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# Journal of Peace Studies

C	O	N	T	E	N	T	S
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## EDITORIAL NOTES

Constructing Terror Capsules Role of Religion	<i>Riyaz Punjabi</i>	1
Human Rights Regime Challenge and Opportunity	<i>Riyaz Punjabi</i>	5
Kashmir: A Fresh Layout	<i>Riyaz Punjabi</i>	8

## ARTICLES

Violence: Not An Islamic Deal	<i>Noor Ahmad Baba</i>	11
Religion as Quest for the Impossible	<i>M. Maroof Shah</i>	20
How Islamic are Islamist Revivalist Movements?	<i>M. Maroof Shah</i>	25
Conflict Resolution in Yemen: The Role of External Powers	<i>Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui</i>	32
Federal Framework and Organizational Culture of the Indian Police	<i>Ajay K. Mehra</i>	55

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## Conflict Resolution in Yemen: The Role of External Powers

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Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui \*



### Introduction

On the eve of mass Arab uprising that swept the Arab world in 2011 shortly after the self-immolation of Tunisian vendor, Yemen like many other countries in region, too could not shield itself against the political wave of change. Learning from others and following the footstep of other protestors and rebel forces in adjacent parts of the Arab world, large numbers of Yemeni thronged the streets with their localized version of “Day of Rage” and taking the cue from Tahrir Square of Egypt, they named their crowded ground in Sana’a “Change Square”. They too demanded the ouster of their rule, Ali Abdullah Saleh who uniquely had ruled both the divided as well as united Yemen for last thirty three years. The demands of the protestors were embodied in the slogan of “no negotiation, no dialogue resign or escape”<sup>1</sup>. Not long ago, President Saleh had pushed a new wave of constitutional amendment that

would have entirely eliminated term limits, paving the way for him to serve as president for life.<sup>2</sup>

The mass uprising in Yemen began a day after the President of Tinian Ben Ali was overthrown as university students marched through the streets of Taiz and Sana’a and in real sense the whole nation was on the street to protest against the long rule of President Saleh. Amid spread of the movement across the nation, Houthis<sup>3</sup> extended all their support to the anti-Saleh protest and the Houthi leader Abdel al-Malik Houthi in an address to the protestors accused President Saleh of surrendering the national sovereignty to the US and other foreign powers.<sup>4</sup> Likewise Hirak<sup>5</sup>, a separatist movement in southern Yemen, showed all sympathies and promised all collaboration with anti-Saleh faction, the protesters in the north, because of its old grievances against the regimes for its north-centric policies. It was perhaps the opportune moment for the southern leaders to

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exploit anti-Saleh sentiments to strengthen their secessionist movement. They saw their dreams of a separate state being achieved in a weakened north and a fragile state.

Apart from the Houthis and the Hirak, the third component of the resurgent political sphere was the Al-Islah, which was earlier known as Yemeni Congregation for Reform.<sup>6</sup> Al-Islah, along with other Islamist parties in the region, also joined the protest at a later stage. But as the movement galvanized anti-regime forces and spread far and wide, and they could not afford to remain ambivalent. What came as further blow to Saleh's endeavor to rescue the regime mounting number of defection from the regime. The most significant defection was witnessed in March when the most prominent figure of Islah, Major-General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, tribal billionaire and influential son of Hashid tribe Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar<sup>7</sup>, commander of Yemen's first armed brigade, Saleh's military chieftain, his cousin and old patron of Al-Islah declared his support to the opposition forces<sup>8</sup>. He was also, in the early bid of Saudi-led GCC initiative, Saudi Arabia's choice for the presidency.<sup>9</sup> General Mohammad Ai Mohsin, commander of the Yemeni's eastern region abandoned President Saleh on the same day. So

initially there emerged four major movements which would determine the political trajectory of Yemen: Al-Islah; Hirak; Houthis and individual groups including terror outfits like AQAP and the ISIS.

President Saleh resorted to all means at his disposal from coercion to cooption, from concession to intimidation and counter-revolutionary oppression, to stay in power. Following the foot step of his contemporaries, he too promised not to contest the election that was due in 2013 and abandoned the idea of apparently transferring power to his son. He also accused Al-Islah, an Islamsit bloc, of manipulating the existing political turmoil for its own sake and warned that in case of his departure, the Islamists would come to power and rule according to their own rule book.

Amidst the growing prospect of the civil war in early 2011, because of deepening polarization and later mushrooming of different political, tribal, militant and Islamist factions within the country, General People Congress of President Saleh and Al-Islah enunciated a series of negotiations in March 2011 with the cooperation of Saudi-led GCC. Finally Saudi Arabia was able to convince President Saleh to exit the office. The deal was known as the

'GCC Initiative' signed on 21 November 2011, which had full support of the US and the UN. President Saleh earlier too had shown some readiness to hand over power, but not to his antagonists like Ahmar brothers.

