

The Challenges of Dealing with Yemen's Deep Crises (ARI)

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Theme: President Saleh's foremost concern is to keep total economic and political power in his own hands as long as he lives, and to hand it down to his son afterwards. The US and the international community are concerned with the threat posed by al-Qaeda to regional and international peace and many educated Yemenis are concerned about the potential for tension between Saleh's goal and that of the international community.

Summary: The first decade of the new millennium was supposed to be Yemen's best in modern times. However, in the summer of 2004 an open-ended rebellion broke out in the Saada region in the far north. By mid 2007, resentment against President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime among the population of the southern governorates came to a head, with thousands of people pouring out onto the streets every day. While Saleh is busy waging war against the insurgents in the north and trying hard to quash the massive unrest in the south, Saudi and Yemeni al-Qaeda operatives have merged together in the so called al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Any sound strategy to tackle Yemen's complexities should meet several conditions: (1) it should be comprehensive in scope and inclusive of political, economic and security issues; (2) its priority should be to dismantle the ongoing political conflicts in the north and south; and (3) it should fully engage Saleh using a combination of incentives and disincentives.

Analysis: The first decade of the new millennium was supposed to be Yemen's best in modern times. President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who came to office in north Yemen in 1978, had by the beginning of the decade survived the unification of the two Yemens, eliminated his southern Socialist opponents in a brief civil war in 1994 and solved his country's border disputes with Oman, Eritrea and Saudi Arabia. He also centralised power in his own hands and in the hands of his very loyal sons, brothers, nephews and in-laws, and weakened all potential competitors within his family, clan, larger tribe, ruling and opposition parties, the country as a whole, and even among Yemeni politicians living in exile. While grooming his son Colonel Ahmed to succeed him, Saleh perhaps thought he had brought Yemen's history to an end.

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But by the middle of the decade, Saleh's greatest achievements began to crumble. In the summer of 2004 an open-ended rebellion broke out in the Saada region in the far north with the government in Sana'a accusing a Shiite group called the Houthis of trying to reinstate Imamate rule, which had dominated Yemen's history for more than a millennium before it was finally overthrown in 1962. In 2005 Yemen's divided opposition, which Saleh had succeeded in weakening, surprised him by adopting a shared comprehensive reform agenda, calling among other things for a parliamentary government similar to those found in India, the UK and many other genuinely democratic countries. In the late summer of 2006 the opposition rallied behind a single candidate to challenge Saleh in the first reasonably competitive presidential election in the country's history.

By mid 2007, resentment against Saleh's regime among the population of the southern governorates, the former South Yemen, came to a head with thousands of people pouring out onto the streets on a daily basis. To make things even worse, the booming oil revenues on which Saleh's regime depended to meet the country's need for hard currency, took a nose dive by the end of 2008, depriving the country in 2009 of almost 65% of its foreign revenues. While Saleh is busy waging war against the insurgents in the north and trying hard to quash the massive unrest in the south, Saudi and Yemeni al-Qaeda operatives have merged together in the so called al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Saleh, who celebrated 31 years in office in July of last year, often quotes an old Yemeni adage, telling journalists and visitors: 'ruling Yemen is like dancing over the heads of snakes'. In saying so, Saleh is probably trying to imply that ruling Yemen is no easy task and that he is the only dancer in town who can manage not to be bitten. But the convergence of Yemen's mighty challenges –a war in the north, a secessionist movement in the south, AQAP and the economic crisis– casts a dark shadow of doubt not only on the dancer's ability to perform but on the stability of the stage itself.

War in the North

For most of Yemen's history in the Islamic era, political, economic and social power was dominated by the Hashemites, comprising around 12% of Yemen's current population of 24 million. The Hashemites, who claim to be descendants of the Prophet Mohammed through the sons of his daughter Fatimah, ruled Yemen intermittently for some 11 centuries. They legitimised their reign exploiting two mechanisms: (a) the teachings of Zaidism, a very moderate Shiite school followed by roughly a quarter of Yemen's total population; and (b) a carefully crafted and maintained social structure in which one's political, economic and social roles were determined by lineage.

