Crisis in Yemen: A Strategic Threat to U.S. Interests and Allies?

Discussion

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TRANSCRIPT

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LEE SMITH: Thank you very much for coming. Welcome to Hudson Institute. And we have a fantastic panel today. Fatima, who is - her first time at Hudson, thank you very much for coming, Fatima Abo Alasrar. To her left is Bernie Haykel, who has come all the way down from Princeton University. Thank you very much for being here, as well. And to the far left is my Hudson colleague, Michael Doran, a senior fellow here. And I thank you very much for coming. And the topic is - will be "Crisis In Yemen: A Strategic Threat To U.S. Interests And Allies?" And I hope that will pose some more interesting questions this afternoon to come to different answers. Thinking about maybe 1:15, we may be able to open it up to questions from the audience. So if you have something in mind, if you want to take notes and ask something of one of our panelists, write it down and keep it in mind, and we'll see how the time is going. Right now, why don't we begin with Professor Haykel? Bernie, if you'd like to begin?

BERNARD HAYKEL: All right. Thank you. Thank you. It is also my first time here.

SMITH: Oh, I didn't know. Thank you. Thank you for being here. I'm glad we were able to get you here.

HAYKEL: So I've been tasked with giving some background on Yemen, the history, the Houthis, their relationship with Iran, how the Saudis see Yemen. So a couple of broad brushstrokes - first, Yemen is a really complicated country. Most countries are, but this one is particularly complicated because of its tribal, social, religious structure. In Yemen, you now have in the north a group called the Houthis. They like to call themselves Ansar Allah. They're a group that belong to a particular caste of Yemeni society. This caste had ruled Yemen for over a thousand years, was displaced in 1962 with the revolution and then discriminated and - against and marginalized from roughly the late '60s until the early 2000s, when they rose up again. And they rose up again politically by becoming very clearly influenced by Iran's revolutionary ideology. I've been reading, for an article that I'm writing, all the speeches and lesson notes of the founder of this movement, a man called Hussein Houthi, and it's very clear that he draws inspiration from Ayatollah Khomeini - quotes him almost exclusively in a lot of his speeches and has a worldview that is very much drawn from a Khomeini-like view of the world. And that view of the world is one in which the United States and Israel - but also Jews, in the case of the Houthis - are enemies of both Yemen and of the Arabs and of Islam and of all Muslims.

So that connection, ideological connection, was then cemented firmly from the middle of the 1990s, when links were established between various Zaidis - this is the community that the Houthis belong to - and Hezbollah in Lebanon. That connection is not just ideological, but it's also a connection where Hezbollah provided military training but also ideological and media training so that the Houthis and their allies have all their centers for information dissemination, television stations based in the southern suburbs of Beirut in Hezbollah land. So it's very clear that that's a connection that - I know it's been often questioned by people here in D.C. But if you read Arabic and if you listen to actually what the Houthis write and say, there's no doubt that that connection with the broader world of Iran and of its proxies in Lebanon and elsewhere exists, and it's a very solid connection. So I'm also of the view that the Houthis are - although they're not a majority, they're a small group in Yemen. They are the most disciplined and best trained and most ideologically motivated group in Yemen and are unlikely to be defeated militarily.

So, as a result, I think that other ways of dealing with them by the Saudis, by the United Arab Emirates, by the GCC and the United States has to be - have to be conceived, have to be
thought of. And then, in the biggest and most macro sense, the problem of Yemen is a structural problem of the Gulf Cooperation Council. You have the most populous nation in Arabia, which is Yemen, that is the poorest and has never been fully integrated into the labor market of the GCC, has never been fully integrated into the economies of the GCC. And then to really ultimately tackle the long-term problems that are structural, developmental, economic and political, it - you need a GCC-wide approach to tackling Yemen. It is the GCC - that is, the Gulf Cooperation Council - countries that will ultimately have to pay the price for rebuilding Yemen, for fixing Yemen and for getting beyond this stage. How we get there, though, is, you know, the big question. And it's clear that the Saudis from what I can tell are never going to let go of the war there because they see the Houthis as a beachhead for the Iranians, an attempt by the Iranians to create a Hezbollah-like force in Yemen on their southern borders with which to then create a serious security - a national security threat to the Saudis through missiles like Hezbollah does with Israel. And that, I think, has to be appreciated. And unless one takes into account how the Saudis see this situation, one can't think beyond a solution, beyond the solution of warfare. And that's what I think needs to be - to be done at this stage. So I'll end there.

SMITH: Bernie, thanks. That's terrific. I mean, I think it's especially important to - well, one of the things we're going to want to come to is U.S. policymakers and how they perceive the situation and if they take this seriously or if they're perceiving it a different way, if it's a political fight in Washington and how important this is for essential U.S. allies. Thanks for the great introduction. Fatima, if you would like to follow up?

FATIMA ABO ALASRAR: Yes. Thank you so much for having me here. And...

SMITH: Thanks for coming.

ABO ALASRAR: And thank you for your presentation. I think that was a perfect snapshot or just summary if people who may not have in-depth experience on Yemen. You covered almost everything. What I would like to touch on is one thing you've mentioned is that there is no military solution to this conflict. And it has proven to be a very devastating conflict. But also, we're having problems in having a political solution to the conflict, too. It has been five years, and there isn't enough incentives for the Houthis to come to the negotiating table. And when they are, they've proven that they are not sincere. Part of that is because, you know, there is, you know, ideological alignment with Hezbollah and Iran that is preventing them from doing so. Historically, Yemenis have had no problem, like, you know, hashing it out together, hashing it out together and resolving their issues and their conflicts. But I think the geopolitical component here from Hezbollah and Iran is really a dangerous one and has complicated matters in Yemen. And so, you know, one thing I like to think about is with this status quo, which, you know, I am a little bit pessimistic here in terms of how I see the future of Yemen. I think that the Houthis are likely to remain the de facto authority on the ground given, you know, the reluctance of the international community to solve this either militarily or politically. And, you know, what would the future of Yemen look like? What would the relationship between Yemen and the United States would look like? And what the - what would the security, you know, of the Gulf - how is it going to be affected? And it is very clear from what we see today is that Houthis' core belief or core track to legitimacy is through force.

It is through force in 2004 that they have started that - their rebellion and continued that for six wars between the government of Yemen and the Zaidi - or the Houthi community, not the Zaidi communities - for, you know, 10 - for about 10 years. And then, during the Arab Spring, different
factions in Yemen recognize that the Houthis were marginalized by the state and acknowledged that and that through the fights with the government, through their fighting with the government, they were wronged. And young Yemeni citizens wanted through it a political reconciliation process to help the Houthis become a state - you know, a legitimate, credible state actor. But shortly after the national reconciliation process, which was known as the national dialogue, the Houthis have decided to carry arms against the state. So it - they did seize a very vulnerable time in Yemen where - and where, you know, Yemeni had not - the Yemen - the new transitional government after the Arab Spring had no army that they can depend on. The institutions were weak. And they, you know, struck at the right time and the right opportunity and just took over the country largely without any resistance. And this is because they understand that - you know, that the only language that they were able to communicate with was force. Since then, the Houthis have proven to be brutal dictators - almost as brutal as Bashar al-Assad in Syria. And they've empowered - you know, basically gave Iran a perfect opportunity to attack Saudi Arabia through virtually, you know, almost no cost to Iran. Iran's empowerment - I mean, there's an ideological alignment between the leader of the Houthi militia, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, and Iran. And, you know, with that comes - you know, not only is there material support through ballistic missiles to this movement and arms that are smuggled through the borders, but there is also an ideological component.