Under the agreement arbitrated by the GCC, Saleh was granted complete immunity for his past crimes and the power was to be transferred to the erstwhile serving Vice President, Mr. Mansur Hadi, who had served as the deputy of Mr. Saleh for seventeen years. But the students in large number refused to acknowledge the role of the CC and they saw it as an attempt to hijack the purely domestic movement. Youth demanded the persecution of president Saleh and other members of his cabinet.<sup>10</sup>

The transition was reaffirmed in a national referendum held in March 2012.<sup>11</sup> Mr. Hadi was the joint candidate of the GCP and JMP and he was the lone candidate in the referendum receiving 99.8% of the total votes cast as 'Yes' for his two-year presidency.<sup>12</sup> Houthis boycotted the election but did not stop people from casting their votes unlike the Hirak in the south who not only boycotted the polling but reportedly prevented people from visiting the polling booths. Both parties were

opposed to the election due to their dissatisfaction with the content of the GCC deal, which had granted immunity to the ousted president. It must be recalled here that Mr. Mansur Hadi is an old confidant of Saudi Arabia and he was the point person for Saudi Arabia during the height of the southern movement in 1990s. In those years Saudi Arabia had supported the movement in the south due to Saleh's Pro-Saddam stance in the first Gulf war.<sup>13</sup>

### **Internal Factionalism and Sectarian Divide**

It was not easy to reach an accord in the country like Yemen, which is traditionally characterized by multi-layered division what was once aptly described by President Saleh himself "ruling Yemen is like dancing on the head of a snake".<sup>14</sup> Very soon the implementation of the GCC initiative became a game of 'hide and seek'. Mr. Saleh in the past had refused to sign the deal on three different occasions on one pretext or another. First he said that he would transfer power only after al-Ahmar brothers<sup>15</sup> leave the country and again Saleh demanded that Qatar should not be allowed in a power transfer ceremony because of the adverse coverage by Aljazeera TV channel while reporting about him. Finally Qatar had to drop itself from the

ceremony.<sup>16</sup> Later to stall the deal, his men allegedly besieged the house of UAE diplomat in Sana and raided the house of al-Ahmar brothers as well.

This hide and seek game was entwined with the rising violence between Republican guards of Saleh and tribal forces loyal to Ahmar brothers and tribes loyal to Houthi sect. Amidst all these, Saleh resigned primarily due to fear of cancellation of immunity provided to him in the agreement and mounting pressure of US, EU, and UN Human Right Council. Before that he was flown to Saudi Arabia in June 2011 for treatment after he had suffered an injury in an assassination attempt. The agreement of his exit removed him from the power but not from the national politics.

The political trajectory in the Arab world has witnessed many criss-crosses on diplomatic and strategic fronts and something similar was witnessed in Yemen. Two arch rivals of the past in national politics of Yemen-Saleh and Houthis-joined the hands. During his long tenure of 33 years, Saleh had failed to win the support of the Houthis and both sides fought six brutal wars between 2004 and 2010. In one of the wars, Hussein Badreddin Al Houthi, the founder of the Houthi movement and the elder brother of present Houthis leader,

Abdul Malek Al Houthi was killed in September 2004<sup>17</sup>

The dynamic of their relationship changed dramatically after the reluctantly signed GCC initiative when the current Houthi leader Abdul Malek Al Houthi and ousted president Saleh shook hands to defeat other political forces: Al-Islah and Hirak. Both Saleh and the Houthis denounced the UN-recognized exile government of Hadi in Riyadh and posed a united shield against Saudi-backed forces in northern Yemen and accused Saudi-led operation for the current humanitarian disaster.

But since August 2017, the alliance seems to be falling apart and both sides appear to have been harboring apprehension of each other's rising power. Both accused each other of dominating and hijacking the movement. On the eve of 35th anniversary of GPS's foundation, thousands of Saleh's supporters thronged the streets of Sana where Saleh vehemently criticized the Houthis and termed them as militia, which has brought the relationship at the verge of collapse.<sup>18</sup> In his address, he accused them of turning the country into a proxy of Iran and transgressing his authority.<sup>19</sup> He also condemned those who want to end his rule and said that those doing it have a wrong understanding of

democracy. While party's General Secretary Mr. Zakka asked the Houthis to fight the corruption in their ruled territory first and give the salary to the employees instead of tampering with the education system and change the theology to fulfill Iran's agenda.<sup>20</sup> The criticism also came from other side when the Houthis targeted Saleh and his forces for maneuvering the current situation for their own political gains. Without naming any one, the Houthi leader Abdul Malek Al Houthi accused many of stabbing in the back and said that there are people who are conspiring against the nation and entering into alliance which would undermine the national sovereignty.<sup>21</sup>

