

Seria Policy Brief cuprinde texte bazate pe surse publice. Opiniile exprimate reprezintă punctele de vedere ale autorilor.

Yemen: Major Saudi-led military intervention of several Arab states against the Iranian-backed Houthis

Dr. Florin DIACONU¹

Starting with the evening of March 25, 2015, Saudi Arabia, together with most of the countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) launched massive air strikes in Yemen, against positions held by the Houthis, a Shi'ia group openly supported by Iran. "The Houthi fighters, representing a Shi'ite minority that makes up around a third of Yemen's population, emerged as the most powerful force in the Arabian Peninsula's poorest country last year when they captured the capital Sanaa"², Reuters reports. Along the past few months, the Houthis significantly expanded the territories they directly controlled in Yemen, aiming at ruling the entire country. The ongoing events in Yemen are very important, and not at all only at regional level, because of the basic fact that most of the oil extracted in and exported by the Gulf countries is transported along sea routes very near to the shores of Yemen. Along the past few years, Iranian involvement in Yemen grew larger and larger, so that the Sunni Saudi Arabia, the most powerful Arab nation in the Gulf region, faces a major strategic threat: that of being 'squeezed' between Iran (acting from the North) and a Yemen potentially dominated by the Houthis, who clearly are, geo-strategically speaking, significant Iran's proxies.

At this very moment (March 30) we know – from extensive reports in open sources – that Saudi Arabia is the “leading” actor of the international “coalition” which launched a

¹ The author is Senior Researcher at the Romanian Diplomatic Institute (IDR) and Associate Professor at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest (FSPUB).

² Mohammed MUKHASHAF and Sami ABOUDI, “Fighting and air strikes across Yemen; dialogue remains distant”, Reuters, March 29, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/29/us-yemen-security-idUSKBN0ML0YC20150329>

massive military intervention in Yemen, against the Houthis openly backed by Iran. Other Muslim-Arab countries (including those in the Gulf Cooperation Council – GCC, but not only these) are offering direct “military support”: Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan. Morocco “did not confirm or deny reports it had sent fighter jets” to help the Saudis. The U.S, U.K, France, Turkey and Belgium are “backing the strikes”, offering “other support”, while Iran, China and Russia are “opposing military actions” led by Saudi Arabia³. On March 28, open sources reported that “a coalition of all GCC countries, barring Oman, is taking part in the campaign” and said “Morocco... and Pakistan” are on the list of countries supporting the coalition’s actions⁴.

Operation *Decisive Storm*: Main military and political events along the past few days

On March 25, *ABC* and *AP* report, “[Saudi Arabia](#) began airstrikes Wednesday [March 25] against Houthi rebel positions in Yemen, vowing that the Sunni kingdom will do ‘anything necessary’ to restore a deposed government that has been routed by the Iranian-backed group”. The same open sources report that “in an unusual tableau, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States announced the rare military operation by his country at a Washington news conference about a half-hour after the bombing began. The strikes started at 7 p.m. EDT, he said”, and that “loud, house-shaking explosions could be heard in the Yemen capital of Sanaa and fire and smoke could be seen in the night sky, according to an Associated Press correspondent whose home is near the military airbase in the capital” of Yemen. *ABC* and *AP* also report that “the White House said Wednesday [March 25, 2015] night that President Barack Obama has authorized logistical and intelligence support to the military operations”⁵.

Late at night on the same day, open sources report, “a Saudi air campaign was launched overnight [March 25 to March 26, 2015] which has already resulted in the elimination of

³ Aljazeera and agencies, “Military action in Yemen: Who’s for, who’s against?”, last updated: March 27, 2015, *Al Jazeera*, at the Internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/arab-league-tackles-saudi-led-air-strikes-yemen-150328072254413.html#> (at the bottom of the text)

⁴ Staff writer, “Saudi armed forces deploy in al-Harth region bordering Yemen”, *Al Arabiya News*, March 28, 2015, at the Internet address <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/28/Saudi-armed-forces-deploy-in-al-Harth-region-bordering-Yemen.html>

