

“It is a war within Islam”

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Ahmed Rashid

The News on Sunday: How do you look at the current conflict in Yemen? Is it a manifestation of the regional power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia?

Ahmed Rashid: I think the idea of this being a regional power struggle is totally exaggerated by the Saudis. This is an internal civil war. It is a reflection of the whole chaos that followed the Arab Spring right across the Arab world, but particularly in Yemen where there were numerous factions vying for power.

Iran has played a very destabilising role without a doubt. In Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, it has backed militias, it has tried to unseat Arab power and become the most influential country in other regions.

But if you talk to people, neutral diplomats who have served in Yemen, especially from the UN and the European Union, they say the Iranian role was minimal [this time]. What is intolerable to the Saudis is that the Opposition i.e., the Houthis, are mainly Shia. And this is an attempt by Saudi Arabia to halt not so much the Iranian advance, because then they [would be expected to] put boots in Iraq and help the Iraqi government fight back ISIS. This, in my opinion, is much more an attempt to create a bogey about the threat of Iran.

Yemen is a tiny country and it is not in a position to invade Saudi Arabia. There is no threat to Mecca or Medina or anything like that. What we have are the Saudis attempting to form a grand Sunni alliance which includes Arab and non-Arab states like Pakistan to halt the Iranian advance, not where it should be halted but in a place of much greater insignificance.

TNS: There is a presence of al-Qaeda and ISIS within Yemen. What can be the potential outcome of this terrorism problem for the region and the world at large?

AR: Yemen is the only country in the world where al-Qaeda controls substantial territory. And the only resistance to this was the use of drones by the United States. This has now stopped because the drone operators, who were operating out of Yemen itself, have been pulled out.

So al-Qaeda has been there for a very long time and the Arab powers and the Americans have been unwilling or unable to deal with al-Qaeda before. The Houthis, on the other hand, have always been an oppressed and repressed section of the population. In our context, they remind me a lot of the Baloch who have always felt that they were victimised by stronger powers, or the Kurds in Iran and Turkey.

The Houthis have always been marginalised and oppressed; they have never seen development in their areas. The Houthis' advance in the South was initially seen as a movement of the oppressed which is why it attracted a lot of young people in Yemen. Also, they were allied with general and former president Saleh who is still quite popular in parts of Yemen.

I think, subsequently, the Houthis became over-ambitious, launched this coup d'état in Sana'a, overthrew the government and have acted very unwisely and rashly. But again, I think, we have to see that in the context of the Houthis who see themselves as people who have been oppressed by the South and the rulers of Sana'a.

Leaders have to look beyond their immediate compulsions and see how damaging this involvement could be for Pakistan. There are ways and means in which we could help the Saudis, without necessarily getting into a war with a country of which we are not an enemy.

TNS: Coinciding with this unrest in Yemen is the nuclear deal between Iran and the US. Does that indicate a shift in the US policy in the Middle East with particular reference to its allies Israel and Saudi Arabia?

AR: I think this is what the Arabs certainly fear. They are as much against the nuclear deal with Iran as the Israelis are. And we have a very unusual situation where the Israelis, the Saudis and a majority of the Gulf countries are in line with one another.

I think a detente between Iran and the US is still a long way away. And there is no doubt the Americans don't like the threat that Iran poses in these other Arab countries. And they would firmly like the Iranians to reduce their role, rein in their militias and stop this covert aid, which is undermining Iraq and Lebanon and other countries in the region. So it's not that the Americans are suddenly going to embrace the Iranians, forgive and forget everything, and lift all sanctions. This is what the Arabs are imagining will happen but it will not.

But this deal has, certainly for the first time since the Iranian revolution of 1979, opened the gates to an improved relationship.

For me, the bigger issue is why can't Iran and the Gulf states sit down and end this Shia-Sunni conflict. This is the most destabilising factor in the Gulf. The Saudis may disguise it and say it's a threat to territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. The Iranians will disguise it in other ways. But essentially this is a sectarian war — a war within Islam. It is not a war against the West. This war within Islam must end because the bigger enemy is the ISIS.

TNS: But then what is the best way to end this conflict and at what forum. Should it be at the level of the UN [which is certainly not the best forum to deal with a sectarian conflict] or the OIC or the Arab League?

AR: If we describe this as the war within Islam, it has to be settled ultimately by the Islamic countries themselves, and not by outsiders. That means there will have to be peace moves between Iran and Saudi Arabia. I don't see any of the present day organisations, which include the Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab League or OIC as capable or willing or having the courage to help facilitate the peace process between these two countries. I think we'll have to see the creation of a new bloc of Muslim countries which would push for a long term settlement between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

TNS: Considering that they are so sharply divided along sectarian lines, is that a realistic possibility?

