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## THE YEMEN WAR:

# How Saudi Arabia is losing grip of the royal egos

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***Saudi Arabia seems to slowly lose grip of its allies in the Gulf, and it is getting more evident in the war in Yemen. What started as a matter of a few months' time and a strategic win for the new Prince turned into a headache for the Saudi monarchy. The country is losing the war against the Houthi insurgents day by day, but is also having a hard time holding the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) together, as well as continuing to persuade the West on its mission against Iranian influence in the region. Saudi Arabia remains as the head of the coalition in Yemen, while the rest of the GCC countries are pursuing their own agendas and pushing for their own views on the region's stability. In the meantime, soft powers within the GCC, such as the Kingdom of Oman, move forward as a new, soft, temperate player and Qatar wins the PR war against the Saudis in the West. The Yemen war seems to be the place where Gulf political elites exercise their clout for regional prevalence.***

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## **The UAE: keep your friends close but your enemies closer**

Within the GCC, the United Arab Emirates remain Saudi Arabia's closest ally but have separated themselves from the goals of their coalition in Yemen and have eventually turned against it. The UAE support the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) in south Yemen against the Saudi-backed government, and have befriended local Salafi militias in order to achieve their separatist aspirations. The UAE's main goal is to divide the state of Yemen and to control its southern region which holds a number of important, lucrative ports, such as the port of Aden. The latter port has become the Emirati base in Yemen, both militarily but also politically, as the UAE troops entered the city as protectors of the population and liberators of south Yemen.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the Emiratis are pushing their own agenda,<sup>2</sup> all the while maintaining their jointed coalition with Saudi Arabia. The estrangement of the allies could be read as the concealed competition for economic and political prevalence within the GCC between the two Princes, Mohammed bin Salman of SA and Mohammed bin Zayed of the UAE.<sup>3</sup> The current political leadership in the two Kingdoms seems to be posing additional challenges, as their new Princes are willing to relinquish the soft power that the older Kings were trying to reinforce. Both Princes seem to enjoy each other's collaboration but are willing to impose their Kingdoms as economic powers and forces of stability in the area, as well as gain Western support in order to do so.

## **Qatar's shadow play**

The Kingdom of Qatar has been mingling with Yemeni politics since 2004, when the Houthis first made their appearance. Qatar benefited from the disequilibrium that the new political power brought to Yemen and chose to support them ethically and militarily against the President of the country.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, Qatar tried to maintain good relations with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, and joined the GCC coalition for Yemen during 2015 which supported the official government, in spite of its agenda. Nevertheless, after the well-known embargo and the expel from the coalition in 2017, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates accused Qatar of supporting the Houthis and parts of the Al-Islah party, and therefore backing during all this time the geopolitical ambitions of GCC's rival, namely Iran. The country never officially admitted its ties with the Houthis and still denounces the accusations, while claiming no geopolitical plans in the war.

Since the embargo, the country tried to present itself as the protector of the Yemeni people's will and applauded the USA for their call for a ceasefire, as a part of a bigger PR war in the West against Saudi Arabia. Qatar also took an extra step and accompanied the governments of Switzerland and Sweden during the United Nations peace talks in Geneva where it offered \$20.000.000 for the alleviation of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, through the Qatari Fund for Development (QFFD) and joined the Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan.<sup>5</sup> The GCC countries still claim that Qatari funds such as the above are only targeting areas controlled by Houthis and that the country's focus on the humanitarian crisis is a cover for its geopolitical interests.<sup>6</sup>

## **Oman's soft power**

Oman, a traditional neutral power, is taking steps in order to strengthen its presence in the area as a peacemaker,<sup>7</sup> while it has alienated itself from Saudi Prince Mohammed's strategies in the Gulf. The Kingdom not only kept a low-key role during the assault against Qatar and helped the country out of the embargo, but it also took massive steps for solving both the Iranian nuclear deal, as well as facilitating the strategic alliance of the Gulf countries with Israel. In the West, Oman presents the image of wanting

to distance itself from the rivalry against Iran and of focusing on the long-term interests in the area by creating a lasting peace, rather than preserving the rivalry. Oman seems to be also approaching another prestigious Arab country and GCC member, Egypt, in order to press for the ending of the Yemen conflict and to promote regional security.<sup>8</sup>

