

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Media Call: Yemen-Saudi Conflict

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Operator: This is conference # 5595294

Tom Carver: Good morning. This is Tom Carver from Carnegie Endowment, and this is a media call on the situation in Yemen. I'm pleased to have with me Farea Al-Muslimi, who is from our Carnegie Middle East center, who is an expert on Yemen and Yemeni politics, and is in fact, Yemeni himself. And Fred Wehrey who's a Senior Associate in our Middle East program here in D.C. who focuses on security affairs and the Gulf in North Africa. So this is a 30 minute call; it's on the record, and a transcript will be made available at some stage, you know, within 24, 48 hours for anyone that wants to get one.

OK -- and by the way, there'll be a lot of chances to ask question; please just announce yourself so that Fred and Farea will know who they're talking to. So Farea, let's start with you. So the war has obviously been going on since the Houthi rebels took over the capital in September 2014, so a couple of years ago. And that was then followed by the Saudi invasion. Is there any sign two years on of it drawing to a close or diminishing?

Farea Al-Muslimi: I mean, I would start by saying that the war did not necessarily start in September 23rd; it's probably a bit before that when the political process was going in Yemen. It was further processed in many ways; that was not surprising how it ended up. That was, obviously, not in the attention. In the center there was a political process going in 2011, but there were many conflicts going around the country from (Sanaa) to the south, into obviously long battle with Al-Qaeda. Is there a, you know, a way forward for peace? The short answer is no. The long answer is yes. If many things happen, but this if is very big. I think it's -- and I say yes because the conflict in Yemen is not as controversial as Syria, it's not as decentralized as Libya.

You know, two years later, 20,000 people probably had been killed. Obviously that's, you know, you do not quantify this, but certainly it's not really a big number compared to Syria, for example. It still can be solved.

However, the whole – for that to happen there must be a, you know, Yemen must be kept away from the conflict in Syria, it must be not put in part of other regional conflict. If it continues as it is going right now, it would be less likely that it would end up anytime soon. But at the same time, I think, you know, whether you speak to the Gulf or whether you speak to many Yemenis, there is right now less belief on the efficiency of the work than there was in the past, but there is a gridlock of how to actually get out of this war.

Tom Carver: So, I mean, we have those peace talks, right, in Geneva I guess – was it this week or recently that finished. I mean, so what was the reason that they didn't make any progress?

Farea Al-Muslimi: Because the conflict was not really about the absence of negotiation or the absence of talks. It was more of other reasons that are not necessary that ones that everyone is fighting for. Saudi has other reason in Yemen other than Yemen to go to the war in Yemen actually for many reasons; for domestic reason, high level of insecurity towards Iran.

And then I think the problem right now is why we haven't seen that peace evolve is because I do not think any one at the UN is at least alone capable of solving the conflict. This has to go – there is many reasons; one because the UN was setup to solve conflict between countries, not within countries -- and this is a conflict within country. But at the same time, because the whole – the whole – this is focused in Yemen, in the past who usually where the Gulf are now part of the problem rather than part of the solution, as they were actually in the past. So, yes, I mean, it will take more than UN and a more different approach than everyone is doing right now. The whole UN resolution 2216 and the whole agenda of the negotiation are normally the drivers of the conflict in the ground, as it was in the past.

Tom Carver: We'll get on to the wider reason or implications on what the Saudis – (we'll want to answer it) in a minute. But I just want to ask you about the Houthis;

what the – I mean, they invaded the capital, they still occupy it, what do they want out of this?

Farea Al-Muslimi: I don't think they even know themselves what they want. Part of the problem is Houthis are 10 years or more than 10 years since 2005 they have learned -- they have established themselves as good in one thing, that's war, and nothing else. And this is a group that has been established as a conflict, and that's why it's a very less likely you'll be able to defeat their war. Because it's the only safe zone it actually has; its only comfortable zone it has been having.

Tom Carver: And that's a business for them?

Farea Al-Muslimi: And that's more than a business, it's an identity, this is a group that has established on war, and that (destabilization) and absence of war is an absence of task, is an absence of identity. Really, it can't afford -- the Houthis can afford war, but they cannot -- just like most nations, they cannot afford peace. And then if even when they reach powers that was actually their biggest problem; Yemen was too big of hamburger for them to understand or even to run, or even to swallow in many ways.

Tom Carver: OK. Fred can you talk to us a little bit about the Saudis and are they still as invested in this war as they were a year or so ago?

