

The Russian Role in the Yemeni Crisis:

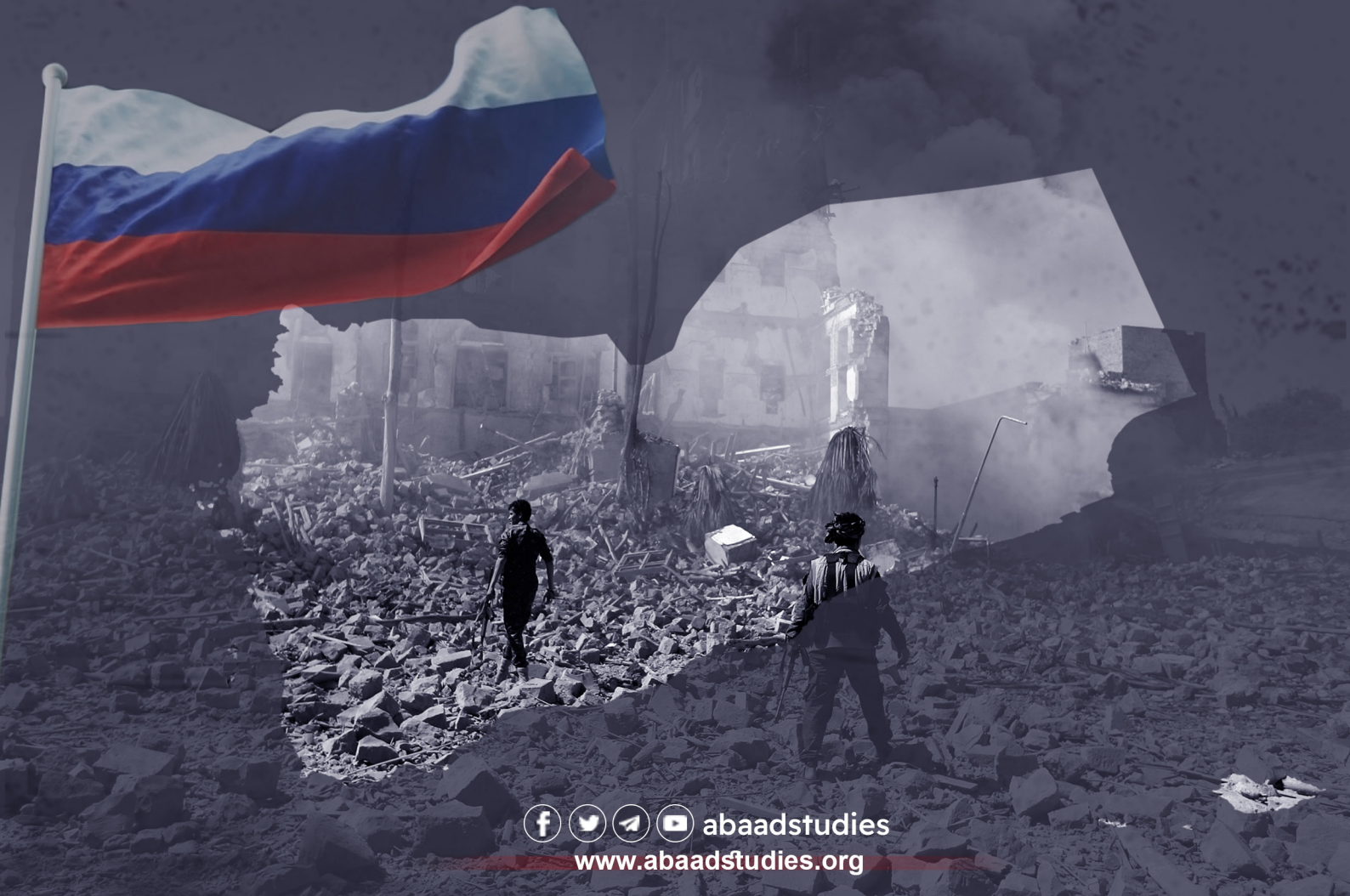
Incentives and Obstacles

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Summary

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia undoubtedly lost a great deal of its geopolitical legacy. Yemen was an important axis of this legacy in the Arab Gulf region. Indeed, it was the only country in the Arabian Peninsula, prior to the declaration of unification of northern and southern Yemen in 1990- which had close relations with Moscow. Both the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) and Yemen Arab Republic (Northern Yemen) had relations with the USSR. However, the Russian loss of this legacy was short-lived, and Russia returned to the international scene as an active player in many regional and international issues under the administration of President Vladimir Putin. As the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the United States in the Middle East intensifies, Yemen acquires additional importance in Russian foreign policy. This was evident in Moscow's active diplomatic moves regarding the Yemeni issue recently.

