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YEMEN CRISIS – THE LEGACY OF ALĪ ABDULLAH ŠĀLIḤ

Summary

Yemen is witnessing what is often described as the worst humanitarian crisis in the World. Even in the past, it was usually considered to be the poorest Arab country, but the problems dramatically escalated since the beginning of the Saudi-led intervention which started in March 2015.

Alī Abdullah ŠāliḤ ruled the country between 1978 and 2011, but in the following years he returned on the political scene and once again became a very important figure in socio-political life of Yemen. On 4 December 2017, ŠāliḤ was assassinated by a group called Anṣār Allah thus opening a new chapter of South Arabian politics.

This paper gives the review of ŠāliḤ's policy from the beginning of his presidency until his death, with a goal to explain his contribution to the creation and escalation of the ongoing crisis in Yemen. It is based on the results of two field studies, interviews as well as on the comprehensive analysis of pre-existing studies on this topic.

Keywords: Yemen, ŠāliḤ, politics, crisis, Salafism, Zaydi Islam, tribes

INTRODUCTION

With its stunning mountainous landscape, vast scorching deserts and coasts along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, Yemen, once home to prosperous pre-Islamic kingdoms such as Sabea, Ma`in, Himyarite, Hadramawt etc, today is often regarded as one of the most fragile and failed states in the World. On 25 March 2018, the devastating war in Yemen, which left thousands of people dead, entered its fourth year.

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Along with the death and devastation, as its direct consequence came a full-scale famine followed by an epidemic of cholera in summer 2017.

On 4 December 2017 Yemen's former president Alī Abdullah Ṣāliḥ, who ruled the country between 1978 and 2011, was killed by Anṣār Allah, in an incident that briefly positioned Yemen in the center of the World's attention. Even though he resigned from the position of president in 2011, Ṣāliḥ remained a central figure on Yemeni political scene until his death. Having this in mind, the author intended to focus this paper on the person of the former president. Through four key points, this paper will argue that Ṣāliḥ's unscrupulous and opportunistic politics designated him as one of the main protagonists of Yemen's fall into political and humanitarian abyss.

In the research, the author relies on the pre-existing studies and media sources in English, Arabic and Serbian language, as well as on the results of two field studies performed in 2006 and 2009 in Yemen and numerous online interviews conducted between 2011 and 2018.¹

1. PRE-ṢĀLIḤ YEMEN

Yemen is considered to be a country with by far the strongest tribal influence among all Arab states as its whole territory is tribally divided and some tribes, particularly the northern ones, have been playing a prominent role in socio-political life of the country for centuries. Another characteristic typical only for Yemen is the presence of Zaydi Islam, a branch of Shia Islam, that was brought to South Arabia in the end of the ninth century by Yaḥya ibn al-Ḥusayn who formed a Zaydi state in 897.² Since then, there was always at least one Zaydi state in Yemen, until 1962.

These states were ruled by imams who claimed their descendancy from the House of Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*) and who rose to power through a public "claim" to the imamate in a widely disseminated

1) The main topic of author's research were developments on Yemeni socio-political scene with particular focus on its different aspects such as Ṣāliḥ's internal policy, Ḥuthī insurgency, tribal system and extremism. Having in mind the fact that working in Yemen demands a high level of cultural sensitivity, most of the interviews were semi-structured, along with some unstructured ones. For the same reason, the interviews were performed only in Arabic and were individual. Most of the interviewed people (approximately 300 of them) were Yemenis, along with several Eritreans and Somalis who lived in Yemen. The more detailed results of the research as well as the scientific methods were presented in author's doctoral dissertation titled "Islamic Reality of Yemen – Cultural, Religious and Political Aspect" (in Serbian), which was successfully defended at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade on 27 September 2016.

2) Marko Gagić, "Ansar Allah – Protectors of Zaydi Islam or a Seed of Sectarian Struggle Yemen", in: *Orijentalističko znamenje – Sećanje na Mariju Đukanović (1923 – 1983)*, (ed. Anđelka Mitrović), Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, 2016, p. 389.

written manifesto³ and needed to be supported by the leading *`ulamā*. But imams did not have a full-size standing army that would secure its sovereignty. Instead, they heavily relied on the powerful tribes who acted as mercenaries. Apart from that, an important element of Zaydi doctrine is *khurūj* or a violent uprising against the tyrant which enabled the tribes to rebel against the imams they considered unjust. So, Yemen's tribes are known for their rebellious nature and tendency to challenge the central authority and are extremely difficult to govern. This is particularly true when talking about two biggest and traditionally most powerful tribal confederations *Hāshid* and *Bakīl* whose territories stretch from the border with Saudi Arabia, across the mountainous plateau of the northern Yemen, to the southern suburbs of Ṣan`ā, which is the birth region of Alī Abdullah Ṣāliḥ.