One thing that Western media doesn't necessarily understand is that the Houthis feel that they have a divine right to rule Yemen. They want to return it to maybe something that looked like before 1962, to a theological imamate, where Abdul-Malik al-Houthi becomes the supreme leader of this imamate and, you know, maybe have a sham, you know, president like an Ahmadinejad - somebody that they could appoint and, you know, have a parliament that is largely under their control. But it's a process whereby they would be the absolute theocratic monarchy in the system. And this is not the makeup of the Yemeni system. Maybe not a lot of people know this, but Yemen since 1990, since it was unified, the north and south, has embraced pluralism. So there are different Yemeni political factions such as the Congregation for Reform, which is the Islah party, or the Socialist Party or the General People's Congress. And all of the different political parties that are there, if they're not - you know, many of them don't see eye-to-eye with the Houthis. Many of them don't want the Houthis as the de facto rulers in Yemen. They recognize that the Houthis could play a role, but they can't have monopoly over the system. That would be extremely dangerous.

And the Houthis, with their theocratic system, do not tolerate dissent. From the Stockholm Peace consultations that were brokered by the U.N. last year, the Yemeni government that is exiled in Saudi Arabia had called for about - over 7,000 political prisoners to be freed in a prisoner-swap agreement. Now, these are academics. They are students. They are political activists. There are journalists. Everybody with an opinion that opposes the Houthis are imprisoned. And then also, the Houthis, being - you know, they're sort of like intimidating people into submission, calling - you know, anyone who opposes the Houthi state would often be labeled as a ally of the West or America or Saudi Arabia. So - and, you know, that's actually a legitimate charge in their courts. Just recently, last Saturday, we were expecting a - there was a group of 36 activists, political activists, that went to trial merely for opposing the Houthis. And, you know, one of the activists said publicly that they have been tortured in the Houthi chambers and asked for Yemeni people to help the prisoners. But it's falling on deaf ears. You know, this person who called for that has disappeared, and we haven't seen him ever since. There is cause to worry because of the mass indoctrination that the Houthis are conducting. And, again,
you know, Yemenis have never been fanatical. So this indoctrination starts with their chant. They have the slogan, which is death to America, death to Israel, curse on the Jews and victory to Islam. This is their stated slogan. You could see it everywhere in Yemen. And it's the - it is the logo behind Abdul-Malik al-Houthi whenever he comes on TV. And, you know, I wonder, is this the type of state that we want to empower? Are these the type of governors that we want to empower? Seeing the Congress - a congressional upheaval on President Trump's veto for the War Powers Act - I find that somewhat troubling. I think Congress is justified to say, you know, we wanted to talk about war powers resolution, but please leave Yemen out of it. Don't rope Yemen into that because I think there's another strategy in play. So I think Congress should attempt to, you know, have a strategy. Both Congress and the administration should have a strategy to deal with this militia in Yemen.

So if Congress wants to voice discontent on Saudi arms sales or relationship with Saudi, I feel that that is one issue on the civilian casualties that were impacted in the conflict. I think that is right, and that's legitimate. But also, you know, it's also right and legitimate for the president of the United States to say, don't leave Yemen exposed to Iranians' interest. And, you know, as somebody who's a Yemeni-American, I would also like to add that perhaps the best way to see Yemen is just converge both items. You know, look at the humanitarian issues, but also look at the governance issues. This is what Yemenis were used to. There were two decades of U.S. assistance to Yemen where the United States has been trying to win minds and hearts of the Yemeni people. And they did it not through just humanitarian aid, but they also did it through governance programs that empowered political party that really made us - made Yemenis pioneers after the Arab Spring. You know, Yemen was called a model for the Arab Spring because of the National Dialogue Conference and the capacity of the society to come together. I hope that the United States can, you know, take a leadership role in returning to that part of the agenda rather than, you know, just either concentrating on the humanitarian aspect or on the transactional aspect of selling arms to the Gulf allies. Thank you. I'll leave it there.

SMITH: Thank you, Fatima. That's terrific. And I think that one of things - just trying to keep a list - one of the things that we'll want to come back and discuss is what Iran wants in Yemen. How does that conflict with what maybe not even other - in addition to other Yemenis want, in addition to what the Houthis want? Will that come into conflict? Thanks very much. Mike, if you'd like to cap off our introductory remarks here?

MICHAEL DORAN: Thank you. I'm - was very struck by the joint resolution that President Trump vetoed. You know, there was a debate in Congress about a year ago about Yemen, and the joint resolution was, of course, originally sponsored by Bernie Sanders. And the Sanders position a year ago that the U.S. should withdraw all support from Saudi Arabia was roundly rejected at that time because of the failure of some of the people who were supporting that position to have - to say anything about the Iranian role and the American interest in seeing Iran driven from Yemen. And this time around, they again showed no interest in Iran, but the resolution passed. And what changed in the - what changed in the interim? Well, it was really more than anything else it was the Khashoggi murder and all that we have heard about the - about that murder since August and now. And from my - in my mind, there's no connection between the murder of Khashoggi and Yemen. And the fact that - the fact that people in Congress are now making that connection is worrying to me because the United States is a superpower. It's responsible for regional order, or it is the single most important factor in creating a stable regional order in the Middle East. It has to think very sensibly about these
things. And they're developed in Congress what I can only call a kind of moral panic where this picture of Mohammad bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, as being an immoral actor was plastered in the media day after day. And everyone in Cairo - a large number of people in Congress felt the need to demonstrate that they were on the right side of doing something about this moral problem. But that moral discussion became disconnected entirely from the realities of power on the ground. And for me, it's very disturbing.

If the United States is - really, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the question we face is, does the - does the United States, in the post-Cold War world, have the capacity to serve as a reliable superpower? Because bouncing around like a pinball in this way is tremendously destabilizing to the - to the region. In my mind, there's no doubt that - let's - let me be clear from the beginning - the murder of Khashoggi was - was an extremely ugly and immoral act. There's no - there's no doubt about that. But let's also be clear. There was a campaign, an information campaign based on that murder designed to shift American policy on Saudi Arabia. And the people who wanted to shift American policy on Saudi Arabia were not - did not come to that conclusion because of the murder of Khashoggi. They used the murder of Khashoggi to push an agenda that they had before the murder happened. And the roots of this go back to President Obama's JCPOA, his outreach to Iran. The outreach to Iran - the nuclear deal with the - with Iran was part of a larger policy of trying to turn Iran into if not a partner for regional stability, at least a party to some sort of accommodation about regional stability. And that necessarily meant a downgrading in U.S.-Saudi relations and in U.S.-Israeli relations.

The former officials in the Obama White House, the former foreign policy officials are now serving as the kind of brain trust of the Democratic Party. They have enormous influence in the press, and they have influence on the - on the Hill. And their strategy is to keep the JCPOA and the outreach to Iran alive through 2020. And then hopefully, in their eyes, if President Trump is defeated, a Democratic president will return American policy in the Middle East back to the grooves that that that Obama set. This is not - this is not me analyzing. This is - this is - you just have to read the newspaper. John Kerry - immediately after the JCPOA, John Kerry went to Europe, told the Europeans keep the JCPOA on a low burner and in 2020 we'll return to it. He went to Zarif, the foreign minister - and it's quite an unprecedented thing for a former - a former secretary of state to go to an official who is representative of a hostile power and say, hold on. We're coming back. Let's thwart the Trump agenda in the fall - in the following ways. You've got - it's well-reported, but it didn't - it didn't cause the - I think the outrage that it should have. So there's an effort to freeze any effort to move away - in any effort to move in the direction that Trump wants, which is toward a containment of Iran, both economically and politically. There's an - there's an effort to thwart that. And the war in Yemen is a very important arena in which they - in which they want to thwart that because this isn't - there are two American allies who are contesting the Iranians on the ground. The Israelis are contesting them in Syria, and the Saudis are contesting them. The Saudi-led coalition, together with the Emirates and others is contesting them on the ground in Yemen. And so they - they launched this campaign around Khashoggi, said Mohammad bin Salman is unacceptable morally as a partner for the United States, and therefore, we should pull our support for Yemen.

