

THE STRATEGIC STRAIT OF BAB EL MANDEB AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE YEMEN WAR

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Abstract: The Yemen War that began in March, 2015 is now completing its fourth year. The interests and intentions of the involved parties are of great importance in any war, as they decide the course of events and, ultimately dictate the terms of conclusion as well. This paper examines the relevance of the Yemen War in relation to the country's proximity to the strait of Bab el Mandeb, the threat of undue Iranian influence in the strait and how the strait has shaped the very course of the War so far.

Index Terms: Yemen War, Bab el Mandeb, Houthi, Saudi-led coalition

I. INTRODUCTION

The Houthis of Yemen are Zaydi Shiites, or Zaydiyyah, a minority within the community of Shiite Muslims. They were followers of Zayd Bin Ali (the great-grandson of Prophet Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law Ali) who settled in north Yemen's mountains in the ninth century. For the next one century or so, the Zaydis fought various powers including the Ottomans and the Wahhabis to maintain control of their territory.

In 1918, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Zaydis established the Mutawakkilite Kingdom in the north, an authority complete with international recognition, as the legitimate government of North Yemen. The Kingdom existed until the year 1962 when a wave of Arab nationalism overthrew the King and established an Arab nationalist government with Sana'a as its capital. Egypt, then under the nationalistic leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, backed the republican coup by sending their troops to North Yemen. The Zaydi Royalists fled to the mountains along the Saudi border to fight a war with the objective of regaining their territory. Saudi Arabia, though initially a supporter of the Royalists in fighting Egypt's involvement, lost interest in the war once the regional rivalry with Egypt was resolved following their 1967 war against Israel.

In 1978, a Zaydi republican general Ali Abdullah Saleh seized power following a number of coups. Remaining in power for the next thirty three years, Saleh united North and South Yemen in 1990, and notably survived a southern civil war that was supported by Saudi Arabia. Being accused of administrative mismanagement and widespread corruption throughout his years of rule, a Zaydi resistance emerged against the President in the 1990s. Led by a charismatic leader by the name of Hussein Al Houthi, the Zaydi faction came to be called the "Houthis". They branded Saleh a dictator who sought to misuse Yemen's scarce wealth, and also criticised Saudi Arabia and the United States of America for supporting his rule.

With Saudi Arabian assistance Saleh launched several military campaigns to suppress the Houthis, managing to kill Hussein Al Houthi in 2004. The power struggle continued well into the 2000s, catching a monumental break with the Arab Spring of 2011. In November 2011, Saleh signed the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative in Riyadh, initiating the transition of power to Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, a Sunni from the South. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman were key to this initiative. Presidential elections took place on 21 February, 2012 and Hadi was inaugurated as President on 25 February.

The Houthis who backed Saleh's resignation were now dissatisfied with the new Yemeni constitution's plan to recast Yemen as a six region federal state. In one of the most hypocritical reversals of alliances in international politics, the Houthis began to collude with Saleh against President Hadi. Attempting to take over power, the Houthis gradually moved towards the capital Sana'a. It finally fell to them in January 2015, the same month King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud acceded to the Saudi throne. Three years after he took up the presidency of Yemen, Hadi resigned on 22 January along with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet.

In Saudi Arabia, new King Salman named his son Mohammed Bin Salman Al Saud (who would later become the Crown Prince) as Minister of Defence, whose first major international commitment was to fight the Houthis in neighbouring Yemen. The Saudi regime was concerned about the fact that in the absence of an intervention, a Houthi controlled Yemen would end up an Iranian proxy, thereby becoming a destabilising agent capable of threatening the entire Arabian Peninsula.

Saudi Arabia led a coalition force with several other members including the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to launch Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015, less than two months after Mohammed Bin Salman (popularly known as MBS) took charge. Promising a quick victory to all states that were part of the military coalition, the Operation took the Houthis by surprise and gained several initial victories. However, the momentum was soon lost and with its fourth year mark arriving in March, 2019, the Yemen War has been anything but a quick victory for the Saudi-led coalition.

