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THE CRISIS IN YEMEN: AL-QAEDA, SALEH, AND GOVERNMENTAL INSTABILITY

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Western policymakers greeted the Arab Spring with a uncertain mixture of idealism and pragmatism. As populist uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt gained strength, U.S. officials abandoned authoritarian leaders and endorsed calls for democratic reform. When civil disorder in Libya collapsed into civil war, NATO intervened to support rebel forces. Regional unrest also implicated other equities, however. Framed by Saudi fears over Iranian infiltration, the West demurred as Bahrain's leadership suppressed Shi'a protesters. Wary of al-Qaeda's growing influence in Yemen, Washington publicly endorsed efforts to broker President Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation while privately collaborating with the Yemeni security services.

This tension between promoting change and preserving stability raises critical questions about the relationship between power and principle in international affairs. How, for example, should the United States define its interests? When should security concerns trump our desire to support democratic change? Most significantly, what kind of policies are most likely to promote a more stable, secure, and peaceful Middle East? Each of these questions illuminates the moral and strategic dilemmas leaders face when formulating U.S. foreign policy. They also reveal the role that our own perspectives and presumptions play in the policy formulation process.

Some of these presumptions offer insight. Since the start of the Arab Spring, observers have focused on broad trends informing regional unrest. Examples include bulging youth populations, high structural unemployment, and rising commodity prices. Also vital is the role of new media, particularly social media, in disseminating information and coordinating political dissent. Regional trends cannot tell us the whole story, however. Although Egyptians and Libyans were inspired by their Tunisian neighbors and used similar slogans and technologies, the challenges and conditions in each of these countries proved vastly different.

This essay examines the challenges and conditions in contemporary Yemen. Part one addresses demographic factors, including the growth of the Yemeni population, the collapse of the Yemeni economy, and the looming prospect of ecological crisis. Part two considers political trends, focusing on Yemen's unification, political centralization, and the sources of contemporary opposition. Part three evaluates threats to Yemen's political and territorial security, including the Houthi insurrection, the southern secessionist movement, and al-Qaeda's attempts to re-colonize the Arabian Peninsula. The essay concludes by emphasizing the need to ground our analysis and our policy in a rich understanding of local realities.

DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS

Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Arab world. Thirty-four percent of the population is unemployed.¹ Forty-five

¹ Mahmoud Assamiee, "Yemen asks for USD 44 billion from Friends of Yemen," *Yemen Times* (Sana'a), Apr. 6, 2010.

percent live below the United Nations' poverty line.² Fifty percent are illiterate.³ Seventy-three percent still live in rural tribal areas.⁴ With per capita gross domestic product (GDP) at only \$2,500, Yemeni living standards have more in common with sub-Saharan Africa than with the rest of the Middle East.⁵ This endemic poverty is exacerbated by one of the highest birth rates in the world. Three quarters of Yemen's population is below age thirty and forty-six percent is below age fifteen.⁶ This unwieldy age structure seems likely to grow rapidly. With net population growth at 3.4 percent annually, Yemen is set to double its current population of 24 million by 2035.⁷

Yemen's endemic poverty and population boom are even more troubling when one considers the state of the Yemeni economy. Already beset with high structural unemployment and low literacy, Yemen has recently endured annual inflation rates as high as nineteen percent.⁸ High inflation comes on the heels of a fifty percent drop in known oil and gas reserves during the last three years.⁹ With as much as seventy percent of government revenues derived from the energy sector,¹⁰ Yemen's government is losing its capacity to implement fundamental economic reforms at a time when unemployment, poverty, and youth populations are all on the rise.