The former Yemeni president grew up in the village Bayt al-Aḥmar in Sanḥān region. At young age, he served in Imam Aḥmad's army but in 1962 Imam was overthrown which triggered a long civil war in northern Yemen. The goal of the Revolution was to form a republic and was directly supported by Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt. As for the strongest tribes, *Hāshid* and *Bakīl*, they had suffered a severe repression for decades from Imam Aḥmad and his father Yaḥya which is why they intended to use the Revolution in order to reinstall their influence, although throughout the war many tribal sheikhs had divided loyalties.⁴

The war officially ended in 1970 which is when Saudi Arabia (who supported royalists) finally recognized YAR as a sovereign state. At about same time, the southern part of Yemen gained independence from Great Britain. The idea of unification did exist even before 1970, but both countries were somewhat unstable and they opted for dealing with their internal divisions and other issues instead of rushing into unification.

2. PHASE ONE – SETTING THE FOUNDATIONS

The developments in the post-Civil War years showed a clear indication that the military and the tribes would play a key role in the YAR's politics. Not only did its three consecutive presidents Ibrahīm al-Ḥamdī, Aḥmad al-Ghashmī and Ṣāliḥ belong to *Hāshid* tribal confederation, but they all had military background as well. Moreover, trib-

3) Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order – Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen*, London, the British Museum Press, 2007, p. 231.

4) Stephen Day, *Regionalism and rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 90.

al sheikhs held many influential positions throughout the government bodies during the reign of all presidents of the newly formed Republic.⁵ But Ṣāliḥ took it to another level as he promoted his relatives to the key military and security posts.⁶ For example, general `Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar, who has been among the most powerful people in Yemen for decades, is a member of Sanḥān tribe, as well as Ṣāliḥ's relative.

Having done this, Ṣāliḥ created a safe zone around him which surely helped him not to end up like his predecessors, who both got assassinated. Hāshid tribes with their paramount sheikh `Abdullah al-Aḥmar undoubtedly were capable of removing him but Ṣāliḥ too was aware of this and he never really tried to impose the state authority to them. Instead, he opted for developing a patronage network, with local tribal leaders being the main beneficiaries, who, in return, enabled him to maintain an illusion of state sovereignty in the northern highlands.

Similar to the Imamate period, when tribes at times challenged Imam's authority, but were also, according to needs, hired as mercenaries to protect the Imamate (since Imams did not have standing army), they now had means to challenge the state authority and their loyalty was very well paid for. This usage of corruptive patronage politics with a distinctive tribal hue remained one of the main features of Ṣāliḥ's internal politics during more than thirty years of his reign.

In the early years of presidency, he had to engage in a brief border war against the South in 1979 and as well as in a counter-insurgency campaign in the midlands (southern provinces of YAR) against guerilla fighters, also supported by the South, which ended in 1982. Since PDRY was a Marxist state, backed by the Soviet Union, it was not difficult for Ṣāliḥ to mark them as infidels or enemies of Islam⁷ and obtain direct financial and military support from Saudi Arabia and the United States.⁸

This was generally a period of Islamic revivalism, but it happened at the approximately same time as the oil-boom in the Gulf countries when huge number of Yemenis emigrated mostly to Saudi Arabia where they were exposed to Salafī Islam. The combination of these two opened the way for Salafī learning to be successfully spread in Yemen, which is usually associated with Muqbil ibn Ḥādī al-Wādī.⁹ During

5) Paul Dresch, *Tribes, government, and history in Yemen*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 362.

6) Stephen Day, *Regionalism and rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, op. cit, p. 95.

7) Marking his political enemies as infidels, enemies of Islam, terrorists etc. was one of Ṣāliḥ's trademarks.

8) Stephen Day, *Regionalism and rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, op. cit, p. 101.

9) Bernard Haykel, "The Salafis in Yemen at Crossroads – An Obituary of Shaykh Muqbil al-Wādī of Dammaj", *Jemen Report*, 2002, p. 28.

this period, Salafīs built or took over some mosques and gained important positions in government schools.¹⁰

As stated before, Salafī agenda in Yemen was heavily financed by Saudi Arabia, but all these activities were also encouraged and financed by the Government of Yemen through its Ministry of Religious Guidance.¹¹ So Salafī thought was undoubtedly in expansion as well as religious extremism. For example, in 1980 there were only two terrorist organizations in the World with the religious pretext, while in 1992 this number rose to eleven, while today there are dozens of them.¹² And Ṣāliḥ readily embraced Salafism, utilizing it as a useful tool in fighting his socialist enemies.¹³ This trend of fostering the spread of Salafism in Yemen proved itself to be very useful in the short term and helped Ṣāliḥ secure his positions in relation to the South which was weakened by internal conflicts and the developments in the World politics that were not in favor of its main ally – the Soviet Union.

