



Brewing Yemen civil war and its implication on international maritime security

Nagapushpa Nagarajan Devendra¹

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 October 2017;
in revised form 20 November 2017;
accepted 11 January 2018.

Keywords:

Iran-Saudi Proxy war.

ABSTRACT

Yemen civil war has been brewing for a while now, but the news of Saleh's death came like roll of thunder, reverberating across the region. It appears that Saleh and his close associates were killed by Houthi's for switching sides in Yemen civil war. His death has led the coalition to reconcile with Saleh's son, Ahmed Saleh in their fight to re-capture the country's capital and strategic ports from the Houthi's. In addition, the escalating tension between Saudi-led coalition and Iran-backed Houthi's has also empowered local franchises of Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to take advantage of the conflict. However, Houthi's are backed by Iran who is likely to increase support as all sides will now fight to gain supremacy over world's strategic trading sea route that borders Yemeni coastal area. It appears that Iran will use Houthi's as surrogates to gain indirect control over Bab-al-Mandab strait, a narrow chokepoint used to transits 30% of world resources, would be equivalent to its current capability to close the Strait of Hormuz, posing a threat to the international maritime security. As a result, the article evaluates, brewing Yemen civil war and its impact on the countries that use Bab-al-Mandab as their primary route. Further, it urges the countries affiliated to the strait to strengthen their collaboration and develop a mechanism that would take into account the interest of all parties involved in the conflict. United States must learn from past conflict and theory in their approach to resolve Yemen civil war. It must seek support of European and Asian countries to establish a cohesive sea defense strategy in the West Asia to ensure safety and security of the strait.

© SEECMAR | All rights reserved

1. Introduction

Yemen civil war has been brewing for a while now, but the news of Saleh's death came like roll of thunder, reverberating across the region. It appears that Saleh and his close associates were killed by Houthi's for switching sides in Yemen civil war. His death has led the coalition to reconcile with Saleh's son, Ahmed Saleh in their fight to re-capture the country's capital and strategic ports from the Houthi's. In addition, the escalating tension between Saudi-led coalition and Iran-backed Houthi's has also empowered local franchises of Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to take advantage of the conflict. However, Houthi's are backed by Iran who is likely to increase support as all sides will now fight to gain supremacy over world's strategic trading sea route that borders Yemeni coastal

area. It appears that Iran will use Houthi's as surrogates to gain indirect control over Bab-al-Mandab strait, a narrow chokepoint used to transits 30% of world resources, would be equivalent to its current capability to close the Strait of Hormuz, posing a threat to the international maritime security. As a result, the article evaluates, brewing Yemen civil war and its impact on the countries that use Bab-al-Mandab as their primary route. Further, it urges the countries affiliated to the strait to strengthen their collaboration and develop a mechanism that would take into account the interest of all parties involved in the conflict. United States must learn from past conflict and theory in their approach to resolve Yemen civil war. It must seek support of European and Asian countries to establish a cohesive sea defense strategy in the West Asia to ensure safety and security of the strait.

¹Researcher, West Asia Center, IDSA, New Delhi.

2. Prelude to the conflict.

In early December 2017, the failure of peace talks between Houthi's and Saleh's followers over the control of sensitive areas, led to violent clash in the country's capital. Amid the escalation, Saleh in a televised speech announced his willingness to reconcile with Hadi government and Saudi-led coalition in the fight against Houthi's insurgencies in the region. He further urged the coalition to stop their aggression, lift the blockade and negotiate power-sharing with the legitimate government. Houthi's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi was quick in denouncing Saleh's speech and accused him of setting "coup against our [Houthi-Saleh] alliance and partnership". However, Saleh's decision was welcomed by the coalition, intensifying air-strikes targeting Houthi's positions in the capital. They assured that, "it [coalition] would redeem Yemen from the evils of Iranian terrorist and sectarian militias, return it to the Pan-Arab and natural fold." In response, Houthi's re-grouped the force against Saleh's supporters in the political district of Sanaa. Their fragile act of balancing the alliance was completely shattered when Saleh accused Houthi's for the country's misery and annulled his association by officially declaring war against them.

