

# **Historical Saudi and Iranian ties to Yemen**

**Policy Brief**

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## **Historical Saudi and Iranian ties to Yemen**

“Keep Yemen weak”, King Abdulaziz founder of the Saudi Kingdom, is presumed to have said this sentence before his death fearing that a strong Yemen could become a major threat to the Saudi security. Saudi leaders see Yemen as a problematic and populous state in their own “back yard” which requires a policy of “containment.” Saudi Arabia has almost been obsessed about its impoverished neighbor. KSA population statistics are often judged to be distorted to show that the kingdom is more populous than Yemen, so as to dent any Yemeni question concerning the historically lost territory.<sup>1</sup>

To contain the security threat, the south-north passage of smugglers, and economic migrants, KSA is building a 1500-km fence that runs the length of the Saudi-Yemeni border. Although the Saudi Arabia Wahhabist doctrine ideologically opposes the Zaydi religion, Riyadh back in the 1960’s supported the Zaydi imamate, a religious monarch, in its fight against Egyptian-backed Arab nationalist republicans. Saudi Arabia view Islamist movements as a counter-weight to secular opposition groupings in the Gulf. In the 1980’s, Riyadh turned its support and became a direct patron to the Yemeni government and tribal and military leaders. KSA paid monthly salaries for the mentioned leaders during Saleh regime’s existence. In this stage, southern Yemen was considered a socialist threat to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The rapprochement between north and the south which led to the unification in 1990 didn’t empower Yemen for a long term. The president of the newly unified Yemen took a disastrous decision in backing Saddam Hussein during the Iraqi invasion to Kuwait. Saudi Arabia cut its aid to the new state and deported approximately 1 million Yemeni workers from KSA. Saleh support to Saddam led to KSA support for a southern succession attempt in 1994. Riyadh slowly reconciled with the Yemeni president where the two countries were working for a border treaty. During the first decade of the millennium, Saudi Arabia focused on tackling of the Islamism extremism where Yemen was a center for Al Qaeda operations and at the same time fighting Houthi expansion in the North. Riyadh counterterrorism official saw Yemen as battleground for these operatives especially with the Saudi and Yemeni Al Qaeda branches cooperating with one another before merging as AQAP in 2009.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Henderson, Stand Off in San’a: Yemen’s Crisis Worries The World, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Peter Salisburg, Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian ‘Cold War’, Chatham House, 2015

Before the Islamic revolution of 1979, the Shah regime closely coordinated with Riyadh and had good relations with the North and the Southern part of Yemen until 1967. After the different revolutions in North and South Yemen in addition to the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Iranian approach toward Yemen changed. The Northern Yemen Republic led by Saleh maintained good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iraq under Saddam Hussein rule and by association held a position of opposition toward Iran. The southern socialist state of Yemen became friendly with Tehran due to their mutual opposition to Western colonialism and the Gulf monarchies. Tehran supported a hard line Marxist faction which succeeded during a 1986 civil war in southern Yemen where the current Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi was on the losing side where he has a history of enmity with Iran. According to Fred Halliday, foreign policy under Saleh consisted of rallying the external backing for his presidential rule preventing outside support for his rivals where possible. Accordingly, Ali Abdullah Saleh tried to maintain ties with the Iranian to back his rule<sup>3</sup>.

### **Zaidism Revival and the Rise of the Houthis**

Ansar Allah began as a faction within the youth offshoot of Al-Haq, a Zaydi political party formed in 1990 to contest the united Yemen's first legislative elections held in 1993. Hussein Badr al-Deen al-Houthi joined its youth wing "The Believing Youth", which focused on the revival of Zaidism in the mid 1990s. Al Houthi mainly resided in Iran after leaving the parliament in 1997 in order to expand his religious education. He returned from Sudan after the events of 9/11 "benefiting from the US wars in the region by taking more anti-American and Israeli stance causing division in "The Believing Youth. An example of his anti-Western and Israeli stance was adapted in his very well know chant "Death to America, Death to Israel, Damn the Jews, Victory of Islam". This chant can describe the Iranian influence on Badr al Houthi where he adapted this chant from the Islamic Revolution of Iran.<sup>4</sup>

