

Conflict in Yemen: A Sectarian Strife or Petro-geopolitics?

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Abstract: Spatial distribution of Petroleum resources and the pattern of its usage is muddled with conflicts and battles for space and power played out in diverse geographical settings. Huge oil reserves and very low cost of production makes the Middle East most outstanding economic region of the world. Yemen, one among the poorest countries of the world has been reeling under multiple crises for years. Currently civil war is going between pro-government and Houthi groups. The situation is proving to be more complex due to the presence of other terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. Yemen has not been endowed with huge oil reserves like other of its Arab counterparts. But it lies on the nerve centre of oil transit and transport to Europe, USA and Asia due to its proximity to Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden. Its strategic location manifold increases its geopolitical significance. The on-going strife in Yemen may be interpreted as sectarian or having petro-geopolitical connotations, the only group losing all battles are the poor and common people. Problem in Yemen is soon going to become a huge humanitarian crisis, since millions are being deprived of life-sustaining commodities and basic services.

Keywords: Conflict, Geo-strategy, Oil Choke-Point, Petro-geopolitics, Strait

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I. Introduction

Oil and Natural Gas, as a source of energy has remained engine of economic growth since the beginning of 20th century. Many believe that the utility of petroleum and natural gas is limited because it is used as fuel for motor vehicles and power generation. However, they are unaware that its derivatives are equally useful and economically lucrative. It is one of the most diverse and multi-functional resource of the World. Spatial distribution of petroleum resources and its pattern of usage is muddled with conflicts and battles for space and power, played out in diverse geographical settings. Geographical space becoming arena of political power play relates it to geopolitics, a discipline defined as analysis of the interaction between geographical settings, perspectives and political processes. Since, both geographical settings and political processes are dynamic, each influences and is influenced by other (Cohen, 2003). Currently the Middle Eastern region accounted for 65 per cent of World's proven oil resources. Out of the total OPECs proven oil reserves about 72 per cent is located in this region¹. These huge oil reserves and very low cost of production makes the Middle East most outstanding economic region of the world. The presence of vast energy resources has proved to be a mix of blessings and misfortune for the region. The region has remained affected by inter-state wars and intermittent conflicts between states, non-state actors such as Arab-Israeli conflict, the issue of Palestine, closing of Suez Canal, Iran-Iraq conflict, Iraq-Kuwait war, insurgents in Libya and Iraq, conflict between North and South Yemen and the rising terror of ISIS. Moreover, these events are intrinsically linked with control over resources – mainly oil and natural gas fields, its transit and transport. Such regional wars and struggles not only affect the polity and economy of Middle Eastern states it also affects oil consumers throughout the World. Most of the Middle Eastern nations are part of Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) are responsible for its pricing and worldwide availability. Any change in oil prices and availability affects political stability, economic growth and international security of the consumer nations as well. The contemporary energy-driven contentions among producing, transit and market states determine the World's energy security architecture (Olayele, 2014).

Political Crisis in Yemen

Yemen, one among the poorest countries of the world has been reeling under multiple crises for years. It is consistently facing shortage of food, water and oil for its rapidly growing population. Yemen has often remained in headlines for US drone strikes and Al-Qaeda's most active franchise in Arabian Peninsula. It has again become a centre of media's attention due to escalating regional rivalry between neighbouring countries, involved in Yemen's on-going civil strife. The current crisis in Yemen could be traced back to its own Arab

Spring, which led to the removal of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, who ruled the country for 33 years. Ali Abdullah Saleh famously compared his job to 'dancing on heads of snakes'. Overseeing the political crisis Saudi Arabia, its Gulf allies and western partners supported Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Hadi got elected in 2012. As a Sunni, he had strong backing of Sunni majority in Yemen and largely recognised by international community. It temporarily avoided the civil war but failed to introduce more fundamental changes in administration and economy. Hadi also attempted to reform the military but it backfired very badly. Strife started between Hadi's government and Houthi rebels, who call themselves 'Anasar Allah' (supporters of Allah), belong to Zaydi sect of Shia Islam and represents about 20-30 % of Yemen's populationⁱⁱ. Houthis demand for greater autonomy in the northern region of Yemen. They ousted Hadi government from Sana'a and captured several places in Yemen. Due to proximity of Houthis to Iran, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition of more than 10 countries to protect Hadi government and started air-strikes against key positions of Houthi rebels in northern Yemen and in and around Sana'a.

