

# Love Thy Neighbor: Saudi Arabia Needs Regional Help to End the War

by [Elana DeLozier \(/experts/elana-delozier\)](#)

Mar 31, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/ahb-jark-almmlkt-alrbyat-alswdyt-bhajt-aly-msadt-aqlymyt-lanha-alhrb\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Elana DeLozier \(/experts/elana-delozier\)](#)

Elana DeLozier was the Rubin Family Fellow in the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy from 2018-2022, where she specialized in Yemen, the Gulf states, and nuclear weapons and proliferation.



Articles & Testimony

---

**After five years of fighting in Yemen, Riyadh has been left to deal with the conflict largely on its own, but the Gulf states will need to band together again if they hope to facilitate another transition of the sort seen in 2011.**

**A** lot can change in five years. At the outset of the war, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was ostensibly intact, even as the first Qatar rift in 2014 had shown cracks in its unity. As a result, when Saudi Arabia decided to intervene in Yemen, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Qatar followed suit. Meanwhile, Kuwait positioned itself as a mediator and Oman stayed on the sidelines. Now, five years on, with the exception of small Bahraini and Emirati contingents, the GCC has left the war in Yemen to Saudi Arabia.

## SAUDI ARABIA

**F**rom the outset, Saudi Arabia could envision only a military victory in Yemen, persisting with this objective well beyond when most military analysts thought they could achieve one. In an abrupt shift in the fall of 2019 after the attack on its Aramco facilities, Saudi Arabia entered direct talks with the Houthis. Those talks have been slow-going as each party has different points of leverage over the other. The Saudi desire for a face-saving exit has given leverage to the Houthis who may not want to grant such an exit without something major in return. The Saudis conversely have economic leverage, with the ability to provide reconstruction, jobs for northern Yemenis and border trade opportunities near Sa'ada, the home base of the Houthi movement. The Houthis' increasing economic strain enhances the value of this leverage. Finally, the Saudis and the Houthis both understand that the latter will be hard-pressed to get international legitimacy as part of [some future Yemeni government](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-caretaker-president-clings-to-legitimacy-in->

**yemen)** without Riyadh on board.

Yet the Saudi bargaining position may be becoming precarious. The **Saudi-instigated oil war** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-saudi-russian-oil-price-war-the-u.s.-blinks-first>) with Russia, coronavirus and a generally gloomy economic outlook may corrode Riyadh's ability to deliver economically if a deal is not reached soon. Most worryingly, the Houthis are pushing hard on the frontlines in Yemen **with some success** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/escalating-houthi-offensives-in-yemen-u.s.-options>), undermining Riyadh's ability to drive things to a political solution and raising the possibility that the end of the war may not result in a transitional government after all.

In addition to talks with the Houthis, Saudi Arabia took on responsibility for turbulent southern Yemen after the UAE largely withdrew its forces last year. Although the kingdom brokered the Riyadh Agreement between the Hadi government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), it has not been able to get the parties to implement it. All eyes were on Saudi at the end of 2019 to use talks with the Houthis and the southerners as a gateway to comprehensive UN-brokered peace talks; unable to demonstrate even small wins, Saudi Arabia's political maneuverability is steadily shrinking.

## UAE

**A**bu Dhabi's experience has vastly differed from that of Saudi Arabia. By running ground operations in the south independently of the Saudis, the UAE was able to demonstrate its military superiority. Most notably, the Emiratis take credit for helping push the Houthis out of Aden and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula out of Mukalla. They also set up a logistics and training hub in Assab, Eritrea, to develop southern so-called "Elite Forces," following the American 'By-With-Through' doctrine of enabling local forces to do the brunt of fighting. Yemen was, in some ways, a proof of concept; UAE forces had spent two decades training alongside US forces in several major international deployments. Yet, the war came with a terrible cost as well. Within six months, the UAE had suffered the shock of losing nearly 60 Emirati soldiers in a single incident—a heavy toll the country had never before paid. Moreover, the UAE's reputation in Washington was tainted by its role in Yemen, where coalition airstrikes too often resulted in significant and avoidable civilian casualties. These factors—along with a coalition decision not to push into Houthi-held Hudaydah city in 2018—catalyzed the UAE decision to draw down in Yemen last year, leaving a very messy bit of southern politics for the Saudis to sort out.

