

Geopolitical Analysis of Al-Houthi Shiites in the Yemeni Revolution (2001 – 2012)

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Abstract

By focusing on the factors and elements that influence the formation of Shiite movements, this article tries to understand their nature especially after the recent revolutions in the Middle East. After becoming familiar with Imam Khomeini, the Shiite leaders formed resistance cells in Yemen which were establishing following this awakening caused by the expansion of Islamic thoughts in Yemen against the colonial rule of Saudi Arabia and thesevere religious and political discrimination imposed by the Yemeni government. In this regard, this paper addresses the geopolitical analysis of the Shiites in Yemen following the Islamic awakening in line with the study of political changes in this area which is located in Northern Africa as part of the Middle east. It is believed that access to the underlying structure of Shiite protests in the country and the recognition of the nature of these movements is important to predict future developments in the area.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Shiites, Al-Houthi, revolution, Yemen

INTRODUCTION

The security crisis in Yemen has its root in identity and structure. Yemen is one of those countries which was exposed to drastic security challenges after the developments of the Islamic awakening and Arab Spring. Any kind of endeavor to establish security in such countries needs to address the challenges facing the political structure. The main problem in Yemen is that there are no effective governments in these countries and, on the other hand, there is no basis for organizing and exercising power. Part of the challenges in Yemen is related to the political atmosphere and the traditions of governance in the era of Ali Abdullah Saleh. During the days following the Islamic Awakening, Ali Abdullah Saleh expanded his relations with Saudi Arabia. The promotion of the Saudi-Yemeni interaction model created new security challenges for the region. Yemen's political future depends on the

mechanisms of resistance and the influence of Saudi Arabia in the regional environment – an environment that has put security challenges in an escalating atmosphere.

The Theoretical Framework of Research

LaCouste and Giblén write: “Different perceptions of geopolitics have been presented, however, there is no general definition for the term “geopolitics” (LaCouste and Giblén, 1999: 36). On the other hand, Laura and Taule argue that geopolitics has not yet been completed in terms of methodology and its topics, but has gained its status as a method of study in the international arena (Laura and Seal, 2002: 134).

LaCouste and Giblén argue that the term ‘geopolitics’ is often used as an “adjective” in many current interpretations (LaCouste and Giblén, 1999: 41), which lacks an independent scientific identity. LaCouste also calls geopolitics a “form” of geographical reasoning.

Revolution

Revolution literally means the change from one state to another and, in the common term used in the world, it refers to the fundamental changes in all institutions, the relations of political and social structure, and the replacement of a new and desirable organization in the

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framework of certain goals and ideals. The principles of revolution can be considered as its definitive means, the change of foundations and social systems, modernism, and the aspiration of political or military violence against the ruling system. According to the above-mentioned meaning and concept, the revolution has a wide spectrum including Cultural Revolution, administrative revolution, political revolution, social revolution, etc.

The hegemony of a country in the world means leading the structure of the existing international system and prescribing accepted cultural, political, and economic norms from that country. Historically, this role is exercised by a number of powers (Dubov, 2004, p. 22).

Islamic Awakening

From the Supreme Leader's point of view, the roots of Islamic awakening can be examined in a number of ways including the division of political, cultural, historical, and other factors. Furthermore, they can be divided into long-term (that is, historical factors), the medium term (contemporary) and short term (current) causes and factors. In addition, they can be divided into two categories of value-identity and historical environmental classes. Despite the positive points held by each of the mentioned divisions, the author has approached the present study in terms of the exogenous and endogenous roots of Islamic awakening for some reasons such as the thematic interference and the overlapping of the above divisions.

The Importance of Yemen in the Regional and International Equations

With a simple look at the map, you can observe the Bab Al-Mandeb waterway, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean along with the Arabian Peninsula, West Asia, North Africa and the Horn of Africa. The country which has never been united and has been practically made up of several tribes is considered the most fertile region in the Arabian Peninsula. The dominance of Yemen over the Gulf of Eden and the Bab Al-Mandeb waterway, which links the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea, shows the country's great importance in the political and economic geography of the region.

This strait is one of the means of transit for ships that travel to Europe via the Suez Canal, and any instability in the region will seriously impinge on the global economy. In this connection, there are some issues that cannot be easily neglected such as having a border with Saudi Arabia in the north as a country which has rich oil resources and has a serious impact on the Islamic world for the location of the Holy Shrines across and the sea borders with Somalia which has highlighted the presence of pirates for a few years. Trade and tourism in important cities such as Jeddah and Yanba

(Saudi Arabia) and dozens of other coastal cities close to the Red Sea depend on security and tranquility in the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait. In addition to Yemeni dominance on the Horn of Africa, the security of Bab al-Mandeb Strait has also given the country a special strategic status.