Frederic Wehrey: Yes, I think they are but I think that they're recognizing that it is, you know, becoming a bit of an entanglement. And I think you're seeing, you know, the leadership is sort of disengaging from their affiliation with this war, some of them at least. And so, you know, I think it's important to emphasize that this was not just about Yemen, that it was about a broader Saudi perception of the regional chessboard and that Iran was checkmating them across the region.

And so when they went into Yemen, this was to sort of send a signal to Iran -- they painted the Yemen conflict in a broad geo strategic, you know, terms as a conflict with Iran, when in fact it was highlight localized, much of it. And so, you know, the question again is royal politics, I mean, who takes the fall for this, how do they extricate themselves? There's a lot of maneuvering that has to go on, you know, behind the scenes.

You know, the young prince, his plan 2030, he's focused on that, so the question is, you know, how does he rearrange the internal, you know, forces within the kingdom to sort of disengage from this?

Tom Carver: But obviously the Saudis have always kind of meddled, right, in Yemen, I mean, historically.

Frederic Wehrey: Yes.

Tom Carver: But do you think that that – this is the kind of step change from that? Do they actually now want to kind of be there long term on the ground in Yemen?

Frederic Wehrey: I don't know if they can afford that. I think again, they're coming to this as a new military power, they haven't learned the lessons of military occupation, of counter insurgency that, I mean, for instance, not learned, or I mean, the Americans learned in Iraq. So, you know, their traditional you know levers of influence have been, you know, tribes, money, and I know if – I mean, there has to be a learning curve for them to figure out they can't manage this country, they can't occupy it for the long-term.

Fareea Al-Muslimi: And if I just many add into the idea of Iran, it's just as if – It's like this was the best thing that happens to the Houthis, the war, it was also the best thing for Iran would, you know, Iran would throw \$0.01 into Yemen, and then Saudi would throw \$1 million. It is a very low cost place for them to consume Saudi and to drag Saudi. Ultimately, you know, despite what everyone actually thinks, Iran does not really have much partnership with the Houthis as much as they will ultimately in the long-term have a problem, because this is an Arab (Shahad Nontoalfas) group, and that is something that Iran does not like. But it is also, you know, it is threatening in that sense to it, actually, despite that fact that is being addressed as one of its proxies or as one of its agents. But yes, it is, you know, Iran got nothing really to lose in Yemen, contrary to Saudi.

Tom Carver: OK, let's just pause and see if there's any questions from anyone.

Operator: At this time, I would like to remind everyone, in order to ask a question, press star followed by the number one on your telephone keypad. We'll pause for a moment to compile the Q&A roster.

And again, in order to ask a question over the phone, it's start and then the number one on your telephone keypad.

And there are currently no question; I'll turn the call over to the presenters.

Tom Carver: So let's just talk a moment about the other regional players, because it's not just the Saudi's, right? I mean, UAE has some stake in this, maybe you could just explain about that, and whether they can play a part of bringing this to an end.

Farea Al-Muslimi: I mean, the UAE right now want to invest more in peace or is willing, and has been trying more than Saudi because it's not as happy at least as Saudi in being part of war. But at the same time, and this is one of the dangers if the war continuous on, is the coalition, or the 12 country coalition will collapse in size in fact on the long term the different Gulf countries have a different priorities in Yemen.

So for example, even right now the Houthis are or the Saudis are willing to actually go to peace tomorrow with the Houthis in Yemen, but they are never willing to go into peace with Saleh. And that applies to UAE; UAE is willing to go into actually a peace with Saleh but never with the Houthis in Yemen. And then at the same time, you know, the UAE actually have more problems with the number one alliance, the coalition in Yemen right now, the Muslim Brotherhood whom they are fighting, than they will ever have actually with – would they would ever actually have with Saleh in Yemen. Let's not forget when the war broke out when Saleh's son was actually in UAE and is still there. And this was even come to a surprise to the coalition countries themselves, the idea of the war, not something that was in there.

(Multiple Speakers)

Tom Carver: And doesn't that most of his family live there or just some?

Farea Al-Muslimi: Most of his family live there, I mean, some of them, the daughters actually have been there for some time. And in fact despite the UN sanctions committee, you know, asking UAE and many countries to freeze assets for Saleh and his family in UAE, actually the UAE has not freeze Saleh's assets or some Saleh's assets in the UAE. So there was, you know, there's a – the coalition are kind of the front partners, and that they do not really like each other or they do not really have the same goals ultimately in Yemen.

Tom Carver: But would the UAE be willing to not see Saleh in power?

