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**Yemen, the far south of the shia
crescent**

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Yemen, the far south of the shia crescent

Abstract:

The civil war in Yemen has opened a new window of opportunity for the regional power struggle fought mainly between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This front is currently the southern flank of the confrontation between Sunni and Shia that spreads throughout the Middle East, and that has led to the creation of an Arab League joint military force.

Keywords:

Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Islamic State, Daesh, Al Qaeda, Houthis, Arab League, Shia crescent.

Yemen, Saudi Arabia's unstable southern border

The Arabian Peninsula is often seen as a whole, characterized by the existence of the so-called oil monarchies, with wealthy societies but with huge social and income inequalities, ruled to a greater or lesser extent by authoritarian systems, largely traditional in comparison to western standards. Nevertheless, these countries (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar) are not a group as homogeneous as it may seem —despite their all being part of the Gulf Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf since 1981—, given the important differences and regional rivalries that exist among them, especially between Qatar and Saudi Arabia,¹ nor are they the complete reality of the peninsula.

Indeed the southwestern tip of the peninsula is occupied by the Republic of Yemen. This country is a regional anomaly because, since its independence, its national trajectory has followed very different paths from its neighbors'. Even the north and the south of the country have been very different entities during the last two centuries. While the south was linked to the United Kingdom through the Port of Aden, one of the many transit ports of the Royal Navy in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, the north was part of the Ottoman Empire.

As a consequence of this difference, both regions reached their real independence in different moments and as different political entities, until they unified in one country in 1990, under the presidency of Ali Abdullah Saleh—former president of the Yemen Arab Republic (North)—, after the military defeat of the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen in the war fought between both countries in the years prior to that date.²

Since that date, at no time has Yemen reached enough stability, due mainly to three factors:

- The continuation of the southern region's independence movement, mainly organized around the so-called Port of Aden, an important strategic enclave both regionally and globally, since it dominates the northern shore of the Gulf of Aden, a vital route for a significant percentage of international maritime traffic, especially of oil and gas tankers on their way from the Persian Gulf through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean.
- The endemic compartmentation of power in the country, already a traditional weak state model, has enabled the strong settlement in part of its territory,

¹ Berenguer Hernández, Francisco José, *Qatar en horas bajas*, IEEE, 12 March 2014, http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2014/DIEEEA16-2014_Qatar_HorasBajas_FJBH.pdf [Also available in English under the title *Qatar at low EBB* http://www.ieeee.es/en/publicaciones-new/documentos-de-analisis/2014/DIEEEA16-2014.html?__locale=en].

² Matalobos González de la Vega, Ignacio, *Yemen*, en *Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2012*, Ministerio de Defensa, Madrid, 2012.

especially its eastern area, of jihadist militias allied with local tribes, notably the regional franchise of Al Qaeda, called Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) or Ansar al-Sharia. This jihadist faction has probably been, until the recent emergence of Daesh and its self-proclaimed Islamic State, the most active and dangerous terrorist group of the international jihadist movement during the last years.

- The sectarian differences that reign in the territory, as a consequence of the presence within national borders of a Sunni majority and a Shia minority of the Zaidi tradition, which amounts to a third of the country's population and is mainly articulated around the Houthi movement of the northwestern part of the country that is bordered by Saudi Arabia.

For a long time this scenario has worried the great peninsular power. Thus, Saudi Arabia has played, especially since the unification, a major role in providing economic, diplomatic and, sometimes, direct military support to the government of president Saleh, seeking the security of its southern border through the consolidation of an effective power in Sana'a, dependent to a significant extent on Saudi support.

However, the events of recent months show that this Saudi strategy towards Yemen has evidently not been successful, since the country is struggling between an open conflict and an environment of unemployment and poverty, that merely seems to be worsening in view of the Yemeni demographic prospects, given that the population of the country is expected to duplicate in the following 20 years, with a percentage of up to 75% of young people without adequate employment and life prospects.³

With scarce arable land, a great part of it devoted to the growth of *Catha edulis*, known as qat or khat, a drug of high local consumption,⁴ the prospects for hydrocarbon exports, the main source of national wealth, are not good.

