



# Middle East Studies

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## Planning for the Gray Zone: The Yemen Quagmire

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The conflict in Yemen is in its fourth year, and by many [assessments](#) warring factions appear to be locked in a stalemate. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and their coalition partners are engaged in a campaign on the Red Sea coast to break the stalemate, shift the balance of forces in their favor, and secure maritime traffic. Secessionist factions, government-allied forces, and various local militias are competing to consolidate gains in the south and east of the county. The US and its allies have continued to pursue a counterterrorism campaign to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in Yemen. The complexity of Yemen's multifaceted conflict is emblematic of the international security environment and the types of intersecting conflicts that policymakers and military planners face when advancing US national security interests and meeting the challenges posed by revisionist actors in the gray zone.

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### Gray Zone Challenges and the US National Defense Strategy

The 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America [describes](#) an international security environment dominated by revisionist powers, rogue regimes, and a variety of non-state or 'hybrid' actors competing across all dimensions of power. These actors are increasing efforts short of armed conflict by expanding coercion to new fronts, violating principles of sovereignty, exploiting ambiguity, and deliberately blurring the lines between civil and military goals. Such competition may be best understood in the context of what are described in a US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) white paper as gray zone challenges, [defined](#) as,

competitive interaction among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality, [...] characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks. [...] Gray zone challenges can be understood as a pooling of diverse conflicts exhibiting common characteristics.

Notably, combining these challenges does not imply a single solution, since each situation contains unique actors and aspects. Overall, gray zone challenges rise above normal everyday peacetime geo-political competition and are aggressive, perspective-dependent, and ambiguous [italics in original removed].

Far from black and white the multifaceted conflict in Yemen is colored in shades of gray, requiring a deeper understanding of the actors and security environment, and a more nuanced approach to meet the national security challenges posed by multiple layers of competition.

## Yemen as a Theater for Gray Zone Coercion

Within Yemen's civil war, various actors are seeking to leverage the internal dynamics of the conflict to further their own geopolitical and strategic interests, while attempting to avoid direct military confrontation with their adversaries and geopolitical competitors. This is especially true of Iran and AQAP, which have adopted gray zone coercion strategies to disrupt the established regional order. At the same time, however, domestic warring factions have adopted [strategies](#) that take advantage of Yemen's strategic location, regional threat perceptions, and the geopolitical competition taking place in the region. Indeed, Yemen's competing factions [understand](#) their economic dependence on external actors and factors, and foreign preoccupation with security challenges in the southwest Arabian Peninsula, and such an understanding has played a significant role in the development of a domestic elite strategic culture that has contributed to perpetual insecurity and internal war in Yemen.

For Riyadh, Houthi expansionism in Yemen is tantamount to Iranian expansionism along Saudi Arabia's long and porous southern border and potential Iranian influence along two of the region's most strategic waterways. Making matters worse for Riyadh is the threat that developments in Yemen pose to Saudi Arabia's ambitious economic reform agenda. In the spring of 2016, Saudi Arabia's crown prince Muhammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud [announced](#) his country's ambitious Vision 2030 blueprint to reduce the countries dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and develop its public service sector by transforming the Kingdom's "unique strategic location into a global hub connecting three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa." Just as Saudi Arabia is seeking to leverage its strategic location in the region, so too are a number of other actors in the region, and the ongoing conflict in Yemen represents a significant geopolitical flashpoint in a strategic corner of the Middle East, and a case that highlights the intersection of regional geopolitical competition.

Yemen's competing elites, to include the Houthis, have understood Riyadh's economic and national security priorities and have pursued an asymmetric strategy along these lines. This is most apparent in the repeated targeting of Aramco facilities under development in Jizan and maritime traffic in the Red Sea. With an Aramco refinery complex as its anchor, the Jizan Economic City in southwestern Jizan Province is [considered](#) a pivotal component of a Saudi strategy to deliver economic transformation in the region, attract foreign investment, and jumpstart economic diversification. The 400,000 barrel-per-day facility is expected to be fully operational in 2019. Jizan Province, however borders the Saada Province of Yemen, a stronghold of the Houthi rebels, and has seen significant spillover from the ongoing conflict. In April 2017, Saudi forces [foiled](#) an attempted attack with a remote controlled boat laden with explosives on an oil product distribution center in Jizan, and while recent missiles targeting the Saudi capital of Riyadh and drones targeting Abu Dhabi airport in the UAE have made international headlines, Jizan, owing in part to its proximity to Yemen, has continued to see a more constant barrage of attacks from across its southern border.

In recent months, as the conflict has moved up the Red Sea coast, attacks targeting the oil industry and civilian areas in Jizan, and attacks on maritime traffic in particular have been on the rise. It is not only the number of attacks (with over one hundred and fifty missiles [launched](#) from Yemen since 2015) and increased range of attacks (including missiles targeting Riyadh) that are

troublesome, but also the diversity in terms of methods and delivery of attacks, ranging from artillery and missile launches to drones and remote-controlled boats to cross border raids and mining operations. Posing a credible and persistent threat to the Saudi economy and international shipping has become a de facto strategy not only for local forces aligned with the Houthis, as they seek to gain leverage in negotiations with warring factions supported by the Saudi-led coalition and consolidate territorial and political gains, but also for Tehran as part of its broader gray zone strategy in the region.

## Iran as a Gray Zone Actor

Gray zone actors are [defined](#) as “powers engaging in attempts to achieve one’s security objectives without resort to direct and sizable use of force.” Iran has pursued such gray zone coercion strategies throughout the region, and can be classified as a gray zone actor in Yemen. For Tehran, Yemen is a low-cost, high-reward theater in its broader regional strategy—requiring few resources and providing ambiguity as to its involvement, while straining Saudi Arabia and its allies politically, economically, militarily, and morally, and distracting Riyadh from Iran’s activities elsewhere. Tehran has been opportunistic in the gray zone and is attempting to capitalize on the conflict by exploiting the “blackmail our neighbor” ([see MES Insights v8i3](#)) mentality of Yemen’s warring factions and the ambiguity that Yemen’s internal operating environment provides, to advance its interests in its ongoing regional geopolitical struggle with Saudi Arabia and its allies.

