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## *The Houthi Insurgency in Yemen's Civil War*

### **Abstract**

The Houthi insurgency has become one of the largest actors in the conflict that Asola Yemen. What is the Houthi movement, what it wants and how it has managed to move from being an insurgent movement more to being able to become a state within the state and to put in check the Yemeni government is the main purpose of this essay. Through this analysis we study the origins of this conflict, its development, current situation and the role of the external powers, especially in response to the presence of jihadi groups in this context and the cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It analyzes how the tribal nature of its society conditions the becoming of any state agent, since this has constituted a fundamental pillar on which have had to settle both the governments prior to the beginning of the hostilities as the different groups.

### **Keywords**

Huthi, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iran, United States, Russia.

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## Objectives and methodology

Analysts, politicians, government leaders, journalists and ordinary citizens are all engaged in a lively debate on the conflicts that are currently a source of concern. At the same time, the so-called *Arab Springs* seem to have resulted in multiple civil conflicts that have stalled due to their complexity, cruelty and virulence. In this essay, however, we are not going to devote ourselves to these tabloid headline conflicts, but to another equally interesting and undoubtedly much more ignored conflict.

What particularities exist that warrant a detailed analysis of the Yemeni conflict? Multiple. The main one is the *sui generis* character of the Houthi Movement. It is an insurgency that is organised as a confederation of groups, mostly of Zaydi ideology, a branch of Shi'ism. It has managed to put the government of Yemen in check, destabilising the country, seizing control of territories within the state of vital importance for the control of it, and creating a government endowed with administration and management capacity. Without the scope and aims of ISIS, nor the political-social provisioning of Jihadist terrorism, the metamorphosis and achievements of the houthis are truly unusual, paradigmatic and, therefore, worthy of study. In these pages we will analyse the Yemeni civil war from the point of view of the houthi movement, as well as the real nature of this insurgency. Through the analysis of the available sources, as well as the authoritative research on the subject, we will deal in the first section with the history of Yemen, paying special attention to the unresolved conflicts derived from its traumatic unification. In the second section we will focus on the houthi movement, its origins, ideology and objectives, as well as its funding and the support it enjoys. Then, in the third section, we will analyse the immediate causes of the conflict, the development of military operations and the intervention of regional powers and superpowers in the war, set in the power game taking place in the Middle East. Finally, conclusions will be drawn, not so much regarding the conflict and the movement itself, but about the dynamics of these confrontations and the role played by the interventions of other states.

## Yemen: from unification to civil war

### *Tribal history and nature*

When the so-called *Arab Spring* erupted in 2011,<sup>1</sup> few could have foreseen the political and social chaos that would follow. The dreams of a different world that were sketched in the imagination of the population have been disrupted by cruel and protracted civil conflicts that do not seem to have an end in sight, among other aspects, because of the multiplicity of actors involved in them, as well as

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1 See FERREIRO GALGUERA, J., *La Primavera árabe: balance, cinco años después*, 2017.

the pretensions of other powers, in some cases mainly interested in carrying out *proxy wars*<sup>2</sup>.

One of these endless conflicts is the one raging in Yemen. Ruled for thirty-three years by Ali Abdullah Saleh (first as leader of North Yemen from 1978 to 1990, and then elected President after unification with South Yemen), the Republic of Yemen has been subject to social and economic tensions that have historically conditioned its progress as a viable state. It should be borne in mind, to begin with, that the logic behind its existence does not rest on a clear national identity<sup>3</sup>, but is based on the different relationships of loyalty and interest between tribes<sup>4</sup>. This means that the ruler does not anchor his source of power –let alone his capacity to govern effectively– in what has traditionally been known as *state logic*<sup>5</sup>. On the contrary, Yemen's uniqueness lies in the fact that the government's success is based on its ability to navigate skilfully through the maelstrom of tribal relations. So much so that such a government cannot claim to articulate policies directly as any state would, but must have the consensus, approval and respect for tribal interests, traditions, behaviours and historical footprints. These largely determine national politics, configuring themselves as *states within the State*<sup>6</sup>, guaranteeing the stability of the state on the basis of a golden rule: the most powerful tribes must be represented in the government<sup>7</sup>. The result is as expected: ungovernability, instability, latent or expressed civil conflict at certain junctures, influence peddling, corruption, accumulation of power and inability to evolve towards a true democratic system. These tribes are constituted as very large family groups, endowed with coherence by the perception they have of themselves as descendants of a common ancestor. They are headed by a *Sheikh* or *Shaikh* with

2 These are conflicts in which a third power intervenes on behalf of one of the warring factions or sides in order to obtain an outcome that is in its interests. Pontijas Calderón, J.L., *Tendencias en la guerra por delegación (proxy warfare)*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2020, pp. 3-5.

3 VELASCO MARTÍNEZ, L., *Identidades colectivas en el horizonte 2050: ¿consenso o disenso? El ejemplo del servicio militar* in *Research Paper 24/2018*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2018.

4 AGUIRRE, M., *Yemen. Un viaje a la Arabia profunda en tiempos turbulentos*, 2006, pp. 24-5.

5 VEGA FERNÁNDEZ, E (coord.), *Yemen. Situación actual y perspectivas de futuro*, 2010, pp. II y ss.

6 The functioning of the Yemeni State is a complex issue, as the nature of the State has varied throughout the internal conflicts that have plagued the country. Reunification after the 1994 conflict opened the door to a political system which, although purportedly modernising, reproduced the characteristics of the former Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen): the maintenance of stability by the government required the development of a clientelist network in which alliances designed as permanent were far from being so and influence peddling among friends and relatives of those close to the executive was a constant feature. This was deliberately designed to reflect the fact that tribal and religious identity is of far greater importance to Yemenis than the relatively modern concept of *national identity*. In this way, the dynamic of continuous conflict of belonging has tried to be tackled by the authorities through the distribution of perks among the tribes, turning the President 'into a great sheikh, a republican version of the old imams', in the apt definition provided in Veiga, F, Hamad Zahonero, L and Gutiérrez de Terán, I., *Yemen, La clave olvidada del mundo árabe 1911-2011*, 2014, pp. 169-171.

7 AGUIRRE, M., *op. cit.*, pp. 35-7.

limited authority over their members and are organised as tribal confederations. The *Shaikh* is an honorary position that is elected by the Local Tribal Councils (composed of *qabili* or members of a tribe or family), whose objective is to watch over the social order within the tribe, occupying the leadership and being its representative with the central power. The title and dignity of the *Shaikh* is called *mashaij*, which refers to leaders of great tribes and the territory under their rule. At the top of the scale is the *Shaikh al-Mashaikh*, the supreme leader of a confederation of tribes and in charge of relations between the confederation and the State authorities, as well as with the other confederations and tribal groups<sup>8</sup>. The most important thing to note about all this is that they are governed by a *qabyala* or tribal code of honour, mainly strong in North Yemen<sup>9</sup>. It is here, in this scenario, that we concentrate our analysis. Since the houthi movement is the focus of this study, before going further into its intrinsic nature and the explanation of its social bases, it is necessary to frame the conflict of which they are one of the most relevant protagonists.

A conflict that is impossible to understand in all its dimensions without reviewing Yemen's history, which is intimately linked to a past marked by the domination of the Ottoman Empire and the distribution of spheres of influence in the region during the first post-World War I.<sup>10</sup> The Ottoman Empire's domination allowed the existence of a Zaydi-inspired kingdom in the territory of North Yemen that had full freedom of action after the defeat of the Central Empires in World War I<sup>11</sup>. This Mutawakili kingdom was constituted as a theocracy that survived until 1962, when it disappeared at the end of a civil war that involved, like the one we are dealing with, an *interposed conflict* or *proxy war* between President Nasser's Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The new republic close to the Egyptian model could not be definitively instituted until the end of the war in 1970<sup>12</sup>. And yet, within the territorial space of North Yemen, as well as in

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8 VEIGA, F *et al*, *op. cit*, pp. 270-1.

9 AVILÉS FARRÉ, J., *El movimiento Huthi del Yemen. Un actor crucial en un conflicto peligroso en Colección: grupos extremistas de ideología radical y carácter violento*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2015, pp. 2 et seq.

10 VEIGA, F *et al*, *op. cit*, pp. 25-57.

11 Yemen played an important role in this conflict, its territory constituting a particularly hot front due to the contact position between the Ottoman and British Empires. Early on, the British began particularly complex negotiations to win the loyalty of Imam Yahya, leader of the Zaydi community and ruler of the Mutawakili kingdom. These pretensions were dashed after Sheikh Said's cannonade, which the imam interpreted as an attack on his territory. Consequently, in February 1915 he reaffirmed his allegiance to the Ottomans and facilitated their penetration of the British-held Aden Protectorate. See Rogan, E., *La caída de los otomanos. La Gran Guerra en Oriente Próximo*, 2015, pp. 161-3 and 368-74.

12 The Pan-Arabism of Gamal Abdel Nasser constituted an expression of the pan-Arab secular nationalism born during the interwar period and which opposed, as a progressive tendency, the first pan-Arabism that emerged in the second half of the 19th century, as a reaction to the Ottoman domination. Although the Nasserist approach was far from reaching a definite theoretical-intellectual definition, its main characteristic notes implied the conjunction of nationalist and socialist aspects,

the South, there remained until 1967 a British Protectorate based mainly in the port of Aden<sup>13</sup>. And it was here, after the liquidation of British colonialism<sup>14</sup>, where a peculiar Marxist experience was established in the geographical space of the Middle East with the establishment of the People's Republic of South Yemen (PYRS) which, after a turbulent process of internal struggle, ended up becoming the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRYYS), a single-party state that tried to replicate –as far as possible– the Soviet model, with its successes and shortcomings<sup>15</sup>.

However, the socialist state was not spared from the consequences of the experiences of *real socialism*,<sup>16</sup> in a way that would transmute into disintegration, South Yemen found itself in a situation of ruin and economic collapse which, fuelled by infighting within the ruling group (there was even a low-intensity civil war), made reunification imperative for the survival of the political elite<sup>17</sup>. Meanwhile, North Yemen, although under a republican regime of a markedly authoritarian nature, had remained in the hands of the Zaydis, thanks in part to the policy of “national reconciliation” advocated by the victors of the civil war, thanks to which important leaders who had fought on the losing side –the royalists– were able to integrate into the administration of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). The fundamental wheel on which the internal affairs of the new republic advanced was none other than the growing and increasingly institutionalised influence of the tribes, as one of the most important consequences of the civil war was their economic and arms reinforcement, following

even if this implied keeping a strict vigilance over the local communists of Soviet imprint. The failure of the pan-Arabist project (based on the bonds of ‘historical community’, ‘linguistic community’ and ‘colonial pressure’) in the 1960s pushed Nasserism back to the Egyptian confines, where a dictatorial one-party regime was implemented with the aim of developing a cooperativist ‘Arab socialism’ through the socialisation of the means of production, assuming the Marxist logic of ‘class struggle’. Son of pan-Arab secular nationalism was also the Ba’ath Party, equally nationalist but with a much stronger Marxist matrix than Nasserism. Born in Syria, its initial Nasserist influence was diluted to the point of renouncing pan-Arabism and adopting a localist stance, as opposed to Iraqi Baathism, which did retain its pan-Arabist stamp. See Peñas Mora, J., *El declinar del panarabismo* in *Boletín de Información*, nº 234. Spanish Ministry of Defence, 1994, pp. 61-83.