This study highlights Russia's role in and position towards the Yemeni political crisis. The significance of the study derives from the fact that the conflict in Yemen has not yet ended. Although the China-brokered regional reconciliation between Tehran and Riyadh last March, with the active assistance of Russia, resulted in what could be described as freezing armed confrontations between the Houthis and legitimate Yemeni government forces. However, without commencing an intra-Yemeni political dialogue based on the three internationally recognized references, it will be difficult to predict the exact outcomes of the crisis in Yemen. Therefore, it can be said that only a resolution based on the legitimacy of restoring the Yemeni state and ending the causes of conflict will be the litmus test that reveals the reality of regional reconciliations in a complex region.

Introduction

Since the early 1960s, the Middle East has become the most troubled and unstable region in the world. The two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, pursued conflicting policies in the Middle East. Each of them viewed the region as a strategic asset, where a defeat or retreat could mean disturbing the balance of international politics.¹ The Middle East was never stable or secure.

For example, in the 1980s, the Iraq-Iran war broke out, and in 2003, the American-British coalition launched a military invasion of Iraq to overthrow the regime of the Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein. After 8 years of the American invasion of Iraq, demonstrations and mass protests in the Arab world (the so-called Arab Spring) began. In this regard, it is generally held that the Arab Spring began in 2011 with the fall of the regime of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Ironically, however, according to K. Vladimir Pavlovich, a researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the "Arab Spring" began in 2004, with the inception of the armed rebellion of the Houthi group since the rebellion of this group was directed against the legitimate Sunni government in Yemen. Later in 2010 a truce was concluded between the two parties, but in the following year hostilities were resumed even more fiercely. ²

Yemen turned into a theater of proxy war in which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran were engaged. Iran supports the Houthi rebels who fight the legitimate government in Yemen³ and seek to restore the Zaidi Imamate that was ended by the revolution of September 26, 1962 in northern Yemen. A broader view of the region clearly reveals that Iran has been increasingly involved in the events taking place in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. This led to tension of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, especially as relations between the two countries have always been complex and even hostile, as each of them claims a leading role in the region, but the open confrontation between the two regional powers can simply lead to the explosion of the entire region. ⁴

Russia realistically deals with Middle Eastern issues of international and regional proportions on the basis of its political and economic interests. Yet, in the case of the Yemeni crisis and the Russian role in it, Russia's interests in the Arabian Gulf must be taken into account since Russia employs military and technical cooperation and economic relations to secure its growing geopolitical influence in this region. During the first decade of the 21st century, Russia renewed its rapprochement with the Arab Gulf states. This rapprochement was based primarily on mutual economic interests. In 2011, the so-called "strategic dialogue" between the Arab Gulf states and Russia was launched.

Since its inception, the annual summit of this event has witnessed many hot debates. The second conference, which was held in Riyadh in 2012, witnessed a sharp debate on the Syrian issue and because of the assessments of the Arab Gulf states of the Syrian question. As a result, the conference was not held in the following year. According to Elena Suponina, advisor to the director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, and a specialist in Asian and the Middle Eastern affairs, despite the differences in views, there is mutual understanding on many issues. One can notice that despite the divergent views on specific issues, the Arab countries have valued, with steadfast respect, the weight of Russia in the system of international relations⁵ and its strategic interests with Iran. In this context, it is important to refer to the Treaty of Basic Principles of Cooperation between the Russian Federation and Iran, which was signed by Presidents of the two countries, Putin and Khatami, in March 2001 in Moscow and entered into force on April 15, 2002. Some articles of this agreement state that the Russian-Iranian dialogue is based primarily on similar views about the concept of a multi-polar global order and the consolidation of cooperation. Article VI of the treaty states that the two parties will work to enhance the development of long-term and mutual relations in order to implement joint projects in the fields of transport and energy, including the use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes.⁶ However, in 2010, Moscow voted in favor of the UN Security Council resolution, which imposed sanctions on Iran, in exchange for cancelling previously imposed sanctions on Russia.⁷ Then, Washington paved the way for Moscow to join the World Trade Organization.

Back to the Yemeni issue, Russia has important interests in Yemen. In addition to the geopolitical importance of Yemen, Russia seeks to secure the flow of oil on the southern border. Besides, there are the many commercial contracts in the fields of arms sales, mining and other sectors, which had been signed by the Russian and Yemeni governments before the Houthi coup against the legitimate authority in September 2014. Elena Suponina stated that she spoke with former Yemeni President, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, during his visit to Moscow in 2013, and that the Yemeni President valued Russia's support for the Gulf Initiative 2011, which provided for a peaceful transfer of power in Yemen.

