

# NOREF Report

## The perils of Yemen's cunning state

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### Executive summary

Under the influence of the Arab Spring, Yemen last year embarked on a political transition after decades of autocratic rule under President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The extreme fragility of the Yemeni state, however, stems from numerous sources of instability and discontent, which the upheavals in palace politics in the capital seem unable to resolve. With its strategic location, various zones of internal armed conflict, an Islamist terrorist threat, ongoing humanitarian crises, scarcity of key resources such as water, and the world's worst gender imbalance, the country remains a source of acute international concern.

However, the apparent fragility of the Yemeni state should not be understood merely as the product of a fragmented, tribal population living in poverty.

The country's politics, before and after reunification of north and south in 1990, have been dominated by elite factions manipulating shifting groups of clients based on tribal or sectarian loyalties. In the process, deep grievances and disaffection with the state have festered. While political transition and the accompanying Gulf Initiative are welcome, they are likely to generate further pressures towards secession and armed rebellion unless they address the deep structural sources of state weakness, namely the strategic political use of difference, as well as the manipulation of conflict and fragility before donors so as to favour the interests of the country's leadership.

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## Introduction: four areas of conflict

The Republic Of Yemen was created in May 1990 when the two national territories were united: the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen), and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). The country is ranked 13<sup>th</sup> among the countries most at risk of failure in 2011<sup>1</sup> and is widely regarded as the embodiment of a failed state. However, the label *failed state* has often concealed the *roots* of the country's problems, and hindered efforts to address them appropriately. It has also given the Yemeni leadership ample opportunities to exploit the international community's growing concern over its fragile status, and in the process resist real reform and change.

However, there is no doubt that the country's stability and governance are threatened by a variety of acute and immediate challenges, including four areas of conflict. The first of these is a power struggle at the centre of the state, within the core elites that have controlled Yemen over the past three decades. The struggle dates back to 2000 when the former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, began to groom his son as successor and the staunch support of his immediate clan and tribal allies started to falter. Today, the political landscape, as well as the military and security forces, is divided between the two rival factions of one sectarian tribal group. One is the family of former president Saleh, his son and nephews. The other is based around Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the commander of the First Armoured Division, and Hamid al-Hamar and his brother Sadeq, the heads of Yemen's biggest tribal confederation.

The second area of conflict is located in the northern region of Saada. The Houthi rebellion, which has led to repeated civil wars since 2002, takes its name from its Zaydi Hashemite leader, Hussein Badraddin al-Houthi, who was killed in September 2004 and succeeded by his brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. The rebellion originated because of perceived regional marginalization on the economic, social and political level. Significantly, the region has expressed deep

resentment towards the encroachment and spread of Sunni Salafism. Today, this sectarian rivalry expresses itself in continued armed clashes between Houthi supporters and Salafi fighters. News reports indicate that the Houthi movement has turned northern Saada into a state within a state, and that its troops have been successfully fighting their way into neighbouring northern provinces.

Third, a further area of conflict is located in the south. Although the Yemen Republic resulted from the unification of two former states, a civil war erupted in 1994, leading to the victory of the northern leadership headed by former president Saleh. A peaceful civil movement that protested against the mass dismissal of southern army personnel and land confiscation in the south turned into a strong movement calling for an end to northern hegemony. The movement is divided between two main factions, one calling for secession and the creation of a separate South Yemen, and the other seeking a federal system, within which South Yemen would enjoy an autonomous status.

The fourth conflict is located within some southern provinces, specifically Abien and Shabwa, where al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist groups are fighting army units, and have succeeded in controlling some areas in Abien.

The peaceful youth revolt of February 2011 took place within this context of multiple conflicts. Its call for President Saleh to step down after 33 years in power (12 of those as head of North Yemen), was met with support from his rival faction, which positioned itself as patron of this movement. But the situation escalated into a military confrontation between the two factions. The Gulf Cooperation Council, backed by the United States, the EU and the United Nations, responded through the Gulf Initiative of May 2011. Based on its provisions, Saleh stepped down in 2012, and ceded power to his deputy. The new president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, was elected after standing as the sole candidate in an election on 21 February 2012.

<sup>1</sup> Failed States Index 2011. Foreign Policy, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/failedstates>, accessed 13 August 2012.

## Immediate challenges: the humanitarian dilemma

A number of immediate, outstanding challenges derive from the levels of internal displacement within Yemen, and urgent humanitarian needs for food, health and education.

A wave of Yemeni civilians has fled tribal clashes in the north of the country, as well as fighting between government troops and militant groups in the south. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported in March that sporadic tribal clashes in the north had displaced 52,000 people over the previous three months. This new exodus will add to an estimated 314,000 Yemenis already displaced in the north, and unable to return to their homes in Saada.

