

Yemen: A Battle for Energy Supremacy

Written by Ashay Abbhi

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ASHAY ABBHI, MAY 23 2015

The never-ending turbulence in the Middle East has reached an all new dangerous level. While yet another country has fallen victim to a civil-war-turned-cold war, another has almost kneeled in front of the Western powers. Yemen has become the latest addition to the great game, which is likely to give more power to the US that it could have imagined. Even as Iran, one of the last countries in the Middle East to have stood up against the United States, is in talks about a nuclear-based alliance with them, its actions in Yemen point a suspicious finger at its intentions. Iran and the US are entangling themselves into what seems like a proxy-war in Yemen, the motive behind which, I argue, is energy supremacy.

The US has recently become the world's largest oil producer, owning nearly 46% of the global oil reserves, directly or indirectly in the Middle East. Proponents of the Hubbert's peak oil theory^[1] may argue that the age of oil is limited. But, if there is one country in the future, given the present circumstances, to have enough supplies of oil to feed its industries and keep its cars running, it is the United States. What started as a 'war on terror' has strategically become 'energy-colonialism'. What began with one country has now engulfed a complete region, with no end in sight.

Perhaps, the Taliban in Afghanistan deserved to be stopped. Perhaps, Saddam's purported WMD program in Iraq deserved to be stopped. Arguably the interventions in Syria, Egypt, and Libya too were perhaps necessary. Regardless of the justifications that were cited, all of these would serve as case studies of this form of 'energy-colonialism' in libraries all around the world.

But Yemen's situation takes a curious diversion from Washington's modus operandi. While the US was directly present in all of the above mentioned escapades, Yemen has not been as lucky. In a clever manoeuvre, the Saudi forces lead the intervention against Yemen to restore Hadi's status as President. This would accomplish two important things.

Firstly, ever since the Saudi King died, speculations about a weakened throne were rife. With monarchies feeling feeble around the oil-rich country, a show of strength and an act of dominance was necessary to deter not just external but internal defectors as well. Case in point is the recent armed Shiite uprising in the Al-Qatif region by rebels associated with Iran. While Saudi Arabia is the undisputed leader of oil production in the region, has the power to influence OPEC's decisions, oil prices, and monitors rogue members, the fear of the 'Arab Spring' has loomed large over the Saudi palace. A military intervention would silence the rebels in Saudi Arabia against the Kingdom and create a sense of dominance in the region's political circles.

Secondly, the US has acquired an image of being the big brother with a stick in the region. Washington stepped back this time, though, because of changing political landscapes, shifts in allegiances, and the increasing public opinion against its war-mongering ways. But Yemen's importance for the US is enhanced by its location, being a gateway into Africa for the US forces. Keeping 'control' of Yemen, the US will be able to check the insurgency in the pirate-infested waters of Somalia. Also, it will give it a vantage point against Al-Shabab, the terrorist organization that has been on the US radar since 2008.

Yemen's importance for the US is further enhanced by its strategic location on the world's fourth most important oil route, Bab-Al-Mandeb. This is a chokepoint between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, from where

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Europe, Asia, and the US received 3.8 million barrels of crude oil per day in 2013. The rebelling Houthis have recently captured a military base near the bottleneck, sparking fears of a possible choking of the passage which also leads tankers from the Persian Gulf into the Suez Canal or the Suez-Mediterranean pipeline. Iranian naval ships have also reached the strait, to counter the Saudi-Egyptian coalition fighting the Houthi rebels. The US-allied forces led by Saudi Arabia will have to offset the Iranian influence in Bab-Al-Mandeb to gain control of the passageway which will give it direct or indirect command over almost 70% of the world's maritime oil trade. Two of the three largest oil trade routes: Strait of Malacca and Suez Canal are already under control of the US allies, while the Strait of Hormuz continues to elude the United States. With Bab-Al-Mandeb, the United States will gain unprecedented power over the energy-hungry world by achieving control of majority of the global maritime oil trade.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have turned Yemen into a political arena, which has become part of the great game, with the seat ultimately going to either the US-Saudi coalition or Iran, thus shifting the balance of power in the region significantly. Even though Iran claims that it has not so far intervened, and will not intervene militarily in Yemen, behind the scenes arms exchange has been strengthening the Houthi rebels to take on the Saudi forces.

Being in Saudi Arabia's backyard, Yemen's strategic significance cannot be emphasised enough. Any instability due to an Iran-backed government would jeopardise Saudi national security. For Iran, Yemen is the hostage that will help them negotiate geopolitical terms with Saudi Arabia, and in turn with the United States. However, with Iran being gradually reeled in by the US with the lure of a nuclear deal that will help lift sanctions, its position against the Saudis in Yemen might go against it. The United States might use the sanctions card to coerce Iran to leave Yemen alone, thereby practically serving it to the Saudis on a silver platter.

For now, Yemen is the amphitheatre where the gladiators will fight each other for the coveted prize of significant amount of resources, clout, and strengthened political will. Regardless of whether the Iran-backed government is placed at the centre or the Saudi/US-backed President Hadi resumes power, the puppet show will continue no matter who stands in the audience.

Notes

[1] Hubbert's peak oil theory suggests that conventional oil production in the US had peaked at around 1970, and has been declining since. Extending this theory for global oil, it suggests that the global conventional oil production would be peaking around this time, only making it scarce and increasingly expensive from here.

About the author:

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