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Preface

The government of Yemen, which came into being as a result of Arab Spring, was toppled by Shia Zaidi Houthis in a Coup d'état. Many countries closed their embassies with the Houthis grabbing power in Sanaa and in the last phase Saudi Arabia have led a coalition air strikes over Yemen.

The Saudi-led coalition forces air strikes had not only targeted the Houthis but it is causing civilian casualties too. What are the historical background of Yemen's crisis and causes? Who are the real players in the in Yemen and regarding Yemen how precise is Afghanistan's stance are the questions which are answered in this weekly analysis.

In addition, since the last two months there are press articles and news about 31 passengers being kidnapped in the Zabul, but still there isn't any news about them. The Taliban which rejected the news that they might have captured these passengers now the question arises who might have kidnapped these passengers.

In this edition of weekly analysis these are the topics which are analyzed by our analytical board:

The Saudi Arabia-Iran 'Great Game' in Yemen and Afghanistan



Since the last decade, Yemen is dragged into a Civil War. Even though the war was turned into a peace accord in 2010, but with the Arab Spring President Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to resign from his Presidency. In the post-Ali Abdullah Saleh Yemen, the new president Abduruboh Mansoor Hadi, for many reasons was not able to control the ongoing conflicts in his country and as a result of it; the Shia Houthis seized many areas one after another and at the end through their so-called coup they gained Sanaa and dissolved the government and Parliament.

Yemen is one of Saudi Arabia's closed and important neighbor and with the ouster of Saudi-Strategic partners in Sanaa and coming of Pro-Iranian Shia Houthis Saudi considers this situation as an alarming sign for itself and Arab World.

The roots of Yemeni crises have reached to Afghanistan and it has raised concerns about Kabul's Foreign Policy, but regarding the Yemeni crises many questions can arise: What is Kabul's stance towards the events that unfolded in the middle east? Where the Yemeni crises had its roots? And additionally, who are engaged in the great game in Yemen and what would be its implication for the region?

The Crisis in Yemen: Historical Background and its origin

Yemen was ruled by many Imams of Shia Zaidi for more than 1000 years, but with the 1962 revolution a full-stop was put to the Imamate of Shia Zaidi and their rule was subsequently ended. In 1978, Ali Abdullah Saleh became President in the North Yemen and later when in 1990 Yemen became united he continued to be President of United Yemen until the Arab Spring.

The Houthis movement began in the decade of 80s under the name of 'Believing Youth'. Until now, it is not clear that who was the founder of this movement but researchers vary their opinions in Muhammad al Houthi and Hussein al Houthi. This movement started their preaching in a peaceful manner but later started insurgency¹.

The group takes its name after its leader *Hussain Badruddin al Houthi* was killed in 2004 by the Yemeni Forces ---and with it; their group is also called *Ansarullah* (supporters of God) --- as a result, the Houthis from 2004 to 2010 launched six different militant uprisings against the Yemeni Government. However, the Yemeni Government due to the presence of Al-Qaeda in Yemen, the long war with the Houthis, and the downward slope of economic trends forced the government to have a peace deal with the Houthis in 2010².

On the other hand in 2010, the protests were popping up across the Northern Africa and Middle East and within a short period of time it forced Tunis and Egypt's governments to step down. This momentum of Arab Spring had also reached Yemen and as a result of it many peoples chanted in anti-government rallies across the country. The Houthis too, took part in these Anti-government rallies and protests.

In the Post Arab Spring and after toppling down of Ali Abdullah Salih in 2011, President Abduraboh Mansour Hadi became the new President of the country. Due to inflation and other economic problems the Houthis had differences with the new president and later their differences were resolved by the United Nations special representative to Yemen, but the Houthis continued their insurgency and at the end via their Coup they grabbed the power by ousting the government of Hadi and is struggling to seize more areas.