The conflict is becoming a grave humanitarian concern. According to United Nations by November, 2015 at least 5878 people have been killed and 27,867 others have been wounded since the escalation of conflict between forces loyal to the exiled President Mansour Hadi and those allied to Houthi rebel movement. The destruction of infrastructure and restriction on imports against rebels has led to 21.2 million people being deprived of life-sustaining commodities and basic services. Almost 16 million population, or 16% are in need of some kind of humanitarian assistance.ⁱⁱⁱ The conflict has reached 21 out of 22 of Yemen's provinces and shows no sign of ending. More than 2.5 million people have been displaced internally; an additional 121,000 people have fled from the country. Yemen usually imports 90% of its food. Due to naval embargo and fighting along Aden imports have slowed down, causing severe shortages of food leading to price rise. These conditions have manifold increased the problems of already disadvantaged poor population of Yemen.^{iv}

Strategic Importance of Yemen

Until recently, the concept of a single unified Yemen was a state of mind rather than a political reality. This has not always been so, Southern Arabia has alternated between one state, usually ruled from the highlands of North Yemen, and a fragmented form of political control, with numerous competing forces and sphere of influence. Much of this is due to region's geography, which has always played a major role in its historical development^v. The present republic of Yemen is located in the South-west corner of the Arabian Peninsula, bounded on two sides by the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and on the landward side by frontiers with Saudi Arabia to the north and Oman to the eastern borders, which are still not completely demarcated. The republic also possesses various small groups of Islands in the Red Sea, and much larger Island of Socotria in the Gulf of Aden, which is closer to the continent of Africa than it is so to the coast of Arabia. The westernmost part of Yemen is the coastal strip bordering Red Sea, known as the 'Tihamah', it is hot, sandy, dry and was formerly badly affected by malaria. Inland part is the central highlands, where relatively abundant rainfall has allowed communities to practice agriculture for thousands of years. In former northern Yemen, the mountain rise to the maximum of 12,000 feet and many towns and villages until recently were accessible only on foot or by pack-animals. The capital Sana'a lies about 7000 feet and as one travels eastwards rainfall declines and mountains become less dominant^{vi}

Although the strategic importance of Yemen is not same as of other major oil producing countries of the middle east, still it has great strategic significance for Arabian Peninsula in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. Yemen may be a small country, but it has a population of 26.1 million, which is having one of the highest population growth rates in the world. The proportion of young population (<24 years) is nearly 63%. These demographic and economic realities have created one of the world's most fertile grounds for extremism, terrorism and sectarian struggles. Saudi Arabia also faces threat from Yemeni illegal immigration, smuggling and hostile political forces, many of these illegal immigrants are from unstable countries like Somalia, and therefore any instability in Yemen could have serious repercussions on peace and good order of Arab nations^{vii}. It is also very important to note that Yemen's territory and islands play a critical role due to the presence of global oil 'chokepoint' at the south-eastern end of Red Sea as 'Bab-el-Mandeb' or 'gate of tears'. It is located at the farthest southwest point of the Arabian Peninsula, and across from it is the coast of Africa. The Arabian Peninsula and Africa are separated by a distance of 22 miles. The strait connects Red Sea with Indian Ocean and is bisected by Perin Islands. Bab-el-Mandeb strait is bordered by four countries, Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula, and Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia on the African side. Bab-el-Mandeb strait is geopolitically very important as it represents the bottleneck of the Red Sea. It is no exaggeration to call Mandeb strait as one of the world's arteries. As a maritime chokepoint, the strait is just as important as Egypt's Suez Canal which connects Mediterranean to the Red Sea, and the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Bab-el-Mandeb overlooks one of the most strategic and global corridor for the transportation of energy resources and international commerce.^{viii}

Is Yemeni Oil important?

