



Understanding the Yemen Tragedy through Iranian Behaviour

By Mitchell Belfer

The ebbing war against Daesh may preoccupy European security thinking, but it is the triple tragedy unfolding in Yemen — the humanitarian tragedy, the socio-economic tragedy and the geopolitical tragedy — that contains the potential to unwind what is left of the Middle Eastern order. Located along the strategic south-western corner of the Arabian Peninsula, where the Strait of Mandeb straddles the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, and heading northward towards the Nejaz, Yemen is cursed by its geography—the most entrepreneurial regional and international actors view it as a stepping stone to projecting influence over Saudi Arabia; its vast oil wealth and Islam's holiest shrines at Mecca and Medina. Control Yemen, so the argument goes, and then reach out for control over one of the world's richest oil reserves and the crown jewels of the Islamic civilisation.

The Ayatollah's Iran is the most recent, in a long line, to enter Yemen's political fray. This has led to spiralling crises: terrorism, famine, cholera and open warfare. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and a coalition of allies stand to prevent Iran's main militia — the Houthi — from a complete takeover of the country while a patchwork of tribal unions and miniature fiefdoms, terrorist groups and militias, have sprung up and turned the country into a jigsaw puzzle. Then, on 04 December 2017, former Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was murdered by Houthi rebels. He had changed sides, publicly denounced Iran and the Houthi, pledged to work with the coalition and paid for it with his life. Yemen went from bad to worse.

Through the projection of power and fear, the Houthis have absorbed a handful of tribes that had once supported Saleh and have consolidated their territorial holdings, including a string of harbours such as Hodeida, with the help of Tehran. Ballistic missile attacks against Saudi Arabia are becoming the new norm and there is no let up in sight. But the war against the Houthi is not the only dynamic at play—South Yemen separatism is back and is threatening to cut-away the last thread of stability...Aden.

In late April 2017, Governor of the Aden Governorate, Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, was sacked by Yemen's UN recognised President, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Standing accused of disloyalty because of his open support for the Southern independence movement, al-Zoubaidi quickly moved away from national politics to concentrate on supporting the so-called Southern Transitional Council (STC), which was formed in May 2017. Hadi has declared the council illegitimate. Since May 2017, a tenuous double stalemate ensued: in the Houthi-Government/Coalition conflict and in the North-South conflict.

But on 28 January 2018 the latter conflict came back to life as STC separatists seized control of the Yemen government headquarters in Aden and spread out over large parts of the southern port city, including military bases. They stopped short of advancing on the presidential palace after clashing with pro-government forces and briefly surrounding the building while Prime Minister Ahmed bin Daghr and his ministers were inside. The UAE had supported these forces

against the Houthi and now their arms were being misdirected against Yemen's national government and Saudi Arabian backed military units, causing unnecessary tensions within the coalition.

Thankfully, these were limited. Shuttle diplomacy between Saudi Arabia and the UAE may have done the trick and both have since called on Yemen's military and southern secessionists to focus their energies on fighting Houthi rebels and end the standoff in Aden. The UAE went further and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, underlined the UAE's supports for the Saudi-led Arab Coalition in light of the Aden clashes that resulted in 15 dead. He added that there shall be no solace to those who seek incitement. It was crisis averted.

Since that incident, direct attacks by the Iran-backed militia have increased in tempo, efficiency and devastation. With Tehran supplying an endless amount of ever-sophisticated ballistic missiles, and the international community busy with an assortment of other, more proximate crises (re: Russia-UK tension, Turkish adventurism and Iranian in Syria) Saudi Arabia — in coordination with its Arab Gulf allies — sits on 24-hour-a-day missile watch. Yemen is rapidly becoming the staging ground for Iran to harass and, ultimately, infiltrate Saudi Arabia. The proxy war is being eclipsed by interstate engagement and it is a matter of time before Iran attempts to invade Saudi Arabia via Yemen.

How the Yemen conflict will end is not a matter of guesswork but a matter of engagement. If the international community turns a blind eye to the crimes being committed by the Houthi militia and does not adequately reinforce the legitimate government of Hadi and the coalition fighting to preserve it then the country will continue on its downward spiral of war and the erosion of the national fabric. This is a Pandora's Box that needs to be sealed before the perfect storm of tribalism, sectarianism, secessionism and raw geopolitics force the country to turn a corner it cannot turn back from.

*This article is a revised version of the Italian language work titled:
"Cosa sta accadendo davvero in Yemen e i crimini commessi dalle milizie Houthi"*

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