In September 1962 the Hashemites' theocratic rule in North Yemen was abruptly brought to an end when a group of military officers backed by Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt took over the Imam's palace and declared the establishment of a Republic. The event marked the beginning of a six-year civil war between the Republicans supported by Nasser and the Royalists backed by the Saudis. With the Royalists failing repeatedly to capture the capital, the two sides finally agreed on a power-sharing deal which preserved the Republican regime but tilted power towards an alliance of Zaidi sheiks and military officers, who come from the two very powerful northern Zaidi tribes: Hashid and Bakeel. One unresolved issue in the new regime was and still is the question of religious legitimacy. According to the Yemeni Constitution and laws, any Yemeni can be a legitimate ruler, but in Zaidi doctrines only a Hashemite male fulfilling certain conditions can be a legitimate Imam.

For Hashemites and tribesmen sharing power in the Republican era, the question of what makes a legitimate Imam served as a dividing factor. Therefore, consecutive republican Presidents, who came from strong and heavily-armed northern tribes, tried constantly to undermine the Zaidi faith in order to prevent a come-back by the Hashemites. By contrast, the Hashemites of the Zaidi sect defied attempts to assimilate them into the mainstream Sunni sect. Parties to the conflict, however, succeeded in keeping their differences within certain well-defined limits. The dynamics of political conflict between the two groups were transformed only after the unification of Yemen. On the one hand, the newly-founded Republic of Yemen (RoY) embraced a fairly open political system that allowed citizens to exercise some political and civil rights, including forming political parties and interest groups, establishing and owning newspapers and freedom of expression. On the other, the Zaidi Hashemites of northern Yemen sought to take advantage of newly introduced reforms by allying themselves with the Socialists of the south –some of them secularised Sunni Hashemites–.

In turn, and fearing the impact of racial affinities, President Saleh supported the creation and expansion of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform –known by its Arabic short name *Islah* (reform)– as an Islamic-oriented Sunni party comprising Yemen’s Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni and Zaidi groups close to the regime. Apparently, Saleh wanted first to balance the Socialists of the south with the Islamists of the north, and then to further weaken the potential for a come-back by the northern Hashemites. Concurrently, Saleh also made sure to divide the Hashemites into several political parties, preventing them from establishing a unified political force.

In the summer of 1994 Saleh, with the support of the newly-founded *Islah*, defeated his southern Socialist rivals in a brief civil war that lasted for about 70 days. In the aftermath of the war, Saleh started to shift his political alliances gradually away from Sunni *Islah* towards a Zaidi group called the Youth Believers (YB), that portrayed itself as a revivalist group within the Zaidi sect. Possible reasons for the shift were many but the most important were Saleh’s worry about the growing power and influence of *Islah* –perceived to be supported by the Saudis– as well as his desire to pursue old policies of undermining Zaidism, this time by encouraging new trends seeking the legitimisation of his reign. In addition, Saleh faced strong pressure to settle his country’s border dispute with the Saudis, and by supporting the Youth Believers –who were concentrated in border areas– he might have sought to counterbalance Saudi influence itself and not only pro-Saudi political forces. In supporting the Youth Believers, Saleh allowed them to establish religious schools to teach Zaidism, receive Iranian support and have their textbooks printed by the government. Saleh also provided them with a modest monthly allowance, the exact amount of which has always been disputed.

It is not quite clear how the relationship between the Youth Believers and Saleh changed over the course of 10 years from alliance to rivalry. What is evident is that during the period Yemen did witness many internal and external developments affecting not only Saleh’s regime but also the Zaidi revivalist group. Internally, Saleh’s concerns for his own political survival and for retaining power within his own family afterwards seem to have collided with the Youth Believers’ growing influence and independence. Externally, Saleh solved his country’s border problems with the Saudis and he badly needed to offset the Sunni Saudi’s fear of a growing radical Shiite group on its southern front.

After concluding a border agreement with Saudi Arabia, Saleh pursued a policy of containing the Youth Believers by various means, including strengthening his support for a Saudi-backed and presumably apolitical Salafi movement. Included in the Salafi movement are groups such as the revivalists al-Hikmah al-Yamaniah Anthropoc Association and the traditional Dar al-Hadith. In return, the Youth Believers exploited Saleh's alliance with the US in the global war on terrorism and adopted the famous Shiite slogan 'God is great, death to America, death to Israel'. The Youth Believers' followers began chanting the slogan in mosques and daubing it on walls around Yemen's capital city. In response, Saleh ordered a crack-down, eventually apprehending and jailing scores of Youth Believers' followers. But when he sent troops to the Saada region in June 2004 to capture Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, the leader of the Youth Believers, after whom the group would later be named, the Youth Believers responded violently and the event marked the beginning of the first war. Since 2004 Yemen has witnessed an average of one war per year, with the sixth round of violence starting in August 2009 and continuing to the present.

