



The Gulf and the Future of Yemen



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Roundtable Discussion¹

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¹ **Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this report that is based on the roundtable discussion do not represent the views or the position of the Gulf Studies Center. This report is reflecting the discussion took place without any further interpretations by the center.

Introduction

The state of Yemen has conquered a wide share of media coverage and international attention since the beginning of the Arab Spring. The political unrest in the state of Yemen has created regional alterations that specifically involve countries of the GCC and Iran. During to the political unrest, and the interference of neighboring state, President Ali Abdullah Saleh resigned from office, leaving the failed state and its conflicts his vice-president. However, this formal political transition did not bring any stability to the political system and governance in Yemen, rather it endowed Houthis with an opportunity to take control of Sana'a by cooperating with pro-regime parties, and in September 2014 to finally evict the legitimate government.

The downfall of the Yemeni state has caused a political vacuum in the Northern and Southern parts of the country. Efforts made by the Saudi-led coalition that wanted to restore legitimacy in the Yemeni state grew weaker and is nearing failure. This lead to the regional and international acceptance of the idea of diving the state and was presented to the people of Yemen as a fait accompli. Before, the country has already witnessed the division, the worst consequence of which was the creation of effective non-state actors (militias / armed forces / al-Qaeda) that strived to fill in the political vacuum. As a result, the instability and lack of security in the country have only intensified. This report brings forth a thorough analysis to the current situation in Yemen through two main points:

- Yemen's political instability and the influence of non-state actors.
- Regional implications in view of the regional and international interventions in Yemen.

First: Yemen's Political Instability and the influence of non-state actors

A better assessment of the internal situation in Yemen is possible if the map of political forces is clearly laid out and understood. The uprisings in 2011 led to a devastating war, political fragmentation of the state, formation of decision-making centers outside the country, and the rise of various political militant actors such as Houthis whose primary goal was to take over the Yemeni State.

Several regional initiatives like the joint intervention by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have added to the weakening of the Yemeni state. With the concept of legitimacy having been undermined, the country fell into a political chaos further exacerbated by the presence of numerous political powers on the military map of Yemen.

The Yemeni crisis cannot be simplified to the understanding of the security situation created as the result of Barack Obama's 'rightsizing' move to withdraw the US troops from the Middle East. USA military absence in Yemen allowed a political vacuum in the stability of the region, which countries like Iran and Israel, and - to a lesser extent - Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have tried to fill in terms of their political and military influence. Saudi Arabia started pursuing aggressive defensive policy to protect its borders, with the same course of actions upheld by the United Arab Emirates, which has economic and strategic interests in different seaports, the Strait of Bab al Mandab, and the island of Socotra and in some of the countries of the Horn of Africa such as Somalia and Eritrea.

It is necessary to emphasize the extent of the influence that external powers exert on Yemen's internal politics. Many of Yemen's members of politics ensured domestic and foreign alliances that would allow them to exert local power and influence. Furthermore, neighboring countries supported different political groups in Yemen, which had different effects on the country. For example, the state of Oman allowed militant groups such as the Houthis to create a political base on the grounds. In addition, the UAE strived to strengthen its influence in Yemen by supporting other forces, such as the Transitional Council formed out of the southern movement with its 90,000 UAE-based fighters, and the General People's Congress in northern Yemen consisting of approximately 70,000 Egypt and UAE-backed combatants. Therefore, foreign interference and the failing governance mechanisms continue to destroy Yemen's potentials for reform.

The failure of political reform in Yemen has had a destructive affect on all spectrums of the domestic life of the country and made the unity of the domestic political forces difficult and almost impossible, especially after the Yemeni government colluded with several parties that support the joint foreign intervention. Therefore, discussion about internal forces usually entails mentioning presence of external powers in the territory of Yemen.

Consequently, the humanitarian situation in the country has drastically deteriorated; until 2011, Yemen was one of the poorest countries in the region with the unemployment rate amounting to

35%. Today these numbers have grown bigger due to the ongoing crisis, war and conflict, and affected by the international community's unwillingness to find settlement to the problem. One of the examples proving the lack of motivation is the fact that UAE launched a strike over 300 army soldiers in Yemen, which had received no accountability.

Geopolitics had an impact on the domestic scene in Yemen as well as Sanaa's relations with its neighbors. Historically, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has always intervened in Yemen's affairs due to the geographical proximity and centuries-long ties between the two countries. Therefore, Yemen's decision-making processes have always been conditional to Saudi Arabia's will and interest. As for Iran, the nature of its relations with Yemen goes back to history, when North Yemen repudiated the Iranian Islamic Revolution, while the South welcomed and supported it. Finally, the state of Oman had an impact on the nature of relationship between Yemen and Iran, thus, Yemen's stance towards Iran remains divided based on these historic relationships.

Apart from the geopolitical dimension, one should also consider the ideological factor and the effects of the economic benefits gained from waterways and seaports.

The security dimension has also had an impact with the role of the United States in the fight against terrorism, and the prevention of China and other countries from firmly stepping into the region.

With all of the previous, the conflict with expanding emerging regional powers like Iran seems inevitable. While prioritizing its security agenda, Saudi Arabia has been putting efforts into ensuring the security of its neighbors through the Arab Alliance: the "Decisive Storm", which is an alliance which is weak and failing. It is worth mentioning that this alliance was linked to the changes in the Saudi Arabia's government, while the decision itself is connected with a military achievement linked to the presence of King Salman and his Crown Prince in power.