<sup>13</sup> VEIGA, F *et al*, *op. cit*, pp. 85-96.

<sup>14</sup> British colonialism in South Yemen has always been a complex reality. It was built on a delicate balance based on a series of treaties with tribes around the port of Aden. A total of nine small states were created with their corresponding governor dependent on the metropolis, giving the British control of more than 23,000 square kilometres on the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Rogan, E., *op. cit*, pp. 160-1.

<sup>15</sup> PRIESTLAND, D., *Bandera Roja. Historia política y cultural del comunismo*, 2010, pp. 461 and 533. Erich Honecker, leader of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), would say the following about the Yemeni socialist experiment: *‘As in Grenada (alluding to the events that culminated in the US invasion of the island in 1983 as part of ‘Operation Urgent Fury’), what happened in Yemen shows what leftist infantilism can lead to’*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 489-451.

<sup>17</sup> VEIGA, F *et al*, *op. cit*, pp. 110-38.

years of Saudi and Egyptian funding. This new role was so overemphasised that the President of the Republic, Abdulrahman al-Iryani, went so far as to declare that the country did not need political parties as it already had tribes<sup>18</sup>. After the civil strife, the tribes experienced a considerable strengthening to the point that they managed to establish themselves as independent forces from the political power that constantly put pressure on it and conditioned its decisions. Before the conflict they already existed as determining agents in the evolution of the country, but as a result of the conflict they burst onto the political scene, revealing themselves to be essential for the development, sustainability and viability of the political system. Thus, no decision could be effectively articulated without the support of the tribes, which rose to become the ruling group of Yemen's destinies<sup>19</sup>. The truth is that politics soon became a transmission belt for the interests of the tribes without –and this is important– becoming completely homologous, among other aspects given that it was not uncommon for members of the same tribe to be members of different political formations. Be that as it may, the importance of the tribes in national politics was institutionalised in their participation in the Consultative Council and in the creation of a specific *ad hoc* body,<sup>20</sup> the Supreme Council for Tribal Affairs, headed by the President of the Republic and whose members were the tribal leaders –*mashajj*– elected in the Local Tribal Councils<sup>21</sup>.

It is essential to retain a precision: Yemen does not function exclusively as a federated union of tribes that ‘wage war’ on their own. On the contrary, as just noted, the interests of other political actors can be and often are different from those of the tribes. It is a Muslim-majority country in which the majority of the population belongs to the Sunni minority, while the Shiite tendency is divided into two: the Zaydi and the Ismaili minorities. Zaydism is the Shiite branch closest to Sunni Islam and the most numerous in Yemen, being professed by about 40% of the population. For her, Zayd ben Ali al-Husayni was the fifth legitimate imam, unlike the Shiite duodeciman branch, which opted for her brother Muhammad Bachir. Ismailism, on the other hand, is more distant from Sunnism and is a minority in Yemen, based mainly in Sana'a, the country's capital. It is another branch of Shi'ism that recognises the legitimacy of Ishmael, son of the sixth imam, which is why they are called septimans.

18 *Ibid*, pp. 141-2. He made this statement in relation to the conceptualisation of political parties as an evil in that it was common for them to become vehicles for ‘dangerous’ foreign influences.

19 HAMAD ZAHORENO, L., *El fenómeno tribal en Yemen: sustrato histórico del poder de las tribus in Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos*, nº2, 2007, pp. 6-7.

20 It constituted a body that replaced the previous National Assembly with the promulgation of a new Constitution. It was specifically designed to institutionalise the tribes and give them a parliamentary-like representativeness, clearly reminiscent of the Consultative Council of ancient Yemen, in which the tribes maintained a cooperative relationship with the central power, which co-governed together with the tribes themselves, and in which their decisions had to be endorsed by the Consultative Council, itself composed of the tribes. These decisions included a wide range of public issues, such as taxation and land ownership. *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.

21 *Ibid*, pp. 141-2.

Territorially, Sunnis predominate in the south-central part of the country, while Shiites predominate in the north. The tribal logic enjoys greater influence in this area because, in the south, the socialist regime implemented a policy that, although with incomplete results, succeeded in weakening tribal structures. Thus, in the territory of the Yemen Arab Republic, the tribes were consolidated in a way that was impossible in socialist Yemen, where secularisation and centralised planning severely attacked the tribal logic, although it did not succeed in eliminating it.

Yemen's functioning is not only delimited by the above, but is also affected by the way in which the tribes organise themselves. The most important are the Hamdani tribes, mainly Zaydis and grouped into two confederations: the Hasid (which holds the largest share of power and to which Saleh belonged) and the Baskil (the largest). There is also another smaller confederation, the Madhaj, which is predominant in the eastern regions and Hadramaut, while the other two confederations are predominant in the western mountainous areas. A corollary to the high population of the country (28 million, according to World Bank data<sup>22</sup>), which makes it the most populated of the Arabian Peninsula (as a sample, see the population of Saudi Arabia, with a much larger territorial area, about 33 million<sup>23</sup>). Although it has traditionally lacked raw materials likely to attract the interest of the great powers, it has an enviable strategic position that the United Kingdom identified when it established its protectorate in Aden, Yemen's main commercial hub. From there it was possible to control a very important trade route to India and the east coast of Africa. An important communications hub whose value increased after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1870, which increased traffic through the Red Sea via the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, gateway to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It carries 5 percent of the oil transported by sea, as well as between 30 and 40 percent of the world's maritime traffic<sup>24</sup>.

This is, after all, an area of the planet that has recently taken on even greater strategic importance for the major powers, as the already persistent French military presence in the Horn of Africa has been joined by the Japanese (it should not be forgotten that 90 percent of Japan's exports pass through the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb strait) and the Chinese, who, together with the military forces of other countries such as the USA, Spain and Italy, are stationed in Djibouti with the aim of securing the region against piracy and terrorism. It is no coincidence that Saudi Arabia's military intervention in the conflict in question has not been exempt from securing the Yemeni side of the strait, within the broad framework of the objective of satellitisation that Saudi policy has had with respect to the Kingdom of Saba<sup>25</sup>.

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22 Consult them at: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/yemen-rep>

23 Consult them at: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/saudi-arabia>

24 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *Yemen: un conflicto sin final* in *Strategy Paper 196. Oriente medio tras el Califato*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2018, pp. 154-5.

25 *Ibid*, pp. 155-6.

### *A failed unification*

Although the civil war in North Yemen had been lost by the forces that had supported the imamate, Saudi Arabia did not give up on continuing to influence, in whatever way it could, both the domestic and foreign policy of its southern neighbour. To this end, it sponsored the policy of national “reconciliation” referred to above, whereby it placed its internal allies in positions of power of such importance that Riyadh’s control was not diminished. However, its constant interventionism, which even led it to support an unsuccessful attempt to invade the South in 1972, proved extremely destabilising, among other aspects owing to the obsessive opposition of the Saudi kingdom to the unificationist tendencies that, despite everything, hovered over the political agendas of both Yemeni states. Despite the fact that certain attempts at conflict continued to take their toll, as the 1979 conflict showed, the rise of Ali Abdullah Saleh (in power since the death of his predecessor in June 1978) together with the discovery of oil deposits on both sides of the border between the North and the South, paved the way towards unification, of course, the calamitous political-economic situation of the PYRD, which left the southern leader Ali Salim Al-Bid with no other option (understanding that the Soviet Union had abandoned them to drift and that, once the socialist bloc had been liquidated after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, he could only flee forward)<sup>26</sup>.

Unification finally took place on 22 May 1990 in a precipitous and hasty manner, which was to be one of the main causes of the bumpy ride of what is now called the Republic of Yemen. One of the greatest fears of South Yemen’s political elites was that what was presented as a union “among equals” would turn out to be an outright takeover. President Saleh’s clientelist policies did not help to overcome southern misgivings. But a new destabilising factor soon appeared: the outbreak of the first Gulf War. At the time, the concomitances between Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Saleh’s Yemen were more than obvious, since Baghdad was a more comfortable and less interventionist ally for Saleh than Riyadh. It was at that time that Yemen took a seat among the non-permanent members of the UN Security Council, just in time to vote against, to Washington’s stupefaction, the historic Resolution 678 of 29 November 1990 approving military intervention to force Iraq to leave Kuwait by force. The United States, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank immediately cancelled all aid programmes for Yemen. The stationing of Western troops in Saudi Arabia, custodian of the Holy Places, excited the population of most of the Arab states to the point of generating a political earthquake that put the rulers in trouble, as they could do little in view of the obvious dissociation between them and their respective peoples, most of whom were opposed to the intervention. This was the case in Yemen, propelling Saleh’s closed-mindedness in his risky diplomatic gamble. In September Saudi Arabia expelled, as a punishment, Yemeni migrants who worked there and regularly sent

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<sup>26</sup> VEIGA, F *et al*, *op. cit*, pp. 142-50.

remittances home in such large amounts that they constituted one of its main economic resources<sup>27</sup>.

As it was, Yemen went into recession in 1992, irreparably damaging the weak economic and social foundations of the new political system that was established after unification. It was a supposedly parliamentary and multiparty regime, with a Constitution and a division of powers similar to those established in Western democracies. At least on paper. A judiciary was designed consisting of territorial courts with the Supreme Court of Sana'a as the final instance, adopting the *Shari'a* as the main legal basis. While this city remained the political capital, the role of economic capital was assigned, as it could not be otherwise, to Aden. Similarly, the agreement confirmed Saleh in the role of President and Al-Bid as Vice-President. This precarious balance was soon upset by the consequences for the country of its support for Iraq during the Gulf War: the Yemenis in the North experienced a sharp decline in their living conditions, while those in the South blamed the authorities for their progressive marginalisation, especially as regards economic investment, which was a priority in the North. In April 1993 national elections were held which gave victory to the General People's Congress (GPC) –Saleh's party– and left the Marxists in a humiliating third place, behind Islah, a Sunni Islamist party close to the approaches of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, and led by Abdullah al-Ahmar, the highest exponent of the Hasid tribal confederation<sup>28</sup>.