UAE's foreign minister Mr. Anwar Gargash had then said that current fallout between the two represent great hope for an end to the impasse in Yemen.<sup>22</sup> Some media houses like 'New Arab' has reported that UAE's foreign minister is lobbying with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia to ditch the President Hadi for Saleh if he abandons the Houthis. In November, the skirmish over control of Saleh mosque ignited the battle between the two and the alliance finally collapsed when in a televised address on December 3 2017, Ali Abdullah Saleh said that he is ready to open dialogue with the Saudi-led

coalition saying "we would turn the page of history with Saudi Arabia and for his loyalist to fight with the Houthis." It was merely after one day of his final breach with the Houthis that former President Abdullah Saleh was killed on December 4, 2017.<sup>23</sup> He was assassinated while trying to flee Sana after the Houthis had already demolished one of his palaces. He was dragged from the vehicle and killed by Houthis while he was on his way to his ancestral home Sanhan. He was buried very secretly in the presence of merely five close members of his family. His self-exiled son, Ahmad Saleh was not allowed to join the funeral. His death gave ample power to the Houthis to expand and they brought new area into their orbit like the port of Hodeida which was the entry point for the imports of food for the Yemenis.<sup>24</sup>

As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, his death deprived Saudi Arabia of the one person they could have struck a deal with in future for a permanent solution. The death of Abdullah Saleh, undoubtedly, would also have been most disquieting both strategically and politically for UAE — a frontline actor in Yemen's politics. It is no secret that both Saleh and the ruling family of UAE had enjoyed an amicable relationship in recent past and his son Ahmad was staying in the UAE. Of late, the UAE



has initiated backdoor diplomacy for communicating with his son to bring Saleh back to the national politics even as conflict between President Hadi and the UAE continues to escalate.

Abdullah Saleh was killed because the Houthis had realized that he is the man who can be a bulwark against their politics. They had no doubt that once he abandoned them and allied with the enemy camp, he can change the course of events in the country because he is a veteran of political maneuvering and possesses an instinct for political survival. All previous efforts ranging from protest to reconciliation to accord to assassination attempt failed to marginalize Saleh's political and military roles and he continued to manage and control the political transition in the country. Mr. Saleh was killed not only because he turned against the Houthis but the Houthis recognized that the man had the political skills to spoil their politics and turn the wave in favor of the Arab coalition. He was the tallest figure in Yemeni politics and had enjoyed the support of many factions. His death came as if on cue after his famous statement that ruling Yemen is like dancing on the head of the snake. Perhaps he lost the balance while performing the political dance. Saleh was killed by those who were

very often manipulated by him as bargaining chips to survive in both domestic and regional politics. The Houthis termed his killing as a historic victory for the people of Yemen.<sup>25</sup>

Amidst complete disarray in northern Yemen following the death of Saleh in December and subsequent battle between the Houthis and sympathizers of Saleh, a renewed demand for southern sovereignty escalated, which suddenly changed the political trajectory in Yemen. It all began in May 2017 when internationally recognized President Hadi dismissed Aden governor Aidrous al-Zubaydi and he immediately announced the formation of Southern Transitional Council (STC), which immediately emerged as a de facto government of southern governorate, to actualize the old demand of a separate nation in the south of Yemen.

There seemed to be a similarity between the current demands of the STC and the earlier demands of the Houthis when the latter too had asked the Hadi government to resign before they captured the capital town of Sana'a in 2014.<sup>26</sup> The same demands were made by the STC when they asked Prime Minister Ahmed Daghr to step down. The situation escalated after Aidrous al-

Zubaydi asked his forces to gather in Aden on January 27 and in retaliation the Hadi government banned any protest in Aden. The clashes broke out in the town between the Presidential Protection Forces and Reform Party Movement (an affiliate of MBH and partner in Hadi's government) on one hand and the twenty-brigades of Security Belt (armed wing of STC) on the other which very soon routed the forces loyal to Hadi. Many of the official buildings belonging to Hadi government in Aden (symbolic capital of Hadi government) were captured by Security Belt including the Central bank of Yemen and other military bases.

