An aerial campaign on Yemen’s capital, launched by a Saudi-led pan-Arab force, has escalated what had in many ways been a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

While the worsening war in Yemen shares similarities with other conflicts in the Arab world, it is the role of foreign powers in Yemen’s descent into leaderless chaos that is particularly striking.

Because Yemen is viewed as the Arab world’s poor brother — inconsequential and with little influence over the region as a whole — it serves as an avenue for the Arab world to push back against Iran. There is little other incentive for Arab governments to become involved with Yemen’s internal quagmire, other than not having a hostile government in a nation bordering the [Bab al-Mandeb strait](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/24/yemen-security-idUSL6N0WQ18D20150324), a highly trafficked [shipping line](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/26/us-mideast-crisis-yemen-shipping-idUSKBN0MM2JX20150326) leading to the Suez Canal.

Though Yemen’s domestic power struggle since the end of President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s reign three years ago was based largely on local grievances, these two historical foes, Shi’ite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, worked to use who they could in Yemen for political advantage.

The Saudi kingdom long was Yemen’s largest benefactor and held sway over powerful Yemeni tribal leaders. Yet following Saleh’s resignation in November 2011, Iran swiftly worked to increase its influence in Yemen by creating ties with whomever shared a common disdain for Saudi Arabia, including liberal anti-Saleh activists.

The Houthi rebels, an oft-ignored militia from Yemen’s far north, were an obvious ally for Iran. Houthi fighters, who follow a sect of Shi’ite Islam known as Zaydism, consolidated power in the wake of the 2011 government collapse. They are staunchly anti-Saudi. They believe that the Kingdom was involved in the systematic corruption of their distinct Zaydi culture via the promotion of Wahhabism (a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam that began in Saudi Arabia) in the Houthis’ traditional homeland in the north.

Then last September, Houthi militia swept into Yemen’s capital, Sanaa, taking over government institutions and effectively forcing the resignation of President Abd- Rabbu Mansour Hadi — a man whose power stemmed from Western governments and the United Nations, which crafted and promulgated the transition agreement that made him president. There was no real attempt at a democratic transition in Yemen.

Hadi was propped up by the West despite his lack of leadership experience, local support and political savvy. He was far from what the pro-democracy protesters had called for in the early months of the Arab Spring. But for the international community, the theoretical alternative to ushering Hadi into power was that Saleh — who had already been president for 32 years — would have clung to power, possibly igniting a civil war. Now that has happened regardless.

Since they took the capital, Houthi militias have continued to push southward, making strategic advances along the way, like taking control of airports. On [Thursday](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/26/us-yemen-security-idUSKBN0ML0YC20150326,) they battled pro-Hadi forces outside the port city of Aden, where Hadi had fled. The extent to which Houthis’ policy is dictated by Tehran remains unknown, but much of the Arab world believes the group is carrying out Iran’s will. Arab governments are capitalizing on this ambiguity to serve their political agendas, as evidenced by their push for a military incursion into Yemen. It’s the consequence of Iran’s challenge to Saudi hegemony over Yemeni politics.

For Yemen, the consequences of foreign powers’ involvement can be dire. For one, [Saudi Arabia’s actions](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/27/us-yemen-security-usa-idUSKBN0MN04020150327) seem to prove the proxy war narrative. And that threatens to further cement sectarian tensions, which have already been on the rise. The Shi’ite/Sunni rivalry — such a powerful current in today’s Middle East — was not relevant in Yemen until this past year. Followers of both sects used to pray in the same mosques. That is not the case anymore, and last week’s deadly suicide bombings in Zaydi mosques in Sanaa was a terrifying indicator of that increasing divide.