

# YEMEN: UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

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# **YEMEN: UNFINISHED REVOLUTION**

**Leonid M. Issaev**

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Address: Yenibosna Merkez Disrict. 29 Ekim Street.  
Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Block Floor:6 No.:52 34197  
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey  
Telephone: +902126031815  
Fax: +902126031665  
Email: [info@sharqforum.org](mailto:info@sharqforum.org)

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## Executive Summary

1. One of the main problems in Yemeni society that was not resolved during the turbulent transformations of the 20th century was the correlation of the tribal and state systems, which inevitably entailed a conflict of sovereignties.

2. The conflict within the Hashid tribal confederation between the representatives of the Saleh and al-Ahmar families is the most important factor in the Yemeni crisis. It had two main tendencies: the increasing role of tribal elites, and the sharp increase in the number of conflicts.

3. In the early 1970s, President Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani launched a policy of “sunnization” of Yemen, which was subsequently implemented by Abdallah al-Ahmar. Its roots go back to the early 1960s, when the head of the strongest tribal confederation Hashid supported the Republicans, acting simultaneously against the Zaidi Sayyids formally occupying the supreme position in the tribal hierarchy of Northern Yemen.

4. The response to the implanting Wahhabism doctrine in Yemen was the creation of the “Faithful Youth” movement in 1995 in the Saada province, the main mission of which was the patriotic upbringing of the younger generation of Yemenis, where the study of Yemeni history and the foundations of the Zaidi dogma played a systemic role.

5. As a weak political figure, Hadi almost immediately allowed the al-Ahmar family to pull the blanket over to its side, which eventually knocked the political bottom out from under the influential family, and then the president himself.

6. Since the beginning of 2012, the situation in which the power in Yemen gradually began to be monopolized in the hands of al-Ahmars in the face of al-Islah, put almost all their opponents on one side and forced them to take extreme measures, predetermining the failure of the General People’s Congress, as well as the seizure of power in Sana’a in September 2014.



7. Within the framework of the National Dialogue Conference, its participants did not manage to reach consensus on three key points: “on the issue of Saada”, “on the issue of the South”, “on the transitional justice” and “on the state structure”.

8. The Kuwait talks failed largely due to the fact that both parties live in parallel worlds, and each world has a right to exist. Yet if authorities in Sana’a focused on the current status-quo, the government in exile, on the contrary, proceeded from retrospective views, insisting on the restoration of the status quo, which is relevant for the beginning of 2014.

9. At the talks in Kuwait, there occurred a situation in which the main demands of the parties, on the establishment of a transitional entity and on the disarmament of the Houthis, were by no means denied by the opponents. However, they, could not agree on what should be done first.

10. The change in all key parameters of the Yemen crisis over the past three years calls for a serious revision of the UN Security Council resolution 2216. The Yemeni crisis is considered by the Security Council exclusively as a confrontation of the “legitimate power” in the face of Mansur Hadi and “Houthi rebels” who committed a military coup in 2014-2015, which is absolutely irrelevant in the realities of 2018.

11. The current balance of powers (even after the murder of Ali Saleh) in Yemen, as well as the difficulties experienced by the Coalition in Yemen, is acting against Hadi. Time plays in favor of the Sana’a government, that is, Houthis and Saleh: the longer Mansur Hadi remains just a nominal president in exile who is not control the situation in the country, the less incentive the international community will have to recognize him as a legitimate president.

12. Yemen is a hostage to its periphery not only globally but also regionally, which leads to a serious lack of interest in this country from the international community.



13. Saudi Arabia has never been able to successfully implement the function of the main “moderator” of the Yemen crisis, which is largely due to the death of Prince Sultan in October 2011, and later Prince Nayef in June 2012, who for more than thirty years managed the Yemeni portfolio in the Kingdom.

14. The Yemeni campaign by no means became a zero-sum game for Riyadh: on the contrary, the Saudi army managed to carry out the minimum program, limiting the expansion of the Houthis.

15. The main problem for Yemen is the preservation of the state in its current borders. To date, a triple power has been established in the country: in addition to the world-recognized government of Mansur Hadi, Northern Yemen remains under the control of the Houthis-led Supreme Political Council, and in the south of the country the Southern Transitional Council that acts on the independence of South Yemen, took the power. This problem becomes even more urgent due to the split within the coalition, when the UAE is staking on the Southern Movement, and Saudi Arabia on Mansur Hadi.

16. A possible scenario is to end the military operation of the Coalition under a plausible pretext, while simultaneously adopting a plan for a comprehensive settlement of the Yemeni conflict under international control. That could, in turn, create the necessary conditions for the formation of a government of national unity, the distribution of power between the parties to the conflict, the withdrawal of troops from Sana'a and other key zones.





## Tribal vs State

The events of the “Arab Spring” in Yemen revived a number of long-standing domestic problems, jeopardizing the very existence of the unified Yemeni state within its 1990 borders. Specificity of the Yemeni crisis derives from the combination of its rich socio-cultural and historical heritage with the new realities of the Middle East.

One of the main problems of the modern Yemeni society is its social specificity which is based on “a combination of ethnic, cultural and social criteria of differentiation of the population”<sup>1</sup>. When Yemen entered an era of tumultuous change in the second half of the 20th century, the Yemeni political

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establishment faced the old problem of interaction between tribal and state structures<sup>2</sup>, which inevitably entailed a conflict of sovereignties. Authorities should make a difficult choice between the recognition of the relative sovereignty of tribes prescribed in their legal rules thousands of years ago, and their willingness to enter into a conflict with them seeking to establish their sovereignty over the entire territory of their state. “The choice of the strategy of this range has always had a significant impact on public well-being and the level of conflict in it. The complexity of the task consisted not only in the exclusively inertial customs of the tribes and the style of their lives, but also in the state of the system of state administration, as well as the material well-being of society”<sup>3</sup>.