Economic tensions added yet another reason to the list of reasons that important sectors in the south added to justify the foreseeable conflict with the north, and the attacks that followed on important members of the southern political elite were not unrelated to this. Al-Bid and his men began to prepare for the inevitable and found an unexpected supporter: Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Riyadh was not prepared to allow a unified Yemen to jeopardise its aspiration to hold hegemony over the Persian Gulf, although Saleh also found himself with another surprising ally: Qatar, which was already beginning to play with the idea of displacing the Saudis' ascendancy in the area. Although the duration of the conflict was short (27 April to 7 July), its toll in lives was high (between 7,000 and 10,000 dead, mostly southerners<sup>29</sup>). Its main consequence was the emergence of Saleh as the undisputed leader, with Abd Rabuh Mansur Al-Hadi as his deputy, and the exile of Al-Bid. From this moment on, the President was able to expand the autocratic features of his regime, proceeding to reinforce his clientelist policy by promoting family members and members of his tribe to the top posts in the Government, the Administration and the Army. The great snake charmer presented himself as the only man capable of combining state-government logic with tribal logic, although the dysfunctionality of his management soon became evident.

27 VV.AA., *La Agencia EFE en el Golfo. La guerra en directo*, 1991, pp. 228-32.

28 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 158-61.

29 The cost in lives for the South was around 6,000 combatants and 500 civilians. For the North, the figure stood at over 931, including civilians and combatants. Veiga, F *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

The population increase had to contend with insufficient food production and distribution, as well as with the scarcity of water, an extremely precious commodity in that it is a fundamental resource for the production of *khat*, a drug that is terribly addictive among Yemenis and whose widespread consumption contributed to a serious economic problem that involved the depletion of agricultural and water resources that the country lacked, disrupting production in a way that had to be, for better or worse, tackled. It was under these conditions that Yemen faced the beginning of the 20th century<sup>30</sup>.

## The houthi insurgency

### *Origins, ideology and objectives*

To understand the full extent of what the houthi phenomenon is, it is first necessary to consider what *Zaydism* is. This is –as has already been pointed out above– a branch of Shia Islam with a strong following among approximately a third of the Yemeni population and which is the branch of Shia Islam that is closest to Sunni Islam. This branch pivots on the houthi family, and is embedded in the above-mentioned logic of tribal relationship. The organisational framework of this tribal logic consists of a *sheikh* who does not have total or vertical control over the rest of the members of the tribe, which, however, also involves the defence of the territory, the protection of tribal elements, such as the Hashemites (descendants of the prophet Mohammed), as well as the revenge of affronts, whether personal or collective<sup>31</sup>. Of course, with such a code of action, it is not surprising that tradition gives a large role to mediation, with the aim of redirecting hostilities and avoiding the collapse that would be reached if a more than foreseeable vicious circle were to start. However, the State is also bound by this tribal code and must also submit to it. It is thus understandable why it is extremely difficult for Yemen to provide itself with a rational –and rationalised– structure of a modern state, something alien to the traditions and *modus operandi* of the tribes that make up the population within the boundaries of its territory. In practice, there is a situation of quasi-permanent war and conflict between the tribes that makes it extremely difficult to consolidate any stable and coherent form of government<sup>32</sup>.

How does Zaydism differ from traditional Shi'ism, and what are its similarities to Sunnism? Like the Shiites, the Zaydis assume the spiritual leadership of the descendants of Fatima –the prophet's daughter– and his son-in-law Ali, but unlike them, they do not share the dogma of the twelve imams, prophesying that the last of them will return in the future as messiah. The Zaydis understand that after the first five imams,

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<sup>30</sup> VEIGA, F *et al*, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-74.

<sup>31</sup> AVILÉS FARRÉ, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> AGUIRRE, M., *op. cit.*, pp. 73-9.

any descendant of Fatima and Ali can be an imam and thus a legitimate spiritual leader of the community. As noted above, once the Ottoman Empire fell, Imam Yahya Muhammad created an independent state of Yemen under a theocratic monarchy, which endured until the Egyptian-backed Republican coup in 1962 and the ensuing civil war<sup>33</sup>. This imamate always sought a rapprochement with Sunni Muslims in order to eliminate the differences between the two communities. And given that the Sunnis of Yemen were followers of the open and heterodox *Safi School*, this approach did not involve as many difficulties as in other cases. During the republican period the differences became more and more mitigated. However, the government never fully trusted the Zaydis. In this way, it opened the door to the spread of Salafism in areas of its predominance –mainly North Yemen– provoking in the 1990s a festering of Zaydi identity and of resentment and resentment, capitalised by the Hashemite family of the houthis, which subsequently materialised in the conflicts that gained strength from 2004 onwards. These were in turn fuelled by President Saleh's attempt to gain direct (rather than indirect, as he had been doing) control of Yemeni territory –which, of course, affected the houthis<sup>34</sup>– in the wake of the post 9/11 situation and the US war against jihadist groups and their local branches<sup>35</sup>.

Bearing in mind that the houthi family is Hashemite, and that it has championed the Zaydi struggle, logic suggests that the aims and objectives were clear and well-defined. They are not. Hussein al houthi (1956-2004) has been the main leader and driving force behind the houthi movement, a legitimacy he derives from the fact that he is the son of the movement's main ideologue, Bar al Din al houthi. From 2002 onwards, its followers chanted a slogan that was highly revealing of its orientation: “*Death to America, death to Israel, cursed be the Jews, victory to Islam.*”<sup>36</sup> Hostility towards the United States and towards Wahhabism are two of the main axes on which the movement pivots, but beyond the borders of these two aspects, the objectives are diluted in an extremely weak coherence. It should be borne in mind above all that the houthis do not represent all the Shia of Yemen or all the Zaydis, although it is true that, like Saleh's family, they owe their power to the formidable clientelist network they have managed to weave, in such a way that the fabric of the movement owes in some respects more to this clientelism and the interpersonal relations between tribal leaders than to ideological and programmatic coherence and immediate objectives to be achieved. The *nature* of the movement is thus strongly atomised. Even though they have publicly denied their links with Iran, this country has been held up on numerous occasions as a model, although it cannot be concluded from this that their aim is the establishment of an Islamic republic along the lines of Iranian Shiism *stricto sensu*,

33 AVILÉS FARRÉ, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

34 It is worth remembering that President Saleh himself is a Zaydi who has internalised the government's logic.

35 BERENGUER HERNÁNDEZ, Francisco J., *Yemen, el extremo sur del creciente chii*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2015, p. 5.

36 AVILÉS FARRÉ, J., *op. cit.*

among other aspects because of the differences that separate the Hajdi doctrine from *classical* Shiism. And to another even more important reason: the remoteness of the tribal spirit from the notion of the nation-state imported from the West<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, it is true that, given that part of the houthi success in the offensives carried out and in the expansion of the territory they control or over which they exercise a more or less obvious influence is due to the alliance and support of the military forces loyal to Saleh, it is possible that this “estrangement” from the nation-state could be redirected precisely because the former president’s ultimate aims are based on that vision, perhaps accepting a certain respect for the tribal worldview. In any case, it is not a question that is clear today and, if it is for some sectors of the movement –also taking into account the tactical and strategic flexibility that a conflict of this nature imposes on the actors– it is very possible that this conviction could be modified as a result of the consequences of the military and diplomatic events<sup>38</sup>.

The message is clear in its apparent simplicity of locating the enemy and dropping all the heavy artillery on him at the propaganda level, as was done during the previous conflict<sup>39</sup>. Which does not imply that real objectives even exist beyond the primary mystification of tribal or religious defence. It must be said that, despite not being a movement with a global or international vocation, merely localist or, at most, regionalist (depending on the impact of the analysis), they have managed social networks, propaganda, communiqués and even the broadcasting of videos on the networks with notable success. The Internet has become a fundamental platform for disseminating its message, although it has not reached the degree of sophistication and expertise that other groups-mainly Jihadists-have achieved with this instrument. As we have just noted, the natural decentralisation of the movement favoured by the mountainous terrain where it is performed prevents the establishment of clear objectives. The “official” authority is more apparent than real in practice, and the component tribes would not allow this supposed authority to attempt at any given time to limit this autonomy. Even so, the policies implemented by the houthis in the territories they control shed some light on their political objectives, beyond the fight against the government, anti-Americanism, the containment of Saudi appetites<sup>40</sup>, the tough fight against jihadist groups and secessionists in the south, and the uprooting of *Salafism*. As Amnesty International points out, the houthi movement has implemented a policy of persecution of the *enemy* and *dissidents*, in short, of any opposition to it or its policies, by means

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37 IGUALADA TOLOSA, C., *Guerra Civil en Yemen: actores y crisis humanitaria*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2017, pp. 3-5.

38 For a proper overview of the houthi movement, see the BBC documentary *Rise of the Houthis*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7HQRyJDTPo&t=760s>

39 AVILÉS FARRÉ, J., *op. cit.*, p. 6.

40 Las milicias huthíes han llegado hasta el punto de realizar incursiones tras la frontera de Arabia Saudí. See PONCE, A., *Yemen: una historia de violencia*. El Orden Mundial en el siglo XXI, 2016, available at: <http://elordenmundial.com/2016/03/18/yemen-una-historia-de-violencia/> (Consulted on: 5 June 2019).

of abductions, detentions, torture, disappearances, censorship, raids, arbitrary restrictions, obstacles to humanitarian aid, etc.<sup>41</sup>. Although the government side also does the same, and always bearing in mind the war context, the application of these methods in relation to the nature of the message and ideology that the houthi movement claims to be espousing, does not seem to indicate that their aims are as pure as they claim<sup>42</sup>. Given that, on the one hand, these objectives are confused, chaotic and poorly elaborated and, on the other, the very nature of the movement itself is equally chaotic, heterodox and even contradictory, only this political praxis can give us any clue as to the real aims of the houthis which, in the light of the considerations and facts set out, do not seem to be aimed at creating a democratic system as understood in the West, nor a plural framework of coexistence in a fragile balance with other postulates. The unfolding of events will clear up this uncertainty, either by confirming what has already been said or by forcing a major shift that will force a reconsideration of goals and methods. At present, what is clear is that the policy imposed by the houthis in the territories has been characterised by the implementation of a highly repressive police regime, which has launched successive campaigns against opponents, journalists and human rights activists, including the imprisonment or murder of dissidents, as well as a general climate of repression of the population<sup>43</sup>.

### *Financing and support*

Far from what one might think, a political, social and religious movement as unique as the houthi does not occupy the role of a mere pawn of some outside power. It is, as we have seen, an autonomous movement that has moved from the stage of *insurgency* itself to consolidate itself as a fully-fledged *state* actor<sup>44</sup>. This means that, by being able to administer a considerable portion of Yemeni territory, the initial insurgency has given itself a government, institutions, legality and administration<sup>45</sup>. And, moreover, armed forces. It is necessary to dwell on this, because applying this concept here must be done with extreme caution. It is not a question of armed forces to the use, since the base of the organisation as militia is what continues prevailing in the combatants. The specificity lies in the alliance (which involves aspects such as organisation, military

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41 Amnesty International, *Report 2017/2018. The State of the World's Human Rights*, 2018, available at [https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/6700/2018/es/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIiMD-toW56AIVAg9TeCh2BMAAbPEAAAYASAAEgISQ\\_D\\_BwE](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/6700/2018/es/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIiMD-toW56AIVAg9TeCh2BMAAbPEAAAYASAAEgISQ_D_BwE)

42 In addition to the above, the consequent slogans against corruption, and the defence of national sovereignty.

43 Sarto Ferreruella, A., *op. cit.*, pp.180-2.

44 See García Guido, M., *Los dilemas organizativos de los movimientos insurgentes* in *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales de la UNAM*, nº 115, 2013, pp.147-169.