But, I mean, I would quote Senator Ted Cruz, who asked a very sensible question, the kind of question that a superpower should be asking, which is, under what circumstances do we want to weaken Saudi Arabia and in particular Saudi Arabia vis-a-vis Iran? Is there any - are there any set of circumstances where we think it's a good idea to undermine the Saudis and give
advantages to the Iranians? Now, my answer to that question is no. I can't imagine that. So then the next question is, how - what do we - what do we want from the Saudis in Yemen? What is the outcome that we want? Do we want an outcome where we have a Hezbollah-like force on the Red Sea controlling the - threatening our shipping, the shipping of our allies in the Red Sea, who - do we want a Hezbollah-like force with rockets and missiles that can hit Riyadh? Saudi Arabia is a country of 32 million people. It's a G20 economy. And the Iranians have introduced weaponry into Yemen that can hit the capital there. Is there any - in any case - any circumstances under which the United States would think that that is in the American interest? Again, I think the answer is - the answer is no. So, for me, everything flows from there. We want the Saudis and the Emirates to win in Yemen against the Iranians. We also - we care about humanitarian issues and other issues. If we - if we care about humanitarian issues, then is pulling support for Saudi Arabia going to make the humanitarian situation better? No, it's not. Is pulling the support for Saudi Arabia going to get the Iranians out of Yemen? No, it's not. So these are - these are just the kind of practical questions that surprisingly few people - you know, it doesn't matter if the guy on the street isn't asking these questions. But when - when Congress passes a joint resolution and puts it to the president and very few people are asking these questions, it's really worrisome.

SMITH: Mike, that's fantastic. I mean, you talked about something which we can swing back around to in a second, basically, and that question is basically, what do other - what do the people who are contesting Trump policy, what is it that they want to have happen? And how does the - how does the conflict in Yemen figure for them? Do they just want to help weaken the Trump administration? Do they want to empower Iran by helping - you know, by helping enhance the Houthis' position on the border of an American ally? So that's interesting, a little more - a little more complicated. Maybe we'll get to it by starting, what exactly is the outcome then that the United States wants? Why don't you start with that, and then we'll work down?

DORAN: The No. 1 thing - the No. 1 interest of the United States is that the - is that the Iranian presence in Yemen be eliminated, if not eliminated, severely circumscribed. And if we - if we can't do that, then the Iranians should pay a very, very heavy price for their activities - for their activities there. They introduced rockets and missiles into Yemen - as I say, you know - missiles that can hit Riyadh from Yemen, which they have used. And where was the debate? Think about the howl - the howl that we heard when Donald Trump moved the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The howl - this was going to create - this was this huge, huge event. There was a howl when he recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan. Where - where was the - where was even a peep when the Iranians put missiles in Yemen, a move that had a much - a much more significant effect on the balance of power and on the - and was much more detrimental to the United States than almost anything I can think of in the last - in the last few years? And nobody said a word. There was no - there wasn't even a debate here. So No. 1, we want - we want to eliminate the Iranians from Yemen. If we can't eliminate them, what we want to make them pay a very, very heavy price. I can go on, but that is the number one.

SMITH: Let me move then because Bernie and I spoke about this a bit briefly before. But you're saying we want to get rid of them, get rid of their influence. Well, I mean, certainly there is Iranian influence in Lebanon on the Israeli border. We haven't done a very good job there. I would say we're still not doing a very good job there, nor have the Israelis. I mean, the Saudis are more limited than Israel. So, Bernie, what are the different ways that we would - Mike says that we should eradicate Iranian influence entirely. Is that possible, and what are the other -
what are the ways about it? 'Cause I think that we spoke before, it would be very difficult to do that militarily right now.

HAYKEL: I mean, the Iranians use proxies. And typically, they would like to find a local proxy. In the case of Lebanon, they have Hezbollah, Lebanese actors. In Yemen, they have the Houthis or Yemeni actors. In Iraq, they have Iraqis. And that's a pattern, and it gives them plausible deniability. It tells - you know, basically it makes it very hard to hit the Iranians directly because they're not - they deny having any involvement. So that's, you know, a structural problem in the international system. And how do you make states accountable for their actions, especially if they're using oblique or indirect forms of power projection? I don't have the answer to that. I would love to hear what Mike would have to say on that. How do you actually make the Iranians pay a price? I think U.S. interests certainly involve making sure that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps or their proxies do not have control over the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, and they should not be allowed to position missiles in Yemen with which to hit Saudi Arabia - but not just missiles. They're also using drones. They've deployed drones - both aerial drones and seaborne drones - in Yemen. So I think that's definitely, you know, a red line. How does one enforce it is a more complicated question. The other, though - there's another dimension, though, to Yemen, as well, which is that other than the Khashoggi - the heinous murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has gotten, also, much more attention. I think that drew, you know, a crowd to say that the Saudis are entirely responsible for this.

And so I think that the humanitarian question has to be addressed, as well. And part of the problem with the humanitarian tragedy in Yemen is that a war economy has developed as a result of the regional actors getting involved. And the war economy - and I'm someone who grew up in the civil war in Lebanon, and I saw this firsthand - just when you have a civil war with regional actors acting and spending money, the local actors have actually almost zero interest in ending that war because the entire economy gets - revolves around them getting, you know - making money off of - also, the distribution or the lack of distribution of food. And the Houthis are making money. Their enemies are making money. The different Yemeni actors who work for the Saudis and for - on behalf the Saudis or for the UAE are also not interested in ending that war. So it's a very complicated situation. And here, I think the U.S. can play a very - much more kind of trenchant role in trying to say, look. You know, certain things have to be addressed, and we can't just perpetuate a situation where, in fact, the local actors who are allegedly your allies are not interested in ending this for...

SMITH: What are the different conditions the U.S. can establish to say - yeah, what are the different things that we set down?

HAYKEL: I mean, I would love to hear what Mike or what you also would like to say.

SMITH: Well, one of the things - I mean, Fatima, if you want to answer this question - but another thing I want to ask of you is, again, the idea that do - to what extent do Iranian interests conflict with what the Houthis want? To what extent do they conflict with what the - most of the Yemeni political parties and the population in Yemen wants?

ABO ALASRAR: It's a very straightforward answer, I think.

SMITH: OK.
ABO ALASRAR: Houthis have an interest - I mean, despite the fact that they publicly support Bashar Assad. They publicly, you know, say there is nothing wrong with being, you know, affiliated with Hezbollah. They publicly say thank you to Iran for its support. But they're also keen on saying that they are not an Iranian proxy. They deny it every chance they get because if they do, then they, you know, become exposed as not really advancing the interests of Yemeni people, but the interests of Iran. So Houthis also have - they're Zaidis. It's an offshoot of Shiite. And the Shiite in Iran is Twelverism. There are increasing amount of converts from Zaidis into Twelverism, and this is causing a problem to the Zaidi community and the Zaidi scholars who want to just stick to their own faith.

SMITH: Interesting.

ABO ALASRAR: So it's important to know that not all Zaidis subscribe to the Houthi way of thinking and the Houthis' governance. And they think that - they think of them as extremists. And that's the first point.

SMITH: Can I ask very quickly - what size - what percentage of the population of Yemen is Zaidi?

ABO ALASRAR: You know, it's interesting. In 2007, people were asking that question because they started to hear more about the Houthis because of the rebellion. And it's just really hard to pinpoint it. But I - I mean, roughly, in the north - you could say 40 percent in the north of Yemen. The south is entirely Sunni, but - most of it is Sunni - but roughly 40 percent. Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh is Zaidi himself. And then there is a difference within the Zaidi sect. There is Zaidi Jaroodi, which is, you know, the type of Zaidism where they believe that only a descendent of the prophet has the right to rule Yemen. And them being Shiite, descendent of the prophet, the Houthi among this clan - historically, you know, this was a situation in the past.

So I think Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, who is the leader - the current leader of this movement has a huge ego. And, you know, Iran is taking advantage of this, you know - them being protector of the Shiite faith. And, you know, with his loyalty that came free of charge because of this ideological alignment, they just found a perfect opportunity in Yemen to advance their own interests. And I will tell you why Abdul-Malik al-Houthi is not advancing Yemeni interests. It's because the mass indoctrination that I see is just - I haven't seen it anywhere in Yemen before. You know, for - to see posters in schools and to see the curriculum is being changed in a way that would, you know - and for the kids, you know, wanting to chant, death to America - that is just fanaticism of a different, you know, degree that we haven't seen in Yemen. The other thing is the child soldiers issue. They have no problem - and also, like, you know, just recruiting and forcing recruitment for anyone. And I think, you know, people are just becoming fodder in this war. Anyone who has an interest in a political settlement or a future of the country is not going to behave that way.

SMITH: I ask, what do the - and I'll ask this of all of you, but you first. What do the Iranians want? What is this investment for? Is it to have a strong position on the Saudi border? Is it to have a - missiles pointed at an American ally? Is it to turn the - is it to have the government run by Iranian allies? What are the - what do they - what do the Iranians want from this?

ABO ALASRAR: I mean, it - a volatile, fragile Yemen - just like a fragile Syria, just like a fragile Iraq - serves Iranian...
SMITH: Lebanon.

ABO ALASRAR: Lebanon - serves Iranian interests very well and allows them - I mean, this is quite a bold move to go into a place like Yemen, south of Saudi Arabia. It's an entirely Arab population - again, a different sectors than the Houthi - than the Iranian theocratic system. And to want to implement that - that just empowers Iran in the region, and it gives it more of a - just a foothold, really, south of Saudi Arabia. So, you know - and I think this serves Iran really, really well. I mean, Saudi Arabia is getting a black eye in the press. Public opinion is galvanized against Saudi Arabia. People think - and I should've said this first. People think that this is a Saudi war on Yemen. And I would like to, you know, just debunk this myth by saying it was the Houthis who have stated or - stated a coup against the transitional Yemeni government in 2014. So they became the de facto rulers. And Saudi Arabia intervened after Houthi and Saleh alliance - which is actually ironic because the Houthis' main grievance was against President Ali Abdullah Saleh, whom they accused of, you know, being subservient to the United States. So they fought this 10 - six wars over 10 years against him, and then they allied with him.

SMITH: He cleverly jumped sides.

ABO ALASRAR: Yeah. He killed their leader. He killed Hussein al-Houthi, and then they allied with him. And then when he was perceived as - you know, after this alliance, after three years into the war, when he exposed the relationship with Iran, they - and when they sensed that he might be talking to the Saudis to negotiate a political settlement, they assassinated him in December 2017.

SMITH: Mike, you look like you wanted to...

DORAN: All right. What's thing to say...

SMITH: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It's just - I thought he was going to step in and say something on Iran or something.

DORAN: The - on the question of why the Iranians...

SMITH: Right.

DORAN: ...Are there - I think it's important to realize, first of all, that they have no history of interest in Yemen. It's an adventure for them. I mean, it's not like the Iranian position in Iraq, a country that is - that neighbors Iran. They want it in order to - if you think about the - what - how Hezbollah serves them in the eastern Mediterranean - first of all, it - Hezbollah serves them as a deterrent to Israel. They have 150,000 rockets and missiles pointed at Israel. Israel can't attack the Iranian nuclear facilities, for example, because the - or if it did, it will be vulnerable to attack from Hezbollah. But what is - Hezbollah also works, as we've seen since 2011, to preserve Iranian interests in Syria against the Sunni insurgents against Bashar al-Assad. They want to build the same kind of structure in Yemen. They can then use it to deter the Saudis - to deter, to weaken, to undermine the Saudis. But they - then they can also extend their influence systematically into the Red Sea. And ultimately, I think they like to control Red Sea shipping - if not control it, at least threaten it. And with these kind of fractured countries like Lebanon and Yemen, once they get a foothold, they can heat up the pressure. They can turn up the pressure or dial it back down at will. And that's what they would like. So we - you're right. We're not imposing costs on Iran for its behavior in Lebanon or - we've turned a blind eye, and they have built up this incredible structure there in Lebanon. The question we have to be asking ourselves
right now is, do we want the same thing transferred to Yemen? - because that is what we're going to get if we don't do something about it.

SMITH: I'm still trying to - I know I'm being a pain, and I keep coming back to you guys with this. I'm trying to figure out, OK, how? I mean, we see right now, and we...

DORAN: Well...

SMITH: You and I complain all the time, and I'm...

DORAN: The...

SMITH: ...And the two of you do, as well, about what the - what even the Trump administration's policies regarding Lebanon, boosting the - boosting what's effectively Hezbollah auxiliary. So we're not right there. So what are we looking at in Yemen to...

HAYKEL: Actually - sorry - can I just interrupt? It's actually slightly even worse than that...

SMITH: OK.

HAYKEL: ...Which is that in the Lebanese case, the Iranians built formidable military arsenals for Hezbollah, but got the Americans and the Saudis to basically bail out the country economically...

SMITH: Right.

HAYKEL: ...For decades.

SMITH: Right.

HAYKEL: And they wouldn't even have to pay for it themselves.

SMITH: Right.

HAYKEL: And I think the idea is to do exactly the same thing in Yemen, which is to have a formidable...

SMITH: Yeah, yeah. Right.

HAYKEL: ...Arsenal with which to threaten the Red Sea and Saudi Arabia...

SMITH: Right.

HAYKEL: ...Get the GCC countries to bail out Yemen economically.

DORAN: Can - I will answer your question. But can I...

SMITH: Yeah. No, that was what...

DORAN: ...Just say something on top of what Bernie just said? Look. If you go back to the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war and you look how it was portrayed in the media, that was an incredible success for Hezbollah and Iran because Hezbollah manipulated the media. And the Western media has proven itself, time and time again, to be very willing to be manipulated, either out of complicity or stupidity or...

SMITH: Allies.
DORAN: ...Whatever. However you want to analyze it, they are willing to turn a blind eye to these tactics that Iran and Hezbollah use so that that war got depicted in the international media as a war between the Israeli Defense Forces and the Lebanese people. That the - throughout the entire duration of the war, there was one picture in the international media of a Hezbollah fighter - one picture. And it appeared in Australia. It didn't appear in the United States. That's an incredible propaganda victory right there. They have - the Houthis have - the Hezbollah and the Iranians have taken those techniques, and they are schooling the Houthis in how to do it. And so the way this war is being depicted now in the West is a war of the Saudis and Emirates against the Yemeni people. It's exactly - it's right out of the playbook, and it's not by accident because it - because, as Bernie mentioned, their communications centers are in Beirut, and they are being tutored by Hezbollah in this. And the war is the coalition versus the Yemeni people, and the humanitarian disaster is caused by the coalition. Nobody - who in the international arena is saying that Iran is causing this humanitarian - the Houthis are killing civilians just as much as the coalition is.


DORAN: And the Houthis are using the civilians as human shields, just like Hezbollah does. And we don't call them out on it. Sorry. One last thing - I'm sorry.

SMITH: (Laughter).

DORAN: The coalition is putting millions and millions and millions into humanitarian relief.

SMITH: Right.

DORAN: So it's just as Bernie said, right? The Iranians and the Houthis are causing this humanitarian disaster.

SMITH: Right.

DORAN: The Saudis and the Emirates and others are paying...

SMITH: Right.

DORAN: ...To try to alleviate it. The Houthis are pocketing some of that money 'cause they control the local authorities and distributing the aid that's paid for by the Saudis and the Emirates to their allies to strengthen themselves. And the international community still blames the Saudis, right? That's a fantastic...

SMITH: Right.

DORAN: If you're the Iranians or the Houthis, this is a fantastic deal.