And if in Southern Yemen this problem was solved by the partial eradication of the tribal system declared a throwback to the past, in the North during the 1960s and 1970s the impossibility of compromise between republican authorities and tribes for a long time kept the country in a state of political turbulence. The solution was found after Ali Abdullah Saleh who was actively supported by Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the head of al-Ahmar clan and one of the most prominent figures of Hashid tribal confederation which had the strongest positions in the



post-revolutionary Yemen came into to power<sup>4</sup>. From 1980 one could observe the process of incorporation of tribal sheikhs in the state apparatus<sup>5</sup>, alongside with the transfer of tribal mechanisms of social control into the institutions of power. For some time, this model of the Yemeni state demonstrated its effectiveness in terms of securing the long-awaited political stability after several troubled decades, from the standpoint of achieving the most favorable level of socio-economic development in the history of the Republic of Yemen, and from an international perspective allowing the two countries to unite on conditions favorable for northerners.

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However, Saleh's policy of co-opting tribal sheikhs in the state apparatus had its drawbacks, because it was not able to guarantee the loyalty of all tribes. The point is that, after becoming a part of the political establishment, sheikhs ceased to focus on the concerns of tribes' members, acting not in their interest, but in their own personal interests and seeking access to political power and the accumulation of financial resources<sup>6</sup>.

### **Export of Wahhabism**

The situation was aggravated when it had been complicated by the inter-elite conflict between two powerful families of the country – the Salehs and the Ahmars. After the death of Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar in 2007 Ali Saleh did not feel indebted to his sons and explicitly made it clear that he did not intend to continue such a generous policy towards the al-Ahmar family which had been the case in previous years<sup>7</sup>.

Also, for a long time it was thought that, in accordance with the tacit agreement between the late Sheikh al-Ahmar and Ali Saleh, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, commander of the first armored and most efficient division in the country, should be the successor in case of Saleh's resignation. However, Ali Saleh himself began to actively prepare his eldest son Ahmad to be his successor; at that moment Ahmad was the commander of the Presidential Guard, and this caused obvious discontent of the



members of the al-Ahmar family and predetermined the split within the ruling Hashid confederation<sup>8</sup>.

The inter-tribal conflict within the Hashid confederation had two main trends as regards supporters of the President and al-Ahmar family.

First, it led to a sharp increase in

the number of conflict sources both in the periphery and within the central government. This manifested itself rather destructively in the province of Saada by alternate transferring of state support from the pro-Ahmar party “Al-Islah” (based on Salafist ideology) to the Zaidi movement leaders and vice versa.

Secondly, it generated a policy of increasing the role of the tribal elite which had “a pronounced social orientation to oust all traditional religious strata of the aristocracy from the system of relations connected with the tribes. However, this was not intended to increase the secular control of the state, but to replace them with new ulama of the Salafi school trained in the Salafi training centers controlled by “Al-Islah”<sup>9</sup>. In this case, the main target of this policy were the dominant schools of Zaidism in Yemen that were undermined by the Wahhabi ideology imported from Saudi Arabia<sup>10</sup>.

One of the reasons of Wahhabism implanting in northern Yemen is that after the fall of the Mutawakkili Yemeni kingdom the monarchists were concentrated mainly in the northern province of Saada that was considered as a stronghold of Yemeni

Zaidism. The greatest threat in this case was the doctrine that the Imam should belong to the Hashemites, while meeting a specific set of criteria.

At the same time the greatest concern to the national authorities was apparently caused by the Zaidi position that the responsibility of the tribes included armed rebellion against the unjust ruler-usurper by the call of a potential Imam<sup>11</sup>.

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It is necessary to bear in mind that before the revolution of 1962 in Northern Yemen there existed quite a specific balance of power between the Zaidi religious elite (sayyids and qadis) and the sheikhs of Zaidi tribes (somewhat reminiscent of the relationship between the brahmins and kshatriyas in the traditional Indian hierarchy) <sup>12</sup>. Formally, the supreme position in the hierarchy belonged to sayyids, but tribal sheikhs possessed much more powerful military resources in the form of highly efficient tribal militias. At the same time, before the revolution, sayyids and tribal sheikhs were in some kind of mutually beneficial symbiosis in which sayyids played an important integrating role of tribal arbitrators, and the tribes provided the Imamate with the necessary military resources.

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Republicans defeated monarchists in the Yemeni Civil War of 1962–1970 mainly because of the actual defection of the head of the most powerful Yemeni tribal confederation (Hashid) Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar to their camp. The Sheikh kept up (quite successfully) his game trying to highlight his important role in the nascent republic. But by joining the republicans al-Ahmars went into an open conflict with sayyids. Al-Ahmars like no other deeply knew and understood the society of north Yemen, and therefore, coming to the forefront in the Republic of Yemen, they realized that the threat for them that came from the Zaidi sayyids<sup>13</sup> (and the events of recent years confirmed the extent to which they were right).

They were well aware that Zaidi Sayyids retained enormous prestige among ordinary Zaidis (and recent events perfectly confirmed those fears as well). It was clear that Zaidi sayyids retained their enormous prestige, while the majority of the inhabitants of North Yemen adhered to Zaidism. In this respect, al-Ahmars have found a powerful ally in some Saudi institutions that were trying to spread the Wahhabi version of Islam into Yemen, as the process of “sunnization» of North Yemen knocked out of the Zaidi sayyids the very foundation of the enormous



influence which they enjoyed there. As a result, al-Ahmars and “Wahhabis” became real allies – the spread of “Wahhabism” weakened the positions of the major rivals of al Ahmars, while not representing a threat to al-Ahmars’ authority, since Sunni Islam in Yemen had no comparable religious figures in terms of their influence with Zaidi sayyids and having equally justifiable grounds for hating al-Ahmars (and other representatives of the Northern Yemen tribal elite who had taken sides with the Republicans).

This predetermined the policy of Zaidi “sunnization” started by Yemeni President Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani (1967-1974), supported and subsequently practiced by Abdullah al-Ahmar and his sons. As prominent researchers of this problem Haykel and Weir write, the implementation of such a policy was based on the creation of Salafi schools in Yemen with the support of Saudi Arabia, in which the policy of inter-confessional intolerance (primarily due to the proclamation of Zeydism as a sectarian teaching) was implemented<sup>14</sup>. The apogee of this policy was the establishment of a Wahhabi educational institution (Dar al-Hadith) in 1979 in the town of Dammaj in the Sa’ada Governorate, which could not but cause a negative response on the part of the Zaidi establishment of the province.

