

Saudi-Yemen Conflict and Its Impact on the Region

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Abstract

The main theme of the research is to discuss the changing scenario of the Arab-Yemen conflict. The study focuses on the dynamics of relating issue. It also investigates the facts and role of the international community. The research describes the concerns of the neighbor countries. Pakistan believes in Muslim brotherhood. The study analyses the foreign policy of Pakistan in this context.

Keywords: Historical Perspectives, Dynamic Actors, Proxy War, Pakistan's Narrative.

Introduction

In 1934, the new kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its southern neighbor, Yemen, signed a treaty which brought an end to a violent war. The Taif Treaty essentially established a common border between the two nations. Much of the strife has likely stemmed from the internal turmoil within Yemen, which then simply spilled over into its relations with Saudi Arabia.

In the late 1980's after fighting a long bloody civil war, Southern Yemen was devastated to the point where it had no choice but to unify with the North. In 1992 intermitted talks revived to settle the boarder questions between the governments. However, hostilities renewed when Saudi Arabia backed Southern rebellious factions, which were ultimately defeated, against the central government in the Yemeni civil war in 1994. Shortly after a new clash flared up in the Najran area, where there are believed to be oil reserves (Whitkar, Brain, 1998).

In June of 1995 the Treaty of Taif was officially renewed, remarking the far western boundary and establishing a framework for settling the last part of the disputed border to the east. It is important to remember that historical borders have always been rather imprecise in this region. The nomadic indigenous populations and political instability of the region contributed heavily to the lack of defined boundaries. Without true established historical borders to reference, the drawing up of modern finite borders has always been problematic. Again, just as they had over the last fifty years under the original treaty, disputes continued to flare up, the most significant of which came in May of 1998. Spcifically disagreements arose over the ownership of a number of Red Sea islands, sperred on by a report that a Syrian accused of bombing and assassination attempts had been recruited by Saudi intelligence.

On May 1st 1998 Yemen sent troops to occupy the disputed islands, opening fire on Saudi border guards, After that initial claim, both sides reported a number of border infractions. Several of which then resulted in violence. There were several battles on Duwamish Island, one of three islands claimed by both countries, where Saudi naval and long range artillery attacked the island. Saudi Arabia claims that 75% of the island belongs to them, while Yemen claims the entire island is their territory.

In June of 2000, Saudi Arabia and Yemen signed another border agreement based upon the border defined by the Taif agreement of 1934. Environmentally speaking, the land disputed is thought to potentially contain valuable oil reserves. Additional economic benefits from seafood and fish products also clearly increase the value of the islands. Clearly this source of economic wealth is desirable for both nations, particularly the economically depressed Yemen. From a political prospective, it has long been said by observers that

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monarchical Saudi Arabia is hostile toward the Yemeni democracy. (Chris Murphy, Nov., 2006)

Yemen being the only democratic nation on the Arabia Peninsula has often claimed the Saudi's have attempted to militarily intimidate and even sabotage the democratic regime. Yemen's government has often blamed the Saudi's for any internal strife, regardless of the availability of adequate proof.

From a Saudi perspective, Yemen's tremendous poverty stricken populous has been viewed as a constant threat. In the 1970's and 1980's the war between southern and northern Yemen, resulted in thousands of refugees heading north (Cordesman, Anthony, 2003). Clearly it is a combination of a century of conflict which contributed to the renewed violence in the mid 1990's.

Yemen has long been the odd man out in the Arabian Peninsula: poor, populous and republic in a region dominated by extraordinarily wealthy but less populated monarchies. Even with the presence of al-Qaeda, it has generally been viewed warily by its neighbours. Relations with Saudi Arabia have always been a central feature of Yemeni foreign policy, not merely because the kingdom is the dominant state in the peninsula and Yemen's most important neighbour, but also because the Saudis' perception of their security needs is that they should seek to influence Yemen's as much as possible in order to prevent it from becoming a threat.

According to this view, Saudi interests are best served by keeping "on the wobble" (a western diplomat put it)-though not so wobbly that regional stability is jeopardized. Before unification of north and south Yemen in 1990, this amounted to ensuring that both parts of country focused their attentions on each other rather than on their non-Yemeni neighbors.

Yemeni Unification, 1990

In 1990 northern Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic, ruled by Ali Abdullah Saleh since 1978) and the southern Marxist-ruled People's Democratic of Yemen united to form a single the Republic of Yemen. Although Yemen's peninsular neighbors formally welcomed unification, in reality they greeted it with a mixture of coolness and consternation. For some of them, the fact that Yemen espoused democratization along with unification made the changes doubly disturbing.

Yemen's unification created a new state with a combined population of around 15 million citizens. Though population figures in the Arabian peninsula tend to be unreliable, Yemeni: greatly outnumbered Kuwaitis, Omanis, Qataris, Bahrainis and Emirates. They also equally possibly outnumbered Saudi citizens. For Gulf rulers, the political changes that accompanied Yemeni unification were no less disconcerting psychologically. In a region where states are generally run along autocratic lines of a 19th-century family business, multi-party democracy tended to be perceived as not revolutionary than the old Marxist regime in south Yemen.