The Houthi leadership in Sanaa and Iran’s military and political leadership in Tehran have repeatedly denied claims of Iranian military involvement in Yemen. Tehran, however, continually capitalizes on Houthi missile and maritime attacks with ambiguous warnings and statements of support for the Houthis. One such instance came following a 25 July 2018 missile attack on a Saudi Aramco tanker by Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, which [resulted](#) in a temporary suspension of oil exports through the Bab al-Mandeb by Saudi Aramco. In a war of words between Washington and Tehran, the commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, General Qassem Soleimani, [warned](#) that, “The Red Sea, which was secure, is no longer secure with the American presence ... [US President Donald] Trump should know that we are nation of martyrdom and that we await him”. The Houthis subsequently [announced](#) a two week “unilateral halt in naval military operations” in the Red Sea. The entire episode underscores the threat that the protracted conflict in Yemen poses to freedom of navigation and the complexity of the conflict. General Soleimani’s comments in particular is another [example](#) of Tehran’s attempts to shape the information environment and regional threat perception as part of its broader gray zone coercion strategy, taking advantage of a number of internal wars, factionalization, and political instability throughout the region.

While the extent of Iranian support to and influence over the Houthis continues to be a subject of debate, there is substantial [evidence](#) of Iranian technology and weapons transfers to Yemen, [including](#) drone and missile technology. Such transfers have a significant impact on the threat perception and security calculus of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, and the US. They have weighed in the calculations of military, political, commercial, and tribal factions in Yemen. Iran’s role in Yemen has also distracted attention and resources from other conflict in the region, which are arguably of greater strategic significance to Tehran. Furthermore, missile and drone attacks by Houthi rebels have proved useful to Iran’s military planners in assessing the effectiveness of Saudi missile defense systems. Such attacks allow Iranian military advisors to observe Saudi defenses for potential vulnerabilities with limited threat of a direct military response from Riyadh or its allies. That said, Iran is not the only gray zone actor exploiting the conflict in Yemen.

## Non-state Actors in the Gray Zone

In addition to Houthi attacks on maritime traffic in the Red Sea and threats to mine the Bab al-

Mandeb—similar to threats made by Iran to close the Straits of Hormuz—the threat posed by AQAP to the freedom of navigation and maritime security has increased as the Yemen conflict has dragged on, including [speculation](#) that AQAP may have been responsible for an October 2016 attack on a tanker transiting the Bab al-Mandeb. The ongoing conflict in Yemen may well enable jihadist groups such as AQAP and IS to threaten freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aden, Bab al-Mandeb, and Red Sea, as part of a broader maritime [strategy](#). Although the threat that AQAP poses to maritime traffic in the Red Sea is currently negligible, the threat still exists and has the potential to grow within the current security environment. Even so, AQAP has used the conflict to advance its interests in different ways already.

Within the conflict AQAP has sought to expand its territorial safe haven in Yemen and worked to forge closer relationships with local actors. Making matters more challenging, within an environment dominated by shifting alliances, an absence of more reliable security partners, and warlordism, the prevailing [thinking](#) among a number of local and regional forces has been “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. This has been especially true in the ground campaign against the Houthis with the primary [benefactor](#) being AQAP. Such an approach has complicated efforts on other fronts—especially the US-led counterterrorism campaign against AQAP and IS—and is likely to have serious long-term security implications.

## Revisionist Actors, Gray Zone Competition, and the Yemen Quagmire

The threats emanating from Yemen are complex, ranging from the threats to Saudi oil infrastructure and freedom of navigation by the Houthi’s and elite competition in Yemen and Iranian meddling in Saudi Arabia’s backyard amidst heightened regional tensions and geopolitical competition to the growing threat posed by jihadists such as AQAP and IS, as they continue to take advantage of the security vacuum, elite competition, and warlordism in Yemen. Yemen’s internal dynamics and protracted civil war are prime conditions for gray zone coercion strategies of state actors, including Iran, and non-state actors, such as AQAP and IS.

Within such an environment, large scale application of conventional military force, capacity building programs, and by-with-through approaches are unlikely to be effective and may even prove counterproductive, in resolving the underlying drivers of what is at its core an internal war, and in eliminating threats that a protracted conflict poses to maritime and national security interests in the MENA region and beyond. Yemen is no stranger to foreign intervention and gray zone competition. In 1981 Professor J.E. Peterson [wrote](#) of the involvement of international and regional powers in the southwest Arabian Peninsula that “too often, the result has been misperception, misunderstandings, and overblown reactions to purely domestic trends and events”. Such was the case in the military coup and ensuing civil war between Egyptian-backed republican forces and Saudi backed royalist forces in northern Yemen in the 1960s, the numerous coup attempts, assassinations, and cross border clashes between the Saudi-backed northern Yemen Arab Republic and Soviet-backed southern People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen in the 1970s and 1980s, and even Yemen’s 1994 civil war and developments culminating in the 2011 uprisings.

Yemen’s internal war has drawn in a host of external players supporting competing political, military, and tribal factions, as well as terrorists and warlords of various stripes. Within the gray zone ambiguity reigns and enables the strategies pursued by revisionist actors. Failure to better understand the background, constraints, and dynamics of elite competition, especially within an international security environment dominated by revisionist actors, geopolitical competition, and intersecting internal wars, may leave some perpetually trapped in the Yemen quagmire.

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