45 Blécua, R., *Una revolución en la revolución: los Houthi y las nuevas relaciones de poder en Yemen*. Real Instituto Elcano, 2015, pp. 5-7.

strategy and logistics) with that part of the armed forces of the former state of Yemen that are loyal to former president Saleh, which ends up characterising the houthis as a “state” at war with other “states” that are disputing the incarnation –some, and it is not certain that all those who claim to do so are really pursuing this purpose– of the Yemeni state.

Having clarified this point, we can move on to answering the question: Where does the houthi movement get its money and material? Mainly two channels, one internal and one external. The first, of the tribes, clans and related groups, since it has proved to be the most organised and effective entity to guarantee their interests. This is in addition to the deals struck with arms dealers who were already doing business in the country before the outbreak of this latest conflict, and whose opportunities have now multiplied. The second, much more controversial, is the support (financial and material) of Iran. Already in January 2013, the *Jihan 1*, a ship from the Republic of the Ayatollahs, was intercepted, which contained a larger military material than that obtained through internal contacts, such as surface-to-air missiles, Katyusha rockets, as well as explosives and ammunition. All manufactured in Iran. The same Reuters agency, based on Iranian, Yemeni and Western sources, has indicated that the houthis receive financial and military support from this country<sup>46</sup>. The houthis deny Iranian support, although they admit that they receive humanitarian aid from Iran. What is clear is Iran’s evident interest in the area, regardless of the degree of material support it gives to the houthi movement, although the evidence in this respect seems to confirm that these rebels are supported by Tehran. Added to this is the fact that, although the support received from both outside and inside (among whom are many dissatisfied with the corrupt practices of the previous governments, although given the alliance with the pro-Saleh forces this may seem a paradox) is strong, it is not enough to allow the movement to take total control of the country or if anything to impose itself on the government forces and the other groups against which they are fighting. However, its destabilising character is formidable, not because it has been able to put the government on the ropes, but because it has managed to establish itself as an alternative legitimacy to the government and to rival it –through the creation of another government and state structures– for control of the territory<sup>47</sup>.

## An international war?

### *The origin*

As we have been anticipating, the conflicts that converged in the open war that began in 2015 had already been evident during the previous years. Essentially there

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46 AVILÉS FARRÉ, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

47 IGUALADA TOLOSA, C., *op. cit.*, pp. 5-7.

were three, which were different in nature from each other and whose intensity varied over time: 1) the Houthi Conflict, which in turn included two serious rebellions against the government in 2004 and 2009, 2) the tensions in the south led by the Al-Hirak movement, created in 2007 and drifting towards secessionism, 3) the spread of Jihadist terrorism across the country by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a branch founded in 2009, which led to a violent campaign of war on terror and drone attacks by the Yemeni government and the US<sup>48</sup>. Before going into the analysis of the beginnings of the conflict in 2015, it is necessary to take into account the powerful mobilising influence of the religious factor in Yemen and, in general, in the whole Middle East, especially since the momentum it has experienced since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In particular, Islam in Yemen has been perceived by the population itself as something “genuine”, pure, if you will, far removed from the contamination and distortions operated in other regions more exposed to the West or prey to more sophisticated political formulas. *Shari'a* has always been the cement that has held Yemeni tribes together, acting as a retaining wall for their respective traditions. Because Islam, let us not forget, is not only a religion in Yemen, but represents a conception of the world and its social, economic, legal and political organisation<sup>49</sup>.

Since the end of the civil war in 1994, political Islamism has gained ground partly thanks to the “laxity” of Saleh’s government, especially in the South, which until recently was subject to policies of a markedly secular nature promoted by the socialist regime. This was compounded by tribal repression, which coexisted with religious repression that, among other things, meant a setback in matters relating to equality or the role that women were destined to play in society<sup>50</sup>. And although the change operated more harshly in this territory, the truth is that the spread of Islamism affected all layers of society, although Saleh and his government used it as a battering ram within the gigantic clientelist network that was growing by the minute as discontent became widespread. In this sense, the promotion –if one can call it that– of Islamism by the authorities generated a dangerous boomerang effect by providing the perfect catalyst for the expression of discontent, especially among the youth. We have already seen the religious upheaval that took place in the country in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, which had its parallel during and after the second Gulf War in 2003. Earlier, in 2001, when the US invaded Afghanistan and succeeded in toppling the Taliban regime, as well as killing or capturing key members of the Al-Qaeda leadership, anti-Americanism and the seduction for *Jihad* advocated by Bin Laden through the screens of the popular Qatari-owned *Al Jazeera* television network soared in Yemen. The young men who marched to fight in Afghanistan and later in Iraq enjoyed the sympathy of the majority of the population who, far from perceiving them as terrorists, saw them as

48 MEDINA GUTIÉRREZ, F., *Yemen: un escenario de guerra y crisis humanitaria* in *OASIS*, 27, 91-III, 2018, p. 94.

49 AGUIRRE, M., *op. cit.*, pp. 37-72, and 162-75.

50 *Ibid.*, pp.211-9.

fighters in defence of Islam, similar to those who marched to fight against the Soviets in the 80s of the 20th century<sup>51</sup>.

The emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) as a result of the Sunni insurgency following the invasion and subsequent occupation of the country by US troops in 2003 added fuel to the fire. Poor post-war and reconstruction planning by the Americans, the British and their allies, together with a policy that ultimately proved unwise for their interests of superimposing the Shia majority in Iraq on the rest of the Sunni population (which had largely nurtured Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime), gave wings to the confluence of two revolutionary forces that together gave rise to the so-called Islamic State: Salafism and secular nationalism<sup>52</sup>. The chaos caused by the occupiers' negligence in refusing to prevent public disorder, coupled with a state of lawlessness as paralyzing as it was deadly, encouraged ex-Baathists demobilised by the US authorities to ally with the most bloodthirsty Sunni extremists and Al-Qaeda members to generate a "resistance" movement against the occupation and effective combat against the invaders, as well as against Shia militias in what was soon to become a bloody civil war. Among the latter, the figure of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who has become the emir of the terrorist organisation in Iraq, soon stood out. A rising figure in the face of Bin Laden's isolation, he did not hesitate to ally himself with the former Baath Party colonel<sup>53</sup> Samir Abd Mohamed al-Jlifawi who, under the name of Haji Bakr became the strategist of ISIS, capable of uniting in the same movement both Salafists and Sunni outcasts resentful and eager to take revenge on the invaders, together with other former officials of the dictatorship who, although secular and nationalist, joined a new organisation that would spread panic throughout Iraq and Syria, and even beyond, being defining even in countries where it was not physically established at all, as is the case of Yemen<sup>54</sup>.

It was the fruit of a careful work developed by the embryonic organisation of the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), led by Zarqawi, which turned its leader into a reference of the insurgency in Iraq. AQI joined with five other Sunni insurgent groups in 2006 to form the so-called Mujahideen Sura Council (MSC), which in November of the same year became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. With little contact with the Sunni population in these early days, it was not until the relocation of its headquarters to Mosul that it became an effective and

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 105-7.

<sup>52</sup> PRIETO, M.G., and ESPINOSA, J., *La semilla del odio. De la invasión de Irak al surgimiento del Isis*, 2017, pp. 95-114.

<sup>53</sup> The Baath Party was born in the 1950s after the creation of the State of Israel. Of revolutionary socialist and pan-Arabist ideology with nationalist overtones, it came to power in Iraq in 1968, leading to the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in 1979. See VV.AA., *op. cit*, pp. 34-7. Syria is currently ruled by Bashar al-Asad, son of Hafez al-Asad, who came to power in 1971 after a coup d'état. See BENRAAD, M., *El conflicto sirio. La persistencia de un régimen in Desperta Ferro. Contemporánea. N° 29*, 2018, pp. 6-10.

<sup>54</sup> PRIETO, M.G. and ESPINOSA, J., *op. cit*, pp. 140-2.

capable insurgent force, revitalised in 2012 after storming the prisons and reaping the rewards of years of work by its political cadres there. The members of the now Islamic State developed an effective policy of co-opting, convincing and indoctrination in Iraqi prisons under the US occupation of former members of the Baath and military officers and cadres of the Army that had once served under the banner of Saddam Hussein's regime. They were integrated into the command structures of the new organisation, giving it considerable paramilitary effectiveness. Three main factors led former members of the Iraqi Armed Forces and ex-militants of the Ba'ath Party to join the Salafists within the same structure: 1) the mistakes made by the occupying powers, which were unable or unwilling to control the growing chaos that followed the conclusion of the military operations after the invasion of Iraq and which criminalised the Sunni minority; 2) the demobilisation of the armed and security forces, which relegated many educated cadres to a role of alarming inaction, to which the proscription of the Baath Party must be added; 3) the work carried out by the cadres of the Islamic State, which was able to attract former members of the Baath and the armed and security forces, who thus chose to collaborate with the Salafists, facilitating their transition towards the integration of a new organisation, already in the hands of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi<sup>55</sup>.

Bin Laden, although Saudi by birth, had Yemeni blood on his father's side, Mohamed Bin Laden, who was born in Hadramut and belonged to the Kinda tribe. Once the terrorist had made enemies with Saudi Arabia, he planned to use Yemen as a centre of operations, although negotiations with the local tribes in 1997 did not bear the desired fruit and he had to remain in Afghanistan. This did not mean that it gave up using Yemen as a theatre of operations, as evidenced by the attack on the *USS Cole* in October 2000 in the port of Aden, the fundamental consequence of which was that the Americans would never again refuel there. But 9/11 changed everything. The wave of antipathy toward the United States coupled with the religious fervour aroused in favour of the Iraqi "resisters" caused no fewer than 2,000 Yemenis to flock to the country to fight in the nascent insurgency. Not only that, but Yemen immediately became a hotbed of Salafist terrorist groups, the most important of which, as has been pointed out, was AQPA, born in 2009. Until 9/11, Saleh's regime had a tacit pact with terrorist groups: it turned a blind eye to their operations against third countries if they refrained from acting against his government. It worked, until alignment with Washington in its "War on Terror" forced it to take much tougher political action<sup>56</sup>.

The arrival of Democrat Obama in the White House imposed a turnaround in US international relations in the region. The evidence that the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan had failed and that, as far as the first country was concerned,

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<sup>55</sup> ESCOBAR STEMMANN, J.J., *Irak tras la caída del Daesh in Strategy Paper 196. Oriente medio tras el Califato*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2018, pp. 74-6.