Moreover, in the south, at least 1,800 people were displaced in March due to fighting between government troops and militants in Abyan governorate. This group, displaced from the town of Ja'ar, now joins more than 150,000 similarly displaced people in the south. In fact, UNHCR estimates that virtually the entire populations of the towns of Zinjibar, Khanfar and al-Kud have been displaced since the beginning of the conflict last May.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, inflows of migrants from the Horn of Africa, fleeing war or seeking economic opportunities in the Gulf or Europe, have continued unabated. UNHCR has reported that, in spite of rising instability in Yemen, "a record 103,000 refugees, asylum seekers and migrants from the Horn of Africa made the perilous journey across the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea in 2011."<sup>3</sup>

In addition, conflict, political unrest and economic decline during 2011 have resulted in severe famine and malnutrition, as well as disruption of health programmes and education. The malnutrition rate in Yemen remains a source of particular concern. Half a million Yemeni children are at risk of dying

during 2012 as a result of severe famine and malnutrition, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has warned. The number of malnourished children under the age of five nearly doubled during 2011, and now stands at 750,000.<sup>4</sup>

## Medium-term challenges: poverty, scarcity and gender imbalances

The medium-term challenges Yemen faces are multiple. These include widespread poverty, rapid demographic growth, lack of alternatives to the dwindling oil economy, limited institutional capacity and outreach of the state, poor infrastructure, rapidly-depleting water reserves and acute gender imbalances.

One of the main problems is demographic growth, which is alarmingly high. Around 50% of the population is below 15. Yemen's total fertility rate remains among the highest in the world, at 6.2 births per woman (a demographic growth rate of over 3% a year). At this pace, Yemen's population could grow from 22 million today to 50 million by 2035. In an environment of limited and depleting natural resources, this demographic rate and its consequent youth bulge is extremely perilous.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, Yemen's economic structure is set to face a major shock. Over the past 20 years, Yemen's economy has been based on oil, turning it into a rentier state that redistributes rents through civil service salaries and a generous subsidy system. Oil and gas output amount to about one third of GDP, 70% of state revenues and 90% of exports. Yet Yemen's oil reserves are rapidly depleting. Based on current exploitation rates (about 300,000 barrels per day), crude oil reserves are expected to be exhausted in the next 10 to 12 years.

2 United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), "Tens of thousands flee tribal clashes in Yemen in past three months" 9 March 2012, <http://www.unhcr.org/4f59e0ca9.html>, accessed 13 August 2012.

3 United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), "Record number of African refugees and migrants cross the Gulf of Aden in 2011", 20 January 2012, <http://www.unhcr.org/4f1968179.html>, accessed 13 August 2012.

4 Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Yemen Humanitarian Emergency Situation", Situation Report No. 14, 13 February 2012, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2014%20-%20Yemen%20Humanitarian%20Emergency%2013%20February%202012.pdf>, accessed 13 August 2012.

5 "Country Assessment Strategy: Yemen Republic (For the period 2009–2012)", Report No. 47562-YE, Washington DC: World Bank, 2009, pp 2–5.

Yemen's economic problems are acute, but they are not caused by an absolute, irreparable shortage of resources. In fact, as Charles Schmitz argues, "it is Yemen's contentious politics and its lack of institutional development that constitute the main obstacle to surmounting present economic difficulties."<sup>6</sup> Even as the country runs out of oil, other resources could provide an opportunity to diversify the economy. These include newly found liquefied natural gas reserves, mineral riches and the strategic port of Aden, in addition to opportunities for tourism. Instead, Yemen's economic problems largely reflect state mismanagement, which is in turn inherently connected to the patronage system. The Saleh regime intentionally inhibited institutional development in order to maintain its grip on power, for example by weakening Yemen's economic institutions "so that Yemeni businessmen became personally dependent upon the graces of the (former) president."<sup>7</sup>

This chronic institutional weakness is reflected across the state. Lack of institutional capacity is an outcome of the Yemeni core elite's patronage system, which bypassed institutions and replaced them with personal networks. The interplay between the government's authority and tribal structures has also played a significant role in hampering institutional development. Institutional weakness has also been related to corruption, inappropriate staffing of the civil service, and a persistent lack of clarity in institutional mandates.