Each of these challenges is compounded by a looming ecological crisis. Long renowned for its arid climate and mountainous terrain, Yemen's renewable water resources amount to only 220 cubic meters per capita per year. This figure is far below the Middle East average of 1,000 cubic meters per capita, and represents less than three percent of the global average of roughly 8,000 cubic meters.¹¹ As a result, only 2.9 percent of Yemeni territory is currently suitable for agriculture.¹² Urban life is under similarly severe strain, with water tables in Sana'a, the capital city, falling an average of six to eight meters every year.¹³

Despite these scarcities, Yemenis continue to allocate a substantial share of their limited land and water to the cultivation of *qat*, a narcotic plant chewed by users throughout East Africa and parts of the Middle East. According to some observers, this resource-intensive crop consumes as much as 37 percent of Yemen's irrigation water.¹⁴ Others estimate that *qat* production accounts for as much as 10 percent of Yemen's annual GDP.¹⁵ On one level, this phenomenon suggests deep desire among ordinary Yemenis to insulate themselves from the harsh realities of daily life. Yet it also contributes to these realities, reducing economic productivity whilst displacing crops that could be profitably exported.

These realities inform political instability in three ways. First, demographic pressures are producing a population that is younger, poorer, larger, and less able to address its basic economic needs. Second, persistent economic malaise is frustrating efforts to maintain public services, improve existing infrastructure, and invest in long-term economic growth. Finally, resource constraints exacerbate each of these structural challenges whilst simultaneously undermining the complex system of tribal and political patronage established during President Saleh's 33-year reign. With a growing number of parties competing for a shrinking pool of assets, the incentives for dissension and armed insurrection show few signs of subsiding.

POLITICAL UNREST

Yemen is no stranger to political unrest. Although the 1990 merger between the Republic of Yemen (ROY) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) was initially amicable, efforts to integrate the North and South swiftly turned contentious. Incompatible economic systems, separate standing armies, and disputes over oil concessions each contributed to a growing schism between President Saleh's Arab Nationalist General People's Congress Party (GPC) and the South's Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP). Just four years after unification, YSP officials broke with President Saleh's regime and re-asserted the

² "Yemen: Country Profile," *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), Mar. 3, 2010, available at <http://www.englished.aljazeera.net.focus.2008/09/20099192235256194.html>.

³ "FM meets foreign journalists," *Saba* (Sana'a), Apr. 10, 2010.

⁴ "World Bank launches report on poverty in rural areas of Yemen," *Saba* (Sana'a), Jan. 16, 2010, available at <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news203250.htm>.

⁵ "Yemen: Country Profile," *Al-Jazeera*.

⁶ Elizabeth Leahy Madsen, *The Effects of a Very Young Age Structure in Yemen: Country Case Study* (Washington: Population Action International, Dec. 2011), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *World Economic Outlook. Tensions from the Two-Speed Recovery: Unemployment, Commodities, and Capital Flows* (Washington: International Monetary Fund, April 2011), 193.

⁹ Ali Saeed, "Yemen introduces 20 investment opportunities in oil and minerals," *Yemen Times* (Sana'a), Oct. 21, 2010.

¹⁰ John Collins Rudolf, "In Yemen, Water Grows Scarcer," *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 2010.

¹¹ Andrew England, "Arid cities face future without water," *Financial Times*, Sept. 7, 2010.

¹² *Country Profile: Yemen* (Washington: Library of Congress, Aug. 2008), 5.

¹³ Qahtan Al-Asbahi, *Water Resources Information in Yemen* (Sana'a: National Water Resources Authority, 2007).

¹⁴ Gerhard Lichtenthaler, "Water Conflict and Cooperation in Yemen," *Middle East Report* no. 254 (Spring 2010).

¹⁵ *Doing Business in Yemen 2012* (Washington: World Bank, Nov. 21, 2011).

South's independence.

The 1994 Yemeni civil war produced a series of unconventional political and ideological alignments. Wary of President Saleh's support for Saddam Hussein during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, conservative Saudi Arabia reversed its historic support for the North and intervened on behalf of the secular socialist South. President Saleh's regime responded by characterizing the civil war as a struggle between Islam and atheistic socialism—a measure aimed at animating Yemeni Islamists and recruiting recently-returned veterans from the Soviet-Afghan war. The result was a confluence of Arab nationalist, Islamist, and socialist actors, each with different ideologies, different objectives, and different perspectives on the conflict in which they were engaged.

