Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen

by **James Jeffrey (/experts/james-jeffrey)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

If the United States more openly addressed the wider strategic threat posed by Iran's role in Yemen, it could convince its allies in the Saudi-led coalition to modify their controversial military tactics, reduce civilian suffering, and support a serious peace effort.

On November 17, Ambassador James Jeffrey addressed a hearing held by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. The following are his prepared remarks.

Mr. Co-Chairs, members of the Commission, it is an honor to be here to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Your other witnesses have far more professional experience in dealing with humanitarian crises than I, although I have had some experience over my thirty-five-year foreign service career. Rather, the best contribution I can make to is to discuss the strategic environment in which the conflict is taking place.

Understanding that environment is essential not only to grasping the nature of the conflict fueling the humanitarian crisis, but also to resolving it. In Yemen, advancing traditional U.S. strategic policy goals and preventing humanitarian catastrophe might appear at odds. They are not. Even if the United States were to totally cease its cooperation with the Saudis and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, the war likely would continue, as would the risk of it descending into a world-class humanitarian crisis comparable to Syria's. Conversely, more American attention to the strategic stakes and our partners' concerns could generate a compensating willingness by them to listen to our humanitarian concerns and political approaches.

THE UNDERLYING CONFLICT

This underlying conflict in the region, of which Yemen is only one theater, can be summed up succinctly as a struggle between Iran and its various mainly subnational allies on the one hand, and a regional coalition led by Saudi Arabia and other GCC states on the other, with Turkey and Israel as "partial" players. This struggle could spark

a Sunni-Shiite conflagration throughout the region, bringing levels of violence particularly against civilians greater than that seen in the Syrian civil war and the Islamic State's campaign, and far greater than what we have experienced in Yemen.

U.S. policy should thus focus (1) tactically, on limiting the humanitarian crisis in particular by persuading U.S. partners to be more careful in military operations in return for more military coordination and better U.S. intelligence; (2) operationally, on reaching a ceasefire and eventually shifting from war to political dialogue; and (3) strategically, on addressing the overarching regional struggle between Iran and the Saudi-led coalition. It is my strong belief, from many discussions over the past eleven years with the top Saudi leadership, that the United States will not succeed even on the tactical and operational levels without giving our regional partners a way forward on the strategic Iranian regional threat.

The Obama administration's position on this conflict has both sensible and questionable elements. What's sensible is President Obama's strong belief, reiterated often, that the United States will not get dragged into a regional Sunni-Shiite conflict. After all, most of the region's Shiite population is not hostile or a danger to America.

But what's questionable is his policy -- revealed in his *Atlantic* interview earlier this year, and not effectively countered by two summits with GCC states after the Iran nuclear deal -- to promote "moral equivalence" between the Iranian and Saudi-led coalitions, or even a shift toward Iran, manifest in the interview quote that Riyadh should find a way to share the neighborhood with Tehran. Such an approach assumes things about Iran and Saudi Arabia that do not hold water: that the Saudis are anxious for an Armageddon-like conflict with Shia Islam, and that Iran is or could easily become a status quo power.

While my conversations with the top Saudi leadership document their fear and dislike of Iran and Shia Islam, I do not believe the kingdom seeks to drive the region into a sectarian conflict. But such a conflict could arise inadvertently from its efforts to contain Iran if not better coordinated with the United States.

Saudi Arabia and most regional states reject the idea of "sharing" the region with Iran. They do not see the Saudi-led alliance and the Iran coalition as having basically similar approaches to the region even if competing between themselves over specific interests -- that is, a model similar to the relationship between Pakistan and India. Rather, the GCC states and their somewhat like-minded partners in Jordan, Turkey, and Israel see themselves as status quo powers, accepting the current international and regional order, generally respecting state sovereignty and traditional state institutions, and supportive of U.S. engagement.

Iran -- whether the radical Iran of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Qods Force leader Qasem Soleimani, or the Iran of moderates such as President Hassan Rouhani and his advisor Hossein Mousavi -- is seen as a threat to the regional status quo. This view holds true whether Iran is wearing the guise of a nation-state building on a Persian imperial tradition dating back three thousand years, a revolutionary Islamic regional movement that shares roots with al-Qaeda, or the champion of the region's 15 percent Shiite population.

