

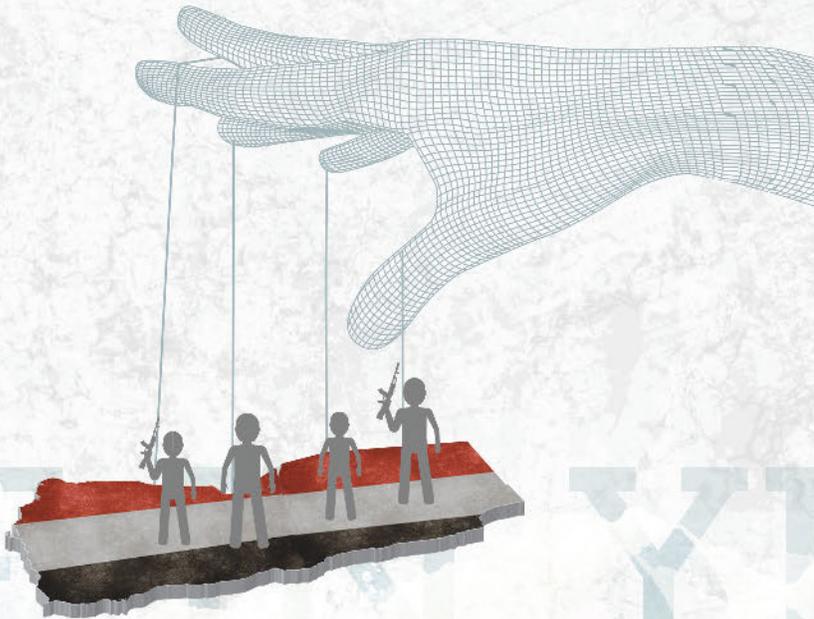


Arabian Gulf Centre  
for Iranian Studies  
AGCIS

A STUDY

# THE IRANIAN ROLE IN YEMEN

AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE REGIONAL SECURITY



MOHAMMAD HASSAN AL-QADHI



# **THE IRANIAN ROLE IN YEMEN** and its Implications on the Regional Security

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**Arabian Gulf Centre**  
for Iranian Studies

Publisher



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**THE IRANIAN ROLE IN YEMEN**  
and its Implications on the Regional Security

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he Iranian role in Yemen has always been debatable over its nature, size, and goals. Many years before 2011, there were several indications concerning Iran's interference in Yemen's internal affairs via support given to the Houthi rebels in their conflict with the legitimate government in Sana and to some movements in the South to break up with the North of Yemen. The Iranian political and media support to the Houthis and to some movements in Southern Yemen were undeniable, but the military and financial support were doubtful and could not be proven easily. However, this situation has changed since 2011. The Iranian support to rebels in Yemen has become open and its interference in this country increased due to the chaotic conditions that accompanied the Yemeni revolution that resulted in the overthrow of the Ali Saleh regime. These conditions paved the way for Iran to enhance its role and expand its influence in Yemen and many reports and evidences have emerged regarding Iran's activities and support given to its proxies in this country- mainly the Houthis who come from the same sect and ideology of Iran.

Considering Iran's focus on the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, Iran looked at Yemen as a key point of interest to strengthen its status in the region and face its rival regional and international powers-especially the United States of America. Hence, Iran strove to play an active role in Yemen, relying hard power represented by pragmatic, sectarian, and ideological considerations and soft power represented by establishing partnership with active non-state players like Hezbollah and the Houthis to adjust the balance of power to enhance its influence in Yemen and in the neighboring regional countries, which have raised concerns about the impact of the Iranian role in Yemen on domestic and regional security.

This study analyzes the Iranian role in Yemen and its impact on regional security based on the following four assumptions:

- » There is a negative relationship between Iran's role in Yemen and regional security. This role goes beyond the usual institutional channels and official relations between Iran and Yemen. Iran relies on non-state players in Yemen by attracting some groups and factions of the same sect and ideology to promote division and instability to change political arrangements and equilibriums.
- » The Iranian interference in Yemen- as in other regional countries- has been established on Iran's security concerns and its desire to maintain its national security by adopting offensive policies to change the balance of power. These policies aim to achieve Iran's national security interests in a zero-sum equation, which means undermining the security of other countries or the security of the whole region.
- » The political vacuum resulting from fragility and weakness of the Yemeni state will pave the way for Iran to expand its influence and achieve its goals in this country. Indeed, Iran aims to enable its proxy groups to take complete control of Yemen or drag the country into more chaos that opens the door for Tehran to expand its influence in Yemen and undermine security and stability in the regional countries.
- » The Iranian role in Yemen is not absolute. It is bound by several obstacles and limitations that diminishes its possibility to succeed and achieve all its goals. These limitations are related to the internal conditions in Yemen, while others are related to Iran's own capabilities.

Based on these assumptions, this study handles the Iranian role in Yemen and its impact on regional security through analyzing eight aspects: 1. The “Concept” that includes a definition of the “Role” and its determinants and “Regional Security” with reference to the negative external interference factor as a threat to security and stability 2. Evolution of Iran’s role in Yemen, knowing that the historic background is the framework of this role. 3. Motives and goals of Iran’s role in Yemen. 4. Tools of the Iranian role in Yemen, including soft power and hard power. 5. The regional and international position towards the Iranian role in Yemen- especially the United States of America, the Russian Federation, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. 6. The limitations of the Iranian role in Yemen. 7. The impact of the Iranian role in Yemen on regional security, including the regional balance of power, stability of the social and political structures in the regional neighboring countries, security of the international sea routes, and the growing threat of extremist organizations. 8. The future of the Iranian role in Yemen and possible scenarios.

**Mohammad Hassan Al-Qadhi**

Cairo, November 22, 2017



## **CHAPTER ONE**

The Iranian Role in Yemen:  
Methodological Approach

## CHAPTER ONE

### **The Iranian Role in Yemen: Methodological Approach**

To discuss Iran's role in Yemen and its impact on regional security, we have to identify the concept of "Role" in foreign policy and its most significant determinants with reference to the negative external interference as a threat to security and stability.

#### **First: The Concept of "Role" and its determinants**

"Role" is one of the key concepts in analyzing foreign policy. Countries adopt positive roles (i.e. cooperation, development, and supporting security and stability) or negative roles (i.e. conflict, hegemony, and tension) on both regional and international levels based on their interests, expediencies, and ideological considerations. They rely on their national capabilities and the views of foreign policy makers on the role their country should adopt-regionally and internationally, to achieve their goals and serve their national interests.

"Role" is identified as the general foreign political behavior of governments, including- positions, decisions, responses, tasks, and obligations toward other countries. It also implies the policy makers' views on decisions, rules, commitments, activities, and directions that serve national interests in the long run in the regional and international system.<sup>(1)</sup>

"Role" is a broad concept with many indications. It can be used in different forms to explain and understand behaviors and foreign policies. In this regard, we can differentiate between four key determinants of this concept as follows:

A. The "Role" perceptions: these are related to the decision makers' understandings and expectations for their countries role on the regional and international levels. They are the rules that establish the expected foreign policy tendencies of these countries and a

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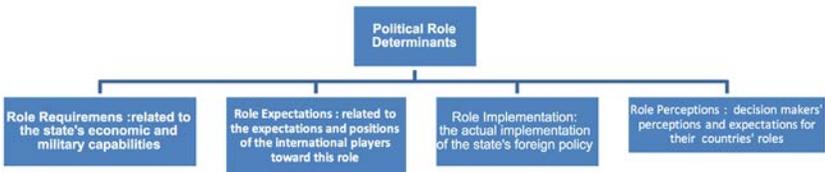
(1) K. J. Holsti: «National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy», *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3, September 1970, PP. 245 - 246.

roadmap for foreign policy makers to understand and deal with the complicated political reality. These perceptions are also linked with the doctrinal pattern of foreign policy makers, which is rooted in the heritage of experiences and political cultures. All in all, these perceptions can be identified through the official speeches and statements of international players and their inclinations towards the outside world.

B. “Role” Implementation: this refers to the actual implementation of foreign policy in terms of decisions and procedures that constitute the outcomes of this role.

C. “Role” Expectations: this refers to the expectations and positions of active players or international groups toward the role adopted by another international player.<sup>(1)</sup>

D. “Role” Requirements: this determines the nature of the role adopted by an international player and its limitations in certain cases. These requirements provide the necessary means and tools to take up the role and are linked with the state’s size, status,<sup>(2)</sup> and economic/military capabilities on the regional and international level. In general, the size and effectiveness of the role are related to the adequacy of these requirements or their relevance to this role.



Based on the determinants, the role forms adopted by the different international players are formed by policymakers’ perceptions of the most effective behaviors/practices and the most adequate given their capabilities to achieve national interests and goals. Following are some of the most important role forms:

(1) Lisbeth Aggestam: «Role Conceptions and the Politics of Identity in Foreign Policy», ARENA Centre for European Studies.

(2) Cameron G. Thies: Role Theory and Foreign Policy, May 2009. <http://cutt.us/olIvU>

A. Home of revolution- the liberator: some governments believe they have to form and lead revolutionary movements outside their borders. One of their countries' priorities is to liberate others and be home of revolutionary movements by providing them with financial and moral support and ideological inspiration. They also provide training to leaders and members of these movements and rebel organizations to use them in guerilla warfare, dispatching military supplies, establishing and organizing political parties, carrying out broad programs of ideological propaganda, and adopting intense intervention activities in other countries.

B. Supporter of liberation: relies on providing moral support to liberation movements. It differs from the first in the way that it does not have any official or financial obligation to any organization or revolutionary movement abroad.

C. Anti-Imperialism: some governments believe their duty is to resist and struggle against what they consider as the evil and threat presented by global imperialism- especially practiced by the United States of America- hegemony, and the new forms of colonialism.

D. Advocate of ideology: a government believes one of its goals and obligations is to defend its values against any threats and to hold responsibility to ensure ideology is upheld for certain countries or groups.

E. Regional leader: the government believes it has leadership characteristics over other countries in a certain region or sub-system.

F. Regional Protector: this form has certain regional responsibilities, but relies, basically, on providing protection to regional neighbors.

G. The active Independent: this form relies on adopting an independent foreign policy and giving up constant military and ideological obligations while dedicating foreign policy for national interests over other countries' interests. In addition, it follows an active cooperative policy to enhance and expand diplomatic and trade relations with the largest possible number of countries in different regions of the world, and rejects all forms of hegemony, and resolves points of disagreement peacefully.

H. Mediator: some governments believe they are responsible for settling conflicts between other countries.

I. Sponsor of regional integration: some governments believe they have a long-term obligation of cooperation with other countries to establish a more integrated regional community.<sup>(1)</sup>

The Iranian role in Yemen- is same as its role in other regional countries- it is a combination of three forms that ultimately serve Iran's ambitions to expand its influence in the region. Indeed, Iran adopted the following three role forms: Home of the revolution, anti-imperialism, and defender of ideology. Since the eruption of the Iranian revolution in 1979, Iran believes it is the revolutionary model that inspires many political movements in the region and that this model must spread and prevail by supporting several revolutionary and rebel movements in its neighboring countries. It also believes it has to be the home and supporter of these movements by providing them with financial and moral support. Based on these assumptions, Iran has carried out hostile practices against its neighbors like training leaders and members of militias from these countries, establishing and leading some political factions, and taking up broad propaganda programs to promote its beliefs and interfere in the affairs of its regional neighbors. Iran also introduces itself as a model for anti-imperialism by claiming to lead the axis of resistance in the region and struggle against imperialism, tyranny, and injustice. Also, raises empty slogans like supporting the poor and resisting tyrant powers in the world, such as the United States. In addition, Iran sees itself as defender of the Shiite ideology by presenting itself as source of religion, a sponsor of Shiite values, and a protector of the Shiite groups in the region. Moreover, Iran strives to attract Shiite minorities in other countries and unify them under its leadership by promoting the sectarian tendencies of these minorities and via intense ideological propaganda to integrate and use them in its regional political projects.

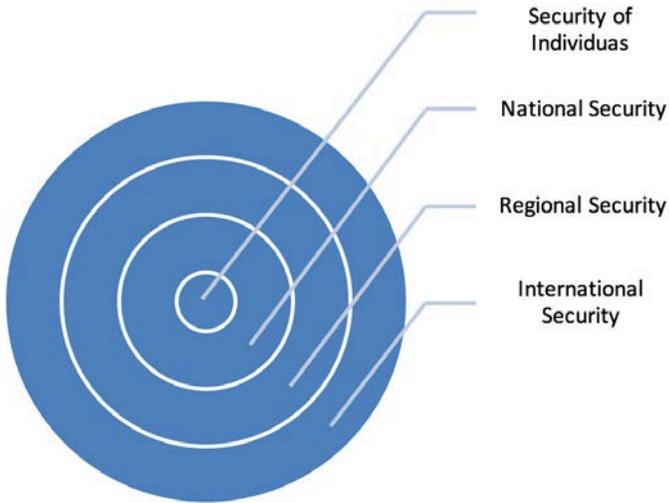
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(1) K. J. Holsti: *op. cit.*, PP. 260 - 292

## Second: The Concept of Regional Security

Regional security is one of the various levels of security besides individual, national, and international security. It is related to the security of many neighboring countries with common willingness, interests, challenges, and risks.