SMITH: Right. No, this is something - but that's what I wanted to come to. That's great because what Bernie was describing was the - how they got the, you know - how they got the U.S. and the Saudis to go out and pay for it - pay for, you know - pay to fix the country. And if we see that this is what they're trying to do with Syrian reconstruction, as well - right? - it was exactly the same play. It's like, whether it's the Iranians and the Russians, we're going to come in, and we're going to tear something apart. And we're going to get everyone else to pay. But what we're talking about, then, is we're talking about - it's not just that the Iranians are pushing it in that direction. It's that we say - you've seen the debate here in Washington. People are - and in
Europe - you see that people are keen to get in and start throwing money at Syria - right? - whatever bagmen this goes to, whether they're Lebanese bagmen or whether they're Syrian bagmen. So then with Yemen, how do we figure out - and you were saying there are other answers to this. So instead of doing the same thing that we appear to have done the last 30 years, how do we say, wait; this isn't working? Look at where Lebanon is now. We don't want Yemen to be in that same place. What do we do?

ABO ALASRAR: Maybe to start - would be good to focus on the local dynamics because the more that we talk about the role of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the more that we forget about Yemenis and what they're suffering from on the ground. And, you know, there's enough evidence that tells us that the Houthis as a governing authority are catastrophic. And they've been fighters, but they're not good in governing the areas that they control. The World Food Program, which is a U.N. agency that distributes large amounts of food, have released an evaluation last - late last year stating that 60 percent of the food aid that is supposed to be delivered to poor people is being stolen by the Houthis. This - we need to have a - this is an epic failure. This is just one aspect. I mean, if it's 60 percent, you can pretty much say...

SMITH: Right.

ABO ALASRAR: ...That that's actually maybe an underestimated number.

SMITH: Wow. This is part of the economy you guys were talking about.

ABO ALASRAR: Yes.

SMITH: ...That this is one of the...

ABO ALASRAR: In terms of the cholera, of course. I mean, this is where - you know, when Bernie was talking about the corruption and the - you know, the local sort of - the thriving war economy that happens, Houthis were blocking cholera vaccines - you know, delivery of cholera vaccines - because it's in their interest to say, hey; we're dying here by the dozens, and no one is paying attention, and it's Saudi fault. They have a role to play in all of this - you know, again, their use of child soldiers, their monopoly of power. I think Houthis need to be accommodated in some way or another, maybe - but they need to be disarmed. We can't have another Hezbollah. You know, I don't have a problem with their theological system, but as long as they don't impose it on everybody else. The Yemenis have coexisted with each other for a while, and there is no reason to do this. But I want to say one thing - that the United States has often been reactive when it comes to Yemen, and there's just not been a strategy when it comes to Yemen. And I would take the south of Yemen as a prime example for that. The south of Yemen - South and North united in 1990. But the South before that was entirely Marxist.

And Russia is finding an opportunity now as it is supporting the Southern Transitional Council, which is calling for secession. What is the role of the United States there? Well, the United States is supporting unity, but why? You know, because it's been that way? Because the Saudis want it? You know, there's no work with the local communities on the ground to understand, you know, what could be in the U.S. interest? What could be also in the local interest? You know - how could we avoid local conflicts from happening again? - because when the Houthi conflict is settled, which is not going to be anytime soon, the South is going to be the next arena of conflict. So I don't think that the United States is - you know, this problem, the dichotomy between Congress and the administration, their inability to see eye to eye, I - you know, I mean,
Michael is right. I think, you know, Congress has been just morally outraged. But, you know, what is the strategy, then? You know, how do you deal with the situation in Yemen? I think that, you know, whatever is going on in terms of the War Powers Act, et cetera, has nothing to do with Yemen or helping Yemen's situation. Actually, if you leave Yemenis in the hands of the Houthis, the Iranian-aligned or backed or, you know, proxy, nonproxy, whatever it is - if you leave them exposed to that, it's going to be the end of Yemen as we know it. It's going to be something, but it's not the Yemen that I grew up with.

SMITH: Bernie, I think that you had something.

HAYKEL: Yeah. I mean, I think that, you know, if you try to go after Iran by addressing Yemen or Lebanon or Syria or Iraq, that's going down a rabbit hole. The Iranians don't give a damn how many Yemenis die.

ABO ALASRAR: Yeah, exactly.

HAYKEL: ...Or how many Lebanese die, how many Syrians die, as we've seen. So, I mean, I think when dealing with Iran, you have to kind of deal with them directly and assume they're rational actors and that the threats have to be immediate, not through their proxies, because I don't think they care about their proxies. So that means that, you know, one has to kind of go to the root cause in Yemen and address what the problems of Yemen are and then deal with Iran as a kind of separate - you know, because they can open up any - and the Iranians are capable of opening up any number of fronts through proxies, not just in the countries I listed. They have others in Bahrain, Kuwait, any number of places. So, you know, I think...

SMITH: Can you...

HAYKEL: Some kind of analytical clarity has to be...

SMITH: Can you address the - I mean, can you address the local issues before you snap the spine of Iranian influence in these different places? Do you know what I'm saying? Can you get in there and do that work? Or are you just going to have - you're just going to have the Iranians pouring in so much money that it's going to - or so much influence that it's impossible to do? I mean, I guess I'm trying to say, like, OK; how do those steps go? Like, for instance, right now, should the administration go even harder on Iran and say - because we want to solve the - we're doing this for the specific purpose of trying to solve the crisis in Yemen; we're not just looking to damage the Iranians; there's a real - there's a specific purpose for doing this.

ABO ALASRAR: But Iran hasn't been cooperating, right? I mean...

SMITH: Right.

ABO ALASRAR: And they...

SMITH: Well, they're - I mean, right.

HAYKEL: I mean, not just Iran - Oman hasn't been cooperating, I mean, you know, when it comes to Yemen with the United States. So I think one has to be very clear in signaling to those countries that there will be a price to be paid if you keep doing what you're doing in Yemen.

SMITH: Mike, were you going to...

DORAN: So I think we have to do three things.
SMITH: OK.

DORAN: ...Two of which are totally doable. The third one is a hard one. The first one is like at the beginning of a 12-step program. You know, you have to...

SMITH: Don't you apologize?

DORAN: No. You admit that you have a problem.

SMITH: OK. When's the apology?

DORAN: After the - first, you admit.

SMITH: OK.

DORAN: Right?

(LAUGHTER)

ABO ALASRAR: You're not an addict? (Laughter).

DORAN: And - because we tell ourselves - when we have these problems in the Middle East that are hard, we are exceptionally talented at telling ourselves happy stories or telling ourselves stories that allow us to feel comfortable about not taking any action, so what - stories like, well - and this is why I'm - I have a slight disagreement with Fatima and Bernie on focus on the local issues. I understand where they're coming from, and I think we don't disagree that much. But you have this problem in the Middle East in that the great power competition is always being carried out through local actors. The local actors always have their own local agendas that have nothing to do with the great power patrons. That allows the geniuses in - who analyze the Middle East to say to people like me who are just, you know, simple-minded oafs, that, oh, it's really very complex. And you're seeing a very simple great power game here, but you have to understand that Abu This is against Abu That and that Abu This - you know, Abu A has had a conflict over this waterhole with Abu B for 150 years, and if you don't understand that - you know. And then you get lost in this incredibly complex local landscape.

And what happens then is that you don't take care of - you end up focusing on some local agenda, and then you don't take care of the great power issue. And that - what - we - there's a laboratory of this right in front of our eyes, and there are two which we've seen in the last few years. One is called Iraq, where we were always going to put together the new Iraqi political system and create the new structures for the new Iraqi state. And then after we did that, Iraqi nationalism was going to take over and kind of slough off the Iranians. Meanwhile, the Iranians have reached in underneath us, and they've hollowed out those institutions that we tried to build. And we have - we now have the Popular Mobilization units in Iraq, which are larger than the Iraqi military, which we sunk billions into building up - billions into building up the Iraqi military. And instead, we have Popular Mobilization units which are armed, trained, equipped and often - you know, often directed by the Iranians. All of that happened under an American security umbrella. I mean, we ought to look at that and say, wow; we actually should have been focusing on what the Iranians were doing and working to thwart them directly. If you don't say thwarting Iran is the No. 1 goal and everything else is subordinate to it...

SMITH: OK.
DORAN: Right? You'll never do it.