Although Ansar Allah leaders and followers appeared to be committed to Zaidism practiced by Hussein which differs from the Twelver Shia practiced in Iran, a number of Houthi supporters

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Salisbury, Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War', Chatham House, 2015

<sup>4</sup> Peter Salisbury, Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War', Chatham House, 2015

converted to Twelver Shia over the past two decades and have visited the religious schools in Iran. The ideology of Ansar Allah can be mostly traced to the Zaidism historical beliefs and incidents. Zaidism had a firm principle that the Shiites must rise up against the Umayyad dynasty and took revenge for Karbala incident that occurred during the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century where Hussein the third Imam was killed. Zayd took this stance and rebelled against the Umayyad rule where he was murdered during this battle to become the Zaidism martyr after Hussein. Both incidents led to the emergence of the basic qualifications of any Zaidi ruler or leader which one of them is to revolt against oppressors. On the other hand, although the Twelver Shiite were continuously oppressed and imprisoned, none of the imam's rose up against the political leaders. The traditional Shiite opinion remained in postponing the formation of the Islamic government until the return of the Mahdi. The surprise was in the Islamic revolution in 1979 which made the Zaidism ideology identical to the Khomeini's revolution. As a consequence, Twelver Shiism became attractive to many of the Zaidism were many traveled to Iran to improve their knowledge in this sect. As mentioned by many sources, Ansar Allah maintained an alliance with the Islamic regime in Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to the Zaidi Sheikh "Mortada Al Mahtouri", the Iranian government and the religious institutions in Iran provide religious training for Yemenis in both countries. Abdel Al Majid Al Houthi, the cousin of Bader Al Din Al Houthi, claimed that the Houthi rebellion is inspired from the Iranian revolution.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Southern Yemeni Question**

In 1904, a treaty was signed between the British and the Ottoman Empire which divided Yemen into a Northern and a Southern region. After World War I, Zaydi Imam replaced the Ottomans in the independent North, but the Shafi'i southerners refused to accept him as a religious sovereign. The south remained under the British rule where Aden served as the capital. The 1962 military coup d'état by pro-Nasser Arab nationalist officers in the North led to a civil war between the Northern and the Southern part. Unrest continued in the North throughout the 1970s and 1980s with an armed rebellion in "midlands", a largely Shafi'i region stretching inland from mountains near the Red Sea to the cities of Ibb and Taiz halfway between Sanaa and Aden. This rebellion

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<sup>5</sup> Saoud Al Mawla, Al Houthiyoun w Al Yemen Aljadid, 2015

was supported by the socialist Southern Yemen, which had gained independence from Britain on November 30, 1967, after a long guerrilla war which began in 1963. In the early 1980s, both regions worked on drafting a joint “unity constitution”, and then the process accelerated mainly after the 1984 discovery of oil in the North and the internal divisions that weakened the south in 1986. Saleh, who became the president of Northern Yemen in 1978 after being elected by the parliament, strengthened his position and negotiated the South from a position of strength due to the above mentioned factors.<sup>6</sup>

In January 1986 the South’s ruling Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) split, and factional fighting sent President Ali Nasser Muhammad and tens of thousands of supporters fleeing north across the border, where Saleh welcomed them. Saleh played the exiled YSP faction against those who remained in Aden, until reaching a unity agreement with the new southern head of state, Ali Salem al-Beidh, in late 1989. North and South Yemen were united on May 22, 1990 and Ali Salem al-Beidh became the vice president which gave an expected northern domination to the presidency especially due to the larger population of their region. The 1993 elections enhanced a civil war between the two regional factions in 1994.. Saleh won his war against the south and drove out al-Beidh and other Southerners from Yemen. Ali Abdullah Saleh played all the available cards in the south to maintain his dominance by first relying on the southern “Ali Nasser partisans” who had fled during the 1986 fighting, and whom al-Beidh had excluded at the time of unity. . The southern Yemenis felt exploited after the 1994 war where Saleh and his close Northern allies benefited from the southern resources in order to preserve their power in the North (oil and lands). The southern movement rose in 2007 through sit-ins, strikes and demonstrations benefiting from Saleh’s weakness position supporting USA’s policy in the region (Iraqiwar).Hirak movement mainly consist of former southern military movement and government officials who were forcibly retired after the country’s 1994 north-south civil war. At rallies in 2009, demonstrators began waving the flag of the former South Yemen, which had not been used publicly since the 1994 war. Yemeni and Western officials have accused Ali Salem al-Beidh, the former southern president of maintaining close ties with Iran. The Wall Street Journal reported in June 2013 that Iran is training militants who are aligned with a separatist movement in the southern Yemen, while Hezbollah, is providing some funding and media training to the