Following day, a radio station of Houthi-controlled Interior Ministry announced the death of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in a road side ambush. On 4th December 2017, while Saleh was trying to flee towards the south to get to coalition lines or to north/east to get to the Saudi border, his car was intercepted and then shot death. Houthi's paraded his body in the capital and began to track down Saleh's family, forces and associates. In fact, Houthi's also killed Saleh's nephew and top military adviser Tareq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh who was expected to lead the military operation against the Houthi's after Saleh. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi in a rebel-run channel al-Masirah affirmed that Saleh has been killed for his "treason" and the "uprising" by Saleh forces has also been defeated. However, Saleh's death will have a huge implication on the moving forward conflict. Houthi's will now attempt to consolidate power over geographical areas previously held by Saleh in order to grow as a stature military in the region. However, they will be challenged by Saleh's son, Ahmed Saleh and his followers who will lead the battle of his father against Houthi's. As a matter of fact, Ahmed Saleh in a Saudi-television stated that, "he will battle until the last Houthi is thrown out of Yemen ... the blood of my father will be hell ringing in the ears of Iran." According to Miriam Eps, regional security analyst at Manama-based risk management consultancy Le Beck International Saleh's son enduring his father's fight is likely to allow for the continuity of Saleh's position, vis-à-vis any attempts at resolving the conflict.

In addition, the killing the former Yemeni president, removes the conflict's most prominent actor for four decades from a complex equation that has plunged the Arab world's poorest nation into conflict and sparked the world's worst humanitarian crisis. According to Thomas Juneau, assistant professor at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa, the condition for a political solution are less ripe now that Saleh is out of the picture. He says that, "There was a possibility of trying to change the dynamics of

the war with Saleh's block shifting to the Saudi Arabian side but right now that's frozen. The bad blood between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, which was always very strong, is even stronger now. Houthi's who are furious with Saudi Arabia are not in mood to negotiate with Riyadh anytime soon". Similarly, Peter Salisbury, senior research fellow at Chatham House's Middle East & North Africa Program, states that, "for the Saudis the gloves are off, they will do everything possible now to destroy the Houthis and they will be willing to impose a much higher cost on the northwest of Yemen than before." In the absence of Saleh, Saudi will attempt to change its approach in Yemen by mending fences with Ahmed Saleh. The probability of Saudi-Arabia allying with Ahmed Saleh along with Hadi government in their efforts to re-capture key Yemeni cities and strategic ports in and near Bab-al-Mandab is going to be very aggressive in coming days. But, Houthi's are covertly and overtly backed by Iran, which is a nightmare to Saudi Arabia as it shares long border with Yemen which is also situated near Bab-al-Mandab strait, crucially important for the kingdom's major revenue form energy exports.

According to Tomasz Otłowski, Senior Fellow at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation, Iran is trying to establish another "out-post", which can contribute to the promotion and implementation of Iranian interest in the region. That's why the Lebanese Hezbollah, Tehran's strategic partner is also directly involved in the support for the Houthi's. It is certainly possible that Iran's long term goal to expel United States and Saudi domination in the region can be fulfilled by gaining influence in Yemen. It would be a mistake to assume that Iran would let Yemen go out hand at the point where it is gaining its roots in Syria and Iraq. Although Houthi's do not have means to counter Saudi Arabia's increasing air-strikes, Tehran will definitely increase the amount of help, through training, arms and financial supports in their battle against Sunni Islamic countries in the region. Iran will make Houthi's capable of holding on to strategic ports until the coalition compromises or provoke an offensive policy between Arab coalition and Iranian allies that could have far reaching consequences for the players involved, not least for Europe and Asian countries. In addition, the abrupt end of Saleh-Houthi alliance has also given enough space for the Sunni jihadist like Islamic State [IS] and Al-Qaeda to further exploit safety and security of the strait as now they will attempt to target Western warships and commercial shipping to threatened the West and re-gain the diminishing recognition in the region. As a result, like a ticking bomb left unattended for a long time, growing security situation in Yemen between various factions might aggravate troubling incident in or near the strait that would impact international maritime security and global energy security.

