

Time for UN to Shift Mission in Yemen. Long history of Saudi Military Intervention

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Peace in Yemen will continue to be elusive unless the United Nations shifts its mission from sponsoring an inter-Yemeni dialogue to mediating ceasefire negotiations between the actual warring parties, namely Saudi Arabia & allies and the de facto representatives of Yemenis who are fighting to defend their country's territorial integrity and independent free will, i.e. the Huthi - Saleh & allies.

Convening its 70th session while celebrating its 70th anniversary this year, the United Nations is unlikely to reconsider its stand on Yemen, but it must do, at least to provide a face - saving exit strategy for Saudi Arabia if not to stop a snowballing severe humanitarian crisis in the country.

The United Nations Mauritanian special envoy to Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed will sooner than later face the fate of his predecessor Jamal Benomar, who resigned his mission last March acknowledging its failure.

The Saudi insistence on dictating a fait accompli on Yemenis undermining the UN efforts to bring about a political solution, which was made impossible by the Saudi - led war on Yemen.

The legitimacy controversy

The UN sponsored Yemeni - Yemeni talks in the capital of the Sultanate of Oman, Muscat, and elsewhere will continue to be deadlocked. They are a non-starter. The Saudis have held their Yemeni allies captives of their dependence on Saudi financial, political and military support without which they could not survive internally.

The UN and Arab League recognition of them as the legitimate representatives of Yemen was counterproductive. They are viewed by most Yemenis more as Saudi puppets than legitimate delegates of their people.

Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who is recognised by the UN and the Saudi - led coalition as the legitimate president of Yemen, arrived in Aden last week aboard a Saudi military aircraft and his safety was secured during his three - day stay there by military bodyguards from the United Arab Emirates. The arrival of his prime minister Khaled Bahah a week earlier was not different.

Conferring UN and Arab League legitimacy on them serves only to turn both organisations into biased parties to the conflict if not partners to it or at least accomplices and compromises their credentials as mediators.

The Huthis are portrayed by the Saudi - led propaganda as a sectarian fanatic and violent intruders into the Yemeni society or as agents of Iran who are waging a proxy war in Yemen, but the Huthis are not aliens. Their ancestors ruled Yemen for some one thousand years. They represent more than one third of the country's population. Their role could have been strengthened by Iranian support and weakened by their religious speech, but nonetheless they are uncontroversial native integral component of Yemen's national history and society.

Similarly, their ally in fighting off the Saudi - led war on Yemen, ex - president Ali Abdullah Saleh, is part and parcel of Yemeni political infrastructure. More than a three - decade ally of Saudi Arabia, when Saleh resisted a Saudi transition plan he hardly survived a bombing of his Friday prayers. Despite his individual ruling style and a wide spread corruption of his governance, he is credited with building a state infrastructure, a national army, a tolerable pluralistic political life and a relatively civil freedoms that were the envy of his Arab compatriots in the north who are still living under the Middle Ages systems of government and, more importantly, making the unity of Yemen a fact of life. When his representative credentials are questioned by his former Saudi allies it is noteworthy to remind them that his "al-Mutammar" party still controls the majority of the last democratically elected Yemeni parliament.

The "external" Iranian interference in Yemen and Iran's sectarian support for "Shiite" Yemenis, in addition to a self - proclaimed role in defence of a controversial legitimacy of a Yemeni president, are the main *raison d'être* cited by Riyadh as the *casus belli* of the Saudi ongoing six - month old war on Yemen.

However history and *realpolitik* facts refute such Saudi claims and render them as merely thinly - veiled justification for installing a puppet regime in Sanaa by the brutal and inhumane force of an external invasion.

The current Saudi war on Yemen could be a "rite of passage" for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but not the Saudi Arabia as claimed by Rami G. Khouri (1).

Long history of Saudi military intervention

Long before there was an "Iran threat" or a "Shiite threat," the Saudi ruling family never hesitated to interfere in Yemen militarily or otherwise whenever Yemenis showed signs of breaking away from Saudi hegemony towards a free will to determine their lives independently.

In the 1930s the Saudis engaged in a war on the Mutawakkilite Imamate of Yemen and succeeded in annexing the Yemeni provinces of Asir, Jizan and Najran to their kingdom, thus creating a border dispute that was not settled until 2000, but the current Saudi war on Yemen seems to reignite it.

Then, they occupied the Yemeni port of Hodeida on the Red Sea and attacked the Yemeni capital Sanaa. Yemen at the time was a similar conservative "kingdom" bound, like the Saudis, by treaties with the British colonial power.