The Saada war has served as a catalyst for the failure of the Yemeni state by draining the country's limited resources, encouraging southerners to challenge the regime, creating a haven for al-Qaeda and eroding Saleh's legitimacy. Nevertheless, Saleh seems unwilling to accept the Houthis as a political and social force. In fact, the weaker he becomes, the more he is insisting on a military solution to this political conflict.

Calls for Secession in the South

Having militarily won the political conflict with his southern partners in the process of unification, Saleh's victory and subsequent policies shattered the national feelings that served as the driving force for unity. The northern military, tribal and jihadist invasion of the south in 1994 looted community, state, and private assets, including state buildings, equipment and most of the country's land, which was publicly owned under the command economy followed in the south during the period from 1970 to 1990. In addition, the government adopted policies that intentionally or unintentionally led to the cultural, political and economic marginalisation of southerners. Most senior and junior officials ended up in exile or were forced to take early retirement, or chose just to quit their jobs and seek refuge in the seclusion of their homes. Names of streets, schools, TV and Radio stations and other public places were changed as a part of a comprehensive unwritten policy of erasing any memory of the past. Public enterprises of the former southern state were privatised –usually sold to officials in highly corrupt deals–. As it turned out, southern Yemenis lost more than the war of 1994: humiliated by defeat, most southerners went unheard, while others staged small-scale protests but faced brutal repression.

When, in 1995, the government started to implement an economic restructuring programme aimed at stabilising the economy, it focused primarily on cutting expenditure on social programmes and withdrawing subsidies from basic commodities. The southerners, whose lives were completely dependent on public programmes, were hit the hardest. While the northern-dominated government in Sana'a relied for survival on revenues from resources extracted from the south, the people of the south were by the beginning of the new millennium living on the sidelines of the national economy. Rocketing inflation consumed their income and the economic restructuring programme deprived them of free education, health and other public services.

After approximately 13 years of deprivation and frustration, southerners finally took to the streets, sometimes in their hundreds of thousands. There were many factors responsible

for the southerners' outrage, but three stand out. The first is the failure of the September 2006 presidential elections to produce any meaningful change in terms of leadership or policies. In fact, the strong show by the opposition parties during the election led Saleh to adopt tougher policies. Surprised by a strong campaign against his policies and leadership style, and by the southern-born opposition candidate's refusal to accept the results as legitimate, Saleh viewed the whole affair as a personal insult and in retaliation began his new term in office by imposing measures restricting the freedom of expression and travel. Activists who backed his opponent during the election were jailed and tried in fabricated cases or in cases related to acts during the campaign. While the election campaign weakened Saleh vis-à-vis his challengers from within his ruling General People's Congress and from opposition parties, his reaction has been to concentrate power and wealth and centralise decision-making in his inner circle. The second and third factors contributing to the uprising in the south have been the regime's inability to crush the insurrection of the Houthis in the far north and the deterioration in their living conditions.

When the southern movement started in mid-2007, it was led by *ad hoc* organisations formed by military and security retirees. At the time, protesters called for the return to service, promotion and compensation of those southerners who were forced to take early retirement or lost their jobs after the 1994 civil war. They also called for the return of land confiscated by powerful –mostly northern– military officers and sheiks.

Shocked by the magnitude and intensity of the protests, the government adopted a dual carrot and stick policy. On the one hand, it tried to reinstate, raise salaries and promote those who were forced to retire or had lost their jobs. It also sought to buy out influential leaders in the protest movement by appointing them to senior government positions and giving them cars, houses and other benefits. It tried, on the other hand, to repress the movement. Between mid-2007 and the end of 2009, scores of protesters and policemen were killed and thousands of people were detained for varying periods of time. Government repression increased rapidly as protesters started calling for the secession of the south although its ability to do so had significantly declined, leading it to lose control over certain areas. Some argue that the government might have been supporting jihadists to counter secessionist groups, a policy that aggravated the situation in some areas. In such a context of chaos and weak or missing government control, AQAP began to expand and establish training camps.

