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THE YEMENI CONFLICT. GENEALOGY, GAME-CHANGERS AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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The genealogy of the Yemeni conflict is complex, stratified and too often oversimplified through the use of purely-sectarian explanations. This contribute aims to decrypt internal and external actors, shedding light on turning-points and game-changer factors within the crisis, in order to isolate the most pressing regional implications of the conflict. In a framework where Yemen's unified institutions are not able to cope with such an incessant loss of sovereignty, power relations between tribes and factions are constantly reconfigured *vis-à-vis* entrenched challenges, following pragmatic rather than ideological interests.

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Genealogy. Four Levels of Conflict

Mainstream narratives are accustomed to frame the Yemeni conflict according to sectarian and regional-centered lenses. Following these short-sighted patterns of understanding, Yemen would be shaken by an inter-confessional war, participated by Middle Eastern powers. Instead, this kind of oversimplified representation only reflects a partial outcome of the conflict, but not its roots, so ignoring how much the original core of the dispute lies in a political struggle for power and resources. From 2015 onwards, regional and local actors have been exploiting and exacerbating confessional differences with the purpose to change balances of power on the ground. Instead, in the alternative framework suggested by this contribution, sectarianism is predominantly seen as a political tool to maintain and/or acquire power.

Two elements are fundamental to understand the complexity of the Yemeni conflict: the *security vacuum* generated by the 2011 uprising and the following *governance of the transition*. The crumbling of the security forces, fragmented along tribal loyalties, allowed Ansarullah, the Huthis' political movement and militia, to easily extend its control beyond the traditional northern fiefdoms, reaching central-southern territories. Security forces, massively engaged in strategic, militarized cities such as Sana'a and Taiz, were simply absent in peripheral areas. Claiming for autonomy and/or secession from central government, the Southern Movement (al-Hiraak al-Janubi) along with popular committees, began to directly rule large swaths of territories. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) did the same, especially among the Southern governorates of Abyan, Shabwa and Hadramawt, exploiting tribal allegiances with indigenous clans against Sana'a. In November 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council's Initiative, endorsed by the United Nations, the United States and the European Union, brokered the Yemeni transfer of power through a power sharing arrangement. In this institutional framework, president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his officials gained political immunity in exchange for their resignations, thus allowing the formation of an *interim* government of national unity, which equally represented the General People's Congress (GPC, Saleh's political umbrella) and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP, a coalition of 'opposition parties' headed by Islah, the Islamist party). The GCC initiative engendered two contradictory consequences. Between 2011 and 2014, the Saudi-led diplomatic plan prevented Yemen from escalating into a full-scale civil war, enabling political bargaining within the National Dialogue conference (March 2013 – January 2014), organized with a view to reconcile the social fabric and amend the constitution. However, the GCC initiative prioritized the protection of the neo-patrimonial, Sana'a-based system of power constructed over decades, in order to maintain Saudi transnational

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leverage in Yemeni public life. This assured regime continuity notwithstanding Saleh's formal departure from governmental affairs. The resilience of this powerful *nizam*, (system, regime), externally supported by the Arab Gulf neighbors, has paved the way for the resurgence of violence, demonstrating that a few improvements are not sufficient to change the whole system and its dysfunctional features, such as corruption, inefficiency and nepotism. In the current Yemeni conflict, at least four levels of dispute can be identified: centre vs periphery, old élite vs new élite, Sunni vs Shia, Saudi Arabia vs Iran. Sometimes, these rifts are also overlapped and entrenched, adding even more complexity to a scenario where realignments among tribal-political actors are fluid and difficult to predict.¹ The struggle for economic resources and political autonomy between "centre" and "periphery" is a permanent, endemic feature of Yemeni politics. In 2011, Saleh's government crisis and the so-called "Yemeni Spring" only accelerated and boosted ancient centrifugal spirits, rooted in socio-economic inequalities worsened by the reunification process. About 80% of national, proved oil resources are located in the south (predominantly in Hadramawt) and the remaining 20% in the central Mareb region. However, Sana'a has always been the pivot of tribal-military power, the source of rent distribution through patronage channels: political élite has proceeded from the capital and its outskirts, such as the Amran province. The Yemeni conflict also concerns factional politics between parties and inside political movements. The removal of many high rank GPC's militaries and politicians gave the impression that an old élite (GCP) was being replaced by a new one (Islah): but this was not the case. Although some well-known elements were symbolically ousted from public roles, the Hadi-Islah led institutions enacted the same regime they were supposedly called to dismantle from within. The Islah party cannot be considered as a real political alternative to the GPC, even when it campaigns as a formal opponent (from 2006 onwards): it has always taken part to the established system of "pluralized authoritarianism" based on the consociational model, which contributed to place Yemen in a state of "permanent crisis", provoking the 2011 popular uprisings.² During Saleh's rule, two contentious dynamics coexisted in Islah: the allegiance to the government on one side, supported by the tribal (al-Ahmar family) and the Salafi (headed by shaykh 'Abd al-Majid al-Zindani) streams, and the opposition wing on the other, which gathered modernists and pro-Muslim Brotherhood intellectuals with a more critical

