

## Crisis in Yemen: Imperatives for Region and Beyond

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### Summary

As the crisis in Yemen unfolds, regional and international media reports suggest that Yemen is heading towards becoming another theatre of Shia-Sunni conflict or proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. What is important to know, however, is whether such a characterisation of the events in Yemen is an oversimplification or there is much more to it. Given the past history and current developments in that country, it can be argued that the conflict in Yemen is much more nuanced and complex. One has to look into regional, geopolitical, ideological, economic and historical factors to understand the current conflict between Houthi rebels and the government of President Mansour Al-Hadi. At the same time, there is no doubt that the Arab Spring has changed the long established status quo of the region and further deepened the fissure between Iran and Saudi Arabia. At present, Shia-Sunni conflict is at its height in the region, but it is not the only factor. In any event, it has not been the cause of the unfolding conflict in Yemen, which has much more to do with internal factors. This Brief examines the various dimensions of the conflict and analyses its impact on the region and beyond.

## Background: The Tribal Dynamics of Yemen

Tribal forces have played a significant role in the politics of Yemen. In fact, the tribal sheikhs have been directing the country's politics more than any other social and political force. Tribes and their allies have generally controlled every revolution in the country. The history of the involvement of the tribes in the politics of the country indicates that they have always fought alongside the army. Examples include their support for: the War in the summer of 1994 against the Socialist Party, the government's military campaigns in Saada against the Houthi between 2004 and 2010, and the army's war against Al-Qaeda in Abyan in 2011-2012. In return for such support, tribes reaped major benefits. Yemen's de facto power is born within tribal ranks. No politician has managed to generate real traction without tribal backing. Although tribal sheikhs are involved in and lead many influential political parties, they also involve themselves in politics outside the framework of these parties often as spoilers.

The control and influence of the tribes over state institutions remain strong even decades after the 1962 revolution. Among others, the Al-ahmar family and Houthis are the most powerful tribal clans. They have been at loggerheads, the former being patronised by the state and the latter marginalised. In 1969, 58 per cent of parliamentary seats was held by tribal sheiks under the powerful leadership of Abdullah al-Ahmar. This percentage never went below 50 per cent and Abdullah al-Ahmar headed parliament from 1993 until his death in 2007. The Al Ahmar family and the political party it controls, Al Islah, have, respectively, enjoyed unmatched tribal and political power since 1994, mostly because of their links with Saudi Arabia. But their suspected establishment of links with Al Qaeda and other radical groups in recent years have put both the clan and the party on unsettled ground. Al Ahmar, which has been using Al Islah as a platform to assert its own hegemonic ambitions and political power grabbing, has been most active over the past decades in its opposition and repression of the Houthis, and is acutely aware of the threat the group poses to its own claim in the Yemen highland. In the past, former President Saleh and Al Ahmar had agreed to share the country's resources more or less equally and had allowed Saudi Arabia to exert control over policies. But the 'Arab Spring' disrupted this arrangement.<sup>1</sup>

To understand the current crisis it is equally important to know about the Houthis. Comprising about 40 per cent Yemen's total population, they come from the Zaidi sect of Shia Islam and are based in mountainous northern Yemen bordering Saudi Arabia. Yemen

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<sup>1</sup> "Tribes Still Rule in Yemen," by Farea Al-Muslimi, *Al-monitor*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/yemen-tribes-revolution-politics-saleh.html>; "Clash of the Yemen – Al Houthi vs Al Ahmar, Ansar Allah vs al Islah," by Catherine Shakdam, Russian International Affairs Council, February 17, 2014, [http://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/catherineshakdam/?id\\_4=978](http://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/catherineshakdam/?id_4=978).

had been ruled erratically for nearly a thousand years by an elite caste of Zaydis until the republican revolution in 1962 which overthrew the last Zaidi Imam "Imam Badr".<sup>2</sup> The Republican state established in the wake of the revolution mistreated the Zaidis and marginalized them politically and economically. The worst for them came in the 1980s when the government started to subsidise the building of Saudi-style Sunni religious schools in Zaidi populated areas, which created a strong sense of being discriminated against among the Houthi. Their frustration with government policies increased during the next three decades and burst out in an armed rebellion against the state in 2004. Since then, Ali-Abdullah Saleh, often with the support and involvement of Saudi Arabia, has led six brutal wars against them with grave humanitarian consequences.<sup>3</sup> After the killing of Hussien Al-Houti, the movement has been led by his brother Abdul Malek Al-Houti. The persistence of the movement can be attributed to the element of "resistance against oppression" that lies at the heart of the Zaidi ideology as well as a deep sense of victimisation.<sup>4</sup> It is this ideology that led them to support the revolution that overthrew the long time dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. Their hope and aspiration is greater participation in mainstream politics.