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah Philips, What Comes Next in Yemen?, Carnegie Papers, 2010

group. Officials in Sanaa claim that al-Beidh television station “Aden Live” runs from a Hezbollah-owned building in Beirut. The reality of Hirak is of course more complex than a simple story of an Iranian proxy where many organizations are present in Hirak.<sup>7</sup>

## **Arab Spring and the Houthi Take Over**

In 2011, the Houthis joined protests against Ali Abdullah Saleh during the Arab uprisings. They joined anti-regime activists throughout the country seeking a change. After Saleh removal from power, the Houthis benefited from the power vacuum following the uprising and became a major winner. They participated in the UN-backed National Dialogue conference (NDC) and were represented by 35 out of 565 delegates. At the same time, they have rejected on principle the November 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative which granted the prosecution immunity for Saleh and established a “consensus government” divided between Saleh’s General People’s Congress (GPC) and their Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). In 2011, Houthis became the de facto rulers in Saada governorate appointing a governor and collecting taxes. In 2012, the short term anti-Saleh alliance between the Houthis and their historical adversaries Islah (Muslim Brotherhood version in Yemen), Ali Mohsen, and the Ahmars (one of the biggest tribes in Yemen) ended. Violence intensified in September 2013 deadline for concluding NDC negotiations before the conflict spread in October around Dar al-Hadith religious institute in Dammaj, Saada governorate between Houthis and Salafist fighters. By January, Huthis continued their invasions in Kitaf, Saada, Amran and the Salafist relocate temporarily their centre in Saada. They burned Ahmar family home in Khamir village and acquired significant weapons. Hadi who became president after the 2011 demonstrations in Yemen avoided a military intervention claiming that it will complicate and prolong the fighting with no results. Although cease-fire was maintained for several times and negotiations were held between the fighting factions, Houthis continued their military invasion reaching the Northern-Southern borders and clashing with Al Qaeda in addition to the tribes militants. The Houthis used their stated demands as decreasing oil price and fighting corruption to expand more to South risking a Yemeni civil war. After the government met their demands, the Houthis rejected the six districts plan and imprisoned the

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Philips, What Comes Next in Yemen?, Carnegie Papers, 2010// Peter Salisbury, Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian ‘Cold War’, Chatham House, 2015

president assistant and many opposition figures. After being house arrested and submitted his resignation along to the government, Hadi successfully escaped Sanaa, left to Aden and withdrew his resignation claiming his presidency. KSA and other gulf countries supported the legitimacy represented by Hadi and moved their embassies to Aden. The Houthis supported by Saleh didn't change their stance, but on the other hand, they continued their invasion controlling Taiz in the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March and lately reaching Aden.<sup>8</sup>

## **Reasons for the Houthis Expansion**

The state authority weakening is the most significant factor that helped the Houthis in their territorial gains. The power of the government diminished during the 2011 uprising due to the split between Saleh and Ali Mohsen. The Houthis used anti regime speech to increase their political strength which attracted people frustrated from the tribal Cheikhs and Al Ahmar benefits and corruptions in the old regime. Although the “Hashemites” clan in Yemen who consider themselves descendants of Prophet Muhammad family do not believe in the group religious ideas, Ansar Allah movement was provided support from them due to the feelings that Zaidis are marginalized by the state and the Islah. The use of coercion cannot be denied as one of the main factors in the Houthi expansion in Yemen. Ali Abdullah Saleh and the tribal factor remain the major causes for the Houthi military success. The former president won't miss a chance to return as the main political player in Yemen. Al Ahmars and the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated party “Islah” remain a handicap for GPC affiliates. Tribal affiliates of Saleh's GPC have aligned with the Houthis in their battles in the North while others remained neutral. The Hashid tribe frustration from Al Ahmar leadership to their tribe added allies to the Houthis in the north.<sup>9</sup>

