

Yemen: On the Brink of Civil War?

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Sebastian Usher

So, Yemen: we will explain it all in half an hour, I'm sure. My name is Sebastian Usher, I'm Middle East editor with the BBC World Service. I normally have to try to explain Yemen in 35 seconds, which actually is easier, I think, than trying to explain it any longer because you don't have to get too complicated. But fortunately, the three people here are going to have a little bit more time to do that. Let me introduce them quickly.

Kate Nevens, who will speak first, is working with Saferworld. They have projects in Yemen to do with conflict resolution – still, as you were just telling me now, managing to keep going, as if you're surfing over all the trouble, and hopefully you won't be taken off in a tidal wave.

Baraa Shiban, who is still based in Yemen, in Sanaa, working with Reprieve, and specifically working with trying to get the testimony of people who have suffered, families who have suffered, from the drone strikes – to have a voice, to be able to explain what's happened to them, why it may not be the most effective way of dealing with the problems in Yemen. By now, I think, we're probably past that in any case. I don't think anyone is perhaps going to be saying that this is the model for how we should be doing things. But as you say, finding it more difficult as each week goes past.

Baraa Shiban

Yes, absolutely.

Sebastian Usher

And Alistair Burt, who's had a long and distinguished career, and for three – was it four? – years was the point man for the Middle East for the government. Just explained to me how he managed to start at a time when there was great optimism, great change – I'm sure it's complete coincidence, but managed to move on just as it turned into the depressing situation that we're now seeing and now experiencing.

Each of our guests will have eight minutes to speak. Just a couple of things. This is on the record. There's no video but it's being recorded for sound. I've also been asked to say that voting for the Chatham House Prize is now open online, so please do that. At about half-past we should have finished with the speakers and then obviously questions, we'll have a good half-hour of that.

Kate, if you'd like to start?

Kate Nevens

Thank you. As Sebastian says, I've been given eight minutes to give an overview of the current political situation and the regional context, so bear with me. It's a lot to fit into eight minutes. I thought I'd start with a brief overview of what's happening right now in Yemen. As I'm sure most of you will have noticed, quite a lot of things have been happening just over the past weekend. Then following that, I thought I'd pose a few questions that might be in some of your minds. Is this a sectarian conflict that we're seeing in Yemen? What are some of the roles that regional and international actors or players are doing that might actually be sustaining or helping to create conditions for the kind of conflict that we're seeing? Finally, what kind of resilience is there in Yemen for these events?

Really sadly, on Friday we saw one of the most devastating attacks against Yemeni civilians in recent memory. We saw coordinated suicide attacks in two mosques in Sanaa. Over 140 people lost their lives

and over 300 people were injured. Not only is this one of the most devastating incidents in terms of scale, it's incredibly significant in the trajectory of Yemen in that this is the first time that we've seen an attack that has an outwardly sectarian nature. It was targeting mosques that are led by Zaidi imams. It also represents an increased willingness to kill high numbers of civilians, not just state targets – something that I don't think really existed in Yemen prior to this.

Yesterday, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, who is the leader of the al-Houthi movement – the al-Houthi movement have been gradually taking over the north of Yemen over the last few months. Hopefully there might be a map somewhere that you guys can see, which shows the al-Houthi movement in orange. The al-Houthi movement – most of the movement's members are followers of the Zaidi branch of Islam, which is the branch of Islam that was attacked on Friday. Yesterday, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi made a speech. In this speech, he declared that the UN-mediated negotiations and talks that are happening in Sanaa cannot continue forever (in his words). He called for further military mobilization against anyone that he sees as loyal to Al-Qaeda or ISIS (ISIS were the people who claimed responsibility for Friday's attacks) as well as forces loyal to President Hadi. This move has been widely interpreted as a justification for war in the south of Yemen, where Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula have the strongest presence and also where President Hadi is currently residing.

Hadi, the president of Yemen's now dissolved transitional government, has been resident in the south, in Aden, since he escaped Houthi house arrest in February. Hadi in the south has been gathering support from local armed groups to augment the few militias that are still loyal to him, and is also using increasingly combative, war-like language against the Houthis. On the same day as the mosque attacks last Friday, the Houthis ran air strikes on Hadi's residence in Aden, using former President Saleh's air forces.

In their expansion across Yemen, it seems the Houthis are still currently maintaining the upper hand, I would say. They still have a quite high degree of momentum. Yesterday, it seems, they seized control of Taiz, which is Yemen's third-largest city. However, the Houthis are fighting on multiple fronts and their hold on some areas is relatively fragile. It's likely that they are overstretched in terms of their capacity.

It's really not clear that any one party is in a position right now to take control of the whole country, but also really unclear whether it's to anyone's advantage right now to enter the negotiating table. I'm also not convinced that anyone really wants formal control of the whole country and the accountability that comes with that, apart from potentially President Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, which we can come back to.

Also, while I know that Baraa and Alistair will probably speak a bit more to this, it's worth noting that this is all happening against a backdrop of a severe humanitarian crisis and a potentially huge economic crisis. So whoever does inherit the country or parts of the country will also inherit something that will be really difficult to control.

