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Special Report

Yemen Starts to Fracture, But is the Biggest Strategic Loss to the US?

The differentiation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the UAE and Oman ... the impact on Bahrain ... the uncertainties of the proposed pax Russo-Sinica in the Gulf ... and the prospect of a new opening for the US?

Analysis. By Gregory R. Copley, Editor, GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs. The war in Yemen has now proven to be a key trigger for the reduction of the US' 70-year strategic dominance of the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula.

This is despite the fact that the US had only minor involvement in, or control over, the war prosecuted under Saudi Arabian leadership against Yemeni Houthi forces.

The full history has yet to be written, but Saudi Arabia's *de facto* recognition of its defeat in Yemen — Riyadh cannot formally admit defeat because of the domestic and regional consequences of that act — is one underlying cause of Washington's dilemma. But it is also proving to be a complex point of change for others in the region, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Bahrain, as well as Yemen itself.

There is also little doubt that the recent loose *entente* created in early 2019 between Iran, Turkey, and Qatar will also play a rôle.¹

The break-up of Yemen — at the very least into shapes resembling the lines of the old Yemen Arab Republic (YAR: North Yemen) and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY: South Yemen) — now seems certain and imminent. And along with that, Saudi Arabia seems likely to see a distinct cooling *or differentiation* in its relationship with the UAE, the one ally which had borne the brunt of the fighting in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia cannot actually acknowledge defeat in Yemen because this would leave it open to an escalation of unrest and insurgency in its own territory, spearheaded by Yemeni Zaidi Shi'a communities, such as the Houthis, but joined by dissident Saudi Shi'as and other minorities.² Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin 'Abd al-'Aziz al Sa'ud (aka MBS) has essentially thrown himself on the mercy of Beijing and Moscow, so that the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia would cause Iran to restrain itself and its Yemeni allies from moving against the Kingdom.³

The US, because of its own current conflict with Iran, cannot offer the same leverage with Tehran as can Beijing and Moscow.

Moscow and Beijing were happy to oblige MBS, and in so doing also strengthened the regional hand of Tehran. It remains unclear whether this would be enough to save the clerical Government of Iran from the widespread and ongoing unrest from citizens, unhappy with food shortages and food prices.

US support for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which launched the war in Yemen in 2015, had been discreet, but consistent in the provision of matériel, intelligence, and selective operational support, but that was not the reason for the turning point. The turning point began to occur because Saudi Arabia had neither the stomach nor inherent military strength to continue to wage its protracted war in Yemen, even though it had relied overwhelmingly on its coalition of allies to conduct the bulk of the serious ground operations there.

The US Government (both the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations) might have spared itself the criticism of the media and Congress had it discontinued support for MBS's war, but the US economy would have suffered from the possible loss of many tens of billions of dollars' worth of Saudi military and commercial orders. US Pres. Donald Trump has made it clear that he was well aware of this.

What was more important for the US than the defense linkages and high-tech sales to the Kingdom, however, was the fact that Saudi Arabia had represented the anchor strategic "real estate" for the US in the region, spanning the Arabian Peninsula for reach into the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Even more important than having Saudi Arabia as an ally was Washington's need to deny it as a base to either Russia or the PRC, or Iran. No-one in Washington, DC, truly remembers the time when both Saudi Arabia and Iran were stable, well-led, and reliable allies of the US during the time Faisal ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz al Sa'ud was King of Saudi Arabia, and the Shah Reza Pahlavi ruled in Iran, both balanced by US Pres. Richard Nixon (1969-74).

Pres. Nixon's Treasury Secretary William Simon in 1974 struck a then-secret deal with King Faisal to have the Kingdom buy US Treasury certificates, which locked Saudi Arabia into the US economy while also locking the US into supporting Saudi Arabia. In April 2016, the Kingdom indicated that it could start selling of \$750-million in US Treasuries and other assets if the US passed legislation holding Saudi Arabia liable in US courts for the September 11, 2001, attacks on the New York World Trade Center and the Defense Department in Washington, DC.