### **Zaidi reaction and escalation of the conflict**

In order to preserve and protect the Zaidi doctrine, the al-Haqq party was established in 1990 by Zaidi sayyids Badr al-Din al-Houthi<sup>15</sup> and Majd al-Din al-Muayyidi who was considered as one of the main religious authorities in the region and bore the title of marj al-taqlid<sup>16</sup>. The main focus of the party was on the issues that caused the most concern to the authorities as regards the Zaidi political philosophy: the issue that the imam should necessarily be a Hashemite, and the issue of adaptation of Zaidi’s religious doctrine to the republican form of government. However, though the party experiment has not given the desired result, it expressed the willingness of Zaidi religious leaders to compromise with the government, even by revising their own doctrinal principles.



The next milestone in the Zaidi fight with the engrafted Wahhabi doctrine in Yemen began in 1995, when all the same Badr al-Din al-Houthi with his son Hussein launched their own movement called the «Faithful Youth» (which later formed the Ansar Allah movement), the main mission of which was the patriotic education of the young generation of Yemenis, the backbone of which was the study of history and the foundations of Yemeni Zaidi doctrine. However, the last role in the movement was played by president Ali Saleh who supported it financially during the periods of exacerbation of his relations with al-Ahmars. It is obvious that such a step of al-Houthi was the mirror image of the Wahhabi policy engrafted by al-Ahmars in Dar al-Hadith and other “educational and enlightening” schools in Yemen. It is no coincidence that many methods of the “Faithful Youth” work were borrowed from Salafi organizations. While claiming their support to the idea of the unity and brotherhood of all Muslims, the teachers of “Faithful Youth” responded to Wahhabis accusations with retaliatory attacks calling them “true terrorists who come from specific mosques, schools and institutions in order to sow enmity and hatred and to impose their views on to young Muslims...”<sup>17</sup>.

In 2004 the ideological confrontation between Zaidis and al-Ahmars who promoted the Wahhabi doctrine as well as al-Islah loyal tribes took the form of armed conflict. But first the Saada war could hardly have had the chance to stretch into such a long-running conflict, if in fact its causes could be explained in terms of the fight against terrorism so necessary for Ali Saleh to obtain financial support from the United States, a catalyst to which was the phrase pronounced by Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi in one of Saada’s mosques in the

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presence of the president: "Allah is Great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Jews are damned! Islam will win!"<sup>18</sup>. It would be logical to expect that in this case the military actions against the "objectionable province" would be genuinely military, carried out purely by security forces of the Republic of Yemen.

However, this was not the case. The war in Saada against the supporters of Hussein al-Houthi (who at that time had at his disposal about 60 people) would

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not have had such a wide resonance if it had not acquired features of intertribal conflict with the "help" of al-Ahmars. It is no accident that the main "conductor" driving the Saada war was Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. As Russian orientalist Sergey Serebrov rightly pointed, the "unusual war against Zaidi dissidents who were unarmed and did not hold violent actions before its beginning, immediately connected the law enforcement officers and Hashid armed tribal militias loyal to the leader of the al-Islah, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar. This factor is likely to become a catalyst for the military mobilization of rival tribal groups inhabiting the Marran area and neighboring areas in Sa'ada populated with the Khaulan and Bakil tribes competing with Hashid. The course of conflict revealed the presence of many cleavages within the tribal confederations in each of which there were tribes supporting the regime and ones fighting on the side of Sayyid al-Houthi. In the ranks of the defenders of Sayyid Hussein al-Houthi there were not only tribes traditionally associated with this respected Sayyid clan, but also those who had no direct relationship to him or to his movement but has conflicts with those tribes that supported the regime and al-Islah groupings»<sup>19</sup>.

It is not a coincidence that in order to fight with Houthis the al-Ahmars had to use in addition to loyal tribes thousands of mercenaries (including people from Dar al-Hadith which in this case acted as a forge of al-Islah military personnel). Incidentally, al-Ahmars used the



same tactics during the confrontation with the Houthis after Ali Saleh left the presidency in 2011, when al-Islah supported the establishment of Salafi group al-Nusra by Sheikh al-Zindani and the Yemeni cell of the Muslim Brotherhood.

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By the way, the same methods were used by al-Islah in regard to Southerners after the Civil War of 1994, when the hegemonic policy toward the South based on the ideas of the spiritual leaders of al-Islah (all the same al-Zindani and al-Daylani) who declared jihad against the “atheists” of the South<sup>20</sup>. In the case of Houthis, the same methods were used as well: the movement’s leaders were accused of infidelity, and the movement itself was presented as an Iranian agent destined to put an end to the Sunni presence in the region. It is therefore not surprising that the anti-Yemen coalition within a military operation entitled the “Decisive Storm” that was formed by Saudi Arabia in 2015 had an obvious anti-Shia character.

In this context, the recently emerged alliance between the General People’s Congress led by Ali Saleh and the Houthi movement “Ansar Allah” should not cause confusion. The most realistic alternative to Saleh after the transition period could be Ali Mohsen who had long been claiming power in Yemen. Certainly, the prospect of strengthening the power of a man whose name is associated with a long-term war which aimed at the actual extermination of Zaidis, did not suit Houthis leaving them the only opportunity to speak out against al-Ahmars united with former President Saleh who also made no secret of his desire to provide the presidency for his son Ahmed.





The turning point in the confrontation between al-Islah and the Houthis occurred in 2011 when the epicenter of the conflict in the northern part of Yemen moved to Dammaj where the main Salafi institute in Yemen, Dar al-Hadith, was situated. The positions of the parties in this case were diametrically opposed, but the propaganda methods were identical. On the one hand, Houthis demanded the complete disarmament of the institution and termination of teaching disciplines disseminating the interfaith discord and hatred toward Zaidis. In their rhetoric, Dar al-Hadith acted as a breeding ground for extremism in Yemen based on imported ideology and foreign funding.