The Course of the Shiite Geopolitical Developments in Yemen

Since 1962, Abdullah Saleh succeeded in staging a coup against Imam Mohammed Badr who was the Yemeni ruler of that era by the support and provocation provided by Jamal Abdel Nasser. On November 10, 1962, a joint defense agreement was signed between Yemen and Egypt, whereby the Egyptian forces entered Yemen to topple the Zeidi government (Jafari Voldani, 1995, p. 241).

After the coup, all religious schools were shut down, the Shia mullahs and Shiites were killed and massacred and this changed the manifestations of the culture from a millennium ago which was related to the Ahlul Bayt. For example, the names of the Ahlul Bayt were mentioned at the funerals throughout all the prayers but this was banned later. Presently, there is no mention of Ahlul Bayt in official and private schools. Publishing books such as *Nahj Al-Balaghah* and *Sahifah Sajjadiyah* are forbidden to such an extent that the government has explicitly ordered the gathering of *Nahj al-Balaghah* from around the country. At least 5,000 women and men and Shiite mullahs have been killed since 1962. A large number of prominent clerics and Imams have been murdered. A number of Zeidi Shiite scholars have been killed in recent wars, some of whom were over the age of 80 (Al-Amad, 2005, p. 232).

In total, the main difficulties and challenges facing Shiites were:

1. The absence of any right to establish religious schools;
2. The persecution, torture and imprisonment of Shiites and Shia scholars;
3. Preventing religious ceremonies such as the celebration of Eid Al-Ghadir;
4. Insulting values such as the destruction of mosques and the burning of books like *Nahj Al-Balaghah* and *Sahifah Sajjadiyah*.

The Zeidis who held the rule in Yemen until 1962 have not only been isolated, but have been suppressed by various authorities in different ways. The Yemeni governments have acted based on three approaches against the Shiites since 1962:

1. Establishing communications and transactions with some powerful non-Shiite tribes and ethnic groups;
2. The development of the armed forces and the empowerment of state security and military institutions;
3. Obtaining support from regional and sub-regional powers;

The tripartite approaches over the past three decades have been increasingly adopted as they have led Ali Abdullah Saleh to the presidency of Yemen (Mousavi, 2009).

In 1986, an organization called “Shabab Unity” was set up to train young Shiite scholars under the supervision of Zaidi scholars such as Badr al-Din Al-Houthi. The Houthis consider themselves the defenders of the Shiite Zeidi community and are under attack and the risk of cultural destruction. In fact, the Houthi forces are the armed branch of the Shiite population in Yemen who support them against a variety of aggressions by the central government. With the unification of two Yemeni countries in 1990, the “Shabab Unity” organization merged with the Al-Haq Party which was a Zeidi political organization. The Al-Haq Party’s organization became increasingly anti-American since 2002 and raised some slogans such as “Allah Akbar”, “Death to America”, “Death to Israel”, “Damn the Jews” and “Islam is victorious” in mosques after all congregations and prayers. The current movement had an open political process until 2004 and had clear participation in parliamentary and political activities.

Since 2004, the Yemeni government has been struggling with this group. So far, there have been at least six full-scale wars between them (Salehi, 2009). During the initial clashes between the government forces and the Yemeni and Houthi groups, there was widespread discontent that the government has always tried to keep Shiites out of power. In the same vein, the Houthis used religious fatwas to stand up to the government and declared that the ruthless ruler must be opposed.

The Houthis; from Shabab Al-Momen to Ansarullah

The Houthi clan belongs to the Houth region from the province of Saada in the north of Yemen. This group is attributed to Allameh Badr al-Din al-Houthi, who was a member of the Yemeni Parliament for some time, and the group was formed in the 1980s. Badr al-Din Al-Houthi traveled to Iran under the influence of the Islamic Revolution in the 1970s to study Islamic sciences directly in the Qom Seminary. He had traveled to Iran with his son Hussein and stayed in Qom until 1981. Then, he returned to his country and established the initial structure of this movement in his country. After years of accepting the oppression and tyranny in that country, he was inspired by the thoughts of Imam Khomeini and succeeded in establishing the movement of the righteous and gained popularity among the Zeidi youth and tribes.

Ansarullah’s modeling of Hezbollah in Lebanon is quite obvious in terms of ideology and structure. The main slogan of this movement is “Death to America”, “Death to Israel” and “Islam is victorious”. Moreover, Ansar Allah,

like Hezbollah, has established a charity and health and educational centers to support the livelihood and the life of Yemeni citizens. It should be noted that after the victories of Lebanon’s Hezbollah as Shiite resistance against Israel (or the Zionist regime), there has been a great growth in Shi’ism in Yemen. After the 33-day war, a high morale was created among Yemen’s Shiites, and it is said that even the children of some of the distinguished Wahhabi scholars in eastern Yemen have converted to Shi’ism.