3. PHASE TWO – SPREADING THE NORTHERN HEGEMONY

Uniting the people of South Arabia into a single state was a long-awaited dream for most Yemenis as Yemen was virtually never willingly united until the late twentieth century. The idea of unification started taking shape in the fifties and was inspired by Arab nationalism, but in the late sixties, after the formation of YAR and PDRY it became more realistic.¹⁴ It was postponed since the two countries had to deal first with their internal divisions, but during seventies and eighties they developed in completely opposite ways ending up more different from each other in 1990 than they had been in 1970. Contrary to what Ṣāliḥ did in the North, the southern leadership managed to extend the state authority to the whole country. With the help of the Soviet Union they modernized the military on the Russian model. They also tackled tribalism, controlled the consumption of *qāt*¹⁵ etc.¹⁶ Making these and

10) Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order – Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen*, op. cit, p. 296.

11) Ibid, p. 296.

12) Radoslav Gaćinović, Vladan Stanković, “Fundamentalizam – Fanatizam – Terorizam” [Fundamentalism – Fanaticism – Terrorism], *Srpska politička misao*, 3, 2017, pp. 223-243.

13) More on Salafism in Yemen in: Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity*, London, Hurst & Company, 2011.

14) Marko Gagić, “The politics and Society of South Arabia – A Dream that Turned into a Nightmarish Reality”, *The Review of International Affairs*, LXIX/1169, 2018, pp. 51-69.

15) Qāt is a plant whose leaves have a mildly stimulating effect when chewed. It is consumed by many Yemenis on everyday basis.

16) Noel Brehony, “The PDRY and the South Yemeni Identity”, in: *Why Yemen Matters – A Society in Transition*, (ed. Helen Lackner), London, SAQI, 2014, pp. 123-141.

other steps towards creating a stable political system has never been attempted in YAR.

These differences were one of the main causes for concern among southerners, which was confirmed by southern prime minister Ḥaydar al-`Aṭṭās, who, in an interview in the early days of unity, stated that the Socialist Party would have problems extending the system of the South to the chaos in the North.¹⁷ But the situation in the South was such that they had no choice but to consider some sort of unity with the North. The southern regime was torn apart by the internal divisions which culminated in January 1986 when Aden witnessed heavy intraregime clashes and “was bombarded from land, sea, and air”.¹⁸ Moreover, the Soviet Union rapidly declined in 1989 and was on a verge of collapse and at that time some kind of unity seemed like a reasonable solution to PDRY’s problems, although they did not have consensus about how it should look like.

The unification itself was announced on 22 May 1990. The two sides agreed that Ṣāliḥ becomes the president and Ḥaydar al-`Aṭṭās the prime minister. They also opted for party pluralism which was supposed to enable fair and democratic competition for power. YSP surely saw this as a chance to win certain number of seats in the north, while the southern provinces were expected to remain their natural stronghold. But Ṣāliḥ knew that YSP was by far the most serious political opponent and that its elimination would pave the way for extending his power to the whole territory of the newly formed Republic.

The problems between the two united sides emerged pretty quickly and it did not take long before the situation turned violent. Following a series of moves that undermined the role of the south the tensions in the country rose and during 1992 there were almost hundred assassinations or attempted assassinations of politicians from the south.¹⁹ Most of these assassinations were connected to the extremists who fought in Afghanistan which could be regarded as continuation of the utilization of Salafism by Ṣāliḥ’s regime.

The sentiment of the southerners towards Ṣāliḥ and, as well, towards the pro-Islamist politics, fostered in the north, was clearly expressed in the 1993 parliamentary elections. The elections in Yemen are based on plurality voting in which person with highest number of votes wins. There are 301 seats in Parliament, with 245 members coming from the north and only 56 from the south, due to the difference in pop-

17) Michael Hudson, “Bipolarity, Rational Calculation, and War in Yemen”, in: *The Yemeni War of 1994: Causes and Consequences*, (ed. Jamal S. Al-Suwaidi), Abu Dhabi, Saqi, 1995, p. 18.

18) Stephen Day, *Regionalism and rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, op. cit, pp. 73-74.

19) Ibid, p. 112.

ulation. In the first elections Ṣāliḥ's General People Congress did win the most seats (122), Iṣlāḥ, an Islamist party which is often regarded as the Muslim Brotherhood Yemeni branch, won 63 seats, while YSP won 56. But if we take only the results from southern provinces, we can see that YSP won 41 seats, 12 were won by the individual candidates, GPC won only 3 and Iṣlāḥ did not take a single seat in the south. So, the results themselves spoke a lot and before long the country slid into a Civil War that started on 4 May 1994.