Amongst the potential Saudi gains from the war in Yemen is the opening of new oil-exporting ports in Mahra where lots of Saudi troops are stationed despite the fact that there are no Houthis in the area. Mahra is located on the border with Oman, and therefore Saudi Arabia's presence there directly threatens Oman's national security. In this regard, when one chooses to analyze Saudi Arabia's actions, it becomes clear that the Kingdom is putting efforts into expanding its military presence in Mahra, as well as in Aden and Marib. To prove that, it is worth mentioning that during

the last three months, Saudi Arabia has gained more visibility in the territory of Yemen, even amongst the areas that lack Houthi presence.

The constant change of political and military scenes and the roles of the actors in Yemen make its political and military map complicated and difficult to comprehend. Houthis managed to move forward through the state's territories, due to the missiles they have in their arsenal, unlike the Yemeni government, which is deprived of its military forces and unable to exercise its political will. This situation has led to the emergence of new forms of theories claiming that political powers are born out of military forces. In this regards, it becomes clear that regional world powers systematically try to destroy governance in Yemen and make the State a secondary player rather than the main one, which makes the statehood in Yemen to undergo a complete restructuring process.

Some experts suggest that the solution to the crisis must be created and applied only by Yemeni parties. The idea of a divided Yemen has been immediately swept aside because South Yemen is too important from economic and social perspective. On the other hand, other experts suggest that reaching a settlement to the crisis from within the country is difficult. They reason that regional and international powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United States should also participate in finding a solution to the Yemeni problem as the Yemeni government is weak while there is no local support to the army, which means that the solution cannot be only Yemeni.

There is also a pressing need to bring joined efforts of people, parties and political powers to the process of the state's restructuring, with special attention paid at the vital role of the Yemeni tribes, because any settlement in the absence of domestic powers will shake a balance in the country. The same can be said about a change in the military balance in the country, which should also be revised on the domestic level. For example, Houthis must be included in the military-cum-political equation, where their role in the country and presence of their 120,000 soldiers will be acknowledged.

Second: Regional implications in view of the regional and international interventions in Yemen

A deep insight into the relationship between Washington and Tehran helps explain the ties between the Houthis and the international community, whose agendas do not coincide with one another in the region. Therefore, it is important to note the difference between the influence that Washington has over Yemen as oppose to the influence and self-interest that Tehran has on Yemen and the Houthis. Both countries, USA and Iran, are capable of supporting or terminating the prominent political groups in Yemen. As the United States did not impose an effective course of action to solve the situation in Yemen nor it disarmed Houthis while Iran is supporting Houthis and even helping them create diplomatic representation thereby giving them official authority to act as a state, the Yemeni situation is getting complicated.

With regards to Iran, its military presence in Yemen is not as expensive as its presence in Lebanon and Syria. On the contrary, Iran receives benefits from its activities in Yemen as these activities give Tehran an excellent opportunity to exert its influence on the security situation in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Iran is considered a winner over Saudi Arabia so far due to its awareness of Yemen's geographical and historical context while Saudi Arabia does not follow a wise policy despite its social and geographic proximity with Yemen. Saudi Arabia's main driver in Yemen is to disarm Houthis and not allow them to control any area in Yemen. In addition, Saudi Arabia has classified Houthis differently from how they are classified internationally, which would affect adversely any mediation efforts or opportunities for cooperation between the two parties. Rather, Saudi Arabia's activities have caused a change in the structure and identity of Yemen, as well as had an impact on the geopolitics and identity in the region as a whole. In this regard, Iran is expected to take a political decision that can grant Houthis particular influence in Yemen, which is the least that Houthis will accept.

In order to understand the role of Iran in Yemen, it is reasonable to compare it with the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as through the assessment of three major strategies that Iran has followed in dealing with Hezbollah: first, fortification over the state; second, imposing the right of veto on the state which gives the party a diplomatic power; and third, create a state within a state.

Following these three strategies, Iran will be able to determine the fate of the Houthis in Yemen.

One of the factors affecting the future of the state in Yemen is the disagreement between Saudi Arabia and Oman in this regard. However, not only Saudi Arabia's stance is important here, but it is crucial to incorporate the neighboring states as well. While Yemen is considered to be an important player to Oman, the UAE is striving to besiege Muscat through both Yemen and countries of the Horn of Africa, including Somalia, Djibouti and others. The UAE is putting its efforts to recruit mercenaries wherever it can, as well continuing its investments in Blackwater companies, military equipment and aircraft. Oman is expected to seek assistance from Pakistan, however that would only add to the exacerbation of the conflict. When it comes to the position of Iran regarding UAE-Oman conflict, it seems that Tehran will not intervene unless it feels any political uncertainty.

Among the regional countries that are not involved in the Yemeni affairs, while may help in resolving the crisis is Kuwait - the state that has been entrusted with the status of mediator in the conflict. As for Iraq, its ability to intervene in Yemen is limited by the geographical factor and the turbulent political situation, although previously, Iraq has intervened in Yemen in favor of the Arab unity. In any case, the current situation in Yemen does not allow new parties to get into the political scene.

In conclusion, given the current situation in Yemen, the future of the region does not seem clear. For a number of reasons, driven by self-interest, the global community has failed the state of Yemen in regards to peace and effective conflict resolution. Given the current situation, humanitarian support and the inputs of civil society and Yemeni people are critical for the survival of the state before attempting to apply a peaceful resolution of the conflict.