The North's decisive military victory did little to consolidate these political factions. Regional and ideological tensions with the South ossified, with the YSP and other small leftist parties forming a permanent yet largely powerless minority in the Yemeni Parliament. Saleh's efforts to build a centralized Arab Nationalist state also drew the ire of Islamists and tribal leaders, who together comprised the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (*al-Islah*). By 2005, YSP's and *al-Islah*'s parliamentary factions had joined forces under the umbrella of the banner of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) in an effort to curb the GPC's dominance and implement long-delayed reforms.

Fragmentation within the JMP has frustrated many of these efforts. The coalition's leftists were divided among the YSP, which was dominant in the South, a Nasserite party, and two competing Ba'athist groups. *Al-Islah* had its own internal coordination problems, often divided between tribal leaders with an interest in preserving decentralized authority structures and urbanized Islamists seeking reform from the top down. Even the Islamists operated in coalition, with their numbers divided between Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood, with its modernist inclinations, and Salafis led by prominent Sunni religious scholar Abdul Majeed al-Zindani.

This ideological diversity explains the resilience of the 2011 Yemeni uprising. Inspired by protests across the Arab world and supported by thousands of student activists, the JMP's constituents formed the National Council for the Forces of the Peaceful Revolution (National Council) and demanded President Saleh's ouster. They even incorporated defecting Yemeni Army units. Chief among them was the First Armored Division, which intervened to protect Yemeni protesters from government forces in Sana'a.¹⁶ Resilience is not the same as effectiveness, however. Beset with incompatible ideologies and factional divisions, the National Council proved far more effective at catalyzing public anger than channeling it into concrete political action.

President Saleh's recent departure underscores this distinction between social mobilization and political transformation. Though forced to resign in November 2011 under the terms of an agreement brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the former President transferred power to his Vice President, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi. In February 2012, Vice President Hadi ascended to the presidency following an election in which he was the only candidate. With the GPC still holding an overwhelming majority in the Yemeni Parliament, and with Saleh's extended family members occupying key posts in government ministries and the national security apparatus, there are few signs of significant structural change.

It is still not clear whether the GCC plan will produce a more stable equilibrium. Despite acknowledging the transition process, the YSP and other opposition groups have relatively little to gain from the *status quo*. The same is arguably true for Yemen's tribal leaders, who remain wary of efforts to centralize power and dilute their traditional authority. Engaging these potential spoilers will be vital to both President Hadi's success and Yemen's security. With the next round of elections nearly two years away, the failure to find a working consensus may create openings for militants that stand to profit from a chronically unstable state.

SECURITY DILEMMAS

This militancy manifests in three distinct and ultimately incompatible movements. Chief among them is the recurring Houthi rebellion. Centered around the northern province of Sa'ada, this struggle pits Yemen's Sunni-majority regime against members of the Zaidi Shi'a minority. Though currently subject to a cease-fire, the dynamics driving this conflict—including religious differences, political disenfranchisement, and the Houthis' fear of cultural assimilation—remain largely unresolved. With four wars and four truces since 2004, the prospect of renewed conflict in Yemen's north could destabilize the Saudi-Yemeni border at a time when the central government is preoccupied with other challenges.

The rebels are acutely aware of this dynamic. Capitalizing on popular protests in Sana'a, Houthi leaders used the 2011 Yemeni uprising to forge new ties with opposition groups and expand their zone of influence. Neither development is likely to be viewed favorably, be it in Sana'a or Riyadh. The prospect of renewed rebellion is not the only concern, however. In reasserting themselves, the Houthis have increasingly clashed with ultra-conservative Salafi militants operating in the same

¹⁶ Tom Finn, "Yemen army split casts shadow over elections," *Reuters*, Feb. 20, 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/20/us-yemen-election-idUSTRE81J0MF20120220>.

border region. Some observers link these Salafis to Sunni tribal factions aligned with al-Islah.¹⁷ Others, however, see evidence of a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹⁸ With regional tensions between Tehran and Riyadh on the rise, what was once a relatively straightforward regional insurrection could devolve into more opaque and fundamentally irreconcilable patterns of sectarian violence.

