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Yemen edges towards disintegration

While the Arab Gulf has called for UN Chapter VII intervention in the wake of Yemen's political crisis, even if it came it would be unlikely to help the country

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Yemen is slipping towards division and civil war and may be embroiled for many years to come.

Nothing will save it from this fate. Whether the call at the emergency GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) meeting in the Saudi capital Riyadh urging the UN Security Council to issue a resolution based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter, allowing the use of military force or economic sanctions on Yemen. Or even reports of Egyptian-Saudi military intervention to restore stability and legitimacy. The outcome of these interventions would irk both friend and foe alike.

On the path to civil war and division, recent reports indicate that popular committees have taken control of Aden after clashes with security forces. Armed militias also took control Sunday of a position held by the Air Defence regiment in Shabwah province in East Yemen in one of the mountains overlooking the city of Ataq, after clashes between militias and soldiers at the post. So far, it is unclear which group these militias belong to. On 12 February, Al-Qaeda militias took control of the headquarters of the 19th Infantry Brigade, also in the province of Shabwah, and captured several soldiers, weapons and military equipment.

The Yemeni army is basically dissolving and the state is falling apart, while Yemeni provinces are moving towards secession and a sectarian Shia-Sunni conflict that has been festering under the surface. All of Yemen is lining up along doctrinal, sectarian, tribal and provincial roots.

What happened and is happening is the outcome of decades of an alliance of authoritarian tribalism that monopolised power and wealth, one that peaked during battles of succession. Meanwhile, the wounded and betrayed revolution is unable to save Yemen from this fate. Nor will the Gulf Initiative that tried to give the ailing regime a facelift, and which was followed by the quick ascension of the Houthis to fill the void through a constitutional declaration that shifted the power monopoly from the Ahmar circle to the Houthi Ansar Allah circle.

The question now is: What is the likelihood of Egyptian-Saudi military intervention? And if it happens, how likely is it to succeed?

Can Chapter VII of the UN Charter and an international military coalition prevent the disintegration of the Yemeni state? Or would it lead to the same fate of Libya and Iraq that became fragmented, and then jihadist and radical groups gained power after NATO intervention. One could even hypothesise that the dictatorships of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi were child's play in comparison to what is happening in these countries today.

COSTLY INTERVENTIONS: Before recent developments in Yemen, namely the Houthi power grab, Egypt's leadership strongly warned against luring the Egyptian army into battles outside Egypt's borders. It limited its cooperation in the international coalition against ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) to intelligence cooperation, diplomatic and logistical support, and the possibility of training and arming units of national armies without sending Egyptian ground troops or direct participation in combat missions.

Cairo was aware that despite their military capabilities, the leaders of the coalition did not send ground troops to the operations theatre and confined themselves to air strikes, limited support to local units, and extensive media and diplomatic mobilisation while waiting for the arrival of token troops to take souvenir pictures and get credit for victory if ISIS is defeated.

More importantly, Cairo was aware that calls for Egyptian military intervention might be a trap to attrition the Egyptian army in battles that would be difficult for even local armies to win, similar to the losses US and Russian armies suffered in Vietnam and Afghanistan. These wars, despite differences in combatants and beliefs, are like fighting phantoms that carry out hit and run operations; there is no stage of operations or battlefield to fight, unlike with regular armies.

Also, conquering land does not carry much value for combatants who can quickly withdraw and return with swift strikes, and disappear among locals for protection and expand the lines of confrontation with higher losses among civilians during the pursuit of fighters in residential areas. Jihad leader Ayman Al-Zawahri described this type of war as a “dog and flea war”, meaning that a small but skilled flea can jump and slowly suck the blood of a large dog, eventually bleeding him dry, forcing him to leave the area.

In short, it is difficult to carry out interventionist wars in the face of irregular forces, unlike confronting regular armies, such as in Desert Storm or Shock and Awe in the presence of the Libya and Iraqi armies.

More importantly, Egypt’s previous intervention in Yemen in the 1960s — as an extension of the Egyptian-Saudi conflict at the time — and its support of the Yemeni revolution did not have a good outcome, especially for Egypt. A large ground presence by Egypt beyond its border in Yemen encouraged Israel to attack Egypt in the absence of a major contingent of its armed forces. This led to the 1967 defeat, which had a greater impact than what is claimed that Egypt gained in Yemen.

There was also the issue of the terrain Egypt was fighting on and the forces it was battling, which did not give the Egyptian forces any combat experience necessary for the main battle Gamal Abdel-Nasser was preparing for against Israel. The episode ended with Egypt withdrawing from Yemen and Egyptian-Saudi reconciliation later, and accepting Resolution 242 recognising Israel’s right to exist inside safe recognised borders.

It would be difficult to repeat the Egyptian experience in Yemen. What Egypt could do is participate in air strikes or provide intelligence to allies.

Also, Egypt may find it beneficial to support a state in South Yemen, to secure Bab Al-Mandab Straits and the security of the Red Sea.

SMOKY MOUNTAIN: Saudi Arabia’s experience with the Houthis is not much different, during what is known as the Smoky Mountain War, even though the latter were weaker and less equipped than they are today.

The mountain, southwest of Al-Khobah in Al-Hareth province, in Jizan region in southwest Saudi Arabia, is about 100 kilometres outside Jizan City. The Smoky Mountain range borders Saudi Arabia and Yemen, covering an area of 14 square kilometres and towers 500 metres above sea level and 250 metres over its surroundings. From these mountains, Houthis launched battles that moved inside the Saudi border and caused losses among border guards. Saudi Arabia was unable to declare victory against these irregular combat units, and there were even reports that Houthis stopped the war after Saudi Arabia paid a ransom demanded by Houthis.

Saudi Arabia realises that getting embroiled in extensive wars inside Yemen would be difficult, and may deplete its strength.

Perhaps this overall Saudi-Gulf understanding explains why they approached the Security Council to apply Chapter VII, military intervention and economic sanctions.

CHAPTER VII: If approved, the Gulf proposal for international military intervention may speed up the fragmentation of Yemen rather than hold it together. Under the cover of Arab League proposals, US invasions took place, as did NATO strikes and military operations that resulted in the dismemberment of Iraq and Libya, as well as decimated every country where foreign intervention occurred. These interventions only brought destruction to the region.

There is reason to believe the US administration is not disturbed by the Houthi ascension to power, and that Washington is comfortable with the path Yemen has taken as it moves along the plot of a new Middle East where countries have devolved into primitive ethnic, religious, sectarian, doctrinal and tribal components through “creative chaos”, assisted by domestic elements of weakness bolstered by thrusts from abroad. It is attractive because it is a better alternative to strangling revolutions, and transforms the main battle against injustice, hegemony and tyranny into a branch conflict as societies return to their primitive identities.

In the past, the US administration did not want a ground invasion of Yemen for the same reasons as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and thus limited itself to intermittent drone strikes against Al-Qaeda leaders. If developments are moving in the direction it wants, why would Washington embroil itself there?

Whatever happens, whether there will be Arab or international intervention, Yemen will never return to what it was and will remain unstable for some time. The biggest danger it faces is a Houthi-Al-Qaeda war that annihilates everything in its path and leaves formerly happy Yemen miserable, grieving and destroyed.