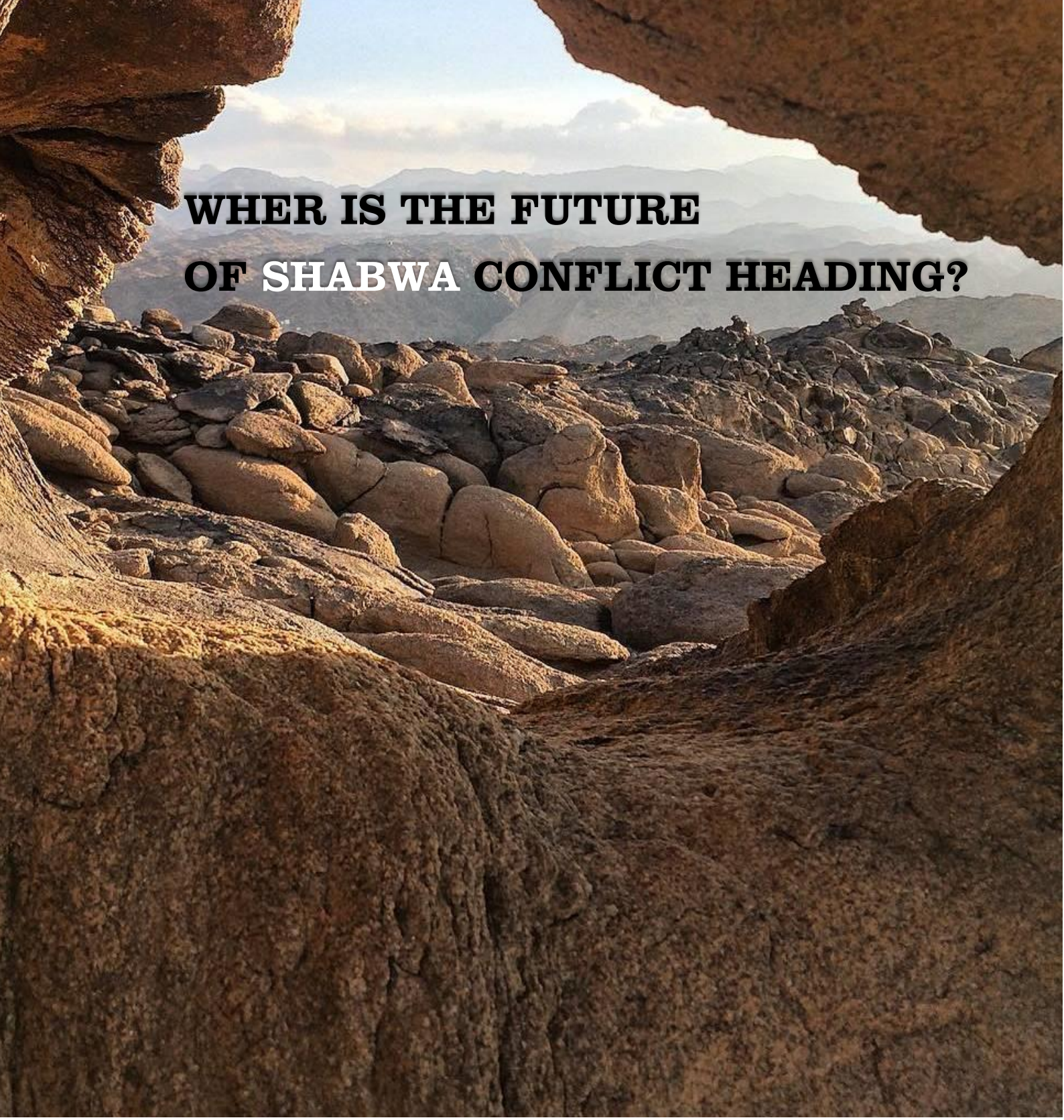

WHER IS THE FUTURE OF SHABWA CONFLICT HEADING?

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The Shabwa name is synonymous to oil, gas, resources, wealth along with the stereotype represented in poverty, diseases, tribal conflicts and the AQAP. This heavyweight governorate, overcrowded with all these contradictions, became the focus of attention of the international and regional actors. In spite of its economic wealth, its area which exceeds 47000 Km2, and its low population density, it is still remote, neglected, and developmentally retreating.

In March 2015, the Houthi-Saleh (Former President) alliance launched a war against the Shabwa with an aim to control it. The Southern Resistance alongside the Hadi Forces engaged in confrontations in several areas including the Ataq, the capital city of the governorate. Those confrontations lasted for months till the end of August of the same year. Shabwa was completely delivered to the Southern Movement (Hirak)'s leader Nasser Al Nouba after the Houthi withdrawal from the governorate's center. During the following two years, the Houthi and Saleh Forces presence had concentrated in Bayhan, in the north west of the governorate due to its being close to the Balhaf Pipeline and its location on a main road to the KSA before their alliance collapsed after the former President was killed in December 2017.

