

Case Report

Yemen Crises and the Role of Saudi Arabia

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Accepted 20th December, 2016

Long since the eruption of conflict in Middle East, Yemen and the adjacent region has seen tremendous drifts and shifts. And the ongoing conflict (having displaced millions of people), is far more complex than a Shia-Sunni Conflict. The Houthis and the Yemenese government have battled on-and-off since 2004 with great devastation. The problem is not that the peace is not landed back in the region, but negotiation is not channeled in a positive way and role played by the regional players of Middle East as well as the major western powers is totally discouraging. In fact, UN is in itself has a greater role to play for peace (for what it was established). There is a need to change the perceptions towards the conflict as it has already crossed the Human Rights parameters. This paper has contributed in highlighting the issue its repercussions and role of major regional player of Middle East (Saudi Arabia).

Keywords: Yemen Conflict, Saudi Arabia, United Nations, Houthis.

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia to the north and Oman to the east, the Indian Ocean to the south including Red sea to west, Yemen has a geostrategic importance in the region. The region is largely covered by a desert or semi-desert flatland (Hadramaut). Yemen has a population of about 25.4 million people. Ethnically, over 90% of them have an Arab or other Semitic-Arab background. The official as well as by far more practiced, virtually universal religion is Islam (99%).some 55% of Yemenis (majorly in the eastern and south-eastern part) adhere to the Sunni doctrine in general and predominantly the Shafi school in particular, and some other 45% (mainly in the north and north-west) follow Shiite sect.

Over since the decades, many people (particularly in the south of Yemen) have been feeling increasingly dissatisfied with existing political status quo. They have not overlooked, nor exonerated, the fact the unification process¹ has been conceded out under (not always

violence-free) northern leadership, and they have often been accusing the central(Sanaa) government of monopolizing power at the expense of the former southern territories, as well as of being unwilling to share its economic wealth with the rest of the country. The conflict has its roots in the failure of the political changeover that was supposed to bring stability to Yemen following an uprising that forced its longtime authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to hand over power to Mr. Hadi, his deputy, in November 2011.Mr Hadi struggled to deal

Although the Arab League brokered a cease-fire and both sides agreed to forge a united Yemen within 18 months, the two regions Yemen remained apart. The following years saw continued unrest and conflict, culminating in the assassination of the president of the YAR in June 1978. A month later, the Constituent People's Assembly elected Lieutenant Colonel Ali Abdullah Saleh as president of the YAR. Renewed fighting broke out in early 1979, but in March the heads of state of the two regions of Yemen signed an agreement in Kuwait pledging unification.

¹By 1972 the two regions of Yemen (North and South Yemen) were in open conflict. The YAR (Yemen Arab Republic or North Yemen) received aid from Saudi Arabia, and the PDRY (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen or South Yemen) received arms from the Soviet Union.

with a variety of problems, including attacks by al-Qaeda, a separatist movement in the south, the continuing loyalty of many military officers to Mr. Saleh, as well as corruption, unemployment and food insecurity.²

The Houthi³ movement, which champions Yemen's Zaidi Shia Muslim minority and fought a series of rebellions against Mr. Saleh during the previous decade, took advantage of the new president's weakness by taking control of their northern heartland of Saada province and neighboring areas. Disillusioned with the transition, many ordinary Yemenis - including Sunnis - supported the Houthis and in September 2014 they entered the capital, Sanaa, setting up street camps and roadblocks.

In January 2015, the Houthis reinforced their takeover of Sanaa, surrounding the presidential palace and other key points and effectively placing Mr. Hadi and his cabinet ministers under house arrest. The president escaped to the southern port city of Aden the following month. The Houthis and security forces loyal to Mr. Saleh then attempted to take control of the entire country, forcing Mr. Hadi to flee abroad in March 2015. Alarmed by the rise of a group they believed to be backed militarily by regional Shia power Iran, Saudi Arabia and eight other mostly Sunni Arab states began an air campaign aimed at restoring Mr. Hadi's government. The coalition received logistical and intelligence support from the US, UK and France.⁴

Role of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states have accused the Houthis of being a proxy for Iran, the region's Shiite superpower. The Houthis themselves deny this. Some outside sources have also suggested a link, however. In fact Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Iran who all claimed that Tehran had supplied money, weapons

² BBC News.