In the rhetoric of al-Islah, Dar al-Hadith was presented as evidence of religious hatred of Zaidis against Sunnis, due to which it was supposed to mobilize the Yemeni Sunnis on their side with the support of Saudi Arabia. However, such a policy carried out by al-Islah failed. The reluctance of officials in Riyadh to actively intervene in the inner processes in the first years of the Yemeni crisis, as well as in inter-tribal conflict which reached its climax before the “Arab Spring”, determined the closure of Dar al-Hadith and the systematic loss of al-Islah’s positions under pressure from Houthis that resulted in the fall of al-Ahmar’s patrimony, the village of al-Hamra, and later the capital Sana’a in September 2014, during which Ali Mohsen and all the heads of the once influential family were forced to flee the country.

### **Al-Ahmar’s fiasco and the end of the Dialogue**

After Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down as President of Yemen, Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi became President, winning the uncontested presidential election on February 21, 2012. Later the General People’s Congress (GPC) was convened to draft a new constitution. The country entered a period of change, which was due to end by the beginning of 2014. However, this did not happen, in many respects as a result of a number of mistakes made by the country’s interim government.



As a weak political figure, Hadi almost immediately allowed the al-Ahmar family to grab the biggest piece of the pie, which eventually knocked the political bottom out from under the influential family, and then the president himself. During its reign, the al-Ahmar family clearly strengthened its position in power and ignored the interests of other political forces, be it Southerners, residents of Taiz, northerners or representatives of Saleh's environment. As a result, by the beginning of January 2014, the General People's Congress (GPC) fell apart<sup>21</sup>, and the country faced increasing discontent with the dominance of power held by the al-Ahmar family and affiliated Islamist organizations (the Al-Islah Party, the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood branch and the Salafi al-Nusra).

First of all, the al-Ahmars never managed to suggest ways out of the current political crisis, which would suit most of the country's political forces. The apogee of this was the results of the General People's Congress<sup>22</sup>. At least in four of the nine working groups of the NDC ("on the issue of Saada", "on the issue of the South", "on the transitional justice" and "on the state structure"), al-Ahmars did not succeed to reach a consensus with their political opponents. At the same time, they significantly weakened their positions, first of all, in connection with the planned federalization of the state. Among all the projects considered by the General People's Congress, the project for the creation of six federal districts: Hadramawt, Aden, Janad, Tahama, Azal and Saba, has been chosen as the most reliable. At the same time, the "cutting" itself provoked intense disapproval. Thus, Southerners opposed the division of the South of the country into two districts (Hadramawt and Aden) insisting on the indivisibility of South Yemen as a single entity of the future federation<sup>23</sup>. The homeland of the Houthis Saada, together with the provinces of Amran, Sana'a and Dhamar, was included in the district of Azal, a landlocked region with low economic potential.

Another initiative of the al-Ahmars was opposed by the General People's Congress headed by Ali Saleh, who acted against the offer to



prohibit for ten years the nomination of persons who had previously occupied military posts for the presidency<sup>24</sup>. Obviously, the victim of this demand would first of all be Ahmed Saleh, the son of the former president<sup>25</sup>.

***The problems in the south of the country where powerful tendencies towards decentralization are only increasing with time, were not resolved. Moreover, the power in Sana'a increasingly associated with Islamists did not suit the southerners, in memory of which the moments of 1994 are still alive, when the North essentially began to pursue a hegemonic policy towards the South that was based on the ideas of the spiritual leaders al-Islah who declared jihad to "infidels" from the south***

This led to the fact that the al-Ahmars and al-Islah managed to quarrel with all the leading political forces in the country. The problems in the south of the country where powerful tendencies towards decentralization are only increasing with time, were not resolved. Moreover, the power in Sana'a increasingly associated with Islamists did not suit the southerners, in memory of which the moments of 1994 are still alive, when the North essentially began to pursue a hegemonic policy towards the South that was based on the ideas of the spiritual leaders al-Islah who declared jihad to «infidels» from the south.

Finally, al-Ahmars entered an open conflict with the General People's Congress and Ali Saleh personally. Repeated attempts to arrest the ex-president by the provisional authorities could serve as a proof in this case<sup>26</sup>. We should not forget that it was Ali Mohsen, who headed the first armored division in 2011 which was the main military force that joined the protesters during the Arab spring. And the most serious confrontations in the fall of 2011 in the metropolitan area of al-Hasaba were observed between forces loyal to Saleh and al-Ahmars.

Therefore, the situation that has been taking shape since the beginning of 2012, when the power in Yemen gradually began to be monopolized in the hands of al-Ahmars in the face of al-Islah, put their opponents on one side and forced them to take extreme measures. The growing



influence of Ali Mohsen who served as adviser to President Mansur Hadi on military issues and who did not hide his political ambitions for the post of the future leader of the country, added fuel to the fire. Obviously, such prospects did not satisfy the Houthis, the General People's Congress, nor the Southerners, which predetermined the September events of 2014, while "Ansar Allah" pursuing a policy of concluding alliances with the Yemeni tribes, as well as members of the General People's Congress, essentially established control over Northern Yemen.

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As a result, al-Islah found itself in a situation similar to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt before the military coup of 2013. In the short period of their rule, the Egyptian Brothers turned out to be de facto in isolation, setting themselves against the majority of political actors from businessmen to the military. A similar situation has arisen with al-Islah in Yemen in 2012-2014, which set against all the key forces in the country. As a result, the influential party dropped out of the list of leaders, and as an alternative pole there appeared "Ansar Allah" movement, that "made a bet on the ideology of nationalism - the protection of traditional values"<sup>27</sup>. The tribal flank led by Sheikh Hamid al-Ahmar, who lost the confidence of the leading tribes of the Hashid confederacy, on which al-Ahmar clan relied for more than 200 years, was defeated. They took the side of the Houthis and former President Ali Saleh.

Mansur Hadi failed to become a compromise figure, and by that time associated with al-Ahmar's deserted from Yemen and by the end of 2014 de facto lost power in the country. Every day of his tenure as president further exacerbated the situation in Yemen, where more and more people were displeased with his rule. That predetermined his flight in



early 2015 first to Aden, and then to Saudi Arabia. The deep intra-Yemeni conflict acquired a pronounced external dimension, and Yemen's future began to depend not so much on a dialogue between forces inside the country, but on the possibility of reaching a compromise between the authorities in Sana'a and the government in exile that enjoyed military support from Saudi Arabia and its coalition allies. This, however, does not solve the problem of the South of the country, where not only the self-determination of South Yemen is in question, but the Hadramawt separatism promoted by the "Nuhra Hadramiyya" movement has also been actualized.