Indeed, although its oil reserves and production are not comparable to the ones of its peninsular neighbors', they have traditionally been enough to satisfy local supply and enable a modest exportation. Nevertheless, the production reached its highest peak in 2001, with around half of a million oil barrels per day,⁵ decreasing from that moment on, as a consequence of the reduction of the available reserves—depletion of wells—and also, often, as a consequence of attacks directed at the oil extraction or transport infrastructures, especially since 2011. The result of this situation and of the inevitable deterioration caused by the civil war on course is the shortfall in the

³ Idem.

⁴ As an example of the effects that khat has in the Yemeni daily life, suffice it to say that the author of this article, together with other colleagues from the Spanish Armed Forces, suffered a traffic accident in Egypt, when he was mowed down by a truck driven by a Yemeni truck driver that was driving his heavy vehicle at noon, completely intoxicated by this drug.

⁵ US Energy Information Administration, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=YM#pet>

local fuel supply at the moment,⁶ which even leads to armed confrontation among the drivers who queue for miles trying to get the scarce available fuel.

The gas situation is better, especially since 2009, when the country opened its first natural liquefied gas (LNG) plant in Balhaf, in the southern coast, east of Aden. Since then, it has been exporting this product that in 2011 reached a production of more than 308 thousand BCF,⁷ of which it has considerable reserves that rank Yemen 32 in the world classification,⁸ enough to significantly contribute to Yemeni GDP in the following decades, mainly taken into account the lack of other resources or their inexorable decline. Yemen also counts on gas to increase the poor electric production that does not reach a considerable part of the population.

In a nutshell, the economic prospects do not seem to portend a substantial improvement of the living conditions and development in Yemen, even in the absence of conflict—which does not seem likely in the near future—. This is probably going to prolong a situation in which the state is incapable of providing the most basic services to its citizens in a large part of the country, or even of establishing its presence through the police and the armed forces, thus generating favorable circumstances in which local actors with interests that differ from or oppose those of the government take control of certain areas of the territory.

The scenario described in the previous paragraph has led to situations in some way similar to the ones seized by Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban or even Islamic State to impose their authority and their effective control of the territory. This is one of the major causes that can be glimpsed in the ongoing Yemeni civil war.

However, as many other conflicts in the region and despite its prominence in the press, it is not a new conflict, but the reactivation and the entry into a different phase of an alternate activation and deactivation conflict that has been going on for more than ten years now. As Farré explains,⁹ in a weak and complex state such as the Yemeni state, the maintenance of local tradition and tribal codes of honor—as the well-known Pashtunwali of Afghan Pashtuns—in a remote, mountainous and isolated environment such as the Yemeni province of Saada, the way in which the central government engages with its inhabitants follows necessarily the respect of those traditions, in a relation based more on the negotiation and mediation among equals than on the negotiation and mediation between the ruler and the ruled.

⁶ al-Mujahed, Ali; Naylor, Hugh, *Yemen grinds to a halt for lack of gas*, The Washington Post, 18 April 2015

⁷ US Energy Information Administration, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=YM#ng>

⁸ US Energy Information Administration, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=YM#ng>

⁹ Farré, Juan Avilés, *El Movimiento Huthi del Yemen. Un actor crucial en un conflicto peligroso*, IEEE, February 2015, http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_investig/2015/DIEEEEINV02-2015_MovimientoHuthi_J.AvilesFarre.pdf

For years, the relative peace in Yemen has depended on the acceptance of a situation as the one described above. However, president Saleh considered, in the context of US reaction to the 9/11 attacks and persecution of the regional franchises of Al Qaeda, that he had before him a favorable climate for a total and an effective control of the Yemeni territory, breaking the pattern in which the relations between the government and the Houthi movement had been kept. The result of this authoritarian turn was a series of armed conflicts between both sides between 2004 and 2010, later considered as part of the political transition process taken by Yemen with regard to the so-called Arab Spring.¹⁰ In this intermittent war, president Saleh often counted on Saudi Arabia's military support, while the Houthis were probably strengthened by Iran, as some incidents such as the Jihan I,¹¹ an Iranian ship, may suggest.