3. Implications to International Maritime Security.

While Yemen is not a major oil producing country, its coast borders Bab-al-Mandab strait at the southern end of the Red Sea where Asia almost meets Africa, gave it strategic and economic significance since the beginning of imperialism during

colonial era. It acts as a bridge between Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea and Gulf of Aden via the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Most relevant fact today is that the location of Bab-al-Mandab makes the route strategically important for the Persian Gulf to transport their goods and resources to European countries, Northern America as well as Northern African oil to Asian countries. In 2016, it was estimated that 4.8 million b/d of crude oil and refined petroleum products flowed through this strait to United States, Europe and Asia on daily basis says US energy Information Administration. Instability or closure of strait, even temporarily, would not only threaten western demand for energy but will also render both the Suez Canal and SUMED pipeline to nearly redundant. Alternative option in case of disruption is the ship has to go around the east coast of Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, adding to transit time, cost and risk of piracy. Yet little has been done for the safety and the security of one of the most crucial waterway in the world. In March 2015, Houthi's captured Bab-al-Mandab strait, posing a threat to International shipping and energy flow to the West. According to retired brigadier-general Mohsen Khasrouf, Houthi's "eyes is firmly on the Bab El-Mandeb strait". Indeed, by gaining control over strategic ports, Houthi's will gain wider recognition in the region and also could threatened or blackmail international countries like United States.

Last two years have witnessed Houthi's increasing use of sophisticated weapons and tactics that analyst say are partly result of Iranian training and equipment. The use of anti-ship missiles, sea mines, speedboats attacks and even drone boat loaded with explosives on such large quantities has given rise to new maritime dimension to Yemen civil war. In fact, since the beginning of 2017, Houthi's have attacked at least three naval ships with modernised weapons, suspecting to carry military equipment's to their opponents. In January 2017, Houthi's launched three suicide boats targeting Saudi warship near the West of Hudaydah. On June and July 2017 Houthi's again launched a missile and an explosive boat targeting Emirati naval ship. Nic Jenzen-Jones, a military arms specialist and director of Armament Research Services, has tracked Iranian equipment supply to Iran. He states that, Iran has recently transferred arms and ammunition including Anti-ship, man-portable missiles, Iranian Ababil series UAVs (drones), fitted with high explosive warheads, and used by Houthis to engage high-value targets, such as radar and Patriot missile batteries. In addition to weapons, Iran also provides Afghan and Shi'ite Arab experts to train Houthi's and act as a logical advisers. These included Afghans who had fought in Syria under Qods Force commanders. Iran has always denied such accusation and asserted that its support to Houthi's is merely rhetoric.

However, Vice Adm. Kevin Donegan, commander of the Bahrain-based US Fifth Fleet and head of US Naval Forces Central Command, says that Houthi's are not capable of producing such modernised weapons due to lack of resources. Prior to Iranian involvement to Yemen, they only had rudimentary missile that could only cover 200 kilometres, basic coastal defence missile and most of their technology or system was under-developed. In fact many terror groups have attempt to manufacture such modernised weapon but only Houthi's managed to do

so because of Iran. He also substantiated his accusation by citing UN reports that clearly states that Iran is supplying weapon to Houthi's and it is a violation of UN Security Council resolution.

It appears that Iran is planning to empower Houthi's militia in Yemen to "strengthen their hand in the region". Iran is aiming to create a Hezbollah-like militia in Yemen in order to confront its regional rival, Saudi Arabia's hostile policies.

As a result, Saudi Arabia along with its allies is attempting to curb Iranian influence and overthrow Houthi's from the region. Since October 2015, the coalition is belligerently attempting to re-capture all the strategic ports by increasing their air-strikes and weapon supply to Yemeni force in the region. They have managed to seize control over the island of Mayuu [Perim Island] and Port Mocha, believed to be Iran-Houthi weapon-supply line. The coalition along with US has also heightened the security in and near Bab-al-Mandab strait. But, despite increasing security, it is very difficult for them to detect such launchings and "significant" maritime traffic passing through Bab-al-Mandab strait "complicates efforts to find bad actors."

All these factors convinced the Saudi Crown prince to negotiate with Saleh and persuade him to abandon Houthi's, paving road to end Yemen conflict. Houthi's certainly noticed the kingdom's effort to divide Saleh-Houthi apprehensive relationship and before things go out of control Saleh was assassinated. However, the incident has shattered Arab hope to resolve Yemeni war, but it has also given them the authority to intensify their air-strikes and other means to counter Houthi's and re-gain strategic ports and the capital. In fact, In fact soon after Saleh's death, the southern Yemeni fighter and allied local forces along with the coalition managed to re-capture al-Khoukha district, a coastal district area near the capital.