⁵ Ken DILANIAN (AP Intelligence writer), “Saudis Begin Airstrikes Against Houthi Rebels in Yemen”, *ABC News*, March 25, 2015, at the Internet address <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/fall-yemen-government-leaves-us-options-29902643>

several Houthi leaders”. The same source reports that “Yemen air space is currently under full control of the Saudi Royal Air Force”, that “as the operation continues, a coalition of all GCC countries, barring Oman, is taking part in the campaign, including Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Pakistan” and that “Saudi Arabia has deployed 100 fighter jets, 150,000 soldiers and other navy units”. A few hours later the same open source reports that “Yemen shut its major seaports on Thursday [March 26, 2015] while Saudi Arabia halted flights to seven airports south of the Kingdom”. According to the same open source, *the military contribution of the other Arab and Muslim nations directly supporting Saudi Arabia is large: Sudan – 3 fighter jets; Jordan – 6 fighter jets; Kuwait – 15 fighter jets; Bahrain – 15 fighter jets; Qatar – 10 fighter jets; Morocco – 6 fighter jets; UAE “contributed 30 fighter jets”, and both Egypt and Pakistan offered “warships & air support”⁶. The total number of combat planes belonging to other countries than Saudi Arabia (85 fighter jets of different types) is almost as large as the number of Saudi jets directly involved in air strikes.*

On March 26 in the evening, open sources report, “King Salman bin Abdulaziz... made a series of phone calls to regional leaders amid an ongoing military campaign against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, the Saudi Press Agency reported”. As far as we know, “King Salman made the phone calls to Egyptian President Abdulfattah al-Sisi, the king of Jordan, emirs of Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar, and to Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir”. On the same day, several hours earlier, “King Salman had ordered the beginning of the sweeping military operation [in Yemen] early on Thursday [March 26]. He gave his order at 12 a.m. on Thursday, Al Arabiya News Channel reported”⁷.

On the same day, *Reuters* reports that “Saudi Arabia kept some key details of its military action in Yemen from Washington until the last moment, U.S. officials said, as the kingdom takes a more assertive regional role to compensate for perceived U.S. disengagement”. The same source also reports that “although the Saudis spoke with top U.S. officials as they debated an air assault in support of embattled Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi,

⁶ Staff writer, “Saudi ‘Decisive Storm’ waged to save Yemen”, *Al Arabiya News*, March 25, 2015, at the Internet address <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/26/GCC-states-to-repel-Houthi-aggression-in-Yemen-statement-.html>

⁷ Staff writer, “King Salman holds phone talks with regional leaders”, *Al Arabiya News*, March 27, 2015, at the Internet address <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/27/King-Salman-holds-phone-talks-with-regional-leaders.html>

U.S. officials acknowledged gaps in their knowledge of the kingdom's battle plans and objectives", and that "asked when he was told by Saudi Arabia that it would take military action in Yemen, General Lloyd Austin, the head of the U.S. military's Central Command, told a Senate hearing on Thursday [March 26, 2015] he spoke with Saudi Arabia's chief of defense 'right before they took action'". *Reuters* is also stating that "Saudi Arabia's air strikes point toward an aspiration to defend its regional interests with less reliance on the U.S. security umbrella that has long been the main thrust of Washington's relations with the oil-rich kingdom", and that "Riyadh has been growing increasingly assertive since early 2011, when Washington's reluctance to back former Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak in the face of mass protests led the Saudis to doubt its commitment to traditional Arab allies"⁸.