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¹ Eleonora Ardemagni, *Yemen's Shifting Alliances: The Triumph of Pragmatism*, LSE Middle East Centre Blog, February 1, 2016.

² For "pluralized authoritarianism" see Marsha Pripstein Posusney-Michele Penner Angrist (eds), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 2005; Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and The Politics of Permanent Crisis*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies-Adelphi series, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011.

view towards the executive.³ Beyond Islah’s inner contradictions, the transitional period has generated another split between political élites, reconfiguring power relations into three factions: interim president Hadi and GPC soft-liners, Islah’s Ahmars with General Ali Mohsin, Saleh and his loyalists, the GPC hard-liners.⁴ The proxy confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the Yemeni field is another feature of this conflict. Saudi Arabia, who shares a permeable border with Yemen, is used to look at the country as the troubled courtyard of the Wahhabi kingdom, a matter of national security and domestic politics rather than a foreign policy affair. Exploiting transnational linkages, Riyadh has always financed Yemeni tribes with a view to assure its leverage on government’s decisions; on the other hand, Saleh’s regime was skillful to invest foreign policy material and immaterial resources -as the Saudi ones- to revive the Yemeni system of power, based on expensive clientelism. The Iranian role in Yemen has not to be overstated. Ansarullah has received economic and military aid from Teheran in the framework of the “Saudi-Iranian Middle Eastern Cold War”, but Iranian support to the Huthi insurgency has been mainly political, sometimes exhibited with propaganda’s intent to open a new field of skirmish with the Saudis.⁵ Differently from Hezbollah, which primarily finds its *raison d’être* in the *muqawama* (resistance) against Israel, Ansarullah pursues a local agenda, vindicating resources for upper territories as a reaction to the top-down process of “Sunnisation”. In fact, the convergence of religious identities has been promoted by the government since decades, with the Saudis’ decisive help, in order to enhance the republican institutions *vis-à-vis* Imamate’s reminiscences. From a religious perspective, Zaydi Shia (who recognize five imam) do not share the same set of beliefs with Twelver Shia, even though cultural exchanges have been gradually increasing, as in the case of the *Ashoura* celebrations.⁶ At the beginning, the Saudi-Iranian competition was a peripheral variable in the Yemeni struggle. However, from late 2014 onwards, the ‘foreign factor’ has acquired a prominent character, paving the way for military escalation. The conflict has been reframed according to externally-driven narratives, serving foreign interests, picturing a Sunni-led struggle against the “Safavid plot” in the peninsula. In the

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³ Anahi Alviso-Marino, *Contentious dynamics for sociopolitical change? The case of the Islah Party in the Republic of Yemen*, Arabian Humanities-Chroniques yéménites, n°16, 2010, pp.57-90.

⁴ Mareike Transfeld, *Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen’s transformation*, Mediterranean Politics, October 2015.

⁵ Refer to F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Brookings Doha Center, Analysis paper, 2014.

⁶ Laurent Bonnefoy, *Les identités religieuses contemporaines au Yémen : convergence, résistance et instrumentalisations*, Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée, n° 121-122, April 2008, pp.201-215 ; Rébellion et religion au Yémen, Orient XXI, November 2013.

