

BULLETIN

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Internal Divisions and Regional Dimensions of the Crisis in Yemen

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The wish by Yemen's protest movement for a more prosperous future is overshadowed by numerous regional and tribal claims to power. President Ali Abdullah Saleh's allies are engaged in a fight with the northern Hashid tribe that is bordering on civil war. With the attention of the security forces occupied, separatist movements are gaining strength in the north and south. Al-Qaeda, too, is gaining strength and support. At this stage of the crisis, the EU has only a limited role to play.

Yemen has never stood united. It is unstable now and always has been. When Saleh became president of North Yemen in 1978, 12 years before the North-South unification, a CIA report predicted that he would last six months. Decades later, Saleh has turned out to be a cunning leader that has managed and exploited Yemen's divisions along tribal lines to his favour. With Saleh now in a Saudi Arabia being treated for wounds received during an attack, it becomes clear how fragile Yemen's relative political stability has been while under his rule. As protesters call for a revolution in Sana'a, other tribal and more powerful groups are positioning themselves in order to secure their interests in a Yemen that is running dangerously low on natural resources, including oil and water.

Sana'a and the North. Even while he is in Saudi Arabia, President Saleh's influence is being kept strong through a network of family and extended family members. At least 14 sons, nephews and in-laws occupy crucial senior posts in Yemen's political and security apparatuses. Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, the President's oldest son and commander of the Presidential Guard, eventually hopes to succeed his father in the highest office. His chances diminish the longer the political uncertainty lasts as protesters start to identify Ahmed Saleh and his brother, Khaled, a prominent army commander, as a major threat to their as-yet-unclear demands. The Salehs are no longer tolerated. An alternative, though, has not yet been identified. The protests enjoy the support of Major General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, a politically powerful military leader. Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Yemen's vice-president and now the acting president, has failed to take a clear position. A southerner, Hadi was installed by Saleh in order to silence calls for stronger representation of southern Yemeni interests. An indecisive leader, Hadi is one of very few to seek a resolution of the conflicts through talks with protest leaders and government officials and tribal stakeholders.

The Saleh clan's strongest opposition at the moment comes from the Hashid tribe, Yemen's second largest and its politically most active. The Hashid managed to mobilize thousands of armed tribesmen in support of the anti-government demonstrations. Yemen's political momentum currently is with the 10 Al-Ahmar brothers leading the Hashid. Together, they form a strong and articulated voice and claim Sana'a's leadership positions. The personal rivalry between the Saleh and Al-Ahmar families has turned violent in a short period of time, and one now has to fear that widespread and open fights between Hashid supporters and security forces loyal to Saleh in North and Central Yemen. Next to the Hashid, the Houthis are another powerful northern tribe claiming a strategic position. The Houthis do not share the ambition of the Hashid to hold political power in Sana'a. Instead, their agenda focuses on regional control with little or no interference from Sana'a. For years, its growing number of insurgent fighters have openly fought Yemeni as well as Saudi military forces. As long as the fight between the Hashid and the Saleh loyalists does not fully escalate, the Houthis gain support. Many northerners perceive Sana'a's politicians as detached from the North, and the Al-Ahmar brothers, heading the Hashid, as elitist. More and more northerners identify the Houthis exclusively as the ones that understand the relevant social issues there. The prospect

of a protracted social conflict in the Sana'a region therefore increases the likelihood of the occurrence of a strong northern secessionist movement under Houthi leadership.