It was also important that this was reflected in many UN Security Council resolutions on Yemen that were adopted unanimously,⁸ as well as those resolutions that Russia supported in the Security Council. Going back to the "Declaration of the Principles of Friendly Relations and Cooperation" signed in 2002 by Sana'a and Moscow, this agreement included cooperation in the areas of culture, science, education, sports and tourism. There was also the Agreement for the Mutual Protection of Investment. These agreements created a solid basis for cooperation between the two countries.⁹ According to the Kremlin statement released after concluding the talks between former President of Yemen, Ali Saleh, and Putin, the Declaration of Principles of Friendly Relations and Cooperation reflects in particular the similar views of the two countries towards many global and regional issues, including non-acceptance of the unipolar model of the global order, fighting religious extremism and terrorism, and the close views on the settlement of regional conflicts.¹⁰ Many researchers in international relations believe that Russia's huge resources and geographical location make it the only power capable of creating a new political breakthrough in the face of globalization by creating a Eurasian-Continental alliance.¹¹ This was confirmed by Russian strategic expert, Alexander Dogin, in his book *The Geopolitical Future of Russia*. Therefore, the geographical proximity of the region to Russia is one of the most important factors contributing to an influential Russian role in the Arab world.

Chapter One: The Political Crisis in Yemen

The Houthi Coup

In January 2015, the conflict in Yemen escalated sharply. The Houthi rebels seized the presidential palace in Sana'a. President Hadi and his government in Aden announced general mobilization.¹²

In March of the same year, the Houthis occupied Taiz, the third largest city in Yemen, and made their way southward in an attempt to control Yemeni legitimacy.

A crisis can be defined as a sudden attitude in which relations between two or more parties move in the direction of confrontation in an escalatory manner as a result of an existing conflict of interests and goals, or because a party acts in a way viewed by the other party as a threat to its vital interests and values, and hence requires a quick countermove.¹³

Therefore, the Yemeni crisis can be defined as a continuous political and military conflict. On September 21, 2014, the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, fell to the Houthi group, a sectarian and extremist military group backed by Iran in northern Yemen. Widely known as the "Houthis," the group calls itself "Ansar Allah." In an accelerated scene of the stages of the conflict, the Houthis established the so-called Revolutionary Council and imposed their control on the North Yemeni provinces. They became the de facto authority in most of the governorates of northern Yemen, but the group was unable to obtain recognition at the international level represented by the superpowers, nor was it able to win the recognition of the United Nations, or even regional recognition, with the exception of the recognition of its backers in Iran.¹⁴

After this coup, Hadi called on the United Nations and the Arab Gulf states to "urgently intervene" in order to "stop the aggression by all possible means and support the legitimate government." Responding to this appeal, several countries led by Saudi Arabia intervened by announcing the formation of a military alliance under the name of "The Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy" and launched a massive military operation that included air strikes that targeted Houthi sites and camps.

When dealing with the Saudi intervention in the Yemeni conflict, it is evident that Saudi Arabia acted on the request of former Yemeni President, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, to achieve a specific goal; namely, to "restore the legitimate authority" in the Republic of Yemen. However, according to experts, Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Yemeni conflict was motivated by other incentives, the most important of which are summarized in the following.

Firstly, Saudi Arabia was much concerned about a similar rebellion on its territory by the Shiite Saudis. The Houthi rebellion soon became a direct source of instability in Saudi Arabia itself. According to Alexei Fenenko—a leading research fellow at the Institute of the Problems of International Security (Russian Academy of Sciences), Riyadh was afraid that a similar scenario might be reenacted in Saudi territory, especially as the Shia constitute 14-15% of the country's population and had actually come out against King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz during the so-called Arab Spring revolutions.¹⁵

Since the Shiites in Saudi Arabia do not have any legal representation in power, it is unlikely that they are content with the status quo. Rather, they will try to create problems for their government as much as they can. Therefore, Riyadh fears the start of their contact with Iran, which has increasingly indicated in recent years that its weapons exceed the armies of other countries in the region.¹⁶

Secondly, Yemen's oil and location: Yemen owns Aden Oil Port which is one of the most important ports in the region. This port comes at the heart of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, and represents the key to the transit of hydrocarbons in the Middle East. In addition, Aden is the way to the Red Sea through which oil supplies pass to the Suez Canal. There are also the oil fields in northern and southern Yemen. According to Diana Malishvia, professor of political science and leading researcher at the Center of Problems of Transforming Political Systems and Cultures at the Moscow State University, "the natural wealth and the unique strategic location of Yemen explain the increasing interest in this country by regional and global powers, all of them, to one degree or another, are trying to benefit from the internal Yemeni conflict." ¹⁷

This is confirmed by the orientalist and expert at the Russian Council for International Affairs, Kirill Simionov, who believes that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has its own views on Hadramout and Al-Mahra through which the oil pipelines can be extended to the ports of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, bypassing the insecure Straits of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, and ensuring the export of Saudi oil to the Far East and Southeast Asia.