³ The Houthis are a Shiite insurgency group that originated from northwestern Yemen's Saada province. Charles Schmitz, a professor at Towson University, writes that their origins lie in the Shabab al-Mumanin (the Believing Youth), a group that operated in the early 1990s. The Believing Youth worked to raise awareness about the Zaidi branch of Shiite Islam, which had dominated Yemen for centuries but was sidelined after a civil war in the 1960s and repressed by the Yemeni government.

⁴ Ibid

and training to the Houthis.⁵ The problem is still there that why cross-border aggression is allowed to sustain?

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia became very uncomfortable when the Yemenese or Yemenite movement of the Houthi or Ansarallah⁶ gained control of Yemen's capital, Sanaa/Sana, in September 2014. The US-supported Yemenite President Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Al-Hadi was humiliatingly rendered to share power with the Houthis and the coalition of northern Yemenese tribes that had helped them enter Sana. Al-Hadi declared that negotiations for a Yemeni national unity government would take place and his allies the US and Saudi Arabia tried to use a new national dialogue and mediated talks to co-opt and pacify the Houthis.

The truth has been turned on its head about the war in Yemen. The war and ousting of President Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Al-Hadi in Yemen are not the outreaches of Houthi coup in Yemen. It is the opposite. Al-Hadi was ousted, because with Saudi and US support he tried to backtrack on the power sharing agreements he had made and return Yemen to authoritarian rule. The ousting of President Al-Hadi by the Houthis and their political allies was an unexpected reaction to the takeover Al-Hadi was planning with Washington and the House of Saudi. And this happened to be a tilt-down event. While the House of Saudi has long considered Yemen a subordinate province of some sorts and as a part of Riyadh's sphere of influence, the US wants to make sure that it could control the Bab Al-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, and the Socotra Islands.⁷ The Bab Al-Mandeb it is an important strategic chokepoint for international maritime trade and energy shipments that connects the Persian Gulf via the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea. It is just as important as the Suez Canal for the maritime shipping lanes and trade between Africa, Asia, and Europe. Israel was also concerned, because control of Yemen could cut off Israel's access to Indian Ocean via the Red Sea and prevent its submarines from easily deploying to the Persian Gulf to threaten Iran.

⁵ Adam Taylor, Who are the Houthis, the group that just toppled Yemen's government?, The Washington Post, January 22, 2015.

⁶ In Arabic Ansarallah means the supporters of God.

⁷ The Guardian, 5 June 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/05/saudi-led-naval-blockade-worsens-yemen-humanitarian-disaster>. Accessed on 20th December 2016

This is why control of Yemen was actually one of Netanyahu's talking points on Capitol Hill when he spoke to the US Congress about Iran on March 3 in what the New York Times of all publications billed as *Mr. Netanyahu's Unconvincing Speech to Congress* on March 4.⁸

Saudi Arabia was visibly afraid that Yemen could become formally align to Iran and that the events there could result in new rebellions in the Arabian Peninsula against the House of Saud. The US was just as much concerned about this too, but was also thinking in terms of global rivalries. Preventing Iran, Russia, or China from having a strategic foothold in Yemen, as a means of preventing other powers from overlooking the Gulf of Aden and positioning themselves at the Bab Al-Mandeb, was a major US concern. Added to the geopolitical importance of Yemen in overseeing strategic maritime corridors is its military's missile arsenal. Yemen's missiles could hit any ships in the Gulf of Aden or Bab Al-Mandeb. In this regard, the Saudi attack on Yemen's strategic missile depots serves both US and Israeli interests. The aim is not only to prevent them from being used to retaliate against exertions of Saudi military force, but to also prevent them from being available to a Yemeni government aligned to either Iran, Russia, or China.⁹

Repercussions of Conflict in The Region

"There is no end in sight to this deadly conflict. Close to 10 million children face fear, pain and deprivation. Children do not start wars, yet are the most vulnerable to their deadly effects."----- UNICEF, 2016

A humanitarian crisis of immense magnitude as a result of intensified fighting is also a serious challenge. The first medical aid team from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) could reach Yemen only on April 10, 2015. People are already under immense pressure firstly because of the fighting between the rebels and the government on one hand and the aerial bombing carried out by the Saudi-led coalition on the other. According to the World Bank (2012) and UNDP (2013) reports Yemen ranks 154th in the world in human development,¹⁰ this highlights