On March 26, 2015, open sources reported that "Saudi Arabia has the best equipped armed forces in the Gulf region", and that "the Saudi military numbers 227,000 troops, including 75,000 in the army, 13,500 in the navy and 20,000 in the air force. Some 16,000 personnel are committed to air defenses, 2,500 responsible for strategic missiles and 100,000 man the National Guard, according to the IISS Military Balance, 2015. The kingdom also has 24,500 paramilitary forces". The same open source reports that the "Saudi army has 600 heavy tanks, 780 light armored vehicles and 1,423 armored troop carriers. Its air force is equipped with 313 fighter jets, including F-15s, Tornados and Eurofighter Typhoons, as well as helicopters", that "considered a priority, air defenses and deterrents include 16 batteries of Patriot missiles, 17 batteries of Shahine missiles, 16 of Hawk missiles and 73 Crotale/Shahine missile units", and also that the Saudi "National Guard is an autonomous force under its own ministry and plays a role both in internal security and conventional defense"⁹.

On the same day, the White House openly "expressed concern about Iran's alleged role in stoking violence in Yemen" Alistair Baskey (who is Deputy Spokesperson for the White

⁸ Matt SPETALNICK, Warren STROBEL and Mark HOSENBALL, "With Yemen strikes, Saudis show growing independence from U.S.", *Reuters*, March 26, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/27/us-yemen-security-usa-idUSKBNOMN04020150327>

⁹ AFP, "Saudi Arabia: The Gulf's Best-Equipped Military", *DefenseNews*, March 26, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/mideast-africa/2015/03/26/saudi-arabia-gulfs-best-equipped-military/70494532/>

House's National Security Council) told *Agence France-Presse*: "We have concerns about Iranian activities in Yemen and reports of Iranian flow of arms into Yemen"¹⁰.

Also on March 26, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan accused Iran of trying to dominate the Middle East, open sources report. Turkey "earlier said it supports the Saudi-led military operation against Houthi rebels in Yemen and called on the militia group and its 'foreign supporters' to abandon acts which threaten peace and security in the region". Erdogan said, in a press conference: "Iran is trying to dominate the region. Could this be allowed? This has begun annoying us, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. This is really not tolerable and Iran has to see this"¹¹.

On March 27, British Prime Minister David Cameron offered "'firm political support' to Saudi Arabia over its air strikes on rebel camps in Yemen", media sources report. A spokeswoman for Cameron's Downing Street office declared that "the prime minister emphasised the UK's firm political support for the Saudi action in Yemen, noting that it was right to do everything possible to deter Huthi aggression, to support President Hadi and his legitimate government", that "they both [Cameron and the Saudi King] expressed concern that Huthi action would lead to an escalation in terrorism and extremism" which clearly is a "serious threat to both our nations". The same spokesperson said Cameron "reiterated that Britain will do all it can to support the Saudis to stop that from happening and offered to provide further UK support", an offer "which the [Saudi] monarch welcomed"¹².

On the same day, open sources report, "Yemen's foreign minister Riad Yaseen said on Friday that Iranian forces were in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa to support the Houthi militants, in an interview with Al Arabiya News Channel"¹³

¹⁰ Staff writer, "Obama calls Saudi king on 'collective Yemen goal'", *Al Arabiya News*, March 28, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/28/Obama-calls-Saudi-king-on-collective-Yemen-goal-.html>

¹¹ Humeyra PAMUK, "Erdogan: 'Iran is trying to dominate the region'", *Al Arabiya News*, March 27, 2015, at the Internet address <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/27/Erdogan-Iran-is-trying-to-dominate-the-region-.html>

¹² AFP, "Britain offers Saudis support over Yemen strikes", *Yahoo! News*, March 27, 2015, at the Internet address <http://news.yahoo.com/britain-offers-saudis-support-over-yemen-strikes-231638019.html>

¹³ *Al Arabiya News*, March 27, 2015, at the Internet address <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/27/Yemen-FM-Iran-forces-were-in-Sanaa-to-support-Houthis.html>

On March 27, 2015, open sources reported on *significant evolutions in the U.S, where both the Democrats and the Republicans strongly support ongoing Saudi-led actions in Yemen, against the Houthi rebels*. The White House declared that “President Barack Obama offered U.S. support for air strikes led by Saudi Arabia and Gulf allies on Houthi militia camps in Yemen during a phone call with King Salman”, open sources report. National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said that “while U.S. forces are not taking direct military action in Yemen in support of this effort, we are establishing a joint planning cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate U.S. military and intelligence support”. The same source is also quoting House Speaker John Boehner, a Republican, who declared: “I applaud the Saudis for taking this action to protect their homeland and to protect their own neighborhood... If America leads, our allies in the region would be tickled to death and would be happy to join a coalition. But America has to lead”¹⁴.

