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The Crisis in Yemen: Opportunity to Restore Regional Order

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An Opportunity to Restore Regional Order 

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One of the problems the Middle East and the broader Muslim World has faced since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire is the absence of a major power that can guarantee international security. In the absence of such a power, Muslim nations have had to rely on super powers like the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union, now Russia, for international security. Of course if Muslim nations were powerful themselves then they would not need the help of foreign powers, but as weak nations, they have had to depend on nations who do not always share their interests¹.

The only way in which weak nations can protect themselves in a world without order is to become the client of a strong power or form coalitions to protect themselves -- institute a collective security arrangement². Of course there is the United Nations, but in the Middle East it serves only two purposes; legitimize US interventions and provide legal cover to Israeli atrocities³. The UN hence is of no use to Arab nations like Iraq and Yemen, and Arab peoples
like the Syrians and Palestinians that need protection.

But we are witnessing something very unusual in Yemen today. A coalition of states led by a Muslim nation is carrying out a military operation to protect regional security. What is it about Yemen that it has forced Muslim nations to act together, when a similar situation existed in Iraq and Libya and Syria and they did not come together? What has motivated them? It would be tempting to hope that this is a moment of enlightenment and that Muslim nations are learning the virtues of collective action and collective security. But I fear that is not the case.

The coalition is led by Saudi Arabia and is composed of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Pakistan, and Egypt. Most of the nations are either members of GCC, or are dependent on Saudi financial aid. While this coalition and its attacks are supported by the United States both politically and materially, the US for once is not leading this assault. The initiative is clearly geared towards protecting Saudi interests rather than regional security or order. The Saudis fear two things; the instability in Yemen will drive potentially dangerous refugees into Saudi Arabia and if the Houthi – a Zaidi Shite tribe – consolidate power in Yemen, then Iran’s Shite allies and proxies would be on its North (Iraq) and on its south (Yemen).

If the military action is short lived, then Saudi demands will be enough to keep the coalition together. But if the operation becomes prolonged and sustained military action is required to remove the Houthis, especially with ground incursion, then this fragile coalition will not last because it lacks both vision and strategic purpose for coalition partners like Morocco, Egypt, Sudan and Pakistan. Additionally if the coalition is pitched as an effort to control or rollback growing Iranian influence in the region then it is not clear if nations like Pakistan and Bahrain with large Shia populations can sustain their commitments. Would they risk a Shia uprising in their borders to protect Saudi interests?

The US is in final stages of its negotiations with Iran. Perhaps it is not leading this campaign in Yemen to avoid direct confrontation with Iran. Forcing Saudi Arabia to act. The political and military alignments in the region continue to defy sanity. Consider this: in Iraq the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia are all fighting Daesh, whereas in Yemen Daesh while not actually aligned with the Saudis and the Americans, nevertheless is attacking the Houthis. In fact while the Saudis are bombing the Houthis from the air, Daesh is suicide bombing them on the ground. The alignments are mind-boggling.

A military campaign designed to weaken the Houthis in the hope that Yemeni forces can then take Sanaa back from the Houthi control is doomed to fail. The Houthis constitute about 30% of the Yemeni population and have a constituency of nearly eight million people. Their concerns are political and more or less legitimate. There must be a political dialogue and a political solution to the Yemeni crisis. A military only solution will fail, because the coalition itself is unsustainable and if the Houthis spread out in the mountains, the air war will become ineffectual. The Yemenis and the Saudis will have transformed this crisis into a prolonged insurgency in the North of Yemen.

The Saudis are risking the creation of a Shia Daesh that will threaten it from the South even as the Sunni Daesh threatens it from the North.

It is important that Saudi Arabia act in the broader interests of the people of the region. Security, steady and managed political change, peace and development should be the goals that it must pursue in the region rather
than selective peace and selective prosperity. A military coalition that acts in the interests of the region rather than some players in the region will not enjoy regional support and is likely to fail.

The United States remains an unreliable partner in the region. Its primary interests are Israeli interests and oil and it will sacrifice its own long-term interests to preserve them. The regional powers, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Egypt, have to find common ground and common purpose to bring peace and stability to their region. If they continue to allow sectarian and narrow interests to guide their policies then the present of Iraq and Syria could well become their future too.

END NOTES


3 http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/UN/usvetoes.html