It is important to notice that in this war Salafis and other Islamists played a very important or even a key role thus contributing a lot to the final defeat of the socialists.²⁰ The fact that the south was overrun in the matter of months by the northern army meant that there were no more obstacles that would prevent Ṣāliḥ to impose northern hegemony to the whole territory of Yemen. This would prove to have heavy repercussions to Yemen's political stability, since Ṣāliḥ's suffocation of the strongest southern political movement, as well as his exploitation of the south, created resentments which later reflected in the formation of southern separatist movements, particularly al-Ḥirāk which was formed in 2007.²¹

Formation of another movement that would have a huge impact on Yemen's political scene was also partially provoked by the rise of Salafism in this part of the World. This movement is now called Anṣār Allah and is popularly known by the name Ḥūthīs, which is the name given after Ḥūthī family or, more precisely, after its former leader Ḥusayn Badreddin al-Ḥūthī.²² In the broadest sense, Ḥūthīs are a Zaydī revivalist movement and, to a degree, it was formed as a reaction to the crisis that Zaydī community fell into in the post Imamate period. Encouraged by the successful Iranian Revolution in 1979, Zaydī revivalist groups started to develop during the eighties, which coincided with the spread of Salafism in Yemen. Being a Shia branch, Zaydī Islam stood as an opponent of Salafism whose prominent educational center Dār al-Ḥadīth was located in Dammāj, a town Zaydī heartland of Ṣa`da. This center was led by Muqbil ibn Ḥādī al-Wādī`ī who explicitly called his students to destruct Zaydī shrines and tombs which they did in the mid-nineties.²³ In the same period, Ḥusayn Badreddin al-Ḥūthī spent several years in Iran and Syria, where he got inspired by Iranian

20) Bernard Haykel, "The Salafis in Yemen at Crossroads – An Obituary of Shaykh Muqbil al-Wādī`ī of Dammāj", op. cit, p. 30.

21) Noel Brehony, "The PDRY and the South Yemeni Identity", op. cit, p. 137.

22) Marko Gagić, "Ansar Allah – Protectors of Zaydi Islam or a Seed of Sectarian Struggle Yemen", op. cit, p. 391.

23) Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, Madeleine Wells, *Regime and periphery in Northern Yemen: the Huthi Phenomenon*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2010, p. 92.

political and economic system²⁴ which coincided with the formation of a Zaydi revivalist movement in Yemen, then called the *al-Shabbāb al-Mu'min*.²⁵

4. PHASE THREE – THINGS GOING WRONG

The situation in Yemen became more serious and dangerous in the early 2000s when it got under the spotlight as the Western World and the United States in particular started facing more palpable and severe consequences of their politics of supporting the conservative Islamist groups around the globe. The first of two major events which marked the beginning of troublesome times for both Yemeni president and his people occurred on 12 October 2000 in Aden. On that day the USS Cole, the American naval destroyer, pulled into Aden harbor when two al-Qaida members launched a powerful bomb attack killing seventeen sailors and wounded almost forty others.²⁶

At first, Ṣālīḥ tried to avoid cooperation in dealing with the terrorist cells inside Yemen, since they had quite strong connections with the regime, but following 11 September terrorist attack, Ṣālīḥ had no choice but to join the “war on terrorism”. Since he had genuine fear of potential US intervention in Yemen, Ṣālīḥ promised Bush full cooperation and instantaneously started with deportations and liquidations of extremists while also allowing the United States to perform drone attacks in the country. From many aspects, this could be described as a turning point after which the situation in Yemen started developing in a disastrous way.

Not only did it cause violent reactions from the extremist cells in the country towards regime, but it also resulted in genuine discontent among ordinary Yemenis. The people of Yemen by nature, are not supporters of extremism, but close cooperation with the United States was regarded as betrayal, particularly after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This situation of growing public unrest was utilized by the abovementioned

24) Marko Gagić, “Ansar Allah – Protectors of Zaydi Islam or a Seed of Sectarian Struggle Yemen”, op. cit, p. 392.

25) More on the Ḥūthīs in Aḥmad Dagħshī, *Al-Ḥūthīyūn: al-zāhira al-Ḥūthīya, Dirāsa manhajīyya shāmila: ṭabī‘at al-nash‘a wa-al-takwīn, ‘awāmil al-zuhūr wa-jadaliyyat al-‘alāqa bi-al-ḥārīj, mashāhid al-mustaqbal* [The Ḥūthīs: The Ḥūthī Phenomenon, A Complete Systematic Study: Nature and the Creation of the Phenomenon, Appearance Factors, Dialectics of foreign relations, Future Horizons], Ṣan‘ā’, 2010; Aḥmad Dagħshī, *Mustaqbal al-ḥaraka al-Ḥūthīya wa-subul al-ta‘āyush* [The Future of the Ḥūthī Movement and the Ways of Coexistence], Ṣan‘ā’, 2012; Marieke Brandt, “The Irregulars of the Sa‘da War: ‘Colonel Sheikhs’ and ‘Tribal Militias’ in Yemen’s Huthi Conflict”, in: *Why Yemen Matters – A Society in Transition*, (ed. Helen Lackner), London, SAQI, 2014; Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Huthi Conflict*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.

