

## SAUDI ARABIA, IRAN AND THE GEOPOLITICAL GAME IN YEMEN

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### ABSTRACT:

*THE PRESENT ARTICLE ANALYZES THE POWER STRUGGLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN A MUCH MORE COMPLEX FRAME THAT TRANSCENDS THE LEVANT, TOWARDS THE SOUTHERN ARABIAN PENINSULA. YEMEN, APPARENTLY A NOT SO IMPORTANT ACTOR IN THE GLOBAL EQUATION, IS IN FACT THE MAIN BATTLEGROUND FOR REGIONAL INTERESTS AND A POSSIBLE FAILURE OF THE ARAB STATES TO MANAGE THE YEMENI CRISIS WILL PROBABLY REPRESENT THE BIGGEST SECURITY RISK WHICH GULF MONARCHIES FACE ON THE MEDIUM AND SHORT TERM.*

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**KEYWORDS:** GEOPOLITICS, MIDDLE EAST, POWER, IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA, YEMEN, AXES, SHIITES, SUNNIS, HOUTHIS, DECISIVE STORM

### YEMEN, THE FAILURE OF UNION

Yemen, under the current state organization, was created in 1990, when North Yemen which included Sana'a, and the Southern with Gulf of Aden in its possession, had merged, with the Western backing.

But the political situation from the first months, however, was to confirm the failure of the union between North and South.

Power sharing between the two regions was expected to be equal, for which the North representative, Ali Abdullah Saleh was elected president, while the Southern one, Ali Salim al-Beidh took over as vice - president. However, economic issues as well as political marginalization of the southern tribes had led to the split of relations between the two leaders, stirring a civil war won by the camp led by Saleh, fact that brought into his own hands the entire power<sup>2</sup>. This is the reason why al- Beidh was forced to flee to Oman.

Saleh regime governed until the end of 2011, when the Arab Spring revolts swept Yemen, corruption and political marginalization being some of the reasons that have bequeathed a state on the verge of bankruptcy.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Reardon, *South Yemen and the question of secession*, Al Jazeera, December 3, 2014, available online at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/12/south-yemen-question-secession-201412351732176656.html>

As a result, the national security is affected on every level. Thus, in economic terms, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is 75% resulted only out of oil resources, resources that are expected to run dry in the next two years. Yemen is the poorest of Arab countries and water reserves are, in turn, increasingly scarce, which causes severe internal migrations and at the same time gives birth to more than 80 % of the intertribal conflicts.

We must add that over 50% of the population lives in extremewhile over 50 % of the population is made of illiterate people. All of these factors contribute to weaken the society to the extent of being vulnerable to extremist speeches. Given the situation, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), taking advantage of the weak capacity of the national army to control the whole territory, has developed in Yemen, succeeding in becoming the most powerful branch of the terrorist group founded by Osama bin Laden.

The transition, started in 2012, was a peaceful one under the mediation of GCC and the United States, Saleh submitting his resignation after two big compromises: keeping in charge in the new government some of his close leaders and judicial exemption from any action taken during his mandate as President. A new beginning rung, when Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi came to power in February, but economic problems have continued to fuel social tensions, underlying perhaps the biggest Yemeni problems: secessionist tendencies from South and Houthi`s power expansion.

In the South, through HIRAK movement, the requests are for a return to borders before the 1990, Houthi is striving for political influence in Sana'a. In fact, this is nothing else but a game with major geopolitical implications.

Founded in the early 90`s, the Houthi group took the name of its founder, *Hussein al-Houthi Addian Bader*, a Zaidi tribesman, under the Shiite influence of Iran.

In its early years, the group was influenced by a modernist current, being, afterwards, subject to a conservative one, apparently influenced by Tehran, and transposed after Bader al-Houthi had spent a few months in *Qom*<sup>3</sup>.

Bader al- Houthi was elected Member of Parliament and became sharply critical of President Saleh, whom he has been accusing for its rapprochement with the US. He died in 2004, when the Yemeni army carried out a raid in Sadah region<sup>4</sup>.

Saleh had put down a reward of 55.000 USD for his murder, suspecting him of pursuing a theocratic Shiite state in northern Yemen<sup>5</sup>.

His son, Abdel-Malek al-Houthi is the current leader of the group, succeeding, in first taking control over the capital of Sana'a in September 2014.

He used the same tactics as in the assault over Mosul by the Islamic State, the rebels soon taking control over the governmental buildings, the international airport, and managing to replace preachers and imams paid by the government with others agreed<sup>6</sup>.

The dismissal of the Prime Minister Mohammed Basindwa, the taking over of some government positions and the peace agreement signed last autumn, couldn't bring the internal stability of the country.

Houthi rejected the constitutional draft of President Hadi, which sought territorial reorganization of the state in six administrative provinces, proposing instead an administrative model based on the two regions: the North and the South<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Neria, *Yemen Changes Hands. Will an Iranian Stronghold Emerge Near the Entrance to the Red Sea?*, Right Side News, October 07, 2014

<sup>4</sup> Neria, *Yemen Changes Hands*.

