THE ROLE OF THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC) IN THE (DE)STABILIZATION OF YEMEN

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The current war in Yemen is a result of the failure of the political transition after the Arab Uprising in 2011. The transition deal was a result of the GCC efforts to stabilize the political situation in Yemen, although its implementation remains more than unsatisfactory. However, before its involvement in the war, the GCC had done very little to prevent eruption of the war. Some analysts have even said that the Yemeni conflict is a direct result of the regional inaction over the last few years, if not decades. This inaction was the consequence of the GCC conviction that Yemen is a weak link in the region and potential source of instability for the Arabian Peninsula as a whole. The instability in Yemen have contributed to the strengthening of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Additionally, the GCC states have perceived Yemen as a much poorer state and as the only republic which does not fit into the "monarchical Peninsula". Yet, although an uneven status of development and different political system are an indisputable fact, problems of the second largest country in the Peninsula with strategic access to the vital Bab al-Mandab strait, where the Red Sea meets the Indian Ocean, are unlikely to be ignored.

Yemen's relations with the GCC

Yemen's relations with the GCC have been poor and neglected for many years. They are worth considering since the Republic of Yemen was founded in 1990 as a result of the unification of the Northern Arab Republic of Yemen (YAR) and the southern state, the Socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), which was weakened after the collapse of its patron – the USSR. Since these days, the problems in mutual relations have occurred and have been related to the Persian Gulf War when Iraq invaded Kuwait (1990). During the war, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh supported Saddam Hussein's invasion and his confrontation with the United States and its allies. As a result, in 1990, Saudi authorities forcefully repatriated more than one million Yemeni migrant laborers for such a Yemen political stance and with other GCC states imposed restrictions on Yemeni laborers. It happened despite the fact that these migrant laborers had helped in the economic development ofthe kingdom over the years.

Another dimension of the Yemeni's relations with the GCC is sectarianism. In Yemen there are two major religious sects – Shia Zaydism (represented mostly by the Houthi, a movement from the northern Yemen also known as Ansar Allah or Partisans of God) and Sunni Shafi'ism. In 2004, the leader of the Zaydi sect launched an uprising against the Yemeni authorities. President Saleh accused the Houthis of trying to overthrow the government and the republican system while the Houthis claimed that they were defending their community against discrimination and government aggression. Saudi Arabia backed president Saleh to crush the Houthis. The Saudi authorities were concerned that the Houthis rise might inspire the Saudi Shia minority and lead to riots. The conflict between Saleh and the Houthi resulted in six wars between 2004 and 2010. Mediating efforts were undertaken by Qatar. Its

delegation helped to negotiate a ceasefire and sign a Doha agreement which was broken a few weeks thereafter. However, a few years later, during the Arab Uprising, the role of Qatar in Yemen changed. The Qatari authorities did not sign the GCC initiative (a peace plan) and were accused by Saleh of backing the conservative Islamist military groups agitating for his overthrow. Qatar was trying to reverse the unfavorable Yemeni stance toward its engagement and used its soft power by offering millions of dollars to help make reparations to former southern civil servants[1].

Another sphere of their relations is development of assistance to Yemen., The UAE remains the most active in this field. In 2009 alone, it transferred US$ 772 million for a range of sectors, including education, water and electricity projects. The UAE also provided aid commitments to the victims of internal conflicts and flooding. Apart from the UAE, also Oman offered a similar contribution (US$ 100 million). The authorities in Muscat believe that it is better to provide aid to Yemen before it joins the GCC than after the accession. Except for the financial support, Oman built a highway with Yemen which might increase opportunities for commercial relations. Oman is trying to establish a Free Zone on the border of both countries. In addition, it is a signatory of 76 agreements with Yemen and its authorities expressed a great appreciation for keeping Yemen on the GCC agenda[2].