Yemeni scenario, sectarianism is a “latent factor that can become politically activated by elites or circumstances”, so highlighting its “political malleability”.⁷ Notwithstanding the inner plurality, Yemeni society didn’t experience sectarian animosities so far. Zaydi Shia (about 30% of the overall population) and the Sunni community, referring to the Shafi *madhab* of the Islamic jurisprudence, are accustomed to coexist in many regions, although Shiites live mainly in the upper and Sunnis in the lower parts of the country. For instance, some tribal confederations are mixed, crossed marriages were not unusual and believers used to pray in the same mosques, since Zaydism is culturally closer to Sunni customs than other Shia branches.⁸ The biggest political parties are cross-sectarian too: Islah encompasses Zaydi tribal leaders from northern Yemen, since parties are firstly tools of cooptation and benefits providers.⁹

Turning Points

In Yemen’s transition process, turning points are connected to complex attempts of reform: the security sector reform (SSR) and the federal one. These issues have been becoming more and more critical in most of the Middle Eastern states. Federalism is an endemic topic for Yemen’s internal debate: the country lacks of a national, unified culture. In 1990, the Yemeni unification was primarily a top-down, élite-driven process tied to international (the end of the bipolar system) and economic (insolvency) reasons. Today, regional and sub-regional belongings matter more than the prior north-south divide, since regional competition for resources has raised due to the unification: such a dynamic has been vital for the construction and then the consolidation of group identities on a territorial basis¹⁰. In the same way, SSR was expected to meet the challenge of military restructuring in the post-unification period, as well as to support Saleh’s security alliance with the United States since 2001 (in the framework of the *war on terror*) and the following post-2011 transition. However, SSR has different, sometimes conflicting meanings, according to the actors’ purposes. Consequently SSR means, at the same time, democratization and social, regional inclusion in the eyes of Western partners and/or donors (as Washington is), while the Yemeni regime uses to look at it as a device to enhance regime-security, sidelining regime’s opponents and promoting loyal officers.

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⁷ Jeff Colgan, *How Sectarianism Shapes Yemen’s War*, The Washington Post, The Monkey Cage Blog, April 13, 2015.

⁸ As written and reported in the past, among the others, by travelers as Freya Stark and Ettore Rossi.

⁹ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, p.139.

¹⁰ Stephen W. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Turning Point I: Security Sector Reform and Saleh's political revenge

Since 2012, the interim president Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi, former vice president during Saleh's presidency, has tried to implement the security content of the GCC initiative: the document called for military restructuring, but without providing concrete details. Such presidential efforts reached the apex in December 2012, when Hadi decided by decree to disband both the Republican Guard, led by Saleh's son and successor *in pectore*, Ahmed Ali, and the First Armored Division of the army, the powerful *firqa* guided by general Ali-Mohsin al-Ahmar, a former Saleh's key-ally from the same Sanhan clan (then appointed by Hadi as military adviser, under Islah's pressures). Yahya Saleh, Central Security forces' chief of staff during his uncle's presidency, was also removed. However, élite corps have always been the best paid, equipped and trained of the Yemeni security sector: for instance, Central Security forces (later renamed Special Security forces) encompassed the counterterrorism unit materially supported by Washington to fight AQAP. Following a spoil-system logic, president Hadi sidelined officers tied, for party affiliation or tribal belonging, to the previous cabinet, appointing and/or promoting officers proceeding from southern, often pro-Hadi areas, such as Abyan (his native region) and Shabwa, in order to secure its weak presidency vis-à-vis Saleh's circle. From this moment onwards, Saleh's supporters (who had performed in the interim institutions) started to undermine the political transition to regain power. While upper ranks of the army were submitted to partial de-Salehification, lower ranks, i.e. the military grassroots, were still composed by loyalists of the former president, thus multiplying cases of defections and mutinies. The Yemeni army has always been a field of tribal and party politics: after the 1990 reunification and the civil war in 1994, it was built up following a northern patronage-based recruitment, in this way prioritizing loyalty over professionalization. This dynamic also marginalized the southerners, as a coup-proofing strategy. Nowadays, the army is still fragmented along competing and sometimes overlapped clanic lines, referring to rival *shuyyukh*; for this reason, the legitimate monopoly on the use of force, untrusted to a single chain of command, remains a mirage, as much as a real civilian, parliamentary oversight on the military system. Hadi didn't clearly define security tasks between the Interior (controlled by Islah) and the Defense (still influenced by the GPC) ministries, with the purpose to centralize his presidential power, deepening the GPC-Islah intra-élite rivalry.¹¹

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¹¹ Refer to International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflicts?*, Middle East Report, n°139, April 4, 2013; Marwan Noman-David S.Sorenson, *Reforming the Yemen Security Sector*, Center on Democracy, Development and The Rule of