Two further issues will prove decisive for the country's general welfare over the medium term. Rapid depletion of water reserves (aquifers) is a major challenge and has the potential to wreak havoc. It jeopardises large swathes of rural territory, economic prospects and the sustainability of livelihoods. Aquifers feeding major cities are expected to dry up within the next 15 to 30 years (aquifers of the capital, Sana'a, may well be fully exhausted in the next 20 years). In some important cities, such as Tai'z, running water is already available only a few hours every other week. Several factors have contributed to this situation. The World Bank lists three: "climate change-

induced alterations of rainfalls which are starting to exacerbate the country's aridity; extension and intensification of agriculture; and fast growth of urban centres."<sup>8</sup> However, Yemen's water problems, like its economic troubles, also derive from state's failure to regulate illegal drilling.

Lastly, there is no doubt that discrimination against women thwarts Yemen's aspirations for development. According to the Global Gender Gap Index 2011, Yemen ranked last among 135 countries. Traditional rules, prevalent cultural attitudes that accord women a low status in the family and the community, and state-sanctioned discriminatory laws together limit women's rights and opportunities. As a result, the dire conditions Yemeni women endure are reflected in almost every social and economic indicator. For example, early marriages (52% of women marry before the age of 15) continue to affect school enrolment, fertility rates, and maternal mortality. Gender parity in education remains low, and female literacy stands at only 31%.<sup>9</sup>

## The long-term view: overcoming entrenched systems of power

These immediate and medium-term challenges are merely symptoms of the deeper crisis, deficiencies and mismanagement of the Yemeni state. Indeed, the roots of the country's problems, and the long-term challenges to the country's public authorities, are connected to a failed nation-building project. Simply put, the modern Yemeni state has not succeeded in representing all its citizens on equal terms; it has excluded the majority of its social groups, and has become an ethnic bodyguard of the interests of a small group of strongmen. There are three key aspects to this failure, each of which is discussed in turn below.

8 "Country Assessment Strategy: Yemen Republic", World Bank, 2009.

9 Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, Saadia Zahidi, "The Global Gender Gap Report 2011: Rankings and Scores." Geneva, World Economic Forum, 2011, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR11/GGGR11\\_Rankings-Scores.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR11/GGGR11_Rankings-Scores.pdf), accessed 13 August 2012; El-ham Manea, "Yemen", Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, eds, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*, New York, Freedom House, 2010, [http://old.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special\\_report/section/268.pdf](http://old.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/section/268.pdf), accessed 13 August 2012; "Country Assessment Strategy: Yemen Republic", World Bank, 2009.

6 Charles Schmitz, "Building a better Yemen", Carnegie Endowment, 3 April 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/03/building-better-yemen>, accessed 13 August 2012.

7 Schmitz, "Building a better Yemen", 2012.



## *i. Resistance of the core elites*

Yemen has an electoral system with a bicameral legislature. The Shura Council (*Majlis Alshoora*) has 111 members appointed by the president, and the House of Representatives (*Majlis Annowab*) 301 members elected by plurality vote in single-member constituencies to serve six-year terms. Under the constitution, the president is elected by an absolute majority vote through a two-round system to serve a seven-year term.

However, this electoral system has not led to alternation in power between Yemeni political actors, nor to the accountability of officials. The Shura Council was used as a channel for Saleh's patronage system, while elections to the House of Representatives have been manipulated since 1999 by the ruling party, the General People's Congress, so as to ensure that it gained a majority. In addition, constant constitutional amendments led to Saleh's "re-election" despite the fact that his term limits have long been exhausted. These various abuses contributed to a gradual erosion of trust in the state.

The Yemeni state's lack of legitimacy is fundamentally connected to its power structure, and in particular to the control exerted by a small sectarian/tribal group. To survive in power, these core elites have depended on a traditional power base, defined here as the sectarian/ tribal/ religious/ regional or client groups that are the source, or provide major support, for the state's political elites, and whose backing is vital for the survival of the whole political system.<sup>10</sup> This group of core elites is still in power after Saleh's resignation and President Hadi's succession. Their resistance to the inclusion of other social groups in the power system represents one of the main challenges to the state's ability to exert legitimate authority.

The core elites in Yemen have until now been of a sectarian, tribal and regional nature. Two circles of power can be discerned: the inner and outer (see Figure 1). Each deserves a detailed description.

## *The inner circle of the power base*

The inner circle of the power base includes two levels of the ruler's sectarian and tribal group affiliation. The first level includes immediate clan members, and in Yemen, these are from the Sanhan tribe, located in the south-southeast corner of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, and part of the Zaydi Qahtani Hashid tribal confederation. Members of this clan fill the key ranks of the security and military apparatus, while the two competing groups in Yemen's current power struggle both belong to this clan. Former president Saleh, and his son and nephews, represent one group. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Commander of the First Armoured division and of the North Western Military Flank, represents another. Mohsen decided to support the youth uprising in 2011.