However, the most important issue seems to be Yemen's accession to the GCC. Yemen has made many requests to join the GCC at least since 1996. The Yemeni authorities hope that inclusion of Yemen would put an end to restrictions on Yemeni laborers in the Gulf and thus, provide its youth with labor opportunities. However, Yemen's Gulf neighbors dismissed its appeals for the membership. Although they did not give a formal reason for the rejection, it is quite obvious that Yemen is much poorer than the GCC members and it is also the only republic in this club

of monarchies. Yemen was perceived by the GCC states as a fragile state with a high unemployment rate, loose borders used for trafficking weapons and militants and fledgling democratic structures (potential threats to the authoritarian sheikdoms)[3]. Nevertheless, the eruption of political situation in Yemen which started in 2011 put the issue of its accession on the table. On the one hand, the Yemeni conflict worsened the internal situation and supposedly put the accession process far away. On the other hand, Yemen's membership in the GCC started to be treated as a solution for the current crisis. Especially that Yemen has been approved by the GCC to become a member of some of its institutions, namely: GCC Standardization Authority, Gulf Organization for Industrial Consulting (GOIC), GCC Auditing and Accounting Authority, Gulf Radio and TV Authority, GCC Council of Health Ministers, GCC Education and Training Bureau, GCC Council of Labor and Social Affairs Ministers, and Gulf Cup Football Tournament. Leaving Yemen beyond the GCC structures might mean that it will turn into a dysfunctional tribal state acting as a sanctuary for al-Qaeda, the scenario that is not welcomed by any of the GCC member states.

The Arab Uprising in Yemen

The Yemeni revolution broke out in January 2011 and lasted for the next 10 months. At the beginning, members of popular protests demonstrated against high unemployment, economic conditions and corruption, after a few weeks, however, they started to demand from president Saleh to resign. This common demand united the opposition, which so far had been formed of the divided tribes – mainly – al-Hirak (the movement demanding a greater southern autonomy or independence), the Houthis (movement from the northern Yemen also known as Ansar Allah or Partisans of God) and youths. The Opposition to the

Saleh used the opportunity and started to put pressure on the regime. When more than 50 protesters were killed in March, general Ali Mohsin and Sadeq al-Ahmar formally defected to the opposition[4].

At the beginning of April 2011, the alliance of opposition parties submitted a proposal to transfer the presidential power to the vice president Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi. Although Saleh showed no reaction, on 6th April 2011, the GCC presented a mediation plan. It included the point that Saleh would transfer the power to the vice president and on April 11th he responded that he would welcome the proposal. It was different from the protester's proposal in one detail – president Saleh would be free from prosecution. As a result, the GCC prepared a formal mediation plan on April 21 , but president Saleh decided to put off the resignation and refused to sign the mediation plan. In the forthcoming weeks, government kept losing control over its territory making room for the Islamic or al-Qaida forces to increase their power. On June 3, president Saleh and the prime minister Mujawar were injured in the bombing while attending a Friday prayer. Saleh went to Saudi Arabia for treatment and when he came back in September he announced that he would not stick to the administration and would delegate power peacefully through elections.

On October 21st, the United Nations (UN) adopted a unanimous resolution calling for Saleh to sign the GCC proposal. The UN and the EU threatened to impose sanctions, thus on November 23, 2011 Saleh signed a final deal and gave the power to his vice president al-Hadi. He appointed Mohammed Basindawa, the former minister of foreign affairs, the acting prime minister on November 25 and two weeks later, on December 7, an interim government was formed. The structure of the new government included exactly the same seat divisions between the ruling and opposition party members. On February 21,2012, through a referendum a new (old) successor of president

Saleh was elected – Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi, who was the only candidate for this office[5].

To sum up, Yemen remains the only country in which popular protests in 2011 turned into negotiations on the regime change facilitated by mediation of the Gulf Cooperation Council. It is not easy to judge the GCC proposal, because on the one hand, it helped to stop the bloodshed (and a potentially prolonged civil war),; however,on the other hand, it relived president Saleh of responsibility for the death of over 2,000 protestors. For those living in the South, who lost their families during an unjust war launched by Saleh against them, this was unacceptable. For them, international powers sacrificed justice for the sake of stability. The proposal, which Saleh received immediately, was also not so attractive to him. What is more important is that the initiative was not good enough for Yemen itself, because the mechanism of power transition, which should be secured and guaranteed by the GCC, has not stabilized the Yemeni political scene.

GCC Initiative

Alongside the United Nations, the GCC intervened into the Yemeni conflict by crafting a model for a peaceful transition called the GCC initiative and the Implementation Agreement. According to the Agreement, a transition period was divided into two phases. The first phase provided presidential elections held on February 21, 2012. The second phase concerned a transformation process, which included a change of the constitution, a constitutional referendum, a reform of the political and electoral laws, parliamentary and local council elections and presidential elections if required. This phase was called "the transition period" and was expected to last 2 years.

One of the major components of the second phase of transition was the National Dialogue Conference (NDC).