The South and Al-Qaeda. Following the 1990 unification, Yemen in 1994 saw a southern secession attempt fail. Anti-Sana'a sentiment remained strong, and in 2007, the Southern Separatist Movement was founded. Although this coalition of numerous interest groups initially intended it to be a peaceful protest movement, a violent insurgency took control and has been fighting government forces since 27 May 2009. Since then, more than 100 people, mostly Yemeni security forces, have lost their lives and more than 500 southerners have been detained. With another protest movement at its doorstep and a crumbling government, Sana'a's attention to the Southern Separatist Movement is slipping. Over time, Sana'a's policies aimed at suppressing the movement will become less effective. The southerners will increasingly gain control over Yemen's last, exclusively southern, area of natural resources. Another, mostly southern factor and threat to the Saudi authorities is Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. This Al-Qaeda branch has become one of the most powerful franchises due to a recent increase in capacity. With the Houthis movement in the North and secessionists in the South, Saleh's government has only diverted limited attention to Al-Qaeda while relying on the U.S. to do most of the containment.¹ The absence of political leadership in Sana'a is benefiting Al-Qaeda, too. Recent U.S. drone strikes on Yemeni Al-Qaeda targets underline that the international community has identified the Al-Qaeda issue as Yemen's most pressing. Containment of Al-Qaeda in Yemen, however, requires a strong Yemeni government that enforces targeted policies that diminish Al-Qaeda's support. The absence of this perspective suggests that Al-Qaeda will continue to gain support, territory and capabilities in the months to come. For the international community therefore, strengthening the Yemeni state should be prioritized over targeting Al-Qaeda directly.

Conclusion. Sana'a's street protesters only seem to play an outsider role as few fight for political power along tribal lines. With Sana'a's military and political elite hopelessly divided, regional movements are gaining power as Sana'a's suppressing grip is loosening. The longer Sana'a's leadership question remains unresolved, the greater the chances that the Houthis or the South Yemen Movement will make a serious secession attempt. The fact that in Yemen tribal associations are rather fluid and subject to change only adds another dimension to Yemen's dangerous instability. A prompt settlement of Sana'a's political question will benefit the Hashid. And their potential political victory can swing northern support to their direction, preventing a northern secession attempt. Long lasting instability though, benefits the secession movements in the North and South. If one region breaks away, the other will follow. Al-Qaeda has become a serious security concern for the U.S., Europe and Saudi Arabia. The best method for containing Al-Qaeda's growth and threat it poses is to invest in a stable Yemen. As one of Yemen's main trading partners and its number one donor in the areas of democratization and political reform, the EU already has realized that stability depends on the involvement of regional tribes in the political process, a process on which the EU has little leverage, though. Most probably Yemen will not remain united under its current vice-president or a Saleh-clan dominated government. The goal must be new elections and a prominent political role for the Hashid clan and the protest movement. Saudi-Arabia, Saleh's current host, has the greatest leverage over Yemen's internal affairs and it would do well to persuade Saleh not to return. It also might be able to facilitate a U.S.-backed deal amongst Yemen's political forces.

The EU has only limited influence over the political process in Yemen, and its immediate challenge is to find the appropriate channels outside the Saleh network to send it aid. It is unlikely that the Yemeni crisis will become a direct concern to the Polish EU Presidency—the crisis already had been escalated but the immigration flow to EU countries has been insignificant. However, the importance of Yemen's case in the wider perspective of the Arab Spring requires the Presidency to more energetically include Yemen in its assessment of developments given that Poland does not have an embassy in Yemen and it already has evacuated all of its citizens. It then requires Poland to more closely cooperate with those EU countries whose relations with the country are more advanced. In this regard, close contact with the United Kingdom about this matter is desirable for at least the period of the presidency. Poland also needs to cooperate closely with relevant EU institutions, such as the European External Action Service, for analyses of the situation and to support the "Friends of Yemen" group in order to stay up to date with U.S. manoeuvres *vis-à-vis* Yemen and Saudi Arabia, which is the most potent external actor to eventually diffuse tensions in Yemen. In the worst case scenario—an attack on Saudi oil installations and civil war in Yemen—Poland will have to coordinate the presidency's response not only with HR Catherine Ashton but also the UK, U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Once a more stable Yemeni government is in place, the EU should partner with the U.S. in channelling economic assistance to the country.

¹ P. Sasnal, *Al-Qaeda in Yemen*, "Bulletin" PISM, no. 6 (82) of 15 January 2010