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### **Deadlock in Kuwait**

On April 21, 2016, under the auspices of Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen from 2015 till 2018, peace talks were opened between the representatives of Yemen's National Delegation (comprising members of Ansar Allah and the General People's Congress, GPC) and the Riyadh Group, which is essentially a government in exile controlled by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. However, the three-and-a-half months of negotiations failed. The Kuwait talks failed largely due to existential reasons: both parties live in parallel worlds, and each world has a right to exist. Yet if Yemen's National Delegation focused on resolving current differences on the basis of the current distribution of powers, the Riyadh Group, on the opposite end, appealed to the necessity to restore the situation back to that of nearly three years ago.

The stances of both parties are entirely justified. Mansur Hadi and his supporters are trying to adhere to the international law, appealing to the need to strictly follow two international regulatory acts that they consider fundamental: The Cooperation Council for the Arab States



of the Gulf's peace initiative and UN Security Council Resolution 2216 dated April 14, 2015. Both documents certainly make the position of the president (who has fled the country) and his government far more advantageous than that of their opponents. For instance, Article 1 of Resolution 2216 requires that the Houthis unilaterally withdraw their troops from the Yemeni capital of Sana'a and from all the areas they have seized, relinquish all "additional arms" and cease all the actions that are "exclusively within the authority of the legitimate Government of Yemen"<sup>28</sup>. It is obvious that implementing even this single article can push Ansar Allah into Yemen's periphery both geographically and politically.

In turn, the representatives of Yemen's National Delegation assume the stance of political «realism», basing their position primarily on the balance of power that existed as of the time that

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the Kuwait talks were taking place. From this point of view, the only decision that could lead to a consensus in resolving the crisis is convening a provisional coalition body: The Presidential Council, which would include members of all the warring parties. Yet should Mansur Hadi agree to this, then, given the fact that he lacks any support "on the ground," not only would he become a political outsider in Yemen's new supreme authority (limiting his political career to the authority's term of office), but he would also lose the possibility to backtrack. President Hadi is experiencing an acute shortage of legitimacy, detrimental to the positions of those external actors who support him. Returning to the «liberated» Houthi Sana'a would strengthen his position, but only on one condition: his opponents must disarm before he arrives in the capital. Otherwise, as the Riyadh group reasonably believes, the establishment of an interim government would mean only one thing: in the new transitional structure Mansur Hadi would have to play the role of "the last among equals".



In other words, at the talks, there occurred a situation in which the main demands of the parties, on the establishment of a transitional entity and on the disarmament of the Houthis, were by no means denied by the opponents. They, however, could not agree on what should be done first. And this issue is far from being as idle as it might seem at first glance.

The current balance of powers in today's Yemen is against Hadi. As previously stated, time plays in favor of the Sana'a government, that is, Houthis and Saleh: the longer Mansur Hadi remains only a nominal ex-president who does not control the situation in the country, the less incentive the international community will have to recognize him as a legitimate president. Meanwhile, Hadi's legitimacy is already questionable: if in 2012 he received a presidential term for two years in a national election, then in 2014 his term was extended for another year by a decision of the House of Representatives only, after which the Yemeni leader could be considered a self-proclaimed president.

It is fair to say that the Yemeni campaign by no means became a zero-sum game for Riyadh: on the contrary, the Saudi army managed to carry out the minimum program, limiting the expansion of the Houthis. At the same time, Saudi Arabia did not hide the desire to weaken North Yemen and support the Southerners: the Yemeni South did not represent a danger for the Kingdom. In addition, the political spectrum in the South is much more diverse than in the North, where only two political forces dominate, Ansar Allah and the General People's Congress. Finally, Northern Yemen has always been characterized by the rooting of tribal structures and the weakness of state institutions, while in the South the picture is reversed<sup>29</sup>. By the way, the tribal monolithic nature of the North in many respects explains its superiority over the South militarily.

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### The “long-run” parliament

Apparently, Hadi’s appeal to Saudi Arabia’s and the GCC’s Peace Initiative as the only possible way to resolve the political crisis in Yemen today looks detached from reality. First, this mechanism has already revealed its inconsistency in practice. Mansur Hadi did not succeed in acting as an impartial “moderator” of the General People’s Congress: at least four of the nine working groups<sup>30</sup> had reached a deadlock, the new constitution was never adopted, and all the terms of the transition period established by the GCC initiative have expired. Secondly, in 2016 it is necessary to resolve a fundamentally different conflict than the one that took place in Yemen five years ago, during the Arab Spring. If in 2011, the issue of changing the regime and the peaceful transfer of power from Ali Saleh to the new head of state was first of all on the agenda, in the course of recent events the conflict turned into an inter-confessional and inter-ethnic clash, and the number of its participants increased noticeably.

After the failure of the Kuwaiti peace talks, the authorities of Sana’a began to seek the legal foundations ensuring the functioning of the political institutions under their control. Finding them was not a big deal: the country still has not abolished the constitution of 1991. Based on this document, the authorities of Sana’a announced the convening of an extraordinary session of the House of Representatives, which had not been convened since early 2015. Moreover, the third convocation of the House of Representatives in Yemen is unique in its own way. It has been functioning for more than thirteen years, since April 2003, when the last parliamentary elections took place in the country. After that, the re-election of parliamentarians was repeatedly postponed, in 2009, 2011 and 2014, but the representative body continued its work based on Article 64 of the Constitution, which allows authorities to “not to hold elections ... in extraordinary circumstances ... until these circumstances disappear”<sup>31</sup>. Paradoxically, the legitimacy of this “overstayed” institution of state power over the past five years caused

***Hadi's appeal to Saudi Arabia's and the GCC's Peace Initiative as the only possible way to resolve the political crisis in Yemen today looks detached from reality***





the least censure from the conflicting parties. However, the convening of the House of Representatives in Sana'a on August 13, 2016 aroused criticism from the Saudi leadership that cast doubt on the competence of the extraordinary session and the availability of a quorum on it.

