between the Yemeni civil war and the Vietnam and Korean wars the international community should take steps to end the outside involvement. The Vietnam and Korean wars were extremely destructive and had consequences that have lasted to today. In Vietnam, thousands of Americans died in a war that we could not win. In Korea the conflict between the north and south is still ongoing. North Korea has developed nuclear weapons and is a significant security threat to the United States. In both conflicts the wars dragged on for many years and there was no clear winner. We don't want the same kind of outcomes for Yemen. There is no way to know what would have happened in Korea, Vietnam, or Yemen if outside powers had never gotten involved, but it is reasonable to surmise that the conflicts would have been much smaller and contained. All of these conflicts began with civil wars in small countries without much power or influence. The United States congress has taken important steps, but it is important that they go further, and that other countries such as Great Britain and France who make up the coalition that supports Saudi Arabia in Yemen to follow suit.

### Conclusion

Although they were not the first, the proxy wars in Vietnam and Korea between the United States and the Soviet Union, were the first proxy conflicts that came to the broad attention of the American public. Using the standards for appraising a proxy war of level of involvement, alignment of interests, and chance of success, it is clear that these are proxy wars. Thousands of Americans protested against the Vietnam war and were unhappy with the

casualties that both these wars brought. It is not contested that proxy wars bring about negative outcomes and makes small regional conflicts worse.

Now, reporting of bad actors using proxy forces across the world is often brought to our focus. Iran especially, is criticized for use of various proxies throughout the Middle East. Clearly, in the case of Yemen the situation is only getting worse. The conflict has dragged on for eight years and it doesn't seem to be ending. The United States is acting indirectly on behalf of one of the benefactor countries in this conflict, Saudi Arabia. Even if the U.S. is not the one dropping bombs over Yemen we still bear some of the responsibility for the escalation there. If we want to escape similar long term ramifications in Yemen as we continue to see in Vietnam and the Koreas we must avoid making the same mistakes and learn from history.

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