According to open sources in Saudi Arabia, “the main aim of the military operations in Yemen currently is to cut off the major supply routes of the Houthis, a senior [Saudi] defense official said on Friday [March 27, 2015]. And “the coalition forces are implementing this particular objective,” said Brig. Gen. Ahmad Assiri, consultant in the office of the defense minister, at press conference”, the *Arab News* daily reports. The same open source reports that *Saudi and Egyptian naval forces were already deployed, also on March 27, “to the to the Bab Al-Mandab strait off Yemen to secure the strategic sea passage, Egyptian military officials said”*. According to senior Yemeni and Egyptian officials, “a top priority after the air campaign has weakened the rebels is for coalition troops – likely Egyptians – to move into the southern port city of Aden”. We also know from open sources that “Yemeni Foreign Minister Riad Yassin said there was an ‘arrangement’ for ground troops of the Saudi-led coalition to deploy in Yemen. ‘It’s a comprehensive military operation’, he said speaking to *Al-Arabiya*”¹⁵.

On March 28, 2015, new really massive Saudi airstrikes took place in Yemen. They “hit Sanaa International Airport and the adjoining military airport, causing damage to planes, airport

¹⁴ Staff writer, “Obama calls Saudi king on ‘collective Yemen goal’”, *Al Arabiya News*, March 28, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/28/Obama-calls-Saudi-king-on-collective-Yemen-goal-.html>

¹⁵ “Lightning strikes pulverize Houthis as warships secure strategic sea passage”, *Arab News* daily, March 28, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.arabnews.com/featured/news/724406>

infrastructure and runways”, and they also “hit multiple provinces in Yemen, including Houthi strongholds and the bases of army units loyal to the group's main ally, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh”. Open sources say that “according to the Houthi-run interior ministry, at least 24 civilians were killed in Friday’s strikes, bringing the toll from Thursday [March 26] and Friday [March 27, 2015] to 45 civilians”. *Al Jazeera* also reports that, *after three days of intense Saudi air attacks, the Houthis said they are prepared to retaliate by means of suicide attacks on Saudi territory*. *Al Jazeera* reports that “Abdel Mon'em Al-Qurashi, a senior member of the Houthis Executive Committee, said on Saturday [March 28, 2015] that the group would destroy the Saudi regime for its ‘aggressive’ policies, Iran's Fars news agency reported”. The same open sources say that Quraishi told the Iranian press agency Fars: “If Saudi Arabia continues its aggressions against the oppressed Yemeni people, [Houthi] fighters will pave the way for the Saudi regime's destruction by conducting martyrdom-seeking operations inside Saudi Arabia in the coming hours”¹⁶.

Also on March 28, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Yemen’s president “who has fled the country” because of the Houthi recent military and political gains, “has called on Houthi fighters to ‘surrender’ at a meeting of the Arab League in the Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh, as Saudi-led air raids continued to strike the group's positions for a third day”. He also “called for the continuation of air strikes against Houthi targets”, until “until this gang [the Houthis] announces its surrender, exits all occupied territories in the provinces, leaves state institutions and military camps”. Concomitantly, Saudi King Salman “vowed that the military intervention his government is leading would continue until it brings ‘security’ to the Yemeni people”, and Saudi Arabia has also “vowed to do ‘whatever it takes’ to prevent Hadi's overthrow, accusing Iran of backing the attempted takeover by the Houthis, who have seized swathes of the country”¹⁷.

On the same day, senior Saudi military officials declared that most of the missiles and combat planes of the Houthis already have been neutralized or destroyed, open sources report.