### Levels of Security



In its simplest meaning, regional security refers to the security of a group of countries related to each other, where the security of any of these countries cannot be achieved outside the regional system that encompasses them.<sup>(1)</sup>

This concept applies to the GCC countries. This council has unique historical, cultural and social bonds. Their political structures and strategic interests are alike with the same political and security challenges that oblige them to have mutual reliance on these concerns.

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(1) Suleiman Abdullah Harbi, "The Concept of Security: its levels, context, and threats (a theoretical study in the concepts and frameworks), Arabian Journal for Political Sciences, Issue 19, summer of 2008, p20.

Regional security means to protect the vital interests of certain regional countries by protecting their sovereignty and preserving their independence, political stability, national integration, and cohesion of society, which requires two basic political and military elements. The political element is related to the ability to limit the interference in the internal affairs of the regional countries by external actors, while the military element is related to the ability to confront direct threats, and restrain hostile practices that might face these countries.

Regional security is also related to the concepts of “Security Complex” and “Security Community”. The first refers to a number of countries with close security correlation where no problems can be resolved for any of these parties or countries away from each other,<sup>(1)</sup> while the second refers to a number of countries with a significant degree of collective consensus on security in an advanced stage of mutual trust. Indeed, there are two basic requirements to achieve “Security Community”- the first is the ability of countries to interfere and prevent conflicts through diplomatic channels and the second is the countries’ (that form the security community) capability to form a joint frontier to face any foreign state or non-state aggressors.<sup>(2)</sup>

In addition, there is a key standard to improve Security Community, which is an institutional maturity that is enough to create diplomatic techniques able to face problems and crises. This institutional maturity is not enough without certain mutual positive expectations between member states that should have common views on their security issues and integrate in one model to interact between each other. This means that the common perception between member states of the “Security Community” against external threats is a necessity.<sup>(3)</sup>

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(1) Barry Buzan and Ole Waever: *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), P. 44.

(2) Svetlana Cebotari and Ion Xenofontov: «Theoretical - methodological Approaches to the Regional Security», *Postmodern Openings*, Year2, Vol.7, September, 2011, PP. 23 - 24. <http://cutt.us/GkqRe>

(3) . *Ibid.*, P. 24.

The regional security system is an institutional and organizational concept regarding the common perception of countries of a certain security group or certain region concerning their security issues. This system is based on an agreement between many countries within one geographic region that have historical, political, and economic ties to form a security system to resolve their conflicts peacefully, face any external threats and interferences, and preserve their regional security and stability.

Stability is the goal of any regional security system, which means to preserve the status quo, prevent any dramatic changes, and achieve a balance of power based on regional security conformity and cooperation. This takes several forms of security arrangements that might expand or narrow according to the countries' goals, mechanisms, and the kind of threats that must be confronted. The following are some of these arrangements:

A. Collective defense: a form of regional security cooperation at which political entities strive to make new allies with countries of the same views to confront any potential common threat or enemy. They also focus on containing any direct military threat against any member in this system through official security agreements.

B. Common security: basically, this system relies on defense military capabilities.

C. Comprehensive security: broader than the defense military dimension despite being one of its basic components. It includes the most important social and economic dimensions to preserve security.

D. Coordinating security: countries resort to this form in case of moderate rivalry in the region with no clear cooperation or direct conflict. Hence, coordination between countries of the regional system is the key driver to maintain security cooperation.

E. Cooperating security: countries agree on developing a number of regional behaviors to ensure mutual security more than individual security, where cooperation in this system is comprehensive and not limited to the military dimension to achieve security. It also includes social cohesion, population growth, continuous development,

environmental problems, and other issues related to soft power.<sup>(1)</sup>

The regional security arrangements of the GCC countries are under the collective defense form that appears through the governing patterns of these arrangements like the joint defense agreement between the GCC countries to enhance their joint military actions and improve their own collective capabilities to defend their security, sovereignty, stability, and interests, deter aggressions, and cooperate to face challenges and crises.<sup>(2)</sup>



### Third: Foreign interference as a threat to security and stability

The negative foreign influence and interference stands as a central factor in threatening regional stability and security. This might diminish political stability in a country or more in a certain region by creating internal conflicts and tensions that might negatively reflect

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(1) Suleiman Abdullah Harbi: previous reference, p24-25.

(2) For more information see, the General Secretariat for the GCC Countries, The Joint Military Action.

on regional security. Usually, the goal of negative foreign interference is to change the internal political balance in favor of the intervening state, enhance its influence in the target country. Also, to create a state of tension, chaos, and instability in the target country and ultimately, harm security and stability of the region.

Some external players might interfere to further aggravate internal conflicts, escalate tensions, threaten political security and stability in the target country. In fact, foreign interference might take several forms 1- direct interference by supporting certain groups or internal rebel groups and covert interference through intelligence agencies, propaganda, the media, carrying out sabotage activities in the target countries, 2- or assassinating some personalities and political leaders in order to overthrow the regime in that country. In addition, interference might take the form of pressures or restraints on vassal or independent states to take control of these states and serve the interests of the intervening countries. In most cases, these pressures or restraints result from normal relations and interactions between countries, but distorted by power disparity between them.<sup>(1)</sup> This means that the negative foreign interference results, in most cases, from unequal political relations between the international players where the balance of power is distorted in favor of the intervening state at the expense of the target country that is usually characterized by weakness or having a chaotic political condition for many reasons, such as an ineffective political system, disagreements and internal conflicts between the elite and various political groups that sets the stage for negative foreign interference as in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

In this regard, the fragility or failure of a state due to the growth of divisions and violent conflicts, failure in preserving its national security, decline of its institutional effectiveness and decline of legitimacy of its political regime provides a suitable environment for

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(1) Abdurrahman Khalifah: *Ideology of Political Conflict: a study in the power theory*, Alexandria, the University Knowledge Publishers, 1999, p238-239.

negative foreign interference.<sup>(1)</sup> When the division between groups and political elites converts into violent conflicts and political institutions brake down and lose the ability to confront crises, the state becomes more exposed to negative interference thus there is an upsurge in divisions and conflicts escalate. This situation soon changes into a severe and complicated crisis that has the potential to expand and take regional dimensions.

This kind of negative foreign interference contradicts the positive interference of some international players like the UN to resolves crises, settles down conflicts, and support security and political stability in war torn countries by implementing development programs, supporting righteous governments, engagement in peacemaking processes and prevention of conflicts by mediation, reconstruction of political regimes/ institutions, and administrative reforms in fragile states.<sup>(2)</sup>

In addition, some regional and international players interfere in certain countries to enforce security and stability. For example, the United States and NATO interfered in the Balkans- Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo- in the nineties of the last century to end military conflicts and enforce security and stability in the region. Another example was the interference of the African organizations to enforce security and peace in the African continent. When the African Union, the African Peace and Security Council, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) interfered to resolve conflicts in many African states by diplomatic/political mediation or military force to enforce peace and stability similar to the work of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group in Liberia in the mid-nineties of the last century when this group interfered to support the temporary government

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(1) Javier Fabra Mata and Sebastian Ziaja: *Users' Guide on Measuring Fragility*, (Bonn and Oslo: German Development Institute and United Nations Development Programme – Bureau of Development Policy – Oslo Governance Center, 2009), P. 6.

(2) About the role of the UN in resolving conflicts and peacemaking see: Massimo Tommasoli (ed.): *Democracy, Peace and Security: The Role of the UN*, Discussion Paper, (New York and Stockholm: United Nations and International IDEA, November 2010).

against rebels.<sup>(1)</sup> Similarly, in March 2011, the Aljazeera Shield forces interfered in Bahrain upon the request of the Bahraini government to prevent any internal social/political turbulence and preserve the stability of the political regime. In March 2015, the Saudi-led Arab coalition interfered in Yemen upon request of the Yemeni legitimate government to prevent the Houthi rebels and their ally, the overthrown president, Ali Abdullah Saleh from taking control of Yemen by military force, to restore the balance between the political groups, and avert Yemen falling under the control of a group with foreign political and sectarian affiliations that would inevitably undermine, regional security and stability.

All in all, keeping negative foreign interference at its minimum level is an important factor for regional security and stability. Success of countries and regional blocks in preserving their political security and stability is connected to their ability to improve their capabilities to confront or contain negative foreign interference.

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(1) For more details see: Mohammed Ibrahim Alhassan: "The Role of the International and regional Organizations in Achieving Peace and Security in Africa", African Reads, August 29, 2016.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Goals of the Iranian Role in Yemen**

## CHAPTER TWO

### Goals of the Iranian Role in Yemen

The historical background cannot be ignored when discussing Iran's role in some Arab countries- especially in Yemen. It represents a general framework for Iran's role and its activities in the region and has significant influence on Iran's behavior toward its neighboring countries. Many of Iran's external actions are driven by its historical Persian imperial heritage that led it to control parts of the Arab World including Yemen. Indeed, many of Iran's movements and activities in its regional neighbors have reawaken some of its ancient imperial glories that still dominate official thinking in Iran.

In this regard, General Yahiya Raheem Safavi, advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei said, "Iran's borders extend up to the shores of the Mediterranean" in reference to the Iranian influence in Syria and south Lebanon. He also said, "This is the third time the Iranian influence reaches the coasts of the Mediterranean" in reference to the borders of the two Persian empires: the Akhmani in 550BC, and Sassanid in 226 AD.<sup>(1)</sup>

The contact between Iran and Yemen started a long time ago. Since the Hemieri dynasty, Yemen had been a center of contest between the Persian and Roman empires. The early beginning of contact between Yemen and Persia started when the Yemeni King Seif Bin Zi Yazan called on Persians to drive the Abyssinian's (the Romans' allies at that time) out of Yemen in 575 AD. Thus, some Yemeni territories- especially Sana and its surroundings were under Persian control until the rise of Islam when Yemen entered under the Islamic rule.<sup>(2)</sup>

Recently, Iran and Yemen had limited relations until the eruption of the Yemeni revolution against the Imamate rule (Zaidi) in 1962 when Iran gave its attention- only marginally- to Yemen again and Iran's Shah provided limited financial support to the Royal forces in

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(1) Walid Shqeir: "The Expansion of Iran's Borders and Soft Power", *Alhayah Newspaper*, May 9, 2014.

(2) "The Yemeni Islamic History"

their war with the Republican forces.<sup>(1)</sup> After the end of the war, with the victory of the Republicans, relations between the Yemeni Arab Republic (North Yemen before) and the monarchist Iran weakened with political ties between both countries at their lowest level. In addition, during the Shah era Iran did not have any role in South Yemen (the People Democratic Republic of Yemen). They did not have positive relations because of the big difference between their political views at that time. Iran followed the Capitalist Western camp under the leadership of the United States of America, while South Yemen was affiliated with the Communist Eastern camp under the leadership of the former Soviet Union. In addition, both sides differed in their positions on the Dhafar uprisings in the Sultanate of Oman in the sixties and the seventies of the last century. The ruling Communist political regime in South Yemen supported the public frontier to liberate Dhafar in its military conflict with the Omani government, while the Iranian Monarch supported the governmental forces.

After the Iranian revolution in 1979, Iran's interest in Yemen increased noticeably. On the public level, Iran attracted some Yemeni students to study in the Iranian Universities, Hawzas, and Husseinis (Shiite temples) in Tehran, Damascus, and Beirut in the eighties and nineties of the last century. Iran aimed at exporting its revolutionary model to its neighboring countries by attracting the Shiite elite and communities in these countries. At the same time, Iran did not have good relations with Yemen on the official level due to the close relation between the regime in North Yemen at that time and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq when Yemen and Iraq built strategic relations, coordination, and partnership during the Iraq-Iran war from 1980-1988 and the Yemeni forces participation in the war on the Iraqi side.<sup>(2)</sup>

On the other hand, Iran established strong relations with the political regime with communist tendencies in South Yemen (former People's Republic of Yemen) due to their points of agreement and

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(1) Mohsen Milani: «Iran's Game in Yemen», *Foreign Affairs*, April 19, 2015.

(2) Nabil Albakiri: "The Iranian Expansion in Yemen", the *Middle East Newspaper*, July 9, 2013.

slogans that antagonized the West and the traditional political regimes in the neighboring countries, their common desire to export the revolution to the GCC countries, and shared rivalry with Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.<sup>(1)</sup>

After the Yemeni unity in 1990 and considering the severe relations between Yemen and the GCC countries due to the Yemeni regime's support to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Iran used this opportunity and enhanced its relations with Yemen and expanded its activities in this country. Iran increased its efforts to promote the Shiite Twelver sect in Yemen through some Iraqi Shiites that lived in this country during the international sanctions on Iraq at that time. Iran also increased its efforts to maintain strong relations with the Shiite Zaidi factions through certain activities like inviting representatives of these factions to visit Iran under the pretext of participating in conferences, celebrating the Iranian revolution anniversary, and to take a close look at Iran's experiences and other political and cultural activities.<sup>(2)</sup>

From 2004-2010, Iran's role increased in Yemen remarkably by supporting the Houthis in their military conflict with the Yemeni government. However, the most prominent development in the Iranian role in Yemen took place during the revolution against the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011. Since then, the Iranian influence has increased in Yemen due to the chaotic situation in this country, the stalemate in the political transition and the weakness of the Yemeni government in its failure to deal with Yemen's political, security, economic, and social problems. In this regard, Iran strengthened its alliance with the Houthi rebels for sectarian and ideological considerations and increased its political, media, financial, and military support to them. In addition, Iran built relations with many political personalities in former Southern Yemen like former president of this part, Ali Salem Beid. It also supported some of the Southern parties with money, media, arms, and training

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(1) Mohammed Alghabiri: "Yemen and Iran: Reality of Ambitions and Future of Relations", *the New Yemeni*, February 10, 2015.