Developments in southern Yemen are equally inauspicious. Starting in 2007, the so-called Southern Movement organized mass demonstrations and other forms of civil disobedience to protest Sana'a's policies towards the six southern provinces comprising the former PDRY. Among their grievances was the central government's alleged misappropriation of the South's oil wealth. Equally important, however, were allegations of official discrimination against southerners with respect to government employment, pensions, and other public benefits. With energy reserves falling and government revenues dwindling, resource constraints rekindled many of the resentments left unresolved following the 1994 Yemeni civil war.

The situation turned violent in 2008, with government forces killing and wounding scores of activists in a bid to quash the protests. In 2009, armed factions associated with the Southern Movement began to respond in kind, with sporadic gun battles erupting in Aden and other southern cities. As YSP cadres called for independence, southern tribal leaders like Tariq al-Fadhli broke their longstanding alliances with Saleh's regime and backed the secessionist movement. By January 2010, local polling indicated that some seventy percent of Yemenis living in the former PDRY favored independence.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula also joined the fray. Calling for the establishment of an Islamic emirate in southern Yemen, AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi invited the YSP and other leftists to abandon secular revolution and follow the path of *jihad*.¹⁹ Wuhayshi's proposal was largely rhetorical. Far from joining the Southern Movement, AQAP used civil disorder in southern cities to expand its recruiting and operational reach. In June 2010, for example, AQAP cadres attacked the regional headquarters of Yemen's Political Security Organization (PSO) in Aden, killing ten officers in an operation to free imprisoned militants.²⁰ Two months later, AQAP mounted an assassination campaign against 54 designated officials from the PSO, the Yemeni armed forces, and other security services.²¹

During the last two years, AQAP has gradually widened the scope of its operations while deepening its ties to indigenous tribal groups. This represents a departure from the usual al-Qaeda model, which seeks to colonize and radicalize foreign (and often non-Arab) Muslim populations. In Yemen, however, many of these militants are speaking their native language and fighting on native soil. Some are even sheltering among their own tribesmen—a fact that dramatically improves their capacity to appreciate and mobilize indigenous resentments. The result has been a paradigm shift in al-Qaeda's typical model. Rather than colonizing foreign lands, AQAP is re-integrating itself into the various elements of Yemeni society from which its members were derived.

This integration is producing a more sophisticated and sustainable insurgency. Active across large swaths of Yemen's Abyan and Shabwa Governates, AQAP has grounded the precepts of global *jihad* in the practical realities of local insurrection. In some regions, this means holding and even governing certain communities. The May 2011 capture of Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan, is a case in point. By emerging from the tribal regions and asserting control over urban space, AQAP demonstrated a capacity to displace existing institutions. It also revealed a capacity for sustained urban warfare, with militants holding the city until mid-September despite a counteroffensive from the Yemeni Army and local tribal militias.²² Hostilities in Zinjibar peaked again in February 2012, with AQAP's local front group, Ansar al-Shari'ah, threatening a torrent of violence if Yemeni forces did not withdraw.²³

AQAP's tactics also embrace territorial exclusion. One notable example is the January 2012 capture of Radda in Bayda Governate. Located near a major road linking Sana'a with eight of Yemen's twenty governates, the move suggested an effort to isolate Yemen's transitional government from the southern and western regions where its writ is already weak.²⁴ There is some evidence that the raid was intended more as a signal, however. After freeing prisoners, flying their flag above the local citadel, and tagging buildings with *jihadi* graffiti, AQAP entered into talks with government-appointed negotiators and withdrew its forces just one week later.

¹⁷ Kareem Fahim, "Yemeni Uprising Opens a Door to Besieged Rebels in the North," *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2011.

¹⁸ Hakim Almasari, "Saudi-Iranian War fought in Sa'ada," *Yemen Post* (Sana'a), Apr. 10, 2010.