Shabwa was not any better prior to the Houthi-Saleh Forces' entry it in 2015, as the city of Azzan had been the epicenter of the AQAP activities in 2011-2012, after the organization declared it an Islamic Emirate, before it quickly withdrew due to pressure from local residents and tribal men, However, the AQAP remained active by launching some sporadic operations against forces in the Yemeni Army, After the eruption of the 2015 War, the organization regained its strength and imposed its control over the whole city of Habban. On February 1st 2016, the AQAP seized control on Azzan in the absence of any kind of resistance from people or the Yemeni Army, It established its local subsidiary known at that time as “Ansar Al-Shari'a”, However, Operation Decisive Sword, launched by the UAE-backed Shabwani Elite Forces in late February 2018, uprooted the organization there, as the second move of its kind after a similar success achieved in Hadhramaut, days after the beginning of “Operation Al Faisal” in the city of Mukalla and the entire Wadi Al Masini which connects between the two governorates.

On the Shabwani Elite

The Shabwani Elite Forces seized control over the Shabwa districts and its capital Ataq, consisting of at least 6000 Shabwani soldiers; they worked to establish security and stability there for a long time after regaining some of its districts from the AQAP in the beginning of 2018. They have made many achievements in the governorate including providing services and security for people and banning holding guns. For example, the Shabwani Elite Forces closed the biggest arms market in Ataq, known as “Al Wehda Market” which was inaugurated after the union between the states of North Yemen and South Yemen in 1990 although the latter’s(the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) laws imposed an all-out ban regarding holding and trading in arms, Moreover, the Elite Forces prohibited holding guns across the Shabwa districts, and distributes pamphlets on walls and shops to urge citizens not to walk around with weapon [(1)] Additionally, they pursued drug smugglers, and tightened noose on the smuggling rings according to a report issued by the UN in 2019.

Although the pivotal role they played in combating terrorism and securing the governorate, the Elite Forces in Shabwa, formed in 2016, kept their independent identity away from the Hadi government's Ministries of Defense and Internal. Thus, the hierarchy and promotions have not applied to them according to the military law which judges security and the army. Consequently, all members of the Shabwani Forces remained at the same ranking level except for the commanders of the Brigades.

The Shabwani Elite consists of the following Brigades:

Brigade	**Location**	**Commander**
The 1st Brigade	Balhaf Facility	Ashraf Mohammed Al Konbola
The 2nd Brigade	Azzan, Mayfa'a District	Mohammed Salem Al Bohar
The 3rd Brigade	Al Saeed District	Salem Hantosh Al Awlaki
The 4th Brigade	Ataq	Wagdy Baoom Al Kholaifi
The 5th Brigade	Jardan, Al Alam Camp	Abdullah Ahmed Al nasi
The 6th Brigade	Arma District	Mohammed Al Korabi (After his death due to heart attack in June 2020, he was succeeded by Teleb Badekhn as Acting Brigade Commander)
The 7th Brigade	Merkhah Al Sufla District	Maged Lamrok Al Nasi

The Shabwani Elite Forces attracted a large segment of unemployed youth, as many of them joined the military units, this in turn, helped in reducing the severe poverty rate and the low wages, as some families earn on the salaries paid to their sons affiliated with the Elite Forces, estimated as 1500 Saudi Riyal for each of them. [(2)]

After the August 2019 events, and the transfer of control to the Hadi government, in which the Islah Party dominates the decision making, the Shabwani Elite Forces were driven out of the governorate except for the 1st Brigade in Balhaf Facility and the 5th Brigade the Alam Camp in Jardan, near the Joint Coalition Forces (Emirati, Saudi, Bahraini and Sudanese troops) according to what a knowledgeable local source told "South 24". The two remaining Forces of the Shabwani Elite constitute a dilemma for the Shabwa local authority, managed by the Islah and other parties. This may be the reason behind the continuing escalation attempts in the governorate to remove the remnants of the Elite Forces, as they consider their survival as a prelude that may pave the way to the return of other Elite Brigades in case of military escalation.