The Resurrection of al-Qaeda

The roots of the terror groups in Yemen lie in the dynamics of inter- and intra-Yemeni political conflicts. During the 1970s and 80s, religious extremism was encouraged by both the Yemeni and Saudi governments as a strategy to contain the Marxists in the south. Later on, the task of the Yemeni jihadists would be expanded to liberating Afghanistan from the Soviet occupation. In less than a decade, the Yemeni jihadists could claim several triumphs: (1) victory against the Marxist forces in the north who, with the backing of the Communist regime in the south, were trying to topple Saleh's regime; (2) the expulsion of the Soviets from Afghanistan; (3) the disintegration of the Soviet Union; and (4) the reunification of the two Yemens –an event directly linked to the collapse of the Communist regimes around the globe–.

By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the Yemeni jihadists began to return home. But they were not alone on their return trip. Many of their international comrades, unable to return to their countries out of fear of prosecution, found in the

newly-founded Republic of Yemen a haven. While the chaos resulting from the hasty unification of the two Yemens may have played a role in attracting the so-called Arab Afghans, some argue that they came to Yemen because they had a role to play, a new round of jihad, this time against the Yemeni left in general and members of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) in particular. In the first few years of unification, Yemen witnessed a wave of terror attacks mostly targeting leaders of the YSP and of parties close to it.

In the 1994 civil war between the ruling northern and southern elites, Yemeni and Arab jihadists, who fought in Afghanistan, took Saleh's side in the war. In return, the government rewarded the jihadists in various ways. Yemenis were incorporated into security and military forces and some groups, especially in the south, were encouraged as a way of containing the moderate Islah. Some Arab jihadists were incorporated into formal and informal educational institutions, but most of them would soon be forced out of Yemen due to mounting pressure on the government from other countries in the aftermath of terror attacks in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and elsewhere involving elements believed to be operating from Yemen.

In the years after September 11 terrorist attacks, Saleh, who had resisted the idea of allowing US investigators access to detainees accused of attacking the USS Cole in October 2000 in the Gulf of Aden, willingly or unwillingly joined the international war on terror. In 2002 he allowed US drones to assassinate some al-Qaeda leaders on Yemeni soil. He later entered into a controversial dialogue programme with al-Qaeda, apparently giving them some financial benefits and allowing them to move freely. The latest resurrection of al-Qaeda can be attributed to three main factors: (1) the Yemeni government was pressured by the international community to restrict the movement of al-Qaeda operatives and prevent them from travelling to Iraq to engage in the jihad, much to the annoyance of al-Qaeda; (2) as the government's financial resources dwindled, al-Qaeda operatives asked for more, while the government was unable to deliver; and (3) the intensification of political conflict –electoral or by other means– made the Yemeni regime reluctant to hunt down al-Qaeda members, either because they represented a potential ally in the regime's war for survival, because the regime did not perceive al-Qaeda as a threat compared to other challenges or because the regime had become too weak to confront it.

As to the spark that triggered the recent events, it is very likely that the US was aware that al-Qaeda was plotting an attack against the US and, as a result, sought to foil the plan by carrying out –alone or in cooperation with the Yemeni government– the pre-emptive attacks that were finally launched on 17 and 24 December 2009. This assumption is supported by mounting evidence, including the following: (a) the father of the Nigerian youth Umar Farouk Abdulmutalib, who tried to blow up a Northwest Airlines plane, contacted US intelligence in early December and informed them of his son's affiliation with al-Qaeda and his last call from Yemen; (b) the American media were at the time concerned about the role played by the US-born preacher Anwar al-Awlaqi, who is resident in Yemen, in the Fort Hood attack; (c) US officials had repeatedly expressed worries about AQAP's exploitation of Yemen's security conditions to establish itself and recruit and train new members; (d) Abdulmutalib, who left Yemen in early December, did not immediately head towards the US; (e) the US strikes targeted areas believed to have been the places where al-Awlaqi was hiding and in which Abdulmutalib is believed to have been trained and equipped with explosives; (f) AQAP operatives came out and threatened to retaliate after the first attack on 17 December; and (g) *Saleh* would have never allowed

the US to strike areas controlled by one of his very important political allies –the Awlaqi tribe– unless he had been convinced that there was an eminent threat against the US.