Its aim was to bring together the conflicted groups and reach a national consensus. It worked during the civil war in north Yemen in the 1960s, when it was brought to an end through such a dialogue. Therefore, political elites decided to repeat this mechanism of reaching an agreement. Unfortunately, the rivalry between the elite factions for their own interests paralyzed the process. A proposed dialogue did not include all the social and political groups, but rather the dominant elite that was over-represented, such as – president Hadi, the alliance of the Ahmar family[6], general Ali Mohsin and the family of the former president Saleh.

This political rivalry and internal divisions on the Yemeni political scene played a destructive role for the state's stabilization. A dominant division was the Houthi-Hadi division. The Houthis cooperated with Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) against Hadi and other adversaries despite fraught history, having fought six wars against each other. The anti-Houthi bloc is composed of Hadi and the Hiraak, yet the relations between them are very tenuous. Southern separatists resent his pro-unity stance and after unsuccessful three years in office perceive him as a weak and ineffective leader. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are other players on the stage. They are responsible for attacks on the Houthis, whom they view as Shiite infidels, and on the state authorities, from whom they want to grab the territory. These groups benefit from the state collapse the most. There is also a traditional Sunni-Shiite division, where the former are represented by Shafi'i in the central, southern and western parts of Yemen, and the latter are represented by Zaydis (Shiites) in the northern highlands[7].

As a result, the NDC could not achieve its most important goal – to reconcile the conflicting groups. The NDC ended in January 2014 with general principles to guide a constitutional reform but without a consensus over power

sharing between particular groups and with no resolution of the state structure, particularly the status of the South. The GCC started to be perceived in Yemen more like a representative of the political elites rather than youth from the streets, the Houthi (from the North) and the Hiraak (from the South) movements, who had in fact caused the transfer of power.

It is worth quoting general Ali Mohsen, who defected to the opposition and helped in organizing protests against Saleh in a better way. According to him, sons of Saleh and his administration,still in charge, are the major obstacles preventing any forward movement: "The problem now is that there are groups that do not want to implement the initiative or that want to break it for their own purposes. The Houthis, the Hiraak and Iran are working together against the GCC initiative. These groups want a different revolution in Yemen, and they are being supported by the remnants of the old regime .... Saleh is still causing problems and he should leave the country"[8].

This is also confirmed by a Huthi sympathizer who was asked, "What is positive about the GCC initiative and has anything good come out of Saudi Arabia in Yemen?". He answered that outside interests generally never serve Yemeni interests. Yemen needs a national program for change, not the GCC initiative. The GCC initiative does not address the issues of the people. Instead, it solely addresses the issues that matter to political parties, the parties that ruled in the past and do not represent the people. The agreement will bring Yemen to a worse situation, especially because it opens the country to the U.S. intervention against terrorism and Al-Qaeda cells.

These opinions confirm that political interests of particular Yemeni groups are so complex that finding any compromise between their demands will be more than difficult. As rival camps seek to protect their interests and undermine their rivals, the contours of their struggle have

changed, but not its fundamental nature or the identity of its protagonists. Likewise, the underlying political economy of corruption has remained virtually untouched. The same families retain control of most of the country's resources while relying on the patronage networks and dominating decision-making in the government, military and political parties.

To sum up, the initiative led to a successful handover of presidency from Saleh to an interim leader Mansur al-Hadi, but at the same time, everything that happened after the transfer of power might be perceived as a defeat of the Gulf States. The GCC members were not deeply involved in the process and played only a limited role in the power turnover because they had other preoccupations. Saudi Arabia, for example, was consumed with supporting Egypt's own leadership change, and other Gulf countries were attempting to topple President Bashar al Assad's regime in Syria. The GCC initiative collapsed also because it was not accompanied with a quick economic and aid plan. Needless to say, any political deal that does not make the economy and aid delivery its priority before addressing any political issue is ultimately going to fail. As long as fighting groups have access to weapons, the security and humanitarian conditions will continue to deteriorate. This means that Yemeni borders need to be consolidated and groups need to be cut off from gun deliveries. If securing Saleh's peaceful exit from the presidency was challenging, implementing the remainder of the agreement would be even more difficult.

Military intervention

The GCC road map started to lead Yemen nowhere. Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, in July 2014, the Hadigovernment lifted fuel subsidies. The Houthi movement organized mass protests demanding

lower fuel prices and a new government. The clashes between the Houthi and the Hadi supporters resulted in September 2014 in the Houthi invasion on Sanaa, the capital. As a result of seizing the presidential palace by the Houthi forces, president Hadi and his Cabinet resigned after having been put under a virtual house arrest. In March 2015, president Hadi managed to escape from house arrest and reinstalled the offices in Aden. He denounced the Houthi takeover as an unconstitutional *coup d'état*. The Houthis appointed a "revolutionary council" and officially marched south to prevent Aden from becoming an al-Qaeda haven. In reallity, they threated president Hadi who was staying in the city.