### **Ideological Issues**

The country in the wake of political uprising witnessed another shade of conflict dominated by religious and ideological issues and the most prominent actor in this battle were the Houthis. The Houthis are mostly in northern Yemen and constitute nearly 45 % of the total population. The real cause of Houthis contempt against Mr. Saleh dates back to 1970s when his regime backed the Salfist-Wahabist clerics throughout the country with the support of newly acquired petrodollar wealth of Saudi Arabia, which funded Yemen's religious and political institutions<sup>27</sup> to

win over the hearts and minds of the masses. On the other hand Mr. Saleh followed the policy of pitting and patronizing one tribe against other. Houthis felt threatened by deepening Salafist ideology and growing political intervention of Saudi Arabia in northern Yemen where the southern border of the Saudi Arabia meets. Al-Islah is another Sunni block (Yemeni branch of MBH which changed its name in 1994 to comply with the state's demands) which was growing at the cost of Houthis and both have remained at logger head for ideological and theological differences. Al-Islah being both opponent and exponent of the ruling GPC in the past has been integral to the national politics and henceforth seen as an stumbling block to the expansion of the Houthis.

The partnership between Saleh and Al-Islah remained tactical rather than strategic and its support to Saleh was more driven by common desire to weaken the socialist influence of southern Yemen in the national politics after the country's unification in 1990.<sup>28</sup> But the relationship between two deteriorated and was redefined in the wake of 9/11 attack after Saleh committed full support to US-led war against terror which put the Al-Islah under scanner. The more the conflict widened and acquired

sectarian and strategic hues following the Arab uprising, more these religious groups involved themselves and inflicted heavy damages against each other hampering the political transition.

### **North South Divide**

Yemen's political transition was also impacted by the lingering federal issue: north-south divide. Not long after the dissolution of the central authority in early days of uprising, the southern separatist movement revived itself, though in the early days, *Hirak* was part of anti-Saleh movement but gradually their protest became south-centric. Mr. Ali Salim al-Beedh, former vice president of unified Yemen called for restoration of southern sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> It is equally important to note that 80 % of country's oil reserve is located in southern parts of Yemen.<sup>30</sup> The leaders of southern movement have always expressed their grievances against the north-dominated national politics and both sides fought civil wars in 1994, 1997 and 2003. The leaders of *Hirak* never trusted President Hadi due to his inclination towards a united Yemen and they were also apprehensive of Al-Islah's growing collaboration and sympathy for President Hadi. Moreover they are still haunted by bitter memories

of Al-Islah's support to the north in 1994 civil war.

The political and security vacuum amidst the weakening central authority provided a conducive landscape to Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (henceforth AQAP), locally known as Ansar al-Sharia, to consolidate itself. They also entered the fray and captured the capital city of Abyan province, Zinjibar and established the Abyan Islamic Emirate and ruled the region according to the Sharia. They were involved in a series of heavy bomb blasts including the presidential palace in Sana after Hadi became president. The consolidation of AQAP demolished all assumption that Al-Qaeda has been eliminated in the whirl of Arab uprising.

### **Role of regional players**

It is not merely the political and religious factionalism or north-south divide in Yemen that have so far foiled all bids to bring political stability in the country. But the involvement of regional players has equally obstructed the political process. Over the last eight years, the global community has witnessed how the extra-territorial actors have impacted the political transition in the region.

Yemeni war, like other wars in the region, has transcended the confines of local politics and the crisis is no more a local phenomenon. The level of Saudi Arabia's political interest can be gauged by the statement made by the King Abdel-Aziz way back in 1953 when he had advised his son to "keep Yemen weak".<sup>31</sup> Saudi Arabia has always engaged itself both strategically and politically in the internal politics of Yemen and has pitted one faction against other. It fought a eight-year long proxy war (1962-1970) against Egypt in Yemen and again in 1994, Saudi Arabia supported the Marxist separatist movement in the southern Yemen. For decades Saudi Arabia had special office for Yemen and the office had the annual budget of US\$ 3.5 billion<sup>32</sup> until the border agreement between the two was reached in year 2000. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia value the nation because of its strategic location. Undoubtedly the involvement of Saudi Arabia is much deeper in all military, financial, strategic, diplomatic and political aspects than Iran. Iran's involvement or support to the Houthis is not to the same extent what one saw in the case of Syria, Iraq or Lebanon.