(2) Nabil Albakiri: previous reference.

in Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria before they broke up with Tehran that coincided with the emergence of the Houthis as an Iranian-backed dominant force that took control of North Yemen by military force and then attempted to control the South.<sup>(1)</sup>

In the beginning of 2015; few months after the Houthi rebels and their ally, deposed president Ali Abdullah Saleh assumed power in the capital Sana, Iran signed joint economic agreements with the Houthi rebels in the fields of oil, electricity, aviation, and sea shipments. According to these agreements, Iran pledged to provide Yemen with petroleum products for one year and establish electricity plants in the provinces of Aden, Hodeida, and Taiz and to repair the electricity transmission line between Marib and Sana. In addition, Iran vowed to expand the port of Hodeida, set a line of credit to supply Yemen with its needs, dispatch Iranian experts in all fields of infrastructure to Yemen, and establish a direct air bridge to launch daily air flights between the two countries.<sup>(2)</sup> These agreements were a turning point in Iran's role from being a covert marginal supporter into a declared ally to the Houthi rebels. However, the launch of the Decisive Storm Operation by the Saudi-led Arab coalition against the Houthi rebels on March 26, 2015 deterred the practical implementation of these agreements and prevented any further penetration of the Iranian influence into Yemen.

All in all, Iran's goals in Yemen do not differ from its role in the region or in other countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Bahrain. These goals lie under Iran's strategy and comprehensive plan of action for hegemony and expansion relying on the Iranian decision makers' views on the role Iran must take up on the regional and international level. Basically, these views stem from Iran's historical memory and its rooted national political culture that is remarkably inclined towards hegemony.

In this regard, Iran's views reflect its history, where the trends of expansion, military hegemony, and the Persian Empire culture

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(1) Ibid.

(2) Russia Today Channel: "Cooperation Agreements between Iran and Ansarollah", March 14, 2015.

congregate with the foreign hegemony and domination of Iran by the Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Afghans, and Russians. This is, in addition to the historical heritage of Iran's Shiism -with all its sense of pain and injustice- in a way that creates a form of combination between glory and a sense of injustice. This results in a complicated view for the Iranian decision makers toward their neighbors and the world but one that catapults Iran into having an influential role at the regional and international levels.<sup>(1)</sup>

It seems that these views of Iran- taking into consideration all of Iran's revolutionary circumstances, the war with Iraq in the eighties of the last century, and Iran's regional and international isolation- contributed to creating an everlasting feeling of threat and insecurity, given that Iran is surrounded by ideological, historical and sectarian rivals. Based on these assumptions, Iran feels this geographic sphere is a constant source of threat and danger for its existence and national interests, which drives it to enforce its security and restrain all existing and potential threats.

In fact, Iran believes its intervening role and activities in its regional neighbors- Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Bahrain- is a kind of self-defense either by mobilizing its supporters and loyalists from the same sect and ideology in these countries (within the framework of exporting Iran's revolutionary model outside its borders and supporting the oppressed people against tyrant forces and imperialism) or by expanding Iran's secure vital sphere at the expense of the other countries and transfer what it believes as its line of defense into its rivals' territories or their vital sphere (under the slogan of defending Iran and its ideology and the priority of confronting its enemies on their land instead of facing them inside Iran).<sup>(2)</sup> This refers to the absence of mutual security with other countries in the Iranian psyche and Iran's inclination toward achieving its national security as a zero-sum game. This strategy is

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(1) Nizar Abdulqadir: "Iran's Security Foreign Policy", National Defense Journal, Lebanon, Issue 58, October 2006.

(2) For more details on this Iranian perception (that contradicts facts) see: Kihan: Mohammed Javad Bani Assad, "Jara Mdafa'an Haram Suriah Mi Jankand?" 31 Khardad 139.

evident by the statements of some Iranian officials like Ali Akbar Velayati, the advisor of the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei when he said, "Iran's presence in Syria and Iraq is self-defense,"<sup>(1)</sup> and the statement of the IRGC Quds Division Commander, Qassem Suleimani when he said, "The goal of the Iranian intervention in Syria is to defend Islam and Iran," claiming that ISIS and Takfirist groups were not formed to face Syria, but to face Iran.<sup>(2)</sup> In addition, the Iranian cleric and head of the so called, "Ammar Center" to confront soft power, Mahdi Ta'ib said, "Syria is Iran's 35<sup>th</sup> province." He added, "If the enemy attacks us to take Syria or Khuzestan (Ahwaz), our priority will be defending Syria because if we keep Syria, we will go back to Ahwaz, but if we lose Syria, we cannot defend even Tehran."<sup>(3)</sup>

By exploring Iran's interference in the neighboring countries, especially in Yemen, Syria Iraq and Lebanon, it is noticed that Iran – in interfering- has relied on three major considerations, which are considered as an Iranian blueprint to achieve the goals of penetrating and expanding its sphere of influence and hegemony over the region. The considerations are the following:

### **First consideration:**

Trying to exploit the chaos, schism, instability and the weakness of the central authority to penetrate countries. Then exploiting the divisions amongst the various political elites by supporting the factions which are doctrinally close to Iran and compatible with its orientations. That is done by seeking partnerships with non-state actors (unofficial actors), as they think they are politically, economically and socially marginalized or because their share of influence and power does not meet their political ambitions, or regionally they are not content with the current balance of power because they assume it is strongly inclined to the side of those –whom

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(1) Islamic Revolution: "Vilayati Hodor Iran Dr Suriah wa Iraq ra (Difa' Iz Khod) Khwand", 16 Ardibhisht 1396.

(2) Alein News Gate: "Tehran Defends its Intervention in Syria: we want to protect Iran from ISIS, October 6, 2016.

(3) "Ra'ees Qararkah Ammar: Suriah Astan Si Wenjim Ast/ Akr Dashman Bikhwahid Suriah Ya Khozistan Ra Bakeird Awlawiat Hifz Suriah Ast", Asr Iran, 2 Bahman 1391.

they consider- opponents/ regional allies of the United States

### **Second consideration:**

Iran relied – with its policies which are diligent on long-term political investments to support its partners or its loyal non-state actors. This is done by selecting and attracting groups or factions that have better potential or have greater chances of success in the future and by strengthening their mutual relations, encouraging and supporting them politically, financially and militarily. In addition, it enhances their capacity through long-term base building, which –often- eventually leads to empowering these groups or factions to take power or to reach political positions that are vital and influential in their countries. Those who currently rule Iraq are the outcome of Iran’s investment in supporting several Shiite Iraqi factions and organizations since the Iranian revolution. Iran also has been investing in supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen for more than three decades.

### **Third consideration:**

*Encouraging groups or factions loyal to Iran to operate on two levels-*

first level; within the framework of the official political structure of states through political participation in official institutions of the ruling government, so these groups would be able to have a decisive role in the key decisions in their states. Second level: outside the framework of the official political structure of states or in parallel with it through the organizational structure of these groups, independent funding sources and military arms, so they are not completely under state power and are able to undercut the current political system when things go against their interests or against Iranian interests— as the case of the Houthis in Yemen or Hezbollah in Lebanon show.

Based on these three considerations - Iran operates through its role and interventions in Yemen to achieve a number of objectives linked to the quest to strengthen its regional position and gain more influence and hegemony and to counter the influence of competitors

or presumed opponents, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United States.

### **First: Expand the Iranian Sphere of Influence**

Iran aims through its activities in Yemen to accomplish more influence in Yemen because of its distinct strategic location and influential geopolitical weight in the region. Iran believes that through its alliance with the Houthis and its political and military support to consolidate their position at the top of power in Yemen, it can greatly increase its influence and dominance in the region by establishing a foothold near to a key international strategic corridor so it can control the traffic in the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Bab Mandab, which is the main link connecting the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean in the Red Sea to the Suez Canal and is considered the main waterway of the world's oil.<sup>(1)</sup>

Within this framework Iran seeks to transform the Houthis (Ansarullah) into a military and political power dominating the political process in Yemen through cloning the experience of Hezbollah in Lebanon, which overtook Beirut by military power in 2008 and then agreed with opposition political forces to sign a new power-sharing agreement and form a new government in which the party would have veto power over its decisions. This is what Ansarullah did when it overtook the capital Sana'a in September 2014, so it has been able to dictate its terms to the Government of National Accord and signed a "peace and partnership agreement" with other political forces. It is the agreement that formed a new government through which the group sought to legitimize its takeover of power. When this was not achievable, it undermined the existing political system through dissolving the parliament and establishing a revolutionary committee under its leadership to take power in Yemen.

In the same vein, Iran supported some factions of the southern movement that pursued to disengage from the north as an attempt of Iran to secure a wider sphere of influence in the southern Yemeni

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(1) Amal Mudallali: «The Iranian Sphere of Influence Expands Into Yemen», Foreign Policy, October 8, 2014. <http://cutt.us/XXxWl>

regions in the future if they succeeded in the separation. Iran's support almost stopped when the Houthis overtook the power in Sana'a and sought to spread their dominance over the southern regions where the Southern Movement was confronting them. Consequently, Iran's spread of influence in the southern regions has stopped yet this influence and support may return in the upcoming stages amongst the changing alliances and orientations along with the possibility of Iran attracting some southern elites or factions through exploiting the current disagreement in Yemen which goes back to old conflicts over power between the elites of Hadhramaut, Dali, Abyan and Aden, during the 1960s.

### **Second: Undermine Yemen's Regional Neighbors**

Undermining regional neighbors and restricting their influence are some of the most important objectives of Iran's interference in Yemen, stemming out from its belief that increasing Iran's influence in Yemen will minimize the influence of Arab Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Iran aims at empowering its Houthi allies to weaken Yemen's bond to its neighbors and obstruct any future steps or complementary projects between Yemen and its neighborhood which may result in strengthening the influence of the Gulf States in Yemen and in the region in general. If Iran could not achieve this goal, it would work to push Yemen towards more conflicts, chaos, and dismemberment, to allow for further Iranian intrusion in Yemen and to harm the security and stability of its regional neighbors. Iran assumes that if it cannot widen its influence and enhance its regional gains through establishing a pro-Iranian political system in Yemen as whole or in the southern parts at least, it must work to cause more harm to Yemen -through seeking to weaken the capacities of the Yemeni State and completely destabilize it- to make it useless for its regional neighbors and a source of harm to them, especially to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—as Yemen represents a strategic depth and a vital location for Saudi Arabia.

This goal is enlisted under the endeavors of Iran to engulf the Gulf States with tension and preoccupy them with threats and

dangers posed by intensified crises and conflicts in their vital area. Furthermore, Iran seeks -through its interference to provoke tensions, violent unrest and instability in Yemen- to attract the attention of the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, to weaken the role and the influence of the Gulf States in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon and to unleash Iran into these three countries. It is like an attempt by Iran to bargain to barter for some influence and interests with the Gulf States.

### **Third: Strengthen Iran's Position to withstand the United States Pressure**

*Iran's role and interference in the Yemeni arena is enlisted under* 1- the larger scope of its general regional policy for maintaining influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, 2- its nuclear and missile program 3- and its relationship with the United States of America. Based upon this policy, Iran strongly believes that by adopting foreign policies of an active or offensive nature and by expanding its influence and interference in regional neighboring countries-particularly in Yemen with its significant strategic location- it can push the U.S. to recognize its vital interests and to accept it as a pivotal regional actor, and allow it to have a larger role in the region. In addition, Iran seeks, through strengthening its alliance with Ansarullah and increasing its political and military support, to have a bargaining chip in Yemen as what it has in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, so to enhance its posture in dealing with the U.S. and in confronting the pressures of the U.S. and its regional allies that are aimed at curtailing Iran's influence in the region and curbing its ambitions to acquire military nuclear technology and to develop long-range missile capabilities.

Accordingly, Iran's role in Yemen is to integrate the Houthis into its alliance or regional axis, which includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Bashar Assad's regime in Syria, and many Shiite organizations in Iraq. Iran threatens to use this alliance to inflict greater damage on the interests of the United States and its allies in the region if the US pressure mounts on Iran or if both sides slide into military

confrontation as a result of the developments that may arise in Iran's nuclear deal under the changing policies of various US administrations. Moreover, Iran's regional project aims at establishing a 'balance of terror' in the Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula- by intensifying its interventions which aim at establishing and strengthening alliances or links of an ideological nature with military doctrinal groups. And being ready and capable of creating non-stop regional tension in the neighboring countries and also being able to act against the US interests in the region assuming that this balance of terror would force the US and its allies to recognize Iran's strategic interests and influence in the region.