SMITH: This brings us to another problem that - we're going a little far afield. I just want to say one thing, though.

DORAN: I have two other points with that.

SMITH: There is no way that's going to happen.

(LAUGHTER)

SMITH: You're not going to get two other...

DORAN: I can make it briefly.

SMITH: OK. Let's see.

DORAN: No. So first of all, when you say analytical clarity, analytical clarity is, Iran is the problem, then building up a Hezbollah force in Saudi Arabia is what we want to prevent. The next thing is, we have to do something about it. And look. We were attacked last year. The Houthis shot a missile at an American naval vessel from Yemeni territory. And we chose to define that as Houthis. We were attacked by Iran. And Iran has a ship disguised as a commercial vessel that provides command and control and support to the Houthis so that they can target their missiles, right? We know this. We - after this happened, we talked about designating the ship - right? - as if it's a single rogue, you know, vessel that's helping the...

SMITH: (Laughter) PT-109.

DORAN: You have to - we have to grim up. We have to say, we were attacked by Iran. They didn't succeed. That allowed us to - easier to kind of just sweep it under the rug. We were attacked by Iran, and we need to make that ship disappear - right? - preferably with a loud explosion, right? When Iran makes things go boom, we have to make things go boom, too. Otherwise, everyone in the region sees that all the booming is coming from Iran and not from the United States. And then the third thing is we have to - contrary to Bernie Sanders' joint-sponsored joint resolution, we have to help our allies on the ground to cause pain not just to the Iranians, but to their proxies. There has to be - Iran has to be - have - when Iran does this to us and our allies, it has to pay a price. But the people who ally with Iran have to be seen as paying a price. And so when the United States stops - forces the coalition to stop in its tracks rather than to continue its offensive against the Houthis at the same time that Congress is howling about all that's wrong with Saudi Arabia, if you're sitting there in Tehran and the Houthis - and you see that, you have to say, whose side is the United States on?

SMITH: Yeah. I am going to - OK. Weirdly, I'm going to play the moderate here against you. How about...

DORAN: You say I'm not moderate.

SMITH: No. You're relatively moderate.

DORAN: Yeah.

SMITH: Yeah. Not as moderate as I'm going to be. You'll see. Look; when you're saying that we have to perceive that the Iranians are doing this and that - and you talked about Iraq before,
right? You're saying that we did all these different things, and then all these institutions were hollowed out, and Iran took over. Isn't one of the problems that we're talking about - it's not necessarily a willingness not to make things go boom because we're making a lot of things go boom. Right now the essential structure is - it's a pro-Iranian structure, right? Like, we perceive that actually, we can work together with Iran in different places. And I wonder if that's not an issue. In Yemen as well, we see the Houthis like, well, who knows? We can work with them because we really perceive the major problem - in Washington, the major structural problem is, after all, the Sunnis. We've been bombing - we've been making Sunnis go boom for - what is it now? - 18 years. So we have no problem with that.

DORAN: Iran is hostile to the - what...

SMITH: You're not arguing with me. I'm trying...

DORAN: What's the slogan of the Houthis? What is the slogan of the Houthis?

ABO ALASRAR: Death to America.

DORAN: Death to America, death to Israel, a curse on the Jews, right? It takes a certain kind of educated American to hear that slogan and to say, well, you know, you really have to understand that there's a really complex local dynamic. Right. They're announcing what they think. It's not - there isn't - you know, there's always some local dynamic at play that makes all of the rhetoric unimportant. No, the rhetoric tells you what they think. And we're hearing the same rhetoric from the Iranians. They want to destroy the American - look. We had the question, why do they want a position in Yemen? Ultimately - I'm not saying that they're thinking about this as tomorrow, five years, 10 years. Ultimately, Iran wants to rule over Mecca and Medina. They want to be - they are - the Iranian regime sees itself as the leader of the entire Islamic world. It wants all of the Islamic world under it. Its aspirations are limitless. Its capabilities are highly limited, so it's not thinking about that today. But they're - ultimately, that's where it wants to go. We ought to wise up and recognize that. We are in a geostrategic conflict with this entity. It has developed a very clever technique for getting us to turn a blind eye. When you say, I'm not moderate - this is what - I've never found a way to get to defeat this kind of rhetoric, right? I don't understand why when the Iranians introduce ballistic missiles into Yemen and when they fire on an American ship and I say, we should retaliate, that I am calling for an escalation. The people who escalated were the Iranians. I'm just saying we ought to fight back. That's not immoderate. I mean, that's not extreme. That's just common sense.

SMITH: Fatima, did you want to - it looks like you...

ABO ALASRAR: I was - I mean, there's a sense in Washington that there's an appetite for a war in Iran. And people are concerned about that, and I think rightly so. And if there is a war on Iran, you know, the Middle East region gets to pay the price for that, you know? We're really exposed to Iran without any protection. And the United States hasn't really showed us where it stands on these things. I mean, we see the consequences of what happened in an American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan and, you know, elsewhere. I mean, the Taliban are still empowered in Afghanistan, despite all of this. So - and I think if, you know, there is enough evidence to make us, you know, understand that, actually, if there is an Iranian change in governance, it's going to be from within because there is massive unrest. But the media is just not paying attention to - you know, people are just not covering the unrest that is happening in Iran. And I think this is, again, going back to the local context. If you empower the people, you
know, with governance, effective institutions, I think that is a step towards change. I mean, I see, you know, people rebelling against them all. I think, you know, the action on the JCPOA, you know, this year and the position that the Trump administration has taken was fortunate because, you know, when Obama launched us into the JCPOA agreement, he didn't calculate or did not care to calculate about Iran's foreign adventurism in the Middle East. That wasn't the point of his concern. And recently, I was actually very concerned. I had a, you know, discussion with a former U.S. military official, who was telling me, you know, it's not our problem to do anything in Yemen, really. It's not our problem. It's just far away. That's Saudi's problem. So, you know, not everyone is willing to take that risk, you know? So...

SMITH: That's a - I think that's a very important point because, obviously, this administration has not been - it's been critical of its predecessor's military adventures abroad. So that's a - that is an important thing; how to balance these different things. We see how important it is, Mike, for American interests and to push back on the Iranians. So how do you manage that with what - not just with the realities on the ground but with what this administration thinks about the world and the rest of the world? I mean, Bernie, do you have a...

DORAN: I don't think that the policy that I'm calling for calls for a George W. Bush-style...

SMITH: No, it doesn't sound interventionist.

DORAN: No, no.

SMITH: I'm just trying to figure out...

DORAN: I would - look. There's clearly a strong current of opinion in America - among the people and among the foreign policy elite - to pull back from the Middle East. You know, America wishes the Middle East would just go away. And we had a policy based on that. It was called Barack Obama's policy. And he pulled the troops out of Iraq, cut a deal with Iran and the whole - and with the Russians - worked with the Russians. And we got, as a result, 12 million people displaced in Syria. We got refugee flows into Europe. We got the rise of - the Iranians took over in - or became the dominant influence in Baghdad. And the Shiite-led government then began persecuting Sunnis, and we got the rise of ISIS in Iraq and in Syria. And America felt like it had to go back in again. So I'd - if you have a plan to leave the Middle East without putting together some kind of order that is acceptable to the United States, I would love to see it.

SMITH: OK.

DORAN: If it exists, I'll - I will support it, but that's a serious discussion, right? If somebody from the military wants to say, we have no interests in Yemen - but when Iran dominates the Red Sea and closes the Bab-el-Mandeb, all of a sudden, we're going to realize, oh, I forgot. Actually, America does have some...

SMITH: Should we be testing this structure now? I mean, it's interesting. You can say, well, we know - 'cause you've spoken about this a lot - we know who our allies are in the region, you said before. You're talking about Israel. You're talking about Saudi Arabia. So is it possible that that's how the U.S. perceives the order of the region, then? It's, like, very, extremely limited footprint. We're still going to keep forces in places like in our bases and, you know, in the UAE...