A Rentier Economy

During the era of division, the two Yemens depended on a rentier economy, with the south relying on the Soviets and the north depending on the Gulf countries. After unification in 1990, Yemen faced its most serious economic crisis. This was largely due to its stance on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, that led it to be viewed by its neighbours and by the international community as a backer of the Iraqi dictator. To punish Yemen, the Saudis expelled hundreds of thousands of Yemeni workers and, as a result, the country lost not only its workers' remittances but also development aid, taking the Yemeni economy very close to collapse.

At the time, the international financial institutions and the Yemeni government agreed in 1995 on a reform programme to stabilise the economy. The premise of the reform was to fund investments and create new jobs for the unemployed. But the programme had mixed results. On the one hand, the government succeeded in stabilising the economy; on the other, savings from the withdrawal of subsidies largely ended up in the pockets of corrupt officials. The reform programme ground to complete halt, especially after Yemen's oil revenues started to rise, first because of increased production and afterwards due to rising oil prices.

While paying donors lip service, the Yemeni government evaded implementing any genuine reform that could have a negative effect on Saleh's grip on power. In fact, Saleh has been keen to concentrate investments in the hands of his relatives and of those whose loyalty to him and his heir apparent is unquestionable. The outcome of Saleh's self-serving policies has been catastrophic. Poverty grew so fast that it came to affect most of the population, making Yemen the poorest country not only in the Arab world but also in the Middle East and the world in general, aside from Sub-Saharan Africa. Levels of corruption climbed to new heights and the institutions responsible for holding public officials to account were further weakened to give corrupt officials full immunity from prosecution. Over a period of almost 20 years, the Yemeni House of Representatives was unable to impeach even a single official. Corrupt and incompetent officials were recruited on the basis of kinship and personal loyalty and have rendered state institutions almost useless by personifying the functions of those institutions.

Conclusion

The Way Out

President Saleh's foremost concern is to retain total economic and political power in his own hands as long as he lives, and to hand it down to his son afterwards. The US and the international community are concerned about the threat al-Qaeda poses to regional and international peace and many educated Yemenis are concerned about the potential for tension between Saleh's goal and that of the international community. Of all his enemies in the south and north, al-Qaeda appears to be the least dangerous and less of a threat to what he values most. In fact, he has had it on his side on at least few occasions. Saleh might not be using al-Qaeda or the Houthis to blackmail neighbouring and friendly countries, as some of his critics often suggest, but it is obvious that he lacks a strong incentive to be rid of al-Qaeda once and for all or to reach a settlement with the Houthis. With Saleh and his country's future depending largely on what the outside world says and

does, al-Qaeda is an insurance policy for dancer and stage, but can also become an accelerator for the collapse of both of them.

The international community's options in Yemen are very limited. On the one hand, it cannot turn its back on Yemen without risking disastrous consequences; on the other, it cannot rally behind Saleh against his opponents either in the north or south or even against al-Qaeda alone while leaving the other two for Saleh to handle alone. Any sound strategy to tackle Yemen's complexities should meet several conditions: (1) it should be comprehensive in scope and inclusive of political, economic and security issues; (2) it should aim as its priority to dismantle the ongoing political conflicts in the north and south –the Saudis, in particular, should immediately stop paying the bills of the war in the north and direct the money instead towards development and reconstruction–; and (3) the international community should fully engage Saleh using a combination of incentives and disincentives.

Containing the secessionist movement in the south and preventing Yemen from degenerating into a Somalia-like state will require restructuring and strengthening the Yemeni state and political system in ways that will allow meaningful power-sharing, accountability, the de-personalisation of power and the rule of law. Parliamentarianism, deep decentralisation, bicameralism, proportional representation and free media are all key components to any viable solution to Yemen's current myriad problems. The separation of south and north is almost impossible and if allowed could lead to the breakdown of the country as a whole into warring tribes, sects, regions and ideological orientations. As in Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and elsewhere, only extremist groups focusing on passion and advocating terror can gain advantage in the event of a split.

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