

In-House Seminar

**YEMEN CONFLICT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH
WEST ASIA WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON PAKISTAN**



May 19, 2015

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The Strategic Vision Institute Islamabad (SVI) organized an in-house seminar on “Yemen Conflict and its Implications for South West Asia with special focus on Pakistan” held on May 19, 2015. Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), honored the discussion as the Guest Speaker. Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema, President SVI, welcomed the distinguished guest and the audience.

Expressing his views on the Yemen crisis, Amb. Khalid Mahmood sketched out a brief history of the conflict that highlighted the major actors as well as motives in the conflict. Discussing the background of the conflict, Amb. Mahmood presented demographic facts and figures of Yemen which has an area of 527,829 square kilometers with a population of 23,833,999 of which 40% is Houthis, belonging to the Zaidi Shia sub-sect. He added that in modern history, the area has been under the Ottoman and British rule. Shias of South West Saudi Arabia (Najran and Jizan Provinces) were once the part of huge and powerful Shia kingdom. It has only been the part of Saudi territory since 1934 when the Saud family had obtained the area on lease for a term of 20 years; however, was never returned to Yemen.

The internal strife in Yemen is nothing new but endemic since 1926. The original root causes of the conflict are socio-political due to an extremely tribal society. Currently, it is being perceived as part of Saudi-Iranian rivalry; an unfinished Arab spring, having Sunni-Shia sectarian animosity, now engulfing the entire Middle East. The recent history shows that military intervention in Yemen has not been fruitful. Egyptian intervention in Yemen from 1962-1967 in support of socialist military officers against new Shia ruler, Imam Badar approved to be a fatal disaster when Egypt had lost about 25000 soldiers.

The most recent crisis arose when an Operation ‘Decisive Storm’ led by Saudi Arabia with the participation of a number of GCC member countries (minus Oman) including some regional countries (Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco and lately Senegal) was launched at the request of the Yemeni President, Mansoor Hadi, to provide immediate support by all necessary means to protect Yemen and its people from the aggression of Houthi militias backed by Iran. In other words the ‘Operation Decisive Storm’ aimed at restoration of the constitutional and political legitimacy in the country represented by President Hadi and his government. Amb. Mahmood pointed out the question that whether the operation was decisive or preventive in nature? Discussing the views of the coalition countries, Amb. Mahmood noted that “In the view of coalition countries, Houthis control of Capital Sana’a, their repeated assault on Aden, and efforts to gain control of Bab-el-Mandeb Strait constituted a coup d’état. It was the failure of international community represented by the UNO that compelled the Arab League and GCC to find a solution to the crisis on invitation by the President Hadi for intervention.

Analyzing Saudi Arabian strategic concerns, Amb. Mahmood noted that on their part, the Saudis felt that the military exercises conducted by the Houthis near its border and the perceived support they enjoyed from Saudi Arabia’s regional rival, Iran, constituted a direct threat to their country and other GCC member states as well. Historical enmity between Yemen and Saudi

Arabia dates back to the pre-Islamic era when Ethiopian Governor of Yemen Abraha's made a failed attempt to destroy Khan-e-Ka'ba, an episode recorded in surah Alfeel of the Holy Quran. He pointed out that, in November 2009, the Houthis had attacked Saudi territory, and that the ill-conceived US military interventions of last decade have enabled Iran to enlarge its influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and now Yemen, virtually encircling Saudi Arabia. The Arabs further fear that the conclusion of incipient Nuclear Agreement with Iran will further embolden it; resulting the greater Iranian influence in the region. Therefore, the coalition countries considered their action as a defensive war rather than interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign country.

Participants of the seminar were agreed that the goals of Operation Decisive Storm are to deter Iran; stop Houthis advances; restore legitimacy of Yemini state institutions; and to force Houthis to the negotiations table in accordance to the principles agreed upon by the Yemeni parties under the GCC initiative signed in Riyadh in November, 2011. Discussing the legitimacy of the Operation Decisive Storm, participants agreed that it derives legitimacy from:

1. Article 51 of UN Charter
2. The 1950 Joint Arab Defence Treaty: All Arab states are committed to helping member country, which is under threat or attack, by all means including military means.
3. GCC Defence Strategy (2009): It calls for joint defence cooperation among all the member states.
4. Formal request for help by the legal President of Yemen.