26) Stephen Day, *Regionalism and rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*, op. cit, p. 195.

Zaydi revivalist movement led by their charismatic leader Ḥusayn Badreddin al-Ḥūthī.

In January 2002, Ḥusayn Badreddin al-Ḥūthī started giving public lectures in which he mostly criticized the United States, Israel and Wahhabism, while also addressing problems inside Zaydi community. Over time, his speeches became more and more fiery which created strong tensions between the group and the regime and it ultimately turned into a violent conflict in the northern regions of Yemen in 2004.²⁷ Ḥusayn himself was killed in the early stage of the conflict, but this only encouraged the Ḥūthī movement to persist in their struggle against Ṣāliḥ's regime. Prior to the so called Arab Spring, Ḥūthīs on one side and Yemeni Army, regime backed militias and occasionally Saudi Arabia on the other, engaged themselves in an armed conflict which, with interruptions, lasted until 2010.

This conflict was multidimensional and apart from political and tribal it also featured a sectarian dimension, since Sunni Islamists, backed by the very influential General 'Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar, were engaged to fight Zaydi Shia Ḥūthīs and even spread Salafī Islam in traditionally Zaydi northern highlands of Yemen.²⁸ It had disastrous humanitarian and political consequences and hugely contributed to general feeling of instability and resentment towards the regime, which gradually increased during the first decade of the 21st century.

In this period, the author visited Yemen two times and performed a series of interviews with Yemenis who were, without exception, very worried about deteriorating security situation and growing tensions caused by constant worsening of the quality of life. Particularly worrying were the indications that Ṣāliḥ intended to transfer power to his son Aḥmad and ultimately destroy Yemen's political pluralism which was already shaken by many irregularities in previous presidential (held in 1999 and 2006), parliamentary (1993, 1997 and 2003) and local elections. Most of the interviewed Yemenis (particularly in 2009) claimed that their country was in a huge need of thorough political changes, but also did not expect Ṣāliḥ to enable holding of fair and democratic elections. Yemen only needed a spark that would turn the accumulated anger and frustration into a mass popular uprising and this spark came in early 2011, simultaneously with protests around Arab World, but unlike the uprisings in other countries, where they came as a surprise, the one in Yemen was actually expected.

27) Marko Gagić, "Ansar Allah – Protectors of Zaydi Islam or a Seed of Sectarian Struggle Yemen", *op. cit.*, pp. 395-397.

28) Marieke Brandt, "The Irregulars of the Sa'da War: 'Colonel Sheikhs' and 'Tribal Militias' in Yemen's Huthi Conflict", *op. cit.*, p. 115.

5. PHASE FOUR – FALL, RETURN AND DEMISE

The first demonstrations during which people called for removal of Šāliḥ occurred on 27 January in Ṣan`ā. Following the demonstrations, Šāliḥ held a speech on 2 February during which he stated that there would be “no extension, no inheritance, no resetting the clock”, claiming that he would not run again for presidency nor that he would transfer power to his son.²⁹ But the peaceful protests, that started as a civic revolutionary movement in which political parties did not participate, continued and eventually became more widespread and long-lasting than the other protests in the region.³⁰

The events that represent one of the key points during the uprising against Šāliḥ occurred on 18 March 2011. The demonstrations scheduled for that day turned into a big bloodshed when more than fifty people were killed and more than six hundred wounded by the sniper fire emanating from the surrounding buildings.³¹ Following this carnage, many powerful figures that had been loyal to Šāliḥ, most notably General `Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar, Ḥāshid paramount sheikh Šādiq al-Aḥmar and Ḥāshid paramilitary forces in general, turned against him and stood with the protestors. It also marked the beginning of what is sometimes referred to as the hijacking or stealing of the revolution, since after that day, institutionalized political actors, such as political parties, joined the uprising thus creating the huge gap between the civic revolutionaries’ ideas and the actual result of this political struggle.³²

And probably the only possible peaceful solution was to reach some sort of compromise with Šāliḥ. On 3 April, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) came up with an Initiative (*al-Mubādara al-Khalījīyya*) according to which Šāliḥ was supposed to leave power in favor of his deputy Abdu Rabbuh Maṣṣūr Ḥādī. The new president would then be voted in the presidential elections, the new Government would be formed, as well as the National Dialogue Conference, a body which would discuss the most challenging issues for the future of Yemen.

29) Marko Gagić, *Islamska stvarnost Jemena – Kulturni, religijski i politički aspekt* [Islamic Reality of Yemen – Cultural, Religious and Political Aspect], Doctoral dissertation, Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, 2016, p. 216.