¹ Saeed Al Batati, Who are the Houthis in Yemen?, Aljazeera English, 29 March 2015, 9 April 2015, see it online:<
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/yemen-houthis-hadi-protests-201482132719818986.html>>

² For more studies about the Houthi insurgency between 2004 to 2010 please read: Christopher Boucek, War in Saada: From local insurrection to National Challenge, Carnegie Papers, Number 110, April 2010, retrieved at 9 April 2015, see it online: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf

The international Importance of Yemeni Crisis

The crisis in Yemen is important, mostly due to the following reasons:

1. This place had enormous strategic importance, because it has one of the seven straits of the world, which is the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. The importance of this strait can be realized from the fact that on a daily basis 3.3 million barrel oil is passed through it³.
2. Iran have become successful in the containment of Saudi Arabia due to fact that the Pro-Iranian Houthis have now controlling the Yemeni affairs, which the Riyadh looks to it as an alarming sign.
3. The supporters of each side(in this case Saudi Arabia and Iran), who are engaged in Yemen's Crisis, are also engaged with each other in the regional cold war and the supporters of the supporter of this crisis (USA, Russia, China, and EU) are also engaged with each other in the new cold war at the international level.
4. As the Shia and Sunni's are engaged in this crisis, the crisis has given sometimes the name of Shia-Sunni rivalry too. That's why the Muslims of the entire world are giving their attentions to it.
5. Since 2004, due to the Crisis in Yemen more than 200 thousand Yemeni peoples were forced to take shelter in the surrounding areas⁴ and the present crisis would further increase these numbers. In addition, the crisis importance is also increased due to civilian casualties.

Saudi Arabia, Iran and the 'Great Game' in Yemen:

Yemen has not only strategic and economic importance at the international level but due to Saudi Arabia-Iran Cold War its importance is substantially increased. With the Arab Spring, Iran and Saudi Arabia confronted each other in Syria, Iraq and now in Yemen. That's why the strategist and security analyst Mr. Martin Reardon call Saudi-Iran rivalry the 'Great Game' type rivalry, which was originally played in the nineteenth century between the Czar and Britain India in Afghanistan⁵.

³ World Oil Transit Chokepoints. Energy Information Administration, US Department of Energy.

<http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=330>

⁴ UNHCR, Yemen: Monthly factsheet (Jan 2015), retrieved at 9 April 2015, see it online:

<http://www.unhcr.org/4c907a4a9.html>

⁵ Martin Reardon, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the 'Great Game' in Yemen, Aljazeera English, 26 March 2015, retrieved at 9 April 2015, see it online: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/saudi-arabia-iran-great-game-ye-201492984846324440.html>

Yemen and Saudi Arabia had such a common border between them that from the one hand there is illegal migration on it⁶ and from the other hand drugs and weapons are smuggled via it. This is the main reason which causes concerns in Saudi Arabia because with the pro-Iranian Houthis grabbing power, Iran can reach easily into Yemen and reaching to Yemen would then mean reaching Saudi Arabia.

The Regional Allies of Saudi Arabia and Iran:

It was during the era of 1991-2007, when Saudi Arabia-Iran relations were diplomatically becoming normal, but with the Arab Spring and Iran's nuclear deal with 5+1 Countries the relations between these two countries were once again have gone from bad to worst and as a result of it, Saudi Arabia are making strives to make Anti-Iran alliance in the region (middle east).

On the other hand with the beginning of Yemen's crisis and the Saudi-led coalition air strikes on Yemen, the government of Syria, Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Iran came under the umbrella of anti-Saudi-led alliance in the region. Moreover, Afghanistan, Turkey and Pakistan are still non-aligned but leaned towards Saudi-led-Alliance.