According to Article 73 of the Constitution, an extraordinary session of the House of Representatives can be convened in three ways: by a presidential decree, upon written request of at least one third of the total number of deputies or by a decision of the presidium of the parliament. For the obvious reasons, it was impossible to use the first two options, and therefore the Houthis and Saleh alliance turned to the third option. By August 2016, the Presidium of the House of Representatives consisted of four members: The Speaker of the Parliament and three Vice-Speakers (from the General People's Congress, "al-Islah" and nonparty). According to the rules of the House of Representatives, decisions in the presidium are taken by a simple majority of votes, but if the votes are divided equally, the decision for which the speaker voted is considered to be taken. When an extraordinary session was convened, two members of four in the presidium voted for it, but one of them was the speaker Yahya al-Rai. In other words, the convening of the parliament on August 13 should still be considered eligible.

The issue of the quorum raised even more debate, since Article 71 of the Constitution clearly states that the presence of more than half of its members is necessary to recognize the House of Representatives meetings as legitimate. In other words, for a total of 301 seats for a quorum, at least 151 parliamentarians are required. But only 142 deputies came to this session, which allowed Mansur Hadi and his supporters to declare the work of the extraordinary session as illegal. However, in this story there is a nuance that changes the essence of the matter. The same article numbered 71 states that a quorum is calculated from the total number of deputies, "except for those whose mandates have been declared vacant". But for thirteen years the parliamentary ranks have considerably thinned: 26 deputies have died, and as a result both



the total number of the chamber and the quorum have decreased. Therefore, in this respect Mansur Hadi was also wrong.

The main decision of the House of Representatives was the convening of the Supreme Political Council consisting of ten people under the chairmanship of Saleh al-Samad<sup>32</sup>, head of the political bureau of “Ansar Allah”. A representative of the General People’s Congress was appointed deputy chairman. In addition to them, the new highest entity of the Yemeni government included delegates from the Popular Forces Union party, the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party, the Yemeni Socialist Party and the Nasserist Unionist Popular Movement.

Most likely, further talks on Yemen will take place with this institution, which in many respects complicates the situation for Mansur Hadi. Now it is difficult to imagine a situation in which during the transitional period Hadi could remain a temporary head of the state. Apparently, even if the parties manage to agree on transitional justice, the only possible formula in Yemen’s terms will be the creation of a presidential council. In this case, Mansour Hadi will have to find such a compromise with his opponents that would allow his incorporation into the presidential council on terms that are favorable for him, and this is practically impossible. Having joined the presidential council even as chairman, Mansur Hadi will only become an integral part of the institution of the presidency, but not its incarnation. Otherwise, the coalition led by Riyadh will have to force the authorities to surrender in Sanaa, which is also unlikely.

### **Weakness of Riyadh**

Yemen is in many ways a hostage to its periphery, not only globally but also regionally, which leads to a serious deficit of interest in the country. If Syria is clearly suffering because of excessive involvement of regional and global players in its affairs, the Yemeni conflict, by contrast, lacks attention from the international community. In fact, the situation in this country since the very beginning of the Arab Spring has been completely at the mercy of the GCC under the leadership of Saudi Arabia that issued their Peace Initiative in November 2011. However,



the Six Arab countries obviously lack experience in settling such complex conflicts. What especially harmed peacekeeping is the fact that Riyadh was both a mediator and a participant in the conflict. The consequences of this state of things were the failure of the political settlement and the unwillingness of the Kuwaiti leadership to provide a platform for the continuation of a meaningless negotiation process.

The current exacerbation of the Yemeni confrontation can be considered the result of the Saudi moderation. According to the Peace Initiative of 2011, it was the GCC that was supposed to act as guarantors for its implementation. Over time, however, it turned out that Riyadh was unable to maintain an equal distance from the opposing actors, allowing the al-Ahmar clan to make themselves ultimately one of the parties to the conflict. Saudi Arabia showed tacit consent when the Attorney General of Yemen violated the Peace Initiative regarding the inviolability of the former head of state Ali Saleh, which first forced the ex-president and his GPC party to take a non-trivial alliance with the Houthis and then forced Saudi Arabia to launch a military operation in Yemen.

This is largely due to the personnel changes in Riyadh caused by natural causes. From the late 1970s until his death in 2011, the Yemeni portfolio in the Kingdom was led by Prince Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz who since 1963 was the Minister of Defense, and since 2005 took the post of Crown Prince. Thanks to his efforts, in 2000 the most important component of the Riyadh agreement was concluded in Jeddah on the settlement of the border issue between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, according to which the parties pledged to follow the Taif agreements of 1934.

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Signed on November 23, 2011 in Riyadh, the Peace Initiative of the GCC was largely due to Prince Sultan efforts, who died a month before this event. Subsequently the Yemeni portfolio passed to his successor the Crown Prince Nayef, who only lived just over six months afterwards. The death of two key people in the Kingdom, who maintained close relations with all political forces in Yemen and who could skillfully find a compromise with each of them, and the transition of the Yemeni portfolio to the young Mohammed bin Salman, left a significant imprint on Yemen's policy on the part of Saudi Arabia, which began to acquire a more and more emotional and deterministic nature.

As a result, the controlled phase was interrupted on March 26, 2015 by the military intervention of the Saudi Coalition. However, in addition to the official version of the elimination of the "Iranian threat" in the face of the Houthis, the risky transition to a military scenario in Yemen for Riyadh was conditioned by ideas that fit perfectly into the foreign policy concept of Muhammad bin Salman to create a unipolar model in Arabia, instead of the historically bipolar one.

***Yemen was revered as the "cradle" of the Arabian civilization and the historical homeland of many tribes of Arabia, in particular, several ruling families in the region, such as al-Nahyan in the UAE and al-Khalifa in Bahrain***

The role of the second pole historically belonged to the Yemeni ethno-cultural area, which, even under the conditions of political disintegration and colonial domination of Britain and the Ottoman Empire (19-20 centuries), did not lose the status of a special subject of relations on the peninsula. Its status was determined not so much by the state of etatist structures or geopolitical factors, but by the universal recognition of the merits of Yemen in front of the Arab-Muslim culture. Yemen was revered as the «cradle» of the Arabian civilization and the historical homeland of many tribes of Arabia, in particular, several ruling families in the region, such as al-Nahyan in the UAE and al-Khalifa in Bahrain.