Following the leadership of Abdul Malik Badr al-Din, the group’s influence on the north of Yemen increased day by day, despite the five wars that were imposed on him by the Yemeni government and the Saudi regime during his time.

The Challenges Facing Yemen

Yemen faces four major challenges that shape the country’s stability and security and its impact on regional and international security. These four challenges are the Houthi issue in the north, southern separatism, Al-Qaeda’s growing activities, and the challenge of relations with Saudi Arabia.

According to some analysts, the issues of Al-Qaeda and the Houthis are not the main issues because they have been led by external forces. The main problem is the southern separatism which is a structural issue. Others see the major challenge of Yemen as Al-Qaeda and its growing activities in the country. Yemen’s internal challenges are different from the perspective of different actors associated with it.

The problems and Crises of the Ruling Yemeni regime

1. The crises of Abdullah Saleh’s regime
 - A) The crisis of legitimacy: Generally, in the case of the legitimacy of any regime, it is said that there can be two foundations for legitimacy, namely internally and external legitimacy. For countries with a popular government being supported by the people, legitimacy is secured from within and there is no need for foreign support. However, countries with internal issues without domestic and popular legitimacy might turn to foreign powers for their legitimacy and survival, a typical example of which was the Pahlavi regime in Iran.
 - B) Crisis of participation: In Yemen, various political groups cannot take part in power, while there are about twenty parties in Yemen. However, many groups are struggling to participate in the power structure and different groups such as the Al-Houthi family ask for a share of the political power.
 - C) Identity crisis: The root of the latest developments should be considered in the year of the unification of Yemen and the development of a new constitution. The conflict between the Houthi family and the Yemeni government began in 1990 (after the

unification of Yemen), causing clashes and violence between 1990 and 1993. The constitution states that the Sharia is the source of the constitution and the Houthis believe that the only source of legislation must be declared as Sharia. This fundamental dispute is based on the fact that the Yemeni society has a traditional texture while, on the other hand, the country wants to join the modern age. Therefore, the rulers of Yemen do not agree to say that there is only the source of sharia law and they want to be free to westernize the society.

- D) The crisis of distribution: with all its limitations, the facilities in Yemen are not equally distributed in all regions; some areas are extremely weak and impoverished and do not have the average living conditions.
2. The regional and international problems of Yemen
- A) Yemen and Saudi border disputes: Yemen has a territorial claim to the three oil-rich provinces of Asir, Najran and Jizan currently controlled by Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia claims that Yemen's oil-rich regions such as Ma'arab, Javaf, Rabat al-Khalil and Hazramaut belong to that country. During the years when the united Yemen was being formed (early 1990s), Saudi Arabia tried to initiate turmoil in Yemen in various ways, which resulted in a clash between the two countries in 1995 which left 54 dead and was mediated by international powers leading to an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Yemen which was signed in February 1995. However, the Yemen and Saudi conflicts remain as an unresolved dispute.
- B) Disagreements with the United States: A group of 150 Al-Qaeda members were based in Yemen and the United States wanted Yemen to turn them over to the United States, but the Yemeni government did not cooperate. More interestingly, some of the elements and persons involved in the September 11 terrorist attacks were among them. Bin Laden himself was originally Yemeni and his family later emigrated to Saudi Arabia (ibid, pp. 288-291)

The Clashes of Yemeni Government with Shiites

By a look at how the Yemeni Shiites live, it becomes clear that under the rule of the Yemeni government, Shiites have experienced complete cultural deprivation and have faced many difficulties and challenges such as:

The lack of any right to establish religious schools for the Shiites

The persecution and imprisonment of Shiites and religious scholars

Preventing religious ceremonies

The conflict between Shiites in northern Yemen and the central government began in 2004. The government accuses the residents in the region of trying to secede and restore the Shia government in the area that was overthrown in a coup in 1962, while the Houthi group rejects this accusation and says that Shiites and fighters in the area only want to receive their natural rights which the central government has denied because of the pressure from the Saudi Arabian extreme Wahabis. Saudi Arabia plays a major role in these clashes. Some argue that the fact that Yemen is the poorest Arab country and one of the ten poorest countries in the world is because of the role of other countries in these clashes including Saudi Arabia.

Al-Houthi Uprising

A group of Shia youth formed a group called "Al-Shabab Al-Momen" which fought and opposed the United States and Israel and opposed the alliance between the Yemeni government and the United States. The Houthi slogans were chanted during Friday prayers at Sana'a mosque. This was a major concern for Saleh's government. Subsequently, the "terrorism" charges were raised against the Shiites and the Yemeni government tried to silence the protesters by gaining US support.

In this regard, in 2004, the Yemeni President attended the summit of eight industrial countries in the United States and sought to get the help and support of these countries. Saleh demanded a widespread attack on Sa'adeh by giving orders to the army immediately after returning from the United States. Thus, on the morning of June 18, this green and prosperous mountainous region was turned into a mass of soil, fire and blood in a few minutes after the full-scale invasion of the military and security forces.