Yemen is only a small oil producer but it lies at the heart of some of the most important energy routes. According to the oil & gas Journal, Yemen has 3 billion barrels of proved oil reserves as of January, 2014. Yemen has two primary areas of crude oil production, Marib and Masila. According to Yemeni government, the southeast Masila basin holds more than 80% of country's total reserves. Yemen began producing crude oil in 1986 at very low levels and gradually increased production in 1987. As per U.S. energy Information Administration Estimates, Yemen's crude oil production was about 100,000 bbl/d in March, 2014, it is meagre when compared to Middle Eastern standards. It saw output fall of around 130,000 barrels a day in 2013, from 440,000 barrels a day before anti-government protest led to power vacuum in 2011^{ix}. The combination of declining production in its mature oil fields and frequent attacks on its energy infrastructure has left Yemen's oil sector in a very poor shape. In 2013 there were 10 attacks on Yemen's oil installations. However, other estimates say that 24 such attacks were carried out in the same year on Yemen's oil infrastructure. As already stated Yemen is not critical due to its oil but its access to Bab-el-Mandeb, which is a chokepoint and strategic link between Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. Most exports from the Persian Gulf that transit the Suez Canal and SUMED pipeline pass through Bab-el-Mandeb. Around 3.8 million bbl/d of crude oil and refined petroleum products passed through this waterway in 2013 towards Europe, the United States and Asia, an increase from only 2.9 million bbl/d in the year 2009. The Bab-el-Mandeb is a very narrow strait, at times limiting tanker traffic to 2-mile wide channels for inbound and outbound shipments. Closure of Bab-el-Mandeb strait could restrict tankers from Persian Gulf to reach SUMED pipeline or Suez Canal. These oil pipelines are co-owned by the state companies of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Qatar. In addition, European and North African south-bound oil flows could no longer take the most direct route to Asian markets via Suez Canal and Bab-el-Mandeb. Sudan and South Sudan would have their only terminal cut-off from Asia-bound trade. Arab allies fear that if Shi'ite tribes Houthis are able to capture Bab-el-Mandeb it will create huge problems for the economy and security of these nations. Growing ties between Yemeni Houthi Shi'ites and Iran also poses threat to some Arab Nations and United States. It could potentially allow Iran to outflank Saudi Arabia, as it could give Iran an opportunity to deploy its air and naval forces in the region. From 2010 world crude oil prices have been fairly stable at around \$110 a barrel, it has fallen almost 50% from second half of 2014. Saudi Arabia is one of the largest producer and exporter of crude oil and influential member of OPEC. All the members of OPEC, including Saudi Arabia needs oil prices to be around \$85/barrel. It cannot cut back its production due to prevailing challenge from burgeoning Shale oil and gas industry of USA. Oil prices started surging after Saudi Arabia escalated military operation against alleged Iranian backed Houthi rebels. Oil prices raised as much as \$10 in a month due to worries about Middle East supplies and stronger global demand. Any further intensification of conflict in Yemen or greater involvement of Iran may trigger rapid increase in crude oil prices. This could ease the mounting pressure on oil exporting nations, reeling under economic slowdown and budget cuts due to falling oil prices. Hidden behind the smoke of sectarian conflict is actually a tale of geopolitics and petro-politics that aims to control Bab-el-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden through Yemen.

Who are Houthis?

In the past, government of Yemen has conducted several military operation for years against a group of its citizens, known as Houthis (Houthis) or 'believing youth'. Houthi conflict presents an enduring threat to the stability of Yemen as a unitary state. The Houthi movement is based on the family of the same name, native to Sada'a governorate, north of Sana'a. The Houthi family is the part of Zaydi branch of Islam, which considers political legitimacy to derive from descent from the family of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)^x. In 2004 armed conflict started between charismatic Houthi leader Husayn-al-Houthi, as he was deemed threat to the government due to anti-national and anti-US activities. Husayn-al-Houthi was killed in September, 2004 and succeeded by his brother Abd-al-Malik, intermittent violence has increasingly evolved into a rolling conflict. Clashes occurred in the mountainous areas of Sada'a governorate, since northern Yemen has remained historical heartland of Zaydi Islam, Sada'a as its epicentre^{xi}.