This status, based on socio-cultural and historical factors, still has weight in the worldview system throughout the Middle East, creating a serious obstacle to the transformation of the region into a new geopolitical space. The transition to a military scenario in Yemen in March 2015 can be viewed simultaneously as both an intervention in a peacekeeping international mission under the auspices of the United Nations and as a new type of conflict between globalism and its priority in geopolitics on the one hand, and traditionalism with its concentration on ethno-cultural and historical factors, on the other.

Contrary to the expectations of Riyadh, of the nine countries that joined the coalition in March 2015, only the UAE became an active participant in the military campaign in Yemen.

Moreover, the participation of Abu Dhabi fully confirmed the thesis that their agenda in Yemen is seriously at variance with the goals of Riyadh, and the conflict of interests over the Yemeni issue constitutes a serious threat to the preservation of the GCC.

***Contrary to the expectations of Riyadh, of the nine countries that joined the coalition in March 2015, only the UAE became an active participant in the military campaign in Yemen***

\* \* \*

Yemeni political transit from authoritarianism to uncertainty already now make it possible to draw a number of important conclusions.

First, the alliance of GPC and Ansar Allah, which with confidence can be called an “alliance of necessity” not only retained political control over the territory of Northern Yemen even in the conditions of military intervention after the murder of Ali Saleh, but also has achieved significant success in the legal field.

Second, the Yemeni conflict led to a rapid depletion of the resources of all the parties involved in the military operation, and, above all, of Saudi Arabia itself. The Kingdom has fewer opportunities, both financial and military, and political and legal, to continue the military operation in Yemen, which every day incurs more and more reputational and



material costs to Riyadh. In addition, the Saudi actions against the southern neighbor have again revived the long-standing territorial conflict affecting three Saudi provinces – Jizan, Najran and Asir, which the Yemeni consider to be occupied territories.

Third, the conflict revealed the far-fetched judgments about Iran's serious involvement in the affairs of Yemen and the close relationship of Iranians with the Houthis. According to the apt expression of the orientalist Sergei Serebrov, Iran is nothing more than a «phantom participant» of the crisis invented by Riyadh to justify its actions against the Republic of Yemen. The war in South Arabia convincingly showed that "Ansar Allah" is an absolutely self-sufficient and independent local force, and Tehran did not play and does not play any noticeable role in the Yemeni war.

Fourth, the situation in Yemen has not allowed the consolidation of Saudi Arabia's status as a regional leader, not only throughout the Middle East, but even within the Arabian Peninsula. Even among the GCC member states over the last seven years after the Arab spring, there have often been controversies and disputes over the reluctance to tolerate Saudi domination on the peninsula. In this regard, we can mention the conflicts between Riyadh and Qatar in 2014 and 2017 and with Abu Dhabi (regarding the strategy for the Yemen operation) in 2016. The dissatisfaction of Saudi Arabia is also caused by the traditionally neutral position of the Sultanate of Oman that conditioned its refusal to join the warring coalition. Moreover, the logic of the Yemen crisis, starting from 2011, has called into question the very ability of Riyadh to act as an intermediary in the settlement of crises in the Middle East.

Fifth, the change in all key parameters of the Yemen crisis over the past three years calls for a serious revision of the UN Security Council resolution 2216. This is primarily due to the absolute priority of the humanitarian aspect of the conflict, as confirmed by the reports of the UN specialized bodies. The current humanitarian situation is largely connected with two fundamental omissions in the decision of the Security Council: the inadequacy of the sanctions component,



which has a pronounced unilateral orientation, and the absence of a requirement to establish mandatory and regular humanitarian pauses.

Sixth, the current phase of the Yemen crisis has nothing to do with the initial provisions of UN Security Council resolution 2216. Its text does not reflect the full picture of the situation in Yemen, due to its propensity to simplify the conflict. Thus, the Yemeni crisis is considered by the Security Council exclusively as a confrontation of the "legitimate power" in the face of Mansur Hadi and "Houthi rebels" who committed a military coup in 2014-2015, which is absolutely irrelevant in the realities of 2018. In view of this, to this day, the actions of resolution 2216 apply exclusively to the Yemeni parties to the conflict and bypass the responsibility that external actors must bear.

***The conflict revealed the far-fetched judgments about Iran's serious involvement in the affairs of Yemen and the close relationship of Iranians with the Houthis. According to the apt expression of the orientalist Sergei Serebrou, Iran is nothing more than a "phantom participant" of the crisis invented by Riyadh to justify its actions against the Republic of Yemen***

Finally, the level of threats created by the war in Yemen for two and a half years is of a fundamental nature for the entire region. The conflict is capable of significantly changing both the fate of Arabia and its neighbors. The former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned of this possibility in June 2015, speaking of the military intervention in Yemen as a "ticking bomb"<sup>33</sup>. In addition to the humanitarian disaster that engulfed 80% of the population of Yemen, one should also pay attention to the imminent ecological catastrophe caused by the destruction of infrastructure, damage to water facilities and long-term disturbances to the repair of ancient dams that for centuries have been the main production base of the country. The security of the Bab el Mandeb strait, through which a quarter of the world's cargo flows, is also directly related to these problems. For this reason, the emergence of the Yemeni problem from the shadow is becoming a top priority in world politics with a very limited time for its resolution.