## **Dancing on the Head of the Snakes**

During the 2011 Yemeni uprising, many actors were united for the aim of removing the 30 years Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime. Houthis, Hirak movement, liberals, leftists and Islamists joined together planning a regime change. Ali Mohsen surprised the Yemeni and supported the revolution against his historical ally Abdullah Saleh. The president was replaced by his southern deputy Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi where “unity government” was formed with the dominance of the Islah a Muslim brotherhood affiliated party by acquiring half of the governmental seats.

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<sup>8</sup> Middle East Report, The Huthis From Saada to Sanaa. International Crisis Group, 2014

<sup>9</sup> Middle East Report, The Huthis From Saada to Sanaa. International Crisis Group, 2014

Although Saleh vacated the presidential palace, he did not retire as a politician; but instead, he was granted immunity from prosecution and allowed to hold on to his title as head of the ruling party. Today, Saleh resides in a heavily guarded compound off a busy street in the capital where he hosts daily meetings with tribal sheikhs<sup>10</sup>. Many in the military are still loyal to him and to his son Ahmad Saleh former head of the republican guards and current Yemeni ambassador to Emirate. Few accuse Saleh in planning to return to power and many critics say he hopes to clear a path for his family. “Saleh is probably glad to see the government weakened and pleased by anything that makes Hadi look weak.” said April Alley, Gulf analyst at the International Crisis Group. In addition, one military officer claimed that many military units were getting out from Ahmad Ali Saleh house to help the Houthis rebels. Al Jazeera leaked a private phone conversation between Saleh and a Houthi commander which was said to have taken place in last October, where Saleh asks the commander to get in touch with several of his close allies.<sup>11</sup>

### **Regional and International Actors**

The well funded and organized Muslim brotherhood affiliated parties in Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya benefited from the Arab Spring revolutions to increase their influence in these countries. Their consolidation of power in several Arab counties led Saudi King Abdullah to view political Islam as an existential threat and vowed to fight it wherever he could.<sup>7</sup> Under King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia constructed a dual-track regional policy of attempting to contain Iranian influence while at the same time opposing the growth of Sunni political Islam which it saw as an ideological threat to dynastic rule (Yemen crisis is the first big test for Saud Arabia’s new King Salman). After decades buying the support of tribes, politicians and clerics in Yemen, the Al Saud watched their patronage network falling apart during a 2011 uprising.

Islah party in Yemen took advantage of the post Saleh regime to strengthen their supremacy in the Yemeni government where the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated party tried to control the Yemeni army through their strong presence in the Yemeni government.

Their policy frustrated the Saudi rule which was already fearful from the rising power of Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring in 2012. In addition, the Qatar support for their previous allies

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<sup>10</sup> النهار- هل من دور لعلي عبدالله صالح في معارك صنعاء أمس؟

<sup>11</sup> David Hearst, The Saudi King who Fought the Wrong Wars, The World Post, 2014/