## OMAN

**O**man, meanwhile, has played a fundamentally different role—that of facilitator and host to the warring factions. In keeping with its traditional neutralist foreign policy, Oman stayed out of the war and opened its borders to any Yemenis that sought political refuge. This put Oman **at odds with its neighbors** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/challenges-await-omans-new-sultan-as-mourning-period-ends>). The groups that have taken up the offer tend toward an anti-Saudi or anti-UAE persuasion; those who are pro-UAE or pro-Saudi tend to live in their patron country.

The Houthi negotiating team, unable to easily get into and out of Sana'a due to airspace restrictions, has based itself in Muscat. This allows the team to more regularly meet with diplomats, the UN special envoy and other international parties. Oman often facilitates these meetings, and in the early days of the war, the Omanis helped parse the then-alien ways of the international community for the Houthis. Members of Islah, the fragmented Islamist political party in Yemen, are also based in Muscat as are a few key members of the once-dominant General People's Congress (GPC). Oman also plays host to protestors who oppose the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra, Yemen's easternmost governorate that shares a long land border with the sultanate.

Saudi Arabia, long frustrated with Oman's hosting of the Houthis and its friendly relations with Iran, claims Tehran

has been sending the Houthis weapons—including advanced missile components—over the Omani border that were then used to attack Saudi territory. Oman has vehemently denied these allegations, but regardless, the Saudis sent a major anti-smuggling force to Al-Mahra in 2017, where it has continually expanded.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Five years on, the strains of the conflict on several Gulf relationships are obvious. The Yemen conflict alone did not split the Gulf states from one another, but it has been the lens through which the splits are clearly visible. To start, the Qatar rift of 2017 led to the expulsion of Qatari soldiers from Yemen. While the joint effort initially brought the Saudis and Emiratis closer together, over time the Yemen conflict made clear the two were never entirely in lockstep. They did not operate in tandem militarily, and they prioritized the Iran and Muslim Brotherhood threats differently, with Saudi Arabia focused on the Iran-backed Houthis and the Emiratis focused on supporting groups that opposed the Muslim Brotherhood. The Emirati drawdown in Yemen in 2019 was done with little coordination with Riyadh and left the Saudis responsible for solving the Houthi threat in the north and for **triaging the government-STC relationship (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/un-panel-highlights-command-and-control-issues-in-yemen>)** in the south. Meanwhile, the Saudi and Emirati missions in Al-Mahra unquestionably raised anxiety in Oman.

To end the Yemen war, the Gulf states will need to band together just like they did in 2011, when they worked in common with the international community to effectuate Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation and Yemen's transition. Already, it seems some version of this is underway, with senior Saudis and Omanis meeting several times recently. The United States and United Kingdom should support these efforts, as they appear to be doing with recent visits to Oman and Saudi Arabia. The UAE should be brought in as necessary. Kuwait may have a mediator role to play. After five years of war, Saudi Arabia may be left largely alone with the conflict in Yemen, but it will almost certainly need its neighbors' help to bring it to an end.

*Elana DeLozier is a research fellow in The Washington Institute's Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy. This article was originally published [on the website of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies](https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/9518) (<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/9518>). ❖*

*Yemen Review*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### **Targeting the Islamic State: Jihadist Military Threats and the U.S. Response**

February 16, 2022, starting at 12:00 p.m. EST (1700 GMT)

◆  
Ido Levy,  
Craig Whiteside

(/policy-analysis/targeting-islamic-state-jihadist-military-threats-and-us-response)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region

Feb 9, 2022



Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil

(/policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## The Middle East at the Olympics: Six Countries Compete While Great Power Politics on Display

Feb 9, 2022



Carol Silber

(/policy-analysis/middle-east-olympics-six-countries-compete-while-great-power-politics-display)

### TOPICS

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)