## The Current Crisis

The Arab Spring, which led to the overthrow of long time dictator Ali-Abdullah Saleh in 2011, gave Yemenis a new hope for better economic welfare and improved security conditions. But this optimism proved to be short lived. Instead, the country's new leaders fought for control over the political space and disregarded the expectations of the millions who had participated in the revolution. The political roadmap after the resignation of Saleh was to bring all the relevant political players to agree upon the principles of the constitution facilitated by the ten-month National Dialogue Conference. A transitional government under the leadership of former Vice-President Abul-Mansour Al-Hadi was set up in 2011.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Who are the Houthis in Yemen?" By Saeed Al-Batati, *Aljazeera*, 29 March 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/yemen-houthis-hadi-protests-201482132719818986.html>

<sup>3</sup> "Yemen: The Houthi Enigma," by Robert F. Worth, *New York Review of Books*, March 30 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2015/mar/30/yemen-houthi-enigma/>

<sup>4</sup> "Yemen's rapidly escalating war: a simple explanation," by Zack Beauchamp, *Vox Political*, March 26, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/3/26/8296021/yemen-war>

<sup>5</sup> "Yemen at War", International Crisis Group," by Michael Zumolt, March 27, 2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen/b045-yemen-at-war.aspx>

The National Dialogue Conference was, however, ineffective in generating a consensus among the different stakeholders because of its mostly vague conclusions on the issue of state structure and division of power. This generated large scale frustration among the people. The resulting tension reached a further high when the government announced the unpopular decision of lifting fuel subsidies. This decision was met by huge Houthi protests. Two months later, Houthi rebels entered Sanaa, as the Crisis Group put it, “riding the wave of anger” over the slashing of fuel subsidies. They met little resistance. A large chunk of the Army sympathetic to former President Saleh as well as others who were frustrated with the transition either supported the Houthi or refused to fight. The Houthi’s capture of Saana in September 2014 was thus facilitated by an unlikely and tactical alliance with Saleh against a common enemy.

By January 2015, a new political struggle erupted over the draft constitution, which defined Yemen as a “federal country” consisting of six regions – four in the north and two in the south, with Sanaa and Aden having a separate status. The Houthi strongly objected to the division of the north. They later surrounded the Presidential Palace and placed President Hadi under house arrest. On February 21, 2015, Hadi fled to Aden from where he asserted his authority as the “legitimate President” and accused the Houthi of carrying out a coup. The Houthi subsequently moved to seize Aden, which forced Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia. This is what triggered the Saudi military intervention in Yemen.

On March 26, 2015, Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes in Yemen to thwart the Houthi militia’s advance towards Aden. This military intervention, termed as “*al-Hazm Storm*” (Operation Decisive Storm), was actively supported by the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Sudan, Egypt and Jordan. For their part, the United States, United Kingdom, France, Morocco, Turkey, Belgium and Somalia conveyed their backing for the intervention. The aim of the Saudi military campaign was to drive the Houthi back to their northern Yemen heartland. Some media reports suggest that having destroyed key military bases, supply capabilities, ammunition dumps and communication facilities of the Houthi rebels, the Saudi-led coalition is looking for a political solution. In a bid to resolve the crisis, the United Nations appointed Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed as the UN special envoy to Yemen, replacing Jamal Benomar. This has been welcomed by the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

### **Regional Dimension: Saudi-Iran rivalry**

The enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran has reached an alarming point due to the sectarian divide in the region especially in the wake of the Arab Uprising. The uprising that began in 2011 has shaken the entire Persian Gulf region, with Yemen bearing the brunt. There are two major reasons for this: first, the sectarian conflict in Yemen; and second, the involvement of two major regional players — Iran and Saudi Arabia — in a proxy conflict on Yemeni soil. The vertical division between Shias and Sunnis in the Persian

Gulf region is receiving greater attention because of the heightening sectarian violence/politics in the region, particularly in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. Saudi air strikes against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen have been identified as the latest chapter in a regional proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As both countries continue to support opposite sides in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon and now Yemen, questions have been raised about where this militarised regional rivalry could go.