in Yemen-Al Ahmar family- angered King Abdullah. As David Hearst claimed in the World Post, Prince Bandar Bin Sultan handled the counter-revolution portfolio in Yemen where he met a prominent Houthi, Saleh Habreh via London. These sources claim that KSA and Emirates supported the Houthis militias to combat Al-Islah party in Yemen or at least neutralized their position. Saudi ambitions had been tactical and probably limited aiming primarily at crushing Islah, the political Islamist group with whom Hadi was sharing power. Informed Yemeni sources have confirmed that King Abdullah's Saudi leadership turned down a request from Al Ahmar for support and intervention in order to stop the offensive against their tribal areas by the Houthis in February 2014. Al-Arab newspaper claimed that the Saudi response was decisive in demanding that Al Ahmar should first fight the Muslim Brotherhood. The sources added that Riyadh considers that Hamid Al-Ahmar, who is the wealthiest sibling among sons of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar, has affected the future of Yemen and the Al Hashid tribal coalition because of his relation with Qatar and Muslim brotherhood despite repeated Saudi warnings to him not to ally with them". However, the Saudis may never have intended the Houthis to walk into the capital unopposed. They calculated, wrongly that Islah would have opposed the Houthis long before they were at the city's gates.<sup>12</sup>The Houthis may have benefited from not being opposed harshly by Islah party and from King Abdullah's death and KSA's transition of power to handle more Yemeni areas.

UAE had taken an extreme stand against the Muslim Brotherhood expansion in the Arab region. Yemen is an example on Abu Dhabi's role to diminish the Muslim Brotherhood power in the Arab region. According to the Middle East Eye, UAE inspired a strategy to crush the Islamist Islah group opening the door to an Iranian-backed Houthi militia.<sup>13</sup> The UAE stated funding for this conspiracy since 2012 by giving Saleh 1 billion dollars to be distributed to Houthis militias, tribes, and media organization. Their plan was to capture major military camps as well as TV and radio stations. In addition, a secret Emirati delegation met Saleh along with two prominent Houthis, Saleh Habreh and Mohammad Muftah, at his residence in the capital. Two weeks before Sanaa fell; president Hadi had received a phone call from the UAE telling him to distance himself from Islah. The advance to the capital happened after the refusal of the current president to remove the Muslim Brotherhood from power completely. Some analysts revealed that this

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<sup>12</sup> David Hearst, Blowback in Yemen: Houthi Advance Is a Saudi Nightmare, The World Post, 2014

<sup>13</sup> David Hearst, The Saudi King who Fought the Wrong Wars, The World Post, 2014

deal was being planned without the KSA knowledge, but the UAE was unlikely to interfere in Yemen without prior approval from Saudi Arabia. As Abdul-Ghani al-Iryani, a Yemeni political analyst claims that “the Emiratis would never dabble in the Saudi backyard without their assent”.<sup>14</sup>

Qatar’s role in Yemen was resurrected during the Yemeni government’s war against the Houthis who constituted a suitable avenue for Qatar’s return to the Yemeni arena. During 2007 and 2008, Qatar was the prominent influence broker in the most important of Yemeni issues by the convincing Houthis to support its role. Qatar initiated for an agreement in 2008 to end the war between the Houthis and the state whereby Saleh later described the accord as the “Dokha (dizziness) accord”. The Arab revolutions that began at 2011 gave Qatar a golden opportunity to fully enter the fray and support financially, politically, and through media the Yemeni opposition mostly composed of Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar’s foreign minister was the first international party who called on Saleh to step down. Their policy in Yemen has continued to diverge from that of Saudi Arabia by not being a signatory to the GCC deal whereby Saleh finally agreed to step down. Since 2013, the Qatari government had been sidelined in Sanaa, while Saudi Arabia has backed attempts to marginalize the same Sunni groups which it views in the same negative perspective as it does Muslim Brotherhood organizations elsewhere in the region that Doha supported. Qatar’s role was even more proved through its mediation efforts to free a Swiss female kidnapped by al-Qaeda in 2012 without even informing or coordinating with Yemeni authorities. Saudi press had stated prior to Hadi’s visit to Qatar in 2013, that Muslim Brotherhood was putting pressure on Hadi to visit Doha. These statements directly reflect Saudi dissatisfaction with Hadi’s visits to Doha; as well that Qatar was replacing it on the scene. Qatar also funded the establishment of the Yemeni television station “Yemen Youth Channel” affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood’s factions. Al-Arab newspaper added that Riyadh accuses Qatar of playing a damaging role through double dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Houthis at the same time.<sup>15</sup> The same newspaper confirmed that one of the causes of Saudi anger at Doha is “what Qatar is doing in Yemen in support of radical groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical groups close to Al Qaeda”. More significant is Doha’s relationship with the Ahmar family, part of the large Hashid tribes in Yemen, and the most