The Yemeni government used intensive news censorship and dismissed reporters from television networks such as Al Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and Al-Alam, and bombarded Shiite areas in the north for three months. On September 10, 2004, the end of the war was officially announced as the government captured the city of Maran after the death of Seyyed Hussein Al-Houthi.

The Second War of the Yemeni Army

After the death of Al-Houthi, the Yemeni government thought it would dominate the area and the Shiites of Saada. However, the battles between the Houthis and the Yemeni army continued shortly afterwards and were called the "Second War of the Yemeni Army". The growing popularity of Hussein Al-Houthi among the Yemeni people and giving the title of martyr to him was coupled by the publication and dissemination of Houthi thoughts that

had been published in the form of books and lectures in previous years. A large population from other provinces and particularly the Hidan area went there to help the Shiites and rebuild the ruined regions of Saada. At that time, the Yemeni army carried out many air strikes and attacks to scare them and hundreds of civilians were killed or injured.

The Third War

The third war broke out in March 2006 and was led by Hussein's younger brother Abdulmalek Al-Houthi. The beginning of this war was to defend Zeidi Shia bases inflicted by the Army. Its geographical area includes the suburban areas of Saada such as Saghin, Al-Majaz and Hidan and these areas were expanded to the center of the province of Saada.

The Fourth War

The fourth conflict occurred in April 2007. In this war, the Believing Youth Movement turned the entire province of Saadah into a military operation against the Yemeni army, causing serious damage to governmental, security and military institutions and organizations. In this war, like the previous wars, the Houthis used guerrilla warfare against the Yemeni army. The war ended with the retreatment of the Yemeni army from the Shiite mountainous regions and strongholds. Afterwards, Abdul Malik Al-Houthi, the brother of Hussein Badruddin, was known as the favorite leader of Zeidi Shiites.

The Fifth War

The war began in February 2008 with the leadership of Abdulmalek Houthi. The Houthis used light and heavy weaponry against the army. The operational circle of this war included the province of Saada, the Bani Hashish region, a part of Sana'a and the Harf Sufian region. This indicated the expansion of the military operation and the qualitative transformation of the Houthi military operation with Sanaa that caused some concern for the government officials.

The Sixth War (Operation Burned Land)

The sixth war began in August 2009. This war was widespread and the massacres and brutalities point to the anger and psychological pressures of the Sanaa army commanders due to the failure in achieving the goals during the previous wars. This war continued with political, military and security coordination between Riyadh and Sana'a.

As of August 11, 2009, the clashes reached their climax and the sixth war (Operation Burned Land) began between the two sides. The conflict also spread into Saudi Arabia, causing the Saudi army to attack the group's positions.

CONCLUSION

Given the sociological factors in Yemen including the Islamic awakening and the national pride of the Yemeni people, the hegemonic system has to accept the realities of the new Middle East based on the Islamist wave and move towards the redefinition of indigenous security structures and methods.

The fact is that the role of Islamists and Islamic ideology in these developments is quite clear. One of the reasons for the success and persistence of the people's presence on the scene is the indigenous movements and the popular origin of the Islamic uprising and the lack of any role played by international forces in this movement.

We present the solutions to the challenges faced by Yemen.

- A One of the problems is the separatism in the South that is a structural issue. Another major challenge for Yemen is Al-Qaeda and its growing activities in the country. The only and the best way is resistance to aggression. The Yemeni government must know that with the separation of Southern Yemen and the disputes will increase more than ever and the Yemeni people will suffer the most.
- B The internal conflict will continue so long as Abdullah Saleh and the Yemeni leaders continue their relations with the United States, contrary to the will of the people. The people have realized that they cannot trust the United States and have detected this distrust raised by American policies.
- C Another issue is the dire economic situation in the northern regions of Yemen which has led to widespread protests by the inhabitants of these areas and an increase in their conflicts with the central government and their attraction towards the Houthi anti-government movement. Moreover, the secular nature of the Yemeni government and, on the contrary, the religious feature of the Houthi ideal governance has led the movement to prevail in the traditional tribal communities of Yemen and especially the Zeidis in the north.
- D In addition to the three major challenges that were indicated, Yemen faces a historical issue in its relations with Saudi Arabia, which directs the relations between the two countries and determines the way in which the two societies and governments view each other. The involvement of Saudi Arabia in the sixth Sa'adeh war raises many questions about the reasons and factors affecting Saudi Arabia's Yemeni orientation. Moreover, according to some experts, the future of Yemen's internal stability and security is in direct relation to Saudi Arabia's attitude towards the country. Saudi Arabia should avoid interfering in

Yemen's internal affairs, as it causes further tensions and conflicts in Yemen.

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