Turning Point II: The Federal Reform and Huthis' Military Showdown

Ansarullah was dissatisfied with decisions taken by the interim institutions too. If the attempted security sector reform touched GPC's consolidated interests and pockets of power, the Huthi movement since the very beginning hampered another reform: the federal one. The federal reform draft envisages six new regions, four in the north of the country and two in the south. Predominantly Huthi lands (the current governorates of Saada, Amran, Sana'a, Dhamar) should be clustered in the brand new Azal region: the latter would become the most populated Yemeni region (at least 6,962,000 millions of people), with no access to the sea and poor in oil resources. Moreover, southern regions should have about 40% of the seats in the new House of Representatives, incrementing their deputies according to "the land and population formula".¹² Nevertheless, the federal reform draft was rejected not only by Ansarullah, but also by southern groups, who directly ask for political autonomy from Sana'a, refusing the proposed two-regions solution (not only Hadhramis, but Mahris and Socotrans too). On January 2015, Ansarullah carried out a *coup d'état* against transitional institutions to stop this reform. Hadi's head of cabinet and responsible for federalism Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak was detained, the Presidential palace surrounded and Hadi, along with Prime Minister Khaled Bahah, was placed under house arrest. Afterwards, heads of institutions managed to reach Aden, where provisional government and presidency were transferred. Therefore, the tactical alliance between Saleh and the Huthis has been made possible by a convergence of interests oriented to (re)gain power against Hadi and Islah. In Spring 2014, Huthis' territorial gains in Amran province (the al-Ahmars fiefdom, few kilometers from the capital) were possible since the 310th Brigade of the regular army (loyal to Saleh) did not engage in defensive combats alongside local Sunni tribes. In September 2014, when Ansarullah's militias entered in Sana'a riding popular protests after the lift of fuel subsidies by the government, security forces -mainly tied to the GPC- either supported or not reacted against northern Shia fighters. This alliance of mutual convenience is not originally driven by ideological and sectarian reasons. Although Ali Abdullah Saleh is a Zaydi Shia too and was able to instrumentally use religion for political purposes, he never connoted his leadership with religious claims, in the footsteps of his military, Nasserian-style political origins. Not to forget that in 2004-2010,

Law-Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, CDDRL Working Papers, no. 137, June 2013; Yezid Sayigh, *Crumbling States. Security Sector Reform in Libya and Yemen*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace-Middle East Center, Carnegie Papers, June 2015.

¹² Sheila Carapico, *Two Resolutions, a Draft Constitution and Late Developments*, Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), April 17, 2015.

the GPC government fought six battles against Ansarullah's rebels in the northern Saada province, provoking remarkable popular resentment in these peripheral areas while, on the contrary, in 2013 Saleh supported Huthis against Salafis during the siege at Dar al-Hadith *madrassa* in Dammaj (Saada province).

Game-changers: External Interventions and Interferences

Under president Hadi's request, Saudi Arabia began airstrikes against Shia militias in March 2015, to restore transitional institutions and prevent Houthis from capturing Aden. Riyadh runs a nine-countries coalition, with GCC's members at the forefront (only Oman has not taken part to the military initiative), plus Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan and with the US intelligence cooperation. Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen is a game-changer factor. In fact, such a move has openly regionalized a conflict which has deep indigenous roots, stigmatizing "the Iranian threat" and therefore fueling sectarian rhetoric. This has provided the jihadi radicalization with a new space for manoeuvre, also fostering "IS"-claimed attacks in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Instead, from a military point of view, Saudi-led engagement cannot be considered a game-changer for balances of power. Riyadh's airstrikes proved to be not only inaccurate but also ineffective, since they were not supported by coordinated efforts on the ground from patchy Yemeni forces. Therefore, starting from early-summer, the regional coalition decided to launch a ground offensive in the south, aimed to organize the regular army and tribal militias, engaging in direct confrontations *vis-à-vis* insurgents with at least 5000 militaries. For the first time in their history, GCC countries have sent soldiers out of GCC boundaries (excluded peace support operations)¹³: an event that marks a shift from Saudi traditional foreign policy, emphasizing the unilateral, assertive regional policy pursued by the newly appointed King Salman and his son, the deputy crown-prince and defense minister Mohammed bin Salman. The outcome of the Saudi-Iranian indirect struggle within the Yemeni conflict is still unpredictable, since nobody seems to definitely prevail on the battlefield. For Saudi Arabia and in particular for the United Arab Emirates (the UAE's Presidential Guard, headed by a former Australian officer, has been leading the ground offensive given some previous counterinsurgency experiences), this unusual military commitment could reveal frustrating in the medium-long period. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia has mobilized about 2100 Senegalese troops to free up the Saudi forces, while at least 6000

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¹³ Benjamin Barthe, *Au Yémen, les pays du Golfe combattent au sol*, Le Monde, September 17, 2015, p. 3.