¹⁶ “Houthis threaten Saudi Arabia with suicide bombings” , *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/houthis-threaten-saudi-arabia-suicide-bombings-150328150346923.html>

¹⁷ “Houthis told to 'surrender' at Arab League summit”, *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/arab-league-tackles-saudi-led-air-strikes-yemen-150328072254413.html#>

“We believe we destroyed most of these capabilities [ballistic missiles previously captured by the Houthis from the regular armed forces in Yemen]’, spokesman for the coalition Brig. Gen. Ahmed Asiri told a news conference in Riyadh”. Asiri also said “Houthi militias were no longer in possession of ‘any jet fighter or any command and control over any airbase or outside the airbases in Yemen’, according to the Saudi Press Agency (SPA)”, and that “The Saudi military will not allow a buildup on the borders”. He also declared that Saudi attack helicopters hit Houthi forces “to prevent a buildup of the Shiite fighters” near the Saudi border¹⁸.

On the same day, *Washington Post* strongly underlined that “the confrontation has added a new layer of unpredictability – and confusion – to the many, multidimensional conflicts that have turned large swaths of the Middle East into war zones over the past four years, analysts say”. The open source we are quoting here from lists *some of the problems analysts and strategists, together with foreign policy practitioners are confronted with in the context of the ongoing major crisis in Yemen*: “The United States is aligned alongside Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and against them in Yemen. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, who have joined in the Saudi offensive in Yemen, are bombing factions in Libya backed by Turkey and Qatar, who also support the Saudi offensive in Yemen”¹⁹.

On March 29, “Saudi-led airstrikes struck military targets and weapons depots controlled by Houthi rebels in the Yemeni city of Saada, where members of the militia released hundreds of convicted criminals and took control of the Kahlan military camp, Al Arabiya News Channel reported”. The same open source also reports that “Houthi militants reportedly released 1,800 inmates in Saada and attempted to release prisoners held in Yemen’s central prison and facilities in other cities”²⁰.

¹⁸ Staff writer, “Strikes pound Houthi depots in Yemen’s Saada”, *Al Arabiya News*, March 29, 2015, at the Internet address <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/29/Strikes-pound-Houthi-depots-in-Yemen-s-Saada.html>

¹⁹ Liz SLY, “How the Yemen conflict risks new chaos in the Middle East”, *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2015, at the Internet address http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/how-the-yemen-conflict-risks-new-chaos-in-the-middle-east/2015/03/27/1c4e7b5c-d417-11e4-8b1e-274d670aa9c9_story.html?wpisrc=nl_headlines&wpmm=1

²⁰ Staff writer, “Strikes pound Houthi depots in Yemen’s Saada”, *Al Arabiya News*, March 29, 2015, at the Internet address <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/29/Strikes-pound-Houthi-depots-in-Yemen-s-Saada.html>

On the same day, *Al Jazeera* reports, “clashes were reported in the Dar Saad district of Aden on Sunday [March 29, 2015] as fighters loyal to President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi battled Houthis trying to push their way to the city’s northern gate”, and “Hadi loyalists told Al Jazeera they had recaptured the airport, which has changed hands several times in recent days, as a gun battle raged in Aden’s central Crater district”. According to the same source, “nearly 100 people are reported to have been killed in the violence in Aden in recent days”, and “heavy fighting was also reported in Shabwa province, with local tribes in Beihan telling Al Jazeera that at least 40 Houthi fighters were killed in battles there”. We also know that “in some of the latest airstrikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition, raids targeted the Houthis’ main stronghold of Saada in the north and also hit ammunition depots and airports”. The same open source also reports that Nabil el-Araby, the head of the Arab League, said: “Yemen was on the verge of collapse which prompted a reaction from Arab states and the international community”, and “the [airstrikes] came after all other means to achieve a peaceful solution ... were exhausted. The [strikes] will continue until the Houthis hand over their weapons”. In the context of a two days long Arab League summit, *Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister said an intervention in Yemen using ground troops is an option taken into account*. “I don’t know that anyone wants to go into Yemen but we don’t rule anything out”, and “right now the objective is being achieved through an air campaign”, Jubeir said²¹.