On 24th March 2015, Hadi called on the UN Security Council to authorize willing countries that wish to help Yemen to provide legitimate authority and protect Yemen from the Houthi aggression. A day after Hadi fled Yemen to Saudi Arabia in a boat , the Houthi forces advanced on Aden. On 26th March 2015, the Saudi-led military operation called "Decisive Storm" began contributing to the conflict escalation. The aim of the campaign, which is still ongoing, is to support Yemeni military troops that are loyal to the internationally recognized government of president Hadi. The intervention of the GCC and Arab League members was justified by the UN Resolution 2216 (2015) of April 14, April 2015, which demanded that "the Houthis should end violence and refrain from further unilateral actions that threatened the political transition ... the Council also demanded that the Houthis withdraw from all areas seized during latest conflict, relinquish arms seized from military and security institutions, cease all actions falling exclusively within the authority of the legitimate Government of Yemen and fully implement previous Council resolution"[9]. The speed at which a ten-country coalition[10] was formed and mobilized is unprecedented in the Arab World. The coalition sent a clear message to many actors

regionally and globally, especially those who had doubted the Arab unity and decisiveness, i.e. that the Arab World is willing and able to control its own destiny, protect its own interests, and prevent the collapse of another Arab state.

Pro-Hadi Yemeni fighters were provided with weapons, equipment and the necessary military training. The biggest quantities of heavy weapons, armored vehicles and ammunition were delivered by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Troops from the Arab countries provided pro-Hadi forces with training in operating weaponry and equipment that have been supplied. The Arab support included also first aid which was provided through ships and planes[11].

Saudi Arabia took the leadership on the coalition of states as its authorities expressed concerns that the Houthi were supported by Yemeni armed forces loyal to former president Saleh and started to pose a threat to Saudi security as some clashes and missiles attack began on the Yemeni-Saudi border. It also posed a risk thatnew Shiite (Zaydi) government, which will be supported by Iran and this was unacceptable for Saudi regime, may be created beyond Saudi border. The Iran threat perception expressed particularly by the Saudis was intensified by the nuclear negotiations with the Iranian authorities led by P5+1 (the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China plus Germany). A comparison was drawn between Yemen and Lebanon and a threat of constituting a Hezbollah-like entity from the Houthi movement[12] was formulated. There appeared voices saying that the intervention is the next step of Saudi Arabia on the way to regional dominance.

The air campaign and naval and air blockade caused harm to more civilians than the Houthis. This changed when the UAE led a ground invasion to recapture Aden. It quickly succeeded with the support of the local Yemeni fighters allied with Hadi. Battle lines began to move

toward the north with an aim of crushing the Houthis and its base in Sanaa. In February 2016, intense battles ensued approximately 70 km north east of Sanaa. However, simultaneously al-Qaeda and the Islamic State campaign was launched in the South. These non-state actors captured next cities and provinces, as well as allies and recruits. This rivalry is harbinger of further violence.

Consequences and future prospects for Yemen

The military campaign that the Saudi-led coalition began in March 2015 was easy to start but it will be more difficult to end or to stabilize the situation after the conflict. The most challenging problems which led to violence are still unresolved and they were worsened by the war. The biggest problem and challenge is a political fragmentation of Yemen. There are autonomy and secessionist demands which have increased, especially in the south. There are two governments: one in Sanaa run by the Houthis, one in Aden, internationally recognized and associated with President Hadi. Both are ineffective and not representative of the majority of Yemeni citizens. This difficult political situation has at least two major inter-related obstacles which are related : sectarianism and the Iranian-Saudi proxy war.

Sectarianism or religious divisions have historically been of limited importance in Yemen. Despite the presence of two major religious groups (the Zaydi Shia Muslim in the north and the Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i school in the south and east) divisions between them have internal and endemic character driven by political rather than religious disparities. But after the Arab Uprising 2011, sectarian discourse has become more visible dividing Yemeni society along sectarian lines. Religious groups started to use sectarian discourse which has led to polarization and relying on language borrowed from the Sunni-Shia conflicts in Syria, Iraq or Lebanon. The Houthis are called the Persians

or Twelver Shia and anti-Houthi leader Hussein al-Ahmar called himself "the powerful lion of the Sunnis"[13]. Sectarianism has inflamed the conflict and served the Saudi-Iranian proxy war for dominance in the region.

