

## Yemen Conflict and the Saudi's Game

Since its birth as a unified republic in 1990, Yemen has been shaken by many internal conflicts which had transformed the country into a weak and fragile state. The latest conflict in the country is an ongoing historical cycle of multifaceted local, regional and international power struggles emanating from both recent and long-past events. Regional powers, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, are using the conflict to settle their account and further push their state's agenda. Although a proxy-war has become a routine of some sort in the past couple of years, recklessly intervening in Yemen can result in some dire consequences, especially for the Saudi Kingdom.

Yemen is the poorest country on the Arabian peninsula and one of the poorest countries in the world. Economic hardships were further boosted by internal struggles, governmental corruption and ineffectiveness to equally distribute wealth and resources. The government of president Saleh (first president of Yemen) that was governing the country for more than twenty years was unable to resolve these issues and stabilize the political situation in the country. After the Arab Spring separatism was more than evident in the country, especially in the Shia community. Instead of trying to resolve these issues, security force's approach was very violent and repressive which further led to a deeper conflict with the state. <sup>1</sup>

The unrest in Yemen which had been evolving since 2011 finally escalated in 2014 with the coup which plunged the country into a civil war. Until 2014, political crisis in Yemen was local and had characteristics similar to other Arab revolutions in the region. However with the Saudi intervention the conflict is now becoming a regional issue with many characteristics of a proxy-war between Riyadh and Tehran.

Strategic crisis in Yemen can also be described as an extension of other global crises which are active in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya etc. Certain trends like Wahhabism, rising extremism, tribalism and warlordism are also evident in Yemen. All these "trends" are affecting the overall cohesion of the country and as the crisis is prolonged the country will go deeper into anarchy. Although from a certain standpoint the situation in Yemen can be assessed as a regional power struggle between the Saudis and Iran to expend their sphere of influence, it is safe to say that Al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) will be the only group that will actually benefit from this situation. <sup>2</sup>

There are a couple of reasons behind the operation "Decisive Storm" and why Saudi Arabia decided to openly engage in Yemen's civil war.

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<sup>1</sup>GermianDifo, *Yemen and U.S. Security*, American Security Project ASP June 2010 p. 2-3  
(<http://americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Yemen-and-US-Security-Re-Release.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> Magdalena El Ghamari, *Jemen – the Proxy War*, University of Bialystok, Poland, p. 45-48  
(<file:///E:/downloads/fulltext899.pdf>)

- The situation in Yemen is quickly deteriorating and it is threatening to endanger the neighboring countries, primarily the southern regions of Saudi Arabia.
- Saudi Arabia needs to stop the Houthi advance and the Iranian influence that goes with it.
- Bab al-Mandab Strait is a crucial gateway with enormous economic significance not only for the Saudis but also for some Western countries as well.
- There is a growing presence of AQAP and other terrorist organization in the country.

One of the main reasons that led Saudis to military intervention in Yemen is the thought that a highly modernized and sophisticated military can quickly deal with the insurgents and bring order and some kind of stability to the country. However, despite its sophisticated technology Saudi Arabia didn't achieve much except destroying the country's weak infrastructure and lives of numerous civilians. Still the Saudis will probably continue with their military endeavor however brutal it may be because there is a reasonable threat that the Houthi rebellion can spillover to Saudi Arabia and engulf its Shia population.

Saudi Arabia is facing economic pressures which are mainly caused by its overall demographics and increased public spending during 2011 and the Arab Spring. Injecting huge amounts of money to the public sector in order to keep social peace during the Arab Spring is taking its toll on the Saudis economic and financial sector, furthermore around 60% of the Kingdom's population is under the age of fifteen. Low oil prices are additionally putting strains on the economy and there is a burning issue of employment, in other words will Riyadh be able to keep the high governmental spending and employment in the upcoming years. The latest economic reforms which are scheduled for 2030 are focused on these issues, still there is no guarantee that these reforms will be successful and won't shake the delicate class/tribal structure in Saudi Arabia. Although the Kingdom has a greater landmass and a larger population in comparison to other countries on the peninsula, these assets can quickly turn into liabilities if the chaos in Yemen starts to spillover.