Should that threat from Saudi Arabia re-emerge at, for example, the behest of the PRC as a tool in the ongoing US-PRC "trade war", then it could have a decisively negative economic impact on the US, particularly if it came before the November 2020 US Presidential election. It would accelerate the decline of the power of the petrodollar in energy transactions, and increase the likelihood of *yuan-* and *ruble-*denominated energy transactions. So while the US Trump Administration had suffered considerable domestic political attack for its loyalty to Saudi Arabia during the Kingdom's highly unpopular war against Yemen, it now faces the prospect of a collapse of Saudi support for the US dollar. All to no avail for Washington.

The fact that MBS discovered that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had almost certainly met in Baghdad with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif at the end of the first week of May 2019 seemed to be the final straw. MBS believed that the Trump Administration was negotiating to strike a deal with Iran which would leave Saudi Arabia out in the cold. He immediately began working with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, his close friend, *Sheikh* Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (aka MBZ), to find another ally which could protect them against Iran. They chose the PRC and Russia, as Yossef Bodansky outlined in his [August 12, 2019](#), report, “The Dawn of the Chinese Gulf”.

In reality, Trump was attempting to help bring Iran back into the mainstream, which would automatically have helped safeguard Saudi Arabia. But MBS, suffering from an increasing lack of control over the Yemeni situation, panicked, and sought an immediate solution.

Whether MBS would now get an acceptable solution is questionable. It may not even be possible for Iran, should it so desire, to rein in the Houthis and stop the potential unrest spreading into the Shi'a regions of Saudi Arabia. Once the scent of weakness is abroad in the land, and prestige of governance is lost, then the motivation for insurrection boils over.

And Saudi Arabia's performance in the war in Yemen since 2015 had continually eroded the prestige of the Kingdom, and of Prince Mohammed bin Salman (first as Minister of Defense and then also, as of 2017, as Crown Prince). Saudi Arabia's allies openly sneered at the performance, or lack of it, by Saudi Ground Forces in Yemen. And then the split began to appear between the objectives in Yemen of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Now, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia flirt — via Beijing and Moscow — with appeasement toward Iran, the Kingdom of Bahrain, which had been an effective military ally in the Saudi Coalition in Yemen, was itself left in the cold. Iran's present leadership is bent on overturning the full support for Bahraini independence given by the late Shah of Iran's Foreign Minister, Ardeshir Zahedi, in 1971, when the British withdrew for a time from “east of Suez”.

But the warm alliance between the UAE and Saudi Arabia is undergoing severe stress, despite the friendship of MBS and MBZ.

It has been long abrewing.

What is emerging, and is a key underlying aspect of the trend, is the reality that the UAE's geostrategic outlook has been shaped by the concentration of power in Abu Dhabi. This is propelling MBZ, aged 58, toward eventual leadership of Abu Dhabi and thus the UAE as a whole. The fact that he was a schoolmate of Morocco's King Mohammed VI (MBZ was at the Royal Academy, Rabat, until he was 10) may have something to do with the encouraging Morocco in recent years to have been a discreet but consistent member of the Coalition fighting in Yemen. [Morocco ended its participation in the Coalition in 2019 due to deterioration of Morocco–Saudi relations, and this may also be interpreted as reflective of the Moroccan-UAE relations.]

The present President of the UAE (and current *Emir* of Abu Dhabi), His Highness *Sheikh* Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, 70, the half brother of MBZ, had a

stroke in 2014, after which his profile in decisionmaking was lowered, and key governance decisionmaking was assumed by MBZ. Thus, MBZ has assumed *de facto* leadership of the UAE, just as his friend, MBS, has assumed *de facto* leadership of Saudi Arabia in the face of his own father's — King Salman's — incapacity.

In all of this, the trend toward the strategic disenfranchisement by Abu Dhabi of other states of the UAE federation (Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm Al Quwain) has contributed toward the evolution of a new view within the leadership of the UAE as to its rôle in regional and world affairs. Within that, even the once economically-dominant Dubai has been tamed. Abu Dhabi is the center and capital of the UAE, and power is finally concentrated in the center as the UAE has moved from its initial confederation as a structure, to federation now dominated by its center. That this has coincided with the rise of MBZ is unsurprising. He has proven to be an adept military commander since graduating from the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, UK, in April 1979. He is formally Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the UAE Armed Forces (the Emir is Commander-in-Chief, but taking little command responsibility at present), and had served in key military positions, particularly rising to the position of Commander of the Air Force and Air Defense.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed has emerged as having put whatever decisiveness of leadership has been shown in the Coalition military operations in Yemen.