#### **Fourth: Strengthen the Iranian Regime's Legitimacy by Succeeding on the External Level**

The desire to achieve success at the external level to support the internal situation of Iran's regime is one of the most important objectives of Iran's role and interference in Yemen, as well as in other countries. There is an obvious link between this interference and the internal Iranian conditions which are in decline and have led to significant decrease in the regime's legitimacy. Also, a crisis in confidence has emerged between the regime and social sectors in Iran. To cover up the internal problems and crises, the Iranian regime has an active interference policy oversees via intensifying its support to factions and groups that are ideologically and doctrinally like-minded whether in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon or Syria. And by recruiting these factions and groups for serving its regional projects; that would support its dilapidated political legitimacy and strengthen its internal situation.

According to the economic conditions, there is public discontent because of the regime's failure to solve socio-economic dilemmas, such as the fall of development rates, upsurge in poverty, unemployment, inflation, and the worsening living standards. These are the dilemmas that have been increased because of the international sanctions imposed on Iran over its nuclear program

and the decline in oil prices.<sup>(1)</sup> On the political level, the Iranian revolutionary regime is suffering from a deep internal crisis considering the contradiction between its declared values and principles and its actual practices along with the growing gap between the regime and wide segments of Iranian society. This is because of its authoritarianism and undermining many fundamental rights and freedoms; all of this has led to a clear decline in overall public satisfaction with the regime.

Because of these tense and complicated political and economic conditions, the Iranian regime—, which is still imprisoned inside its ambition to export its revolutionary example abroad— is intensifying its interference in several regional neighboring countries including Yemen with it wishing to gain more influence on the external level to support the position of revolutionary ruling system inside Iran. Furthermore, the Iranian regime intends to celebrate its external interference, the movement of its allies in the regional neighborhood, and the developments resulting from these movements as a victory of the Iranian Revolution.

This Iranian intention to compensate for its internal inability, failure and political bankruptcy via external successes and achievements, is expressed in the statement of some Iranian officials. For example, when the Commander of the Quds Force in the Revolutionary Guards, Qassem Suleimani, in January 2012, stated that “Iran is in southern Lebanon and Iraq... and these two countries are subject in one way or another to Tehran’s will and ideas<sup>(2)</sup>” or when Alireza Zakani, a member of the Iranian parliament, after the Houthis took power in Yemen in 2014, stated that “ The 1979 Revolution has echoed in the Yemeni capital Sana’a, which became the fourth Arab capital to join the Iranian Revolution, in addition to three other Arab

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(1) For more details about Iran’s escalated economic conditions, See Middle East Online “Regional Ambitions Destroying Iran’s Economy”, January 7, 2016. <http://cutt.us/wlgw0>

(2) Mohammed Abbas Naji: “Iran and the Arab Spring: interrelated considerations and deferred benefits”, Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 13 March 2012. <http://cutt.us/Ma1Pu>

capitals; Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut.”<sup>(1)</sup> And the statements of Ali Akbar Velayati, Advisor to the Iranian Leader of the Revolution, in October 2014, during his meeting in Tehran with a group of Yemeni Zaydi scholars in which he celebrated the triumph of the Houthis (Ansarullah) in taking power in Sanaa, he affirmed that “The Islamic Republic of Iran supports the legitimate struggle of Ansarullah in Yemen which is considered a part of the movement associated with the successful Islamic awakening,” adding that Iran has a great hope that “Ansarullah would practice a parallel role to that of Hezbollah in Lebanon.”<sup>(2)</sup> As well as the spokesperson of the Revolutionary Guards, Ali Saeedi, stated that “the spiritual influence of the Iranian Revolution is extending from the Mediterranean to the Strait of Bab Mandeb.”<sup>(3)</sup>

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(1) Al-Mursed newspaper: “Iranian official: four Arab capitals fell under Tehran’s control”, September 22, 2014. <http://cutt.us/R92Xr>

(2) Tasnim News Agency: «A Provincial Council Meeting with Yemen’s Zaidi Ulema: Iran Endorses Ansarullah’s Campaign in Yemen», October 26, 2014. <http://cutt.us/Zu3ZP>

(3) Shabtab News: «In terms of this» Ali Saeedi «, all people are» enemies «and are full of enemies!» 1396 - 02 - 06. <http://cutt.us/mjm9X/>

## **CHAPTER THREE**

The Tools of the Iranian Role in Yemen

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### **The Tools of the Iranian Role in Yemen**

To achieve its goals, Iran's role in Yemen relies on a combination of various tools where some are related to soft power, which is considered as the framework or moral structure of this role, whereas others relate to hard power, which constitutes the financial frame of Iran's role and interference in the Yemeni arena.

#### **First: Soft Power**

Iran relies heavily on the soft power to expand its influence and dominance in the region. So, the Iranian regime used the two most important tools of Iranian soft power which are: political Shiism and media tools, intensively, to attract the Shia communities across the region and to get them fueled and merged in to Iran's regional projects. This has led to Iran's pivotal role and influential political presence in some states of the region where there are sizable Shia communities such as in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen.

According to Yemen's situation, Iran has endeavored for a long time to use political Shiism to infiltrate and establish influence, as it has sought since the 1980s to attract the Yemeni Zaidi community by inviting many Zaidi young men and scholars to visit Iran to learn about the Iranian Revolution. Iran has truly succeeded in attracting many of them including the most prominent members of the Houthi movement, such as, Mohammed Azlan Abdulkarim Jadban and Hussein Houthi and other Zaidi scholars; Badr Uddin Houthi and the father of Hussein (the founder), the current leader Abdul-Malik Houthi. This has allowed the Houthi movement to be influenced by the Iranian Revolution and its slogans. In the same vein, the speeches of Hussein Houthi- which represent the ideological reference of the Houthi movement- have showed the level of ideological influence of the Iranian Revolution and its political theocratic leadership, as he usually cites the leader of the Iranian Revolution Khomeini and the general secretary of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah whom he represents as leading examples of resistance against colonialism and Zionism.

Also, he borrowed some slogans of the Iranian Revolution such as: “Death to America” and “Death to Israel.”<sup>(1)</sup> The Houthis mobilized a huge number of young men under the flag of these slogans and under the pretext of confronting America and Israel, as the Yemeni regime according to their point of view was an American agent. Moreover, the founders of the Houthi movement were influenced by the ideas of the Iranian Revolution and Khomeini to the extent that in 1986 they taught a specialized subject about the Iranian Revolution and its principles to students enrolled in training courses of “the Believing Youth” (which later became known as “Ansarullah”).<sup>(2)</sup>

This was accompanied by the pursuit of Sa’da Governorate—which is considered the historical stronghold of Zaidis in southern Yemen—to revive its religious institutes which Iran has supported and encouraged. Some Iranian Maraji, among those who are the followers of two prominent Shiite clerics; Ali Sistani and Jawad Shaherstani in Qom, have provided religious educational programs and multimedia for Yemeni Zaidis in Yemen or Iran—especially certified by the University of Religions and Denominations, under the supervision of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s which is specialized to train Twelvers Shiites or non-Twelvers.<sup>(3)</sup>

Likewise, Iran has offered scholarships to many Yemeni students belonging to the Houthis to study in Qom. The Zaidi students who are sons of tribes’ sheikhs or high school graduates had scholarships at the expense of the Iranian embassy in Yemen to attend Iranian Hawza for four years, to study the theology of the Twelver and the principles of the Iranian Revolution. The Iranian Embassy has also enrolled dozens of students from middle and high schools at the Twelver’s (Ja’fariyah) institutes in Sana’a and Sa’da to receive six months to two years courses fully sponsored by the Iranian embassy; to qualify them to become advocates in the various Yemeni Zaidi

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(1) Maysa Shujaiddin: “Houthis and Iran: Political Alliances and Doctrinal Tensions”, 18 May 2017. <http://cutt.us/h8miv>

(2) Amal Alam: “Iranian Influence in Yemen: Tools, Reality, the Future”, the Forum for Arab and International Relations, April 23, 2015. <http://fairforum.org/research/>

(3) Mahdi Khalji: “Yemeni Zaidis: A Gate for Iran’s Influence,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015. <http://cutt.us/WAXhu>

regions. This was accompanied by the influx of many Yemeni students to Iran for study, without scholarships yet Iran covered all their tuition fees and living costs. Iran's aim behind this is to recruit those students to work for its interest in Yemen; to support the Houthi movement and some Yemeni Zaidi political parties. Also, to make the students convert to the Twelver Shia, to make them skilled enough to become advocates of the Twelvers, and to provide them with the necessary combat skills to help pro-Iranian groups in Yemen. Some of the reports revealed that these students were received by the leaders of The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and then were distributed to three camps belonging to the IRGC in Shiraz, Mashhad and Isfahan.<sup>(1)</sup> Iran has also contributed in establishing several religious institutes to spread the Twelver sect Twelver's (Ja'fariyah) across Yemen, within this circle the Houthi movement was founded by Iran's support, and several schools and institutes such as: "The Supreme Dar Al Uloom" which was built with Iran's funding and the number of students reached 1500; the Ja'fariyah school, based in Aden, is the media committee of the Twelver Shi'a Society; the Badr Alami Center, based in Sana'a, also teaches the Zaydi sect and has a large public library; the Center for Islamic Studies also based in Sana'a and publishes the weekly Balagh newspaper; "Al Hadi School" is the main center for the start of the Houthi movement, located at the top of Mount Maran in Sa'da province; the Thaqlin Center based in Sana'a; Dahyan center located in the province of Sa'da was inaugurated by the Iranian ambassador to Yemen<sup>(2)</sup>; Dar Al-Zahraa Cultural Media Foundation, based in Sana'a, has several branches in some other Yemeni provinces and publishes the Shiite ideology through the visual media, The Yemeni Islamic Shiite Council, based in Taiz province, aims to organize a human rights organization that seeks to guarantee the rights of the Shiite community; Dar Ahbab Ahl Al Bait, also based in Taiz, is a religious cultural institute that aims to spread and promote Shiism; Naba'a Charitable Foundation and Ali

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(1) Ibrahim Menshawi: "The Soft Influence: The Religious Dimension of Iranian Foreign Policy and the Houthi Movement in Yemen", Arab Center for Research and Studies, January 31, 2016. <http://www.acrseg.org/39871>

(2) Op. cit.

Asghar Ibn Hussain Society based in Jawf Governorate.<sup>(1)</sup>

Additionally, Iran has revived many Twelver Shia's celebrations and occasions which were not done before in the Yemeni community but entered Yemen with Iran's pursuit of influencing the Zaidi sect. Iran was keen, through its embassy in Sana'a, to participate in these celebrations. Some of these occasions are: the Event of Ghadir Khumm, Ashura, and Remembrance Days of some of the Twelve Imams.<sup>(2)</sup>

Also, The Iranian government has worked to persuade the Houthis and to strengthen mutual relations through some symbolic positions. Thus, the Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei ordered to renovate the Shrine of Nasser Haqq (who is an outstanding Zaidi Imam in the 3rd century AH. His shrine is located in Mazandaran province, Northern Iran) for strengthening the relations between Iran and Yemen. Later, the Iranian government invited dozens of Yemeni Zaidi leaders to visit the shrine on October 2014.<sup>(3)</sup>

At the same time, Iran has continuously strengthened its political influence with the Houthis and tightened its ideological bond through supporting and empowering the most influenced blocs and elements that have been politicized by Iran's Shiism and by laying the ground for a religious political culture closely linked to the principles of the Twelver Shiite doctrine adopted by the Iranian regime.<sup>(4)</sup>

These endeavors have contributed to reducing the differentiation between the Twelver Shia and Zaidism and bridging the gaps especially between the political alignments (though their school of jurisprudence remains different). Some Zaidis converted to the Twelver Shia believing the Iranian regime's version of Twelver Shiism (covered by slogans of resistance against oppression, injustice and foreign hegemony, as Zaidism also mobilizes the masses to confront

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(1) Center for Theological Research: "Shiite institutes in Yemen". <http://www.aqaed.com/shia/institution/yemen/>

(2) Ibrahim Menshawi, op. cit.

(3) Mahdi Khalji, op. cit.