Farea Al-Muslimi: I don't think the UAE is looking forward to see Saleh in power as much they are looking to Saleh from. Exactly to be accurate, there is no way that (Saleh) not necessary on power, but to have some sort of a – to have some sort of a deal over the last year and until probably October 2015, the UAE despite its high engaging in the work, it was highly engaged actually, you know, in a silent conversation with Saleh, there was a backdoor piece actually happening, and there is completely collapse.

But what is one thing, you know, the UAE never willing to see in Yemen is actually the Muslim Brotherhood in power who are right now the main power actually, the Saudis are depending on in northern Yemen. But, you know, it's beyond the Gulf politics, beyond all of this, the continuance of the work in Yemen is actually ending the country in many ways, it's fragmenting it, there is mini states, you have Hadhramaut almost a place by itself, you have Aden almost a power center by itself, you have Sanaa almost a power center by itself.

There was one thing that was keeping this place together until last month which is the Central Bank of Yemen until its reallocation by the President and he fired the whole board; that I think has – this is probably more dangerous than the war itself because it was the last (contribution) in the state and institution, and it was the one last thing that is keeping this country together in one piece. So, yes, if it continues even if at one point, you know, the Gulf comes into an agreement with Saleh or with the Houthis or with anyone in the ground, it will be much, much harder to end, than it was possible a few months ago.

Tom Carver: And we haven't talked about ISOL at all or Al-Qaeda. I mean, are they active in Yemen, are they gaining a lot as out of this war? Either of you?

Frederic Wehrey: Well, my understanding is Al-Qaeda is, you know, is reasserting itself, and I mean, some of the tribes are realigning with Al-Qaeda. So, you know, I mean this is a classic dynamic where you have extremist groups, you know, emerge from the vacuum of these wars, from the (fishers), and certain social groups tribes ally with them. So I think it's a very real dynamic going on.

Farea Al-Muslimi: Yes, I mean, and beyond that it is rebranding, it is remerging as a group. I mean, it was taken – it took Hadhramaut for a year, Hadhramaut (commensurate) in Yemen, it provided millions of dollars of revenues, until it was kicked off by the UAE forces, and some local forces, or maybe to be accurate, (Salafis) more than actually really kicked off Hadhramaut.

And that is, you know, one – while that's good in the principle that that we cut the last revenue or source of money they had in Hadhramaut, they also, you know, they also went to the other strategy, which is hide and strike. At the same time the whole war where it does – what it did is, you know, beyond idea it helped Al-Qaeda immediately from a financial source, from a political source and from a rebranding source.

What it does is it has radicalize everything to its (version squared). So for example, the Muslim Brotherhood are now Salafis. The Salafis are part-time Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda are ISIS, the Saleh are ISIS, and Socialist in the south are (Civilist). Everyone has kind of (stepped) one more step into a radical version of them, that obviously with the benefit of – for the benefit of Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

The relationship between Al-Qaeda and ISIS obviously at one point united, especially when they kicked off Saleh, they kicked off Saleh and Houthis from the south, and from different parts. But on the long term they are actually, and they have been struggling because they are trying to recruit the same assets, the same people, the same resources. It's a very strange relationship of actually liking each other, but also struggling with each other for both human and financial resources.

Tom Carver: There have been some calls, Fred, here for sanctions against Saudis on the Capitol Hill. I mean, do you see that happening?

Frederic Wehrey: Well, I mean, this latest review I think is a strong signal, but I think what the review does is it sort buys time without really, you know, enacting something substantially. I mean, there is -- there is a real problem with the way the Saudis are conducting this campaign, and I think a lot of military officials thought that if they just, you know, provided more very close assistance in terms of, you know, targeting methodology, I mean, lawyers, this is how you do these sorts of assortments, and, you know, really joining themselves to the heap with Saudi, they could avert that. But, you know, the Saudis are still making these, you know, these mistakes.

The question is what, you know, if there is a halt on arms, what will that do? Could the Saudis go elsewhere? You know, I think some sort of curtailment, you know, combined with reassurance on other threats that, you know, signaling to the Saudis that yes, we recognize you have real threats from cyber-attacks, from missiles, from Iranian attacks on critical infrastructure. But, you know, the way you're conducting this war is not only a humanitarian disaster, but it's counterproductive to your strategic aims and it's becoming a liability to the United States as well.