Both states support different sides of the conflict – the Houthis receive support from Iran, while Hadi followers receive backing from Saudi Arabia. However, their presence in Yemen is not a precedence. The interference of the Saudi Arabia and the US in Yemen occurred in the last decade. The support of these two powers to the autocratic Saleh regime occurred in the context of close cooperation with Yemeni president on counterterrorism efforts after al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula had established its main base in Yemen and conducted a terrorist attack on the United States Navy guided-missile destroyer USS Cole on October 12, 2000 in Aden. Saudi Arabia also supported Saleh efforts to install Salafists in place of Zaydi imams in mosques in northern Yemen and with the US backed his fight against the Houthis in six wars between 2004 and 2010. Antiterrorism campaign with US-led program of drone strikes in Yemen was a vital driver of increasing extremism.

Iran is on the opposite side of the proxy war in Yemen. It is widely believed that authorities in Tehran provide the Houthi fighters with financial and training support, using another Iranian proxy – the Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran also recruits leftists and political groups, which were left behind by the GCC brokered power transfer deal, particularly in the south. But beyond all the wars Yemen is for Iran a useful low-cost way to keep the Saudis engaged in one more regional power battle. This war will divert Saudi's attention from wars in Syria and Iraq, which have more strategic meaning for Iran, at least because of their proximity. However, Saudi Arabia seems to exaggerate Iran's power in Yemen to justify its own expansionist ambitions.

Above all, the proxy war is not the cause and the driver of the conflict. The problems which led to the violence are

still unresolved and were made even worse by the war. Economic and security conditions of average Yemenis deteriorate. As a result, Yemen is suffering from a humanitarian crisis likely to trigger catastrophic famine and refuge flows that would further destabilize the region. The Saudi-Yemeni border could be under the pressure of millions of people trying to cross the border to find jobs, order and livelihood.

These poor living standards, political marginalization and weak government are the reasons for political and military rise of the Houthis. Unless some improvements are made, the ideological and political defeat of the movement will not be reached, even if they lose on the battlefield. The longer the conflict lasts the more difficult it will be to resume the negotiations. And, beyond all, dialogue is the only way forward[14]. The role of mediator would be played by more neutral players such as Oman and the European Union. They could demand an immediate ceasefire and also ensure that there is an adequate flow of food and medical supplies to the country. These neutral players could also renew their commitment toward Yemen by placing economic and local priorities before regional rivalries. The most critical issue in Yemen at the moment is that more than half of its population is starving[15].

NOTES

1. P. Salisbury, *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War',* Middle East and North Africa Program, February 2015, p. 10.
2. E. Burke, *One blood and one destiny Yemen's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council,* Kuwait Program on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States, no.23, June 2012, p. 14-16.
3. More about threats and risks which flow from Yemen read: T. Juneau, *Yemen: prospects for state failure – implications and remedies*, Middle East Policy, vol. XVII, no. 3, Fall 2010.
4. M. Transfeld, *Yemen: GCC roadmap to nowhere*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit; Berlin, 2014, p. 7.

5. H. Sato, "A proper application of the «Arab Spring» – the Republic of Yemen", [in:] H. Suzuki (ed.), *The Middle East Turmoil and Japanese Response For a Sustainable Regional Peacekeeping System*, Chiba 2013, p.19.
6. Is a Yemeni multimillionaire businessman and politician currently living in exile after fleeing Yemen during the Houthi takeover of Sana'a September 2014. He is the former general secretary of the Preparatory Committee of the National Dialogue for the JMP and a member of opposition party Yemeni Congregation for Reform, commonly known as Islah.
7. *Yemen at War*, Crisis Group Middle East Briefing, no. 45, 27 March 2015, p. 4–5.
8. *Yemen: enduring conflicts, threatened transition*, Middle East Report N° 125 – 3 July 2012, p. 12.
9. Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015), 14 April 2015, p. 3.
10. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, and Sudan. Oman is the only GCC state which is not taking part in the military campaign.
11. A. Mitreski, *Civil war in Yemen. A complex conflict with multiple futures*, Doha 2015, p. 3.
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13. F.al-Muslimi, *How Sunni-Shia sectarianism is poisoning Yemen*, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=62375, [20.02.2016].
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