(4) Farea Al – Muslimi: «Iran's Role in Yemen Exaggerated, but Destructive», The Century Foundation, May 19, 2017. <http://cutt.us/m6pos>

foreign powers and unjust rulers). Consequently, many Zaidi officials and leaders have been open to Iran's foreign policy and its practice of Twelver Shiism, which has given Iran a ready means to expand its influence in Yemen.<sup>(1)</sup>

As for the media tool, Iran has used its huge media empire to serve its project and objectives in Yemen. Iran has worked to attract prominent Yemeni media professionals to support its project from various Yemeni governorates and has succeeded in making significant number of professionals join its empire. Reports show that Iran managed to recruit more than 1300 Yemeni media professionals who have been trained in several countries like Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran in technologies and software specialized for satellite broadcasting, and for various media roles such as directors, anchors for TV/radio stations, and writers for print and electronic media. Iran also trained the Houthi media cadres from the northern governorates through training courses in Beirut and Tehran. Iraqi and Lebanese professionals were assigned to this purpose under the Lebanese cadre supervision of Hezbollah's Al-Manar Channel.<sup>(2)</sup>

Iran has generously funded the launch of several satellite channels reflecting its own alignments or the ones of its Houthi allies and of some Southern Movement's factions, such as: Mayadeen Maserah channels led by the Houthis and located in Beirut; Sahat channel belonging to a group of activists leaning to the left in the political spectrum and the Aden Live channel belonging to the Southern Movement. Iran has also supported the publication of several Houthi and Southern Movement's newspapers<sup>(3)</sup>. Some of the newspapers, which directly support the Houthis, are: Al-Masar, Demokrati, Haqeeqah, Balagh, Haweyah, Ummah, Sawt Shura. Some of the newspapers which indirectly support the Houthis and Iran's project are: Share' and Oulah. In addition, many websites and social media accounts have been launched which are supported and coordinated by the pro-Iran media lobby in Yemen, the most important of these

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(1) Mahdi Khalji, *op. cit.*

(2) Ibrahim Menshawi, *op. cit.*

(3) Nabeel al-Bakeeri, *op. cit.*

websites are Ansarullah, Ofoq News, and the Democrat Tribune.<sup>(1)</sup>

Furthermore, Iran has used other media arms, both from its state media organization and its allies in the region, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, to serve its objectives and to promote its political propaganda regarding its role in Yemen. The most prominent of these are- “Al-Alam” news channel in Arabic, The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Press TV in English, and the multi-lingual Sahar channel group, International Jam-e Jam Channels in Persian (which mainly targets Iranian expatriate communities), Al-Manar channel of Hezbollah backed by the Iranian government. The broadcasting stations of the Iranian Broadcasting Corporation broadcast in more than twenty languages, along with many newspapers such as the: Tehran Times targeting English speakers, and various social media networks.<sup>(2)</sup>

Iran has used these media arms to spread its own narration of the Yemen conflict as wide as possible to mould the public opinion in the region, while seeking to place this conflict within a broader ideological prism related to the fundamental revolutionary slogans of the Iranian regime, such as: the resistance against injustice and Iran is the champion and savior of the “oppressed” and “persecuted”. Thus, Iran’s media arms have worked to depict the Yemen crisis as an “Islamic awakening.” Also, they have depicted the Houthi military movements as resistance for the oppressed against the oppressor.<sup>(3)</sup> One way or another, this has led to generating a kind of ideological flame that has stimulated sectarian division and enhancing the Houthis and their allies to continue their efforts to overtake the territory of Yemen by armed force to meet Iran’s core objectives there.

## **Second: Hard Power**

These tools are mainly the Iranian military support to the Houthis, whether through supplying weapons or through providing training

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(1) Ibrahim Menshawi, op. cit.

(2) Majid Rafizadeh: The Iranian Media and the War in Yemen, July 25th, 2016. <http://cutt.us/lhqU3>

(3) Ibid.

and military experiences. This support has noticeably increased since 2011 and reached the peak when the Houthi militias overtook the capital Sana'a in 2014, meaning that the military capability of these militias was boosted enough to confront pro-legitimate government forces.

The supply of arms, Iran has – in collaboration with its regional agents, especially Hezbollah- supplied its allies in Yemen with shipments of advanced weapons through maritime smuggling operations, either directly through sea voyages from Iranian ports to Yemeni territorial waters, or indirectly through the Horn of Africa. Many Iranian arms shipments to the Houthis were seized; the most important seized shipment was the Iranian ship “Jeehan 1”, intercepted by the US Navy and the Yemeni Coast Guards in the territorial waters of Yemen in January 2013, it contained, according to the Yemeni army, a large and varied quantity of weapons, explosive materials and devices; M12 Katyusha rockets, Strela 1 and 2 operated by surface-to-air missile (SAM) to target modern aircraft of various types at a distance of 4-5 km, RPG-7V antitank grenade launcher, Iranian-made night vision devices, artillery guidance systems to identify land and sea targets within 40 kilometers, G9 artillery systems, Night Vision Goggles Binocular PN-14K used to identify the targets and coordinates of the artillery, various explosive ordnance (RDX) with a total volume of 2,660 kg, an amount of highly explosive C-4, a quantity of sorbitol which is used in the manufacture of bombs and explosive devices, that amounted to 199 kilograms, remote controls, capsules and electric circuits used in the preparation of explosive devices, silencers and modified ammunition for automatic rifles.<sup>(1)</sup> On March 7, 2013, the Yemeni authorities announced the seizure of another Iranian arms ship called Jeehan 2 on the Yemeni Sawabi Island near Bab Mandab while loading a shipment of weapons to a Yemeni fishing boat to be transported to the Houthi militias.<sup>(2)</sup>

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(1) Al-Masdar Online: “Details about the types and numbers of Iranian weapons seized in Jeehan ship”, 6 February 2013. <http://almasdaronline.com/article/41340>

(2) Yemen Press: “Yemen seized Iranian vessel (Jeehan II ) in regional water”, 7 March 2013. <https://yemen - press.com/news17749.html>

On February 27, 2016, the Australian Navy intercepted a sailboat and seized 2000 Kalashnikov rifles, 100 rocket and other weapons. On March 20 of that year, a French destroyer seized 2000 Kalashnikov rifles and dozens of *Dragunov* sniper rifles, anti-tank missiles and other equipment. On April 4, the US Navy intercepted, in the Arabian Sea, a shipment of weapons, which contained 1,500 Kalashnikov rifles, 200 rocket-propelled grenades and 21 50-millimeter automatic rifles, and it was coming from Iran to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. On July 12, the Popular Resistance (Yemen) seized a fishing boat that had managed within one week to transfer six weapon shipments to the Houthi militias from an Iranian ship anchored off the African coast in international waters.<sup>(1)</sup>

In addition, several reports indicated that Iran has supplied Houthi-Saleh militias with various weapons, including long-range ballistic missiles, *Kornet* anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM), which had not been available in the Yemeni military stockpiles before the outbreak of war. Also, Iran has supplied them with Iran's *Ababeel* drones equipped with highly explosive warheads used to attack high-value targets such as radar systems and air defense missile batteries.<sup>(2)</sup> In late 2016, several reports indicated that Iran was supplying the Houthi militias with Iranian-made (Zelzal 2) and Zelzal-3 missiles and supplying them with Burkan 1 missiles which the Houthis claimed in targeting Ta'if in 2016, it provided them with Shihab 2 missiles that carry a destructive head with an explosive weighing half a ton and a range of 800 km.<sup>(3)</sup>

Some reports also indicated that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, in cooperation with Hezbollah, supplied or modified anti-ship missiles had been used by the Houthi-Saleh militias in the attack against the American destroyer *Mason* in October 2016.

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(1) Saleh Hameed: "Will Iran's ships continue to transfer arms to the Houthis from Bab al-Mandab?", Al-Arabiya.net, October 16, 2016. <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/iran/2016/10/16/>

(2) Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi: «Iran steps up support for Houthis in Yemen's war – sources», Reuters, March 21, 2017. <http://cutt.us/9jND>

(3) Yemen Monitor: "Iranian Missile Systems under Houthis' Control", 20 November 2016. <http://cutt.us/cNcy>

The Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah's elements have also provided the direct technical expertise needed to carry out the attack. In addition, they have supplied the Houthi-Saleh militias with sophisticated types of explosives such as explosive hoses, which were discovered by Saudi Special Forces on the Saudi-Yemeni border in early 2017. It was also reported that Iranian Revolutionary Guards or Hezbollah may provide technical expertise to modify the stockpile of Scud missiles which have been in the hands of the Houthi-Saleh militias to reach further targets; this has led to an increase in the number of ballistic missiles launched by these militias in 2017. Moreover, Iran has contributed to the development of a naval mine system for the Houthi-Saleh alliance. The mines hit a Yemeni government's escort ship near the port of Mocha in Taiz and a fishing boat near Midi, in March 2017. Iran and its allies have also provided the technology the Houthi-Saleh militias used in attacking, with remote controlled boats, a Saudi warship in the Red Sea, in January 2017.<sup>(1)</sup>

The Houthi militias' capability has been boosted to target Saudi territories with many missile attacks, mainly in the border areas with Yemen. The seriousness of missiles attacks have increased and reached up to targeting King Khaled International Airport in Riyadh with a missile attack, on November 4, 2017. The attack was done by Burkan H2 ballistic missile,<sup>(2)</sup> the Houthis claimed it is a locally modified version of Scud whereas evidence has shown that it is made in Iran.

According to the military training, Iran has worked to support the capabilities of the Houthi militias and their allies through providing them with the skills they need such as: strategic planning and special military skills necessary for operating complicated and strategic weapons. Besides, it was reported from many American and western security officials that IRGC trained the Houthi militias to

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(1) Maher Farrukh and Tyler Nocita: «Warning Update: Iran's Hybrid Warfare in Yemen», *Critical Threats*, March 26, 2017. <http://cutt.us/4LSVR>

(2) Channel Russia Today (RT): «Houthis target King Khalid Airport in Riyadh with a ballistic missile», November 4, 2017. <https://arabic.rt.com/videoclub/908333>

strengthen their fighting capability and readiness. Also the IRGC and Hezbollah trained the Houthis in using advanced weapons, which they seized from the Yemeni military bases after they took over the capital Sana'a.<sup>(1)</sup> As well as, Iran sent the Houthi militias some Arab and Afghan military specialists to train them and to work as logistics consultants, including Afghans who fought in Syria under the Quds Force of IRGC.<sup>(2)</sup> Additionally, Iran's military supported the factions of the Southern Movement through the supply of weapons and military training whether in Iran or its areas of influence in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria;<sup>(3)</sup> however, this support was reduced after the Houthis took over power in Sana'a.

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(1) Reuters: Warren Strobel and Mark Hosenball: «Elite Iranian guards training Yemen's Houthis: U.S. officials», March 28, 2015. <http://cutt.us/1eSap>

(2) Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, *op. cit.*

(3) Nabeel al-Bakeeri, *op. cit.*



**CHAPTER FOUR**  
Regional and International Positions  
on Iran's Role in Yemen

## Chapter Four

### Regional and International Positions on Iran's Role in Yemen

International and regional positions- especially that of the U.S, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey- have significant influence over Iran's role in Yemen whether by restraining and confronting this role or by encouraging and supporting it.

#### The United States of America

The position of the U.S. on Iran's role in Yemen has passed through two stages: Obama's reign in which the American position was lenient which encouraged, one way or another, Iran to escalate its influence and dominance over several states in the region, including Yemen. Donald Trump's reign in which the U.S. adopted a more serious posture towards Iran's expansionist activities and showed obvious signs to restrain these activities. During Obama's reign and Iran's pursuit of expanding its influence and dominance over the region, Iran's nuclear deal was signed by the U.S. and major powers in 2015 which provided a political cover for Iran's regional project. Apparently, the agreement between the two sides was not only about the nuclear deal, but also it includes direct and indirect understandings regarding Iran's regional influence. The reality of these understandings, and the compromises to entice Iran to comply with the terms of the agreement, have become clear based on certain facts, such as; accepting Iran as a key partner in the initiatives to resolve the Syrian conflict.<sup>(1)</sup>

The American lenient position, during Obama's reign, contributed in Iran's interference in Iraq and Syria- mainly focusing on terminating al-Qaeda in Yemen as a superior strategic priority at the expense of the growing Iran's influence across Yemen- by giving Iran the opportunity to increase its interference in Yemen. This led to critical criticism of Obama's policy towards Iran. The senator John McCain accused, in 2015, Obama's administration of "allowing Iran

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(1) Mohammed Mujahid Al-Zayat: "Strategic Balance in the Gulf Region: Variables and Solutions", 29 November 2015. <http://cutt.us/HUZ1K>

to take over the Middle East,” adding that “the Houthis supported by Iran are the ones who took over the power in Yemen not al-Qaeda, and Iran is dominating or having great influence over Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen,” criticizing the Obama’s administration for not dealing or confronting Iran’s influence across the region as a priority.<sup>(1)</sup>

Thus, some indicators showed that Obama’s administration inclined to a tacit submission to Iran’s role in Yemen, through implicit recognition of the Houthis’ achievements gained in Yemen. During his meeting in Jeddah with foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, in August 2016, the US Secretary of State John Kerry presented a political initiative to resolve the Yemeni crisis and resume peace negotiations between the two parties. The initiative aimed at ceasing military operations, forming a national unity government, the withdrawal of Houthi-Saleh militias from Sana’a and other cities under their control, and to hand-over all heavy and medium-sized weapons to a neutral, third party. John Kerry affirmed that this initiative gives the Houthis, a minority, an opportunity to participate in a future government in Yemen.<sup>(2)</sup> In September 2016, the U.S. started to contact directly with the Houthis; the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs met with a delegation of Houthis, in the Omani capital Muscat, and presented a proposal for a comprehensive ceasefire in Yemen.<sup>(3)</sup>

Apparently, the American efforts, under Obama’s administration, dealt with the Houthis as a key actor, in Yemen and tended to empower them in the Yemeni arena as being a minority; taking into consideration the general positioning of the American administrations led by the democrats which seek to empower minorities in several countries. This is clear from the principles of the initiative of the US Secretary of State John Kerry, which converged the political and military tracks to resolve the Yemen crisis, to hand over

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(1) CBS News: «Face the Nation», January 25, 2015. <http://cutt.us/x4748>

(2) Russia Today (RT) : “Kerry Announces the Launch of a New Initiative to Resolve the Yemeni crisis”, 25 August 2016. <http://cutt.us/BzaBK>

(3) Al-Masdar Online: “The Houthis study US proposal for a ceasefire in Yemen”, 15 September 2016. <http://cutt.us/P11i9>

the weapons of the Houthi militias to a third neutral party (While the previous suggestions to resolve the crisis specified that the solution should begin with the withdrawal of Houthi militias from the cities and hand over weapons to the government of Mansour Hadi, then the formation of a national unity government). In other words, this initiative was closer in meeting the ambitions of the Houthis and their ally the ousted president than achieving the objectives of the Arab coalition in Yemen. It was a reward to the Houthis and their ally the ousted president for their military adventures, which represented Obama's administration tacit submission to Iran's influence in Yemen.

