

Not too strong, not too weak: Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen

By Stig Stenslie

■ Executive summary

Saudi Arabia is the most important external player in the fragmented and conflict-ridden Yemen. The kingdom's overall goal has been to prevent its neighbour to the south from becoming too strong. Today there is little reason to worry about a too powerful Yemen and Saudi concerns are rather that the country will become too weak. The Saudis cannot afford to have a failed state on their borders, because spillover effects into Saudi Arabia might be grave.

Keep Yemen weak

"Keep Yemen weak", King 'Abd al-'Aziz allegedly advised his sons on his deathbed in 1953. Saudi Arabia's founding father had fought against Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din for control of Yemen's northern provinces, which eventually became part of Saudi Arabia after a war in 1934. The imam was forced to sign the Ta'if Treaty, which meant that the Yemeni provinces Asir, Jizan and Najran became part of Saudi Arabia. However, the treaty contained an unusual clause: it had to be renewed every 20 years. Although the authenticity of the late king's advice is questionable, the policy itself is one that his sons have followed for decades.

Until the border dispute was solved permanently in 2000, Riyadh preferred a weak regime in Sanaa in order to secure the upper hand in the renegotiations of the Ta'if Treaty. Accordingly, the Saudis actively sought to undermine the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. For the same reason, the Saudis ignored ideology and supported the southern Marxist separatists in the civil war in 1994.

Besides, a key objective of the Saudis has been to prevent hostile foreign powers – and ideologies such as republicanism and Shi'a revivalism – from gaining a foothold on their southern doorstep. In the wake of the 1962 revolution, which deprived the imam of power, civil war broke out between the republicans and those still loyal to the imam. Egypt's Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir sent an expeditionary force that peaked at 70,000 men to protect the new Yemen Arab Republic against the royalists and eventually spread the revolution to Saudi Arabia. Egyptian troops remained in Yemen until 1970. A self-proclaimed Marxist government – backed by the Soviet Union – ruled South Yemen after the

British withdrawal in 1967 until 1990. From the early 2000s, there has been a Shi'a insurgency in northern Yemen, which the Saudis claim is backed by Iran. In order to realise its aims, Saudi Arabia discreetly supported efforts to overthrow the Marxist regime in Aden during the 1970s and 1980s, including offering covert aid to dissident factions within the ruling Yemeni Socialist Party. Additionally, the Saudis supported Yemeni actors opposed to the unification of Yemen and fought against foreign invaders by proxy war.

The Special Office for Yemen Affairs

In Saudi Arabia, the king formally has overall responsibility for foreign policy, but in reality this responsibility is fragmented. It is based on individuals and their expertise, contacts and networks. Powerful princes have different – and sometimes overlapping – portfolios, and coordination is at times poor. The country's Yemen policy illustrates this.

For decades, Prince Sultan, the late defence minister, had the main responsibility for the Yemen portfolio, until he died in 2011. He founded and directed the Special Office for Yemen Affairs, a small royal family committee, which cultivated a wide network of contacts and informants in Yemen, all bribed with oil money. Thousands of Yemenis received stipends, including politicians, tribal sheikhs, religious leaders and military officers. At its height the committee's annual budget was estimated at \$3.5 billion, until it was drastically cut following the border agreement in 2000. Saudi Arabia at that time had financial problems and the then crown prince, 'Abd Allah, who was tired of Sultan and others using the committee's money to enrich themselves, pushed through the border agreement to cut the budget.

Prince Nayif – the late minister of the interior – also had an eye towards Yemen, with a focus on terrorism and trafficking in persons, illicit arms and drugs across the border. His son and successor as head of internal security, Prince Muhammad bin Nayif, is now an important player – especially in the war against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and in handling spillover effects of the Houthi rebellion. Finally, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the director of the General Intelligence Directorate, is responsible for monitoring developments in the neighbouring country.

The foreign ministry of Sa'ud al-Faysal, however, has little to say about Yemen, because for the Saudis Yemen is not about foreign policy, but about national security: defence, terrorism and smuggling.

Nightmares of a failed state

Today there is little reason to worry about a too powerful Yemen, and Saudi concerns are rather that the country will be too weak. In private conversations Saudi authorities express fear of a total disintegration of the Yemeni state and the security challenges this will entail for Saudi Arabia. The Saudis cannot afford to have a failed state on their borders.