The reasons behind Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey's stances toward non-alignment but at the same time supporting Saudi Arabia had the following reasons:

- Afghanistan is only supporting to protect the territorial integrity of the two holy mosques but regarding the Crisis in Yemen it hopes that the crisis should be resolved peacefully via Organization of Islamic Cooperation as well as the UN. Moreover, it is not a part of Saudi-led coalition who is air striking Yemen.
- Even though Pakistan is the strategic partner of Saudi Arabia and calls 'protecting territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia' its responsibility, but until now it had not taken part in the Saudi-led-coalition air strikes. Pakistan, which wants to lead the Islamic ummah, might became non-align in this crisis and like Turkey it would seek to play a more conflict-resolving role.
- Turkey had from one hand had condemned Iranian role in Yemen but on the other hand it is not part of the Saudi-led-coalition. In addition, Turkey had the same

⁶ Brian Whitaker. "Saudi Security Barrier Stirs Anger in Yemen." The Guardian. February 16, 2004. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/feb/17/saudi-arabia.yemen>

relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia and as a result it is in best position to resolve the conflict.

The Afghanistan's Stance:

Regarding the situation in Yemen, Kabul has declared its policy in such a presidential statement, which was consulted with many. We call Kabul's statement and stance in between the non-alignment and Realpolitik. The Afghan Presidential statements have the following important points:

- Afghanistan would protect the territorial integrity of the two holy mosques and the Afghan government therefore stands with all power by the brotherly government and people of Saudi Arabia in defending the sacred territory should there be any threat.
- The government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan strongly believes in the principle of democracy and supports the legitimate government of Yemen.
- Afghanistan hopes that the crisis is resolved peacefully and there should be an end to this conflict through Organization of the Islamic Cooperation and UN.

In the above statement, there are few things which are quiet important and it is as accordance to the UN principles (Principle of democracy and the legitimate government) and Afghan tradition (non-alignment). Afghanistan being an Islamic country and like the Muslims of the world loves their sacred places and It had only supported Saudis in this regard, but on the crisis of Yemen it has a motive that the conflict should be resolved through OIC and UN.

On the other hand, looking into Ashraf Ghani's Foreign Policy one can easily understand that Peace is an essential part of it and therefore Saudi Arabia's position can not only effect Pakistan's decision but the Taliban as well. That's why Kabul's Foreign Policy is circulating around Pakistan-Saudi Arabia-Afghanistan and Afghanistan-Pakistan-China.

On the economic aspect, Kabul's decision would also increase the chances of giving Afghanistan 100 thousand labor visas, which would then positively affect afghan Economy through remittances.

The dilemma of 31 missing passengers in Zabul



After 50 days, the fate of 31 abducted Hazara passengers in Zabul, who were kidnapped on Kandahar-Kabul highway, their fate and the demands of kidnappers are still unknown.

Afghan government claims that its launched military operation in Zabul province has killed nearly 100 foreign militants in Khak-e-Jabbar district of this province, but the fate of the abductees are still unknown. The question that who are behind this abduction or what the purpose of the abduction is are also still unknown.

Military operation in Zabul:

After the kidnapping of 31 passengers, Afghan military officials has claimed that its launched military operation against Islamic State (DAESH), which is led by Mullah Abdullah "Haqmal" in Zabul province, and also claimed that Mullah Abdullah might be among the detainees by Afghan military forces or might be killed or injured; but Mullah Abdullah Haqmal on 9th March in a telephonic interview with Radio Tehran has rejected the claims made by Afghan officials. He rejected the claims of Afghan government about

his relations with Islamic State and called this as propaganda. He said IS might be operating in Zabul, but he is still a commander of Taliban in this province.

According to Haqmal, Taliban have not any role in this particular kidnapping and also rejected the claims made by Afghan government that he is wounded. Mullah Abdullah emphasizes on the continuation of their war against foreign troops under the leadership of Mullah Omar.

His explanations shows that the military operation in Khak-e-Jabbar district of Zabul province claimed by Afghan security forces has not any damages for the kidnapers otherwise they might start killing the abductees.

Another false claim:

Soon After, the name of another Taliban Commander Mansoor Dadullah who is not part of the war, but now came to media as the one who leads Islamic State in Afghanistan.