Farea Al-Muslimi: And just on that, I mean, while many would argue that the Saudi probably were dragged into this war, especially when the Houthis did the military operation on the border because Saudi actually interfered, that if you can argue about that how this would have been conducted. It could have been conducted in a much less harmful way, in a much different way. But I think -- and this was back to the US, is there is a high level of tendency, at least in D.C., to maintain the Iran deal. And the only way to really bribe Saudi to let that go is actually give them Yemen; it's almost as a tip. If you would put it in a simple terms, it's almost, you know ...

Tom Carver: Quid pro quo.

Yes, it's most, you know, Saudis talking to Iran, play with Yemen until I'm done. It was something that you cannot really afford to piss the Saudis off

more or to make the Saudis angry about. But, I mean, that, you know, probably sad, but that has been kind of Yemen rule over the last 10, 20 years is a makeup something for something else. It's a very backdoor country where you can easily low cost argue about it between countries. Let's not forget even at the UN Security Council, until recently, the Saudi – until recently, the U.S. and the Russians were actually completely on the same page, and even the Russians let the resolution 2216 go with no objection, and contrary to what they have done today because there was a consensus overall at Yemen at that time. Both both at times of peace and both at times of war.

Tom Carver: OK, let's see if there are any questions from others.

Operator: Again, if you would like to ask a question, press star then one on your telephone keypad. Your first question comes from the line of James Reinl from Al Jazeera. Your line is open.

James Reinl: Good morning gentlemen. Thanks very much for the briefing. Can you hear me?

Tom Carver: Yes, we can hear you fine, James.

James Reinl: All right, there. Thanks so much, yes. I got two questions; one which is really obvious and political, but is there any possibility that the Yemen conflict could change in some way, or is U.S. policy towards it with the change of presidency -- either Hillary or Donald Trump depending on which way it goes in November?

I've got another question about airstrikes on hospitals. You might be able to answer this, you might not. I'm really interested in it and hopefully you can help me. But Yemen is -- along with Syria and Afghanistan -- one of those conflicts where hospitals and medicals teams have been targeted or destroyed by airstrikes either deliberately or accidentally. There's been like a whole state of these incidents in the last couple of years. I'm wondering if you've, like, heard through your contacts whether or not these kind of incidents are causing to rethink in MSF, Doctors Without Borders, and other groups. Are they, you know, struggling to get new recruits to go and work in these centers? Are

they realizing that perhaps it's becoming too risky for them to operate in these kind of theaters?

Tom Carver: OK. So why don't we start, Fred, with number one, about, yes, the kind of future American policy?

Frederic Wehrey: You know, I mean think the sort of signal we saw from Obama was, you know, this -- and he made this in several speeches, that, you know, telling the Gulf states don't worry so much about this Iran threat, but focus on your own, you know, internal affairs. And there's almost sort of, you know, from the Gulf perspective, sort of, you know, throwing them to the wind, I mean, not recognizing their very real security concerns.

The signals, I've seen from at least Clinton is more reverting back to a status quo of, you know, sealing this alliance, yes, we have your back. So I would anticipate a bit less, you know, perhaps less pressure on the Gulf and the Saudi's, you know, from a Clinton presidency. You know, look Trump, I think he is so fixated on, you know, Iran as this sort of geopolitical threat, and I'm not sure if he's really even thought out how to -- if he has a well thought out strategy toward Yemen.

Farea Al-Muslimi: Since the beginning of the debate, I think there have been 20 of them so far, the word Yemen had been mentioned six times only, and it has been always even in a size of other centers just a war than not as a Yemen itself. So it's apparently not as important. Yes, not as important. Regarding America ...

Frederic Wehrey: MSF, yes.

Farea Al-Muslimi: Yes, it is difficult. Actually, MSF has withdrawn from all northern Yemen, most of that aid organizations have actually shut down their hospitals around Yemen; it has been in many ways impossible to deliver aid around Yemen. And that's their job, I mean, whether MSF or ICFC have been equally hunt by both radical groups like Al-Qaeda which actual have kidnapped some ICFC staff in the back. it has been handled by the Houthis, and most important also finally it has been attacked multiple times by the Saudis.

Despite the attention the bombing on the Funeral had gotten, it was not the first time, it's actually many times in the battle where hospitals have been – and have been targeted multiple times. And yes that definitely have implicated the aid work in Yemen. There is more than 21 million Yemini's right now, out 26 in the need of humanitarian aid. And it has been impossible in many ways, especially in northern Yemen, to deliver aid to these areas.

Tom Carver: OK, other questions?

Operator: And there are no further questions at this time. I like to turn the call back over to the presenters.

Tom Carver: OK.

