Middle East is Risking to Pay Too High a Price for the Murder of Abdullah Saleh

At the end of November, a major crisis erupted in Yemen, when former President Ali Abdullah Saleh announced his intentions to start negotiations with the Saudi-led coalition that has been trying to bomb Yemen into submission. This resulted in the Houthis movement voicing accusations of treason against their former ally who they’ve been supporting in the struggle against the pro-Saudi runaway President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The day before these accusations were made by the Houthis, they would announce that they’ve managed to hit a nuclear power plant being built in the United Arab Emirates with a missile. Previously, a similar missile hit an airfield in Riyadh, which resulted in the latter rushing to spread allegations that the Houthis are using missiles supplied to them by Tehran.

Amid the internal conflict in Yemen, any attempt to use it toward one’s own interests by Saudi Arabia, the Arab League or even Iran may trigger disastrous consequences. After all, Saudi Arabia and Israel have been looking for an excuse to launch strikes against Iranian troops in Syria along with nuclear facilities deep inside the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Now one can expect Saudi Arabia to begin forming an anti-Iranian coalition under the guise of uniting the Arab League. It is even possible that the UN is going to be drawn into this process, accusing Tehran of hostile actions against certain Arab states along with attempts to pursue Shia expansion across the Middle East.

Yemen is a state where tribes have been at center stage of internal politics. However, the south of the country has already witnessed a partial disintegration of this rigid tribal system, while in the north this hasn’t been the case. No wonder the so-called Arab Spring movement swept Yemen from south to north with the main demands of protesters being concerns over indecisive and insufficient steps taken in the direction of changing the social fabric of the country so that tribal leaders would have less control over people’s lives. Even though those protests were not entirely justified, since Abdullah Saleh had taken many steps against tribalism. The division of the country into north and south has been developing over decades and this division is the single most important reason for the internal conflict the development of which in little to no way is connected to other causes. The Yemeni situation is so unique in the whole of the Arab World that in spite of the catastrophic social conditions most Yemenis are forced to live in, only a marginal part of them actually supports Al-Qaeda and ISIS. ISIS continues its attempts to win popular support through the use of its media capabilities, releasing footage and reports of its terrorist attacks, but the support it is gaining from such activities cannot be compared to any other state of the region.

The alliance between the Houthis and Yemen’s former leader Ali Abdullah Saleh was purely situational, which was no secret to those following developments in Yemen. It’s enough to note that back in the day when Saleh was still in power he would send the Yemeni Air Force to hunt the Houthis down in the north of the country. For sure, external forces do influence the course of the Yemeni conflict, but northerners and southerners can be hardly described as proxy forces of Iran and Saudi Arabia, since they’ve been trying to settle their own differences and contradictions.

It won’t be an exaggeration to state that Ali Abdullah Saleh is one of the most intelligent and cunning Arab dictators of our time. One can just mention that most regional players that used to sit together with Saleh at the same negotiation table are killed, toppled, or turned into puppets of global players, while Saleh continued playing his own game. He would lead Tehran and Riyadh in opposing each other all across Yemen, while carefully eying both parties in anticipation of the best possible deal to be put on the table.

The Ansar Allah group that constitutes the main driving force behind the Houthis resistance was in desperate need to sustain an alliance with Saleh and his forces for a straightforward reason: Yemen used to be a hub of illegal arms trade back in the day when Saleh was in control of the country, and it has largely remained one. To a certain extent,
Saleh had been in control of other forms of illegal trade like drug and oil smuggling, which would grant his forces a certain degree of independence. The only reason why Saleh would summon Iran and the Houthis to help him was that he would need to put additional pressure on Saudi Arabia, while he would only rely on the forces he has at his disposal to win the internal struggle. Generally speaking, he was still the Comander in Chief of the Yemeni Armed Forces, since in a country where tribes mean more than ranks a local warlord can ignore the official military chain of command.

The goal Saleh had been after all through these years was to return to power. The war between the North and South should burn out eventually, even though it may take a lot of time with high unemployment rates that are common in Yemen. But sooner or later the idea of the need to unite the country should prevail across all parties, and by that time Saleh’s clan would have been the single most influential force in Yemen. Upon being thrown out the door, Saleh would pit both allies and enemies against each other in order to get back through the window.

The gears are now shifting quickly in Yemen. The runaway President Mansour Hadi who abandoned his position two years ago ordered the forces still loyal to him to assist pro-Saleh militants in hunting the Houthis. The situation plays into the hands of Saudi Arabia, as it can now take advantage of the abrupt consolidation of the Yemeni elites.

Thus, on December 4 the Houthis crossed the red line by murdering Ali Abdullah Saleh - one of the most influential people in Yemen, putting themselves out of bounds of any negotiations. The Houthis are now trying to provide an excuse for this step. Is there an Iranian trace behind the murder of Saleh? There’s no clear traces, but those who want to find them are likely to succeed. The latest reports indicate that the Houthis have wounded and captured the son of Saleh Ahmed, the commander of the Republican Guard, but there’s been no official confirmation yet. However, what is already known can bring the level of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia to an all time high. A strike against nuclear facilities launched by the Houthis can result in a symmetrical response - a nuclear strike by countries possessing such weapons. In a region where everyone is prepared for war, such can lead to instantaneous transition to a direct full-scale engagement between principal regional players.

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