Sudanese soldiers have been deployed in southern territories. As the UAE-led ground coalition shifted to stabilization operations in Aden, Abu Dhabi dispatched 450 Latin American contractors, predominantly Colombians, prepared for guerrilla warfare.¹⁴ For the Gulf monarchies, the Yemeni conflict is perilous because it is a real hybrid one, with wane distinction between soldiers/civilians and involved hybrid actors: the regular army fights alongside tribal militias and coalition's troops, while Ansarullah's insurgents are backed by former army's segments still loyal to Saleh (with missile expertise). The rising phenomenon of popular committees sheds light on the incessant erosion of Yemeni sovereignty. Armed militias, most of which with a tribal background, are backing both the pro-Hadi front and the Huthi one, replacing regular security forces and even judicial institutions in peripheral territories as much as in the big cities. Although they were employed by the government to tackle AQAP's penetration, these committees have been further undermining the institutions' authority, as they lack in military professionalization and since they cannot be eventually persecuted for committed crimes.¹⁵

Regional implications

Intra-jihadi competition: anarchy and external penetration have been multiplying operational space for jihadism. Huthis' centre-southern territorial gains, in predominantly Sunni areas, have also contributed to enhance this trend. AQAP expands its control on key southern cities as Mukalla, the capital of Hadramawt governorate, where it patrols the city under the name of "Sons of Hadramawt" and in alliance with the local Hadrami Tribal Confederation (HTC), that now administers Mukalla.¹⁶ AQAP released prisoners from the local jail, seized the Dhaba oil terminal, banned the cultivation and consumption of qat, the narcotic leaf which constitutes not only a Yemeni social tradition (see the *qat chews* phenomenon, daily venues for political discussion at a tribal level), but also a source of economic survival for local clans. Some districts of Aden, next to the port, were occupied by AQAP-tied cells, such as the affiliated Ansar al-Sharia, after Shia militias' retreat, underlying how much the regular army is unable to exert long-lasting control on the ground. While AQAP remains the most rooted Jihadi presence in Yemen, "Wilayat

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While AQAP remains the most rooted Jihadi presence in Yemen, "Wilayat al-Yemen", the local branch of the so-called Islamic State, has been rising both in terms of attacks and recruitment, attempting to attract AQAP's disaffected members mostly targeting the Shia community, but also striking politicians, security forces and judges and coalition's troops

¹⁴ Emily B.Hager-Mark Mazzetti, *Emirates Secretly Sends Colombian Mercenaries to Fight in Yemen*, The New York Times, November 25, 2015.

¹⁵ Refer to Farea Al-Muslimi, *The Popular Committee Phenomenon in Yemen: Fueling War and Conflict*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Syria in Crisis, April 1, 2015; Frederic Wehrey-Ariel I.Ahram, *Taming the Militias: Building National Guards in Fractured Arab States*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie paper, May 7, 2015.

¹⁶ Michael Horton, *The Hadramawt: AQAP and the Battle for Yemen's Wealthiest Governorate*, Terrorism Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation, vol. 13, issue 14, July 10, 2015.

al-Yemen”, the local branch of the so-called Islamic State, has been rising both in terms of attacks and recruitment, attempting to attract AQAP’s disaffected members mostly targeting the Shia community, but also striking politicians, security forces and judges. “Wilayat al-Yemen” publically appeared in November 2014: its leadership and operative structure are still to be assessed, since at least seven sub-provinces claimed responsibility for terrorist attacks so far, most of them against mosques and funerals involving Zaydi Shia, as occurred in Sana’a at Badr and Hashoush’s mosques in March 2015 (provoking more than 140 victims).