The Houthi rebellion: some brief remarks on the history and geo-strategic meaning of a long regional conflict

Open sources say that the conflict between the Houthis and the central government in Sanaa is not at all a new one. In 2009, for example, *Al-Arabiya TV* reported that this “Shi’ite rebel group in the north of” Yemen wants “to restore a Za’idi Shiite sultanate overthrown in 1962”. The same open sources were quoting “Khattar Abou Diab, who teaches political science at the University of Paris III”, who “says the fighting between the Yemeni government and the Houthy rebels has been repeatedly flaring up for the past 15 years”. Abou Diab also said “that this is the sixth war in a long series between the Yemeni government and the Houthy rebels,

²¹ “Fighting grips Aden as Houthis continue to push south”, *Al Jazeera*, March 30, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/fighting-grips-aden-houthis-continue-push-south-150329193145474.html>

which began in 1994. This new conflict has been in gestation for a while, now, he adds. The founder of the Houthy sect, Badreddin Houthy, he notes, has tried to restore the old shi'ite sultanate and some suspect he was supported by countries like Iran, Qatar, or Libya". He also said that "Yemen is now in a serious phase of destabilization, with three different threats: one from the Houthy rebels, a second from separatists in the south, and third by an upsurge in al-Qaida activity", and that "the son of [founding] rebel leader Badreddin Houthy, Hussein, was killed during fighting with government forces in 2004, and relations between the rebels" governmental authorities in Sanaa "have been bitter, ever since". Abou Diab also said that "Iran officially denies involvement in these events, but there are signs of involvement, such as the presence of the Iranian version of Shiism, a version that has traditionally not been present for the last 1400 years. So, he argues, it appears to be a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia for leadership in the Arab world, along the lines of what is going on in Iraq and southern Lebanon". His main conclusion was that "the creation of a Hezbollah-like entity on the border with Saudi Arabia, he stresses, is not acceptable regionally, from a security standpoint"²².

A specialist extensively quoted by BBC says that, along the past several decades, the Houthi movement significantly evolved or changed. "Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), which is also known as the Houthi movement, has experienced several major transformations in arriving at its current dominant position in Yemeni politics", he says. We know that the Houthi movement "began in the 1990s as a youth-orientated revivalist movement that wanted to defend the religious traditions of a branch of Shia Islam known as Zaidism", and that "by the 2000s, it was leading a stubborn military insurgency that enveloped tribal politics in the far northern governorate of Saada. Its objective was to defend itself and its allies against President Ali Abdullah Saleh's military". We also know that "when the Arab Spring began in 2011, Ansar Allah was a welcome supporter of the peaceful protests against Mr Saleh and actively participated in the National Dialogue that followed his fall. The group backed regional autonomy, respect for diversity, and the strengthening of a democratic state". More recently, "as the interim government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi stalled in early 2014, Ansar Allah launched an aggressive military campaign in the north, defeating key military units allied

²² For text fragments quoted along this paragraph see "Clashes Between Houthi Rebels, Yemeni Government Forces", *Voice of America (VOA)*, November 2, 2009, at the Internet address <http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-2009-08-13-voa41-68706237/409334.html>

to Gen Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and the Islah political party”, and this major campaign launched by the Houthi movement “culminated in its descent upon the capital, Sanaa, in September 2014”. The same source reports that, starting with September 2014, “Ansar Allah’s stated aim was to install a more effective interim government to implement the outcomes of the National Dialogue. But clearly, it also sought military dominance in the north”, and that “in the last year, an alliance with its former enemy, Mr Saleh, played a key role in transforming Ansar Allah into the dominant military and political force in the country”; and, “for his part, the former president [Saleh] used the alliance with Ansar Allah to overthrow the Gulf-backed Hadi government and carve a more secure place for himself in future Yemeni politics”²³.