Back again to reviewing the Yemeni conflict after the fall of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, in the hands of the Houthi rebels. On November 29, 2017, clashes erupted between the Houthi rebels and supporters of former Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, using heavy machine guns. On December 2, Saleh announced the termination of his alliance with the Houthis, only to be killed in an attack by the Houthis in his home on the 4th of December. The Iranian Fars News Agency released a video showing the Houthis carrying the body of Saleh in the back of a car in blood-stained clothes. ¹⁸

Drawing a conclusion from the above review of the stations and motives of the conflict, we find that the conflict is essentially linked to Iran's expansionist agenda in the region. Of course, this does not mean that Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not have their own agendas in this conflict. The goal of Saudi Arabia was to weaken the Houthis so that they would not be able to create future problems on its southern borders, whereas the UAE sought to weaken the forces that supported the popular youth revolution in Sana'a in 2011. Iran's goal, on the other hand, is clearly to form a Shiite government absolutely loyal to it in the west bank of the Arab Gulf region.

Given the consequences and outcomes of the conflict, the past years of the war have shown that the image of the Saudi-led Arab Coalition has been severely affected. Despite the promises of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to continue the fighting, the cost of the military operation brought about a perilous gap in their budgets, especially during the years that witnessed a sharp decline in oil prices. Moreover, the war in Yemen was too far from the ease that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi expected for many reasons, including the voluminous contradictions that arose between the two countries after launching the military operation, in addition to the complications of the Yemeni scene, and its changing alliances and overlapping with many regional and international issues. Moreover, air strikes and the maritime blockade were not sufficient to completely defeat the Houthis. Nor were they as decisive as an extensive land operation, which would have contributed to the defeat of the Houthis on the ground. In fact, such a land operation would have been the best option, especially in view of the size and influence of the forces opposed to the Houthi coup d'état and control of the capital city. However, the calculations of both parties of the coalition and the conflict of their agendas prevented this. Followers of writings about the war in Yemen in the Russian electronic space come out with the conclusion that many of these readings often confirmed that the armies of the Arab Gulf states had a much lower combat capacity than expected.

One of the readings that may seem to be somewhat odd, especially in the part related to Iran's participation in this conflict, is the statement made by Sergey Serberov- an expert on Yemen and a researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, to Putin Today website. According to Serberov, "it is crucial to know that Iran is not a party to the conflict in the Yemeni crisis. Talking about its participation is nothing but a slander to cover up the reality of the aggression against Yemen. Although there is in fact an internal division in Yemen, there are different warring factions between 'North' and 'South', and Saudi Arabia is trying to deepen this division in order to divide the country again for its own purposes." According to the Russian expert, "the most important factor of inciting the conflict is the supplies of Western weapons that constitute the fuel for this conflict. The American and British interests are clearly evident in this ongoing war. Yemen is the gateway of the Mediterranean to Europe and is the key to the security of the entire Arabian Peninsula. In addition, from a demographic point of view, it is a great giant in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, and has a great historical and cultural weight in the Arab civilization."¹⁹

Chapter Two: Russia's position towards and role in the Yemeni crisis

Before proceeding to explore the position and role of Russia in the political crisis in Yemen, it will be necessary first to briefly highlight Russian-Yemeni relations in a historical context. The visit of the Russian scientist, Bogoma Fernsky, who was delegated by the University of Moscow to conduct scientific research in the Arabian Peninsula, was perhaps one of the most prominent stations in the history of relations between the Arabs and the Russians. He was received warmly in Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in March and April 1902.²⁰ Fernsky's mission was carried out during the Caesarean era. As for the Soviet era, the starting point in the process of establishing direct contacts between the Arabs and the Soviet government was the meeting of Georgy Chicherin with the representative of the Kingdom of the Hijaz, which resulted in the establishment of the Soviet diplomatic mission in the Hashemite Arab Kingdom in Jeddah in 1924.²¹

It is believed that this mission was the first official USSR mission in the Arab countries. Relations between the Soviet Union and pre-1990 north and south Yemen and then between the Republic of Yemen and the Russian Federation from 1990 onwards, and after the establishment of the Russian Federation following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, went through several stages.

A more detailed view of Russian-Yemeni relations will be presented in the following sections.

I. Description of North Yemen-USSR relations

The First Phase: 1928-1955

During this period, relations between the Soviet Union and the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen (northern Yemen) were established. This stage of relations was characterized by common hostility towards Great Britain. During this period the first Soviet-Yemeni Friendship and Trade Treaty was signed.²² However, during this stage, Yemen is depicted negatively by the Russian diplomat, M. G. Astakhov in his book *Memoirs of a Russian Diplomat*. According to Astakhov, during this stage, Yemen still lingered in the Middle Ages, and was frozen in the feudal system. Moreover, Yemen was deprived of any potential to develop due to its poor internal conditions, as the imam was the Islamic Pope, to use a Christian analogy.²³ Astakhov was the head of the Soviet delegation in the Yemeni-Soviet talks in Sana'a in November 1928.

