



Ressort: Politik

A forgotten war

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Yemen has the shape similar to a rectangle and it is a very poor country, located on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. It shares its entire northern border with Saudi Arabia and its entire eastern border with Oman. From 1962 until 1990 there were two Yemeni states: in the north, the Arab Republic of Yemen, governed in a despotic way by Ali Abdullah Saleh, in the southern part the People's Democratic Republic

of Yemen, ruled by a Marxist regime. After the unification, which took place in May 1990, in the south several citizens were active participants in the movement for political independence, and still today these movements continue to act against the central government.

In 2012, in Yemen the protests generated by the so called Arab Spring broke out and President Saleh was forced to leave power after thirty years. A civil war between the Shiite Houthi rebels of Shiite faith - minority in the country - and pro-government Sunnis started.

In 2015, under the umbrella of the Arab coalition, Riyadh launched an intervention in the attempt to prevent what it traditionally perceived as its backyard from falling into the hands of Iran-allied Houthi rebels, as well as from becoming a hub for terrorist groups. Saudi Arabia became increasingly active in the Red Sea and in the Horn of Africa over the last ten to fifteen years with the aim of establishing an economic, political and military presence. This strategy has been driven also by the war in Yemen and the need to protect the Bab el-Mandeb. At the moment in Yemen there is a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran and Saudi Arabia has engaged local elites in East Africa in a money-for-loyalty scheme.

It is since 2015, that the conflict in Yemen has attained a regional dimension, with the intervention of a multinational military coalition marshaled by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and some Gulf countries, in support of the government forces against the rebels officially called "Ansar Allah".

The rebels control the capital San'a and much of northern Yemen while President Hadi and his government are established in Aden. What is considered a forgotten war by the international community, has seen, for weeks, the rebels defend themselves from the offensive of the coalition led by the Saudis on the port city of Hodeida (Al-Hudayda).

Hodeida, a place on the Red Sea in the east of Yemen, houses a fundamental port, from which ships loaded with goods and humanitarian aid arrive. The city has become a real humanitarian emergency, on top of the diplomatic efforts of the United Nations and the international community. Efforts that have achieved a

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success in Stockholm, with the ceasefire agreement on Hodeida reached between rebels and government during the first peace talks promoted by UN special envoy Martin Griffiths.

The opponents in Yemen are in fact Iran and Saudi Arabia, in a dangerous game of regional power that confronts the Sunni world with the Shiite one, with all the severe consequences for the region.

Located in a strategic geographical position for the region, the Yemeni Republic faces east on the Red Sea and in the southern part on the Gulf of Aden, that mirror of sea from which all the oil tankers pass through the Persian Gulf.

More than 3 years after the start of the Saudi bombing and the clashes between Houthi rebels and government forces, the Yemen battlefield counts thousands of deaths and a humanitarian crisis that mainly involves children. 22 million people need humanitarian aid, including 120,000 children who risk starvation, as reported by Save the Children.

The Houthi are Shiite Zaydis, a very special sect of Shi'ism that makes up about 35 percent of the Yemeni Muslim population: for a long time Zaydis and Sunnis prayed in the same mosques and married to each other.

In addition to the food crisis and war, Yemen is living also in the paradoxical situation of being a harbor of migrants arriving by sea from the Horn of Africa in an attempt to reach the Gulf countries. 150 thousand, according to the World Organization for Migration: numbers that make Yemen one of the countries with more internal and external refugees. After the involvement of the multinational coalition in support of the government, now the real players in the arena are recognizable.

On the one hand the Shiite world, headed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which finances and supports - albeit unofficially - the Houthi rebels; on the other the Saudis always mentors of the Sunni universe. In the middle of this catastrophe, there are strategies of power that have nothing to do with theology and the doctrine and concern only power and zones of influence.

The Saudi monarchy entered the scene to support President Hadi not only because of the expansion of Shiite Houthi, who arrived to control half of the country. Riyadh was extremely frightened by the reverberation that the Yemeni affair could have had on the Shiites distributed in the region.

Shiites consider Teheran the only shield for those who have always been a minority in the Islamic world. There's a fracture between Shiites and Sunnis, also capable of destabilizing the Middle East because Iran and Saudi Arabia are more and more perceived as primary references for Shi'ism and Sunnism respectively. The Saudis consider security the main reason for their intervention in Yemen: in addition to the long border that they share with Yemen, the problem is linked to the fact that a strengthening of the Yemenite Shiites could strengthen the Shiite minority that is found in some eastern parts of Saudi Arabia, and that periodically challenges the power of the Sunni monarchy.

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In the Islamic Republic of Iran, Shiism is the state religion. The highest institutional position is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for almost 30 years. The homeland of Sunnism, the Saudi Kingdom, houses in its borders the sacred places of Islam: Mecca and Medina, place of birth and death of the Prophet Muhammad.

The cohabitation between Sunnis and Shiites in the countries of the region is difficult, with the Sunnis representing 85% of Muslims.

This difference has its roots in 632 AD, year of the Prophet's death. Those called Sunnis indicated as successor of the Prophet the "Sunna", or the tradition, the companions and disciples of the Prophet. The future Shi'ites, on the other hand, assert that only one of Muhammad's kinsmen can lead Islam, and therefore designate Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. In Karbala, Iraq, in 680 AD, the son of Ali, Hussain, was killed by the Sunnis. It is since then that the paths between the two souls of Islam separated forever, with the Sunnis who became the majority and centralized the political and religious power in their hands.

Waiting for the return of the 12th Iman, Ali's direct descendant, the Shiites decided to be guided by the Ayatollahs, spiritual guides trained in the most important Koranic universities. On the contrary, Sunnis do not rely on spiritual guides. Only the companions of the Prophet, those who have shared his life path and listened to his teachings can hand down the true message. In the midst of a rivalry that has its roots in 632 AD there are regional plots that see Tehran as defender and as ideal for all the oppressed Shiite minorities in the region, including Yemen. Last but not least, there's also the trade in oil and weapons that involves the United States, allies of Saudi Arabia and adversaries of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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