There is no question that the UAE now sees itself as a strategic power in its own right in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, and this has been compounded by the reality seen in Abu Dhabi of Saudi Arabia's inability to recover from its declining circumstances, not just in Yemen, but domestically and regionally.

Some of the antecedents of the differing geostrategic objectives between the UAE and Saudi Arabia lay in the creation of the "Southern Transitional Council" (STC: *al-Majlis al-Intiqālī l-Janūbiyy*) in Aden on May 11, 2017, with former Aden Governor Aidarus al-Zoubaidi as president, and with former Minister of State Hani Bin Breik as vice-president. There were 26 announced members of the STC, including the governors of five southern Yemeni governorates (Dhale, Shabwah, Hadhramaut, Lahij, Socotra, and Al Mahrah) and two government ministers. Apart from the territory controlled by the five governors, the STC also had partial control of Abyan and Aden governorates.

The STC was formed as a faction of the Southern Movement, *al-Hirak al-Janoubi* (or South Yemen Movement, colloquially known as *al-Hirak*), which had been itself formed in 2007 during the tenure of then-Pres. Ali Abdullah Saleh. It called for the re-separation of southern Yemen in the boundaries which existed until 1990. The STC originally positioned itself alongside the Saudi-led coalition which intervened in Yemen in 2015, but on April 27, 2017, then Aden Governor Maj.-Gen. Aidarus Qassem Abdulaziz al-Zoubaidi was dismissed by incoming Yemen Pres. (and Saudi ally) Abd al-Rab Mansour al-Hadi for disloyalty to him.

That led to major rallies in Aden to protest the dismissal, further leading to the formation of the STC on May 11, 2017. On May 12, 2017, Pres. Hadi called the council illegitimate. Significantly, Maj.-Gen. Aidarus Qassem al-Zoubaidi had been the "Southern Resistance Supreme Commander", and had been loyal to Maj.-Gen. Hadi — later Vice-President and then President of Yemen — throughout the Yemeni civil war.

Then, on January 28, 2018, STC forces seized control of the Yemen Government headquarters in a *coup d'état* attempt against the Hadi-led Government. By January 30, 2018, STC forces claimed that they had control of all of Aden. However, the city remained fractured and home to militias of different persuasions. The Government of Pres. Hadi only nominally functioned from Aden. In reality, the President and most of his Cabinet were — and remain — in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

By early July 2019, it had become clear that the Saudi-led Coalition fighting in Yemen was now unable or unwilling to do anything other than to help retain some credibility for the “internationally-recognized Government” of Yemen Pres. Abd al-Rab Mansour al-Hadi. Hadi, a South Yemeni, had done little to help himself, Yemen, or his allies. Meanwhile, the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates began working toward an “exit plan” from much of the fighting in Yemen.

In July 2019, the United Arab Emirates — which had provided the bulk of the fighting force for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen — said it was “drawing down and redeploying troops”, but said that it remained committed to the coalition and to the Hadi Government. Coalition members such as the UAE and Bahrain had felt that they needed to hold the ground in Yemen to offset Iranian projection there. Now, influence from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had been to bring some kind of discreet mediation between the UAE and Iran, possibly lessening its concerns over Yemen. Even Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman began heeding the Beijing line, which offered to balance regional relations between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula states, as US Pres. Richard Nixon once did.