Some observers believe that the reasons behind the defeat of the Shabwani Forces in the governorate after being controlled by the Hadi Forces are related to the reinforcements that

came from Marib, in addition to the bases of their establishment and distribution according to the tribal affiliations of each region, they have not been one coherent block. For instance, some local residents give names to Elite Forces based upon the dominant tribes in the areas of their presence such as (Al Wahidi Elite- Bani Hilal Elite- Balabid Elite- Al Awalik Elite). This is one of possible reasons that melted the Elite Forces in their first clash with the Hadi Army. Additionally, those forces were trained for certain tasks such as security and countering terrorism, so they have not been trained as a fighting combative army, those extra factors constituted a security risk regarding their survival as a force that enjoys presence and acceptance in the governorate. The majority of the Elite Forces' tasks focused on protecting Shabwa from the AQAP as well as blocking any Houthi penetration.

A conflict tour in August 2019

The escalation between the STC Forces and the Hadi Forces in the capital Aden during the summer of 2019 led to the STC's control over Aden and the governorate of Abyan after many days of tension between the two parties, especially after the Commander of the STC-affiliated the Security Belt, Brig. Gen. Munir Al Yafi, dubbed as Abul Yamamah was killed in a missile attack which took the lives of 31 soldiers. Later, the Group of Experts' Report, presented to the Security Council noted that the Houthi claims of bombing the Jalaa Camp are wrong, [(3)] This has been interpreted that there are other parties behind the attack,

The military situation in Shabwa erupted between the Hadi Forces, whom the Muslim Brotherhood- affiliated Islah Party dominates their decision making and the STC-affiliated Shabwani Forces after the failure of the local mediation committees to calm the tension, especially in the wake of the STC's control over Aden and Abyan. Quickly, the KSA, alongside the Hadi Forces, sent reinforcements from Marib to control the situation in Shabwa, and this is what actually happened after bloody battles between the two parties in Ataq, that witnessed the involvement of all Shabwani Brigades except for the 3rd and the 6th Brigades for tribal connection considerations. The harmful effects of this decision on the STC exceeded those for the Yemeni government according to the Group of Experts' Report to the Security Council. [(4)]

The conflict affected the military balance in Shabwa, as the Elite Forces' role declined, and most of their commanders and personnel stayed at home, which is somewhat similar to the retirement of the Southern military members after the 1994 War, especially after the control by a number of the Northern brigades, belong to the Islah-affiliated National Army in the Governorate, and which are commanded by Northern military elements including the commander of Bayhan Axis "Mofarah Behebah", whose Forces consist of 5 Brigades, General Staff Mohammed Al fati, the de facto Commander of the 21st Brigade, and Colonel Al Dharman, the Commander who is responsible for protecting the oil companies and the leadership headquarters in Al Oqla and the Austrian company OMV, in addition to the commanders of Northerners Battalions in most Brigades, and the commanders of the checkpoints in some districts.

Therefore, it was not a surprise that come Shabwani Elite members moved to Aden, Abyan and Mukalla following assassinations, arrests and pursuits targeting the Elite Soldiers, especially after the Islah security authority tightened its grip over the governorate, For

example, Zakaria Baouda Al Aqel, a soldier in the Shabwani Elite Forces" was assassinated in the city of Jool Al Reeda of Mayfaa District by unknown armed men, [5] Similarly, the Shabwani Elite Soldier, "Mohsin Al Qimishi" and kept for 3 months in a detention facility belonging to the Security authority, where he has been subjected to severe torture to extract forced confessions due to his affiliation with Elite Forces.[6] Additionally, there have been assassinations and organized operations by the AQAP, suspected of ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, in some locations and checkpoints, controlled by some Elite members in Shabwa, and the Security Belt in Abyan during the last two years. Local residents in Shabwa confirmed that American drones have intensively flied again over the governorate to pursue the AQAP's elements after the decline of the Shabwani Elite's control over it.

The impact of the Muslim Brotherhood's control over Shabwa

The internal military fighting in late August 2019 revealed shifts in the security and military dynamics of the governorate, as Shabwa Governor, Mohammed Saleh Bin Adyo, who was appointed by a presidential decree in 2018 [7], and who holds a position in the political circle of the Islah Party appeared more comfortable after the control by the Army Forces, which are controlled by the party to whom he belongs, after his influence had been limited on the administrative work within the governorate,

Moreover, Bin Adyo played a role in appointing his close circle and the Islah's members in important positions, to tighten his control over the governmental institutions. For example, he appointed his relative "Khaled Mohsen Al Doholi" as the Head of the governorate's Joint Operations Chamber in the governorate. He also appointed "Mahmood Abdullah Al Amri", as his Office Manager, along with his previous position as the General Manager of the Gas Company's Office in the governorate, [8] as well as appointing "Nayef Mohammed Al Qemeshi", who also affiliated with the Islah Party, [9] as the Commander of the Coastguards Forces. This contradicts Governor Adyo's talks about the benefits of variety and political pluralism in Shabwa, through facts on the ground that proved that a certain political party restructured the prominent local jobs and to be occupied by its members to dominate the decision making in many institutions and facilities within the governorate,

Parallel to that, the declaration of opening the port of Qena (Biʾr Ali) in Rudum District outside the institutions of the Transport Ministry, which is among the STC's share in the new Parity Government, according to the "Maritime Ports Law" No. 23 issued by President Hadi in 2013[10], stirred a wave of controversy among the government members, as the port has to be managed by the Ministry of Transport's Arabian Sea Ports Authority, based in Mukalla which manages the ports overlooking the Arabian Sea as the Mukalla, Socotra and Nashton. However, the Shabwa local authority ignored that and dealt with the matter in an illegal way and away from the technical navigation administration which is exclusively relevant to the Ports Authority and the General Authority for Maritime Affairs. Observers believe that the goal behind opening the port is possibly related to illegal motives such as smuggling operations, and at the same time, a kind of political intrigue against its main political and military rival, the STC, which has the Ministry of Transport as a part of its share.

Furthermore, the insistence that Bin Adyo remains as Shabwa Governorate constitutes a clear violation to the Riyadh Agreement's articles regarding the appointment of governors and

security directors in the southern governorates, by which Bin Adyo is supposed to be replaced according to the procedures that took place in Aden. However, the adherence to it by the Hadi Presidency and Yemeni Vice President Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, who is close to the Muslim Brotherhood, indicates the desire of these parties to continue to achieve the interests of the Islah party in the governorate, as his departure threatens ending them, especially since Shabwa is the last stronghold in South Yemen for the Muslim Brotherhood which enjoys a strong "military" authority.

As for the KSA, things seem completely contradictory to the efforts made in the Riyadh Agreement and inconsistent with what is happening on the ground. Riyadh has obviously supported the Islah Party with money and weapons in Shabwa, as shown through the quality of weapons and equipment used by the Special Forces and the rest of the units affiliated with the Brotherhood [(11)]. Otherwise, the KSA provides political and material support to "Bin Adyo", in the governorate, and played a pivotal role in equilibrating the events of August 2019, through its haste to support Hadi's Forces by sending military reinforcements from Marib to block any advance of the Shabwani Elite Forces.

It is not clear how this situation will continue, as Riyadh always talks about its support to Hady legitimacy, the National Army Forces and the security. It has been no longer a secret that the Islah Party (the Muslim Brotherhood) control the decision making in the government's institutions, especially the ministries of Defense and Interior. Consequently, Riyadh is directly responsible for the increase of the M.B 's influence in Shabwa, Hadhramaut and other parts in Yemen.

The Special Forces in Shabwa

The term "Special Forces" has emerged a lot recently, especially after the Ataq clashes in mid-July between General Security and the Special Forces. The latter, as a security body, is independent from the Ministry of Interior, in spite of its affiliation to Shabwa Security Administration. It has huge capabilities which are much bigger than the Shabwa Security Administration. The Special Forces spread across Shabwa Districts, led by the Commander "Abdrabbu Lkaab Al Sharif" and consists of more than 5000 soldiers who don't have the Ministry of Interior's military numbers, and don't take salaries but they take a daily pocket money and receive many shapes of aids from tax and oil revenues or external assistance. Reliable sources confirmed to "South24 " that these forces receive a monthly support of about 500000 dollars, from "Hamoud Saeed Al Mekkhlafi" the leader in the Islah Party, supported by Turkey, and who currently stays in Oman. This confirms that the Special Forces was established for special agenda, and to serve certain M.B interests in the governorate through getting financial resources outside the Ministry of Interior's budget.

On the other hand, this force was established on an extremist ideological basis, and the moral guidance of these forces includes clerics in the Yemeni Islah party. Shabwa, like the rest of the southern governorates, has distanced itself from the impact of the conflict on sectarian grounds. However. The relationship of the Special Forces, represented by its commander "Abdrabbu Lkaab Al Sharif" and its General Staff Ahmed Daraan Alsayed, with the Houthis is close. Both of them belong to the so-called "Al Saada" (Al al-Bayt). Many of their uncles in Merkhah support the so-called "the Quranic March".

Recently, the detention of a military convoy, affiliated with the UAE Forces in Balhaf Gas Facility days ago by armed men who belong to “Al Mehdar Tribe”, due to prior issue, while the convoy was in its way to Al Alam Camp in Jardan District for making monthly troops exchange, and which ended by Saudi Mediation, enhanced the possibility that the Special Forces is the party who arranged the detention and the protection of the militants according to frequent comments, due to the close relationship between the tribes loyal to the Houthis and the Special Forces run by the Islah Party in Shabwa.

It is clear that the Special Forces, who work outside the formal frame of the state, do not have the acceptance among many local community’s circles. Because of the provocative and violent practices of its Commander Abdrabbu Lkaab Al Sharif against the governorates' citizens. This pushed Al Awalik Tribes to issue a statement, directed to the Bayhan tribes especially “Al Ashraf" to whom Al Sharif belongs, to adopt a clear attitude towards the leader’s practices, which stir “sedition” among the people of the same governorate. (12)

New Regional Actors

In addition to fighting the AQAP, The Western engagement with Shabwa, emerged through global oil companies and a number of facilities such as Balhaf Facility for exporting the liquified Natural gas, which is one of the biggest economic projects in South Yemen, and run by the French company Total, and the American “Hunt” Which stopped working in mid-April 2015, after declaring a state of force majeure following the outbreak of war, and then became a base for the Emirati forces in the governorate. As for the Austrian OMV company, it resumed its activity in 2018, to export through the facilities of Sector 4 and the Al-Nashima port in the governorate. (13)

Today, interest is no longer limited to international level, but has turned into a regional race over the most important economically strategic sites in Shabwa, and the matter has turned into something like a conflict between regional powers and their allies on the ground. On the one hand, Turkey and Qatar are trying to confuse the position of the Arab coalition in the governorate, especially between the UAE forces in the Balhaf facility, and the Saudi presence in the vicinity of Ataq city and its airport. On the other hand, it is trying to create an environment of political and security differences that would create more chaos in the governorate. As soon as confrontations intensify between the local parties on both sides, they end, as usual, with Saudi-Emirati understandings, though reluctantly at times, without knowing details of their content.

Back to the Port of Qena, which was opened outside the formal frame of the state, it is clear that Ankara, which has military bases in Somalia Coast, tries to secure its interests through it by providing the necessary support for its local agents, represented by the M.B in Shabwa, to strengthen its influence in South Yemen. For example, and according to sources in the local authority in Shabwa, the first Turkish he first shipment of Turkish weapons smuggled through the port of Qena arrived four months ago and was unloaded into fuel tanks, then transferred to one of the Islah party camps east of Ataq. (14)

Parallel to that, Oman became one of the active players on the Yemeni scene, through its large influence on the Houthis whose delegations go to Muscat constantly or stay in it permanently. While Oman plays the role of “mediator” in Yemen, its latest roles reveal task bigger than neutrality and the convergence of disputing views, as Oman became a platform of launching a lot of illegal Houthi and M.B activities in the Yemeni governorates according to what a knowledgeable source told “South24”.

Moreover, Muscat’s intervention was limited at one time to the governorate of Mahra and to some extent in the city of Taiz, but the Omani ambition has recently extended to Marib, Hadhramaut and Shabwa. For example, an Omani delegation visited Shabwa early this month to look at investment opportunities, according to what was announced, however, observers denounced the visit raising questions about the conditions in Shabwa which do not encourage investment, especially since the Hadi government and the local authorities run by Islah are not performing their duties well, on the security level on particular. This is most likely what was understood as the beginning of Omani intelligence activity in the governorate.

Accordingly, it can be said that the conflict in Shabwa was built on an economic basis rather than political, as the party who controls the most important oil and gas will be addressed seriously by the international community. Therefore, the M.B in Shabwa strongly clings to preserve their locations there. On the other hand, the Houthis try to launch a war in Marib for the same reason, especially as it is located within the oil governorates known as “the Black triangle” along with Al Gawf and Shabwa. So, the economic resources, especially “oil” play a decisive role during the conflicts.

Consequently, the general situation may head to an all-out political settlement with commitment to its articles, or to a scenario in which new conflicts erupt on a larger level, especially since the choices M.B and the Houthis, as religious movements, always lead to zero results which don’t accept bargaining, and they may escalate the conflict with the participation of their regional allies if the settlement path don’t match their goals and interests. This unstable climate, particularly in Shabwa, led to the increase of the AQAP’s role again and would fuel more increase.

On the other hand, and in spite of the indirect criticism, which every now and then directed against Riyadh due to its policies in the Yemeni file especially Aden and Shabwa, there is questions about if the KSA pays the price of its miscalculations after it let down the reliable Southern Parties on which it sincerely bet. It is clear that KSA will lose its most important allies if it continues in its policies which contradict the Riyadh Agreement, by supporting the behavior of the Hadi Government, especially in light of the weak position of the Hadi government in comparison with other parties on the ground.

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(The opinions expressed in this piece reflect the opinion of the author)

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