Yemen is a sectarian fault line between Sunnis and Shias, bordered by Saudi Arabia to the north. The chaos in Yemen has given Iran and Saudi Arabia an alibi to involve in a proxy regional conflict. When dealing with the reasons for the involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen, one must consider the internal dynamics of both these countries which have contributed to a worsening of tensions between Riyadh and Tehran. While both countries have desired to play leading roles in helping solve the Yemen crisis, Saudi Arabia and its allies have resorted to military action against the Houthi with the aim of protecting the Hadi Government, which seems to have lost its legitimacy among the people especially the Houthi and the followers of Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Iran has warned Saudi Arabia and its allies about the consequences of the latter's intervention. The Iranian parliamentarian stated that the Saudi regime should be aware that the fire which they have set will backfire and impose a heavy cost on the Muslim world. Even Iran's senior leader and former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who now chairs the state Expediency Council, called off his visit to Saudi Arabia. He said: "Unfortunately, some Arab countries on lame excuses and with aimless bombardments in Yemen have committed a clear and dangerous mistake and, in fact, they have started playing with fire."<sup>6</sup> Last month, on April 5, 2015, the Iranian Parliament strongly condemned the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. And it issued a statement supporting the "Yemeni nation's popular uprising" and condemned the "foreign, specially the Saudi, meddling and military attack." Iran views the Saudi intervention as a clear case of interference in Yemen's internal affairs.<sup>7</sup>

For its part, the Saudi government views the present crisis in Yemen as exposing it to two major challenges. First, any sectarian fault line in Yemen has the potential to stimulate the gripes of the Shia population in Saudi Arabia's eastern province where most of the Kingdom's oil wells exist. And the second is the threat of Iran's increasing influence in the region, which has been further heightened by the recent signing of the framework agreement between Iran and the P5+1.

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<sup>6</sup> "Iran's Rafsanjani Cancels Visit to Saudi Arabia," *Fars News Agency*, March 29, 2015, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940109000744>

<sup>7</sup> "Iranian Parliament Condemns Saudi-Led Military Aggression on Yemen," *Fars News Agency*, April 05, 2015, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940116000841>

Given these challenges, Saudi Arabia has been focusing on the larger geopolitical goal of isolating Iran. In fact, the Kingdom's foreign policy has always given the highest significance to the Persian Gulf region – its immediate neighbourhood. GCC countries in general and Saudi Arabia in particular are worried that Iran may take advantage of the present crisis in Yemen to extend its own influence in the region. That is one of the main reasons why Saudi Arabia led the military intervention against the Houthi. The Saudi fear was that once the Houthi established control over the whole of Yemen, they would take the country into the Iranian orbit.

Saudi Arabia and the Hadi government have blamed Iran of supporting the Houthi rebels and supplying them with weapons. Categorically denying these allegations, Iran has called for an immediate end to Saudi-led air strikes and is pushing for a negotiated settlement. The appointment of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef as the new heir of Saudi Arabia is likely to complicate the regional situation further. His appointment indicates the possibility of Riyadh adopting a tougher foreign policy, especially towards Iran. It is also believed that the upgradation of the King's son, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, to the position of deputy crown prince is a reward for his recent work as defence minister in directing the Saudi-led coalition's intervention against the Houthi in Yemen.

The rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq has also given an upper hand to Iran as the convenor of the Iraqi Shia resistance forces in Iraq. Now, as the Iran-P5+1 nuclear negotiations enter their final stage, Saudi Arabia suspects that the US has abandoned any attempt to curtail Iranian influence in the region. The present crisis in Yemen has also provided Iran an opportunity to exploit the political turmoil to further the formation of the "Shia Crescent." Though there is uncertainty as to what extent Iran has been involved in the conflict in Yemen, the reality of links between the Yemeni Shia and Tehran is quite noticeable.

### **Impact of the Crisis**

The current crisis has pushed Yemen into a state of complete anarchy. Fears of the country turning into the next battleground for a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia loom large. More importantly, the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has used the crisis to seize and control a significant extent of Yemeni territory including the port of Mukallah, the country's fifth largest city. In addition, the Yemeni associates of the Islamic State have also expanded, albeit in a limited way, their presence.<sup>8</sup> A humanitarian crisis of immense magnitude as a result of intensified fighting is also a serious challenge. The crisis has already claimed the lives of about 1,000 people and forced a further 100,000 or so to flee

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<sup>8</sup> On March 20, 2015, the Islamic State conducted its first major operation in Yemen, using suicide bombers to attack a number of Shi'ite mosques killing 142 people and wounding more than 350.

their homes. Some have even sought safety across the Gulf of Aden in war-torn Somalia. 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 154<sup>th</sup> in the world in human development.