However, during the reign of Donald Trump's administration, the U.S. has had a tougher stance on Iran and has considered confronting Iran's influence and its nefarious activities across the region a top priority. The American president Donald Trump announced on October 13, 2017 the new American strategy on Iran which affirms "to stop Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, supporting terrorism and destabilizing the Middle East, with imposing tough sanctions on Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, decertification of the nuclear agreement, directing congress to review the deal and to decide whether to re-impose sanctions, while keeping the deal under contestant review."<sup>(1)</sup>

Therefore, Trump's administration considers Yemen as an influential factor in its campaign to curtail Iran's influence across the region, especially with the growing U.S. concern that Iran will be able to block navigation in the Bab Mandab Strait and the Red Sea as the Iranian regime continues to support militarily the Houthis by providing them with advanced missile systems. This has enabled them to attack some ships in the regional waters of Yemen. The U.S. seeks to stop this Iranian support for the Houthis by strengthening its efforts to guard strategic waterways off the coast of Yemen, along

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(1) CNN Arabic: "Trump Announces a new strategy towards Iran: We will not ratify the nuclear agreement with Iran», 13 October 2017.  
<http://cutt.us/fNtts>

with increasing its support for the Arab Coalition Forces.<sup>(1)</sup>

## **The Russian Federation**

The Russian position is the most tolerant and accepting of Iran's role in Yemen, that has encouraged Iran to strengthen its efforts to expand its sphere of influence across Yemen. The Russian-Iranian relations are close as they share common views regarding several regional issues, leading to increased cooperation in economic and military fields and in dealing with some regional cases as in the Syrian conflict since 2013 where they reached an unprecedented level of cooperation. This type of collaboration is considered part of the policy of both countries to confront the American influence across the Middle East.<sup>(2)</sup> Although the Iranian and Russian alignments are not completely compatible regarding some regional issues -including Yemen, Iran sought to exploit the rapprochement and coordinate with Russia, mainly in the Syrian conflict to serve its interests in Yemen. Upon this policy, Ali Akbar Velayati, the advisor to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, said in February 2016 that "Iran will intervene in Yemen with Russian support similar to what happened to the Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria and Iraq. There is unprecedented transformation of Russian-Iranian cooperation which will not be only confined to Syria- in addition to Iraq and Lebanon- but it will also expand to Yemen."<sup>(3)</sup>

On the other hand, Russia supported, indirectly, Iran's influence in Yemen through some political positions, which created support for Iran's ally; the Houthis; in Yemen and encouraged them to be stubborn and slack in responding to international political exertions to settle the crisis. On November 12, 2015, Russia refused to vote for issuing a statement from the UN Security Council holding the

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(1) Jay Solomon: "Trump places great emphasis on Yemen in the campaign against Iran," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 20, 2017. <http://cutt.us/SgMeu>

(2) Anna Porshevskaya: "Can Trump Break the Russian-Iranian Alliance?," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 6, 2017. <http://cutt.us/0v8ZG>

(3) Al-Arabiya: "Khamenei's adviser: We will intervene in Yemen with Russian support." 21 February 2016. . <http://cutt.us/DnnsC>

Houthis responsible for the failure of the political process and for escalating the Yemeni crisis and refused to condemn their takeover of power in Sana'a.<sup>(1)</sup> In July 2016, the Houthis and their ousted president formed what is called the "Political Council" to take power and as a substitute to the legitimate government in Yemen. The Russian Embassy Chargé d'Affaires in Sana'a described the formation of this council as a correct step in the right direction and urged the Yemenis to bypass the talk about legitimacy.<sup>(2)</sup> In August 2018, Russia blocked the UN Security Council statement calling the Houthis and their ally the toppled president to respond to the settlement endeavor, while the Houthis commended this position which they considered as Russian support.<sup>(3)</sup> However, this Russian position, supporting the Houthis at any rate, reflected the Iranian-Russian desire to exploit the Yemen crisis as a bargaining chip for settling other issues with the U.S. mainly the Syrian and Ukrainian ones.<sup>(4)</sup>

### **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

The Saudi position is the most opposing and decisive one on Iran's role in Yemen. It has an influential and pivotal role in blocking Iran's infiltration in Yemen, as it strengthened its efforts through increasing its military and political presence in Yemen. Politically, Saudi Arabia endeavored to apply the Gulf Initiative to fill the political vacuum and de-escalate the crisis in Yemen. Militarily, after the Houthis took over Sana'a by armed force, Saudi Arabia launched the Decisive Storm Operation to confront the Houthi coup, sending a very strong message to Iran that Saudi Arabia will never ever allow Iran to expand its influence in the Saudi crucial areas. As well as, it was a clear message to the international powers -especially with their relative

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(1) Al-Arabiya: "Yemen: UN Security Council fails to condemn the Houthis", 12 February 2015. <http://cutt.us/9G3It>

(2) Mahmoud al-Taher: "Yemen is the winning card for Russia to obtain victory in Syria and Ukraine", Noon Post, 24 August 2016. <http://www.noonpost.org/content/13569>

(3) EremNews "The Houthis praise Russian support for them in the Security Council", 3 August 2016. <http://cutt.us/7mLWA>

(4) Mahmoud al-Taher, op. cit.

rapprochement with Iran resulting from consensus on the nuclear file- that Saudi Arabia with the collaboration of the GCC states and other Arab states can confront its security and strategic challenges away from the consensus of international powers.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia increased its endeavors aiming at mobilizing international and regional efforts to isolate Iran and confront its interference aimed to spread its influence and dominance across the region. Successfully, Saudi Arabia held the Riyadh Summit in May 2017, with the participation of the U.S. and many Arab and Islamic countries, with the most significant issue being to confront Iran's destabilizing activities which have caused the spread of chaos, sectarian conflicts and terrorism in the region.

## **Turkey**

Generally, the Turkish position is against Iran's role and interference across several regional states, including Yemen. The relationship between them is competitive – due to historical baggage – over regional leadership. Also, they have different orientations because of their different political systems and their conflicting alliances and the various tools they use to achieve their interests in the region. Turkey tends to invest in its soft power, successful economy, and openness to western and Arab countries, altogether, to expand its influence. On the other side, Iran usually uses hard power to expand its regional dominance and influence, based on narrow sectarian considerations.

Turkey refused Iran's policy and alignment in the region and strongly criticized it. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused Iran of "trying to dominate the region" by supporting Shiite groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, adding that Iran "has a sectarian agenda" and contributed in transforming the conflict in Yemen into a sectarian one, thus, "Iran must change its regional posture and must withdraw from Yemen and Syria as well."<sup>(1)</sup> Also, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in April 2017, accused Iran of "adopting a

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(1) Al – Arabiya: "Erdoğan: 'Iran is trying to dominate the region'", March 27, 2015. <http://cutt.us/OcYwV>

Persian expansionist policy... and it has its own equation in Syria Iraq and Yemen and seeks to infiltrate in these regions to form a Persian power in the region.”<sup>(1)</sup> However, these criticisms have been dimmed under the Iranian-Turkish rapprochement resulting from some political developments in the region; mainly the independence referendum of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in September 2017, which led to their consensus considering the Kurdish case one of their highly significant ‘common’ concerns.

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(1) Anadolu Agency: Erdoğan: We will never allow holding territories in Syria. Iran adopts a policy Persian expansionist policy”, 20 April 2017. <http://cutt.us/fRCap>

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

**The Scope of the Iranian Role in Yemen  
and its impact on Regional Security**

## Chapter Five

### **The Scope of the Iranian Role in Yemen and its impact on Regional Security**

Iran's bid to expand its role in the region is limited because of various obstacles that hamper and undermine the successes Iran has defined. The obstacles include- the Yemeni domestic situation, the intrusion of regional/international actors and the actual Iranian potential in the region.

#### **First: The limitations caused by the situation in Yemen**

The perpetual shifts in political positions and loyalties are the hallmark of the Yemeni political landscape, which makes Iran's current alliances with the Houthis and the deposed president Ali Abdullah Saleh volatile. A case in point is that Iran backed the former southern leader Ali Salem Beid. However, he severed ties with Tehran after the military takeover by the Houthis in Sanaa. Furthermore, the forces of the Southern Movement, supported and trained by Iran, joined the forces resisting the Houthi militias and expelled them from the province of Dhale in Southern Yemen in mid-2015.<sup>(1)</sup> Also, the alliance between Saleh and the Houthis is impermanent. They were rivals in the past. The two sides fought bitter armed conflicts in the period between 2004-2010.

The Houthi Ansarullah group, that Iran relies on mainly to expand its sphere of influence in Yemen, lacks sufficient popular support, material capabilities and human potential to 1-strengthen its control over Yemen, 2-to maintain its military advances and 3- to continue to retain its territory, especially in the long-run. A great number of Zaidists in Yemen do not fully support the group, and many among them believe the group violates the core beliefs of the sect. Also, the Yemeni arena is full of influential forces, political elites, and many factions other than the Houthi movement, such as the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, the Yemeni Socialist Party, the Southern

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(1) Farea Al – Muslimi: op. cit.

elites, the Southern Movement and the Salafist forces. These elites and forces represent a major obstacle to the Houthi Ansarullah group when it comes to advancing its dominance and superiority in Yemen, and represents a serious obstacle to the role of Iran and its project in Yemen. These forces and elites (together with most of the Yemeni Zaidi sect), the party of the deposed president, “General People’s Congress Party”, pay great attention to the relationship between Yemen and its Arab regional partners. They are aware of the common geographical, historical, cultural, social and economic ties between Yemen and its neighboring Arab nations, especially Saudi Arabia and refuse all efforts to overlook such bonds by making Yemen a pawn in the hand of Iran for its expansionist regional ambitions.

The tribal factor also represents a major limitation to Iran in strengthening its influence in Yemen. Iran remains oblivious to the complexities of the Yemeni tribal situation, which not only reflects a traditional social structure but is also a key element of social and political influence. It is one of the most important keys to influence in Yemen, curbing Iran’s ability to influence Yemeni policies in the long run, that will limit its role and clout in Yemen, given Iran’s lack of experience in dealing with this complex tribal situation. Also, tribal considerations are a major obstacle to the success of the Houthi movement in dominating Yemen, and consequently an obstacle to the expansion of Iranian influence in Yemen. There is hostility between the Houthis and big/influential tribes. The hostility has intensified as the movement seeks to wrestle control over the Yemeni state through militancy. To reach this end, the movement had targeted major tribes, especially Hashid and Bakil, Al-Ahmar, the leaders of the Hashid tribe who enjoy far-reaching political clout, as well as the tribes of Arhab, Jawf and Marib that are affiliated with Bakil, the tribe which enjoys the largest support in Yemen.

Moreover, the sectarian strife that characterizes the existing Yemeni conflict, which Iran relies on to expand its sphere of influence in Yemen by polarizing some of Yemen’s factions, is short lived, although currently aggravated by the conflict. This is because the sectarian divisions within the society are not deep due to the

similarities between the two Islamic schools of thought- Zaidism and Shafei. They have always coexisted in harmony and often without conflict. Also, the ongoing conflict is not of sectarian nature. It is rather waged over political clout and power. The odds are low for ending Iranian interference in the future, as it depends mainly on stirring sectarian sentiments affiliated to the conflict given that Iran is aware that the high sectarian tensions that exist are likely to wind down in case of a political settlement over the conflict sooner or later.

The limitations related to Iran's capabilities and the role of regional and international actors

The role of Saudi Arabia represents a powerful stumbling block to Iran's role and a major impediment to its attempts to expand its influence in Yemen, which to Saudi Arabia is a vital area and is considered its strategic depth. Saudi Arabia has a strong presence in Yemen because of historical, cultural, social and economic ties. This political clout is also linked to the considerable familiarity with the complexities there and Saudi Arabia's experience in dealing with such complexities and the massive support offered to Yemen's governmental and non-governmental apparatuses there. Some estimate the amount of Saudi support to Yemen over the past years to be about \$50 billion.<sup>(1)</sup>

Given these close ties, Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Yemen with the participation of many other Arab countries. This move came to counter the Houthis' attempts to extend their control over all the Yemeni territories by armed force and to put an end to the penetration of Iranian influence in Yemen by sending a clear message to Iran that Saudi Arabia is determined to preserve the political balances that exists in Yemen as it considers Yemen a vital area and a means of its strategic depth. Riyadh also wanted to relay a message to Iran that it is determined to defend its clout and interests in this vital sphere using different means, including its hard power, which has considerably curbed the movement of Iran in Yemen.