The Second Phase: 1956-1964

During this phase, relations between the Soviet Union and the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen began to develop. Prince Muhammad Al-Badr (Yemen's Crown Prince at the time) visited the Soviet Union. During this period, political and military relations became of the utmost importance. The Soviet Union initially refused to help the Republican forces in their battle against the royalists. In his book, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, former Russian official, Yevgeny Primakov,²⁴ stated that Moscow never disdained relations with the royal Arab regimes. It not only dismissed ideological considerations from its relations with the Arabs, but also the Soviet Union never participated at any time or in any way in any works that aimed at changing the royal regimes in the Arab world. The Soviet Union adopted the logic that changing socio-political structure could only take place when an internal explosion emerges from within, rather than when it is imported from the outside. In other words, it takes place only when there is a revolutionary situation. This condition is determined by the inability of the masses to endure the ancient regime. However, in the same book, he added that Moscow could not watch without showing any concern that the progressive change in Yemen is subject to a real threat from the forces that are supported by external powers. It supported Egypt generously, not only at the political level, but also provided it with military transport vehicles. Then, a new logic emerged; namely, to support Nasserist Egypt, which turned more towards the Soviet Union after the collapse of the unity with Syria.²⁵

The Third Phase: 1964-1970 (after the revolution against the imam and the creation of the Yemen Arab Republic)

A new friendship and cooperation treaty was signed between the USSR and the Yemen Arab Republic. In 1964, Yemeni President, Abdullah Al-Sallal visited the Soviet Union for the first time after the September 1962 revolution. Primakov states that the Yemeni leader, Al-Sallal, who led the revolution against the monarchy was the chief of the crown prince's personal guard, that he was chained up in a deep pit, and that his food was thrown to him.²⁶ Other points he mentioned in his book relate to the opportunity he had to visit Yemen as a correspondent of Pravda. after the monarchy was toppled, and how he saw in Yemen as an astonishing mass of contradictions. According to him Ideas that sprang from the unstoppable stream of technological and cultural developments halfway across the world would reach Hodaidah,

Sana'a, and Taiz as a faint trickle, but nonetheless lay the groundwork for the republic that it would become. The most important example of such contradictions is the royal life of the imam in his Taiz palace. Primakov was able to visit the imam's room where he kept his personal belongings that no one was authorized to touch. He recounts: "Ahmad was evidently a great lover of clocks, for the walls were covered with them. But for all the sound of ticking and striking clocks, the imam was deaf to the changing times." Among the other possessions the Russian journalist also saw in the palace were two pistols loaded with blanks. They were placed on a table in a small office. They were used to give the starting signal to sports competitions. The imam used to pretend to shoot himself with them in the presence of his guards to prove to them that no bullets could harm him. There were also a screen and a projector as the imam used to watch a movie every day, while at the same time forbidding his subjects from watching movies.²⁷

The Fourth Phase: 1970-1978

This phase witnessed the deterioration of relations, especially as the Yemen Arab Republic drew closer to Saudi Arabia and Western countries.

The Fifth Phase: 1978-1990.

This phase witnessed improvements in relations between the Soviet Union and the Yemen Arab Republic, after Colonel Ali Abdullah Saleh's came to power in northern Yemen. During this phase, the Soviet Union signed a military agreement with the Yemen Arab Republic that included a billion Rubles worth Soviet arms sales to Yemen Arab Republic in 1981, despite the hostility of north Yemen to the Moscow-aligned People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.²⁸

II. Description of relations between the Soviet Union and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen).

Relations between the USSR and the PDRY can be can be classified into three phases, as follows.

The First Phase: 1967-1978

During this stage, diplomatic relations were developed between the PDRY (Southern Yemen) and the USSR. The Soviet side provided much economic assistance to Southern Yemen.

During this stage, the PDRY "had won independence under the leadership of a revolutionary group whose aim from the outset had been the creation of a socialist society." According to Primakov, both during its fight for independence and in its plans to build a new state, the leading force that emerged was committed to scientific socialism. This could not fail to kindle hopes within the Soviet Union that an Arab country would join the socialist camp, and that that country would be the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. These hopes were not to be realized. The methods used to build socialism and put it into practice in the Soviet Union and elsewhere could not survive the society's demands and vested interests. ²⁹

The Second Phase: 1978-1986.

During this stage, political, military and economic relations between the two countries evolved.

The Third Phase: 1986-1990.

Relations between Southern Yemen and the USSR somewhat stagnated for political and economic reasons, especially with the beginning of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the colored revolutions, as the Russians dubbed them, in the countries of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe.

Third: Description of relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Yemen

The history of modern Russian-Yemeni relations begins with the formation of the Russian Federation and the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The Republic of Yemen, which emerged out of the unification of northern and southern Yemen, was declared in May 1990. The Russian Federation was officially recognized as a legal successor to the former USSR. ³⁰

Based on all of the above, we can conclude that Russian-Yemeni relations were well-established and strong, and reflected a long history of cooperation and partnership. At the current stage, relations between the two countries are promising and friendly.