Meanwhile, simultaneously and concurrently, two anomalous situations of different sign were occurring in the county. The first one was the constant unrest of the population of the south of the country, which since 2007 had reactivated the secessionist movement of Aden.¹² The second one was the airstrike campaign, mainly through the use of drones, that the United States had been launching since 2009 and whose main target was AQAP.¹³

Therefore, it is not difficult to conclude that the internal situation of the country has not at any time ceased to be extraordinarily complex, and that ongoing internationalized civil war is nothing but another phase of the one that has been waging in the country for a long time. This turns its southern border into an element of instability and risk for Saudi Arabia, who seriously ballasts its aspirations of becoming the leading power in the region.

¹⁰ Berenguer Hernández, Francisco José, *La revolución secuestrada de Yemen*, IEEE, 15 June 2011, http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2011/DIEEEA15_2011Yemen.pdf

¹¹ Charbonneau, Louis; Nichols, Michelle, *Exclusive: Arms ship seized by Yemen may have been Somalia-bound: U.N.*, Reuters, 1 July 2013.

¹² Al-faqih, Abdullah, *Desafíos ante la gestión de las profundas crisis en Yemen*, RIE, Ari 29/2010, 17 February 2010. [Also available in English under the title *The Challenges of Dealing with Yemen's Deep Crises*

http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/!ut/p/c5/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3jjYB8fnxBnR19TE2e_kEAjV2NDAwgAykdyyvs5GcDkidBtgAM4EtLt5V5Gfm6pfkBsaUe6oqAgAPpBoUA!!/dl3/d3/L0IDU0IKSWdra0EHIS9JTIJBQUlpQ2dBek15cUEhL1ICSIAxTkMxTktfMjd3ISEvN18zU0xMTRFRDQU01NENOVFEyN0YzMDAwMDAwMA!!/?WCM_PORTLET=PC_7_3SLLLTTCAM54CNTQ27F3000000000000000_WCM&WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/elcano/Elcano_in/Zonas_in/ARI29-2010].

¹³ Jordán Enamorado, Javier, *La campaña de ataques con drones en Yemen*, Revista Electrónica del IEEE, 2013. [Also available in English under the title *Drone attacks campaign in Yemen* <http://revista.ieeee.es/index.php/ieeee/article/view/35/64>].

The Arab Spring and the middle east cold war

To this already sufficiently unstable and belligerent panorama, we must add, from 2011 onwards, as has been already mentioned, the wave of popular protests by the population of numerous Arab states that also found its reflection in Yemen. Therefore, inevitably, the social and political uprisings, similar to those that started in Tunisia or in Egypt, were instrumentalized for the benefit of the power struggles between the preexisting actors in Yemen, who used those protests to boost their cause.¹⁴

Just as Saleh considered the environment of the post 9/11 actions favorable to his interests, the northern rebels did likewise in this new situation, expanding from the native province of Saada until they reached the current situation.

Saleh's loss of the weak control he still had of the country, his fall and the expansion of the Houthis from the north until the conquest of the capital Sana'a in September 2014, the dissolution of the parliament, the arrest of president Hadi by the Houthis, the departure of western staff from the embassies and, finally, Hadi's flight from the capital towards Aden with the aim of leading the group that could oppose the military power of the Houthis confirms the collapse of the always weak Yemeni state.

But above all, from a regional perspective, this has opened a new window of opportunity, another chance for the Sunni-Shia cold war, played in other scenarios for years, to intensify in this wretched country. In this war, as in the original Soviet-US Cold War, the main actors, Saudi Arabia and Iran, fight essentially through proxies, avoiding direct confrontation, since a violent clash between their forces could cause an inevitable escalation of unpredictable consequences.

Certainly, in the actual phase of the Yemeni war, the sectarian strife is not the only factor, but it is just a classic example of the struggle for regional power, in which the different religious confessions practiced by the contenders become an incentive, an actual tool, by which the leaders of each faction mobilize more easily their populations and allies. Unfortunately, it also has the effect of exacerbating the spirit of the combatants, given that religious wars, or rather those perceived as religious by such combatants, are particularly merciless.