First and foremost interest of Saudi Arabia in Yemen is preservation of internal security<sup>33</sup> because of its geographical proximity to northern

Yemen, where anti-Saudi forces and seemingly pro-Iranian Houthis are most influential. The Houthis have not only challenged the central authority in the Yemen but forced the transitional government of Mr. Hadi first to flee to Aden in February 2015 and next month to Saudi Arabia. The Houthis had captured the capital city of Sana'a in 2014 and the Saudi Arabia seemed to be paranoid of similar usurpation on its southern borders or the border areas becoming a safe haven for the militants, rebel forces and members of AQAP. Houthis rebel have targeted Saudi Arabia with 48 ballistic missiles and a total number of 138 missiles have targeted either Saudi territory or its forces.<sup>34</sup>

### **Role of Iran**

On the other hand, Iran after seemingly consolidating itself in Damascus, Baghdad and Beirut, is eyeing Yemen where it has Houthis to cooperate with them. By deepening its strategic presence in Yemen, Iran is not only trying to win over another close ally in the region but it is also trying to find a solid foothold in the Gulf, which is passing through a transformative phase. It seems that four decades of Khomeini's dream of exporting Islamic revolution is now materializing.<sup>35</sup> Iran has become a crucial – if not the decisive-power- in the hottest war in the region.

Between September 2014 and March 2015, Iran is reported to have lent logistic support to the Houthis and militia tribes in Yemen enabling them not only to take over the Sana but also control other strategic parts of the country. Very recently the Prime Minister of Yemen, Ahmad Bin Daghar accused Iran of prolonging the war and asked the UN to stop Iran from intervention.<sup>36</sup> Mr. Asiri, the spokesperson of Saudi-led operation in Yemen and its defense ministry said that Saudi Arabia did not need to wait for Yemen to become another missile base for Iran that threatens the security and safety of his country.<sup>37</sup>

The rise of Houthis triggered an alarm among the neighboring nations and the leaders were reminded of Khomeini's revolution of last century. Arising fear of Houthis and their ascendancy in northern Yemen led Saudi Arabia to form a coalition of Arab countries including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and the GCC except Oman and it launched an 'Operation *Al-Hazam*' (Decisive Storm) on 25 March 2015. According to some report, Colombian and South American Special Forces under an Australian were also seen on the Saudi side of the border while Egypt's navy too is reported to be present there.<sup>38</sup>

This operation was launched after Houthis (Saudi Arabia see them as a proxy of Iran) and Pro-Saleh rebel forces seized the town of Aden and Sana and attacked the palace of President Hadi. This Saudi-led operation was more a show of new deputy crown prince and defense minister, Mohammad Bin Suleiman. The operation in Yemen was more a compensatory act for the loss Saudi Arabia incurred in Syria. US declared its logistic support to Saudi Arabia while Pakistan and Turkey extended diplomatic support. After the uprising, the US has almost endorsed the policies and mechanism pursued by Saudi Arabia in Yemen. The US was instrumental in framing the GCC initiative which later became a major content of the UNSC resolution 2216.

It has not only supported the Hadi government but reportedly sent arms shipments to the coalition forces apart from providing intelligence input on the ground. Despite two years of heavy bombardment by the Saudi-led forces in the Houthi-controlled areas in both northern and western parts of Yemen (Taez, Sana and Aden), nothing desirable has been achieved so far and the Houthis are still maintaining their stronghold in the north. Of late, the UAE one of the strongest allies of Saudi Arabia

seems to have drifted from the unified agenda of the Saudi-led coalition in the ongoing conflict.

### **Failed Peace Endeavors**

The most important and foundation of successive deals was the transition agreement signed under the auspices of GCC in November 2011. The initiative allowed Mr. Saleh to play greater role in the security and military affairs of the country. Under the agreement, Mr. Hadi was to contest a free election for the post of president for two years and power was to be shared between the GPC and Joint Meeting Party (an opposition group under the leadership Al-Islah). Mr. Hadi being a southerner was not acceptable to many and moreover the role of GPC was not cooperative in the implementation of the deal. Mr. Hadi's south-centric policies and hostility towards Saleh's men further foiled all prospects of peaceful transition. The GCC initiative seemingly failed because the Houthis in the north and Hirak in the south and youth behind the uprising were excluded in the political process.

Another major effort to bring all the warring factions on the table was National Dialogue Conference (NDC) enunciated in March 2013 and which lasted till January 2014. The

conference called for laying the foundation for a federal democratic Yemen.<sup>39</sup> The major focus of the NDC was the reconfiguration of internal boundaries, redefine the state structure also and bring political reform<sup>40</sup> but it failed to make any headway because the proposed demarcation of the country which was opposed by the Houthis. Similarly in September 2014 the Peace and National Partnership Agreement<sup>41</sup> was signed by all major stakeholders including the President of Yemen, Houthis, representatives of GPC and several small parties. Under the new deal, a new technocratic government was to be formulated within one month after signing the deal but it faltered as well because of internal differences among the parties.