Russia's role in solving the Yemeni political crisis

When the political crisis started in Yemen, Moscow did not take sides with any party and chose to stay neutral.³¹ It did not stop contacting the legitimate authority in Yemen, represented by former President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. In this context, it is important to cite the statements of former Foreign Minister of the legitimate Yemeni government, Abdulmalik Al-Mikhlafi, during his visit to Moscow and his meeting with his Russian counterpart.

He stated that "Yemen appreciates the balanced Russian position regarding conflicts in the region." He explained that Russia "did not interfere in our internal affairs, and Russia is always committed to this position in its foreign policy. We, in Yemen, appreciate that. In addition, Russia is still committed to international law." He added that Russia had maintained its relations with the legally elected Yemeni government. In addition, Al-Mikhlaifi indicated that Russia supported Yemen in political and humanitarian issues, adding that there were changes at the level of political interaction and cooperation according to previous agreements.³² Russian diplomacy also established close relations with other major players in the country, primarily with former President Saleh and his party, the General People's Congress (GPC), as well as with the Houthis. Despite the escape of the government of former President Hadi to Saudi Arabia and the beginning of the turbulent stage of the conflict, Russia remained the only main international player that continued to run its embassy in Sana'a, before moving to Riyadh after the killing of former President Saleh by the Houthis in late 2017. The Russian embassy in Riyadh established relations with Hadi and his government. Russia also held consultations with various political parties in Yemen, such as the Socialist Party and the GPC.³³ Russia also held consultations with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and with the Southern National Coalition. It is true that Russia has not been assigned any leading roles in the international efforts in the Yemeni peace process comparable to the size of the Western role and influence in Yemen. However, before the war and the coup against the Yemeni state, Russian diplomats in Sana'a worked within the framework of the Ten Ambassadors Group, which expanded later to become the Group of Eighteen.

According to Sergey Serberov, an expert on Yemeni affairs and the leading researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia has proven to the Yemenis its commitment to compliance with international law, respect for sovereignty and rejecting the scenarios of neocolonialism. This approach helps it start positive contacts with all major local actors in Yemen without exception, a point which could constitute a key to resolving the entire crisis.³⁴ Since the inception of the military intervention led by Saudi Arabia in March 2015, Russia has not changed this approach even in light of developments in the Yemeni issue, including the killing of former President Saleh, who had promised the Russians in a meeting with Russia 24 in 2016 to open Yemeni airports and ports to combat terrorism, which the Russians understood as a clear indication of the possibility of building a Russian military base in Yemen.³⁵

To understand this state of neutrality, it is important to refer here to the remarks of former Russian Foreign Minister and former Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, in his well-known book, *The Hidden and known Middle East*. Primakov visited Yemen more than once, the first of these visits was during the period of conflict between the Republicans and the monarchists in the 1960s. Primakov says: "One story well illustrates the Yemenis' attitude to Russians and other people from the Soviet Union: A group of Soviet geologists working a few kilometers from Sana'a ran into a band of armed pro-Badr tribesmen. When the tribesmen realized they were Russians, they not only let them go in peace but also had mercy on their bodyguards—who were republicans—warning them: you'll have us to deal with if you so much as lay a finger on the Russians."³⁶

Given the nature of the Russian relations with the parties to the conflict in Yemen in recent years, a single change can be identified. It has occurred after the killing of former President Saleh. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, described what the Houthis have done as an extremist act and contributes to undermining the possibility of stability in Yemen. He added that the assassination of Saleh was aimed at obstructing the efforts to move towards a peaceful settlement of the situation in the country.³⁷ This was followed by moving the Russian diplomatic mission from Sana'a to Riyadh.

According to Raslan Muhammadov, a researcher at the Arab and Islamic Studies Center, the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russian role lies in Moscow's effort of somewhat reducing tensions with Saudi Arabia on the Yemeni issue, while maintaining a multi-channel approach. It continued to work with all the parties in the crisis at various levels, and called for intensifying political dialogue, but it seems that Moscow has not supported its diplomatic endeavors with any practical measures on the ground due to the limited resources and the priority of other areas in foreign policy.³⁸ However, the Russian International Affairs Council, in a report, demanded the Russian government to seize the opportunity to enhance its political and diplomatic presence in Yemen, justifying this call with the change of all the main contours of the Yemeni crisis. The report envisioned three scenarios for the future of the conflict in Yemen, all of which indicate that the crisis will continue unabated and the political and humanitarian situation will deteriorate further unless, according to the first scenario,

a powerful and acceptable external party acceptable to all parties to the conflict—in an implicit reference to Russia—interferes. The second scenario is to end the military operation of the Saudi-led coalition on a reasonable argument without approving a plan for a comprehensive settlement of the crisis under international supervision. In this case, external parties will primarily use the tools of their internal influence, and the situation in Yemen can turn quickly from a mixed war to a civil war, fraught with dangerous consequences for the whole region.³⁹ Moscow realizes that if it can give credibility to these aspirations by facilitating and mediating an intra-Yemeni dialogue, and resolving the conflict in Yemen, it will be able to consolidate its position as a diplomatic equal for the United States in the region. Moscow's desire to get involved in the Yemeni issue, which is viewed as a strategic area of influence, is reflected in statements by Russian officials, including statements by the Deputy Director of the African Department at the Russian Foreign Ministry, Oleg Azarov at the Valdai Meeting in Sochi, which was held under the theme "Russia in the Middle East: A player in all areas). He said, "Russia and the Western countries can cooperate in a fruitful manner in resolving the Yemeni crisis for the benefit of the Yemeni people, who deserve a better future, especially as the volume of contradictions between Russia and the West is less in the Yemeni file."⁴⁰

