



## Yemen, the Forgotten War Between Sectarianism and Regional Geopolitics

by Frauke Greiffenhagen

On 6 April 2018, the Euro Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) hosted an event titled ‘Yemen: All You Need to Know,’ which analysed the war in Yemen and explored the dynamics of a largely underreported conflict. The panel included: Admiral Andrea Mucedola (former Admiral in the Italian Navy), Daniele Raineri (a journalist covering jihadi terrorism), Antonino Occhiuto (Analyst at EGIC) and was moderated by Nikola Zukalova (Researcher at EGIC).

Mr Occhiuto opened the panel by contextualising the conflict and reiterating that the existing North-South division in the country precedes the current situation. Now, however, the main trigger for escalation has been the ousting of the UN-legitimated President, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, in a coup d’état by the Houthis, the country’s main Shia militia. Yemen is again a battlefield for regional powers. Saudi Arabia supports President Hadi and Iran backs the Houthis. Adding to the chaos is the tribal system and the tribe-busting religio-insurgent groups (re: ISIS and Al Qaeda). With a conflict that is splintered into an assortment of variables — such as the shifting allegiances of the General Peoples’ Congress, heightened operations of external powers and power-struggles within and beyond the Houthi fronts — no letup is in sight.

Admiral Mucedola, in his talk, highlighted an aspect of the conflict that is reported on even less than the war itself, the issue of piracy and its link to terrorism. While the Saudi-led coalition has continually sought to disrupt and destroy terrorist infrastructure and strong-holds, predominantly of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Daesh, the efforts to combat terrorism and piracy at sea have been less coordinated and successful. An act of piracy is constituted, according to Mucedola, when an act of violence is committed by a private entity in international waters. Applying this definition, the recent Houthi attack on a Saudi tanker (03 April 2018) qualifies as an act of piracy and indicates the increasing capabilities of the Houthi militia— supplied with Iranian missiles— and the risk to the strategic al-Mandeb strait. The issue is not only of concern to the Saudi-led coalition, and is not merely a question of regional stability. Piracy, perpetrated by the Houthis, is a global issue and needs to be addressed by the international community, as an estimated 3.8 million barrels/day of oil travel through the strait. Securing al-Mandeb is vital for the stability of the global energy market, as the narrow choke-point, 25km at its widest, 3km at its narrowest point, is the entry way to the Red Sea, and the only route from the Arab Gulf to the Suez Canal.

Piracy and lawlessness at sea have also given rise to illegal activities along the Yemeni coast, with drug and arms smuggling, as well as human trafficking, becoming increasingly common, and difficult to tackle. This is especially problematic in the light of illegal arms supplies to the Houthis, feeding into the cycle of conflict escalation. The international community needs to take piracy seriously and increase efforts to crack down on smuggling and illegal activity at sea.

Mr. Raineri, who was based in Yemen prior to the conflict, highlighted another aspect of destabilisation in the country: the aforementioned radical jihadi terror organisations, which have found fruitful breeding grounds in the impoverished country.

It is a common theory that these groups are funded by external states, a sentiment that Raineri refuted, stating that both AQAP and Daesh are capable of funding themselves. This ties in with the argument of piracy and lawlessness at sea going unsanctioned, as terror groups are able to seize assets or blackmail governments to pay large ransom sums for hostages.

The self-sufficiency of these organizations makes it harder to cut off their flow of capital. Even so, the organisational strategies of the terror groups play a vital role in their survival in Yemen. Daesh and AQAP follow different models, with AQAP being much more successful, and roughly 20 times the size of Daesh in Yemen, in terms of military capability. This is because AQAP creates new entities (re: local branches) which fly a different flag, making it harder for international actors to target them. This model ties the organisation closely into the web of regional powers, an achievement that is vital in a country like Yemen, where tribal power structures and loyalties dominate political, social and cultural life, as Mr. Occhiuto explained. Daesh has been unable to win the hearts and minds of Yemenis, and is an easy target for the coalition, as it raises its flag as soon as it captures territory.

We at EGIC have tasked ourselves with promoting enhanced synergy between Europe and the Gulf, a mission that relies on fostering education and knowledge regarding the events of the region. We believe that it is of vital importance to shine a light on the Yemen war, which has been dragging on for four years, with the international community and mainstream media turning a blind eye. This conflict is at the heart of regional instability, and the main battlefield of the Saudi-Iranian proxy war for regional hegemony. It deserves the same attention as the war in Syria, and we believe that analyzing the multidimensional conflict is the first step to finding a solution to this forgotten war.