Distinct from Sunnism, the Zaydi School of Islamic theology and jurisprudence (madhab) venerates 'Ali' as the legitimate heir of political rule (Imam) in Islamic World (Umma). Yet, Zaydism is also distinct from Shi'ism associated with Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, because it differs from them over the Imamate succession in 5th generation after 'Ali'. Although Zaydis are minority of all Yemen, they have historically dominated the north. In 2011, the Houthis were among many forces that took part in the revolt against 'Saleh' government. The group has been strongly opposed to transform Yemen into a federal state of six regions, where Sada'a province will be linked to Sana'a region. Houthis also demand greater share of power in federal government. They want north to be designated as Houthi territory. They have also capitalised the widespread frustration among people with the government against rise of fuel prices, poverty and corruption. Considering the importance of oil, Houthi fighters are deliberately targeting oil installations of Yemen such as Aden oil refinery and bordering Saudi

Arabia's oil infrastructure near Jizan. A Houthis political rival, Islah party accuses Shia rebels of being proxy of Iran and trying to restore Zaydi Imamate that ruled Yemen until 1962^{xiii}.

Power game played in Yemen

Sectarian conflict which is going on in Yemen is just a side of larger power play going on between competing powers for establishing their hegemony in the region. In the past also Yemen received much international attention when tension between undivided parts of Yemen started increasing during 1960s. While YAR (Yemen Arab Republic), northern Yemen was the land of semi-feudal tribalism, while southern part PDRY (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) was a Marxist nation. Each side desired unification but on their own terms. Saudi Arabia, other gulf states and their western allies were worried by rising influence of Soviet-Union through PDRY in the region^{xiii} PDRY was Arab World's only Marxist state, granted Soviets naval facilities at Aden and on the islands of Socotra, it supported revolutionaries within YAR^{xiv}. Yemen remained one of the prominent axes of cold war politics till its unification in 1990, when Ali Abdul Saleh became the head of the state. Many political commentators have observed that strategic foothold over Mandeb strait and Gulf of Aden in the current context is a major objective of all the parties engaged in the conflict. It is also strategically important because any attempt by Iran to close Strait of Hormuz to oil shipments and international shipping could be contained through control over Mandeb and Gulf of Aden. It could provide nearly all Saudi commerce via sea and direct access to Arabian Sea, eventually diminish its dependence on the Persian Gulf. If in future Iran Cut-off the Strait of Hormuz, Saudi Arabia could use Aden and other Yemeni ports. Control over Mandeb is also important for tightening noose around the Iranians under any scenario of war with Iran.

As per a report published in New York Times, South Yemen could be eventually merged with Saudi Arabia. In this case poor Yemenis will get Saudi riches. However, Houthi are opposed to such plans. Washington has opted out of this conflict directly but providing logistical and intelligence support to the Saudis. Israel also has its own concerns, as any pro-Iranian rule in Yemen could cut-off Israel's access to Indian Ocean and could significantly hamper its abilities to deploy its submarines in case of war with Iran. On-going strife in Yemen is very complex, not only because of the proxy war games being played but due to the involvement of multiple fractions and groups involved. Main fight is between forces loyal to Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi and those allied to pro-Iranian Houthi group. Yemen's security forces have also split loyalties, some to Hadi and other to Houthis. Both the groups, Hadi and Houthis are opposed by Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The picture has become further complicated with the arrival of affiliate Jihadi group ISIS in 2014. All these events suggest that Yemen has remained hotbed of power play between international power blocks in the past^{xv}. In the post-cold war era the canvas of conflict has now reduced to opposing regional blocks, striving to establish control over Yemen through covert and overt mediums.

Peace efforts to resolve crisis in Yemen

International community is making efforts to resolve the on-going conflict in Yemen. In September, 2015 all parties in Yemen agreed to hold talks mediated by United Nations. Earlier both warring factions met in Geneva but left without agreeing to a humanitarian truce. Before the beginning of September, 2015 meeting all parties agreed to abide the Security Council resolution that instructed Houthi rebels to pull out of major cities^{xvi}. United Nations Human Rights council proposed to recommend an enquiry into international human rights violations by all parties due to heavy civilian loss of life inflicted not only by the airstrikes of the military coalition led by Saudi Arabia but by the indiscriminate shelling carried out by Houthi rebels. A Dutch resolution also called for warring parties to allow access to humanitarian agencies for delivering aid^{xvii}. But due to stiff resistance from Arab nations a resolution lacking any direct reference to independent inquiry was passed. By December, 2015 Yemeni government and Houthi rebels called an immediate halt to hostilities and started peace talks mediated by United Nations Special Envoy at an undisclosed location in Switzerland. Saudi led coalition announced seven day halt in airstrikes; it was desperately needed respite to the country's civilian population battered by nine months of ferocious conflict^{xviii}. Ismail Ouhd Cheikh Ahmed, the UN Special Envoy hailed the cease-fire as "real achievement". Warring parties also agreed to release hundreds of prisoners^{xix}. However, days of negotiations in Switzerland halted with no sign of resolution, fierce fighting again started between both the parties. The hostilities appeared to be accelerating. Political leaders are unwilling to stop the fighting. All parties are hoping to tip the negotiation in their favour. International community lacks influence over various armed groups that have sprung during the war. It has led to a deadlock in the peace process. If the peace process not re-initiated, it may aggravate the humanitarian crises that has already crippled the country.