The coalition is also intensifying its air-strikes near Hudaydah port in an attempt to control Houthi's influence over the ports. But, Yemen is placed crucially between Saudi Arabia and Bab-al-Mandab strait, making it important for Iranian interest in the region. A senior Iranian official said "Yemen is where the real proxy war is going on and winning the battle in Yemen will help define the balance of power in the Middle East."

Thus, Iran will increase its weapon supply enough to foment a crisis that would seriously harm international maritime security. The rebels still have control over some of the height overlook the strait and number of ports near Bab-al-Mandab. The fight to gain supremacy over the strait between Iran-backed Houthi's and Saudi-led coalition is anyway going to continue post Saleh period. This will affect commercial ship passing through the lane and the demand to energy by the West will not be encountered. Developing Asian countries like China, Japan and India who are the major importers of Persian oil will also be adversely affected.

Conclusion.

The need for the hour is the safety and security of Bab-al-Mandab strait to ensure sovereignty and safety of international maritime trade. The countries which use Bab-al-Mandab strait

as their primary route must form a diplomatic alliance to curb or mitigate terror activities. At present, three warships of United States is patrolling Bab-al-Mandab to counter Al-Qaeda and IS in Arabian Peninsula and European Union is patrolling Gulf of Aden from Somali pirates. Although both the countries are determined to protect global economy, it is very important to establish a cohesive sea lane defense strategy. United States, European Union and Asian countries like India and China must facilitate international cooperation, be non-intrusive and form a combat-ready force in and near the strait. Although these countries might have different approaches towards different issues, they share a common interest in Bab al Mandab strait. Due to which it is necessary for these countries to engage and conduct maritime security operations near the strait. The nations will benefit from collective security approach and give them the strategic advantage in the control of international trade and commerce. However, establishing an international coastal guard for patrolling the strait will not entirely mitigate the threat. The use of modernized tactics and weapons from land will make it difficult for the international coast guards to monitor or target the opponents. In such case, countries like India, China and United States who have developed enhanced carrier strike group can deploy their force on rotational bases or contribute to international force that will ensure safety of one of the most precarious water way in the world right now. Although it is a very tall call, but a necessary measure to keep global economy run smoothly. In 1956, French-British carriers were involved in Suez Canal crisis and by United States in Gulf of Sidra in 1981, 1986 and 1989. In addition, International communities like United Nation and International countries like Russia and China must force United State to stop backing Saudi air strikes and diplomatic pressures to curb Iranian weapon supply must be deliberately discussed in negotiation table and bilateral talks. In addition, International communities must re-establish an autonomous government in Yemen in order to retrieve its economic and political stability which has been deva stately affected since the absence of a functioning administration. International communities must also support Yemeni legitimate force to monitor and protect the strategic ports from future terror attacks that could hinder world trade.

References

- Browning, Noah, and Sami Aboudi. 2017. "Ex-President Saleh Dead After Switching Sides In Yemen's Civil War". IN. <https://in.reuters.com/article/yemen-security/ex-president-saleh-dead-after-switching-sides-in-yemens-civil-war-idINKBN1DZ-0E3>.
- "Saleh Forces Deny Houthi Claims Over Control Of Sanaa". 2017. Aljazeera.Com. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12-/saleh-forces-deny-houthi-claims-control-sanaa-171203063622-865.html>.
- Sharp, Jeremy M. 2017. "Yemen: Civil War And Regional Intervention". Ww.crs.gov. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R-43960.pdf>.
- ("Yemen's Former President Saleh Killed By Houthi Rebels, Saudi And Iranian Media Claim" 2017)

"Houthi Rebels Execute Two Of Saleh's Top Commanders". 2017. The National. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/houthi-rebels-execute-two-of-saleh-s-top-commanders-1-681893>.

"Yemen's Houthi: Ali Abdullah Saleh Killed For 'Treason'". 2017. Aljazeera.Com. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/yemen-houthi-ali-abdulla-saleh-killed-treason-171204-165531953.html>.

Ahmed Saleh was the former commander of Yemen's Republic Guard and was also the ambassador to UAE until Saudi-led coalition decided to intervene Yemen in 2015. Since then he has been under house arrest by the coalition.