30) Helen Lackner, *Why Yemen Matters – A Society in Transition*, London, SAQI, 2014, p. 12.

31) Marko Gagić, „Političke promene u Jemenu – revolucija kompromisom“ [Political Changes in Yemen – The Revolution by Compromise], *Politički život – časopis za analizu politike*, 8, 2013, p. 56.

32) Laurent Bonnefoy, “The Shabab, Institutionalized Politics and the Islamists in the Yemeni Revolution”, in: *Why Yemen Matters – A Society in Transition* (ed. Helen Lackner), London, SAQI, 2014, pp. 87-88.

Among other things, the GCC Initiative granted Ṣāliḥ immunity from prosecution, which enabled him to remain in politics, but at that time, signing of the Initiative, with all its compromises, was probably the only option if war was to be avoided as Ṣāliḥ was still powerful enough to resist for some time and drag the country on the brink of a civil war. The widespread armed clashes continued even after 3 June when Ṣāliḥ barely survived an explosion in the presidential mosque³³ after which he left to Saudi Arabia for treatment.

On 23 September same year, Ṣāliḥ abruptly returned from Saudi Arabia leaving many people wondering whether his presence would calm or worsen the crisis in Yemen.³⁴ But two months following his return to the country he finally agreed to sign the GCC Initiative, which he did at a ceremony in Riyadh on 23 November. His deputy and acting president during Ṣāliḥ's absence, a South Yemeni Abyan born, Abdu Rabbuh Maṣṣūr Hādī, reassumed presidency,³⁵ but, as stated before, the signing of the GCC Initiative left many Yemenis frustrated about the fact that Ṣāliḥ did not have to stand trial for the crimes he was accused for. Still, it was mostly regarded as success at that time, since the war was avoided and a new hope that they would be given a chance to build a new country in a peaceful way was given to Yemeni people.

The presidential election held on 25 February 2012 in a way showed that Yemenis do trust in peaceful reforms and better future for their country as voter turnout was quite high (around 65%) even though the ballot was uncontested. The process of reforms and stabilization continued with the preparation and formation of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC – *Mu'tamar al-Ḥiwār al-Waṭanī al-Shāmīl*). It was a transitional body divided into nine separate working groups that discussed the most important issues for Yemen's future, such as the Ṣa'da issue (concerning the Ḥūthī insurgency), the Southern issue, rights and freedoms etc. The NDC was pretty inclusive since all relevant political actors took part in it, including the representatives of *al-Ḥirāk* and *Anṣār Allah*.

During 2013 and 2014 the author had the opportunity to perform a series of online interviews with some politically active Yemenis³⁶ whose feelings about the NDC and the future of Yemen in general could be described as a mixture of cautious optimism and worry. The interviewees were mostly worried about the Ḥūthīs, who showed a

33) It is very likely that this attack was organized from Ṣāliḥ's own circles.

34) Laura Kasinof, Robert Worth, After Four Months, "Saleh Is Back in Yemen", *New York Times*, 2011, Internet, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/24/world/middleeast/yemens-president-ali-abdullah-saleh-abruptly-returns-from-saudi-arabia.html>, 10/04/2018.

35) Sheila Carapico, "Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism", in: *Why Yemen Matters – A Society in Transition* (ed. Helen Lackner), London, SAQI, 2014, p. 39.

36) The names are not mentioned in order not to jeopardize their security.

very rigid attitude, but one particular bitter comment made by a former Islāh local elections candidate stood out from the others since he openly claimed that Šāliḥ was “up to something together with the Ḥūthī dogs”. Apart from the fact that author was aware of his interviewee’s Islamist political orientation and that his comment about the “Ḥūthī dogs” was bitter and possibly biased, his statement was pretty accurate.³⁷

On surface, this coalition might sound awkward and unlikely to happen, but Šāliḥ had a long history of opportunistic and unscrupulous behaviour that earned him the nickname Snake Charmer while his political moves were often described as dancing on the heads of snakes. This time, he wanted to utilize Anṣār Allah in order reestablish himself as a prominent, if not key, political figure in Yemen.

Anṣār Allah confirmed their unwillingness to make political compromises by rejection of some major decisions of the NDC, which ended on 24 January 2014. By that time Anṣār Allah had been in firm control of Ṣa`da Governorate and occasionally in control of parts of the surrounding governorates, but from 2014 they gradually became the strongest political factor in most of the territory that once belonged to YAR. Dissatisfied by the outcome of the NDC, Anṣār Allah allied with Šāliḥ and swept across the country occupying Ḥāshid stronghold `Amrān Governorate in July and the capital Ṣan`ā in September. Following these events, they started off 2015 by rejecting the draft Constitution, mainly due to the proposal for making Yemen a federation of six regions.