Therefore, it is not surprising to see how the supporters of former president Saleh, whose sole motivation has always been the perpetuation and the hereditary transmission of power within his family—a new case of hereditary republic, such as Syria or the failed attempts of Egypt, Libya or Tunisia—, now fight with the Houthis

¹⁴ Berenguer Hernández, Francisco José, *La revolución secuestrada de Yemen*, IEEE, 15 June 2011, http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2011/DIEEEA15_2011Yemen.pdf

or, on the other hand, how AQAP¹⁵ tries to take advantage of the decomposition of the Yemeni state, fighting both Sunnis and Houthis indistinctly.

The Southern Shia tip

This new window of opportunity for Iran brought by the military preponderance of the Houthi movement, from which it cannot be, at any moment, alien, completes a movement of evolving character against its main Sunni adversaries in the aforementioned struggle against regional leadership. The so many times referred to as Shia crescent, supported in its northern flank in the Syrian Mediterranean coast, finds in Yemen, after the lower intensity attempts in Bahrain in the shadow of the “Arab Spring,” an anchor point in the south, in a classic example of geostrategy. In a position, furthermore, extremely delicate for Saudi Arabia due to its physical border with this scenario, a scenario which although not new—as has been already mentioned—has reached a greater intensity.

This Saudi threat perception has mobilized the important financial and diplomatic resources of the country, which have enabled the creation of an ad hoc coalition to try to regain the advantage lost in Yemen. Moreover, concurrently, in the meeting of the Arab League in Sharm el Sheikh (Egypt) at the end of March, the member states agreed to the creation of a joint military force of permanent nature¹⁶ to fight the terrorist groups in their environment, a vague expression that would enable not only the fight against groups such as Daesh or AQAP but also against the Houthi rebels in Yemen or in future Shia revolts in Bahrain, for instance. This initiative launched and announced by the Egyptian president el-Sisi, would theoretically allow for a ground force of 40,000 men, which would intervene at the request of the Arab state attacked by the abovementioned terrorist groups.

This permanent pan Arab coalition will have to overcome numerous difficulties that will range from the political will to provide the military forces in particular cases to the resolution of the logistic and financial problems that may arise, apart from the disposition of a common doctrine and procedure that would enable the countries to operate jointly and effectively. In short, problems that NATO or EU member states know well and that are not easy to solve. To this difficulty we must add the traditional Arab division and rivalry, which does not seem to be a positive factor to contribute to solve the difficulties outlined. Without going much further, the bombings of the

¹⁵ De La Corte Ibáñez, Luis, *Al Qaeda en Yemen: una amenaza en progresión*, IEEE, December 2010,

http://www.ieeee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2010/DIEEEO26_2010AlQaedaEnYemen.pdf

¹⁶ González, Ricard, *La Liga Árabe acuerda crear una fuerza militar conjunta*, El País, 29 March 2015.

coalition in Yemen have sparked the continuous protests of the Iraqi government,¹⁷ finally an ally of Tehran, whose role in supporting the Iraqi military capacity in its fight against Islamic State is currently essential.

In any case, it is a new political initiative that may respond to the Arab perception of a strategic regional vacuum left by the United States in its process of global strategic retrenchment, as well as to the doubts about the Iranian nuclear power, which seems to be breaking away from the pre-agreement signed between Teheran and the Group 5+1. These processes, together with the growth of jihadist franchises in all of the Arab world, are what is probably leading the members of the League to try to fill that strategic vacuum that has emerged in their own space, since if they do not fill it, others undoubtedly will. This is a historical constant that to date has proven to be inexorable.

Therefore, from this perspective, it is a lucid and coherent attempt, but casts some doubts on its own existence. The first one is whether the Arab countries will be able to overcome the already mentioned discrepancies that so many times have led them to confrontations. The second one, but not less important, is whether these countries are willing to make for their security in the following years the sacrifices that others do not seem to be willing to make for theirs' in this or other scenarios.

The Yemeni advance of the Arab joint military force

The action of the rapidly created coalition, in parallel with the negotiations for the creation of this permanent Pan Arab coalition,¹⁸ may represent a preview of the joint military force capacity and, especially, of the political will of the Arab countries to engage in potentially long and costly wars depending on the circumstances.