Firstly, there were fears that democratization in Yemen could create pressure for similar measures in Saudi Arabia and upset the stability of the monarchy. Secondly there was the fear that Saudi opposition groups might look to Yemen for support, and that Sana'a well aware Saudi support for opposition groups in Yemen, might feel justified in providing it. Saudi Arabia's wary-even hostile-attitude towards Yemeni unification, coupled with Yemeni anxieties about the kingdom's reaction, exacerbated relations during the early 1990s. At about the same time, three additional factors came into play.

- One was the discovery in Yemen, started from the mid-1980, of modest but useful quantities of oil and natural gas;
- The second was renewed interest in the border question and
- The third was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

In combination these brought a rapid worsening of relations. Less than three months after unification, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait presented Yemen with a stark dilemma. It had long-standing links with Iraq; at the same time, it depended on remittances from Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states. Whatever Yemen decided to do, it was bound to suffer. Opting for what it saw as a middle course, Yemen simultaneously condemned the invasion of Kuwait and opposed Western military intervention arguing instead for a regional-Arab-solution. In this it differed little from several other "neutral" Arab states, but as the only Arab member of the UN Security Council at the time, Yemen possibly felt it had a special responsibility on behalf of the Arab world. In any event, was in a uniquely exposed position and its behavior came under special scrutiny.

The Oil Factor

Yemeni oil had begun to come on stream shortly before unification; by 1989 the northern firms were producing 200,000 barrels a day and proven reserves at the time were estimated at four billion barrels. Although modest in comparison with its neighbours oil resources, this gave Yemen, for the first time in its history, an independent source of wealth. Economic independence in turn held out the prospect of greater political independence because it made remittances aid from Saudi Arabia less important. Internally, oil provided a substantial new source of revenue for the central government and, since existing tax revenue was extremely low, this created an opportunity for Sana'a to increase its control over the whole country by using its funds to benefit the more wayward tribes, possibly making some of the sheikhs less susceptible to Saudi bribery. It was generally assumed that most forms of opposition and political intrigue in Yemen at the time were funded by the Saudis. There was no documentary evidence for this but the stories so widespread as to suggest they considered the main recipient of Saudi largesse.

Another important effect of oil was to increase pressure for a settlement of the largely under border with Saudi Arabia. This issue had been of little practical consequence until when Yemen discovered its first oil close to the notional line. Shortly afterwards Saudi Arab began on assert territorial claims in oil concession areas allocated by Yemen, apparently to discourage further exploration by foreign companies under Yemeni auspices. In 1991 Saudi forces reportedly chased out a party of French geologists working in the Hadramaut region. The Saudis sent warning letters to six oil companies operating in Yemen. Bar Patrolem, Atlantic Richfield, Hunt Oil, Phillip Petroleum, Elf Aquitaine and Petrol-Canada received the warnings, according to diplomats in Sana'a. Most of them appear to have ignored the threats, though BP halted drilling work on a well in the Antufash block in the Red Sea. Possibly the Saudis also feared that Yemen would use its oil wealth to acquire modern weapons, as had happened with Iraq. Although oil revenue was unlikely to be sufficient to allow Yemen to build up its armed force the way Saddam Husain had done, it did mean that for the first time Yemen would have the hard currency to buy weapons on the opens on the open market should it choose to do so. It is important however, not to over-estimate the military threat that Yemen was able to pose. Its financial resources were modest and likely to remain so; northern and southern forces were not interested into a single fighting unit; and the main functions of the armies were

- To maintain internal control ;
- And provide employment of sorts for large numbers of young men.

The Border Question

Yemen and Saudi Arabia shared one of the longest undefined borders in the world. Only a short part of the line had ever been agreed: a portion at the extreme north-western end stretching from a point just north of midi on the Najran oasis. Apart from the need for a

settlement created by oil discoveries, there were a number of reasons why the border question came to the force shortly after unification. From the Yemeni standpoint unification made the mechanic of border talks more straightforward than previously because there would be only one Yemeni government negotiating with the Saudis instead of two. There were frequent Yemeni claims of Saudi troop movements in the frontier areas. These were coincided with periods of tension or new diplomatic moves on the border question. In October 1990, Saudi Arabia announced plans to construct a multi-billion dollar “military City” near the north-western end of the border. A bizarre diplomatic incident occurred in May 1992 when a Saudi weather forecast appeared to claim that the Kharakhayr region of Hadramaut belonged to the Kingdom. As this was the birthplace of Vice-President al-Baid, it resulted in a stiff protest note from Sana’a. Further complicating issue, about the same time, the Saudis were reported to be offering Saudi citizenship to son traditionally Yemeni border tribes in Shabwa, Hadramaut and al-Mahara provinces.