The core elites' second level of traditional power is that of the larger tribal-sectarian group. This is currently comprised of strongmen from the Zaydi Qahtani Hashid tribal confederation. The al-Ahmar family, (sheiks of the paramount Hashid tribal confederation), was the Saleh regime's main supporter for three decades, before turning against him and supporting the 2011 uprising, siding with Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (not related to the al-Ahmar family).

By using the word strongmen, an important dimension of state-tribe relations in Yemen is highlighted. The tribes, as an institution, have only limited influence in the political decision-making process, although tribal representation in the state and the political landscape since the end of the civil war is evident. This seeming contradiction is resolved once we realise that we are facing a situation of strongman control in Yemen. As Paul Dresch put it, "a small class emerged (some of tribal background, some not) whose interests became distinct from those of their immediate neighbours. The distinction between those in power (the state, roughly speaking) and society at large arose within a previously quite integrated setting."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Elham Manea, *The Arab State and Women's Rights: The Trap of the Authoritarian Governance*, London, Routledge, 2011, p 95.

<sup>11</sup> Paul K. Dresch, "The Tribal Factor in the Yemeni Crisis", Jamal S. Al-Suwaidi, ed, *The Yemen War Of the 1994: Causes and Consequences*, Abu Dhabi, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1995, p 38.

### *The wider circle of the power base*

The wider circle is both diverse and fluctuating. It includes those religious, sectarian, tribal, or regional groups which are marginalised, discriminated against, or feel threatened within the larger system, or simply aspire to be part of the political system and gain some of its spoils. This circle has proved vital for the survival of the ruling elite, which has often played on the sense of victimisation, fear or ambition among these groups, and then played them against other competing political powers or against each other.

Yemen's wider circle of power has shifted along with the sands of politics. Sometimes it includes tribal confederations, such as the Zaydi Qahtani Bakil, known historically to be at odds with the Hashid tribe. Most importantly, though, the wider circle of power has included the camp that was defeated in the 1986 southern civil war. It includes army commanders and political figures, the majority of whom came from the southern regions of Abien and Shabwa. During the 1986 war, they fled to the north and were allowed to reorganise their defeated army brigades in what were later called the Brigades of Unity. These brigades were then instrumental in supporting Saleh in the 1994 civil war. Representatives of this group are often appointed to symbolic positions such as vice-president, or given technocrat positions in the cabinet. Today, the current president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-*Hadi*, and the defence minister belong to this group.

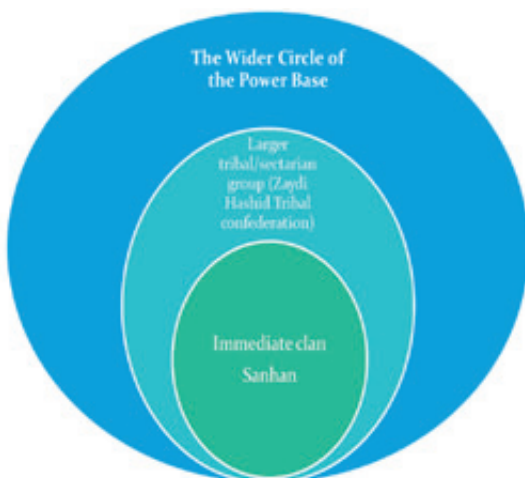


Figure 1. Yemeni power structure

In light of the above, it is clear that the power

equation in Yemen did not change much after Saleh stepped down. The same strongmen of the Sanhan clan and the Hashid tribal confederation (now competing against each other) still hold the strings of power. Moreover, the new president belongs to the same southern group that was part of the wider circle of power that supported the Saleh regime.

### **ii. Exclusion and grievances**

Political and social exclusion of whole social groups and regions has been an ingrained feature of the Yemeni state, both in the north and south of the country. Addressing these grievances and including these groups in the new political system is imperative for the stability of the state.

#### *Northern groups*

Within this category, two groups are of primary importance: Shafites in the central regions and Zaydi Hashemites. Broadly speaking, the population in north Yemen is divided along sectarian/tribal lines between adherents of the Zaydi and Sunni Shafite denominations. No statistic verifies the precise weight or number of these two population groups.