From 1962 to 1970 the Saudis interfered militarily on the side of the "Shiite" Yemeni "royalists" whom they fought in the 1930s against republican revolutionaries who sought to usher Yemen into the twentieth century out of the Middle Ages. The Saudi military

intervention led the Pan - Arab leader of Egypt Gamal Abd al-Nasir to rush to the rescue of the Yemeni republicans, thus regionalising a Yemeni internal affair into an Egyptian - Saudi war among the "Sunnis."

History it seems is repeating itself nowadays, but the Saudis have so far failed to embroil Iran in Yemen as they did with Egypt then. Instead, the kingdom is itself plunging deeper into the Yemeni quicksand.

"In 1977, then, Saudi Arabia conspired (together with Salih) to the assassination of modernist President Ibrahim al-Hamdi, who was determined to loosen the stranglehold of the kingdom over Yemeni politics," **Tobias Thiel (2) of The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) wrote on last April 2.**

In the aftermath of the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran into the regional scene, "the House of Saud expelled around 800,000 Yemeni guest workers to punish the newly united republic for its stance in the 1991 Gulf War (Kuwait war), plunging the country into an economic crisis" and "the kingdom simultaneously supported both sides - Sunni Islamists and Marxist separatists - in the 1994 war of secession," **Thiel added. Both those events had nothing to do with the so -called "Iran threat" or the "Shiite - Sunni" sectarian rivalry; both were inter - Arab and inter Yemeni conflicts.**

"Finally," according to Thiel, "Riyadh has backed the Salih regime against the mass protests in 2011 and has - as elsewhere - tried to stifle the democratic opening."

Launching the Saudi war on Yemen last March had regionalised a Yemeni internal conflict, undercut short a Yemeni successful national dialogue sponsored by the United Nations, undermined the territorial unity of the country, which was then compromised only by the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) that was isolated in the far south eastern part of Yemen, destroyed the infrastructure of the Yemeni state, created a snowballing severe humanitarian crisis and rendered the possibility of a Yemeni - Yemeni political solution a mission made impossible by both the mutual bloodshed and the Saudi insistence on shaping by brutal force the future ruling regime in Yemen on Saudi terms.

Riyadh intervened militarily in Yemen when the Saudi - led GCC initiative for a "transition" on their terms in Yemen broke down in 2014. The Saudis planned the "transition" in Yemen to be a show case that could be replayed in Syria where they have been arming and financing a similar "regime change" for the past five years. The failure of their "show case" in Yemen doomed their plan for Syria.

Historically, Sanaa and the northern rough mountainous provinces failed all Arab and non-Arab invaders. The Ottoman Empire at its zenith could not subjugate it. It is the bedrock of Yemen's independence and self determination. There the hardcore of the Yemeni anti-Saudi invasion is entrenched and there this invasion will most likely meet its defeat.

The so - called "liberation" of Aden by Saudi and UAE military intervention could serve only as a recipe for a perpetuated civil war and regional capital of a divided Yemen. Hadi is unlikely to deliver in Aden what he failed to achieve when he was in Sana'a.

On last March 22, the former UN special envoy Jamal Benomar, addressing the UN Security Council via video conference, warned that, "the situation is on a rapid downward spiral" that is "leading the country away from political settlement and to the edge of civil war". The

status quo is “inviting a protracted conflict in the vein of an Iraq-Libya-Syria combined scenario,” he told an emergency UNSC session. Benomar resigned his UN mission acknowledging its failure. His successor is more likely to come to the same conclusion sooner than later.

The presence now of reportedly between 5 – 10 thousand ground GCC troops in Yemen is proof that the aerial onslaught had failed and that the so-called pro-government forces are merely a Yemeni make - believe address for the thinly - veiled Saudi - led external invasion.

The introduction of GCC ground troops into Yemen is more a show of the failure of the so - called Yemeni pro - legitimacy and pro - Saudi forces than a display of GCC military prowess.

Quoted by the Qatari News Agency (QNA) on September 18, the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, tacitly acknowledging his country’s failure in Yemen, said that he “personally ... suggested Israeli help as our only hope to end the status quo ... His Highness King Salman put this proposal forward for further consideration.”

Ruling out any open Israeli contribution to the US-led war on Iraqi forces in Kuwait in 1991, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the US “leading from behind” in the ongoing war on Syria is an instructive strong reminder that any Israeli role in the Saudi - led war on Yemen will most likely be ruled out as well, at least in public, because it would be definitely counterproductive.

It is high time that the UN moves to facilitate an exit strategy for Saudi Arabia from Yemen.

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Notes

(1) <http://america.aljazeera.com/>, September 16, 2015. Rami G. Khouri is a senior public policy fellow at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut and a senior fellow of the Harvard Kennedy School.

(2) **Tobias Thiel** is a PhD Candidate at the LSE’s Department of International History. His dissertation is about contentious politics, collective memory and violence in post-unification Yemen. He has spent the past three years in Yemen conducting field research.

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