Over the next two and a half months, Anṣār Allah, together with forces loyal to Šāliḥ, managed to launch an attack on the presidential palace in Ṣan`ā (20 January) and put president Ḥādī under the house arrest for one month,³⁸ disband the Parliament and form the new Revolutionary Committee (*al-Lajna al-Thawriyya*, 6 February) and finally storm the territory south of Ṣan`ā all the way to Aden which they reached in the month of March.

On 25 March the conflict turned international, when a Coalition of several countries led by Saudi Arabia started aerial attacks on Yemen in order to suppress Anṣār Allah. But the intervention that, at the time of writing, “celebrated” its third anniversary not only proved to be a complete failure from the military point of view, but also is an extremely devastating one. Initially, the Saudi-led coalition had some limited success since it made the Ḥūthīs retreat from Aden and some other regions, but since then there have been no obvious successes for any of the warring sides.

37) Marko Gagić, “The politics and Society of South Arabia – A Dream that Turned into a Nightmarish Reality”, op. cit, pp. 61-62.

38) After which he fled to Aden and then to Saudi Arabia.

Apart from the fact that the intervention has turned out to be ineffectual, it has many other disastrous consequences. The ongoing war in Yemen dramatically worsened the humanitarian situation in one of the poorest countries in the World. The UN reports from April 2017 showed that 6.7 million Yemenis were in need of urgent food assistance.³⁹ Moreover, it was estimated that around 60% of Yemen's population are food insecure which means that Yemenis are literally dying from starvation.⁴⁰ Over series of online interviews conducted during late 2017 and early 2018 it was confirmed to the author that Anṣār Allah regime had become extremely oppressive and that the last salaries had been paid in September 2017. So, most Yemenis cannot afford to buy food or purified drinking water nor do they have means to boil it.⁴¹ Coming as a direct consequence of the war, these extremely poor living conditions, among other things, resulted in the epidemic of cholera in Summer 2017. By the end of March 2018, there have been 1.1 million recorded cases of cholera, while more than 2.200 people died.⁴²

As for the political situation, at the moment of writing, the things were looking very bad for Yemen since the country was torn apart by Anṣār Allah, the extremists, local militias, southern separatists, Saudi Arabia, UAE, USA etc. Moreover, the United States, along with the UK and other countries, keep selling weapons to Saudi Arabia which is highly problematic due to the fact that there are numerous reports of bombs hitting civilian targets. It is hard to say who is to blame for this catastrophic situation, since all the warring sides, both local and international, played their part in its creation. It is a shared legacy of unscrupulous struggle for interest and power and a significant share in it belongs to the most prominent person of Yemeni politics in past forty years, Alī Abdullah Ṣāliḥ.

As stated before, when the coalition between Ṣāliḥ and Anṣār Allah was formed it seemed to be an awkward one, but Ṣāliḥ was well aware of the huge differences between himself and the Ḥūthīs and he certainly believed that he was able to handle them and ultimately turn things in his favor. The tensions existed since the very beginning and over time they only grew. Ṣāliḥ instructed the military to work with the

39) *Millions in Yemen on brink of famine, situation 'close to a breaking point,' warns UN agency*, United Nations, 2017, Internet, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56550#.WYGyK-mfK1s>, 23/07/2017.

40) Marko Gagić, "The politics and Society of South Arabia – A Dream that Turned into a Nightmarish Reality", op. cit, p. 64.

41) Helen Lackner, *On a wretched third anniversary of the international intervention in Yemen, is the rise of the Huthis irresistible?*, Open Democracy, 2018, Internet, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/helen-lackner/on-wretched-third-anniversary-of-international-intervention-in->, 15/04/2018.

42) Ibid.

Hūthīs but he totally miscalculated the outcome since, contrary to his expectations, the Hūthī's influence rose. Previously, Anṣār Allah had established themselves as a strong political factor in the north. They gradually expanded their influence and established firm control over their homeland Ṣa'da as well as of the surrounding areas, although Ṣāliḥ remained popular among people, particularly in the rural areas, mostly due to his role in the process of the unification.⁴³

This possibly led him to believe he was strong enough to turn against Anṣār Allah. The tensions between Ṣāliḥ and Anṣār Allah intensified in late November 2017 which led to the severe fighting in Ṣan'ā. On 2 December Ṣāliḥ publicly broke off his ties with Anṣār Allah which was considered a betrayal by the Hūthīs and labelled as "a coup" against their alliance.⁴⁴ Two days later, on 4 December, Ṣāliḥ's almost forty years long "dance on the heads of snakes" came to an end as he was killed in an attack on his car in the outskirts of Ṣan'ā.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

For years, Yemen has been facing the political crisis that gradually turned into chaos followed by a humanitarian catastrophe, particularly after the beginning of Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015. The death of Alī Abdullah Ṣāliḥ marked the beginning of a new chapter on Yemen's socio-political scene as he was the key figure in the country for almost forty years. For this reason, the author's intention was to write an article that would cover the whole period from the beginning of Ṣāliḥ's presidency until his death, focusing on some of its crucial moments or phases and with a goal to show the former president's contribution to the creation and escalation of the crisis in South Arabia.

