How Yemen’s War Stands to Redefine the Region’s Future

If ever anyone was still under the impression that North Yemen would soon surrender to Saudi Arabia’s intense military pressure, Saturday’s attack on Aramco some 200 miles east of Riyadh, the Kingdom’s capital, most definitely shattered such belief. If anything, Ansarallah, under the leadership of the Houthis - a tribal faction turned political on the heel of Yemen’s 2011 insurrection, is in for the long haul.

One may argue that Ansarallah is actually looking forward to an escalation in hostilities as any such move would further expose Saudi Arabia to geopolitical black swans, thus allowing the Houthis to entrenched themselves deeper still within Yemen’s socio-political fabric. While Yemen’s war and the unrest which preceded it brought unimaginable hardship to an estimated 26 million Yemenis, it also allowed for the formerly disenfranchised Houthis to rise a powerhouse over North Yemen, a feat few experts could have predicted.

And though it is precisely such rise which Saudi Arabia hoped to render null by carpet-bombing its neighbour, war acted as a political fertiliser, cementing Abdel-Malek Al Houthi’s position as leader of Yemen’s Resistance - a title which has struck Yemenis’ imagination so deeply in the face of their suffering that Yemen’s Seyyid now sits somewhat a legendary hero, the expression of his people’s determination to defend their land from foreign boots.

Four years have now passed… four years during which famine and terror have been Yemen’s daily bread. Four years of a campaign so brutal and heinous that not even the most adept propagandist could rationalise it as a necessary evil. More to the point, Yemen’s war has failed on all accounts to manifest those realities Saudi Arabia and its regional partners wanted either to manifest or prevent, begging the question: why continue?

Indeed! Yemen’s war has only served to explode an already fragile and complicated mesh of overlapping and often contradictory alliances - both locally and regionally.

Yemen’s war is now precipitating a profound geopolitical shift in the region, one which will likely define future challenges and opportunities by way of a grand realignment, one we have yet to come to terms with as we mostly have failed to recognise, if not discounted its premise.

For all intents and purposes offshoots of Iran’s revolutionary model have learnt to think beyond their immediate national ideological interests to instead think as a regional movement - quite similarly to pan-Arabism.

Far from being alone in its struggle Ansarallah has benefited from the support of many of its brothers in ideological arms - from Lebanon to Syria, Iraq, Iran and even Bahrain all have stood united in what they understand as a fight for political relevance.

Now at the epicentre of a pan-Arab Shia Islamic revival movement, which can be traced back to the fall of Saddam Hussein, rather than Iran’s 1979 Revolution, and the ascendance in Iraq of the Dawa party - a political outfit which abides by the principles Wilayat al Umma (governance of the people), Yemen stands to act a grand unifier in that its stubborn resistance to Saudi Arabia’s military assault has drawn the Kingdom onto uncharted geopolitical waters, thus offering untold opportunities for change.

If one considers that the latest drone attacks Ansarallah claimed against Saudi Arabia were in fact launched from Iraq’s PMU military outposts, it becomes evident that Yemen is no longer acting alone, and that other like-minded factions have joined in to bring about a new Middle East.
To bring war to Saudi Arabia is to challenge both its territorial integrity and its foreign partners’ interests. A tactical ally of the United States as well as Israel’s gatekeeper, the Kingdom also happens to be in a delicate transition of its own as Crown Prince Mohammed Salman is looking to crackdown on the most radical elements within the regime to fast-forward much needed social and economic reforms.

Unrest is not an option for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia!

While Iraq has denied any participation in the attack, US officials confirmed on Monday that they received intelligence pointing to the contrary.

Iraq’s involvement in Yemen and the PMU new gained access to long range weaponry prompted Israel to target several of its bases - a move aimed at downgrading the militia’s ability to act out any military ambitions against Tel Aviv at a juncture in time when tensions have risen greatly in the Persian Gulf.

US officials have confirmed that Israel was behind a series of airstrikes, which targeted bases and ammo depots of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) back in July, the New York Times reported on August 22.

Yemen’s new friendships now sit the Southern Arabian nation in the eye of a much broader geopolitical storm, with all the complications it brings.

Yemen’s war was never just about the foiled ambitions of President Abdul-Mansour Hadi or even the threat posed by Al Qaeda ... today any misstep could trigger regional dominos to fall, bringing down a tentative regional balance.

Ironically it is the fear of an alliance with Iran which propelled the Houthis to the forefront of this Pan-Arab ‘Resistance’ movement by way of a war Riyadh cannot possibly win.

While Iran’s influence and desire to use proxies to weaken Saudi Arabia’s position in Yemen and to a greater extent the region should not be discounted, it is worth considering the following alternative: Iraq is developing ambitions of its own independently from Iran.

More to the point the Houthis may too have ambitions we have yet to fully grasp. Recent whispers in Sana’a are pointing to a newfound desire to return those provinces which Yemen once lost to Saudi Arabia: Asir, Jizan and Najran (1934)

To the south, competing local and regional agendas too stand to explode Yemen to a litany of unforeseen consequences. As the Southern Secessionist Movement stands in direct opposition of Hadi’s UN-backed government, other factions in the provinces of Hadramawt and Al Mahra are looking to secure an alliance with Oman to back their claim for territorial independence.

While it is virtually impossible at this stage to predict an outcome to Yemen’s war it is glaringly obvious that the war-stricken nation will weigh heavy on the region’s future and how power dynamics will translate.

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