¹⁹ "The Southern Issue: Secession or Unity. Is there another Option?" *Sada al-Malahim* (Sabwa), May 13, 2010.

²⁰ "Yemen Gunmen in Deadly Raid on Aden Security Services HQ," BBC News, Jun. 19, 2010.

²¹ Ghanda al-Yusufi, "Report on al-Qaida Threat to Assassinate 54 Yemeni Security Officials," Elaph.com (Dubai), September 20, 2010.

²² "Yemen army recaptures provincial capital of Abyan," *CNN*, Sept. 10, 2011.

²³ Mohammed Mukhashaf, "Al-Qaeda-linked group gives Yemen Government ultimatum," *Daily Star* (Lebanon), Fe. 29, 2012.

²⁴ Ahmed al-Haj, "Al-Qaeda in Yemen Captures Town South of Capital," *Associated Press*, Jan. 16, 2012.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The incident in Radda encapsulates many of the factors undermining Yemen's domestic security. Distracted by the uprising in Sana'a and their own power transition, Yemen's central government was unable to deter the militants or prevent the town's temporary loss. AQAP, by comparison, was unable to consolidate its gain. Rather than entering into a prolonged urban battle, as in Zinjibar, the insurgents chose to negotiate, withdraw, and preserve their forces for future action. The resulting ambiguity is destabilizing in its own right. Although Radda did not experience a change in control, it confirmed the growing absence of it.

This absence of control is a product of several converging factors. Years of unresolved internal conflicts have gradually eroded the central government's authority, legitimacy and, capacity to act. The same is true for months of anti-government protests informed by lingering resentments and inspired by the Arab Spring. Equally important, however, are decades of demographic pressure. Even without persistent political turmoil and overlapping insurgencies, Yemen's exploding population, dwindling resources, and persistent economic malaise would each be fundamentally destabilizing in their own right.

A reflexive emphasis on terrorism diminishes these dynamics. By focusing exclusively on AQAP's tactics and rhetoric, we risk ignoring the indigenous dynamics that shape its operations and potentially constrain its options. A superficial emphasis on the Arab Spring raises similar concerns. While mass uprisings in cities such as Sana'a and Aden demand our attention, the historical and tribal resentments driving popular resistance in Yemen may have few meaningful equivalents in more centralized countries like Egypt or more secular societies like Tunisia. This is why an emphasis on local conditions is so crucial. Without a firm grounding in the circumstances shaping everyday life, we lose sight of the nuances that distinguish one set of threats and priorities from the next.

An emphasis on local nuance is particularly vital in Yemen, where a centralized Arab nationalist state exists in an increasingly tenuous equilibrium with a decentralized tribal society. To the extent that state governance is absent or ineffective, traditional structures will invariably fill the void. And the more these traditional structures perceive greater payoffs from defection, be it to political movements like the National Council or militant movements like AQAP, the less influence President Hadi's regime will ultimately wield.

This involuntary erosion of state power is consistent with al-Qaeda's longstanding desire for a stable base of operations within the Sunni Arab heartland. So long as Yemen's internal divisions persist, they create the kind of ungoverned space where transnational terrorist syndicates and their indigenous allies flourish. Dysfunctional institutions will also hasten ecological and economic collapse. Absent some measure of stability, the international community is unlikely to make the kind of sustained investments that could mitigate Yemen's looming demographic crises.

These dynamics transcend the false dichotomy between promoting change and preserving stability. Yemen is already in the midst of dramatic change—change that has more to do with local conditions than regional trends. It is also suffering from chronic instability—instability that persistently undermines efforts to preserve the *status quo*. Against this backdrop, the central challenge in Yemen is finding a functional equilibrium before factionalism and parochialism inspire a race to the bottom. With an estimated 9.9 million small arms circulating within a population of only 24 million,²⁵ the failure to appreciate Yemenis' local grievances could inadvertently precipitate a regional crisis.

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²⁵ "Yemen: Small arms sales heading underground," *IRIN*, Feb. 14, 2010.