<sup>56</sup> VEIGA, F *et al*, *op. cit*, pp.185-98.

had only served to unleash a civil war between Shiites and Sunnis, to generate the embryo of a new terrorist movement and, ultimately, to decapitate a regional power that could act as a counterweight to the Iran of the ayatollahs, motivated that, from now on, direct military interventions were replaced by “indirect” actions carried out by the CIA and other governmental organisations, through the use of drone attacks. Activities that the US government would carry out in Yemeni territory with the support or, if anything, the acquiescence of the Saleh government, whose attitude fluctuated between permissiveness and restriction, especially motivated by the protests of the population and by public scandals such as the one that took place in the wake of the Al-Mayalah Massacre: in December 2009 the Americans dropped cluster bombs on an alleged AQPA-identified target that actually hit a Bedouin camp, killing 41 people and killing only one terrorist. All this contributed to forge a social discontent that, together with the rest of the open fronts, would end up exploding in the face of Yemen’s leader<sup>57</sup>.

This discontent led to the outbreak, on 18 June 2004, of the Houthi Insurgency or First Sada War. Based around Hussein Badredin al-houthii, leader of the Young Believers group, the movement took up Zaydi demands while questioning the authority of Saleh, also a Zaydi but belonging to a family of lesser importance than the Houthi. In essence, the houthis embedded their insurrection in three vectors: the government’s abandonment of the northern mountainous regions (where they operated), their support for Salafism and Sunni Islam, and cooperation with the United States; to which a fourth can be added: the reaction generated by the opening of hostilities in Afghanistan and Iraq in the framework of the US “War on Terrorism”. The government’s response was swift and, although tensions escalated on both sides, once the conflict began it refrained from using regular army troops (although marginal and poorly equipped troops were deployed), instead using mercenaries, fighters from northern tribes sympathetic to the regime and even Sunni Salafist militiamen. What initially began as a conflict of an arguably broadly “tribal” nature, led to open warfare against the Saleh regime by the Houthi Insurgency, prompting Saudi Arabia to intervene with a bombing campaign despite Iran’s warning to refrain<sup>58</sup>.

Despite the ostensible differences, the affinity between the houthis and Tehran shone through from the first moments. From the very beginning the conflict was perceived as a kind of “proxy war” in Saudi Arabia and Iran. The houthi leaders did not hesitate to use continuous references to the Iran of the ayatollahs in their proclamations, and even their fighters –who went so far as to make incursions into Saudi territory and capture prisoners– regularly used the colours of the Iranian national flag. So much so that, once the conflict became ‘embedded’ in the generalised civil war that erupted in 2015 following the Arab Spring of 2011, it seems clear that both Iran and its Lebanese Shi’a ally Hezbollah have supported and are supporting the Huthi

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 201-3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 203-8.

insurgency with instructions, training of fighters and arms shipments. In this sense, Iran's intervention in this conflict has been less spectacular and less visible than that of Saudi Arabia, but it has nonetheless served to nurture a force with sufficient combat capability to put the (now Al-Hadi) government in considerable difficulty, as well as the US-backed Riyadh-led coalition, which is barely making any headway in a heavily defended territory that makes it extremely difficult for the forces employed to deploy their combat capability.

Apart from the above, the other major conflict that linked to the Arab Spring of 2011 was the one generated by the discontent in the South. After unification, and even more so after the end of the civil war in 1994, the Zaydi tribal power rushed to erase all the bureaucratic, socialist and anti-tribal vestiges that had previously been promoted by the official policy of the communist dictatorship<sup>59</sup>. This was not done without acrimony, and aspects that the population valued positively –such as, for example, equality between men and women and the improvement of the status of the latter– were eliminated in order to implement a model of society with a markedly religious character, with all the consequences. The latter is particularly worrying in Yemen, a country where women are totally subjected to their husbands and where domestic violence –and especially violence against women– is tolerated by the Government as a matter of “family honour” only. So much so that sex is conceived as a *duty* towards the husband that the wife has to fulfil on pain of reprisals, often violent<sup>60</sup>.

Alongside this situation –as far as women were concerned, widespread throughout Yemen, but especially abject in the south because things had been different until recently– the marginalisation that the South's elites experienced, even though some of them had found accommodation under Saleh, resulted in a growing and widening source of discontent, in part due to cuts in government investment in the area and the president's abrasive patronage and cooptation policies. This was compounded by the accumulated resentment and irritation of the demobilised members of the armed forces of the former YPDR. It was with this background that the Al-Hirak movement emerged in 2007 and took the lead in asserting the grievances of the aggrieved south. Although in its initial stages it lacked a secessionist character, in 2009 it experienced a split that led one faction of it to launch an armed struggle in the provinces of Lahig, Abyan and Al-Dali, while the faction that refused to do so had to face its atomisation into various groups with disparate and even contradictory agendas. Saleh's response ranged from the recruitment of Al-Hirak leaders to repression. Not only that, but in a diplomatic manoeuvre of dubious results, he tried to link the southern rebellion to Islamist terrorism, which, in the eyes of the southern population, only succeeded in strengthening the movement and adding new legitimacy to the protest<sup>61</sup>.

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59 AGUIRRE, M., *op. cit.*, pp. 220-6.

60 *Ibid.*, pp. 146-54.

61 VEIGA, F *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-3.

## Arab Spring and Civil War

With this background in mind, the seeds of the current conflict can be traced back to the unsuccessful negotiations for constitutional reform between the General People's Congress (GPC) and the Common Encounter (CE)<sup>62</sup>, the governing party and the main opposition party respectively. President Saleh failed to deliver on reform commitments in both 2006 and 2009, leading to the political deadlock that further agitated the already turbulent waters of Yemeni politics. The last straw came in January 2011, when a government initiative was announced to make Saleh president for life. It made sense from his point of view. The country's ungovernability could only be combated by implementing a state logic that would *make positive* the more or less solid relations of the vast clientelist network that the president and his family had created around themselves, greased with an authoritarian logic. The calculations failed, and these clientelistic networks turned out to be weaker than originally assumed. But this weakness was still not enough to dislodge him from power. In recent years things had changed. The strategy of targeting the opposition for further domestication was no longer viable. At the same time, this mechanics was experiencing increasingly evident cracks, hence the urgency to shore up what remained<sup>63</sup>. The momentum behind the proposals led the president to apparently give in to pressure from the opposition. Both a heterogeneous student movement and the once servile opposition, each in its own way and according to its own agenda and goals, put the government on the ropes. The demonstrations and mobilisations became increasingly violent, in an escalation that the authorities were absolutely incapable of controlling, let alone channelling. The progressive divorce between the student movement and the opposition, added to the particular and not coinciding objectives of the various tribes, the secessionist movement in the South, the houthis in the North and the various jihadist groups present in the country (at the top of which was AQAP) further complicated matters<sup>64</sup>.

The 1994 civil war that pitted the government against the secessionists of the South, supported by the PSY<sup>65</sup>, and the houthi insurrection that led to six armed conflicts with the PSY between 2004 and 2010, still lingered in the collective memory. The result of all this was, as we have seen before, a strong social polarisation and greater resentment between the North and the South. It should never be forgotten that Yemen's fragile national foundations (in reference to the difficult balances achieved by the president, to which reference has already been made) were sustained, in addition to the

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62 Coalition "opposing" Saleh, composed mainly of the Islah formation and the Yemeni Socialist Party.

63 HAMAD ZAHORENO, L., *Los movimientos antigubernamentales en Yemen: ¿La revolución frustrada?* in *Relaciones Internacionales*, nº 18, 2011, pp. 115 et seq.

64 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 163-4.

65 Yemen Socialist Party, remnant of the communist dictatorship of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which disappeared in 1990 after unification with the Islamist Yemen Arab Republic.

premises established by Saleh, by a tacit agreement between *Shafis* and *Zaydis*, schools of Sunnism and Shiism respectively, to overcome religious dualism and integrate into a larger entity. Therefore, the increase in social tensions, to which religious tensions had to be added, turned the *Arab Spring* into a veritable time bomb, since the causes of the conflict threaten the very foundations of the State. It was thus clear that this conflict was nothing more than a continuation of the previous ones, but with a new veneer and fuelled both by the interests of the superpowers and by the latent conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran (and, in a hidden way, by a conflict between the former and Qatar) for hegemony in the Middle East<sup>66</sup>.

The situation was spiralling out of control, and although an international coalition led by Saudi Arabia –always on the lookout for its southern neighbour– and backed by the US proposed negotiating an agreement, Saleh did not give in. It had to be when he survived a bomb blast that nearly ended his life that he decided to go into exile in Saudi Arabia and sign a transition sponsored by the Americans who offered him, in exchange for his stepping down from the presidency, immunity from prosecution for him and his family, although he was allowed to retain the leadership of his party, which soon proved crucial<sup>67</sup>. In February 2012, elections were held in which only one candidate ran, Saleh's vice-president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who obviously won. Thus began the second part of the plan, that is, the holding of elections and the drafting of both a Constitution and a new electoral law. Negotiations became so bogged down that by February 2014, when the transition was scheduled to end, no agreement had been reached and Hadi's mandate had to be extended for another year<sup>68</sup>.

In September of the same year, the houthi insurgency resumed the conflict it had maintained with the government since 2004 and occupied the country's capital, Sana'a, an event facilitated by troops loyal to Saleh, who was trying to regain control from his exile in Saudi Arabia. This peculiar "alliance", an example of *realpolitik* on both sides, opposes both the secessionists of the south and the Hadi government and the Jihadists. He was placed under house arrest and the houthis began to create a *de facto* government<sup>69</sup>. It was at this time that an advance was made that brought practically the whole of the west of the country under their control, reaching the city

66 VEIGA, F *et al*, *op. cit.*, pp. 262-3.

67 Centre for Analysis and Prospective. Technical Cabinet of the Civil Guard, *Yemen in Serie Conflictos 2/2015*, 2015, pp. 6 et seq.

68 Hadi designed a government of national concentration together with a federal constitutional project that contemplated the demands for autonomy in the South. Very important for him was the support of General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, commander of the 1st Mechanised Division (one of the most important and effective in the country and which had already been used against the houthis before) and who was emerging as Saleh's natural successor, which was spoiled by his displacement in favour of the president's son, the commander of the Republican Guard Ahmed Ali Saleh, sent by Hadi to Dubai as ambassador, providing the Emiratis with an important asset to play with.