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<sup>14</sup> David Hearst, Was the UAE behind the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, Middle East Eye, 2015

<sup>15</sup> Farea al-Muslim, Qatar Encroaches on Saudi Influence in Yemen, Al-Monitor, 2013

important historical ally that Saudi Arabia has in Yemen<sup>16</sup>. Saudi media revealed information about Muslim Brotherhood figures loyal to Qatar standing behind the recruitment of tens of thousands of conscripts into the Yemeni army and security forces in the years since the Arab Spring revolutions began.

Yemeni, Arab, and International officials accused Iran in backing the Houthis in Yemen. In February 2014, an article in “Financial Times” claimed that Iran and its Lebanese proxies provided direct financial and logistical support, as well as advisers, to the Houthis a view was supported by US officials as stated in the article.<sup>17</sup> The Iranian leaders considered the Houthi advance in Yemen as a victory for the resistance alliance in the region and adding Sanaa as the fourth capital to be dominated by Tehran after Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad. Many analysts considered that the Houthi advance is a mark to the Iranian influence spreading in the region in order to surround KSA from its South. These analysts added that Iran is working through its Houthi proxies to hold “Bab El Mendeb” strait a key passage for the Gulf oil and a main route for the World’s trade. As stated by U.S secretary of State John Kerry, Iran has “contributed” to the Houthi militia’s takeover of Yemen and the collapse of the government there. The presidential council appointed by Houthis and Iran signed an agreement to establish 14 direct flights per week between the two countries.

During Obama’s delegation visit to KSA to present condolences to the royal family after King Abdullah’s death, US president discussed several issues with King Salman where the Yemeni crisis was one of them. Yemen can be considered as one of the main priorities for the USA counter-terrorism strategy. As stated previously, US considered that Iran helped in the collapse of the Yemeni government a major ally to them. US approved the UN decision in sanctioning several Houthi leaders and Abdullah Saleh. On the other hand, reports were spread through the media claiming that US maintains intelligence relationship with the Houthis. Senior US intelligence official Michael Vickers said in January 21 that the United States has an intelligence relationship with the Houthi insurgent group that seized much of the capital since September. Vickers subsequently told Al-Monitor through a spokesperson that the US relationship with the

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<sup>16</sup> Middle East Monitor, Fight the Brotherhood first: Saudi refuses to intervene in Yemen citing Qatar-MB support, 2014

<sup>17</sup> Peter Salisburg, Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian ‘Cold War’, Chatham House, 2015

Houthis was not a formal agreement. On dangers to US national security, Vickers said the “global jihadist threat” remains at the top and that the amount of the territory across North Africa and the Middle East that comprises a safe haven for such groups is “greater than any times in our history”.<sup>18</sup> From a US perspective, Yemen is a counter-terrorism problem.<sup>19</sup> The Houthis advance in Northern Yemen may trigger an alliance between the tribes and AQAP which will affect US counter-terrorism plan in Yemen.

## **The Turning Point**

It is impossible to describe the latest events in Yemen without understanding the regional aspects influencing the current events. King Salam and his team are focusing on facing the Iranian expansion in the region (Syria, Iraq, and Yemen) which impose a threat to the KSA. King Salman assured to improve KSA’s relations with Qatar, Turkey, and Pakistan in order to create a Sunni alliance to contain the Iranian advance. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia decreased its stance in oppressing the Muslim brotherhood affiliations in the region. According to some sources,<sup>20</sup> Saudi officials met members of the brotherhood Islah party of Yemen in Riyadh to discuss the Houthi advancement in Yemen before launching their attacks on Aden. Arab21 and Middle East sources<sup>21</sup> cited that tribes from Ma’rib and Al-Jawf received various types of aid from Saudi Arabia, most notably war supplies that would guarantee the tribes’ domination in any future battle with the Houthis who possesses weapons arsenals stolen from Yemeni army stores and camps. The Houthis and Saleh didn’t respond to Saudi Arabia’s demand to return to the negotiation tables in Saudi Arabia or in Qatar. Media sources stated that a meeting was held between Ahmad Saleh and KSA’s defense minister Prince Mohammad Bin Salman where the latter alerted Ahmad from crossing the red lines by aiding the Houthis in any attempt to reach Aden. Prince Saud El Faisal warned the Houthis and Saleh that KSA and the gulf countries will use other means to stop the Houthi expansion toward Aden. After several days, KSA heavily spread its military force on the Yemeni border threatening the Houthis and Saleh. Few hours later, the Saudi Arabia’s ambassador in USA stated that a coalition will be formed to prevent the