Furthermore, the Coalition action has been endorsed by the UN Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015), adopted under Chapter VII of UN Charter, passed on 14 April, 2015. The Security Council has demanded that all parties in the embattled country, the Houthis in particular, should immediately and unconditionally end violence and refrain from further unilateral actions that may be threatening for the others. The Council also demanded that the Houthis should withdraw from all areas seized by them during the latest conflict, relinquishes arms seized from military and security institutions, ceases all actions falling exclusively within the authority of the legitimate Government of Yemen and urged the full implementation of previous resolutions by the Council. Acting under chapter VII of the UNO Charter, the Council also called upon the Houthis to refrain from any provocations or threats to the neighboring States. It also demanded that the Houthis should release the Minister for Defence, all political prisoners and individuals under house arrest or arbitrarily detained, and end the recruitment of children for violent activities. UNSC also imposed various sanctions including a general assets freeze, travel ban, and arms embargo on Houthi rebels. The resolution called upon all the Yemeni parties to abide by the Gulf Cooperation Council with other initiatives for peaceful settlement and to resume the United Nations-brokered political transition in Yemen.

After covering the comprehensive account of the Yemen conflict the Guest Speaker discussed the implications of the conflict for Pakistan. He said that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have a history of close brotherly ties marked by thick and thin mutual support. In 1969, Pakistani

pilots flew Saudi jets to thwart Yemeni incursions into the kingdom and throughout the Cold War Pakistani troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia. Pakistani troops were again stationed there in 1991 during the first Iraq war. The fact that Saudi Arabia has been bankrolling Pakistan in its time of need that some two million Pakistanis are gainfully employed in Saudi Arabia who are source of US\$ 14 billion. Therefore, Saudis take it for granted that Pakistan shall always join Saudi led coalitions. In fact, Saudi Arabian government declared its military intervention in Yemen, in a very hasty manner without proper consultation with Pakistan. Therefore, were jolted due to very high expectations when Pakistan refrained from getting directly involved into the military adventure. Discussing the reasons that why Pakistan refrained from direct involvement into the conflict, he considered that Pakistan military does not want to commit troops at a time when its own resources are severely at stretch especially in the ongoing Zarb-e-Azb operation. Moreover, Pakistan's relations with India over the Kashmir issue and situation at LoC is also worrisome. Further, Pakistan has been reluctant to get embroiled in sectarian driven geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East, conscious of the fact that it would antagonize Iran. Besides, the destabilized situation along the Baluchistan border with Iran is also amongst the significant reasons. Unnecessary involvement Yemen conflict carries the risk of exacerbating Shia-Sunni violence in the country itself.

The manner, in which Pakistan crafted its response to the Saudi request for participation in the coalition against the Houthis, added worries to the Saudi concerns. Public discussion of Saudi request in the media and its reference to Parliament subjected Saudi Arabia to unprecedented and gratuitous public criticism. On day five of the joint Parliamentary session on Yemen, a resolution was unanimously adopted on April 10, 2015. Implying that Islamabad should refrain from assisting Riyadh militarily, it added that Pakistan should stand shoulder to shoulder with Saudi Arabia to protect the territorial integrity of the Kingdom as well as against any threat to Haramain Sharifain. It further added that the crisis in Yemen could “plunge the region into turmoil”, calling upon the warring factions in Yemen to resolve their differences “peacefully and through dialogue”. The resolution also noted that while the war in Yemen was not sectarian in nature, it had potential of turning into a sectarian conflict and thereby having critical fallout in the region, including within Pakistan. It added that government should initiate steps to move the UN Security Council and the OIC to bring about an immediate ceasefire in Yemen. It urged that Muslim Ummah and international community to intensify their efforts to promote peace in Yemen. The provision which caused much controversy said that Pakistan should maintain the neutrality in Yemen Conflict so as to be able to play a proactive diplomatic role to end the crisis.

In the Q&A session, the participants of the seminar appreciated the endeavor of SVI in arranging the seminar. The audience of the seminar also actively participated in the session and raised the important questions pertaining to shift in the political landscape of Middle East and South Asian region. The participants of the seminar were agreed on Pakistan's stance on the Yemen crisis. Pakistan wants a peaceful resolution of the conflict and expresses unequivocal

support for Saudi Arabia and affirms that in case of any violation of its territorial integrity or any threat to Haramain Shahrifain, Pakistan will stand shoulder to shoulder with Saudi Arabia and its people.

At the end of the seminar, Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema President /Executive Director Strategic Vision Institute (SVI), thanked the honorable guest speaker and the participants of the seminars for finding their time to be the part of this seminar and appreciated their spirit to work for the national interest of Pakistan. He concluded the seminar by saying that Yemen Conflict has become highly significant variable in the contemporary debate on regional security, and Pakistan should take rational decisions by keeping in mind its national interest.