On the Yemeni Side, the new unified constitution signaled a tough, uncompromising position when it stated in the opening sentence: “The Republic of Yemen is an independent sovereign state, an inviolable unit, no part of which may be relinquished.” A further, but related, issue was that the Saudis had long sought a land corridor southwards to the Arabian Sea (and hence to the Indian Ocean). Strategically, their oil exports were potentially vulnerable to a military blockade their oil exports were potentially vulnerable to a military blockade because tankers from Saudi ports had to pass through one three narrow waterways, none of which the Saudis controlled directly: the Strait of Hormuz the Gulf, and the Suez Canal and the Bab al- Mandab at each end of the Red Sea. A pipeline open sea in the south would thus provide extra security. In principles Yemen had no objection to a pipeline; the sticking point was that the Saudis, presumably for security reasons, had insisted on having full sovereignty over a strip land on either side of it.

How will Pakistan respond to the Crisis in Yemen?

Pakistan, a Sunni- majority Islamic state, maintains close defense and strategic ties with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Last week, after the air strikes began, Saudi Arabia’s state media reported that media reported that Pakistan was one of the Muslim countries outside of the Middle East that was considering providing material support. Among Muslim countries, Pakistan is perhaps the most capable military with an active nuclear weapons program and a large military-primarily to counter its greatest perceived threat from neighboring India-Pakistan is an important provider of military training and arms to Saudi Arabia’s armed forces.(Ankita Panda,2015,1-2)

According to Reuters, “Pakistan received \$1.5 billion in aid from Saudi Arabia to meet debt obligations and bolster its foreign exchange reserves. Given these factors, Pakistan’s involvement in a Saudi-led military campaign is far from unthinkable. Pakistan enjoys close and brotherly relations with Saudi Arabia and other GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries and attaches great importance to their security,” noted a statement that came out of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s office. However, over the weekend, the Pakistani foreign office noted that “rumors” of Pakistani military participation in the ongoing military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen were just that.” These are several reports in the media which are completely baseless,” Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry told the press on Saturday evening, according to Pakistan’s Geo news agency. He did note that a senior Pakistani delegation is heading to Riyadh to discuss possible options, but the country has not conclusively determined the extent of its military participation in the Saudi-led campaign.

Khawaja Asif, Pakistan’s defense minister, made it clear that no Pakistani combat troops were currently in Saudi Arabia. “We have made no decision to participate in this war. We did not make any promise. We have not promised any military support to the Saudi-led

coalition in Yemen,” Asif said. He noted, hearkening back to Pakistan’s involvement in Saudi Arabia in 1990 that Pakistan would only step in if Saudi Arabia’s territorial integrity was threatened.

Within Pakistan, Imran Khan, a prominent opposition politician who led widely destabilizing anti-government protests for the greater part of 2014, cautioned against Pakistan’s involvement in the conflict. Sharif’s government faces widespread criticism domestically for Pakistan’s ailing infrastructure and internal security situation and involvement in a far-flung foreign conflict could lead to a bad situation getting worse for his government.” Given our close ties to both Saudi-Arabia and Iran and our own internal sectarian terrorism, Pakistan must stay strictly neutral,” a lawmaker with Khan’s Tehreek-e-Insaaf party told the WSJ.

So far, the extent of Pakistan’s involvement in Yemen since Saudi air strikes began has been focused on rescuing Pakistani citizens in the country. The government evacuated 500 Pakistani Nationals from Yemen after strikes began with the use of the national airline. (Ankit Panda, 2015)

Conclusion

It is concluded in the end that Saudi Arabia and Iran have engaged in a series of proxy wars to undermine each other, some hot and some cold, throughout the Middle East. In a March 2012 article, The New York Times cited claims by unnamed US military and intelligence officials that the Quds Force, an elite arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IGRC) was smuggling significant quantities of AK-47, rocket propelled grenades, and other arms to Houthi rebels in Yemen And in January 2013, a cache of weapons seized from a ship off the coast of Yemen was reported by CNN to have Iranian markings. It included surface-to-air missiles, C-4 explosives, and other weapons, all allegedly destined for the Houthis.

FOR Saudi Arabia, which shares a porous 1,770km southern border with Yemen, the stakes there are high. According to a November 2013 article by Middle East Voices, Saudi intelligence officials consider Yemen to be the weakest security link in the Gulf and “easy prey for Tehran to penetrate and manipulate”(Martin Readon, 2015).

The meltdown in Yemen is pushing the Middle East dangerously closer to the wider regional conflagration many long have feared would arise from the chaos unleashed by the Arab Spring revolts. A new layer of unpredictability-and confusion-to the many, multidimensional conflicts that have turned large swaths of the Middle East into war Zones over the past four years (Liz Sly, 2015).

It is suggested for the regional peace and security that the international community should play role as mediator to solve the issue. War is not the solution of any problem. It may be solved through amicable means under the auspices of United Nations.

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