The question that arises is: are these contradictions in the Yemeni file between the West and Russia still limited in light of the repercussions of the geopolitical fight between the West and Russia on the Ukrainian front, on the energy front, and on the fronts of influence and control in Africa?

Kirill Simionov, an expert in the Russian International Affairs Council, was more realistic when he said: "Russia seeks to enhance its reputation in the role of mediator in several conflicts, and it can exert an effect in Yemen to push the two sides to sit at the negotiating table in the context of its endeavors to obtain a permanent military base in the Red Sea coast, like several other countries that have military bases in Bab al-Mandab strait."⁴¹ Therefore, it can be said that "Moscow's desire to work as a mediator in Yemen increases as a result of increase in strategic interests and aspirations of the regional situation. The main strategic interests relate to Moscow's desire of benefiting from Yemen's location and expanding the scope of its partners in the Middle East," based on the principle of economic pragmatism it adopted in its foreign policy since the beginning of the rule of President Vladimir Putin for its foreign policy is no longer based on ideological principles or factors.

Although Yemen's strategic importance to Russia declined after the end of the Cold War, the place of Yemen in the southern Arabian Peninsula, especially along Bab al-Mandab strait at the entrance to the Red Sea confirms its importance to Moscow as evidenced by Moscow's power calculations in the Middle East.

In 2009, TASS News Agency reported that Russia decided to establish naval bases in Libya, Syria and Yemen.⁴² Russian decision-makers believe that a successful mediation in the Yemeni file will help strengthen economic partnerships with its Gulf competitors in the energy market, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and will strengthen its relations with Iran as it may open the way for the implementation of its initiative for collective security in the Arab Gulf region. It will also constitute a response to Western propaganda, which depicts Russia as a rogue state that seeks to spread chaos in the Middle East. Russia depicts itself above all as a stakeholder committed to preserving collective security in the Middle East. Russia's vision for Yemen is to form a coalition government led by a strong man. It also seems that Russia considers the Yemeni conflict as an opportunity to present mediation skills to the international community, especially since Russia's approach to resolve the Yemeni crisis calls for taking into account the interests of all parties to the conflict.⁴³ "In his visit to Moscow in July 2019, and in his conversation with the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, former UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, called for "the mutual consideration of the interests of the conflicting parties." Lavrov affirmed his support for the efforts of the UN envoy, "We are still convinced that this is the only way to achieve the long-awaited peace and stability in Yemen."⁴⁴ The same position was repeated by the Russian minister with the new international envoy to Yemen during its visit to Moscow in early 2023.

Russia as an external mediator in the Yemeni settlement

The inclusion of Russia as a leading international power at a later stage in external mediation efforts in the Yemeni settlement may prove advantageous to it on several counts:

First, it will enhance Russia's position as an active political player in the region, capable of contributing to the effective settlement of crises from the point of view of a neutral mediator. According to the concept of Russian foreign policy in 2016, Russia is working hard to enhance the operation of the international system and resolve conflicts within the framework of the United Nations and seeks to enhance the role of international law in resolving conflict.⁴⁵

Second, the success of Russian diplomatic efforts in any upcoming Yemeni political settlement between the legitimate government and the Houthi rebels will allow Russia to correct the image of Russia as the Shiite's ally that has emerged among the Arab public due to Russia's special relations with Iran, and that Russia in many cases looks at some issues in the Arab region— including the Yemeni issue— "through Iranian lenses".

Third, this will help to strengthen the image of Russia as a peacemaker on the international arena, and will contribute to discrediting the Western practice of distorting the reputation of the Russian Federation.

Fourth, Russian mediation and the active Russian diplomatic interaction regarding the Yemeni crisis can turn into a valuable resource for advancing Russian-Saudi relations and can contribute to the convergence of positions on regional affairs, especially in view of the cold relations between Riyadh and Washington.

In conclusion, it must be said that Russia plays an important role in resolving the political crisis in Yemen that has been going on for about 9 years. It turns out that the Russian Federation calls for building constructive measures to overcome the Yemeni crisis. Russia believes that in order to mediate a peace treaty between the two warring parties, it is imperative to take into account the interests of all parties to the conflict. The Russian interest in the Yemeni issue and the call for an intra-Yemeni dialogue that takes into account the interests of all actors achieve several goals for Moscow.