II. SOURCES OF DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study primarily used secondary sources of data ranging from books to journals. Books such as *A History of Modern Yemen*, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen* and *Yemen in Crisis* were referred to delve into the historical background of Yemen and the War. Reports by newspapers, prestigious institutes as well as the United Nations were referred to for the current matters relating to the study.

III. THE IRANIAN INVOLVEMENT IN YEMEN

Between 2004 and 2011, Saleh maintained that Iran supported the Houthis – claims he could provide little evidence for, and which even Washington disregarded. However, evidence of strong Iranian support to the Houthis began to surface post 2011.

Yemeni authorities seized an Iranian fishing vessel in 2011, and found it to be carrying 900 Iranian-made anti-tank and anti-helicopter rockets. In January 2013, the US Navy in assistance with the Yemeni Navy seized an Iranian dhow - Jihan I carrying around forty tons of military supplies meant for the Houthis. Around the same time, the United States also reported that the Houthis were receiving training from Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

After the Houthis took over Sana'a in 2015, their leaders travelled to Tehran and signed agreements to open direct civilian air traffic between the two capitals. Iran reciprocated by offering oil to Yemen at cheap prices. A larger consensus on strengthening Iran-Yemen cooperation was arrived at. Since 2015, Houthi provocations threatening Saudi Arabia's security have increased in intensity and frequency - a reaction believed to be caused by the increased Iranian support. A UN panel of experts found in 2018 that the Houthis are using ballistic missiles and drones that "show characteristics similar to Iranian-made weapons".

An Iranian parliamentarian Alireza Zakani had gone on record to say that Sana'a had in fact become the fourth Arab capital (after Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus) to fall under Iran's "sway". Iranian President Hassan Rouhani described the Houthi takeover of Sana's as a brilliant and resounding victory. In February 2015, Iran's deputy Foreign Minister publicly pledged support to the Houthis. The following month, the Houthis declared that Iran had promised them an economic support package that included assistance in expanding Yemeni ports, building power plants and providing a year's worth of oil supplies.

The accumulation of all these pieces of evidence, along with the commendable reporting of the United Nations panel of experts, point to the Iran-Houthi ties that are framing the Yemen war.

IV. THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE BAB AL MANDEB STRAIT

An angle that has been least explored while scrutinising the Yemen war has been the one relating to the Strait of Bab al Mandeb. Measuring not more than 40 kilometres at its widest point, the strait is a strategic waterway located between the countries of Yemen, Djibouti and Eritrea, linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea.

Thanks to this waterway, ships need not go around the Cape of Good Hope to connect Europe and Asia, thereby shortening the continent-to-continent access route by seven to ten days. This is a first-class sea corridor, as an estimated 5 million barrels of crude oil pass through it every day. Any hostile presence along the Bab el Mandeb strait poses a threat to this heavy global oil traffic, affecting the oil producing Arab states and their customer states in North America, Europe and Asia. The significance of the strait goes beyond energy concerns too – a stable Bab el Mandeb is of paramount importance in order to ensure the safe passage of every cargo vessel and combat ship that passes through the Suez Canal. A dysfunctional Bab el Mandeb would cost the entire world dearly in terms of energy and security.

V. IRAN INFLUENCE ON HOUTHIS IS DETRIMENTAL FOR COALITION INTERESTS IN BAB EL MANDEB

Iran's presence in the Bab el Mandeb region has been definitely strengthened by its ties with the Houthis in Yemen. Although the Houthis are unlikely to act entirely subordinate to Iran's wishes, the Islamic Republic certainly has a strong influence over what happens in Bab el Mandeb. Iran could easily wreak havoc in the strait through its Houthi proxies, without even entering a full-fledged armed confrontation with Saudi Arabia or the United States. Also, if a full blown crisis were to erupt in these Straits, it could trigger an extremely devastating power struggle in the much more strategically important Strait of Hormuz along the Persian Gulf that is surrounded by Iran and the Arabian Peninsula. Though Iran has never acted upon it, it has issued a number of threats to close the Strait of Hormuz when faced with undesirable circumstances in the international arena. The latest of such a threat came in July, 2018 when American sanctions threatened Iran's oil exports.