Meanwhile, neither the old “North Yemen” nor the old “South Yemen” seemed to have any unifying, strong leadership or specific plan. Both had become fractured. There was no Saudi “leadership” in either the war or in finding goals for Yemen. Only Iran was escalating its capabilities, directly, and via the Houthi groups. It is possible that the UAE is, discreetly, accepting of a continuing rôle by Iran in supporting the Houthi in Upper Yemen, allowing the UAE to rise strategically to compensate for the decline of Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, there has been a major doctrinal cause of the schism between the Saudi and UAE approaches to the Yemen war. While both support a Sunni-oriented solution in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has traditionally supported anti-tribal elements, such as *jihadists* or Islamists, while the UAE has worked to support tribal leaders, operating under the STC. These are diametrically-opposed approaches.

On August 12-13, 2019, a delegation led by Mohammed Abd al-Salam, the Spokesman of the *Ansar Allah* Movement (the Houthi movement) in Yemen, visited Tehran and met with senior Iranian officials, including the Supreme Leader of Iran, *Ayatollah* Ali Khamene’i. Mohammed Abd al-Salam delivered a letter from the Houthi leader, Abdul Malik Baddreddin, to Khamene’i. The Iranian leader condemned Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for the “crimes” they were committing in Yemen, alleging that they strove to partition Yemen. He called for dialogue between the different groups in Yemen to ensure its territorial integrity. Khamene’i also condemned the apathy of the West toward the crimes committed in Yemen and Palestine.

Early in August 2019, STC forces regained control of Aden. But then forces loyal to Pres. Hadi on August 28, 2019, claimed to have taken back control of Aden from the

STC forces, which, by now, had received the backing of the United Arab Emirates. They also re-took control of Aden International Airport. Government forces had, hours earlier, pushed the UAE-backed and trained separatist élite militia wing of the STC, known as the Security Belt Forces, out of the city of Zinjibar, the capital of southern Abyan province, following clashes which left at least one fighter dead and 30 wounded.

The separatists had seized Zinjibar earlier in August 2019. The Security Belt had fought against *Islah*, *al-Qaida* in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's Yemeni branch. By August 29, 2019, the STC said that some of its troops — the Giants Brigade — positioned on the outskirts of the Red Sea port city of Hodeidah, presently under Houthi control, had returned to Aden to join the battle against Hadi's forces.

Reports from Aden on August 29, 2019, indicated that UAE Air Force combat aircraft had bombed Hadi Government forces just outside Aden, killing 40 and injuring 100 troops. This, if proven, further exacerbated the split between Saudi Arabia, which backs Hadi, and the UAE, which has backed the STC.

So the outcome in the new South Yemen is likely to be decided in Abu Dhabi, and the “internationally-recognized Government” of Yemen Pres. Abd al-Rab Mansour al-Hadi will not figure in its future. Hadi, in any event, had been a weak, ineffective, and uncharismatic factor from the beginning, and had only risen to the status of Vice-President under Yemen President Field Marshal 'Ali 'Abdullah Saleh *because* he was not seen as a leader, even among southern Yemenis.

So the UAE's effective creation of a new South Yemeni Government can be expected to embarrass Saudi Arabia, which hosts the Hadi Government, just as it hosts the former governing royal families displaced when the communist PDRY was created from the patchwork of Hadhramauti and other tribal states of the Federation of South Arabia.

A key question arises, however, as to where the borders between the “new South Yemen” and the “new North Yemen” will settle. If they return not to PDRY-YAR lines, but something like the old lines when Britain created the Federation of South Arabia (which collapsed when the UK withdrew in 1965), then the “new North Yemen” could embrace what was, until 1965 or so the regions of “Upper Yemen” and “Lower Yemen”, with the latter extending its coastal control down the Al Hujariya Region to a coastal point facing the volcanically-created and largely unvegetated Perim Island, which divides the 32km-wide entrance to the Red Sea at the Bab-el-Mandeb.

The UAE supports a separation of the largely Sunni South Yemen, where it has the potential for significant influence, from the largely Shi'a North, where it can have little impact. And with the UAE dominating the new South Yemen and the island of Socotra, which guards the egress of the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean, it can exert, it feels, some influence over the Sultanate of Oman which sits between the UAE and Southern Yemen.