Zaydism is an Islamic denomination which is neither Sunni nor Shiite, though some scholars identify it as closer to the Sunni tradition than to the Shiite.<sup>12</sup> Those who embraced Zaydism are ethnically divided along two main tribal lines:

- *The Hashemites*, who claim to be descendants of the prophet of Islam, Mohammad. Translated into tribal terminology, they are members of the Adnani tribe, dominant in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula. They established themselves as a higher and closed "class". From this class came the Yemeni Zaydi imams, who ruled north Yemen until 1962. Today, the Houthi family, who led the rebellion in Saada, a

<sup>12</sup> Named after its founder Zayd Ibn Ali, who died in 740 AD, Zaydism appealed to dissatisfied tribesmen. Its ideological foundation was the principle of revolt: *al-Khuroug ala al-Thalimiin*. It called on Muslims to stand up against any imam who proved to be unjust. The mountainous terrain of northern Yemen provided refuge for Zaydi leaders persecuted by the central authorities. It also allowed the Zaydi missionaries who moved to Yemen in 859 AD from al-Hijaz, a region in the west of present-day Saudi Arabia, to propagate the new sect among the northern Yemeni tribes.

governorate some 240 kilometres north-west of the capital Sana'a, belongs to this Hashemite tribal category.

- *Qahtani northern tribes*. They claim to be descendants of Qahtan, a son of Noah, and are dominant in the southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. They resented the Hashemites' claim to authority and ethnic superiority. They in turn were divided into different tribal groups, most prominent among them being the Hashid and Bakil confederations. Today, the core elites of the inner circle of power come from this tribal category.

This ethnic division has expressed itself in political terms, and two groups – the imams and the Zaydi tribes – also competed over the centuries for authority. Equally important, those who suffered most from this state of affairs were the Sunni farmers who were settled in the fertile middle region and coastal areas of Yemen (located in the Ta'iz, Ibb, al-Baitha, and Hudaida provinces of North Yemen). As Sunnis, they were followers of the Islamic Jurisprudence School of Shafite. These Shafite farmers, who endured constant tribal raids, were also subject to an arbitrary system of taxation enforced by imams claiming authority in their area. This led to constant waves of immigration, while wars and raids during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were also launched on a sectarian basis.

The military coup of 1962, and the civil war that followed, put an end to the Hashemite group's control. New core elites emerged from the northern tribes, especially from the Hashid confederation. The Sunni Shafites remained marginalised politically, but constituted the bulk of Yemeni technocrats in northern administration. They have also played an important role in the private sector – a role that has nevertheless been diminished by rising competition from Zaydi tribal figures.<sup>13</sup>

This political marginalization of the Shafites continues to be a source of deep but unspoken

<sup>13</sup> Yemen expert Sarah Phillips provides one telling example. Twenty years ago the majority of contractors were from the traditional commercial hub of North Yemen around Tai'z. Now the majority of government contractors are sheiks, and over half of these are from the Hashid confederation. Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2008, p 105.

grievance. Such resentment has not escaped the attention of southern secessionist movements, who have often called upon the Shafite regions in northern Yemen to “rebel against their Zaydi oppressors.” On close examination, it also becomes clear that the spark of the youth revolt in February 2011 can be found in groups of students from the Ta'iz region. It was also no coincidence that Saleh's troops tried to play on the sectarian division, attacking protesters in Sana'a University using expression like ‘ي غل غل’, or *Lughlughhi*, which is a derogatory and insolent term to describe a member of the Shafite middle region.

Members of the Zaydi Hashemite group, supported by their tribal allies, have also expressed feelings of alienation and besiegement at the spread of the Salafi and Wahabbi strains of Islamist ideology. This ideology found its way into North Yemen since the 1980s through religious institutes, largely supported by Saudi Arabia. The spread of this religious teaching has in turn led to a radicalization of the Zaydi teachings, and efforts by members of this denomination to build and support their own religious schools. Both religious movements actively seek to recruit disillusioned young Yemenis.

Sectarian animosity is a source of continuous military confrontation, evidenced in the Saada war, which lasted five years and resulted in more than 300,000 internally displaced persons.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Houthi rebel troops have recently been fighting their way into neighbouring governances (such as Haja, Amran and al-Jawf), allegedly with the support of former president Saleh.

### *Southern groups*

It is generally assumed that the former communist regime in South Yemen, and its satellite

<sup>14</sup> The Saada war, which started in 2002 and continued until 2007, takes its *Houthi* name from its Hashemite leader, Hussein Badraddin al-Houthi, killed in September 2004 and succeeded by his brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. The Houthi movement originally supported President Saleh who showered it with money and privileges, encouraging the movement to propagate its own line of faith through preaching and schools. The Yemeni regime was trying at the time to counter the growing influence of the Sunni Islamist Islah Party. The strategy clearly backfired. The war, on the other hand, continued for longer than anyone expected because of the power struggle between Saleh and Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who was at the time leading the war against the Houthis. The war was in fact a proxy struggle between the two, and Saleh used it to weaken his rival's military base.

relationship with the Soviet Union, made ethnicity and tribal affiliation irrelevant to its political life. Only after unification were these tribal identities then supposedly brought back to life by President, Saleh.