In the same month, Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Quds Force (the external branch of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps tasked with exporting Iranian regional influence) directly threatened the United States. This was a reply to President Donald Trump's tweet that Iran would have to face historic consequences. Trump's tweet was in response to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's warning that a war with Iran would be "the mother of all wars". The General made an implicit reference to the Iranian influence on Bab el Mandeb when he said, "The Red Sea which was secure is no longer secure for the presence of American (military) ... The Quds force and I are your match. We don't go to sleep at night before thinking about you." The Major's threat came the same week two Saudi oil carriers were attacked by Houthi missiles in the Bab el Mandeb. Earlier in 2016, the Houthis had also carried out an audacious attack on the American destroyer USS Mason which came under fire (originating from Houthi-controlled territory) in the north of Bab el Mandeb.

VI. THE BAB EL MANDEB FACTOR IN THE COURSE OF WAR

Given the sheer strategic value of the Bab el Mandeb strait and its fall to the Houthi control (and the undeniable influence Iran has had on the Houthis), it is no small wonder that one of the foremost priorities of Saudi Arabia's Yemen military campaign has always been the restabilization of Bab el Mandeb. The analysis of how the Saudi-led coalition has gone about its offensive operations in Yemen shows that the war in the country has revolved around this very objective.

In early October 2015, the coalition launched an attempt to capture the area that stretches from Yemen's Aden to Bab el Mandeb. The Houthi forces holding the strait moved out by the second week of October. On 6 January, 2017, Operation "Golden Spear" was begun, with the intention of liberating the Bab el Mandeb Strait and the entire West Coast of Yemen that faces the Red Sea. This was followed by the Liberation of Mokha. Mokha was a sea port that had long been under the coalition's radar as it was being used by the rebel forces to smuggle in arms and other supplies from Iran. The coalition aided the Yemeni government forces to storm the town of Mokha and take control of its sea port on 23 January, 2017. The battle for Midi is also notable, as it has been one of the longest lasting campaigns since the war began. The coalition army gained complete control of the port city on 11 April, 2018.

This then allowed the coalition to focus on taking back the port city of Hodeidah, the second largest port in Yemen after Aden port. Operation "Golden Victory" initiated on 11 May, 2018 aimed at seizing control of two districts in

Hodeidah and eventually launching a larger offensive on the city. The operation was halted for a brief while in light of the UN peace efforts. However, the Yemeni forces declared on 12 June that the negotiations had failed, and that the Saudi-led assault on the port city would resume. In December, 2018, the UN peace talks bore fruit when the Houthis agreed to hand over the port of Hodeidah to the Yemeni government forces.

Many stakeholders including the United Nations viewed this as an initiation of a final solution to the Yemen War, but more such tangible steps for conflict resolution are yet to materialise. Regardless of how or when the Yemen War would come to an end, it is clear that the war so far has unfolded around the principal objective of securing the strait of Bab el Mandeb.

VII. CONCLUSION

With the number of fatalities as well as potential fatalities (combat-related and otherwise) running into millions, the Yemeni crisis is one of the worst the world has ever come across. However, throughout its duration, the Yemen War has been overshadowed by more unpopular happenings in other parts of the Arab world like Syria. Already being dubbed as the “forgotten war”, the Yemeni issue has been side-lined largely due to the fact that Yemen is the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula. But its humble economic standing does not negate the strategic importance the country and its surrounding waterways holds.

As is evident from the manner in which the Saudi-led coalition forces have conducted themselves, the Yemeni War has indeed revolved around the strait of Bab el Mandeb, clearly depicting the country’s geostrategic significance. This significance is what makes it dangerous to ignore the Yemeni War, and this is the feature of the conflict that could indeed bring more consolidated efforts for sustained peace.

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