Operator: Oh, looks like we do have a question that just popped in.

Tom Carver: OK.

Operator: The question is from Akbar Ahmed. Akbar your line is open, please state your affiliation.

Akbar Shahid Ahmed: Hi, thanks for the call. This is Akbar Shahid Ahmed, a reporter with the Huffington Post.

My questions is on the review that you mentioned, and you sort of said it might just be a way to buy time. What do you know about this review? There hasn't been a lot of transparency from the administration about who is conducting the review? What's involved? What are they looking at, when should we expect a result? Do either of you have any insight into this, and what we can expect from the review?

Tom Carver: Fred?

Frederic Wehrey: You know, I just don't – I don't think we know. And I mean, historically reviews are these are these sort of political, you know, signals. And so, you know, I would assume obviously, I mean, it's Congress – but I just don't – I just don't have the details, I haven't seen them to be honest.

Farea Al-Muslimi: And I think it's more of an attempt, actually, especially after the last Funeral attack; it's more of an attempt by the Obama administration to (work blogs) of this crime scene more than actually an attempt to really clean it. It is too late though; it's already the (fingerprints out there). Because there are so much more you can do to pressure the Saudi, I mean, I think beyond just making the statement that this was – or we will review it. It's more to be, I mean, it seems more of an attempt to wash hand off than to really review it in many ways.

Tom Carver: Do we know anything about the time scale of this review and we can conclude this?

Frederic Wehrey: I don't have that. No, I don't know.

Farea Al-Muslimi: I have asked that question the last few days to a lot of office in D.C., government ones, and no one really has an answer.

Tom Carver: It's kind of open ended. All right, other questions?

Operator: And there are currently no more question in queue. I'll turn the call back over to the presenters.

Tom Carver: Great. OK, well, I think we're -- we will wrap it up. We're just about on the half hour, if there's no other questions. Do you have any kind of concluding thoughts you want to say? I mean, do you – I mean, the specs that you raise of this country completely disintegrating, I mean, do you think that this is, you know, potentially the end of Yemen as a functioning nation? Or, I mean, can it be put back to piece together again?

Farea Al-Muslimi: I mean, I still – I still think that the – I still worry about Saudi Arabia more than I worry about Yemen from this war. Because this is a country in many ways throughout history, one, has been gone to a lot of conflicts, two, you know, it's a country in a way that forgets to die; it has gone through so many - - so many conflicts over 10 of years.

Frederic Wehrey: You're talking about Yemen, not Saudi?

Farea Al-Muslimi: Yes of course, Yemen. I still again think that there is more threat on Saudi from this than actually on Yemen obviously. But at the same time the Yemen we know is gone, you know, that central state of one person dominating it and taking the rest of the country that way of a central state is gone. But, you know, as an idea, as a nation, it's very hard, I think, to assume none of this place would disappear. But obviously, yes, on the way on the formula, on the structure, and the power dynamics, and the relationships within different groups within the country is definitely -- is definitely gone. Doesn't mean, you know, it will be any clean process until we see the new Yemen. But it is definitely ...

Tom Carver: I mean, historically for a long time there was the north and the south. Do you think it might kind of split to that way?

Farea Al-Muslimi: I mean, the problem in Yemen right now is what was a -- what as a nightmare is a dream. The idea of two Yemen's is probably the best thing that can happen. But the only thing that is banning that from happening is the fact that the south has not been able to have its feet together as one place as it was before in the past. What we will see I think in the long-term is, you know, you have Hadhramaut as one place by itself, one entity, it's one third of Yemen, and it's actually Hadhramaut despite the fact that it's part of the south, it has more problems with the south than it actually has with the north. And then you will have Aden I think as a state by itself, of the (inaudible) south of separatists.

And then you will have Sanaa as the center of Saleh/Houthi, and then there will be other buffering zones; that includes (Marib), you know, where most of the Islamist and part-time Islamists. And then you will have either the conflict zone for some long time. So there would be many centers, many different -- many different players, but obviously I don't think will go back to the Democratic Republic of Yemen that was existing before 1990, and then the Arab Republic of Yemen that was there.

Tom Carver: OK. Great. Thank you very much to both of you, Farea Al-Muslimi and to Fred Wehrey, and that's the end of the media call. And there will, as I say, be

a transcript if you want to look at it, which we will send that to those who are on the call.

Farea Al-Muslimi: OK, thank you.

Frederick Wehrey: Thanks.

Operator: This concludes today's conference call. You may now disconnect.

END