Like domestic peace initiatives, the global peace initiatives could not resolve the crisis either. The first UNSC resolution came only in February 2105 after capture of the capital by the Houthi rebels in September 2014. The resolution stated that Shiite (Houthis) rebel forces should immediately relinquish the city and all government offices. The UN's erstwhile Secretary General Mr. Ban Ki Moon said that "Yemen is collapsing before our eyes".<sup>42</sup> UNSC resolution (2216) called on all parties

in Yemen to abide by the GCC initiative and pressed for resumption of the UN-backed peace process.<sup>43</sup> Another effort in Geneva (May 2015) and in town of Biel in Switzerland (December 2015) under the supervision of UN's special envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmad were unable to end violence. The Houthis did not participate in the first one and the talk ended without any side coming face to face. The Biel talks were postponed indefinitely due to violation of ceasefire by Saudi-led forces in their anti-Houthis operation. In Biel the Houthis had shown some interest to abide by the UNSC resolution (2216) if Saudi Arabia stopped bombing of cities but Saudi Arabia insisted that the Houthis will have to retreat from the occupied territories first.<sup>44</sup> The third UN-brokered intra-Yemeni peace talk in Kuwait lasted the longest in hitherto all UN-led effort to resolve the crisis.

The talks held in Kuwait between April and July 2016 have been the most cordial where both Houthis and GCP participated but it yielded nothing. The talks primarily failed after Houthis refused to abide by the UN Peace Plan unless a unity government was formed which President Hadi rejected. Immediately after the failed negotiation in Kuwait, Houthis, in order to show the sign of their unity and pose more formidable

challenge to President Hadi dissolved the Higher Revolutionary Council of 2015 and formed a five-member Supreme Political Council representing both the Houthis and Saleh. It was the Republican forces loyal to Saleh which had provided a new strategic and military strength to Houthis who had not only taken over the capital city of Sana in September 2014 but forced President Hadi to flee first the capital city for Aden in south and later in March 2015 to Riyadh.

The last peace effort came in the Castle of Rimbo in northern Stockholm in Sweden when the head of rebel Houthis, Muhammad Abdelsalam and Foreign Minister of internationally-recognized Government of Yemen, Khaled al-Yemeni shook hands in presence of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on December 13, 2018. The occasion was the signing of a hard-won peace accord between the two warring factions after marathon efforts for almost two years. This success was preceded by many failed efforts to bring the two rivals on the negotiating table and discuss the end of the eight-year old civil war.

The final round of peace negotiation could be attributed to the failure of Saudi-led operation to retake the captured town of Sana from

the control of Houthis and their realization that the Houthis cannot be subdued in the political sphere of Yemen. These changes are reflective of regional developments in general and in Syria in particular where Saudi Arabia has lost influence.

The four-year long war failed to bring any desirable outcome apart from exhausting both Saudi Arabia and its closest ally, UAE politically, militarily and financially. The growing frustration of UAE on military front is understandable and it was possibly an emerging rift between the UAE and Saudi Arabia on the pursuit of Yemen war and changing dynamics of Yemeni politics that brought Saudi-backed government on the negotiating table. But the final endeavor also failed to see any desirable outcome

### **The Current Phase**

Today Yemen as a state seems to be failing on several fronts in the last seven years due to vicious violence and deepening divide among different stakeholders. The country is divided between two governments and two capitals in Sana and Aden and none is able to provide solution or stability. The Houthi takeover had caused further fragmentation of national security and subsequent Saudi-led operation has deepened

the crisis. The death toll is rising every day and its half of the population is below 18 years of age and so the one third of civilians killed happen to be children only. More than three million have been displaced in four years of Saudi-led air strikes and other intra-tribal violence. The deputy spokesperson of UN General Secretary said, "There has been huge humanitarian cost in Yemen".<sup>45</sup> The current situation is at UN emergency level where around 21.2 million of total 26 million populations are in need of humanitarian assistance while only 8.8 million have been provided the same so far.<sup>46</sup> About three million children and breast-feeding women are mal-nourished and 17 million people are considered food insecure.

The Saudi-led operation which is backed by the US, France and the UK has conducted many strikes in the towns where school and hospitals have suffered collateral damage leading to large number of civilian deaths. It is not merely the Saudi-led air strikes or Houthis' counter insurgency which have rendered the nation vulnerable but the rise of tribal war lords, drug smugglers, arms sellers and brokers and the local militias have further doused the hopes for an early evolution of steady security architecture or stable political



order in Yemen. Moreover the AQAP, a well-acquainted entity with the geographical terrain of the country due to its decade of involvement in multiple wars and conflicts, has embarked to exploit the political vacuum and today it is thriving in the environment of state collapse. The recent alliance between Houthis and Saleh has further strengthened their appeal among the local Sunni militia under the principle of "my enemy's enemy is my friend".<sup>47</sup> Similarly the ISIS, given the 'environment of free for all' is poised to strengthen itself and evolve as a powerful entity from its nascent state. They have already indicated their presence when it claimed the responsibility for many attacks in recent past. The war has exacerbated the hunger and disease of unprecedented level. The rise of cholera epidemic has made the situation unbearable for the poor masses trapped in the war-torn areas. According to a WHO report; the epidemic has hit 21 provinces of total 31 provinces in Yemen.<sup>48</sup>