The Saudi paranoia of "Persian subversion" in Yemen is probably exaggerated and its main purpose is to justify the Riyadh's military actions and expansionistic ambitions in the country. Though it is clear that the Houthis want and need Iranian support in order to prolong their resistance, it is questionable if Iran sees them as an equally important asset or ally. Iran's primary interests in Yemen are developing on two levels. First, Iran will try to use the conflict in Yemen and the Houthis in order to establish some kind of outpost or network which will later allow them to push their influence further into the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Second establishing themselves in Yemen, Iran can contain the Saudi and Salafist influence on the peninsula.<sup>3</sup> However at the moment Tehran has more pressing matters in Syria and Iraq and deeper engagement in Yemen can prove to be costly. Nevertheless any kind of Shia disturbance on the peninsula is automatically treated as an Iranian "move" or a proxy by the Kingdom, we

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<sup>3</sup>Michael D. Wyss, *Iranian Proxy Warfare in Iraq and Yemen*, April 2016, p.34-35  
(<https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/ICT-Rag-Iranian-Proxy-Wyss.pdf>)

shouldn't forget the 2011 Bahrain demonstration and the Saudis reaction to it. This frantic state of the Saudi elite is constantly pushing Riyadh to reach for violence against the Shia population on the peninsula and beyond, this would often include financing various extremist or Wahabist factions.

Bab al-Mandab strait is a bottleneck of the Red Sea, along with Socotra islands these two geographical points are the crucial gateways which connect Red Sea with the Mediterranean and Arabian Sea as well as with the Indian Ocean. The economic significance of this strait is enormous. It is estimated that around 30% of world's oil passes through the Bab al-Mandab Strait along with natural gas shipped from the Persian Gulf.<sup>4</sup> Instability in Yemen makes this waterway quite risky and of course this will affect shipping routes going through the Strait. Endangering it also affects Saudi economy as well as oil supply for some Western countries. It is possible to suspect that the Kingdom has been pressured by the international community to secure the Bab al-Mandab strait because of the overall global trade and economy. Furthermore Saudi Arabia doesn't really want to concede this strategic foothold over to their rivals. The biggest threat for the Saudis would be if Houthi rebels could somehow close the strait, though this is hard to imagine the ballistic missiles in the Houthi's arsenal can be used to control or possibly close this waterway. Finally, most of the Kingdom's commerce is carried out by the sea, potential closing of the Bab al-Mandab strait would put huge strains on the Saudi economy.

Lastly we have the terrorist issue. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or AQAP is becoming a serious threat as the society in Yemen further deteriorates. In recent years the AQAP branch of the global Al Qaeda organization took a leading role in organizing and executing terrorist attack against the West. AQAP was created back 2009 when Saudi and Yemeni militants decided to operate under the one flag.<sup>5</sup> Although it is widely known that Riyadh has ties with many different Wahabist or Salafist organization there is no guarantee they can actually control them. Furthermore one of the main AQAP goals is to remove Yemen's and Saudi governments as they are deemed weak and unworthy in order to create a true Islamic caliphate. Nevertheless engaging terrorist networks would be a side objective of the Saudi military intervention. Elites in the Kingdom share the same views on religion and ideology with these radical organizations, additionally these radical organizations often serve as an "exporter" of Wahabism and Salafism to other regions. At some point Riyadh might decide to confront these radicals, but it would only serve as a media stunt or a tool to further justify its military operations in Yemen.

The domino effect of the Arab revolution also reflected itself on the Yemen's society. Unlike Syrian crisis the crisis in Yemen is happening in the Saudis backyard which gives Iran

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<sup>4</sup>Shaul Shay, *The Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Houthi threat*, IPS Publications October 2016 p.1 ([http://www.herzliyaconference.org/\\_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/BabalMandabstraitandHouthithreat\\_Shay\\_19\\_10\\_16.pdf](http://www.herzliyaconference.org/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/BabalMandabstraitandHouthithreat_Shay_19_10_16.pdf))

<sup>5</sup>International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, *CTTA: Counter Terrorism Trends and Analysis*, June 2011 p .1 -2 (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CTTA-June11.pdf>)

political opportunities to pressure the Kingdom. Since the start of the Syrian crisis Riyadh along with other GCC members was trying to push Iran out of the Middle East, however with the civil war in Yemen the proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran got a new dimension. The conflict is now on the Saudi's borders and as it turns out to be the Houthi rebels are a "tough nut to crack". With the military intervention Saudi Arabia has nothing to gain on the other hand if the intervention fails Riyadh may have much to lose. If the instability in Yemen starts to spread and evolve the country may become a "ground zero" for a new people's revolution on the Arabian Peninsula. The primary adhesive of the Gulf societies is the vast public wealth which the ruling elites are able to provide and keep the social peace in their countries. Yet there is no deeper national nor cultural identity, the societies have still retained tribal characteristics which are especially evident in Saudi Arabia. If that adhesive (wealth) starts to evaporate the social structure of the Kingdom will slowly begin to crumble and the crisis in Yemen can turn out to be the Saudi's Vietnam.