DORAN: That...
SMITH: ...And in other places. But really, our allies - that's where we're going to understand the Middle East.

DORAN: That's what we have to do - so limited footprint, work through our allies. Saudi Arabia - I don't think anyone in their right mind would say that Saudi Arabia is a country that we can just forget about, hand it to - hand it off to China and say, goodbye, Saudi Arabia. If we say we have no interest in Yemen, then we're going to get Hezbollah in Yemen. Let's just be honest. Now, can we - are we going to be comfortable with Hezbollah in Yemen? My answer's no. The answer that we're hearing from Capitol Hill is, oh, that won't happen. That won't happen because if we stop supporting the Saudis, this thing - the natural distance between the Houthis and the Iranians will lead to the Houthis to throw away the Iranian alliance, just like the Iraqis have thrown away - I mean, this is me saying - yeah - just like the Iraqis have thrown away the connection to the Iranians, just like Hezbollah has thrown away the connection to the Iranians. That's just ridiculously wishful thinking.

SMITH: Bernie, did you want to respond? OK. I think I - why don't we open - see if there's any questions right now? Let me see. The gentleman in the second row - can you wait until you get a microphone please?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Michael's exactly right. The long game here is Shiite control of the holy places. And the Houthis, once they've solidified their position, will pay the Iranians by giving them a place to put a strong base on the border. That's what this is all about. It will be very, very hard for Iran to give that up. They've been fighting for that for a century. The question is - I'm really disappointed with Western journalists who keep referring to Yemenis as Shiite. As you pointed out, the strain that runs strongest is Zaidi. And a Zaidi mosque in downtown Tehran would be mocked because the differences are so substantial. You broke off hundreds of years ago, and you're still calling them Shiite? Why can't we wake up every journalist in the West? Stop that. Every time a newspaper does it, I send them an email, and it has no effect whatsoever.

SMITH: OK. Is that the - is that your question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah.

SMITH: Why can't we wake up the - I'm going to - Fatima, why can't we wake up the journalists?

ABO ALASRAR: I mean, it's a simple way of thinking about it. You know, it's easier to say Sunni, Shiite as opposed to saying, you know, Zaidi, offshoot of Shiite. They're Fivers, and those are Twelvers. So I think it's just an oversimplification. But what I don't like seeing in the media by Western journalists is when they assume that the Houthis speak for all the Shiite or for all of the Zaidis in Yemen. That is just not accurate. They speak to their network.

SMITH: Yeah, I think that's actually the important point 'cause I'll just say, as a journalist - I mean, some of the times you can get too far - if you continue to get too far into the - I basically - I hate to say this in public, but I basically agree with Mike on this - that the important thing is to look at the - for United States' interest - to look at the larger power dynamics, right? In a way, we can get too far into the details and miss the more important things that are going on. And I think that when Fatima is saying is that the idea that, you know - that everyone in Yemen supports them - that's incorrect. Gentleman up here - Mr. Husseini - do you have a - can you wait, please, for a mic? We'll bring it.
AUDIENCE MEMBER: Bernie, this question goes - how efficient was the late Defense Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz in managing Yemen and the fund that was - he was managing, as well, and whether the Houthis were lucky recipients from that fund?

HAYKEL: Right. So the Saudis, you know, regard - and still regard Yemen as their backyard in the same way that you know let's say the U.S., you know, with the Monroe Doctrine, sees, you know, Latin and this hemisphere as part of its backyard. So the Saudis had a special committee that was managed by the former minister of defense and then Crown Prince Sultan Abdulaziz basically distributed patronage and funds to different Yemeni tribal leaders, different Yemeni politicians and a couple of things happened. One is Yemen and Saudi Arabia signed a border agreement in 2000, and after that, the Saudis felt that they didn't have to spend as much on Yemen so that the expenditures went down. And then the particular Prince Sultan fell ill, had cancer in the mid-2000s and then spent most of his time undergoing treatment actually in the United States. And I think Yemen - the Yemen file was sort of abandoned because he had kind of - he was no longer able to look after it and hadn't delegated. And so Yemen - so the amount of money that was going went down considerably. And that coincided with a period when, also, Yemeni oil was declining very seriously.

So there were serious budgetary problems, deficits in Yemen. But ultimately the failure of Yemen is one that I would place the blame not just in Saudi Arabia, but the entire GCC which is, you know, for - from 1978, from time Ali Abdullah Saleh became president, to essentially try to give him support and give different Yemeni factions support to keep a lid on the place and not to deal directly with the problems of the country and the real problems of the country, which have to do with, you know, overpopulation, running - the country is running out of - is running out of water - lots of, you know, structural developmental issues that the GCC just never wanted to deal with. They just threw money at the place, and that money, once it dried up in the early to the - early, mid-2000s led to - helped lead to the implosion of the country.

SMITH: Interesting. Do you think now they're aware of that, that they...

HAYKEL: Yeah...

SMITH: ...That they should have been...

HAYKEL: I think the Saudis admit that they are partly responsible for, you know, cutting off the supply of money. Having said that, a lot of the money that the Saudis spent was, you know, going into the pockets of Ali Abdullah Saleh and to Yemeni politicians - a lot of corruption. I mean, I would love to see what bank accounts they have all over Europe and Dubai and elsewhere. These Yemeni politicians are - Ali Abdullah Saleh himself is worth several billion dollars apparently.

SMITH: Maybe one...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Inaudible) are the Houthis (inaudible)?

HAYKEL: I don't think the Houthis were actually recipients of that - of that Saudi largesse. Although - 'cause you have to also remember that Ali Abdullah Saleh was using the Houthis very much also as a - as a chip, if you like, as a card against the Saudis. So from very early on, he prevented the Saudis from dealing with the Houthis. And that was, again, another mistake. They should have actually been dealing with the Houthis from fairly early on and prevented that kind of vacuum that allowed Iran to occupy.
SMITH: Is this something that we can ask from our GCC partners to plan on now, say, look, looking down the road when this crisis, when this conflict done - it does end, we need you to - a Yemen program?

HAYKEL: Yeah, definitely. They need a Marshall program for Yemen.

SMITH: OK, well, that's good. That's something that we can have allies to work on.

(CROSSTALK)

HAYKEL: Right. Absolutely. And in fact, it's the one thing that, you know - if you - if you tell the Yemenis, look, you have a stake in an outcome that, you know, stops the war, constrains the Houthis, gives them a role but a much more constrained role, then maybe you can try to lure them out of - out of the present morass they're in.

SMITH: There's a gentleman in back here, right in the back row, all the way. Wait for a microphone. All right.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My question - well, to begin, I think it's important to remember that part of the reason that we are in this situation now is because the installation of President Hadi did lead to - did lead to a lot of Yemenis perceiving - I mean, again, after the many wars that the Houthis were marginalized and excluded from the Yemeni political process and led to sympathy that might - might not otherwise have existed and enabled them to take power to begin with. So I do think it's important to keep track of, you know, the local element. My question is, what - what role do you, do the panelists, believe - what...

SMITH: It's OK. We can hear.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: OK. What role do the panelists believe is appropriate for the Houthis to have in a post-conflict settlement?

SMITH: Fatima, would you like to...

ABO ALASRAR: Briefly on Hadi - Hadi is not meant to be there forever. It was a political settlement. Hadi - president - current president legitimate internationally recognized rather than legitimate, has been appointed there for a short measure, and then elections were supposed to happen. Yemen was not equipped for elections immediately after the Arab Spring. So all of that was set in place. Concerning is that the Houthis want to see themselves there forever. And, you know, their system is - does not allow for power-sharing, although they say that. So assuming that they share power, the first thing is disarmament. I don't want to see them having any control over heavy and medium weapons. And, you know, take that of the equation and I think we can start to - you know, Yemenis can start to work it out among themselves. And second is that they shouldn't have monopoly of power in Yemen, so - and that can only come through a negotiated political settlement that would do so.

SMITH: Did you - do you have something to say about that?