### **Conflict Resolution in Yemen**

The history of cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia goes back to the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 which led to the foundation of Islamic republic of Iran and it subsequently resulted into US losing

one of its pillars in the region of the Middle East. After the overthrow of the monarchy in Iran, both Iran and Saudi Arabia suddenly turned into arch rivals and ideological and political theological propaganda erected two poles of ideological and strategic rivals in the region. The spiritual leader of Iran ruled that monarchy was an un-Islamic system that must be thrown while Saudi clergy enunciated new religious discourse to undermine the Shiite history and theology. Amid the Arab uprising, Iran had the upper hand in the Arab Middle East despite Saudi Arabia's all efforts to counter Iran's influence in the region. Iran had the upper hand in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and on the issue of Qatar as well which further troubled Saudi Arabia in Yemen and later military operation was an obvious outcome of this long-held conflictual positions. Backed by President Trump, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohamed bin Suleiman has tried to counter Iran's supremacy with little success so far and Yemen has turned into a expensive quagmire. Iranian support for the Houthis comes at very little cost when compared to expenditure incurred on the military involvement of Saudi-led coalition forces.

The 2015 military intervention on the part of Saudi Arabia in Yemen and Iran's interference certainly on the

increase, although still limited, have given credence to the idea of a proxy war fought in the name of geopolitical rivalry between antagonistic regional powers. When the Houthis had got full control of Sana'a in 2014, they lent full substance to the allegation of their ideological proximity to Iran. Later direct commercial route was opened between Iran and Yemen triggering wave of accusation that Iran was using this new air route to supply weapons and ammunitions.<sup>49</sup> There was also a buzz that Lebanese and Iranian military advisors were being sent to Yemen to train and teach the Houthis about the guerilla war in the parts they are controlling and further how to expand themselves. Again, few official statements by Iran added fuel to the fire, such as the claim in September 2014 that Sana'a after Baghdad, Damacus, Beirut, was the fourth Arab capital held by Iran's allies. Independent arm experts reveal that Houthi militias were using Iran-made weapons and other war equipments like missiles which lend further credence to the collusion between Iran and the Houthis. There is little doubt that the Houthis are part of a pro-Iranian orbit including Assad of Syria whose portraits can be seen on the walls in the town of Sana'a.

On the other hand, troops loyal to President Hadi in exile are seen to be surrogates of Saud Arabia and the

United Arab Emirates. The extent to which each party in this ideological war is acting according to their geopolitical frame is very much noticeable. The war is not confined to Yemen or Syria alone but it has transcended the battle field. A new wave of demonization on part of each other has begun and in an editorial of Saudi Arabia daily, it was argued that Arab must realize that Iran is more dangerous than Israel and the Arabs have no other option than reconciliation with Israel to counter the hegemonic design of Iran in the region.<sup>50</sup> The Crown Prince addressed the spiritual leader of Iran as the New Hitler.<sup>51</sup>

Yemeni civil war is showing no sign of de-escalation due to the involvement of two old theological, ideological, political, strategic and military rivals in the region and one cannot hope for an early solution until these two masters of the region evolve a consensus and come together and ponder over means of resolving the conflict.

Now question arises how to bring peace in a war-torn nation which is located in a very vital region in the Gulf and the world cannot afford to have an unstable Yemen. Yemen is increasingly a part of pre existing flow that includes Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria and Mali and many other

countries heading to the Gulf, Europe and South East Asia. Yemen occupies a strategic location and is at the crossroads of the continents with vital shipping routes for the world economy as 70% of the world oil tankers pass through this route. But the response of the world powers and regional powers to address this issue suggests that they see it merely as one backwater among many.

First, both Iran and Saudi Arabia will have to acknowledge the fact that proxies have never helped in resolving the crisis or ending the war in favor of one party or the other and war in Syria is a living example. This is a political crisis and that must be resolved through political means. Both sides need to recognize the political and strategic relevance of each other and evolve a collective, and consensual mechanism to end the crisis. Before evolving a peace process for Yemen, both the regional powers in the region should learn to share the Middle East with each other, and realize the existence as both the nations are a reality and their strategic and political ambitions are a natural outcome of their economic and ideological baggage and their historical past. There should be a serious pondering over the ways how to control the sectarian or ideological dimensions of the conflict and how to treat it as a political quagmire and

solution must be searched in the existing political template of the country.