Serious and very reliable open sources strongly indicate the conflicts between governmental authorities in Yemen and the Houthis have been really major ones, generating a lot of casualties and damages, plus a large number of refugees. A RAND study published in 2010 reports that “official numbers released by the GoY [Government of Yemen] in August 2008 after the fifth war claimed that 6,000 houses, 900 farms, 90 mosques, 80 schools, and five health facilities had been damaged in Sa‘da. An additional 1,120 facilities, houses, and farms were damaged”²⁴.

One day after the opening stager of the Saudi-led military intervention against the Houthis, Fatima Alsmadi, a specialist in Iranian affairs at the Al Jazeera Center for Studies and author of several books, interviewed by *Al Jazeera* staff, offered some interesting opinions about the *significant and ongoing Iranian involvement in the Houthi crisis*. “In recent years, Iran has developed a relationship with the Houthis and supplied them with arms and military training, and kept in close contact with Houthi leaders to create a proxy for Iran in that region. This has recently been exposed as the Houthis have made significant advances in Yemen and have taken control of key cities and areas. They have ousted the government forces loyal to

²³ For the fragments quoted along this paragraph see Charles SCHMITZ, Professor, Towson University (Baltimore), “The rise of Yemen’s Houthi rebels”, *BBC*, March 28, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31645145>

²⁴ Barak A. SALMONI, Bryce LOIDOLT, Madeleine WELLS, “Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon”, *RAND National Defense Research Institute*, April 2010 (a report prepared for the Defense Intelligence Agency), p. 245, freely available in .pdf format at the Internet address <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG962.html>

President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi who is backed by Saudi Arabia”²⁵, Alsmadi said. *She also said that interpreting the ongoing events in Yemen as simply being a sectarian conflict might be a serious analytical mistake. According to her opinion, the conflict between the Houthis and the governmental authorities in Yemen is nothing else but an obvious proxy war fought by Saudi Arabia and Iran: “It is a political conflict not a sectarian one, even if recently the Houthis have been identified or depicted as a Shia sect. Some Saudi media outlets tend to portray the conflict in sectarian terms, i.e. Sunni vs Shia, in order to gain support from the predominantly Sunni Arab population, and to lend legitimacy to its actions. The conflict essentially remains a political one for power and influence in the region between Iran and Saudi Arabia (and its Arab and western allies)”*²⁶.

*In 2010, the Iranian interests in Yemen – and the way in which such interests might seriously enhance the decision to more or less openly support the Houthis – were already very clear. An extensive study published by RAND almost five years ago reported that “ultimately, Iran’s leverage in the region is highly contingent on the evolution of the Huthis as a movement. If the conflict continues and the Huthis evolve from an organism into an organization that provides social services or exhibits more standardized C3 arrangements, it may be more tempting for regional security officials to view the group as approaching the Hizbullah/Hamas model. This could intensify speculation about Iranian contacts with the group, increasing anti-Iranian and anti-Shi’a sentiment in the Gulf”. The text we are quoting here from also said that “in this case, the GCC states, already sensitive about sectarian activism and the presence of Shi’a within their borders, could take further actions to prevent Iran from meddling – thus legitimating such involvement in Tehran’s eyes. When paired with the GoY-approved tendency of analysts to refer to the Huthis as Shi’ite rebels and the increasing readiness of Iranian speakers to speak of Zaydis as “al-Huthi Shi’ites,” the sectarian motif of the GoY [Government of Yemen] information operations could become the dominant conceptual paradigm through which the conflict comes to be understood – not only by outsiders, but by regional protagonists themselves. This would harm prospects of conflict abatement”*²⁷.

²⁵ “Q&A: Yemen: ‘This is not a sectarian war’”, *Al Jazeera*, March 26, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/03/qayemen-sectarian-war-150326110539304.html>

²⁶ *Ibidem*

²⁷ Barak A. SALMONI, Bryce LOIDOLT, Madeleine WELLS, *op. cit.*, p. 269