The role of the United States is also a major obstacle to the

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(1) Shuja Buqami: «50 billion dollars .. The size of Saudi support for the economy of Yemen», Middle East newspaper, March 27, 2015. <http://cutt.us/Mu7A5>

Iranian presence in Yemen, especially as President Donald Trump's administration adopts a tougher approach towards Iran, and intensifies its political and economic pressure on Iran. As well, as announcing a new US strategy to counter destabilizing Iranian activities in the region. This US approach, applied especially in Yemen, aims to abort Iran's attempts to consolidate its influence near vital maritime passages such as the Bab Mandab Strait and to prevent it from wresting control over this strategic spot that would allow Iran the possibility of obstructing international maritime navigation directly or indirectly through its regional allies and surrogates.

### **The limitations related to Iranian capabilities**

Iran's limited capabilities as compared to its ambitious role in the region are a major obstacle to expanding its influence in Yemen. Iran is not a major power, nor a dominant emerging regional power, but a regional force of medium size, suffering from great political dilemmas, pressures and difficult economic challenges. Therefore, its level of modernization and its level of economic and military capabilities are not commensurate with the scope of its role and activities in the regional sphere, especially in Yemen, given the pressures, roles and countermeasures aimed at curbing this role, particularly from Saudi Arabia and the United States of America. These measures are aimed to limit the effectiveness of the tools which Iran relies on to play its role and enhance its influence in Yemen.

Iran's hard power is limited, particularly military support through the supply of weapons, training and military expertise. It is difficult for Iran to use more resources and shoulder more burdens by stepping up its military support for the Houthis, in light of its major commitments to its allies in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria which is considered a key priority. Iran is aware that the escalation of military support for the Houthis could lead to direct military confrontation with Saudi Arabia or the United States of America. Iran is fully aware of the consequences and wants to avoid this.

As for Iranian soft power- the media and political Shiism, considerable limits are visible. Regarding the media, although

the Iranian regime has intensified its political propaganda through its multiple media outlets, especially in Arabic, and has succeeded relatively in communicating its views on the conflict in Yemen, especially to its masses or actors close to it, Iran has faced considerable limitations on influencing public opinion, especially among the Sunni majority population in the region. This relative failure has happened because of the effectiveness of the Arab media - especially those funded by Saudi Arabia or financed - in countering the Iranian narrative on the conflict in Yemen and the role of Iran in it.<sup>(1)</sup>

Regarding political Shiism and the associated slogans of “resisting injustice and arrogance” and “supporting the oppressed”, the scope of its impact on the Yemeni arena is narrow. It is confined to the factions close to Iran, including portions of the Zaidists, who are a minority. Iran’s focus on sectarian polarization via employing sectarian groups to serve its interests and objectives, regardless of the resulting devastation, has painted a picture of its reputation as a subversive sectarian force and contributed to the growing rejection of its policies and approaches. This discontent could be seen within the grassroots and groupings amongst the Zaidists themselves.

Also, the contradiction between the slogans raised by Iran and its allies and their practices on the ground diminished any chances for political Shiism and its associated slogans in Yemen to succeed. While Iran entered Yemen with slogans to support the oppressed and the downtrodden and to resist injustice and arrogance, its intervention and practices contributed to moving its Houthi allies from the state of “vulnerability” - considering that they suffered from marginalization and injustice at a previous stage - to arrogance. They have suppressed their foes on political and sectarian grounds and are trying to wrestle control over the Yemeni state. This utter contradiction between the slogans and practices, made slogans relating to resisting injustice and aiding the oppressed appear as mere hypocrisy, discrediting Iran and its allies, which curbed the impact of political Shiism, as a political card to expand Iran’s clout in Yemen.

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(1) Majid Rafizadeh: op. cit.

## **Second: The implications of the Iranian role in Yemen on regional security**

Iran's perceives national security as a zero-sum game, with the belief that it must work to undermine the security of some regional neighbors, or the regional security system as a whole to render its national security protected, subsequently bypassing the legitimate and institutionalized means of cooperation and regular political relationships among nations. Iran's dependence on actors other than the state to serve its agenda through supporting some groups such as Ansarullah and the Houthis, fermented tensions and deepened divisions. Thus, it is no surprise that the Iranian role impacts regional security, through shaking the balance of power in the region, as well as undermining social and political structures in neighboring countries, threatening international maritime passages, and contributing to the rise of terror groups.

### **1- Impact on the Regional Balance of Power**

The concept of balance of power refers to a state of stability or parity in terms of overall military, political and economic capabilities to a group of countries united by one framework.<sup>(1)</sup> Maintaining a balance of power requires that a state limits its independent or unilateral quest for greater power at the expense of other states; this endeavor will naturally create tensions and upset the balance.<sup>(2)</sup>

From this perspective, it is possible to imagine the negative impact of the Iranian role in Yemen - whether direct or indirect - on the balance of power in the region. Iran seeks through its interventionist agenda in Yemen to increase its strength and influence at the expense of other countries in the region to the extent that it can push these countries to agree to its dominance. This happens through strengthening its alliance with the Houthis and supporting them militarily, in a way that enhances Iran's and its allies' ability to launch asymmetric wars, terrorist activities against neighboring countries

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(1) Mohammed Mujahid Zayat: op. cit.

(2) Majid Ahmed Zamili: The International Balance of Power, Urban Dialogue, Issue 3386, June 4, 2011. <http://cutt.us/KErSx>

and threaten navigation in the Straits of Bab Mandab. A balance of fear will emerge instead of a balance of power, which is detrimental to the security of the region.

Iranian interventions and activities in Yemen directed to disrupt the balance of power in the region through two possibilities- first, by annexing Yemen, with its important strategic location and relatively large demographic size, to Iran, if these interventions and activities succeed in empowering the Houthis and making them ascend to power, as in Iraq, where forces close to Iran hijacked the political process. The influence of Iran extends, not only in the vital area of the Gulf States, but in other geographic and strategic neighbors of the Horn of Africa, as Yemen is a gateway to this area via the Arabian Peninsula.

Removing Yemen from the balance of power equation in the region (as in the case of Syria). This could happen in the event of continued Iranian interference, that could lead to prolonging the conflict in Yemen by escalating the military support of the Houthis, which would lead to the Gulf Arab States to lose their important strategic depth, and even turn this depth into a source of danger and threat to these countries. This is in the interest of Iran, as any losses inflicted on the Gulf Arab countries are advances for the Iranian side when it comes to the balance of regional power.

Moreover, the continuation of Iranian interventions in Yemen would indirectly harm the balance of power in the region by increasing and consolidating the dependence of the countries of the region on international and regional external parties to achieve a balance, particularly the United States of America, Britain, France and Turkey. This negatively affects the regional integration efforts of the countries of the region, or postpones these efforts, as well as contributing to keeping the balance in the region dependent on the calculations and agreements of these external parties with Iran.

## **2- The Impact on Stability of the Social and Political Structures in Yemen's Regional Neighbors**

The Iranian role in the Yemeni arena could indirectly affect the stability of the social and political structures in the neighboring

countries. This could happen through the so-called phenomenon of proliferation or simulation (domino), as the Yemeni internal crisis could be transferred to other countries, in the same regional sphere or outside it.

If Iran's interventions and activities empower the Houthis, a relatively limited minority, to consolidate their dominance or to strengthen their position in the political process in Yemen beyond their size as a minority, the impact may extend to countries in which Shiite factions are large, such as Bahrain and Kuwait. This could transpire through inciting some of these Shiite actors to stir turmoil and tensions, with the aim to reshape the social and political balances in their favor.

This is, of course, encouraged and supported by Iran to gain more influence in other countries. One of the most important indicators is the occasional protests and tensions in Bahrain with the political and media support of Iran. Along with, what is sometimes exposed as terrorist cells linked to Iran in some countries of the region, such as the «Abdali cell» which was arrested in Kuwait in August 2015. It was convicted of communicating with Iran and Hezbollah and planning to carry out acts that would harm the unity and territorial integrity of Kuwait.<sup>(1)</sup>

### **3- The Impact on the Security of the International Sea Routes**

Iran's interference in Yemen poses a major threat to the security of international sea lanes. Iranian military support to the Houthi-Saleh militias, has enabled these militias to attack some vessels operating in the Strait of Bab Mandab and the Gulf of Aden.<sup>(2)</sup> Iran has sent warships to the Gulf of Aden under the guise of confronting piracy, and some Iranian officials have declared that Iran is planning to establish a maritime basis in Yemen. These are all indications that the conflict in Yemen could turn into a comprehensive regional war that would impede navigation in the Gulf of Aden, the Bab Mandab and

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(1) For more details, see: Al-Ittihad Newspaper: «Kuwait: 12 Members of Abdali Cell arrested», 13 August 2017. <http://cutt.us/d8I7I>

(2) Iran plans to establish naval bases in Yemen and Syria, 26 November 2016. <http://tutt.us/tlcQJ>

the Red Sea. This could hamper oil and commercial markets across the globe, which will have a knock-on effect on the interests of Gulf nations.

Houthi-Saleh rocket attacks on one of the UAE's supply ships and on the Mason US destroyer in the Straits of Bab Mandab in October 2016 posed a serious threat from Iran and its allies to the international fleets operating in the Gulf of Aden and Bab Mandab. It is also a challenge to the ability of the US Navy to operate freely at one of the most important maritime crossing points in the world. The United States has responded by launching some air strikes on Houthi military positions on the Yemeni coast, which is an indication that the conflict in the region - due to the growing military activities of Iran and its allies in the shipping lanes - could warp into a comprehensive and complex regional war, which could threaten the safe navigation in the Strait of Bab Mandab and the Gulf of Aden.<sup>(1)</sup> In the same context, there are fears that Iran may provide the Houthis with more anti-ship weapons, which could contribute to their growing potential to threaten international shipping traffic in the region. This is, in addition to Iran sending anti-ship C-802 missiles to the Houthis before the current war began in 2015. There are fears that in the future they will be able to supply them with more advanced naval missiles, such as the Nasr C-704, which are easy to transport and operate. It carries an explosive head that can sink large ships and has a range of about 35 kilometers, enabling it to reach almost all parts of the Bab Mandab Strait, or supply them with radar and electrically-guided Kusan missiles with a range of 15 to 25 km. This could pose a significant threat to vessels operating in the Straits of Bab Mandab and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthis, with direct or indirect assistance from Iran, may blow up the coastal and international shipping routes close to their areas of control, which may impede navigation in the

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(1) Katherine Zimmerman and Emily Estelle: «Escalation in the Red Sea: Yemen's Civil War, Iran, and Saudi Arabia», *Critical Threats*, October 14, 2016. <http://cutt.us/XyMLU>

region.<sup>(1)</sup>

#### **4- The Impact on the Growing Threat of Extremist Organizations**

One of the most significant negative effects of the Iranian role in Yemen is its contribution to the growing threat of extremist organizations, with the potential the activities of these organizations could spill over beyond the domestic level in a way that threatens regional security. Iran's intervention and its backing of the Houthi Ansarullah group, in particular its political and military support, contributed to the transformation of this group into an extremist group, as it distanced itself from the real Zaidi heritage and resorted to violence to achieve its political objectives. Iranian intervention to support this group, which is a proponent of sectarianism, led to the escalation of sectarian sentiments and the fueling of sectarianism and extremism. This led to the targeting of Sunni factions in Yemen, and the emergence of ideas such as "confronting the Shiite expansionism" and "Persian expansion", providing new pretexts and additional justification for extremist Sunni organizations to pop up and to attract more affiliates and step up their activities. Also, Iran's continued support of the Houthi militias and the consequent prolongation of the conflict in Yemen is fermenting chaos that fuels extremism and violence, stimulating extremist groups, that provides them with greater opportunities to strengthen their capabilities and expand their activities.

In this context, the Houthis' quest to dominate Yemen by armed force, and their invasion of predominantly Sunni areas (Shafei), led to an increase in sectarian conflicts and the activation of extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda, which presented themselves as advocates of the Sunni factions. On September 25, 2014, a few days after the Houthis seized control of Sanaa, al-Qaeda issued a statement accusing the Houthis of "completing the Persian project in Yemen,"

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(1) Farzin Nadeemi: «How can Iranian intervention in Yemen cause America to go to war?», Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 17, 2016. <http://cutt.us/OJEU>

and calling on the Sunnis to “take up arms against the Houthis.”<sup>(1)</sup> The organization stepped up its activity in an unprecedented manner, launching many attacks on the Houthi militias in different parts of Yemen. By December 2014, the organization claimed responsibility for 149 attacks against the Houthis in 14 counties in less than 90 days.<sup>(2)</sup> With the escalation of the conflict, the growing sectarianism, chaos and security vacuum, al-Qaeda in Yemen has become stronger than ever before, expanding its social base, attracting many tribal elements, seizing large quantities of weapons, and expanding its attacks to include Houthi opponents – and forces loyal to the Yemeni government, its recruits’ number doubled, reaching about 4000 by 2015, according to estimates of the US Department of State.<sup>(3)</sup>

Moreover, the rise of the Houthis led to more extremist groups emerging, in November 2014, shortly after the Houthis seized control of Sanaa, several members of al-Qaeda announced their dissent and announced the establishment of a branch of the so-called the Islamic State” in Yemen. On March 20, 2015, the organization launched its violent activities by launching four simultaneous suicide attacks against mosques frequented by the Houthis in Sana’a. Later, the organization expanded its attacks to include elements of the security and forces affiliated with the legitimate Yemeni government and Arab coalition forces in the southern regions, particularly in the city of Aden.<sup>(4)</sup>

The danger lies in Iran’s continued support of the Houthi militias and the prolongation of the conflict, which will further exacerbate the chaos and security vacuum in Yemen, providing greater political and social space for extremist organizations, giving them greater opportunities to strengthen their capabilities and expand their activities beyond the Yemeni arena, spilling over into the neighboring countries, causing serious damage to regional security.

