

A Chronic War or Divided Yemen Project?

Divide et Impera

Yemen has been drowning in the protracted 'civil war' since 2011. The Arab Spring and capture of capital Sana'a by Iran-backed Houthi militia and military intervention of Saudi Arabia-led Arab Coalition have turned the already poor country into a place of insane humanitarian disaster. The humanitarian situation, aggravated by the war, not to mention the Covid-19 pandemic, is now one of the deepest tragedies after the Second World War.

Arm struggles for the influence of regional and powerful states constitute the biggest obstacle to the continuation of the current status quo and to peace. While foreign powers conduct direct military interventions on Yemen, they are seizing all of Yemen's underground and ground riches. Interferences with the motto 'chaos first, then the savior' are transforming Yemen into an uninhabitable place, open to foreign intervention through the perception of a collapsed society; a society where war and violence prevail, poverty and living conditions in chaos, with no state authority that functions the way it should. Currently, interfering forces that undermine the freedom and democratic efforts in Yemen are preparing the ground for the disintegration of the country by direct or indirect intervention.

Meanwhile, various diplomatic initiatives - especially the UN - to stop the conflicts in Yemen have been unsuccessful until today. On the other hand, the ruptures among Yemenis caused irreparable damage to the political integrity of the country. UN-backed peace talks between the Houthis and Hadi's government resulted in failure, and the social gap among Yemenis is widening.

It should be clearly stated that today, Yemen is on the verge of division with a chronic state of war, thanks to the acts of foreign actors. Yemen is de facto divided into at least three autonomous regions. Iran-backed Houthi is in the North, the United Arab Emirates (UAE)-backed separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) in the South and the legitimate central government in the Central and Eastern regions.

The Partition Scenario of Yemen in the Regional Actors' Triangle

Yemen has geostrategic importance in terms of international trade and energy supply. The country is located on the strategic crossroads of the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. With about 200 large and small islands around the Gulf of Aden, Yemen is one of the most strategically important passages in the world. Yemen, which boasts the most important sea passage between Asia, Africa, and the West, has always been viewed by major powers as a key destination that needs to be dominated. Throughout history, regional and global powers have always fabricated instability in Yemen for their personal interest by exploiting the country's sectarian and ideological nature.

In the regional context, Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia are Yemen's neighbors that interfered and played a big role in destabilizing Yemen. Iran is a pivotal actor that backed the Houthi militias. Iran is supplying the Houthis with arms and is supporting them economically and diplomatically. Iran contests Mansur Hadi's legitimacy and considers Saudi Arabia's military intervention arbitrary and illegal. It should also be noted that since 2016, Tehran has been seeking a comprehensive agreement with China involving a US\$400 billion investment agreement over the period of 25 years, where it includes military agreements such as joint training exercises.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia sees the Houthis as a threat since it is a proxy of Iran that protects its regional interests. Saudi Arabia is the most concerned country when it comes about the situation in Yemen. Saudi Arabia's Southern borders are at high risk from Houthi attacks. Moreover, the Houthis are targeting the Kingdom's oil processing facilities, as in the September 2019 Abqaiq-Khurraish attack. Nevertheless, despite Saudi Arabia-led Operation Decisive Storm, the circumstances in Yemen only become worse and Saudi Arabia still hasn't reached its defensive and security goals. The situation remains in favor of the Houthis and the country's infrastructure and social divisiveness exposed the danger of even worse scenarios.

The most controversial power in Yemen's civil war is the UAE. In alliance with Saudi Arabia, the UAE had troops in the Southern regions of Yemen. Besides the UAE soldiers, more than 90,000 UAE-funded mercenaries are also present in the country. The first of these groups were formed in late 2015 and early 2016, initially as a way to combat the Houthis and Al-Qaeda. In Hadramawt, the UAE backed the Hadrami Elite Forces, which helped push Al-Qaeda out of al-Mukalla city's port in 2016. Around the same time, the UAE also formed the Shabwani Elite Forces in neighboring Shabwa, and the Security Belt Forces, which were designed to protect Aden. The Southern Transitional Council (STC), which was formed a year later in 2017, aligned itself with the UAE. Both have a shared interest in opposing the Al-Islah party and Muslim Brotherhood.

Indeed, over the past three years, UAE-founded-and-funded proxies have effectively formed the STC's military. There are, however, a few notable exceptions, including the largely Salafi Giants Brigade as well as Tariq Saleh's National Resistance Forces, both of which are close to the UAE but are not within the STC's umbrella of support. Finally, the UAE has also remained active on the island of Socotra, where its representative Khalfan al-Mazrouei is instrumental in distributing aid. The UAE has also continued to recruit local Socotris for its proxy forces in Yemen and has set up facilities on the island to train new recruits in battle skills, weapons handling, and first aid before sending them to the frontlines. This makes maritime security essential, particularly in the U-shaped area around the Arabian Peninsula encompassing the Persian Gulf, the Arabian and Oman seas, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. From this perspective, UAE's involvement in Yemen was part of its broader regional strategy, which included military bases and ports on both sides of the Red Sea.^[1]

Meanwhile, the UAE has captured the strategic Miyun Island and has constructed a military airport without the Hadi administration's knowledge. The UAE with its proxies clearly aims for independence from Northern Yemen.

The UAE's proxy units that operated outside the control of Hadi's government are a huge threat to Yemen's territorial unity. The UAE's economic and geostrategic agenda has turned Yemen into a failed state and divided society.

It can be easily said that all of these developments will serve their roles in the 'Divided Yemen Project'. It is seen that this political structure, which is expected to be under the control of the UAE, has made a serious investment in South Yemen - both psychologically and economically - in the last five years.

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The demonstrations in Yemen, which began in 2011 with only humane and libertarian ideas, have now evolved beyond their original intentions as the country is turning into a score-settling battleground between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a result, Yemen, where political and military unity has been lost, is on the verge of division with the interventions of foreign powers. Unless there is a comprehensive integration process and a peace plan for the country, it is unlikely that the country could be united. Without doubt, the main reason for this is the control of international trade and energy corridors by regional actors and global powers.

[1] https://sanaacenter.org/files/The_History_the_Politics_and_the_Future_en.pdf