## Endnotes

- 1- Rodionov M. Democratic Yemen: Problems of the Ethnical Consolidation, In: Ethnocultural Processes in the Asian Countries at the XX Century, Ed. by Its R. Moscow, 1991, pp. 28-54.
- 2- See: Dresch P. Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen, Oxford, 1989; Korotayev A.V. From Chiefdom to Tribe? Some Trends of Evolution of Political Systems of North-East Yemen in the Last Two Millennia, *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 2, 1996, pp. 81-91; Korotayev A. V. Social History of Yemen, Moscow, 2006.
- 3- Serebrov S. Revolution and Conflict in Yemen, In: Conflicts and Wars of the XXI Century. Middle East and Northern Africa, Ed. by Naumkin V., and Malysheva D. Moscow, 2015, p. 281.
- 4- The revolution of 1962 destroyed the monarchy, but it did not completely eliminate the archaic tribal structure of society. The civil war between Republicans and Monarchists that lasted until 1970 resulted in the consolidation of the dominant position of tribal unions in society, including the structures of power. Moreover, if under the royal regime this dominant position was divided between two tribal alliances, Hashid and Bakil, after the revolution the tribal confederation Hashid took the leading position in this tribal duumvirate due to the fact that its ruling family of al-Ahmars initially and relatively consistently supported the republican regime, while the tribal union Bakil together with other tribes of the northern regions occupied ambivalent positions during the civil war.
- 5- See: Brandt M. The Irregulars of the Sa'ada War: "Colonel Sheikh's" and "Tribal Militias" in Yemen's Huthi Conflict (2004-2010), In: Why Yemen Matters. A Society in Transition, Ed. by Lackner H. London, 2014.
- 6- The most striking evidence of this is the state of the al-Ahmar family that was «nationalized» by the Houthis after the capture of Sana'a in September 2014, quite comparable to the wealth of the sheikhs of the Gulf monarchies.
- 7- See: Issaev L., Shishkina A. Syria and Yemen: Unfinished Revolutions]. Moscow, 2012.
- 8- See: Issaev L. Tribal Revolution in Yemen, *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* 4, 2012, pp. 178-187.
- 9- Serebrov S. Revolution and Conflict in Yemen, In: Conflicts and Wars of the XXI Century. Middle East and Northern Africa, Ed. by Naumkin V., and Malysheva D. Moscow, 2015, p. 288.
- 10- It should be noted that the Sunni part of the population of Yemen (as well as the Zaidi) traditionally distrusted the ideology of Wahhabism, which was perceived by the majority of the Yemeni population as hostile doctrine, including due to the memories of the alienation of the territories of Asir, Jizan and Najran, populated by ethnic Yemenis in 1934.
- 11- Salmoni B., Loidolt B., Wells M. Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: the Huthi Phenomenon, Santa Monica, 2010, pp. 64-66.
- 12- See: Chelhod J. L'Organisation sociale au Yémen, *L'Ethnographie* 64, 1970, pp. 61-86; Dresch P. Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen, Oxford, 1989; Abu Ghanim F. Al-Bunyah al-Qabaliyyah fi 'l-Yaman Bayna 'l-Istimrar wa-'l-Taghayyur. Dimashq, 1985; Abu Ghanim, F. Al-Qabilah wa-'l-Dawlah fi 'l-Yaman. al-Qahira, 1990; vom Bruck G. Réconciliation Ambiguë: Une Perspective Anthropologique Sur le Concept de la Violence Légitime dans L'imamat du Yémen, In: La violence et l'état: Formes et évolution d'un monopole, Ed. by LeRoy E., and von Trotha, Paris, 1993, pp. 85-103; Korotayev A.V. Two Socio-Ecological Crises and Genesis of Tribal Organization in the Yemeni North-East, *Oriens* 6, 1996, pp. 18-28.
- 13- Note that, on the other hand, the Zaidi Sayyids did not represent such a threat to Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was nominated after the 1962 revolution and came from an extremely uninfluential





Hashidite clan.

14- See: Weir S. A Clash of Fundamentalism. Wahhabism in Yemen', MER. The Arabian Peninsula 27, 2015; Haykel B. Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani. Cambridge, 2003.

15- Father Abd al-Malik al-Houthi and the leader of Ansar Allah movement.

16- Literally from Arabic - a source of tradition or a role model.

17- Weir S. A Clash of Fundamentalism. Wahhabism in Yemen', MER. The Arabian Peninsula 27, 2015.

18- Later this phrase became the main slogan of "Ansar Allah".

19- Serebrov S. Revolution and Conflict in Yemen, In: Conflicts and Wars of the XXI Century. Middle East and Northern Africa, Ed. by Naumkin V., and Malysheva D. Moscow, 2015, p. 295.

20- In 1994, between the Yemeni government in Sana'a and the Yemeni Socialist Party in Aden led by Ali Salim al-Bid, an armed conflict occurred that ended in the defeat of the Southerners. During the civil war, the religious leaders of the al-Islah party, sheikhs al-Zindani and al-Dailani, issued fatwas against the inhabitants of the South, justifying the massive violations of political and economic rights by the Northerners, and the removal of socialists from state administration (see: Day S. Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen. A Troubled National Union. Cambridge, 2012).

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22- The texts of the resolutions can be found on the official website of the GPC: [www.ndc.ye](http://www.ndc.ye).

23- Texts of speeches and reports of working groups are posted on the official website of the GPC: [www.ndc.ye](http://www.ndc.ye).

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28- See: UN Security Council Resolution № 2216, April 14, 2015, <https://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/9385182.85751343.html>.

29- See: Korotayev A.V. Two Socio-Ecological Crises and Genesis of Tribal Organization in the Yemeni North-East, Oriens 6, 1996, pp. 18-28.

30- See: Serebrov S. Yemen: national Dialogue and Problem of the South, Bulletin of the Institute for Oriental Studies of RAS 5, 2014, pp. 1-20.

31-Constitution of the Republic of Yemen, <http://www.almotamar.net/22may/more.php?category=19>.

32- Saleh al-Samad was head of the Supreme Political Council from 2016 till 2018.

33- Cumming-Bruce N. U.N. leader calls Yemen a "Ticking Bomb", amid delay in cease-fire talks // New York Times, June 15, 2015.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Leonid M. Issaev (PhD in Political Sciences) is currently an Associate Professor at the Department for Asian and African Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics – Saint Petersburg. He is the Deputy Chair of the Laboratory for Sociopolitical Destabilization Risk Monitoring at the National Research University Higher School of Economics and senior research fellow at the Institute for African Studies, which is part of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is a member of the Scientific Council of the Russian Political Sciences Association and the Russian Sociological Society. He teaches courses in Islamic political philosophy and Political systems and political processes in the Arab World.

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Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6  
No.:68 34197 Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey  
Telephone: +902126031815  
Fax: +902126031665  
Email: info@sharqforum.org

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