Some of the possible consequences of the current conflict could be:

- It could flare up into regional conflict particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia and end up engulfing the entire region.
- Military cooperation among Arab countries could create some kind of polarisation between those who are supportive of the military actions against the Houthi and those who do not wish to get involved in such a campaign.
- While a direct military intervention by Iran is extremely unlikely, the dispatch of a flotilla, comprising of a logistic vessel and a destroyer, came at a sensitive time and was designed to send a strong message of Iran's assertiveness to the Saudi-led coalition bombing Yemen. The tough posturing of the Iranian President and Supreme Leader is indicative of that country's commitment to staying engaged in Yemen.
- The conflict has pulled in external actors as well. While the UK, US and France are siding with Saudi Arabia and are supportive of Saudi military actions, China and Russia have opposed the air strikes and have called for a political solution through negotiation. These differences in approach among major external powers could create a situation similar to that in Syria and increase the possibility of Yemen heading towards greater chaos and instability.
- Questions are also being raised about Saudi Arabia's effort to "Consolidate the Sunni States" against Iran's increasing influence in the region and the fear of the firming up of a "Shia Crescent". This could pose serious challenges in future for stability in the entire West Asian region.

## India's Concern

Even though India has followed a policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states as well as non-involvement in the security issues of other regions, it has not been able to isolate itself from the direct consequences of any security crisis in the West Asian region. The energy security dimension and a seven million strong diaspora in the region have been significant factors in its policy formulation towards West Asia. In a situation of conflict, the biggest challenge for India has been the evacuation of its citizens from the conflict zone. In the past, India had been forced to evacuate citizens from Kuwait

in 1990, Lebanon in 2006, Libya in 2011, and Iraq in 2014. This year it has had to do so from Yemen. India's security and the security of West Asia are interlinked and also extends to the challenges posed by terrorism and piracy. India has been deeply concerned about the growing instability in the region as well as the spread of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. It has shown a desire and readiness to work with the international community to deal with these issues.

India's main concern in Yemen was the safety of more than 5,000 citizens. It was able to evacuate them under *Operation Rahat*, which saw coordinated action among the Ministry of External Affairs, Indian Navy, Indian Air Force and Air India. Saudi Arabia's timely help proved to be great value in this evacuation mission. Prime Minister Narendra Modi discussed the safety of Indians in Yemen with the King and sought his help during the course of a telephonic conversation. Recalling the "strong and close"<sup>9</sup> relations between the two countries, the Saudi king guaranteed Modi of his full cooperation in enabling the early and safe evacuation of Indian citizens from Yemen.

From India's point of view, Yemen is important because of its strategic location between the Red and Arabian Seas. Yemen is a member of the IOR-ARC and its cooperation in dealing with piracy in the Gulf of Aden has been significant. At the same time, Yemen has also been a source of oil and gas. Instability in Yemen is not in India's interest.

### The way forward

Given the complexities of the problem in Yemen's internal and regional dynamics, the road ahead appears challenging. Though this is an internal conflict, it has indeed acquired a regional dimension and could well engulf the entire region. Despite the UN initiative to find a political solution to the conflict, the Iran-Saudi Arabia standoff poses a serious challenge for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Yemen.

The best way to deal with the issue is to first bring neutral actors acceptable to both parties to negotiate a deal between the warring factions. Second, it is also important to address the long standing internal grievances of the Houthis. Third, efforts need to be undertaken to work towards re-establishing a transitional government at the earliest. Fourth, the United Nations needs to bring Iran and Saudi Arabia to the negotiating table for finding a peaceful political solution to the crisis in Yemen. Saudi-Iran engagement is extremely important to avoid another Syria like situation in the region.

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<sup>9</sup> "Indian PM seeks Saudi help for evacuation of Indians from Yemen," *Khaleej Times*, March 31, 2015, [http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/international/2015/March/international\\_March786.xml&section=international](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/international/2015/March/international_March786.xml&section=international)