There has been growing tension between the UAE and Oman, particularly escalating in 2018, as the UAE appeared to have decided to take advantage of the protracted illness of Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id al-Said. It is clear, however, that despite any Beijing/Moscow-brokered *rapprochement* between Iran and the UAE/Saudi Arabia, Tehran

would on principle firmly support Oman in any clash with its neighbors. So, too, almost certainly would the US and UK, and probably Qatar and Bahrain. Strange bedfellows, perhaps, but all with historical loyalties to Muscat, or at least varying degrees of preference for Oman over Saudi Arabia.

What is emerging is that the UAE sees itself moving further to differentiate itself from Saudi Arabia, and potentially dominating both the southern littoral of the Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, and the northern (actually eastern) littoral of the Bab-el-Mandeb at the mouth of the Red Sea. At present, the UAE already effectively occupies, militarily, the southern Yemeni offshore island of Socotra, where the USSR had built a substantial air base (from which the UAE has been conducting air operations as part of the Yemen war).

In all of this, it has been unsurprising that the UAE has discreetly been conducting information warfare campaigns — allegedly resolved in 2018, but clearly long-simmering — designed to disenfranchise Oman from being seen as the legitimate sovereign controller of Ras Musandam, Oman's exclave governorate which actually sits at the tip of land which represents the southern littoral of the Hormuz Strait. Musandam Governorate also includes a further small coastal exclave — the 75 sq.km. Wādī Madhā' — south of the larger Ras Musandam.

The question at this point is whether the Saudi and UAE attempt at switching expectations of strategic support from Washington to Beijing/Moscow would, in fact, be as helpful as they desire in withdrawing the threat to both countries from Iran. In other words, would Iran transfer its allegiance from its historical ally, the Ibadi Muslim Oman, to the Sunni Muslim UAE or the Wahhabi Sunni Muslim Saudi leadership?

There seems little doubt that Tehran — whether controlled by the Shah, as it was until 1979, or the Shi'a clerics as it has been subsequently — would find a way to exert a dominating and expedient friendship with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In other words, peace on Tehran's terms. But that is unlikely to result in Tehran abandoning its allies in Oman and northern Yemen.

At the end, then, is whether — by seeking a "truce" with Iran — the UAE and Saudi Arabia might still find that Iran would want to regain its dominance over (although not necessarily absorption of) the Kingdom of Bahrain. The UAE had, in early 2011, sent military and police support (as did Saudi Arabia) to Bahrain to help calm Iranian-instigated anti-Government riots. Under the anticipated new regime between Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Beijing, would they be able to continue to support Bahraini independence?

Bahrain certainly showed its support for Saudi Arabia and the UAE by becoming a highly-effective player in air power and ground force terms in the war in Yemen. This was partly motivated by Bahrain's concern over Iran's engagement in Yemen, but more to show solidarity with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

However, as this scenario unfolds, Bahrain is seeing a growing cause for concern in neighboring Qatar's alliance with Iran, and in the UAE's and Saudi Arabia's willingness to embrace a *pax Russo-Sinica* in the Gulf. This leaves Bahrain as increasingly de-

pendent on, and supportive of, the US and (to a lesser extent) UK positions in the region.

There is some suggestion, given the constraints which Qatar has put on the use of US forces at its al-Udeid Air Base near Doha, that the US may already be considering transfer of some key US Central Command (USCENTCOM) assets and missions from al-Udeid to Bahrain, where the US Navy's Fifth Fleet is based (under CENTCOM), along with the international, US-led, 33-nation Maritime Forces Command.

And, in all of this, then, is there an opening for the US to abandon the baggage of Yemen, and re-assert its rôle and influence in the Persian Gulf? And what of the fate of MBS as this falls into place? Can the PRC and Moscow sustain him? And will they wish to?

Footnotes:

1. See, Bodansky, Yossef: "A New 'Middle Eastern Entente' Shakes Moscow and Washington", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [March 27, 2019](#).
 2. See, Bodansky, Yossef: "Iran Moves at Highest Level to Support the Newly-Declared 'Republic of Eastern Arabia'", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [May 18, 2009](#).
 3. See, Bodansky, Yossef: "The Dawn of the Chinese Gulf: Saudi Arabia and the UAE move away from the US as Iran cements its ties with Beijing and Moscow", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [August 12, 2019](#).
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