There is no doubt that the Saleh regime played on the tribal and regional affiliations of South Yemen. But tribal affiliations in the former People's Republic were hardly absent. In fact, communism only managed to keep traditional identity structures in check. From the inception of the communist state, tribal and regional affiliations shaped its power structure – with some tribes and regions excluded, and others heavily represented – and every time the regime's elites competed for power, they fought across tribal and regional lines.

This characteristic was in evidence, for example, during the 1986 southern civil war, whose ferocity shocked the region. Feuding factions within the Socialist Party fought each other, causing an estimated 13,000 civilian deaths in 11 days. The two fighting factions were split over their regional and tribal origins, and embarked upon acts that were tantamount to group cleansing. One journalist recounted to this author how the warring parties established checkpoints, demanding to see the identity card of any passing civilian. Those who had the “wrong” birthplace would be shot at point blank range.<sup>15</sup>

The end of the war was seen as a victory for the tribal regions of Radfan and Ad Dalih over the defeated faction of the Abien and Shabwa regions. The defeated camp fled to the north and was allowed to reorganise their defeated army brigades in what were later called the Brigades of Unity. However, no serious efforts were made to address the grievances caused by this war, and the absence of any reconciliation mechanisms has left its mark on the southern population, fostering regional and tribal hatred that has endured until today.

Regional hatred has been further deepened by the survival politics applied by the leadership of unified Yemen. Despite the fact that the victorious southern faction, led by Vice-President al-Baid, was united with North Yemen in 1990, the northern

President Saleh kept the Brigades of Unity intact. In doing so he maintained his southern partner on a tightrope, and countered the claim of al-Baid and his faction that they alone represented South Yemen.

Not surprisingly, the support of the Brigades of Unity was instrumental in President Saleh's victory in the 1994 civil war against al-Baid. Representatives of the Brigades have often been appointed to symbolic positions such as vice-president, or given technocratic positions in the cabinet. As mentioned earlier, the current president, Hadi, belongs to this group. Often these appointments are overshadowed by resentment and discontent in the southern camp that was defeated in 1994.

These internal divisions within the south are not to be underestimated and run very deep. Yet it should not be forgotten that southerners, despite their differences over the type of solution they seek for their cause, continue to perceive northerners as occupiers who plundered their country and brought instability and chaos.

### ***iii. Politics of survival and the power vacuum***

Former president Saleh and Yemen's core elites remained in power for decades because of the type of survival politics they employed, through which they shifted alliances and allocated resources to various political and social groups in order to ensure their hold on power. In a Machiavellian sense, they undertook whatever was necessary to survive by juggling different and sometimes competing interests.

This type of politics – with its use of valuable resources in addition to the constant application of the divide and rule principle – has brought Yemen to the brink of collapse. Even after the “election” of President Hadi, former president Saleh and his family seem to be applying these same principles, as do their rivals, Mohsen and the al-Ahmar family. This political bickering has exacerbated the security situation in Yemen, especially in the southern regions of Abien, Shabwa and al-Baida.

An al-Qaeda affiliated group, renamed Ansar al-Sharia, has taken advantage of the power struggle

<sup>15</sup> Interview during field visit to Sana'a, April 2010.



in Sana'a, and managed to control tracts of southern Yemen, especially in Abien and Shabwa. Although the Yemeni state has always been weak, and unable to control its territory, the success of Ansar al-Sharia has been attributed to different factors. Some opposition figures have accused the Saleh clan of exacerbating the al-Qaeda threat to ensure that their army units retain power and influence. Although this claim is hard to prove, it is clear that the loyalties of army commanders are split between the two competing elite factions, thereby contributing to the success of Ansar al-Sharia on the battlefield. A recent TV report by France 24 has shown the disillusionment of soldiers with their own state and army command. These soldiers, who fought in Abien, complained that they were sent to fight without ammunition, and that army commanders repeatedly ignored their requests for back-up.<sup>16</sup>

It is very difficult to assess the size of Ansar al-Sharia, and the threat it represents. The information at our disposal is mainly from news reports, which are hard to verify, or from security services, which are often provided by Yemeni or Saudi authorities. It is repeatedly reported that al-Qaeda has a strong hold in some areas in Yemen, and received a boost in 2009 through the integration of Saudi jihadists among its ranks. The creation of Ansar al-Sharia was announced on 22 April 2011. The name, which literally means supporters of sharia law, was meant to appeal to the Yemeni public.<sup>17</sup> But the creation of this group just two months after the eruption of youth revolts, at a time of increasing pressure from the international community on Saleh to step down, raises questions as to whether its existence has been manipulated by the former president's faction. What is certain is that both rival factions (Saleh and al-Ahmar) fostered close relations with jihadists, and that both have strong relationships with Yemeni Afghan jihadists stationed in Abien.