DORAN: No, I agree that - I would just point out that they have been offered power-sharing arrangements, which they have rejected in - because their appetite is limitless. So you can't get to that negotiation till you defeat them. They have to be defeated - if not defeated, at least wounded severely.
SMITH: Gentleman over here - right over here - can you just wait for the microphone?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The - I'm old enough to remember when there was an Aden in the South Yemen. And I keep thinking all the problems - not only here, but most of the Middle East - goes back over 100 years when the British and the French carved everything up. Is there any possibility that the, you know, local economy - not economy - autonomy and some sort of light federal governments - central governments could develop? I mean, it seems like we try to put a strong central government on these countries, and they're artificial in the first place. The boundaries are artificial. Nobody paid attention to the ethnicities of the areas. And so it seems like it's a never-ending problem. They don't want - just like he just said, they don't want control. They don't - seems like the only solution is some - either a whole lot of little countries or some very light central government with strong local autonomy.

SMITH: Bernie, would you like to take this one?

HAYKEL: Yes. So I mean, the one thing that cannot be said about Yemen is that it was a creation of colonialism. Yemen predates Islam as a geographical unit, and it has fairly, you know, well-defined borders and boundaries - in the Yemeni imagination, that is, and in Yemeni historical writing. So I don't think that, you know, one can just blame it on the colonial - and North Yemen was never colonized, for that matter, unless you consider the Ottomans to have been colonizers. But I think the idea of a kind of federal, less - you know, less centralized political structure is definitely one that would be good for Yemen. One of the reasons the Houthis actually rejected participation in the initial offer that was given to them was that, in the federal structure that was created, they weren't given access to the sea. They wanted to control a territory that had a boundary that went right up to the Red Sea, presumably because they wanted to maintain contact with Iran. But they wanted an outlet, and they weren't given that. And so that's one of the reasons they actually refused the federal kind of system. So, you know, if they're going to remain in power in any way, shape and form in some federal bit of Yemen, you might want to, you know, deal with that question of whether they have access to the sea or not. And one of the reasons they're not giving up Hodeidah, by the way - and they've re-entrenched themselves there in the port of Hodeidah, despite the agreement of Stockholm - is because they will not give up an access, an outlet to the sea.

SMITH: How do we perceive that in terms of managing our interest around the world, especially in the Middle East? I mean, they did, like, breaking up all of these different things. And how is that for American policymakers? Mike?

DORAN: You know, we played a role in promoting the diplomacy that allows the Houthis to hold on to Hodeidah, which is not in the American interest, because this is the route through which - one of the routes through which they're keeping their pipeline from Iran. I mean, one of our goals should be to close them off from the sea. A lot of the local answers, you know, in places like Yemen and Syria and Iraq can be alleviated or ameliorated through some kind of federal structure. But you still have the problem that the local actors in each of the autonomous or semi-autonomous regions have no compunction about making their own foreign policy and making connections with outside powers. This is the problem. I mean, Hassan Nasrallah doesn't hide the fact that he has his own foreign policy with Iran. So the job of the United States - we can come up with ideas or help local actors implement wise ideas about local governance, but we - part of our job has to be to teach Iran geography. You know, Iran is Iran - Iraq not Iran, Syria not Iran, Yemen not Iran. That's - only we can do that.
SMITH: Another question - this gentleman right here in the...

HAYKEL: There's one right...

SMITH: I'm sorry, did you - oh, oh, oh - this gentleman here. You want to - we'll come to you in one second. Did you want to...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What's the role of Oman in the unity conflict? And then an ancillary question is, what are the dynamics within the GCC with regard to Oman's policies?

DORAN: That's for you, isn't it?

HAYKEL: Yeah (laughter).

SMITH: You mentioned Oman before.

HAYKEL: Yeah. I did.

SMITH: It's on you.

HAYKEL: So, I mean, if you go to visit Oman - which is, by the way, a beautiful country - very gentle people, kind of open to the Indian Ocean with a long history of empire in the eastern - in East Africa - they kind of position themselves as, like, Switzerland. It's like, we're Switzerland here, and we want to have good relations with everybody, right? And they think of themselves or they present themselves as kind of offering good - you know, their good offices to negotiate any possible, you know, disagreement between countries. So they can be the mediators or help facilitate things with the United States and Iran, which they did do during the Obama administration without the Obama administration telling the Saudis about this. They seem to have been a conduit to - for weapons between Iran and the Houthis - that - they turned a kind of blind eye to various Iranian weapons shipments into Yemen. The Houthis seem to have good relations with the Omanis. Now, you know, the Saudis are kind of upset about this autonomy that they have. The Omanis see the Saudis as kind of the new bully, the big bully on the block who wants to just dominate them. And, you know, the Omanis, in a way, like the Qataris, maintain excellent relations with the U.S. and the British in particular so that - you know, they want to play it all ways, you know?

DORAN: And the Israelis.

HAYKEL: And the Israelis. It's the one Arab country, by the way, that has never stopped its cooperation with Israel. And I think it's on a project to do with desalination or some technical project that comes out of the Oslo Accords. So they're kind of an idiosyncratic, you know, country that does its own thing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is that, like, part of the GCC dynamics?

ABO ALASRAR: It's nothing troubling at the moment.

HAYKEL: Well, I mean, you know, actually, when the - you know, if Oman ever - which has less oil than many of the other GCC countries - if ever there was a real fiscal or financial crisis in Oman, which pegs its currency to the dollar, and it needs, you know, financial aid from the other GCC countries to bail it out, in order, for instance, to defend the peg, that's when, I think, you know, the rubber will hit the road, and we'll see how the other GCC countries deal with it. Right now, the other GCC countries - Kuwait likes to think of itself a bit like Oman as a kind of outlier
that gets along with everybody. But Kuwait is a much richer country, and Oman is the most likely country, along with Bahrain, to need financial assistance from the other GCC countries.

SMITH: We have time for - I'm just going to - this gentleman before, so this is probably going to be our last...

JUSTIN: Hello, Justin (ph) with IRI. My question is, Fatima, you mentioned earlier that you believe the U.S. government should help with issues in Yemen regarding governance. And my question is, how would you see that, considering that the Hadi government is now in Saudi Arabia and has very little control over many of the territories in Yemen?

ABO ALASRAR: I think one common problem in Yemen is the lack of public services in Houthi-liberated areas. So if - you know, just because an area is liberated, it doesn't necessarily make it government-controlled. And - you know, and there's a little bit of - I mean, yes, Hadi president is in Riyadh, perhaps for political reason. But other members of the government, of the Cabinet, local councils are there. The parliament was recently reconvened in the south of Yemen. And I think just, you know, paying attention to state institutions, strengthening state institutions and making them serve the public good - that would just solidify the government's hold over its territory because the majority of grievances in Yemen have to somehow do with the political distribution of power and the unequal political distribution of power and the unequal distribution of public services. More attention on - you know, and I think the Arab coalition, the Gulf allies are doing great in terms of supplying humanitarian assistance, but they're not looking at political institutions and how they can help in that way and how they can help in stabilizing the country. And you can't just throw money at Yemen and expect that things are going to be OK. Strengthening local institutions, local governance, you know, people having some type of ownership is just extremely important. So I wouldn't get too hung up on Hadi being in Riyadh perhaps for political reasons. I mean, if Hadi is to die by a Houthi drone, Yemen will even be in a more fragile situation than it is now because the Houthis will take the opportunity to say, you know, we are the only authority on the scene here, and you guys have nothing. Not only that, but his vice president is Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who is somewhat affiliated with the Islah party, the Congregation for Reform, and they are maybe the sworn enemies of the Houthi. So Yemen could even plunge into deeper problems with that.

SMITH: Bernie or Mike, did you want to - well, I wanted to thank the three of you for, really, a wonderful afternoon and a great panel. I wanted to thank you all for coming.

(APPLAUSE)

SMITH: And, of course, thanks to Hudson Institute. Thanks very much.

ABO ALASRAR: Thank you, Lee.