



The Yemeni Conundrum

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Yemen has become the new theatre of the power struggle between the global and regional powers, all engaged in their respective attempts to gain supremacy. The Houthi takeover of Yemen and the ouster of elected President Abed Rabbu Mansour Hadi have done more than merely bringing to the fore the fragile state of Yemeni politics. This has also, yet again, highlighted the old sectarian politics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the two powerhouses increase their battle for influence in the region. In this entire scenario, the US and Britain are supporting Saudi Arabia, while Russia is favouring Iran. In fact, the civil war in Yemen has become the principal theatre where the allies of Saudi Arabia and Iran are in direct conflict. This has also led to the escalating humanitarian crisis and risks beyond the borders of Yemen. The Nation has seen the worst humanitarian crisis of modern times. More than 22 million people—nearly two-thirds of the total Yemeni population—are in need of aid and protection. Out of this, seven million Yemenis live in areas almost on the verge of being affected by famine. Almost two million children are suffering from acute malnutrition. Not only that, an outbreak of cholera has affected over 600,000 people.¹ This West Asian state is the poorest in the region. In 2015, it was ranked 168 out of 188 countries on the Human

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Development Index, which measures life expectancy, education and standard of living.² However, this civil war in Yemen has led to the collapse of its already weak economy as well as heightened the humanitarian crisis in the country.

The Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen—which started in 2015—have entered their third year, but the conflict is yet to come to an end anytime soon. However, the internal strife between the Houthi rebels and pro-government armed forces has hardly remained the core issue of the Yemeni conundrum; the power struggle between the

Shi'as and Sunnis has. This has further intensified the struggle for supremacy in the region, as the battle in Yemen remains entangled in the fight of competing international interests. As a result, this ongoing struggle in Yemen has led to the

worsening of the humanitarian crisis. At the same time, the magnitude of the Yemeni crisis is also an indication of the inherent and longstanding tensions between the different warring groups. Furthermore, this issue is heightened due to foreign military support to the opposing groups in Yemen.³

Yemen: The Tribe and the State

The state of Yemen underwent several structural changes since its inception both at the societal

level as well as at the national/state level. The primary social unit of Yemen is the tribe—the *Qahtan* Tribe. The tribes in ancient Yemen constituted the structural foundation of the state in the form of kingdoms at that time. The collapse of this ancient state characterised the beginning of the tribal independence of the state. It also designated the difference between the role of the tribe in the Southern part of Yemen and its counterpart in the North.⁴

The Yemen Arab Republic was established in 1962. This happened after the revolutionaries, influenced by the contemporary ideas of nationalism, deposed Imam Muhammad al-Badr and created the Yemen Arab Republic, also known as North Yemen. The major outcome of this was that the previous separation between the state and the tribal institution no longer existed. In fact, the state became virtually an embodiment of the tribes. For almost thirty years, the foreign educated elite, who were responsible for sparking the revolution, occupied the most important positions in the newly formed republic. The legitimacy of their rule was, in fact, based on their roles during the revolution.⁵ However, the revolution resulted in the total transformation of the Yemeni society. It ended the power that was held in the hands of the elite families – or the “*Sayyids*”—who traced their lineage to Prophet Mohammad. This sent Yemen’s northern tribes—supposedly responsible for deposing Badr—into political wilderness.⁶

The modern Yemeni state was the unification of the US & Saudi-backed Yemeni Arab Republic in the north, while the Russians backed the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south in 1990. The military officer, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled North Yemen since 1978, assumed leadership of the new country. Despite unification, the central government’s rulings beyond the capital of Sana’a were never absolute. Saleh secured his power through patronage and by playing various factions off against one another.⁷ Saleh eventually appointed Soviet-trained Major General Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi—who hailed from Southern Yemen—as his vice president. Saleh ruled the country like a family enterprise.

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The Conundrum: The conflict in Yemen is often misunderstood as the ongoing rivalry between Shi’as and Sunnis. But this totally misunderstands both the origin of this war and the reasons for the intervention of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. As Asher Orkaby explains, the war is not about regional interests; it is a continuation of a long-standing conflict between the Yemeni government and the marginalised northern tribes in the country.⁸ This also explains the lack of authority and competency of the central government in the Yemeni capital of Sana’a. Another set of scholars believe that Saudi Arabia intervened not to counter Iranian expansionism but to secure its southern border against the Houthi threat.⁹ This clearly demonstrates that this Yemeni conundrum can end only through Yemeni

political settlement internally, although there are lesser chances of that happening due to major powers supporting opposing groups in the country. It seems unlikely that the Houthis will accept the preconditions for the

negotiations that are being demanded by the internationally recognised Yemeni government.

Iran and the West in Yemen

Iranian influence on the Houthi rebels of Yemen can be said to be overstated. This can be explained through the fact that the Houthis do not follow the Twelver Shi’a tradition predominant in Iran, but adhere to the Zaidi sect, which in practice is closer to Sunni Islam, and had expressed no solidarity with other Shi’a communities. On the other side, along with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has conducted airstrikes on Yemeni soil. Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Morocco, Sudan, Jordan and Egypt have also contributed to the operations. The US and the United Kingdom have both provided logistical support and intelligence to the Saudi-led coalition.

The Russian ambassador to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, said in a speech on February 24, 2018, that the UN Security Council should not condemn Iran in the resolution to renew sanctions on Yemen. Russian support to Iran was demonstrated to resist the Western bid to criticise Tehran for failing to stop Yemen’s Houthi group from getting Iranian missiles.¹⁰ The Security

Council subsequently voted unanimously in favour of a resolution drafted by Russia. This was done despite the fact that the findings of the UN report said Iranian-made missiles had been found in Yemen.¹¹ However, the previous draft which was made by Britain, in consultation with the US and France, denounced Iran for violating the arms embargo on Houthi rebels and supplying weapons to them. In fact, Russia could use the Yemen case as an opportunity to expand its geopolitical influence in the region.