Ṣāliḥ took over presidency in 1978, when pretty much nobody else wanted to, due to very unstable political situation in YAR and the fact that the previous two presidents got assassinated in a short period of time. So, in the early days he had to secure himself internally and also to deal with the threat from the socialist PDRY. He built a strong network based on kinship and family ties which functioned on the principle of patronage and corruption and this became the main feature of his internal politics throughout his reign. Also, in this period, he utilized

43) Helen Lackner, *On a wretched third anniversary of the international intervention in Yemen, is the rise of the Huthis irresistible?*, Part 1, Open Democracy, 2018, Internet, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/helen-lackner/on-wretched-third-anniversary-of-international-intervention-in->, 15/04/2018.

44) *Yemen: Ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh killed*, Al Jazeera, 2017, Internet, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/houthi-media-ali-abdullah-saleh-killed-sanaa-171204123328290.html>, 14/04/2018.

the political climate that favored the strengthening of conservative Islamic ideology in the Muslim world. Supported by Saudi Arabia and the United States, he allowed Salafism to spread in Yemen and act as a bulwark towards the socialist South.

The similar pattern was followed during the nineties when Ṣāliḥ gave refuge to many jihadists who, in return, helped him stigmatize the Yemen Socialist Party, and ultimately win the Civil War in 1994 which allowed him to spread his hegemony to the whole territory of the newly unified country. On the surface, it did appear that this created some stability, but it also created resentment in the south as well as among the Zaydi revivalist groups who naturally felt threatened by the spread of Salafism, particularly in its extreme forms.

Ṣāliḥ started facing heavy consequences of his policy at the beginning of the 21st Century, after the USS Cole bombing in Aden in October 2000 and particularly after 11 September 2001. After these events, Ṣāliḥ had no choice but to join the “War on Terrorism” and to allow the US to perform the drone attacks on Yemeni territory thus creating a chain of resentment, not only among the extremists and the members of the Zaydi group the Ḥūthīs, but among ordinary Yemenis as well. What followed was the serious deterioration of security situation in Yemen most notably reflected in the extremist attacks and the Ḥūthī insurgency. Moreover, the economic situation in this already poor Arab country dramatically worsened and by the end of the decade it was obvious that Ṣāliḥ’s reign is in its last years.

The developments that came as a direct or indirect consequence of Ṣāliḥ’s decisions during his more than three-decade long presidency undoubtedly confirm the hypothesis about his role in gradual worsening of the situation in Yemen. They also speak a lot about the failure of the international policy towards Yemen, particularly that of Saudi Arabia and the United States. But what followed Ṣāliḥ’s resignation in 2011 was a culmination of horrific interconnected decisions, made by all sides, that altogether had a devastating impact on life in Yemen. As for Ṣāliḥ, his attempt to reestablish himself as a South Arabian strongman ended in his own demise that now stands as one of the symbols of Yemen’s tragedy.

Apart from some minor changes in the battlefield, the killing of the former president did not change much in Yemen and Yemenis’ dreams remain unchanged. All the people of Yemen are left with is hope – a hope that this senseless war will end. The responsibility is upon the leaders of all sides, this time, after many years, without Alī Abdullah Ṣāliḥ.

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КРИЗА У ЈЕМЕНУ – НАСЛЕЂЕ АЛИЈА АБДУЛАХА САЛИХА

Резиме

Смрт Алија Абдулаха Салиха, дугогодишњег председника Јемена и најутицајније политичке фигуре у том региону, означила је отварање новог поглавља на друштвено-политичкој сцени Јужне Арабије. Како тај део света потреса једна од најтежих светских политичких криза праћена хуманитарном катастрофом огромних размера, овај рад даје пресек Салихове владавине и његовог политичког ангажмана по одласку са власти 2011. године, са циљем да прикаже улогу бившег председника Јемена у креирању и ескалацији политичке нестабилности у земљи. Ово је по већини параметара изузетно хетероген регион, па је исправно разумевање јеменског проблема од изузетне важности за његово посматрање и анализирање ситуације која има и елементе међународног сукоба.

Рад је базиран на ауторовом вишегодишњем истраживању ситуације у Јемену. Спроведене су и две теренске студије, као и бројни интервјуи са локалним становништвом и политичким актерима, а рад се ослања и на претходно објављиване студије других аутора.

Кључне речи: Јемен, Салих, политика, криза, салафизам, зајдитски ислам, племена

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