69 Centro de estudios internacionales Gilberto Bosques., *Actores y prospectiva del conflicto en Yemen: insurgencia chiita en el norte y movimiento secesionista en el sur*, 2015, pp. 4-6.

of Aden, the main city in the south and an important port that opens the gates to the Gulf of the same name. In the course of this advance they have confronted both government troops and al-Hirak, recently reconverted into the Southern Resistance Movement, which in turn is made up of a series of pro-independence groups that compete in the southern areas with the Jihadists, although at certain junctures they prefer an alliance with them to combat the houthis and the pro-Saleh forces. Jihadism in Yemen is, as has already been analysed, mainly led by AQPA, a group formed by the union in 2009 of the Saudi and Yemeni branches of Al Qaeda<sup>70</sup>, Ansar al Sharia (AAS), a group linked to Al Qaeda with strong support in rural areas<sup>71</sup>, and, to a lesser extent, ISIS which, however, is not able to displace AQPA in this scenario<sup>72</sup>. It is in these that, in March 2015, the Saudi-led Coalition launched Operation Decisive Storm<sup>73</sup> in government support, after President Hadi managed to escape from his captors and reach Riyadh, the capital of the Saudi monarchy. This campaign has consisted of brutal bombings with no respect for the civilian population and a ground invasion<sup>74</sup>. Despite the support of the US and Sudan, the coalition did not achieve its goal of breaking the houthis, although it did cause them to lose ground and abandon Aden. It is now clear that the government forces are unable to prevail even with the support of the Islah party, which enjoys formidable influence among various Sunni tribes at odds with the houthis<sup>75</sup>.

Despite the foregoing, the battle for Aden was the turning point from which the territorial extension of the houthis came to an end, and they had to go on the defensive at the same time as Egypt and Saudi Arabia began a naval blockade of their territory with the support of the United States. Meanwhile, the first Coalition ground troops appeared in April as it became clear that the aerial bombing campaign, though indiscriminate, was far enough from achieving its objectives to give serious consideration to incorporating troops on the ground into the offensive. After a brief pause, during which diplomatic negotiations were initiated in the framework of Operation Restore Hope, applauded by Iran, the offensive was relaunched, while the naval encirclement was tight-

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70 JORDÁN ENAMORADO, J., *El terrorismo global una década después del 11 – S* in *Actores armados no estatales: retos a la seguridad global*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2011, pp. 145-149.

71 ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, C., *Ansar al Sharía (AAS) y otros grupos yihadistas salafistas actuando en la cirenaica y su creciente tensión con el Estado Islámico (EI)* in *Grupos militantes de ideología radical y carácter violento. Región: “mena” y Asia central*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2015.

72 SPANISH INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES (IEEE), *Strategy Paper 180. Estrategias para derrotar al Dáesh y la reestabilización regional*, 2016, pp. 93-94.

73 The coalition also included Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Morocco, Jordan and Egypt.

74 RIU, A., RUIZ, A., FONT, T., SIMARRO, C., *Arabia Saudí y los bombardeos en el Yemen. La responsabilidad del Estado Español*. Centre Delàs d'estudis per la pau, 2016.

75 On the bombing campaign carried out by the Saudi-led coalition and its effects, see also Mundy, M., *The Strategies of Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial bombardment and food war in World Peace Foundation*, 2018.

ened and the US and British stepped up their drone strike campaigns against ISIS and AQPA. Once, the advances were slow and meagre in proportion to the means deployed: positions were taken at Bab el-Mandeb and progress was made towards Taiz. Already in 2016, control of Marib, which is important for oil production, was obtained<sup>76</sup>.

All in all, 2017 proved to be a year of extreme importance. Firstly, because of the spread of a cholera epidemic due to the shortage of drinking water, which led to the consumption of contaminated water, with the resulting consequences. In addition, diarrhoea and dengue fever have spread like wildfire, undoubtedly contributed to by the lack of fuel and minimal infrastructure, including lack of electricity, which prevents adequate shelter. The massive coalition bombardments, as well as the maritime blockade, have also hindered the arrival of humanitarian aid, as the destruction caused to buildings (relevant to hospitals) and communication routes blocks its effective distribution<sup>77</sup>. According to Amnesty International, supported by data from the World Health Organization (WHO) more than 500,000 people are suffering from cholera, with a death toll caused by this disease since its detection in 2016 of almost 2,000 people<sup>78</sup>. Secondly, the beginning of the launching by the houthis of ballistic missiles against “military” targets inside Saudi Arabian territory. As we have seen previously, this is not the first time that the houthi insurgency has not hesitated to operate inside Saudi territory. The difference on this occasion lies in the frequency and in the causes: in the face of the loss of its offensive capability and with the aim of combating Riyadh's overwhelming air superiority. This has prompted the Saudis to launch a cataract of protests against Iran, accused of being behind the financing and support of the houthis, managing to attract international attention and acquiring a partial credibility that has not left Tehran in this respect in a good light<sup>79</sup>.

Alongside all this, and of paramount importance when analysing the current state of the Houthi Insurgency and its future prospects, mention should be made of the death of President Saleh in December 2017, following the clash between the houthi forces and his supporters. The reasons for this lie in the increased tensions between the two groups since their unlikely alliance at the beginning of the conflict. Marked by necessity, this alliance has always been uncomfortable for both sides, and has been punctuated by opacity, conflicts and semi-independent diplomatic manoeuvres on the part of each faction<sup>80</sup>. It was one of these operations that ended up blowing up in Saleh's face, and he was unable to successfully complete his latest political ploy. Noting the entrenchment of the conflict and the slow but steady advances of the Coalition, the presence of his son –as it turned out– in the United Arab Emirates offered Saleh the opportunity to play one last card. Knowing that the Emiratis were beginning to

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76 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 166-70.

77 MEDINA GUTIÉRREZ, F., *op. cit.*, pp. 106-8.

78 AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *op. cit.*, p. 464.

79 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, p. 171.

80 MEDINA GUTIÉRREZ, F., *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100.

perceive Hadi as an amortised political figure, of whom they were wary given his proximity to the Islamic Islah party, and that the Saudis also harboured doubts, he decided to take advantage of his son's presence in the Emirati capital to try to bring the coalition closer together. To this end, he announced his intention to negotiate with Riyadh, taking advantage of the failure of the Coalition forces' approach to Sana'a, where the President's position was dominant. The reaction of the Houthis was not long in coming and, after a fierce armed confrontation in the capital, Saleh was eliminated and his supporters defeated. The consequences were not long in coming: the only effective counterweight to Zaydi power in the areas under their control disappeared, reinforcing their power to almost absolute extremes. Despite this, it was a Pyrrhic victory, given that it led to the defection or abandonment of many of the supporters that the Houthi Insurgency maintained precisely because of its alliance with Saleh, making possible an advance of the positions gained by the Coalition to the point of threatening Zabid by the end of 2018<sup>81</sup>.

The peace initiatives do not seem to produce tangible results, beyond a series of more or less irregular truces, broken after a short time by one or other of the contenders<sup>82</sup>. Despite this, a detailed plan for a large-scale prisoner exchange was agreed on 16 February 2020, which was particularly significant after the violent battle of Hudayda. Where there has been progress in terms of normalisation of relations is between forces loyal to the Hadi government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), in a Saudi Arabia-sponsored agreement for the formation of a joint, parity North-South government and the return of the latter to Aden, from where it had been expelled in January 2018 by southern rebels in a virtual Coup d'état<sup>83</sup>. The Southern Transitional Council was formed as a Southern government independent of both the Houthi insurgency and the UAE-backed government of President Hadi, in what has been interpreted as a confrontation between the Saudis and Emiratis over their different political agendas in Yemen –as will be seen later– which does not hide an obvious UAE interest in the territories of South Yemen, while the British-US “drone war” against AQPA and the remnants of ISIS continues<sup>84</sup>.

### *Intervention by foreign powers, war in Syria and hegemony in the Middle East*

The conflict in Yemen cannot be separated from the formidable influence exerted on it by the major regional powers vying for hegemony in the Middle East (supported

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81 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 181-2.

82 *Ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

83 As reported by Amnesty International at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/yemen-the-forgotten-war/>

84 MEDINA GUTIÉRREZ, F., *op. cit.*, pp. 102-3.

in turn by the superpowers), nor from the development of other conflicts in the region that are highly defining on the diplomatic chessboard. Alongside the civil war in Iraq and the fight against ISIS, which is now almost completely defeated, the development of the civil war in Syria cannot be disconnected from the war in Yemen, as it has altered and continues to alter the decisions of the intervening foreign powers. Insofar as most of these actors are the same—largely speaking, and to a greater or lesser extent depending on which one—the diplomatic-war map functions as a large network of sensitivities and actions, each of which affects the development of the other conflicts in which they are also immersed. The role played in Yemen, but also in Syria and, by extension, in the struggle for hegemony in the Middle East by Iran, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States will be analysed.

Since the beginning of the war in Yemen, Iran's support for the houthi insurgency has gone from covert to little more than overt. The houthis, in the Iranian worldview, are merely another cog in the machinery of patronage of related groups on which Tehran relies to underpin its struggle with the other two regional powers that threaten its status in the Middle East: Ankara and Riyadh. It is obvious that none of these actors has the power or the means to rise as the visible and undisputed leader of the region, something that it is doubtful that the superpowers would tolerate, as became clear after the First Gulf War of 1990 and later with the Invasion of Iraq in 2003, which annulled Saddam Hussein's regime precisely as a regional power capable of standing up to Iran and making Saudi Arabia uneasy<sup>85</sup>. Fully aware of this, Iran has surrounded itself with a number of actors it funds and supports, such as the houthis themselves, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinian Sunni Hamas or the Shiite militias in Iraq who are engaged in civil war against the Sunni insurgency and ISIS. When it decided to intervene in Syria, its strategic objectives were to prevent the fall of al-Assad from imposing a regime close to or allied with Turkey or Saudi Arabia. Losing this link in the chain would weaken the ayatollahs' republic's presence in Lebanon—and thus its ability to exert pressure on Israel—and, by extension, in the whole of the Mediterranean Levant, a sphere of influence that is indispensable. This has not been unrelated to the projection that Iran has always had of exporting its revolution beyond its borders. Paradoxically, the conflict in Syria is as unrenounceable for Iran as the one in Yemen is for Saudi Arabia. This is evident when it comes to assessing the intensity of its intervention, the leading role of which has fallen to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, a sort of political police created by Khomeini in 1979 to eliminate opposition to his regime and tie up the Regular Army. Through its own expeditionary corps, the al-Quds special forces, it has played a leading role in the conflict by training the regular Syrian forces and fighting alongside them. Not only that, but they have proceeded to create and train pro-regime militias that have fought alongside Hezbollah, which has become fully involved in the war at the same time as Iran has maintained the flow of arms. This human and economic cost has made it clear that Iran will not accept anything other than the complete victory of

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85 PRIETO, M.G. and ESPINOSA, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 63-91.

its Syrian ally, which, in view of the development of the war operations, seems more than likely<sup>86</sup>.

