



YEMEN AND SAUDI PART II: A FUTURE OF NEIGHBORLY RELATIONS

By:

Abdulghani Al-Iryani

March 31, 2022

YEMEN AND SAUDI PART II: A FUTURE OF NEIGHBORLY RELATIONS

By:
Abdulghani Al-Iryani

March 31, 2022

COVER PHOTO : Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman introduces Saudi Vision 2030 at an April 26, 2016, press conference.// SPA photo



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

For seven decades, leaders and pundits from Yemen and Saudi Arabia have capitalized on the differences and conflicting interests between the two nations to advocate adversarial, often antagonistic relations and policies. Incompatibilities pointed out between the two states typically include republic vs. monarchy, poor vs. rich, left-leaning vs. right-leaning, chaotic vs. stable, etc. So, while Yemen depended and continues to depend on remittances from its migrant workers in Saudi Arabia for its economic survival, and Saudi Arabia depended on cheap Yemeni labor for its initial construction boom through the 1970s and '80s, and for a large portion of the service sector until today, the trajectory of the relationship between the two states has been heading toward a clash.

A quick review of the differences cited above shows how baseless they are. The republic vs. monarchy argument does not stand up to scrutiny. During the last decade of Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule, he was as authoritarian as any of the region's monarchs, and his family, in-laws and close allies were a privileged aristocracy. Many leaders of the region's republics were far more despotic than any king or prince in the region. As for the global geopolitical game that was played during the cold war, it was already over by the day of unification. The Saudi fear of Yemeni democratization that was rational in the early years of the republic was discredited by the mid-1990s when Saleh amended the constitution to concentrate power in his hands, and effectively laid to rest with the 2003 parliamentary elections in which his party, using state resources and outright fraud, achieved a suffocating majority.

Counterintuitive as it may be, the authoritarianism that the Saudis usually favored was a major cause of the deteriorating relations between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Saleh viewed the official state relationship between Yemen and Saudi Arabia as a personal competition with the Saudi dynasty. He acted with grave disregard for the counsel of his advisers and the interests of millions of Yemenis who relied on remittances from Saudi Arabia. His frequent confrontations with the Saudis were often a means to extort them, ruining many attempts by the Saudi private sector to invest in Yemen. Saudi willingness to turn a new page after the signing of a border treaty in 2000 was foiled by Saleh's devious behavior toward Saudi Arabia, which included the smuggling of arms into Saudi territories and providing a safe haven for Saudi-designated terrorists.

However, Saleh was not the only culprit in the deteriorating relations between the two neighbors. Yemenis attributed the goodwill of the Saudis to the late King Abdullah. His half-brother Nayef, and Nayef's son Mohammed, who handled the Yemen file for a period, did not demonstrate goodwill. They never did. In 1994, after Saudi Arabia's dismal failure in effecting the cessation of the south, Prince Nayef argued that Prince Sultan's costly approach of maintaining, through the Special Committee for Yemen Affairs, a vast network of clients among the military,

civilian and tribal leaderships in Yemen was not working. Nayef managed to wrest control of the Special Committee and its fat budget from his brother Sultan and immediately launched a campaign of assassinations and sabotage throughout Yemen. The hired assassin and member of Spain's Al-Qaida cell, Nabil Nanakli, who was arrested in Sana'a in 1996 and convicted for organizing a sabotage and assassination network, confessed that he received his instructions to assassinate the foreign minister of Yemen at the time, Abdel Karim al-Iryani, from Prince Mohammed bin Nayef himself. The Yemeni government sent the taped confessions of Nanakli to the UN security council. Yemen remained vexed by the Saudi policy of maintaining a vast network of Yemeni clients, many of them tribal sheikhs who defied state authority and undermined the project of state building. As a result, most Yemenis distrusted Saudi Arabia as much as Saudis distrusted Saleh. Distrust, misperceptions and bad decisions, more than anything else, led Yemen-Saudi relations to the dismal state they are in today.

For Yemen and Saudi Arabia to avoid the mistakes of the past, they need to move beyond lip service on a few rather obvious facts. For Yemenis, the first of these is that Yemen has little chance of exiting the vicious cycle of poverty and underdevelopment without establishing a strong relationship with its northern neighbor. Yemen is a poor country. Talk about developing its natural resources and tourism and suchlike is not an option if Yemen cannot be nursed back to stability and viability through an indispensable partner in development like Saudi Arabia. The second is that Yemen's sovereignty and territorial integrity are better defended with a posture that is non-threatening to its neighbors than via a military buildup that drains resources and subjects the Yemeni people to the twin existential threats of poverty and instability.

For Saudis, they need to acknowledge that living next to a time bomb is not an option. As the Houthi movement has demonstrated, Yemen can easily become a serious threat to Saudi Arabia. Yemen's impoverished and underdeveloped nature has been no barrier to this antagonistic ideological movement acquiring the technology to cause the kingdom a major headache. In time, further technological advancements will make Saudi Arabia even more vulnerable to disaffected forces in an alienated Yemen. The climate of uncertainty created by the Ukraine invasion could also create unpredictable shifts in regional alliances. Yemen is quite literally a gaping hole in Saudi Arabia's strategic underbelly, open for adversaries to walk in at will. Talk in some Saudi quarters of exiting the conflict and leaving Yemenis to fight a long war of attrition will only keep that time bomb ticking. Seven years of war have amply demonstrated that the Houthis – the best-organized and best-led faction in Yemen – are perfectly capable of pulling out the pin.

A second obvious fact is that the Saudi tendency of encouraging one-man rule continues to prevail in decision-making circles today, despite the costs to Riyadh

of dealing over 33 long years with Ali Abdullah Saleh, not to mention figures such as Saddam Hussein and Moammar Qaddafi. Saudi Arabia needs to ditch policies of submitting the fate of an entire nation to the whims of one man if there is to be hope of building a healthy relationship between the two countries. Democracy is an unwieldy and often messy form of government, but it offers the best chance for placing the welfare of the people above the personal aggrandizement of a ruler. Saudi decision-makers who persist in the notion of a strongman managing their Yemen problem for them out of Sana'a risk sacrificing the interests of both countries. Saudi Arabia needs to work harder on its Yemen relations to enjoy long-term stability and security along its southern borderlands.

The third obvious fact is that Yemen and Saudi Arabia have much in common and should be able to complement each other strategically and economically. The combined demographic weight of the two countries would be a deterrent to any regional power. And marrying Yemeni labor and the Yemen market with Saudi capital is only the first in a long list of economic synergies that are within reach but require a new approach in Riyadh. Saudis have seen Yemenis as either clients or enemies, never their counterparts. But Yemenis are a proud, if humble people and will never accept such a status. A new page in Yemen-Saudi relations must start on the basis of partnership between equals.

Abdulghani Al-Iryani is a senior researcher with the Sana'a Center.

This article is part of a series of publications by the Sana'a Center examining the roles of state and non-state foreign actors in Yemen.



SANA'A
CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES
مركز صنعاء للدراسات الاستراتيجية

WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG