

Report: Roundtable on “Situation in Yemen” with Mr. Raza Naeem, Assistant Professor at the School of Governance and Society at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore, on April 01, 2015.

## **The conflict in Yemen is not sectarian**

**Aarish U. Khan**

ISLAMABAD: “The conflict in Yemen is not sectarian; it has its distinct local political dynamics. The Zaydi Shia Imams have been ruling Yemen since independence from the Ottomans in 1918,” said Mr. Raza Naeem, Assistant Professor at the School of Governance and Society at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore. He expressed this opinion at a roundtable discussion organized by the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) Islamabad on 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2015. Giving a detailed account of the political history of Yemen, Mr. Naeem shared that Ali Abdullah Saleh—who ruled Yemen from 1981 to 2011 with the support of the Saudi government—was also a Shia of the same Zaydi denomination to which the Houthis belong. He added that the Houthis were also allied with Saleh in the beginning and that after 2011 Saleh had taken refuge in Saudi Arabia. Mr. Naeem said that after breaking up from 2004 to 2011 with six wars the Houthis and Saleh were back together again.

Mr. Naeem stated that the Houthis fought against 70,000 troops of the Egyptian army and Nasser from 1962 to 1970 (Nasser had used phosgene and mustard gas against the Houthis. The latter had suffered 1,500 fatalities and 1,500 injuries from the chemical weapons. Total Yemenis killed were estimated to be 100,000 while Egyptian army suffered 20,000 fatalities).

Mr. Naeem dilated in great detail upon the sociocultural difference that prevailed between the northern and southern parts of Yemen before they were unified into a single state in 1990. He was of the view that South Yemen had a distinctly more liberal and non-tribal sociocultural identity from North Yemen before unification with a mix of socialist military officers, Marxists, Maoists, Social Democrats, and Arab nationalists. He added, however, that after the unification in 1990, the dictatorial Saleh government that got to rule over the whole of Yemen, applied the more conservative and tribal sociocultural traits of North Yemen throughout the united territories thus crushing the unique liberal culture of the South even though it was the only functional democracy in the Arab World. “The unification of Yemen has failed,” said Mr. Naeem.

Mr. Naeem was of the opinion that al-Qaeda was not as strong in Yemen as was being portrayed in the media. He argued that the threat of al-Qaeda was hyped by Saleh for acquiring political and financial support from the West. He maintained that the al-Qaeda office in Aden was in Saleh’s presidential palace according to the local Adenis. In this kaleidoscope of tribal, ethnic, sectarian, ideological, and regional rivalries outsiders muddled at their own peril.