⁸The Geopolitics behind the war in Yemen, [http://Users/hp/Desktop/on%20yemen/The%20Geopolitics%20behind%20the%20War%20in%20Yemen%20\(I\).htm](http://Users/hp/Desktop/on%20yemen/The%20Geopolitics%20behind%20the%20War%20in%20Yemen%20(I).htm), accessed on 28th November 2016.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Meena Singh Roy, M. Alam Rizvi, Zaki Zaidi, Crises in Yemen: Imperatives for Region and Beyond, Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis, New Delhi, May 05,

the impact of the crisis in the region. On 15th July 2015 Stephen O'Brien¹¹, released a statement, pointing out that the continued air strikes and conflicts have caused more than 3,500 deaths and 16,000 injuries. Around 1.3 million people have been forced to flee their homes in desperate search for safety and security, and 21 million people require humanitarian assistance, including food, water and medical equipment. Thousands of civilian households, schools and even refugee camps have been destroyed in the flames of war.

Yemen is in the grip of its most severe crisis in years, as competing forces, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, fight for control of the country. The "tussle for power" between the two countries has intensified the conflicts between Iran and some Arab countries, which is working against the restoration of unity and overall solidarity of the Islamic world.¹²

The "proxy war" has turned into a Saudi-led military intervention; the Yemen Crisis has ended up as the biggest geopolitical contest on the Arabian Peninsula since the unrest in 2011. As a result of crisis, the situation in Yemen has an important influence on the Middle East landscape.

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia and Al-Hadi are now courting the southern separatists in Yemen, which have the support of about one-tenth of the population. The next option for the US and Saudi Arabia may be to divide Yemen as a means of

2015, http://www.idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/IB_YemenCrisis_0505151.pdf Accessed on 29 November 2016.

¹¹ Stephen O'Brien is a British politician and diplomat who is the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

¹² Dong Manyuan, The Yemen Crises: Impacts and Prospects, China Institute of International studies, 25th November 2015, http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2015-11/25/content_8404964.htm accessed on 26 November 2016.

mitigating the strategic shift from a Houthis victory. This would ensure that Saudi Arabia and the GCC have a southern transit point to the Indian Ocean and that the US would maintain a foothold in the Gulf of Aden.

The current UN envoy has been organizing meetings of the main actors in Muscat – with some support from the US. His efforts have been inhibited by a lack of knowledge of Yemen and strains in the otherwise remarkable international consensus on Yemen since 2011. These will continue and provide a process for when the combatants are eventually ready for serious negotiations. Hadi and the Saudis demand that the Houthis/Saleh implement UN Security Council Resolution 2216 before negotiations; the Houthis want negotiations about how Resolution 2216 should be implemented. This might eventually lead to progress, since it implies that the Houthis accept Resolution 2216 in principle, but there is no other sign that the warring parties are ready for serious negotiations.

Some factors might influence the attitude of the international community. Firstly, several thousand people have died, tens of thousands have been wounded and hundreds of thousands displaced. The coalition is using a naval blockade to limit supplies; the Houthis use siege tactics internally. Relief agencies issue daily warnings of an impending humanitarian disaster. Britain and France, in particular, are looking for ways of responding to growing public concern about the human and physical costs of the war to an already impoverished Yemen. So far they have not been willing to put pressure on Riyadh, which sees the damage as a consequence of war or blames it on the Houthis, but this could change soon, especially if there is more public awareness of the situation. Furthermore, Al-

Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is the most dangerous of the Al-Qaeda franchises. It has pursued both a global agenda (attempts to bring down western aircraft and foment lone-wolf attacks) and a local one (the creation of Islamic emirates in south Yemen in 2011-12 using its insurgency arm, Ansar al-Sharia). Western governments provided extensive assistance to the Yemeni counterterrorist forces – most of which were commanded by Saleh cronies and have remained loyal to him. Drones are still being used to kill top AQAP leaders – most recently in September 2015. AQAP, working through Ansar AlShariah, seized on the Houthis advance to “protect” Sunnis in parts of central Yemen, work alongside militias in the south and take partial control of coastal areas in Hadramaut. Elements within AQAP have declared loyalty to the Islamic State (IS) and have attacked mosques in Sanaa and claimed operations elsewhere.

The longer the fighting continues the greater the danger that AQAP and ISIS will entrench themselves and possibly take control of some areas. The coalition says that it is aware of this and will soon move against the terrorists. The Houthis, their political opponents, the GCC, and the west share a common objective of eliminating AQAP and ISIS, which one potential benefit of a negotiated settlement is. And in the long run, if the issue is not adopted with realistic impression, this is going to create a renewed havoc in the region in particular and International system in general.

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