1. Such cooperation can strengthen the position of Moscow in a country that has been viewed as a strategic location since the Soviet era. We need not talk about the geopolitical importance of Yemen. Rather, it is sufficient to state that Yemen overlooks the main commercial routes from the Red Sea via the Gulf of Aden to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Russia considers stability in southern Yemen a prerequisite of achieving its goal of obtaining a sphere of influence in the Red Sea. After the independence of former Southern Yemen from the British occupation in 1967, the USSR supported the new Yemeni state economically and politically. This facilitated using the Yemeni island of Socotra, located off the Somali coast at the entrance to the Gulf of Aden by the eighth "Indian" operational squadron of the Soviet Navy. Moscow hopes that those days may return. The Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow described the Yemeni island of Socotra as the ideal place to build a Russian base in Yemen,

as Moscow bets that a potential base in southern Yemen will be its important gateway to exercising influence in the Horn of Africa.⁴⁶ In October 2008, the Chairman of the Russian Federation Council, Sergey Mironov, visited Yemen and held talks with the Yemeni leadership on the establishment of a military base on the Red Sea coast in the future, but the instability that followed the overthrow of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012 impeded any further discussions or implementation of this place.⁴⁷

2. It will give Russia the opportunity of practicing some pressure on Saudi Arabia, with which Russian relations over the last two decades have been, euphemistically speaking, cold for good reasons. Therefore, Moscow is well aware that the Saudis are very concerned about the situation in their country, which is "close to Yemen." For Moscow, it will be quite reasonable to consider the potential options for creating pressure tools on "new friends," especially as Riyadh's approach is linked to the changing pattern of Washington's policy and the change of US administration. At least, this is the way demonstrated by the Houthi accounts, and perhaps by the most influential powers behind them.

Conclusion

In a changing world, Moscow's allies shall not necessarily be the enemies of Washington, and vice versa. Cooperation between Russia and the Arab Gulf states and Iran depends on their common interests, but it is unlikely that Moscow will change its geopolitical priorities and end the firm and successful cooperation with Iran— a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization— for the sake of rapprochement with the Arab Gulf states. At the same time, Russia is much irritated by Iran's exaggerated sectarian tendency in the region, despite the consensus of and disagreements between the two countries in relation to the Syrian file. Besides, the current international moment, after the Russian special operation in Ukraine, endows the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, with the ability to maneuver with the West and reduce the strong American influence on its foreign policy, which has been a prevalent feature during the past decades. The diversity of the sources of power in the world is very important because it gives a large margin of independence to Washington's traditional allies in the region; and this is exactly what Putin's Russia strives to achieve. The Russian vision is based on the principle that it is crucial to build a multi-polar world. This moment, according to the Russian thinker and philosopher, Alexander Dugin, is decisive in the history of the international order, and the transformations that will come after it are not the same as those that came before it.

Given the events that followed this process, evidently the Arab Gulf states have benefited from doubling their incomes from oil, and from increasing their stocks of securities in investment funds due to price increase. So, these countries have maintained a balanced policy with Russia regarding the reduction of production of oil and Russia necessarily benefited from maintaining its superiority in the battle of energy with the West, a battle that is no less important than the battles fought at military fronts with NATO in eastern and southern Ukraine. By contrast, cognizant of the West's need for energy resources, Iran made it clear that it was necessary to go back to the nuclear deal and that the sanctions imposed on it should be lifted, which means returning to the energy market at a high production cost, an approach that entails weakening Russia's position in its energy war with the West.

In this context, it is important to refer to the statements of the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov. As reports were of an imminent agreement between Tehran and Washington in Vienna flooded the media, he stated that Russia wanted a written guarantee from the United States that Russian trade, investment and military and technical cooperation with Iran would not be affected by the he sanctions in any way. This prompted Iranian officials to state that Russian demands aimed to ensure Moscow's interests in other areas and that such demands were "unconstructive". The Iranian News Agency, Tasnim, reported, while keeping its source confidential, that by postponing the revival of the agreement between Iran and the Western powers and delaying the return of Tehran to the global oil market, Russia sought to raise prices of crude oil and increase its energy revenues.⁴⁸

All the arguments of this study point to a general idea around which the Russian role in Yemen revolves; namely, that Russia looks at the Yemeni file from the vantage point of its interests with the regional powers in the region. Russian foreign policy is no longer based on the ideological option in its approach and relations with countries in the region as it had been in the past. Russia today assesses its role in the Yemeni file carefully due to the regional characteristics that have appeared in the Yemeni scene. Undoubtedly, it will have to take into account its partners in OPEC and in many investment files, as well as its interests with Tehran. It also focuses on the importance of creating balance between the power centers in Yemen as that would ensure pushing towards establishing joint negotiation platforms among all Yemeni parties to form a government of national unity. Russia can then return to activating cooperation agreements between the two countries and resume the arms sales and investment contracts that are still in force in accordance with the provisions of international law.

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