Ahmed Saleh was the former commander of Yemen's Republic Guard and was also the ambassador to UAE until Saudi-led coalition decided to intervene Yemen in 2015. Since then he has been a 'Guest' of the Emirati government.

Aboudi, Sami, and Noah Browning. 2017. "Exiled Son Of Yemen's Saleh Takes Up Anti-Houthi Cause". Reuters. <https://in.reuters.com/article/yemen-security/exiled-son-of-yemens-saleh-takes-up-anti-houthi-cause-idINKBN1DZ0JV>.

Feteha, Ahmed, and Zainab Fattah. 2017. "Death Of Yemen's Saleh Leaves Saudis In Tight Spot: Analysts". Bloomberg.Com. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-04/death-of-yemen-s-saleh-leaves-saudi-in-tight-spot-analysts>.

"Killing Of Ali Abdullah Saleh Changes Dynamics Of Yemen's Civil War". 2017. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/05/ali-abdullah-saleh-killing-changes-dynamics-yemen-civil-war>.

"Yemen Heads for More Uncertainty after Saleh's Murder". 2017. RCI — English. <http://www.rcinet.ca/en/2017/12/09/yemen-saleh-houthi-war-saudi-arabia/>.

Feteha, Ahmed, and Zainab Fattah. 2017. "Death of Yemen's Saleh Leaves Saudis in Tight Spot: Analysts". Bloomberg.Com. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-04/death-of-yemen-s-saleh-leaves-saudi-in-tight-spot-analysts>.

Ołowski, Tomasz. 2017. "Cite A Website - Cite This For Me". Pulaski.Pl. https://pulaski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/-Pulaski-Policy-Papers_No.08_15_EN.pdf.

Shippingtribune.com. (2017). World Oil Transit Chokepoints. [online] Available at: http://www.shippingtribune.com/newsdetails.php?s_id=6093 [Accessed 16 Oct. 2017].

Villar, L. and Hamilton, M. (2017). Three important oil trade chokepoints are located around the Arabian Peninsula. [online] Eia.gov. Available at: <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=32352> [Accessed 13 Oct. 2017].

Most ships passing through Bab Al Mandab are either coming from or going to Egypt's Suez Canal, through which around 8 per cent of the world's trade passes each year and generates around \$5 billion (Dh18.3 billion) a year for the Egyptian economy. The Egyptian government expects to Suez Canal revenue to increase to \$13.2 billion by 2023. It is also important for the Gulf States with about 4 per cent of the global oil supply passing through the strait.

BBC News. (2017). Deadly attack on Saudi warship off Yemen. [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38808345> [Accessed 9 Nov. 2017].

Fox News. (2017). Crewman injured after Yemen rebels fired missile at UAE ship, Saudi coalition says. [online] Available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/06/15/saudi-coalition-says-yemen-rebels-fired-missile-at-uae-ship.html> [Accessed 9 Nov. 2017].

Aljazeera.com. (2017). Houthi claim attack on UAE ship off Yemen's west coast. [online] Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/houthi-claim-attack-uae-ship-yemen-west-coast-170729184615831.html> [Accessed 9 Nov. 2017].

"Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Support For Houthis In Yemen's War - Sources". 2018. Thomas Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R>.

Cavas, C. (2017). New Houthi weapon emerges: a drone boat. [online] Defense News. Available at: <https://www.defense-news.com/digital-show-dailies/index/2017/02/19/new-houthi-weapon-emerges-a-drone-boat/> [Accessed 9 Nov. 2017].

"Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Support For Houthis In Yemen's War - Sources". 2017. U.S.. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R>.

Khan, Taimur. 2017. "Yemen War Threatens To Spill Into International Arena As Maritime Risks Grow". The National. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/yemen-war-threatens-to-spill-into-international-arena-as-maritime-risks-grow-1.14432>.

"Saudi-Backed Fighters Capture Coastal Area In Yemen From Houthis". 2017. Thomas Reuters. <https://in.reuters.com/article/yemen-security/saudi-backed-fighters-capture-coastal-area-in-yemen-from-houthis-idINKBN1E11IJ>.

"Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Support For Houthis In Yemen's War - Sources". 2018. Thomas Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R>.