If Yemen becomes another Somalia, the Saudis worry that Islamist militants might use the neighbouring country as a safe haven and a platform for launching armed attacks in Saudi Arabia. Hundreds of Saudis have already been linked to AQAP, which was established in 2009, some in prominent positions. Among them are Sa'id 'Ali al-Shihri, the group's deputy commander and Saudi Arabia's most wanted man, and Ibrahim Hassan al-'Asiri, the bomb maker linked to many AQAP plots. The former was killed in January 2013 – assassinated by a U.S. drone launched from an unnamed base in Saudi Arabia, according to media reports. In August 2009, AQAP sent a suicide bomber to kill Prince Muhammad bin Nayif. The group has also threatened to attack oil infrastructure and shipping lanes, which would be a direct threat to the Saudi economy.

Moreover, the Saudis worry that further fragmentation of Yemeni society and the weakening of state authority will make it easier for hostile states to buy influence in the country. Their primary concern is Iran, as the Iranians would probably see a strategic advantage in causing trouble for the Saudis in the latter's own backyard by supporting groups such as the Shi'a Houthi rebels in Sa'da province in northern Yemen, where the rebels have created their own state. Moreover, a collapsed Yemen would lead to a surge in refugees crossing the border into Saudi Arabia, increased crime in the kingdom's southern provinces, primarily in the form of smuggling, and perhaps also piracy similar to that around Somalia.

Exit Salih

Although the Saudis are obviously concerned about state collapse in Yemen, they are also worried that their influence in the neighbouring country may be in decline as a result of two parallel developments.

First, Saudi Arabia has stuck by the old, traditional elites whose power has been rocked by the Arab Spring. The Saudis hoped to the bitter end they could save President 'Ali 'Abd Allah Salih, Yemen's strongman of 33 years. In 2010, King 'Abd Allah handed Salih \$700 million, and in September 2011 he angered many Yemenis by allowing the president to return to Yemen after being hospitalised for three months in Riyadh. Prior to this, two other people who had been very important in Saudi Yemen relations also disappeared: Grand Shaykh 'Abd Allah al-Ahmar, Yemen's most powerful tribal leader, head of Hizb al-Islah and a "Saudi man", who died in 2007, and Prince Sultan, who died in 2011. With the latter's demise, the Saudis lost both valuable knowledge about Yemen and contacts in the country. The Saudis knew how to deal with the Yemeni army, tribal leaders and Hizb al-Islah, but not the people who mobilised in the streets.

Second, because the Iranians' influence in Syria is under pressure, it is plausible to believe that they aim to gain more weight in Yemen. Many Yemenis distrust the Saudis because of their handling of the revolt. Riyadh was seen as only working to establish a new sympathetic regime in Sanaa. Thus, there are many groups in the country that would accept Iran's help with open arms, but without thereby supporting Iran's regional aims. Apparently, Iran and the Houthis are establishing partnerships with leftist and liberals who are wary of the power that Sunni Islamists might gain in post-Salih Yemen. These ties have been publicised during conferences and workshops that Iranian officials have held with Yemeni political actors inside and outside Yemen.

Moves to regain influence

Given the highly destructive consequences of a failed state on its borders, now Saudi Arabia's goal is a stable rather than a weak Yemen. Following Salih's fall, keen to regain influence in Yemen, the Saudis have resumed and intensified the payments of stipends that were stopped for a short period during the demonstrations in the spring of 2011. These payments are now most likely overseen by the new minister of defence, Crown Prince Salman. Besides, at the meeting of Friends of Yemen in May 2012, Saudi Arabia pledged \$3.25 billion in aid to its impoverished neighbour, but did not set out its plans for the funds. In September the same year, at another donor meeting, the kingdom promised to deposit \$1 billion in Yemen's central bank to support its currency.

Salih's successor, 'Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, has so far been a good choice for the Saudis. Hadi – who made his

first state visit to the kingdom in March 2012 – has curbed popular protests and successfully clamped down on AQAP. Regardless of Salih’s departure, his family still plays an important role in military cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the U.S. His son Ahmad controls the Republican Guard, while another kinsman, ‘Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, is commander of the First Armoured Division. Another elite family, the al-Ahmar family, is also showing a willingness to be on good terms with Saudi Arabia and maintained the ceasefire in line with Saudi wishes during the fierce fighting in the summer and autumn of 2011.

In addition to cultivating relationships with established elites, the Saudis are seeking dialogue with new groups, probably also the Houthis. This might make it difficult for

Iran to gain a foothold and is a far more constructive approach than the unsuccessful military attack that Saudi Arabia launched against Houthi rebels in November 2009, the first time the kingdom had intervened directly and not by proxy.

Yemen will be increasingly dependent on outside help in the years to come. This would give Saudi Arabia, as the largest provider of development assistance, increased influence on how policies should be designed in Yemen and on which areas should be prioritised. The latter implies continued focus on the defence sector. A military restructuring is expected and those inserted into the new positions will need a good working relationship with both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. ■

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