Its interest in Yemen is undoubtedly minor, though patent, as evidenced by the growing support it has provided to the Houthi Insurgency. Such support is not only due to “ideological” proximity, but fits squarely into the scheme just described. What is more, it can be stated that, as this is a secondary theatre of operations for Iran, it is the virulence of the Saudi intervention-intended to contain any expansionist attempt by Iran, be it real or fictitious-that has attracted the latter to Yemen. After all, the Zaydis represent a branch of Shi’ism different from the one endorsed by Tehran, so it is not out of the question that it could cause them problems if, at some point, they were to establish themselves definitively in power in Yemen. Perhaps for this reason –and because of the intensity of the rest of its adventures in the region, at the forefront of which is Syria– Tehran’s actions are kept low profile, especially when compared to those of Riyadh, in an inverse parallelism with respect to the support that the ayatollahs lend to al-Assad. From this point of view, and unlike what is happening with the Syrian conflict, the harsh and overwhelming intervention that Saudi Arabia has carried out in Yemen has generated a significant drain on economic, human and military resources in the face of an uncertain prospect of victory. This has considerably weakened the position of the Riyadh government which, bogged down in the development of military operations, cannot afford to give up the intervention itself, as this would ostensibly weaken its position vis-à-vis Iran. The latter, given the present state of affairs, should only limit itself to providing the houthis with enough support to avoid being crushed by Coalition forces, ensuring the prolongation of a war that drains Saudi resources further and further and increases the divergence of diplomatic agendas between them and the United Arab Emirates<sup>87</sup>.

Russia’s intervention is even lower-profile and has refrained from acting directly on the scene, although it did invite Saleh to set up a military base on Yemeni territory. Russia’s role has not been disconnected from support for its strategic ally in the region, Iran<sup>88</sup>. Despite this, the role Russia is currently playing in the Middle East is much more complex than might be imagined and is closely related to endogenous causes. It should be remembered that, having overcome the turbulence caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian diplomacy opened up to the Western world and did not object to the political imperatives of Washington and the main European powers. This was only altered following the enlargement of NATO in 1997, which expanded eastwards by incorporating Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Even during Putin’s government, the “War on Terrorism” promoted by the United States was resolutely supported and hardly any objections were raised against the intervention in

86 JORDÁN ENAMORADO, J., *Estrategia e intervención de las potencias extranjeras en el conflicto sirio* in *Desperta Ferro. Contemporánea*. Nº 29, 2018, pp. 44-5

87 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 187-8.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Iraq in 2003. In this context, Russian diplomacy expected the US (and “Western” diplomacy by extension) not to interfere in the post-Soviet conflicts that emerged in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. Relations worsened after the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014, which enervated NATO members in Eastern Europe, to improve slightly and stabilize after Donald Trump’s accession to the White House. Russia’s support for his candidacy is not unrelated to the Syrian conflict or the power play in the Middle East,<sup>89</sup> knowing in Moscow that the new president has a marked *isolationist* profile, averse to military interventions on the ground and to adventures in the region.<sup>90</sup>

What are Russia’s objectives in the Middle East? The Russian government’s decision in 2015 to leave what had traditionally been considered its sphere of influence following the demise of the Soviet Union –the post-Soviet space in the Eurasian framework– has materialised, principally, in the military intervention in Syria in support of al-Assad. In what has been yet another display by Russia to take its natural place as the heir power to both the former Russian Empire and the extinct USSR<sup>91</sup>. This was not merely a diplomatic or economic action, but a full military deployment by land, air and sea. Unlike what happened in Afghanistan, the human cost has been mitigated by the use of private contractors to carry out certain operations, thus avoiding the discontent of its own population. Two immediate objectives can be glimpsed in this campaign: 1) to obtain diplomatic recognition in the area in the absence of a clear strategy from the United States and the other Western powers (an objective that has subsequently been revalued in contrast to the “emotional and erratic” leadership offered by the current Trump administration), and 2) to test the successes of the new military reform that has been implemented. However, owing to the new role played by Moscow and its firm commitment to the permanence of al-Assad in power, its responsibility in the reconstruction of Syria after the end of the conflict is unavoidable, something that will have to be faced by an economy that does not exactly show the best figures and is based almost exclusively on the export of hydrocarbons and raw materials. Even bearing this in mind, Russia’s main objective in the Middle East is probably none other than to become a major player and arbiter in the important decisions to be taken. The support given to the Syrian regime is just another piece in a regional chessboard, which includes being a buffer to the escalating tensions between Iran and Iraq, as well as playing a calculated risk game with Turkey and its conflict with the Kurds, given Moscow’s repeated overtures to the Kurds on more than one occasion<sup>92</sup>.

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89 NIETO, M. I., *Las relaciones Estados Unidos-Rusia en la era Trump* in *Revista UNISCI*, No. 48, 2018, pp. 93-103 and 113-5.

90 TAIBO, C., *Historia de la Unión Soviética. De la revolución bolchevique a Gorbachov*, 2017, pp. 400-5.

91 FERNÁNDEZ RIQUELME, S., *Rusia como imperio. Análisis histórico y doctrinal* in *La Razón Histórica*, nº25, 2014 [128-148], ISSN 1989-2659. Instituto de Política social, pp. 145-8.

92 SUCHKOV, M.A., *La intervención rusa en Siria* in *Desperta Ferro. Contemporánea*. Nº 29, 2018, pp. 52-6.

In Yemen, while Russia initially criticised the Coalition's actions while drawing attention to the humanitarian crisis, it later changed its position. While it is true that it abstained from voting in the UN on resolutions declaring an arms embargo on the Huthi insurgency, it is no less true that in 2017 it accepted Hadi's ambassador after previously rejecting him, possibly because of Moscow's offers to establish a military base on its territory.<sup>93</sup> It may be deduced from this that Russia aims, on the one hand, to shore up the position of its ally Iran on the stage without altering its relations with Saudi Arabia, especially as regards the military and oil agreements between the two powers. And, on the other hand, to set itself up as an arbiter to be taken into account in the resolution of the conflict by carving out a profile of an "impartial third party", fundamentally concerned with resolving the humanitarian crisis and drawing attention to the consequences caused by the Coalition's intervention, especially those stemming from the naval blockade and indiscriminate bombing. The consolidation of the contacts and relations opened up following its intervention in the relevant events in the Middle East place Moscow in the position of presenting itself as an "uncontaminated" guarantor of the peace agreements. If this were the case, its influence would not go unnoticed by the rest of the actors, larger or smaller, who would later have to operate successfully in the region<sup>94</sup>.

Another actor vying for hegemony in the Middle East is Turkey. Although it does not have direct intervention in Yemen, its role in the region is far-reaching enough to condition the conduct of the rest of the powers, something to which the Yemeni conflict has been no stranger. Since the integration into the European Union was definitively ruled out, Ankara turned its eyes to the territories of the former Ottoman Empire, with the purpose of recovering its ascendancy over this space<sup>95</sup>. It could not, however, have chosen the right moment for its intervention, as the outbreak of the Arab Spring blew up almost the entire network of power and relations in the region, opening up a window of opportunity that the Turkish regime wanted to take advantage of.

Its particular model of "liberal Islamism" was perceived as a formula that could be transplanted with greater or lesser variations to countries where the revolution was expected to bring about a substantial change in the political model<sup>96</sup>. It should be borne in mind that these "springs" mainly affected republican states of Nasserist import or secular socialist nationalists such as that embodied by the Baath party in Syria, leaving the theocratic monarchies of the Persian Gulf untouched. Those authoritarian

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93 MEDINA GUTIÉRREZ, F., *op. cit.*, p. 105.

94 SEREBROV, S., *Yemen Crisis: Causes, Threats and Resolution Scenarios in Russian International Affairs Council*, No. 14, October 2017, 2017, pp. 6-7.

95 JORDÁN ENAMORADO, J., *Estrategia e intervención de las potencias extranjeras en el conflicto sirio in Desperta Ferro. Contemporánea. N° 29*, 2018, p. 48.

96 See ALBENTOSA VIDAL, J.A., *Turquía: autoritarismo, islamismo y 'neo-otomanismo'*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2017.

republics were not very far from the socialising authoritarian republicanism embodied by Kemalism, which is why the Turkish model could be a feasible replacement for the dictatorships that were now compromised. Despite the support of the United States in this adventure, and the definitive diplomatic alignment of Ankara with NATO (remember, despite being a member, Turkish governments had been very careful about foreign interventions and were concerned about forging a profile of a “friendly third party”), the Turkish intervention in the Libyan Civil War in 2011 did not result in the expected results, hardly tangible, but with a significant loss of credibility within the Arab world, which short-circuited the entire network of contacts supported by that apparently impartial profile built up over so many years. As if that were not enough, it has had to deal diplomatically with Qatar, an important Western ally and a not inconsiderable rival in the political area of the “capitalist Islamism” that Ankara wanted to export<sup>97</sup>. Its diplomatic games took the initiative away from Turkey and relegated it to the background in a strategy, perhaps, not clearly weighed<sup>98</sup>.

In Syria, Turkish President Erdogan's main priority has been to neutralise any attempt to create an independent Kurdish state in the north of the country. If he had initially cherished the possibility of the fall of al-Assad and his replacement by a Sunni Arab regime close to the Muslim Brotherhood –which Turkey supports– the Iranian and Russian intervention in his support soon made him discard this objective. In turn, US support for the Kurdish forces has led the Turks to make a diplomatic shift towards rapprochement with Moscow, once the incident caused by the downing of the Russian plane in 2015 has been overcome. With its acquiescence, Ankara has been able to carry out various operations in Syria against the Kurds (which have more often than not involved ethnic cleansing) and against ISIS, while at the same time maintaining its internal confrontation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is waging a guerrilla war in Turkish Kurdistan against the government<sup>99</sup>. The pressure, however, that the Turks are exerting in the Middle East has led both Iran and Saudi Arabia to press harder in their respective key conflicts, including Yemen, further increasing Saudi determination for victory in this arena. Although Ankara's immediate objectives have remained limited and the diplomatic gains of its intervention in Syria have yet to be quantified, there can be no doubt that it has made a strong impact on the Middle East theatre, acquiring considerable diplomatic weight which, although not evident in the conflicts in which it does not intervene –such as Yemen– is decisive when it comes to altering the behaviour of other regional powers and even superpowers, in a delicate balance that pivots on three main axes against the backdrop of the Kurdish conflict: the struggle for a sphere of influence, the rapprochement with Moscow and its membership of NATO.

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97 Véase FERNÁNDEZ, L., *El desarrollo del islamismo político en Turquía: ¿un modelo de democracia o un obstáculo para la adhesión a la Unión Europea?* In *Revista UNISCI*, N° 9, 2005.

98 VEIGA, F., *El turco. Diez siglos a las puertas de Europa*, 2019, pp. 575-7.

99 JORDÁN ENAMORADO, J., *Estrategia e intervención de las potencias extranjeras en el conflicto sirio* in *Desperta Ferro. Contemporánea*. N° 29, 2018, pp. 48-9.

But Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have certainly played the most important interventionist role. Their interest in conflict has already been largely unpacked throughout this study. Nevertheless, it is imperative to dwell on it, if only to clarify any obscure points that may have remained, given the capital importance that both actors are playing in Yemen at the moment. The escalation of Saudi intervention has been linked to the rise of Mohamed Bin Salman, heir to the throne and Minister of Defence. His geostrategic vision is to make Saudi Arabia a great power beyond the regional sphere, as a key between Europe, Africa and Asia. As well as promoting itself as an investment power, Riyadh intends to do the same in the military field in order to put a stop to the extension of Iranian influence, which is evident in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq<sup>100</sup>. This is within a worldview rooted in Saudi Arabia's self-assumed role as leader and protector of the Sunni world. Consistent with this, the hostility between Wahhabi Salafism and Shi'ism is absolutely manifest. And there is still more: the chronic fear on the part of the Riyadh government of an uprising by the Shia minority concentrated in the east of the country, in the territories with the largest oil reserves and dangerously close to the maritime borders with Tehran. The Saudis have developed a kind of Iranian obsession that has endowed their foreign policy with a momentum it has hitherto lacked, a sign of which was the crude intervention in their satellite Bahrain in 2011 to crush the Shiite revolts that erupted in their territory. Given that the bulk of the intervention in Yemen, which has revealed major shortcomings in terms of military manpower, the action of the Saudis and Emiratis in Syria has been little more than testimonial. Beyond air strikes against ISIS mainly in 2014 and logistical and financial support to the Free Syrian Army and various anti-government rebel groups, these two actors have been able to do little to influence a conflict that, at least since 2015 with the Russian intervention, began to swing in favour of al-Assad. With Sunni rebel groups divided and without a unified coherence in their action, the practical results of this intervention have not had very positive consequences. The most that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi can hope for is to play a supporting role for the rebels at a hypothetical negotiating table, should it come to pass<sup>101</sup>.

Although in Yemen the initial stages of the war were intended to be an indirect intervention in support rather than the execution of military operations on the ground, the course of the war pointed almost from the outset to an escalation that has not hesitated to be christened a veritable "Saudi Vietnam", although it bears more resemblance to the intervention of Nasserist Egypt precisely in Yemen during the 1962 conflict. However, one of the immediate objectives of the operation –control of the banks of Bad el Mandeb– appears to have been achieved. This is at the cost of an international discredit in humanitarian matters that NGOs operating in Yemen have not failed to point out. As is clear, Bin Salman's rise to power seems to depend on how things go in Yemen and his ability to hold together the Coalition fighting the houth-

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100 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 166-7.

101 JORDÁN ENAMORADO, J., *Estrategia e intervención de las potencias extranjeras en el conflicto sirio* in *Desperta Ferro. Contemporánea*. Nº 29, 2018, p. 48.

is<sup>102</sup>. And not everything is easy in their midst. As has been pointed out, the United Arab Emirates, headed by Mohammed Ben Zayen, heir to the kingdom and, like his Saudi counterpart, defence minister, does not share all the objectives of Bin Salman's geostrategic agenda. Its actions are driven by a much greater concern than those of the Saudis regarding jihadism and the need to combat them effectively, although it has actively supported the intervention in Yemen as a member of the Coalition with troops on the ground and bombing raids within the Coalition. The one that has been a major headache for Riyadh is Qatar, which, as has already been discussed, maintains an autonomous diplomatic roadmap, setting itself up as a *cold war* pole *within the cold war* being waged in the Middle East. Like the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, it intervened in Yemen as a member of the Coalition despite its good relations with Iran, derived from the common exploitation of the South Pars-North Dome natural gas field. But in 2017, Saudi Arabia and its allies –including the Hadi government– severed relations with Qatar, being expelled from the Coalition and forcing the Islah party to renounce its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is known to be supported by Doha<sup>103</sup>.

As the war in Yemen has intensified, Bin Salman has spared no effort in eliminating domestic opposition to his rise, which has increased as a result of the conflict's entrenchment, the high cost to Saudi coffers and fears of further escalation with Iran. The launching of a missile against Riyadh itself has alarmed important sectors of the country's political elite, weakening to some degree the position of the heir to the throne. In addition, scandals such as the failed forced resignation of Saudi-born Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the assassination of opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Turkey have blown up in the crown prince's face. This has left it no choice but to bet even more heavily on the defeat of the Houthis in Yemen, causing a relaxation in its operations against jihadist terrorism (which is not the case of the UAE) in the face of the irritation of the United States. It may be concluded, in short, that Bin Salman's future is linked, for better or worse, to that of the war in Yemen, on the outcome of which his permanence or not in power will depend to a large extent<sup>104</sup>.

The United States has been, by far, the most erratic and inconcrete actor of all those who have come together. Since the failed post-9/11 military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Washington has reduced its willingness to send troops, preferring a model of indirect intervention through funding, troop and militia training and logistical support, which took shape under the Obama Administration. With the unipolarity that took shape in the early post-Cold War years broken,<sup>105</sup> the Americans have had

102 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 166-8.

103 SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 174-6.

104 *Ibid.*, pp. 183-4.

105 ASTORGA GONZÁLEZ, L.F., *El tablero mundial: en transición hacia el multipolarismo*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2012.

to come to terms with the fact that the extension of their sphere of influence in this scenario is encountering impetuous actors and is becoming increasingly problematic. Proof of which has been the persistence of the al-Assad regime in Syria thanks to the support of Iran and Russia, despite Washington's initial interest in overthrowing him. The emergence of ISIS reordered its strategic priorities, concentrating from then until today on its elimination<sup>106</sup>.

This quasi-exclusive focus on combating jihadist terrorism has seen its particular facet in Yemen for, although the United States has signed a military contract worth \$110 billion with Saudi Arabia and supports the Coalition, its intervention has been limited to the contours of the "Drone War" waged in the country during Saleh's rule and since before full open hostilities began in 2015. The Americans seem to have been preoccupied with waging their war on terrorism through drone strikes and targeted assassinations by the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and the CIA, which –since its inception– has been diverted from its purpose as an intelligence agency to carry out attacks against pre-assigned political-military targets in other states<sup>107</sup>. The Persian Gulf monarchies support these operations in exchange for arms and training from Washington, a fact that has generated an arms race in the region between these countries. What is undeniable is that the United States is immersed in a climate of strategic withdrawal in this theatre of operations, whether or not it actually materialises. The acquisition of self-sufficiency in fossil fuels, of which it is an exporter, does not make the option of a progressive abandonment of Washington's military presence in the Middle East far-fetched, while ensuring that it does not renounce this sphere of influence through a military ally-Israel-and a political ally-Saudi Arabia and the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf-while shifting its diplomatic ambitions towards Southeast Asia, where the world economic axis is progressively shifting. The consequences of this are difficult to quantify, but it is safe to assume that it would open the door for another superpower to make its presence felt in the region, such as China, whose economic ambitions on the scene are clear<sup>108</sup>.

Although the European Union as such has been virtually absent from the conflict in Yemen, this has not been the tone for some of the powers that make up or were then part of it, such as France and the United Kingdom. The main hope of most countries regarding the conflicts in the Middle East is that they will end as soon as possible, regardless of the outcome, so that the huge numbers of refugees who have poured over Europe's borders trying to flee the horrors of war can return<sup>109</sup>. However, France

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106 JORDÁN ENAMORADO, J., *Estrategia e intervención de las potencias extranjeras en el conflicto sirio* in *Desperta Ferro. Contemporánea*. Nº 29, 2018, p. 50.

107 VEIGA, F *et al*, *op. cit*, pp.252-5.

108 FOJÓN, E., *La retirada estadounidense de Siria: una guerra no tan lejana* in *Real Instituto Elcano*, 2019, pp. 5-7.

109 JORDÁN ENAMORADO, J., *Estrategia e intervención de las potencias extranjeras en el conflicto sirio* in *Desperta Ferro. Contemporánea*. Nº 29, 2018, p. 50.

aims to become another important player in the region by strengthening political and economic ties with the United Arab Emirates and by making diplomatic moves with Bin Salman to reduce the repercussions of the international scandals in which Riyadh has recently been embroiled<sup>110</sup>.

## Conclusions

Yemen has become a forgotten and heavily internationalised war, generating one of the biggest humanitarian crises facing the world right now. This is not really a new conflict, but rather a continuation of previous conflicts, to the causes of which new ones have been added and which have led to the outbreak of hostilities. What is truly novel is its scope, an assessment that should be made not so much in terms of its impact on the international agenda or that of the major powers, but in relation to the backdrop of the *proxy war* in search of hegemony in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the phenomenon of an insurgency such as the houthi, which is based on a tribal conception, decentralised and without defined objectives, and is capable of *going* beyond the phase of mere insurgency, gaining support that goes beyond the characteristics that give the movement its identity and generating a minimally coherent state structure that allows it to administer a territory and present itself as an organisational alternative to the government against which it has revolted. All the more so if we consider the fact that this is a group with a relatively minor or modest scope compared to the Jihadist groups, which are well-oiled by their *millennarian* approaches, propaganda and the alliances they may form with their peers. It should not be overlooked that Iran's external support and the alliance with Saleh's pro-Saleh military forces, not to mention the inability of President Hadi's government to manage-and unite-are undoubtedly important elements without which this situation would change considerably. But it is important to note that even under the relentless campaign unleashed by Saudi Arabia and its allies, the houthis have managed to maintain most of the territory conquered during the first offensives, which shows the wisdom of certain tactics employed by the group in the context in which it is forced to operate.

As of today, the conflict continues to stall despite the UN's efforts. The attention of the powers, large and medium-sized, does not hide the fact that this is a secondary scenario compared to Iraq, Syria or Libya, which is why there is no excessive concern to end the war. As Amnesty International noted in its *2017/2018 Report on the State of the World's Human Rights*<sup>111</sup>, the conflict is notable for particular cruelty exercised by all parties involved in the fighting, including the use of child soldiers. As similar conflicts with multiple interests in them are developing, it does not appear that the resolution of this one is close. At least, as long as the interest on the part of other states is not

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<sup>110</sup> SARTO FERRERUELA, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 185-7.

<sup>111</sup> Amnesty International, *Report 2017/2018. The State of the World's Human Rights.*, 2018, pp. 463-7.

low enough to let any side prevail over the others sooner or later, nor high enough to hasten the end of military operations. Given the disparate nature of the groups and interests involved, the exhaustion of the main factions that are best organised militarily does not guarantee that the situation prior to the outbreak of hostilities can be restored, let alone safeguarding the territorial integrity of Yemen as a whole within the same pre-war limits.

With an entrenched conflict that does not seem to be able to find a possible conclusion in the short term, it certainly serves to reflect on whether the interventions of foreign powers in matters of this nature, under the announced purpose of stabilising the region, attempting to reduce negative externalities and combating Jihadism, only serve to prolong these struggles indefinitely. Perhaps it would be more advisable to let the internal affairs of each state take their own course, and to concentrate on the fight against jihadist groups and on protecting the civilian population from the effects of military interventions, insurgencies or counter-insurgency operations.

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