With considerable success Iran has expanded its influence in four Arab states, three of them majority non-Shiite: Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, plus Iraq. It struggles in every way possible to drive American power and influence from the region, and it is responsible (directly or through surrogates) for thousands of attacks against U.S. targets in Iraq and scores elsewhere -- most recently, it seems, the missile attacks on U.S. ships off Yemen's coast. Moreover, it respects neither the national sovereignty of other states nor the loyalty and integrity of their institutions. In all of the aforementioned states, it undercuts sovereignty by supporting parallel political and military institutions more loyal to Tehran than to a government in Lebanon or Damascus; call this the "Hezbollah model." Finally, it leverages "total war" policies and rhetoric against Israel to expand regional influence.

The United States is aware of the Iranian threat. As then CENTCOM Commander Gen. Lloyd Austin put it to the

Senate Armed Services Committee on March 8, "Iran continues to pursue policies that enflame sectarian tensions and threaten U.S. strategic interests." At the April 21 GCC-U.S. summit, the participants reaffirmed the need to remain vigilant about addressing Iran's destabilizing actions in the region, including its ballistic missile program and support for terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and other extremist proxies in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

Despite signing up to that affirmation, the United States has done little on the ground to counter that Iranian threat beyond the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Many believe that the administration's priority is protecting the JCPOA against an unlikely possibility of Iranian withdrawal, and that this is why it has not followed through on its commitments with the GCC. Those who have spoken to the region's friendly leaders in the past six months have heard basically the same message everywhere: "We are very concerned about Iran, and even more concerned about America's seeming abdication from its traditional regional security role."

Some defending this absence argue that Yemen is the GCC states' Vietnam War; they are in a bloody stalemate and eventually must conclude that they are losing too much, and thus withdraw as the Israelis did from southern Lebanon. That analogy is applicable, but in the opposite way. For the GCC states, especially the kingdom, this is not a war of choice far from Saudi soil. They saw what happened when the Israelis withdrew, and Iran then armed Hezbollah with 150,000 rockets and missiles that can now strike almost all of Israel.

Thus for the Saudis, Yemen is an existential conflict in two ways. First, Saudi soil and Saudi citizens are under fire, just as we have seen with Israel, from both rocket attacks and ground incursions. Second, and even more important, the GCC states see this conflict as part of a larger struggle, with the Sunni Arab states increasingly on the defensive as Iran secures footholds in Arab state after Arab state -- sometimes on the back of local Shiite populations, and in other cases via actors such as Oman and Hamas that yield for opportunistic reasons. Consequently, the attitude of the GCC states and to some degree other U.S. regional partners is "we are besieged."

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Under such circumstances, ending the very limited American military and diplomatic support for the GCC is unlikely to end the war or humanitarian crisis. Both the GCC states and the Houthis and their Iranian ally will fight on. But more American recognition of, and willingness to actually help deter, Iranian advances could generate willingness by our Arab friends to modify their tactics (especially aerial bombing), try harder to reduce civilian suffering, and support any serious peace effort.

That might not end the conflict, depending on how Iran reacts, but it could limit the extent of violence and humanitarian disaster, aid in the common fight against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, give the United States more leverage in the region, and avoid a descent into Syria-like chaos in Yemen or beyond.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq. ❖

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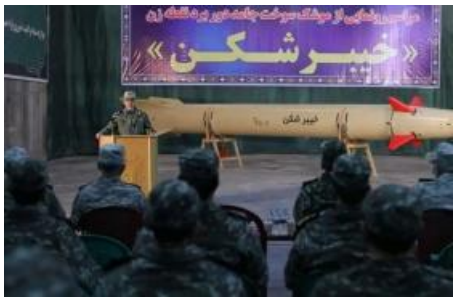

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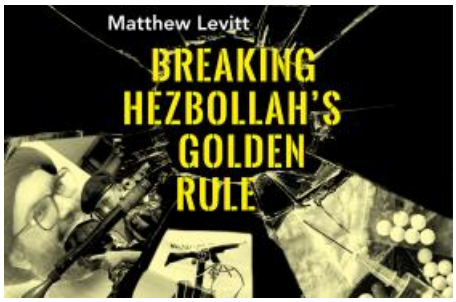

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