<sup>5</sup> Neria, *Yemen Changes Hands*..

<sup>6</sup> Neria, *Yemen Changes Hands*.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Reardon, *The ungovernable Yemen*, Al Jazeera, January 22, 2015, available online at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/01/ungovernable-yemen-houthis-201512374240683455.html>

Of course, the President's request did not seek only the ramp down the splits, but he also wanted to avoid that all the political power and influence to be on the tribe's side, aspect seen as a trap situation by rebels<sup>8</sup>.

Houthi insurgency has been resumed in January 2015, but it has ended with another failure concerning the negotiations, leading to the dismissal of President Hadi and the government of Sana'a, creating a political chaos that can shape a future civil war.

### **THE GEOPOLITICAL GAME**

Political chaos and power vacuum that emerged led inevitably to both social crisis and the expansion of AQAP, turning Yemen into an insecure climate which is likely to expand and threaten the stability of the Gulf monarchies.

Accusations are pointed out to Iran, presumably aiming destabilizing the Gulf Cooperation Council members in his desire to become a regional hegemon.

In 2004 Houthi was turning into a paramilitary group, but three years later, Sana'a directly accused both Iran and Libya for their support<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, in recent years, there have been various evidences showing that Houthi rebels were trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah (pro-Iranian Lebanese groups), while last year it was discovered a ship carrying Iranian arms illegally to Yemen<sup>10</sup>.

Gerald Feierstein, in turn, stated in 2012, as US Ambassador to Yemen, that "to expand its influence in Yemen, Iran supports Shiite rebels in the country and other forces that are interested in secession state<sup>11</sup>". In response, Nasser Mohammed al-Bakhit, the Iranian ambassador to Sana'a, claimed that US, by the accusations it brought was trying to justify its own actions in Yemen.

It seems hard to believe how a state just about to fail, with natural resources on the verge of exhaustion, can have such an important role in regional geopolitics. But, if we look carefully at its geographical location we can understand its strategic importance, since Yemen is at the entrance of the Gulf of Aden and Bab el Mandeb Strait, crossed daily by over 3 million barrels of oil leaving the Persian Gulf to the West<sup>12</sup>.

With a Yemen divided or not, but coming effectively into its own sphere of influence, in practice, Iran would control, in addition to the Strait of Hormuz the Strait of Bab el Mandeb too, thus holding a capability of total power projection over shipping of hydrocarbons from the Persian Gulf to Europe and the United States. Then, it would have access to the Red Sea which would allow it to arm Hamas more easily, through seaway; therefore reinforcing the assumed role of defender of the Palestinian cause and Muslims everywhere, but the most resonant advantage could be given by the *awakening of Shiite axis*. The rise of *Zaidi* correlated with events in Lebanon, Syria or Iraq can export inside the Gulf monarchies the deepening of sectarian conflicts, unavoidably leading to the risk of social anomie, secessionist bias or regime changes. In the case of such a scenario, Kuwait and especially Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are feeling the most exposed, and that because the regime in Manama is ruled by a Sunni monarchy, in a majority Shia state (over 75 % of the population of Bahrain is Shiite), while Saudi Arabia hosts on its territory two compact groups of Shiite minority: one in Saddah region on the border with the Yemeni government, and the other in the Eastern province of the country, placed precisely in the oil fields near the Persian Gulf. Divided by tribal struggles and irredentist conflicts, Yemen is living, in fact, *its own geostrategic curse*, becoming in time a battle field

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<sup>8</sup> Reardon, *The ungovernable Yemen*

<sup>9</sup> Neriah, *Yemen Changes Hands*

<sup>10</sup> Neriah, *Yemen Changes Hands*

<sup>11</sup> Michael Segall, *Iran Targets Yemen*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Vol. 12, No. 9 April 22, 2012

<sup>12</sup> Tim Lister, *Why we should care about Yemen*, CNN, November 23, 2011

of geopolitical rivalries and interests. Saudi Arabia has always opposed to the union in 1990, fearing the birth of a powerful actor at its Southern border able to endanger its territorial integrity and the rule of hegemonic power. The glorious past under the governance of Queen Sabaa, the architecture old more than 2.000 years, or the huge role in the spread of Islam to India and Indonesia are just some of the arguments that could have changed Sana'a into the center of Arab world.

Against this background, Riyadh has always been interested in maintaining breakaway tensions in the South, but the complexity of security made the Saudis to be cautious about a failed state at their border, hereby aiming to maintain a weak Yemen, but at the same time preventing to reach the point of turning itself into a new Somalia<sup>13</sup>. But Yemeni failure has proved to be inevitable given the corrupt system based on political marginalization, transmuting the country not in a new Somalia, but most likely into a future Afghanistan. Moreover, all these have allowed diversification of the Iranian strategic game and expanding Tehran's sphere of influence into Yemen.