U.S. counterterrorism strategy: notwithstanding the discontinuous physical presence of recognized governmental forces in the country, the United States have been continuing the drone campaign against AQAP, launching at least 23 strikes in 2015, according to the Long War Journal. However, the U.S. counterterrorism strategy cannot be considered successful: drones have killed many top-jihadi leaders (then rapidly replaced), but the high number of civilian casualties at the same time has boosted anti-Americanism and nourished the AQAP’s recruitment campaign itself. Washington’s air efforts are even less effective than before without coordinated local military support. Initially, the Saudi-led coalition didn’t target the areas under AQAP’s control (as the Hadramawt), since jihadi militias also contributed to oust the Shia ones from many southern lands. However, Saudi Arabia and UAE have started since early 2016 targeting AQAP and “IS” bases in Mukalla and Aden: the threat perception level with respect to jihadi cells has raised. During Barack Obama’s administration, drone strikes have multiplied with respect to the presidency of George W. Bush, emphasizing how much U.S. politics towards Yemen is still driven by the ineffective securitization narrative.

The Aden regional (in)security complex: the Yemeni multilayered war has worsened the already harsh humanitarian conditions of the country, the poorest of the MENA region. According to the UNHCR, about 80% of the Yemeni population needs humanitarian assistance, about 6300 persons have died, while the number of internally displaced persons (IDP) has reached 2,5 million. Nevertheless, about 70.000 Somalis and Ethiopians migrants have reached Yemeni coasts since January 2015, despite the coup and the external military intervention.¹⁷ Unmanaged migration, jihadism, arms smuggling and piracy constitute the negative face of interdependence between the south-Arabian peninsula and the Horn of Africa. AQAP and al-Shebaab exploit losses of sovereignty to increase their connections, with an eye to Sinai peninsula’s cells and the security

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¹⁷ UNHCR, *Refugees continue to reach Yemen by sea despite conflict*, News Stories, October 27, 2015, (www.unhcr.org).

vacuum along the Saheli belt. Even though some international maritime missions, as EUNAVFOR-Atalanta and Nato-Ocean Shield, have reduced the impact of piracy on trade routes in Somalian waters, the Yemeni entropy is going to further destabilize the already unstable balances in such a fragile area as the Aden regional security complex is. The Yemeni crisis means also energy insecurity, although international oil trade has not been affected by the conflict so far: the Taiz province, which encompasses the *choke-point*, is one of the most critical battlefield between regular army and Shia militias. According to the Energy Information Administration, 3,8 million barrels of oil pass every day through the Bab-el-Mandeb straight connecting the Gulf of Aden with the Red Sea. It is not by chance that Egypt's engagement in the Saudi-led coalition was firstly related to maritime security, with the purpose to protect Egyptian national interests. Owing to rising oil linkages with the Gulf, China is looking with growing concern at the Yemeni situation too: the decision to open the first permanent military base abroad in Gibuti underlines the will to protect strategic interests in this complex scenario.¹⁸

European diplomacy: the European Union (EU) has mobilized *vis-à-vis* the Yemeni crisis primarily to provide humanitarian assistance for local population and refugees arrived to Djibouti and Somalia, focusing on basic needs, sanitation and emergency household.¹⁹ Yemen depends entirely on food importation. However, the air and naval blockade imposed by the Saudi-led coalition since the beginning of the airstrikes undermines these efforts, often impeding the delivery of humanitarian aid to the population, as occurred in Taiz. In order to really impact on Yemen's humanitarian conditions, the EU should upgrade its diplomatic engagement in the political solution of the Yemeni conflict, fostering with renewed energies the United Nations' efforts (and the informal Omani ones) in order to reach firstly a ceasefire and then a minimum political agreement, starting from UNSC resolution n°2216 (withdrawal of Shia militias from occupied territories, included Sana'a, plus relinquish of arms seized from regular forces). This political initiative is even more needed now since the United States have left so much room for manoeuvre to Riyadh with regard to the Yemeni file. From a geopolitical perspective, Yemen has already become the third security vacuum land in the MENA region, together with Libya and the Syrian-Iraqi scenario: even Brussels can no more turn the eyes

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¹⁸ Eleonora Ardemagni, *La Cina e Aden: la difesa dell'interesse nazionale nei mari lontani*, in "La via della seta tra Corno d'Africa e Medio Oriente", Orizzonte Cina, Torino World Affairs Institute (T.wai)-Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), VI, n°6, November-December 2015, (ISSN 2280-8035).