## The Gulf Initiative: a safe scenario for Yemen?

The Gulf Initiative has been adopted by the international community as a means to give Yemen a safe route out of its current predicament. It is a welcome step – one that demonstrated international commitment to Yemen's stability. However, if not supported with additional measures, it is doubtful that this initiative can resolve the roots of Yemen's problem.

Issued in 2011, the initiative was designed by the Gulf Cooperation Council.<sup>18</sup> According to its provisions, President Saleh was to delegate power to his vice-president, which he eventually did after months of haggling. The opposition named its candidate for the position of prime minister, and a "national consensus government," divided on a 50/50 basis between the government and the opposition, was created. "Elections" were held in February 2012 to confirm the new president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Finally, the new president and the government have been tasked with "disengaging" their rival military forces. The government and the president will then convene a national dialogue conference to discuss Yemen's conflicts, including the southern question, in a manner that "preserves the country's unity." In addition, the president will create a committee that has the task of drafting a new constitution, which will be put to a referendum. Once that step is accomplished, a new election will take place, and the president will ask the elected party to form a government.

However, the feasibility of this initiative is undermined by a number of shortcomings. First and foremost, it did not change the basic structures of the power system. In fact, the same core elites are still ruling the country, albeit from different positions. In this sense, the initiative has simply "recycled" these elites. Former president Saleh remains influential even after stepping down, continuing to meddle in Yemeni political affairs through his function as head of the General People's Congress. His position is supported

16 "Ansar al-Sharia are coming," [in Arabic], France 24, 16 April 2012 <http://www.france24.com/ar/20120416-ش-ش-ج-ل-م-ال-س-ال-إ-إ-ة-د-ع-ا-ق-ل-ا-ن-م-ي-ل-ا-16-2012> قرام-ال-ك-ف-ر-اع-م-ة-ع-ي-ر-ش-ل-ا-ر-اص-ن-أ, accessed 13 August 2012.

17 "Who are Ansar al-Sharia," [in Arabic], BBC Arabic, 7 March 2012, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2012/03/120305\\_ansar\\_yemen.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2012/03/120305_ansar_yemen.shtml), accessed 13 August 2012.

18 Text of the Gulf Initiative, in Arabic, Al Tagheer Net, 23 April 2011, <http://www.al-tagheer.com/news29007.html>.

by the military power of his son Ahmed, which remains unchallenged. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, for his part, is still a military commander. President Hadi, furthermore, has been a member of the wider circle of Saleh's camp since the end of the 1994 civil war. In short, the regime remains intact.

Moreover, the preservation of Yemen's status quo is related to three factors. First, Saudi Arabia, which brokered the Gulf Initiative, has an interest in maintaining the old system, whose leaders have been their trusted allies. It also has an interest in hindering real political reform in the country lest it encourage Saudi citizens to demand similar changes. Second, the international community seems genuinely worried that any serious push to change the power structure will lead to the collapse of the Yemeni state. Third, the war on al-Qaeda has made the United States rely on core members of the Saleh clan in their military operations in the south. Replacing them will be costly from the perspective of hard security.

Given the fact that the same core elites are still in power, the task of building a "national" army out of a clan-controlled military has proven very difficult. A number of deep-seated grievances have also been ignored by the transitional division of power. Both the movements of the south and the Houthis, which initially supported the youth uprising, have expressed disillusionment with the Gulf Initiative. The discontent of other groups previously referred to in this paper have also been largely ignored by the initiative, while the insistence on maintaining Yemeni unity, while commendable, may not be feasible over the long run.

## Moving beyond a cunning state

As a result of these flaws, it is doubtful whether the initiative in its current shape will lead to the best possible scenario for Yemen's governance. The shortcomings could well generate what might be termed a cold war scenario, in which control over the army and security apparatus by the two rival camps of the core elites (Saleh and al-Ahmar) remains unchallenged. The relatively equal division of military power between the two, in addition to the inability of either of them to win the power struggle, would lead to a shaky status quo, in which neither can defeat the other. This

situation will continue to manifest itself in political bickering, a divided military, and the emasculation of state institutions, exacerbating conflicts in Saada and the south. Virtual autonomy for Saada, an expansion of the influence of terrorist groups in southern regions, separation of some southern provinces that aspire for autonomy (such as Hadarmout), and a breakdown of law and order in certain areas of Yemen are possible outcomes of this scenario.