In an interview for the *Yemen Times*, the director of *Abaad Center for Strategic Studies*, Mohamed Abd Al-Sallam, said that subversive actions of Iran in Yemen have increased both along with economic sanctions imposed by the US vis a vis the Central Bank of Iran and at the same time with the bans of oil exports. As Al-Sallam has noticed, Iran's actions were not aimed only at arming and training Houthi Shiites but also the Sunni members of HIRAK group<sup>14</sup>, ultimately demonstrated us the complexity of this geopolitical game.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since we, lately, are assisting to a reshaping of power centers in the Middle East, Yemen, apparently a marginal state is, in fact, a genuine field of the geopolitical battle. The strategic advance at the disposal of Tehran seems to strengthen the Sunni axis around Saudi Arabia, and if the stances of Pakistan and Egypt are already known, the latest talks from Riyadh between Erdogan and King Salman unveil a rapprochement between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in order to curb Iranian influence. Of course, all this must be understood from the perspective of realist paradigm, where the big players will always follow momentary alliances to diminish the opportunity of another state actor to gain hegemonic power status. What we expect is that, beyond the proximity to Saudi Arabia, Ankara to try also to mediate the Yemeni crisis in a bid to bring both Riyadh and Tehran to dialogue.

In an economically collapsed Yemen, whose territories are controlled by Houthi and AQAP rather than the national armed forces, outside military intervention led by the Arab states was being a plausible scenario since January 2015.

Regarding the issue of sending ground troops to Yemen, such an action would not only legitimize a similar intervention of Iran in Syria or Iraq, but mountains and massive expanses of desert which make Yemen into a hostile battlefield would make ground operations unworkable, and a failure of the Arab coalition would question furthermore their power projection<sup>15</sup>.

Unlike air raids, rough relief makes any ground campaign extremely critical, the best example being given by Egypt intervention to Yemen in 1960, when Egyptian troops have lost over 10.000 soldiers, which caused the decrease of the popularity of President Gamal Abdel Nasser<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Abubakr Al-Shamahi, *Saudi Interest in its Yemeni Neighbour*, Fair Observer, February 20, 2012

<sup>14</sup> Ali Saeed, *Negligence of the Southern issue threatens international security*, Yemen Times, February 23, 2012

<sup>15</sup> Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, *Gulf countries standing idly by in Yemen*, Asharq Al-Awsat, 5 October, 2014

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Rogers, *Yemen's First Civil War Offers Lessons for Ending the Country's Current Conflict*, Muftah.org, April 21st, 2015

Meanwhile, a ground invasion could lead to the perception of foreign occupation of Yemen, uniting some of the tribes in the fight against Arab states<sup>17</sup>.

Therefore we expect that monarchies would opt, essentially, for strengthening the Yemeni army and providing political and economic support in order to unify Sunni tribes.

Even the former President Saleh, in exile after he resigned following the protests in 2011, and the General People's Congress Party (GPC) - still under his influence - have announced that they are open to discussions for solving the crisis. The statements came in the context of the political agreement signed between the GPC and Houthis, in order to support them-? Who GPC Or HOUTHIS?<sup>18</sup>.

Secession, otherwise a highly plausible scenario, is, at least for the moment, out of the areas of paramount importance to dialogue.

Firstly, the *Hirak* movement does not have a unified policy, being divided into three camps with their own, different agendas. And that happens because, besides those, which are majority and want secession and independence of the South, there are also the advocates of increased autonomy through a federalist system and those who want a technocratic government that includes the *Hirak*<sup>19</sup>.

Then, although Houthi, currently, holds control over Sana'a capital, it is hard to accept secession as long as the frail national economy depends entirely on natural reserves available in the South<sup>20</sup>, reason why the rebels are still tempted to continue the dialogue in order to achieve their goal as having a government controlled by their key positions. The failure of negotiations will, eventually, likely lead to a civil war, where the two geopolitical blocs will continue to preserve their interests.

In the meantime, AQAP continues to take advantage of the created power vacuum, trying to advance towards the oil fields of *Marib*<sup>21</sup>, while the Islamic State announces its presence in Yemen<sup>22</sup>.

Whether we like it or not, in a context when the attention of international public opinion is drawn to the crisis in Syria, Iraq or Ukraine, to the outbreaks of Ebola or the Iranian nuclear issue, the geopolitical game of the centers of power in the Middle East is playing beyond Levant, in the southern of Arabian Peninsula, and Yemen could be one of the main points that will lead to the shift of the existent regional *status quo*.

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<sup>17</sup> Rogers, *Yemen's First Civil War*

<sup>18</sup> Fernando Carvajal, *The Next Step in Yemen's War*, Fair Observer April 30, 2015

<sup>19</sup> Reardon, *South Yemen and the question of secession*,

<sup>20</sup> Reardon, *South Yemen and the question of secession*,

<sup>21</sup> Reardon, *The ungovernable Yemen*,

<sup>22</sup> *ISIS video claims 'we've arrived' in Yemen*, Al Arabiya News, April 26, 2015

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