The exclusion of ideological and sectarian elements must be the primary focus of any negotiation because the current conflict continues to rage and both sides have failed to find the solution and do not have the ability to put out the flames on their own or decisively win over the war against each other. The political, cultural and religious aspiration of Houthis must be addressed and their existence cannot be reduced to merely as a fringe group or a bunch of usurpers. Iran should also respect the concerns of Saudi Arabia arising out of political onslaught of the Houthis as the latter shares 1400 KM. borders with Yemen and any upheaval in the border area would have its natural bearing on the internal security of the country. What is further required is to address the Saudi Arabia's sense of vulnerability and its fear of Iran's hegemonic ambitions and that could be done through series of trust building measures between two countries. Iran and Saudi could withdraw from Syria to build the trust. What is required further is a regional collective security architecture which would take care of all parties. Recognizing legitimate the interest of each other is another requisite for

peace in Yemen and UN needs to broaden its horizon and should include Iran and Saudi Arabia in future negotiation.

Iran needs to convey to Saudi Arabia that it has no strategic ambition or aim in Yemen and Saudis need to recognize Houthis legitimacy in their demands. Saudi Arabia and UAE should avoid the language of separating the Yemeni territories. Saudi Arabia wants to have access to Indian Ocean through Yemeni corridor and that may not be done at the cost of Yemeni territorial integrity. But who will take the initiative to bring these arch rivals on the negotiating table and make them to soften their respective stance?

### **India's Role**

India is well placed to shape and lead this initiative as its relations go back to centuries. The relations between two are an uninterrupted phenomenon and the ties consist of intellectual, philosophical, economic and commercial interactions and both have shared civilizational values. The relations between two have moved beyond trade and energy and have now entered into a new phase where the issue of terrorism and ideological politics have added new level of urgency in the bilateral ties.

Under Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi both sides have come closer and the region has responded enthusiastically to Indian aspirations and demands and for new political and economic cooperation and strategic partnership. India can fill regional diplomatic vacuum and can help in promoting the engagement between the estranged neighbors. The US never allowed any one to enter in the region but its role is well tested and people want a change and the US itself is showing a sign of retreatment. It is time for India to take its diplomatic mission beyond South Asia and look for new strategic partners and new initiative for peace can come from India.

Yemen is in great need of help and challenges it faces are many. Yemen cannot manage its problems on its own and cannot handle its developmental problems. The solution does not lie in sending US drones to the country and the camps of terrorists. Foreign military interference has proved to be counterproductive and it is deployed at the expense of Yemenis and their security and cultural sensitivity. There are other issue like environment specially the depletion of water resources and climate change which has brought draught. Producing negative effect on agriculture and the daily lives of

entire village life. Local food production can meet only one third of the requirement and population is likely to double every twenty years.

### **Conclusion**

Looking at the interplay of Yemeni actors in the conflict and the multi-layered division among warring factions, a long lasting solution seems to be out of sight unless two arch rivals sit together and evolve a comprehensive and agreeable mechanism to resolve the issue. The re-emergence and ascendancy of secessionist movement in south seems to be sapping regional and global efforts in bringing about political stability. The sustenance of President Hadi in power and the issue of his legitimacy on one hand and the expansion of Houthis, their control of substantial part of territories and their adherence to the UN Resolution of 2216 (calling Hadi to resign and forming an inclusive government) on the other hand had foiled all past bids to bring both sides on the negotiating table for a composite political dialogue.

The rise of tribal war lords, drug smugglers, arms sellers and brokers, local militias apart from the expansion and consolidation of the AQAP and the ISIS and their tactical and strategic usage has further worsened an already weak security

architecture in the country which is likely to pose multiple challenges to Yemen. The country is overflowing with arms and ammunition and the demobilization of armed teen-age recruits (switching loyalty for extracting more money) would be an uphill task even after the political crisis is resolved. There are many arm smugglers who have embedded economic interest in the ongoing war and would not like to see the war ending soon.

The political future and survival of the Houthis will largely depend upon how Iran carves out its strategic path after Saleh, and what level of involvement Iran would choose in post-Saleh Yemen. Reprisals against Saleh's loyalists and GPC members by the Houthis are likely to increase and that would worsen the security situation further. Given the complexity of the crisis in Yemen and involvement of various stakeholders, it is difficult to predict the outcome of any agreement but recently one major achievement has been the recognition of Houthis and the government of President Hadi by each other as legitimate entities and, similarly, the identification of core areas of concern where both sides need to focus. There is still a long way to go to achieve complete peace, as there are reports of ceasefire violations already. There are other issues which might be difficult to implement. ■

### Endnotes

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