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(1) Amal Mudallali: op. cit.

(2) International Crisis Group: Yemen’s al - Qaeda: Expanding the Base, Report No. 174, February 2, 2017. <http://cutt.us/iliUA>

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

Future of the Iranian Role in Yemen

## **Chapter Six**

### **Future of the Iranian Role in Yemen**

As based on the dimensions of the Iranian role in Yemen, and in light of the current political developments and reactions to the Yemeni and regional/international positions, the prospects for the Iranian role in Yemen can be envisaged through three main future scenarios:

#### **First: Upsurge of Iran's Role in Yemen**

This is the most dangerous scenario for the stability of Yemen, and regional security, via Iran's political, media, financial, and military support for the Houthis. Stepping up this assistance, especially financial support would preserve the ability of the Houthis and their ally, deposed President Ali Abdullah Saleh, to continue their war by providing them with more sophisticated weapons, which would enhance their military capabilities in the face of pro-government forces backed by the Arab coalition, enabling them to maintain and possibly expand their areas of control. This will lead to the consolidation of Iran's influence in the northern Yemeni regions, especially by turning its relationship with the Houthis and their ally to a kind of official alliance with the Yemeni state as the Houthis and their ally represent a de facto authority in Sanaa.

- This scenario is also linked to the possibility of Iran succeeding in resuming its activities and expanding its influence in the Southern Yemeni regions. This would happen through restoring its relations with some of the southern movement's wings that it had previously dealt with and supported before the Houthis seized power in Sana'a, especially the groups loyal to the former president of the South, Ali Salem Beid. Also by attracting some factions or other southern leaders, and taking advantage of the divisions and quarrels suffered by the south, in light of the possibility of a return to old conflicts amongst the various wings of the political elite that ruled the southern part notably in January 1986. As well as the possibility of conflicts between other political and tribal forces with different

objectives and orientations, which would contribute to the expansion of Iranian influence in the southern regions.

- One of the indicators backing up this scenario is Iran's possession of a powerful card, namely, its alliance with the Houthi-Saleh militias as a professional military force with significant weight on the ground. Iran also has a clear vision when it comes to its role in Yemen. It performs this role through meticulous calculation of the changes in the regional and international arenas. It adopts a pragmatic strategy that allows it to make the necessary adjustments to its policies to deal with these changes, as well as its ability to employ its tools of power, both soft and hard. The aim of this is to maintain its various alliances of a sectarian and ideological nature in Yemen, and to build new alliances based on pragmatic considerations through capitalizing on divisions, attracting some factions and earning loyalties of some leaders of different sects through financial and military support.

- The possibility of achieving this scenario depends on three main factors. The first is the continuation of the alliance between the Houthis and the ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the success of the two parties in developing and strengthening their partnership by overcoming their differences concerning the contest over power and influence in the northern Yemeni regions. Second, if the efforts of the Arab coalition in Yemen have deteriorated or stalled, and there have been major disagreements and cracks in the pro-government forces' in a way that tips the scale in favor of the Houthi-Saleh alliance in the ongoing battles. The Houthis and Saleh, both backed by Iran, bet on the possibility that the Arab coalition may get disbanded as time lapses. Therefore, they seek to prolong the crisis, either through military escalation or through political maneuvers, in the hope that the efforts of the Arab coalition in Yemen will stop in a manner likely to weaken them in the military confrontations and show them as victors or steadfast in the face of the Arab coalition. They may also seek to at least make political gains that do not befit their size on the ground in a future settlement of the dispute. Third, in case the world powers ease their posture on the terror activities aimed to boost Iran's expansionism in the region.

## **Second: Firmness of Iran's Role in Yemen**

- This scenario is that the Iranian role in Yemen remains unchanged over the short or medium term, through the continued engagement of Iran with the Houthi-Saleh alliance, while retaining its political and financial support for this alliance at current levels without retreat or escalation.

- The possibility of this scenario depends mainly on the likelihood that the conflict in Yemen reaches a stalemate, with the failure to end the conflict through a political settlement. Neither side can resolve the conflict militarily in its favor, or achieve strategic breakthroughs or great military successes on the ground, in a way that radically changes the balance of power in its favor.

- The chances of this scenario are linked to two main factors. First, the international efforts, especially the efforts of the United States of America, to counter the expansion of Iranian influence in the region at the current levels without escalation. Second, the extent to which Iran has succeeded in establishing its influence or achieving its objectives in other situations or countries, particularly in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Bahrain. The escalation of its activities and its continued success in expanding its influence in these countries will motivate it to escalate its activities and interventions in Yemen in the hope of repeating successes and hoping for greater influence and domination.

## **Third: Retreat of the Iranian Role in Yemen**

- This is the most viable scenario for the stability of Yemen, and for the security and stability of the region. It is also the most likely scenario, considering the obstacles and challenges facing the Iranian role in Yemen that limits its effectiveness and the possibility of expansion or success in achieving its full objectives. This scenario is due to the decline of Iran's interventionist activities and the winding down of its influence in Yemen. The dire economic conditions it is going through may make Iran unable to step up support for its allies in Yemen and keep it at the current levels. Tehran's support for allied forces in Syria and Lebanon caused these burdens to increase. Also,

the mounting pressures from the region and the world as the new US administration is adopting a new tougher policy towards its activities and behaviors in the region, as well as the possible shifts in alliances in Yemen, are detrimental to Iran's interests.

- This scenario could come true due to any possible crack in the Houthi-Saleh alliance on which Iran relies to expand influence in Yemen, considering the mounting rifts within the alliance. These differences emerged after the Houthis made changes and appointments in the executive, military and security circles, to remove the leaders loyal to the deposed president and to replace other Houthi leaders. This angered the military leaders loyal to the deposed president who refused to obey orders of the Houthis to go to some fronts, such as in Marib and some other Yemeni provinces. Also, sharp rifts occurred over the position on negotiations, and other political decisions such as implementing the emergency law based on the yearning of the Houthis. The differences between the two sides have been exacerbated by the rising intervention by the Houthi militia in the work of the executive and administrative bodies in Sana'a, enabling these militias to have an upper hand in running these bodies at the expense of the deposed president's supporters. Signs of these rifts and divisions started to come to the fore, with reports speaking of clashes between the Houthi militias and supporters of the deposed president in Sanaa, as well as the mounting attacks by the Houthi militias on leaders and ministers affiliated to the "General People's Congress" led by the deposed president. Also, cancelling some administrative decisions and storming headquarters of ministries and expelling ministers affiliated with the party have increased rifts. These differences seem to be normal or predictable, since the alliance between the Houthis and the deposed president is nothing more than an transient one imposed by a change in the balance of power following the outbreak of the Yemeni revolution in 2011. A change that has made yesterday's enemies allies of today. There was a round of armed confrontations between 2004 and 2010, thus, hostility and mistrust govern their relationship, which increases the likelihood of the collapse of this alliance.

- The chances of achieving this scenario depend on the possible success of the forces loyal to the legitimate government backed by the Arab Coalition in escalating military confrontation and achieving great strategic successes on the ground and tightening the noose around the Houthis in the capital Sana'a, and intensifying military pressure on their main stronghold in Sa'da. This may lead to two possibilities, First- pushing the Houthis and the deposed president to unconditionally accept the political settlement of the crisis in accordance with the UN resolution 2216, the Gulf initiative and the outcome of the national dialogue, or accept a settlement in return for guarantees to stay in the political scene and not being subjected to retaliation. This could be a preemptive step to avoid the utter collapse of their military capabilities in a way that may ostracize them from the political process or diminish their representation in any political system. Second- any possible collapse in the ranks of the Houthis and Saleh forces or the collapse of the ongoing alliance between them, with many positions falling to the forces loyal to the legitimate government and the Arab coalition forces, which could lead to an ultimate control over Sanaa and tipping the scale of the conflict in favor of these forces. This could lead to curbing the Iranian influence there as the pro-government forces aided by the Arab coalition will have the full control over the Yemeni territories.

- The chances of achieving this scenario also depends on a possible agreement amongst representatives of the legitimate Yemeni government, the Houthis and their ally the ousted president to agree on a more serious round of negotiations to resolve the crisis peacefully. This will be followed by reaching a consensus on the mechanisms of implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2216 and the outcomes of the national dialogue and the Gulf Initiative, providing a timeframe for implementing these outcomes. This will also include providing international and regional guarantees for the implementation of the outcomes that may result from the negotiations, leading to the formation of a technocrat government until the elections. In addition, groundwork for an effective and balanced political system that accommodates all Yemeni forces and

regulates the relationship between the state and political, social, sectarian and regional groups within the framework of citizenship. This should happen in a way that guarantees that the Yemeni state represents all factions without discrimination or being hijacked by a certain group. This will ultimately lead to strengthening the central government in Yemen and thus closes the door to negative external interference, in particularly from Iran.

- This scenario is likely to happen due to the discussions albeit semi-official, among the forces loyal to the legitimate government and its supporters, and, Houthis and their ally, the deposed president, on sensitive issues related to regional security such as the nature of the Houthis' relationship with Iran. Through these discussions, there will be attempts to convince the Houthis that their interest lies in having a positive and constructive relationship with the Arab regional states to which Yemen belongs geographically, historically and nationally. This sphere cannot be overlooked. They will also be asked to renounce their alliance with Iran as they don't have any interest in it. The discussions will assert that the Gulf nations will not allow Yemen and its northern part to be a backyard for Iran. These discussions are aimed to weaken the Houthi-Iran alliance.

The chances of achieving this scenario are closely related to the readiness of the Arab-led coalition countries led by Saudi Arabia, in cooperation with other Arab countries and the international community, to adopt a comprehensive and long-term strategy to address the Yemen crisis triangle, which is now is a favorable environment for negative external interventions in Yemen. This Yemeni crisis triangle is reflected in 1- economic inefficiency with low rates of development, worsening living conditions, and worsening rates of poverty and unemployment 2- weak political effectiveness, manifested in a deadlocked political system, failure to achieve a comprehensive agreement among different forces and groups, and lack of broad popular acceptance 3-Weak national integration, which is manifested in the exacerbation of communal divisions, the multiplicity of tribal and sectarian loyalties, the lack of a national identity and the weakness of state control in many Yemeni regions.

## **CLOSURE**

As part of its efforts to expand its sphere of influence in the region, Iran has stepped up its interventionist activities in Yemen since 2011, taking advantage of the vacuum and instability caused by the faltering political transition following the overthrow of the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh. Iran's interventionist activities in Yemen, as in other neighboring countries, have stemmed from Iran's security concerns and its desire to strengthen its national security by following aggressive policies and using them in the process of achieving its national security as a zero-sum game. It is seeking to enhance its security through impacting the security of other countries in the region. It adopts a strategy based on bypassing regular representatives of the state and forging partnerships with actors other than the state, especially with groups close to it in sectarian terms. It offers generous support for these groups and employs them to serve its interests in the region. In this context, Iran has strengthened its partnership with the Houthis and sought to transform them into a political and military force dominating the political process in Yemen and thus exploiting them to achieve its objectives related to seeking to strengthen its regional position, gaining more influence and dominance, and countering the influence of presumed competitors or opponents, including Saudi Arabia and the United States of America.

However, Iran's efforts to revive its role and achieve its objectives in Yemen faces many obstacles and restrictions that reduces the effectiveness of this role and limits the possibility of its expansion. The most important of these obstacles and constraints: the complex nature of the Yemeni arena, which is characterized by fluctuating political trends and loyalties, making the Iranian alliances on which Iran relies to extend its influence in Yemen subject to disintegration. Also, the Houthi militia lacks public support, cadres and financial capabilities enabling it to wrestle control over Yemen or retain its gains and the areas it has occupied, especially in the long run. Also, many Yemeni political forces and large tribes reject Iranian interference, and back regional and international activities aimed at curbing Iran's role in Yemen, especially Saudi and American activities.

As Iran rejects the idea of interdependence in achieving regional security, depending rather on sectarian polarization to reach this end, it was normal that the Iranian role became detrimental to the region. As Iran would strengthen the ability of its allies to launch wars and damage the Yemeni state's assets in a manner that would completely remove them from the balance of power equation in the region, tipping the balance of power in favor of Iran. The Iranian role could also wreak havoc on social and political structures in the neighboring countries due to the domino effect, especially shaking the balance among internal forces, in neighboring countries, which could stir social and political unrest in these countries. The role also poses a threat to maritime corridors and gives rise to extremist groups, whose terror could reach areas beyond Yemen, which could be detrimental to regional security.

All in all, given the many restrictions and constraints to the effectiveness of Iran's role in Yemen, it is unlikely that Iran will be able to have a long-term impact on Yemen's domestic politics. The most it can do is to temporarily change the internal balance of power in favor of the Houthis, without the ability to change the political equation of Yemen radically, which makes Iran's desire to consolidate its position and gain more influence in Yemen a difficult task.



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**THE IRANIAN ROLE IN YEMEN**

**AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE REGIONAL SECURITY**