



Iranian Involvement in Yemen

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Abstract: For at least a decade, there have been numerous Yemeni, Saudi, and other countries' assertions that Iran has been involved in supporting northern Yemeni rebels seeking autonomy from the Sana'a government. Iranian diplomatic and political support for this rebellious group (known as the Houthis) is undeniable, but Iranian military assistance for them has not always been easy to prove. This situation appeared to change in 2011 when Iran's increased involvement in Yemen occurred in response to both the chaotic situation there during the final year of the Saleh regime and the danger that the Arab Spring revolutions would leave Iran increasingly isolated. Evidence of Iranian efforts to supply weapons to the Houthis now seems overwhelming in contrast to uncertain reports prior to 2011. In addition, at least some of Yemen's southern secessionists also appear to be receiving at least limited Iranian financial support.

Over the past decade, Yemen's internal political problems have become increasingly linked to the need for future stability in the Arabian Peninsula—including security for the wealthy Gulf Arab states. Yemen is a large and strategically important country, but it is also deeply impoverished with significant tracts of its territory beyond the control of the central government. These vulnerabilities are especially problematic in the Middle East, where weak states often have to endure meddling in their internal affairs by stronger regional neighbors. Internally divided and sectarian countries usually have been more vulnerable to such activities than more unified states. Within this environment, it is sometimes difficult to underestimate the degree to which many powerful regional states, such as Iran, feel comfortable intruding into the internal politics of their neighbors through covert actions and other means. Moreover, Yemen sometimes seems an especially attractive state for such actions due to its weak central government.

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For at least a decade, many Yemenis, Saudis, and others have accused Iran of supporting northern rebels seeking substantial autonomy from the Sana'a government. Iranian diplomatic and political support for these rebels (known as the Houthis, after their most prominent family) is undeniable, but Iranian military assistance has not always been easy to prove, until around 2011. Additionally, there have been many more recent reports of Iran expanding its involvement in south Yemen to include supplying various forms of aid to secessionists, known as the Southern Movement (*al-Hirak al-Janubbiya*). Leaders of the Southern Movement normally are not friendly to Iran but may have to take their supporters where they can find them. Underlying and potentially distorting all of these accusations is Yemeni leaders' certainty that there is often no better way to gain Western and Saudi financial and military support for any policy than to accuse Iran of being on the other side of the conflict. Moreover, the Yemeni government is not above publicly dismissing the legitimate political and economic demands of their domestic opponents by claiming that these people are acting in accordance with an Iranian conspiracy. Untangling the actual level and significance of Iranian involvement in Yemen is, therefore, a complicated task that requires considerable care and nuance.

Factors Influencing Iranian Geopolitical Interest in Yemen

Most of the Gulf Arab monarchies, and especially Saudi Arabia, have a history of concern about Iran. These nations have often attempted to limit and counter Tehran's regional influence. Gulf Arab concerns often parallel those of the United States, which also has a long history of viewing a variety of Iranian regional policies as a threat to Western interests. In this environment, Iran's sense of isolation reached a high point in 2003 with the U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. These missions frightened Tehran with the prospect of bringing two of its closest neighbors into a hostile camp led by the United States. Tehran's fear of encirclement later relaxed when post-Saddam Iraq became more deeply divided internally and did not emerge as a strong U.S. ally. In contrast to their earlier concerns, the Iranians were able unexpectedly to exert considerable influence in Iraq through their ties to important Iraqi Shi'ite political factions and militias, although such activities further damaged relations with the Gulf Arab monarchies. More recently, Iran has been facing increased isolation by the application of progressively more severe economic sanctions due to its pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability.

At a wider regional level, Iranian interests were not clearly enhanced by the Arab uprisings that began in early 2011, despite Tehran's high hopes when the pro-Western governments of Tunisia—and especially Egypt—fell quickly. At that time, some Iranian leaders, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, claimed that the 1979 Iranian Revolution was the inspiration for the Arab uprisings. However, no major Arab opposition leaders, including Islamists, claimed to be inspired by Iran.¹ Rather, in many cases, important Islamist leaders in Arab Spring states distanced

¹ Adeed Dawish, *The Second Arab Awakening: Revolution, Democracy, and the Islamist Challenge* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), p. 114; Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising, The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (Public Affairs, New York), 2012, p. 94.

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