¹⁹ European Commission, *EU gives euro 12 million in new humanitarian aid for the crisis in Yemen and its impact in the Horn of Africa*, Press release, August 5, 2015, (www.europa.eu).

from it, for many strategic reasons such as energy security, jihadi networks, illegal trafficking and piracy.

Widen Saudi Arabia-Iran divide: the Yemeni indirect battlefield has further broaden the geopolitical divide between Saudi Arabia and Iran, competing for supremacy in the whole Middle Eastern region and especially in the Levant. The Saudi Kingdom has always looked at Yemen as a matter of national security and domestic politics: Riyadh did not hesitate to use the military tool to defend its “Yemeni courtyard” against the Iranian perceived interference, in this way assuming a new assertive military posture in the neighborhood. Deepening its leverage in Yemen through Ansarullah, Iran -that already controls Hormuz- would have the possibility to indirectly influence the Bab-el-Mandeb straight too, another fundamental junction for international oil trade. Teheran could also enhance its projection in Eastern African countries, competing not only with the GCC but with Turkey too. However, the Sudanese regime has recently shifted from the Iranian to the Saudi camp, driven by budget security reasons: Riyadh has rewarded Khartoum’s military engagement in Yemen with 5 billion dollars in military aid, highlighting how much the strategic allocation of revenue characterizes Saudi regional politics.²⁰

Conclusions and Perspectives

The complexity of the Yemeni conflict must be understood and addressed entirely in order to elaborate a political solution with some chances of exit. Whatever compromise the parts will decide to agree upon, it will have to respect military balances of power achieved on the ground so far, with the purpose to really engage all Yemeni actors in a long-lasting ceasefire, aimed to secure the viability of the political project. At the moment, these military balances seem partially to reproduce the north-south divide prior to the 1990 unification. However, both the northern field and the southern one are internally fragmented, since remarkable differences exist and are primarily related to tribal identities and regional interests. Moreover, in every faction lacks a shared vision even on the features of an hypothetical “North Yemen” or a “South Yemen”: for this reason, Yemen’s division cannot be considered as a sustainable solution and would be a heavy political failure, also considering that natural resources are predominantly located in the south while political-military elite traditionally proceed from the north. The alliance between Ansarullah and Saleh’s loyalists is a tactical one, driven by political resentment and the desire to (re)gain power. In the south, president Hadi’s groups, secessionists and

The Saudi Kingdom has always looked at Yemen as a matter of national security and domestic politics: Riyadh did not hesitate to use the military tool to defend its “Yemeni courtyard” against the Iranian perceived interference, in this way assuming a new assertive military posture in the neighborhood

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²⁰ Eleonora Ardemagni, *The Yemeni Factor in the Saudi Arabia-Sudan Realignment*, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), The Bridge Blog, April 12, 2016.

jihadi fighters are only committed to the retreat of the Shia militias from southern lands. Within both factions, alliances are 'against someone' and not 'for something', thus narrowing spaces for future political bargaining: in the Yemeni case, alignments are firstly shaped by pragmatic interests rather than ideological similarities. In such a scenario, Saudi and Iranian external penetrations have introduced the variable of sectarian animosity in local struggles, making even more difficult to reach a viable agreement to solve the Yemeni crisis. Moreover, Yemeni institutions are chronically dependent on external rent and this factor fosters foreign interferences. However, after the GCC-led military intervention, it is up to regional patrons to encourage the Yemeni factions to negotiate. This is the paradox of a conflict which was generated by deep, ancient domestic grievances: informal, direct tribal mediation between Ansarullah and Saudi Arabia has started to de-escalate tension on the border. The appointment of General Ali-Mohsin Al-Ahmar as deputy commander of Yemeni armed forces and then vice-president should enhance tribal support to recognized institutions. However, his promotion, as well as the appointment of Ahmed bin Dagher as the new prime minister, are clear signs of the resilience of the northern, Saleh-based system of power. At present, what remains of Yemen's sovereignty lies in the resilience of competing tribal structures who directly rule on the territory, choosing allies at their convenience. In order to preserve the idea of a Yemeni state, tribal micro-sovereignties should change their attitude with respect to Sana'a's authority, passing from 'coercion' to 'consensus' *vis-à-vis* central institutions: a really participated decision-making process, combined with an inclusive army might be the only, though challenging, way to build a less