A rather more optimistic scenario, on the other hand, can be envisaged. This would in effect build on the Gulf Initiative, but go beyond it. Most importantly, a realistic scenario should avoid an essentialist approach to Yemen, seeking to portray it as different in order to avoid hard decisions. It has been sometimes assumed, for instance, that the "state" is a foreign concept that may not suit the Yemeni society. The country's tribal structure, the argument goes, make it difficult to "impose" a modern state paradigm, and it is therefore better to give up such a project and engage directly with the tribes.

The tribal structure has certainly been utilised and abused by core elites for their survival. But tribal revolts in remote areas have often been related to the "absence" of a functioning state rather than its "presence". Listen to what people demand, and this becomes clear: they want roads, schools, hospitals, jobs and a judiciary that guarantees justice. The ruling elites, however, have succeeded in making the state synonymous with corruption, and converting it into an oppressive leviathan that does not guarantee services, nor security or justice.

The same can be said of Yemen's status as a failed state. The country is certainly a failed state *par excellence*. But this status has often concealed the roots of its failure, which are intrinsically connected, yet again, to the core elites that have run its affairs over the past three decades. Significantly, failure has been constantly used and exploited by the ruling elites to prevent the international community from pushing for the implementation of real reforms. From this perspective, this strategy has turned Yemen into a *cunning state* – which can be defined here as a state run by ethnicised and corrupt core elites, who exploit the fears of the international

*community over the state's failure to perpetuate its grip on power.*<sup>19</sup>

A realistic future strategy thus requires concurrent approaches to untangle the Yemeni crises:

1. **Ansar al-Sharia's increasing control of territory should be halted.** This will require a two-tier strategy: the first will involve military actions against Ansar al-Sharia and al-Qaeda operatives with the help of the population in the target regions. Organised in People's Committees, the population in Lodr turned the tide against the attacks of al-Sharia militias. Yet any military action will be useless if the development needs of these regions are not addressed. Furthermore, the split loyalties of army commanders will have to be resolved, requiring an end to the power struggle in Sana'a.
2. **Outside the areas of conflict, a federal solution is required.** This federal solution, based on a system where the power to govern is shared between national and provincial/state governments, should be achieved through a national conference organised and supervised by the United Nations. All regional actors must be engaged, and a national consensus is required. To do so will require overcoming the lack of trust and divisions between regions. Moreover, some countries, especially Saudi Arabia, are wary of a solution that guarantees more authority and power to the Houthi movement (because of internal calculations involving its own Shiite population).
3. **Addressing economic and social demands.** This will require building efficient and transparent state structures and administration. This task will either be carried out within a united federal system, or within new Yemen states. However, corruption is the main obstacle. In order to facilitate developments projects, donors must engage with local authorities in the target regions. The youth uprising of last year has shown that there is a small group of educated young men and women who believe

in the possibility of building an accountable Yemeni state. These groups have long left the sit-in camps and started civil society initiatives. Making use of their capacities will be an asset in future development programmes.

4. **Integration into the Gulf Cooperation Council.** The GCC has to realise that a patchwork solution will not guarantee regional stability. It will have to undertake a more active role by integrating its poor neighbour into the economic and labour markets of the GCC.
5. **Addressing grievances through a Truth and Reconciliation Committee.** A committee in the South African style is necessary. This should be established to address the grievances within north and south Yemen, and between the north and the south. The one obstacle that stands in the way will be the reluctance of the parties, above all the winners in the 1986, 1994 and Saada wars, to admit to any wrongdoing.

## Conclusion

Yemen is certainly in a dire condition, but the country's situation could turn to outright collapse if the two factions of the country's core elites continue to exploit the international community's fear of Yemeni failure. The country's best options instead lie in international support for a legitimate, transparent and strong state, and avoidance of an essentialist viewpoint that views Yemen through the prism of tribal structure. Tribal identity is only one of many identities that are relevant in any political or developmental approach; it is the way of doing politics in Yemen that truly lies at the root of the country's many weaknesses.

<sup>19</sup> The term *cunning state* has been used by Shalini Randeria to refer to states "which capitalize on their perceived weakness in order to render themselves unaccountable both to their citizens and to international institutions". Shalini Randeria, "Between Cunning States and Unaccountable International Institutions: Legal Plurality, Social Movements and Rights of Local Communities to Common Property Resources", *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 44, issue 1, 2003, pp 27–60.

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