Implications for India

India does not have any direct involvement in the on-going conflict in Yemen but the conflict has affected India in many ways. Many Indian expatriates were working in Yemen, whose lives came in danger when fierce fighting started between rival groups in April, 2015. India carried out operation 'Rahat', one of the

biggest of its evacuation mission on a foreign soil. Indian armed forces evacuated more than 4640 Indian citizens and 960 foreign nationals from 41 countries. The effort was so professional that US embassy advised its citizens to seek Indian assistance to leave Sana'a. The evacuation from Yemen also provided a rare chance for arch-rivals India and Pakistan to look beyond hostilities, as 11 Indians were evacuated by Pakistan navy and flown home^{xx}.

As Saudi Arabia is directly involved in the confrontation, the coalition of Sunni nations requested Pakistan to send its troops for ground operations in Yemen. Pakistani parliament decided against sending any troops to Yemen to fight against Houthi rebels. It brought bitterness in the relations between Pakistan and Arab Nations. Saudi Arabia made critical comments about Pakistan publicly. The UAE Minister of state for Foreign Affairs Anwar Mohammad Gargash warned Pakistan that it may have to pay heavy price for taking 'vague' stand on the issue of supporting their struggle in Yemen^{xxi}. Many political commentators feel that this breach of trust between Pakistan and Gulf allies gave Prime Minister Modi's foreign diplomacy chance to strengthen ties with UAE and Arab nations. In his visit to UAE Prime Minister Modi received heroic welcome. He was given an opportunity to address 50,000 Indian expatriates in Dubai Cricket Stadium. The Gulf country also decided to commemorate this historic visit by allocating land to build temple. By laying down red carpet for India, UAE and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia gave an impression to Pakistan that its vague stand on Yemen may take away all benefits it gets from Arab Nations and it could turn the wheel of fortune in favour of India.

II. Conclusion

It can be concluded that although Yemen has not been endowed with oil reserves but due to its proximity to Bab-el-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden it lies on the nerve centre of oil transit and transport to Europe, USA and Asia. Its geo-strategic location manifold increases the geopolitical significance. Fighter group (Houthis) that control over Sana'a and other parts of southern territory may weaken the control of Sunni regional powers over Yemen. It could drastically hamper its security and economic prospects. The possibility of Iran providing logistical help to Houthi rebels is very strong, as Iran does not have very good relations with other Sunni powers of the region. However, it is very difficult to say that Houthis are loyal Iranian proxies, as common faith has not brought them together. The Iranians are predominantly Jaffri (twelvers) Shi'ites, while Houthis are Zaydi (fivers) Shi'ites. World media depicts Yemen crisis as war between Shia and Sunnis but as a matter of fact Sunni nations have always supported Al-Badr-Zaydi Imamate and Ali Abdullah Saleh in the past (both Zaydi Shi'ite) against the Houthis. Whether this strife is interpreted as sectarian or having petro-geopolitical connotations, the only group losing all battles are the poor and common people of Yemen. According to FAO estimates, ten governorates, Aden, Aldhalee, Lahj, Taiz, Abyan, Sa'da, Hajjah, Hodeida, Al Bayda, Shabwa are facing food security emergency. These governorates are currently among the worst affected by the conflict. At-least six million people are identified as being in need of emergency life saving assistance^{xxii}. Food security situation is expected to deteriorate significantly, if the on-going strife is not contained immediately.

End Notes

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