Oman has been directly impacted by the war in Yemen. The two countries share a long border as well as some cultural similarities within their neighboring areas. Therefore, the Kingdom is afraid of the reverberations of the war in Yemen. Its Sultan, Qaboos bin Said al Said tries to act as a mediator for Yemen in a diplomatic way not very common for the Gulf countries. His diplomacy is considered the Kingdom's way of showing its disapproval of the bloodshed that SA and the UAE are causing in Yemen and of acting as a counteract in the Gulf. For instance, Oman refused to join the military campaign in Yemen, by calling on its constitution which forbids external military intervention, unless it is requested by the UN.

Generally, the fellow GCC countries do not seem pleased with Oman's stance towards the Yemen war, as they call it "a negative neutrality", implying that Oman presents a soft diplomatic front, only to cover its allegiance to Iran.<sup>9</sup> Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have accused Oman of openly supporting Qatar and of helping Iran to smuggle weapons to Yemen through its borders, an opinion also expressed by the USA.

Yet, the three GCC countries have further conflicting geostrategic plans for Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are eyeing the territory of Mahrah in southern Yemen, in which they placed military bases in order to infuse separatist ideas. Mahrah fulfills the Emirati plans for the independence of southern Yemen but the excuse for the invasion was to stop weapon smuggling from Iran. While there is no clear reason for the presence of troops as the area has no Houthi militants, the cities of Mahrah are under siege by the UAE troops and its proxy, the Southern Transitional Council. Nevertheless, the population and especially its tribes' leaders are trying to avoid participating in the civil war at all costs and seek humanitarian and financial support from the Omani side. The area not only borders Oman but also bonds culturally, politically and economically to the Kingdom.<sup>10</sup> Oman, from its side, wants to protect the bordering area and prevent it from joining the war, and seeks to maintain the healthy economic and political exchange with the governorate.

## **The role of the new generation of Princes in the GCC**

As the antagonism between the Gulf kingdoms intensifies, the GCC crisis seems to be taking place over Yemeni land. At this point it is quite evident that it is the new generation of Princes in the Gulf that has generally placed the coalition in danger, as the Kingdoms are fighting for prevalence and influence through their proxies in Yemen. Saudi Arabia's primacy among the GCC is being endangered, and, for the time being, the Kingdom is incapable of holding the coalition together and of fulfilling the members' demands on security against Iran. In the meantime, the Kingdom has set the example for political organization for the other Gulf monarchies to follow. The notion of "the Gulfification of the Arabs" has become popular among the ruling elite in Abu Dhabi.<sup>11</sup> They claim that for the rest of the Arab world to succeed, they need to follow the model of the Gulf monarchies – forgoing democracy and popular representation in return of providing financial prosperity and security, in both internal and international affairs.

Therefore, the rest of the Kingdoms will have to present themselves as frontrunners in international affairs and offer a new approach for regional stability or form new bilateral relations within the GCC in order to serve their interests. The organization of the GCC lacks the proper mechanisms for absorbing the tensions created by the royal egos, further maintaining the crisis, even with the absence of the Qatari Kingdom from the coalition.

It is of great importance that Qatar's new role was also reprised following the inauguration of its new prince Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who claims a reinforced but moderate role in the Gulf,

juxtaposed to the Saudi raw strength. The new Emir seems to generally favor Arab movements towards change and has bonded with Western allies upon calls for moderate liberalization and peace, often through Qatari media. The Prince views Saudi Arabia's embargo as a move towards its state's sovereignty and has declared that Qatar will not be "a follower state".<sup>12</sup>

From his part, Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, who started as Saudi Prince advisor and protector, seems to be enjoying the part of the junior partner in Gulf politics, but, as mentioned above, has his own geostrategic views on the area, which include his Kingdom as the pivotal country. Despite the underlining antagonism between Prince Bin Zayed and Prince Bin Salman, the two Princes are ready to bypass the GCC organization if it remains that much of a burden and to focus on a new one which will only include the two of them. While the conflict in Yemen continues, MBZ and MBS will hold themselves together, at least until it's time to divide the spoils of the war.

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