AR: I agree with you. I think this war in Yemen has to run its course. But, eventually, all sides will see, and the history of Yemen shows us, that all interventions get bogged down into a stalemate. Yemen is a country which is ten times more complex than Afghanistan, with a terrain that is ten times worse than Afghanistan. It's not a terrain where conventional armies can ever be successful. We have to see this present state of aggression lessen, let these powers bogged down and then perhaps there could be an initiative by some Muslim countries to bring the two together.

But there has to be an admittance of the sectarian conflict and a means to resolve it which is not just a political issue but a religious issue. Saudi Wahabism has to accept that Shiaism is a legitimate part of Islam and Iranian Shiaism has to accept that Wahabism is a legitimate part of Sunni Islam.

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TNS: But then aren't there too many sects within Shia Islam as within Sunni Islam?

AR: I agree but broadly both these two countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, have to accept each other's existence. The existence of Wahabism and Shiaism has to be tolerated rather than abused. We need some kind of Reformation, at a political level and at the level of ulema, religious leadership. That Reformation or change in attitude to end this sectarian conflict has to come from these two bigger states who are both the perpetrators and the victims of this conflict.

The other thing that will push them together eventually is the fact that there is a far bigger threat in the Middle East and that is ISIS. The coalition against ISIS, which is American-led at the moment, should be led by the Muslim countries and particularly the Arab countries. It's a forty nation alliance now which includes all the major Western powers, but it should be led by the Arabs. This war on Yemen is a total distraction from the main threat which is ISIS. If, God forbid, tomorrow there are terrorist attacks in the Gulf, there will be panic and everyone will forget about the war with Yemen. We have to understand that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are extremely vulnerable to acts of terrorism by ISIS. And ISIS has to be put down by force.

It means Arab countries should be playing a leading role. This Sunni alliance that is being built in Arabia should have been used against ISIS.

TNS: To come close to home, what must Pakistan do regarding sending troops or military assistance to Saudi Arabia? Some people say Pakistan has no choice. What is the compulsion for Pakistan?

AR: The real tragedy for Pakistan's foreign policy for several decades is we have always tried to be an appendage of somebody else's foreign policy. For a long time, during the cold war, we were an appendage of the US and its policies. So on behalf of the US, we went to war in Afghanistan, supported the mujahideen, joined up on 9/11 etc. etc. And here is another reflection of that – we are going to become appendage of the Saudi-led alliance. Frankly, I think we should play a neutral role, try and help mediation. There are a number of things Pakistan could do which are positive in this very hysterical climate. And certainly we have no business going to war against the Houthis. What have the Houthis ever done to us to warrant us to go to war against them?

Then there will be consequences for Shia-Sunni relations in Pakistan itself and the escalation of the sectarian conflict. I do understand the compulsions of the government. With perhaps two million Pakistanis working in the Gulf, their remittances are vital to the economy. The Saudis have given us cheap oil, provided loans, investment. There is already large scale employment for retired military personnel in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, for which the military gets money. So there are lots of compulsions which make it very difficult. Then there are the business interests of the Nawaz Sharif family. Apart from the one steel mill that they have in Saudi Arabia, they are said to be setting up a new 3 billion dollar steel mill there.

But leaders have to look beyond their immediate compulsions and see how damaging this involvement could be for Pakistan. There are ways and means in which we could help the Saudis, without necessarily getting into a war with a country of which we are not an enemy. Yes, if the Houthis were to cross the border and start invading Saudi Arabia [which is unlikely to happen under any circumstances because they have made it clear], that would present a different set of circumstances. Then we could cite this threat to Mecca and Medina and all. But that is not going to happen.

At this point in time, when the Iranian system is opening up, we should be fully engaged with Iran. It's tragic that there has been no interaction with Iran. The prime minister should have visited Iran weeks ago, even if he was going to join this alliance, to explain to the Iranians his position. Iran is a neighbour of Pakistan with whom we have a 600 mile long border. Not to speak of what Iran could do to us in Afghanistan and also internally because of the sectarian issue.

Lastly, we don't know what the compulsion of the military is. I would have thought that the military was over-stretched already, fighting wars in Fata and Karachi, etc., for the first time taking on the extremists and in a very comprehensive and positive way. I think the military has a very good excuse not to intervene by simply saying that we are totally over-stretched internally.

TNS: To be fair, they have been put in a difficult position?

AR: Yes they are. We don't know what is the nature of relationship between the military and the Saudis, the exchange of weapons, money. It's not a very transparent relationship.
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