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At the same time, the Russian veto of the western bid to hold Iran accountable for failing to prevent its weapons from falling into the hands of Yemen's Houthi group has come as a defeat for US lobbying. If Moscow expands its diplomatic presence in Yemen and makes progress towards ending the seemingly intractable military stalemate, Russia's role as a crucial power broker in West Asia will be rooted for years to come.

Saudi motives in Yemen

In March 2015, the Saudi-led coalition started bombing Houthi rebels who had forced Yemen's President, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, into exile. The only reason cited by Saudi Arabia for this action is their so-called belief that the Houthis are the Iranian proxies in the country. However, as has been mentioned before, the Houthis adhere to the Zaidi sect that is closer to Sunni Islam.

Saudi Arabia imposed a blockade on Yemen's air, sea and land borders in November 2017 in response to Houthi rebels firing missiles towards Riyadh airport, closing an aid lifeline to tens of thousands of starving Yemenis. Riyadh justifies this blockade as a tactic to prevent Iran smuggling arms to the Houthis, but the consequence is that vital aid – medicine, food and fuel – cannot get in, and so civilians are dying. In December 2017, Saudi Arabia said it was lifting the blockade of Hodeidah port – the main port for shipping aid – and in January it announced an aid package of £1.06 billion for Yemen. However, various humanitarian groups are still pushing for complete and unrestricted access to ports across

the country.¹²

However, there are various speculations being made in the context of Saudi intervention in Yemen. Firstly, Saudi Arabia wanted a friendly government in Yemen by establishing Hadi as the President and crushing the Houthi rebellion against it. Secondly, Riyadh's bottom line could also be related to crushing the progressive democracy emerging in its backyard. This could also be supported by Saudi actions in Bahrain in 2011. In Bahrain, the threats of Shi'a majority breakout to

fight for democratic rights would have turned out the Sunni majority and emboldened Saudi's own Shi'a majority.

In March 2018, there were reports of Houthi rebels firing a ballistic missile into Saudi Arabia. The attack was responsible for killing one Egyptian national and injuring two others. Saudi Arabia has blamed Iran in the past for supplying the rebels with weapons. This charge has been denied by Tehran, time and again. These casualties were the first since the Saudi intervention in Yemen in 2015. The barrage will likely spark new criticism of Iran's role in the conflict as well. Various international organisations, including the UN, for long, have been pointing fingers towards Iran's role in the Yemeni conundrum.

The truth is that no one is winning the war in Yemen. While all the parties involved in Yemen seem far from reaching their goals, the one clear loser is the Yemeni people.

Conclusion

In Yemen, however, things have changed since the assassination of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh on December 05, 2017 by the Houthi rebels. This did not leave Yemen in a better position. The Houthis have introduced a complication into their own situation. His absence from the scene does deprive the Houthis an important symbolic presence that gave them some credibility as a broad-based movement that advocated good governance. However, the truth is that no one is winning the war in Yemen. While all the parties involved in Yemen seem far from reaching their goals, the one clear loser is the Yemeni people. The involvement of the numerous foreign actors on all sides of the Yemeni civil war has not changed the fact that the conflict is tied to local domestic politics of Yemen.

Notes

- ¹ Asher Orkaby, "Yemen's Humanitarian Nightmare", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2017-10-16/yemens-humanitarian-nightmare> Daniel Nikbakht and Sheena McKenzie, "The Yemen war is the world's worst humanitarian crisis, UN says", CNN, April 03, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/03/middleeast/yemen-worlds-worst-humanitarian-crisis-un-intl/index.html>. Accessed on April 09, 2018.
- ² Human Development Reports, United Nations Development Programme, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI>. Accessed on April 16, 2018.
- ³ Connor Schoen, "The Current State of Yemen: The battleground for the competing foreign interests", *Harvard Political Review*, December 13, 2017, <http://harvardpolitics.com/world/the-current-state-of-yemen-a-battleground-for-competing-foreign-interests/>. Accessed on April 18, 2018.
- ⁴ Charles Scmitz, "Understanding the role of the tribes in Yemen", *CTC Sentinel*, volume 4, issue 10, October 2011, <https://ctc.usma.edu/understanding-the-role-of-tribes-in-yemen/>. Accessed on April 19, 2018.
- ⁵ Asher Orkaby, "Yemen's Humanitarian Nightmare", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2017-10-16/yemens-humanitarian-nightmare>. Accessed on April 09, 2018.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Zachary Laub, "Yemen in Crisis", *Council of Foreign Relations*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/yemen-crisis>. Accessed on April 09, 2018.
- ⁸ Asher Orkaby, "Yemen's Humanitarian Nightmare", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2017-10-16/yemens-humanitarian-nightmare>. Accessed on April 09, 2018.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ "Russia vetoes UN Yemen Resolution targeting Iran", *DW*, February 26, 2018, <http://www.dw.com/en/russia-vetoes-un-yemen-resolution-targeting-iran/a-42751326>. Accessed on April 09, 2018.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Patrick Wintour, "Why is Saudi Arabia in Yemen and what does it mean for Britain?", *The Guardian*, March 08, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/08/why-saudi-arabia-in-yemen-what-does-it-mean-for-britain>. Accessed on April 10, 2018.



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