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara Slavin, US maintains intelligence relationship with Houthis, Al-Monitor, 2015

<sup>19</sup> Simon Henderson, Stand Off in San’a: Yemen’s Crisis Worries The World, 2015

<sup>20</sup> السعودية تعيد الاتصال بإخوان اليمن وتستقبل وفدا قياديا بحزب الإصلاح, Yemen nation-2015

<sup>21</sup> Ashraf AL-Falahi, Saudi Arabia Decides to Turn the Tables on the Houthis, Middle East Monitor, 2015

Houthis military attack on Aden. Under the title of “Decisive Storm”, KSA affirmed that a coalition of different countries will restore stability, return back the legitimate president Hadi to Sanaa after he left under pressure to KSA. The Kingdom supported military by different Gulf countries, Sudan, Pakistan, Morocco, and Egypt stated that it will prevent further regional interference pointing on Iranian support to the Houthis. Nor the Iran demand for talks, neither Saleh’s request for negotiations stopped KSA and its ally’s airstrikes on different targets in Yemen. The Houthis and Saleh militias are facing resistance in Shabwa region and are trying to keep their advance regardless the coalition air strikes.<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion and Future interpretations**

With the intervention in Yemen, Saudi Arabia’s military is trying to kill several birds with one stone. Saudi Arabia first is preserving the country from an immediate military threat posed by advancing pro-Iranian Houthi rebels. In the medium-term, Saudi Arabia is trying to declare its leadership to the GCC. While on the long term, KSA is trying to build a geopolitical balance in the Middle East between itself and Iran. Riyadh is in good position to kill the first two birds due to its military and political capability. A Sunni alliance to balance the Iranian alliance (Bachar El Assad-Hezbollah-Shiite militias in Iraq and Houthis) in the region can be also observed. Pakistan and Egypt are highly supportive to the Saudi Arabia’s decisive storm and Turkey supported politically Riyadh’s position. The Iranians may have miscalculated their movements this time leading the Houthis and Saleh to oppose KSA and its allies. If Aden falls, and with it the strategic Bab al-Mandeb strait, through which all of the oil traffic of the Suez Canal passes, roughly three quarters of the most populated part of Yemen would be in the hands of an Iranian-backed militia, openly threatening Saudi Arabia and the world. Another miscalculation by Iran may appear concerning the US policy in the region. Although USA is working on reaching a nuclear agreement with Iran, and they are fighting a common enemy together, the gulf countries security will remain a red line for Washington. USA’s logistical support for “Decisive Storm” operations is a clear indicator in ensuring Saudi Arabia’s security and stability. Returning to Yemen’s domestic politics, several players may re-emerge to the arena especially Al Ahmar family and General Ali Mohsen Ahmar. Islah party may be strengthened to check the Houthis

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<sup>22</sup> Yemen at War ,Crisis Group, 2015

especially in Taiz and Sanaa. KSA may restore its connections with the tribes and return to its traditional policy in financing them. Ali Abdullah Saleh and his son Ahmad will be the possible victims in the future after losing the confidence of KSA and UAE. Hadi's removal of Ahmad as ambassador of Yemen in UAE can indicate a diminished future role for Saleh family in Yemen. Although they are described as the Iranian backed militias, Houthis will possibly play a role in the future. The Houthis are part of the political combination in Yemen in future in order to reach any beneficial agreement.