But Mansoor Dadullah also denied this claim in a telephonic conversation with Pashto service of Tehran radio. He added that he is not the leader of Islamic State in Afghanistan and called this information being spread as propaganda of American and pro-American media. "I will never leave Taliban Tahreek (movement) and will die as a Talib" he said.

Mansoor Dadullah added that Islamic State or DAESH does not exist in any part of Afghanistan, because all of us are fighting against foreign troops under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar and will not join any peace process.

Mullah Mansoor Dadaullah is Taliban`s prominent commander Mullah Dadullah`s older brother who is dismissed by Mullah Omar from commandership of Taliban in Helmand, following his meeting with Mikel Sempple, and later on detained and imprisoned in Pakistan. He was released last year after spent 5 years in jail.

Mansoor Dadullah on the question that why he left Pakistan said that ISI or the military Intelligence of Pakistan had such demands from me that were against the national interests of my country, based upon this reason I left Pakistan and came to Afghanistan to fight foreign troops side-by-side of my fellow fighters.

Where is Islamic State or DAESH?

Taliban hosted some foreign fighters during their Emirate rule in Afghanistan, who after the fall of the regime sheltered in Tribal areas across the Durand line, especially in Waziristan.

In 2006, a war out broke between Pakistani Taliban under the leadership of Hafez Gul Bahadur and Mullah Nazir resided in North Waziristan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, where Mullah Omar ordered to Baitullah Mehsud to shelter the Uzbek fighters for short period of time. Later on, most of these fighters moved to Dai-Choopan and Khak-e-Afghan districts of Zabul province along with their families, but the decision of Taliban that they left the international Jihad made them hopeless.

Taliban brought some changes in their plans, among which is their decision to leave Jihadi programs outside Afghanistan; they proved this in reality and limited their war to Afghanistan.

When Abu Baker Baghdadi announced Islamic State and claimed himself as Khalifa, it was obvious that whoever join the Islamic State will be this group who want to move the war beyond the Afghan borders, and today the same group has joined the Islamic State.

The existence of Islamic State in different parts of Afghanistan is extremely propagated, especially prior to president Ghani's participation in Munich conference in which the important issue was existence of Islamic State in the world. Rumors of the existence of Islamic State in Afghanistan could draw attentions to assistances from the world community to Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Islamic State group made their first stage by electing Hafiz Saeed as their Ameer and Mullah Abdurraof Khadem as the assistant of their Ameer. Mullah Abduraof became under pressure from Taliban in Helmand province, but he was soon killed in an American drone attack in Kajaki district of Helmand.

The uncertainty and concerns:

Recently Haji Mohammad Mohaqeq the first deputy of Executive Chief Officer of National Unity Government told international media that the 31 passengers are

kidnapped by Islamic State under the leadership of Mansoor Dadullah and Mullah Abdullah Haqmal. Mohaqeq is one of the important faces within the government and he might have received this kind of information from the military institutions of the government, and in case, this information is true then the security institutions does not have accurate information which further increases uncertainties.

The other dilemma that media early reported was the information about contacts from local elders with the kidnappers. If it is true then the kidnappers have some demands. The state of these demands can show who the kidnappers are, but Afghan government does not say anything about the kidnappers which increases the concerns of the families of the abductees.

Where are the abductees?

This is a significant question for which no one has an answer including the Taliban. Taliban in a statement has denied their role in abduction of the passengers and said that they don't have information about where they are.

If the claim of Taliban is true, than the dilemma can become more complicate. Hiding 31 abductees in the regions under the control of Taliban is not that much easy especially when the hostages have been transferred in smaller groups, the hiding becomes more difficult. Taliban do not neglect the presence of strange people in the areas of their control for preventing the influence of government spies.

The other possibility is that the abductees are being kept in some mountainous areas in Zabul by the group who joined Islamic State. There are also the rumors that number of kids and women from members of the Islamic State affiliated group families were captured during their travel in the north regions of the country and the group in return abducted 31 passengers for their release, but the government wants to hide this issue.

The End

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