The formula chosen by the coalition to intervene in Yemen, exclusively through airstrikes attempting to degrade the military capacities of the Houthis and the allies, repeats the scheme preferred by the West in its last interventions, with all of its advantages and disadvantages. As a consequence of the disadvantages, the Houthis have not been stopped in their advance with the desired efficiency, leading to the seizure of the Port of Aden and the exit of president Hadi from the country. The control of this port, which the Saudi naval force is trying to block, is of vital importance, since it can enable the Houthis to receive aid on a large scale from its Iranian allies.

¹⁷ Gordon, Michael R; Schmitt, Eric, *Tensions Flare Between Iraq and Saudi Arabia in U.S. Coalition*, The New York Times, 15 April 2015.

¹⁸ Carrión, Francisco, *La Liga Árabe estudia una intervención terrestre en Yemen cuando avanza en la creación de una fuerza militar conjunta*, El Mundo, 28 March 2015.

The arrival in the area of the US aircraft carrier *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, with its corresponding escort,¹⁹ may intend not so much to contribute to keep Iranian vessels out of Aden but to prevent with its presence a hypothetical confrontation between the Saudi and Iranian naval force, in a potentially explosive situation of direct tension, this time without the use of proxies.

Moreover, the diplomatic efforts that have been made to prevent the escalation of the conflict are producing unclear effects, given that at present the news are contradictory, since there is an almost simultaneous broadcasting of ads about the end of the coalition's airstrikes,²⁰ and the day following this ad,²¹ about king Salman bin Abdulaziz's announcement of Saudi Arabia's decision to intervene in Yemen with Saudi ground forces,²² or about the liberation by the Houthis of the Yemeni Minister of Defense.²³

All of this results in an extremely complex situation, situated very far from the decision or solution point, and in which, very probably, the main beneficiary would be once again, as it is occurring nowadays in Libya, the jihadist international.

The risks of a non-state and the possible territoriality of Al Qaeda

Indeed, AQAP is taking an undeniable advantage, especially in the eastern third of the country, from the situation of chaos in which Yemen is immersed and in which the country is likely to remain. From this traditional territorial location,²⁴ the group is gaining ground at the expense of everyone.²⁵ This may turn out to be a significant asset in its confrontation with Daesh for the leadership of international jihadism.

Al Qaeda might be seeking in Yemen the territoriality that has given Daesh and its Islamic State such visibility and benefits, so as to create a new jihadist sanctuary that would be attractive for the establishment and the fight of the most radical, in a moment in which the star of Islamic State in Iraq seems to be losing shine.

¹⁹ LaGrone, Sam, *Pentagon: Iranian Convoy 'One of the Factors' in Moving U.S. Carrier Roosevelt Closer to Yemen*, USNI News, 21 April 2015.

²⁰ Hamid, Nadeem; Hatem, Mohammed, *Saudis Call Halt to Yemen Operation Saying It Achieved Goals*, Bloomberg, 21 April 2015.

²¹ Carrión, Francisco, *La aviación saudí ataca Yemen tras anunciar el fin de los bombardeos*, El Mundo, 22 April 2015.

²² EFE, *El rey saudí ordena a sus tropas terrestres participar en la operación en Yemen*, ABC, 21 April 2015.

²³ EFE, *Los hutíes liberan al ministro de Defensa yemení y a otros dos altos cargos*, La Razón, 22 April 2015.

²⁴ United States Senate, *Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: a ticking time bomb - A Report to the Committee On Foreign Relations United States Senate*, 21 January 2010.

²⁵ Zimmerman, Katherine, *Yemen's Pivotal Moment*, The Critical Threats Project Of The American Enterprise Institute, February 2014.

Conclusions

We need only observe the migrant and humanitarian crisis that has arisen from the Libyan chaos for us to wonder if we can allow another no-country, Yemen, to become a permanent cancer for the international community. We could even wonder what would be the short-term future of Oman with such a jihadist pseudostate as a neighbor.

It is not easy to define the strategies followed against international jihadism during the last years but, whatever they may be, they are not working, because the jihadist international seems to be growing day by day instead of decreasing in its objectives and achievements. This leads to the need to seriously wonder at the global level whether it is time to think about other different strategies.

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