So, my questions. Is this a sectarian conflict that we're seeing in Yemen right now? Personally, I would say that the roots of this conflict are purely political. On the surface, this appears to be a Sunni-Shi'a division, which I'm sure a lot of people are reading about in the news. The Houthis, as I say, are followers of a branch of Islam called Zaidism. It's a form of Shi'ism but it's very distinct from Iranian Twelver Shi'ism. Actually, theologically, it's not that dissimilar to Sunnism. The other major actors in the conflict appear to be Sunni.

However, in Yemen there's very little history of sectarian discord, let alone sectarian violence. When you talk to Yemenis, often they'll tell you what their political identity is – I'm a Houthi, I'm a southerner, I'm

with the GBC, I'm an Islahi, I'm a youth activist – but they'll hardly ever mention an affiliation, in my experience, to *madhab*, their religious school of thought. Really rarely comes up in conversation. Yemenis tend to pray side by side and they tend to choose, in my experience in Sanaa, mosques that are close to the family home, not mosques that are relevant to a very specific type of doctrine.

What there has been in Yemen, however, is a history of competition for resources, for control and for power. Those that have had resources, control and power have often maintained this through systems of inclusion and exclusion, or divide and rule. These kind of systems, particularly under President Saleh, are marked by shifting affiliations that have little to do with political or religious ideology. Marriages – and quite often divorces, I would say – of convenience in order to maintain or gain these types of resources or control. For example, the Houthis fought six wars against former President Saleh's regime yet last year it was quite clear that President Saleh was supporting the Houthi movement into Sanaa. So they're enemies, now they're friends. The Houthis have been using Saleh's air force to attack President Hadi, who is the former deputy of Saleh, in Aden. There's a definite pattern there of shifting affiliations. There are lots of examples.

However, all that said, while the goals are still political and defined primarily at the moment around regionalism, I would say, the narrative is becoming increasingly sectarian. This is both a reflection of some genuine growth in sectarian sentiment maybe, but mainly because I think it's in the interests of various parties to promote and exploit these fault lines to their own gain.

A second question. For the sake of time, I'm going to talk about the role that the GCC and the UN-led transition process may have played in this conflict that we're seeing, and a tiny bit of speculation about Saudi. Everyone likes a bit of speculation about Saudi.

The GCC and the UN transition process – this is a process that started in 2011. In 2011, youth activists came to the streets of Sanaa. They demanded a complete structural change to the Yemeni political system. What they got was a transition process led by the Gulf countries, the US, the UK and the UN, which basically (in my opinion) re-legitimized and further embedded the existing, exclusive, elite political system that the youth were railing against, and installed a transitional government under Hadi that was either unable or unwilling to transfer power away from the elite groups. To a certain extent, this initiative, in my opinion – when it came out, it was clear that this initiative came about to stave off civil war. It was an elite contract between elite players. And it's done that. So now, three or four years on, we have not seen a civil war. So maybe it was effective. But I think the title of this event is, are we on the brink of civil war? So maybe it was successful on its own terms.

It also did not, in this elite bargain that was brokered in 2011, include the Houthis or the southerners. So there's probably some lessons learned there about how that may have come to help with the situation.

Very briefly on Saudi speculation. Obviously, the ascent of the Houthi movement has not gone unnoticed in Saudi. A lot of people are talking about a proxy war because of the Sunni-Shi'a thing, which I don't personally believe in. However, Saudi are famously good at hedging their bets, basically backing every horse in the race to make sure that they have a stable neighbour. But I do think – this is the speculation – that the Saudi government will want to see the defeat of the Houthis. I think it's already assumed that they are backing President Hadi's forces in the south. To do this effectively, you may see some Saudi financing and arming of Al-Qaeda and southern secessionists in the south, in order to defeat the Houthis. I think it's something to really think about, when you think about the British government's relationship with Saudi. A lot of the British government's trade and intelligence relationships go right through Saudi and you might have a partner in the region who is financing AQAP.

I want to preface my final point about resilience with the fact that I've been working on Yemen now since about 2009, so not anywhere near as long as I'm sure many people in the room. But I think every other panel event I've been to and every other publication I've read has been called 'Yemen on the Brink'. So that's at least seven years of Yemen being on the brink. So there must be some kind of resilience in Yemen. I think what we're looking at now is how tested is this resilience. I think this resilience comes from local-level community structures and ties that really hold things together. How much is this current situation going to test that?

I'm going to end with a quote from one of my favourite youth activists, Farea Al-Muslimi. He says: 'Violence has slowly become the norm in Yemen. Violence and a declining quality of life have come to represent Yemen'. So that resilience has also become normality of violence.

Sebastian Usher

Thank you very much, Kate. I think that was a Yemeni eight minutes but it was fascinating. Baraa, if you'd like to take us a little beyond that.

Baraa Shiban

I would, if you would allow me, position myself in three different places at the same point. I would be a bit political, I would be a bit analytical, and allow me to be a little bit emotional, because I feel it's also my role to represent the voices of the youth who went to the streets in 2011. For many of you, it was known as the Arab Spring. For people like us who were in the streets, we called it the revolution.

In 2011, I do remember very well, we met a senior US official who actually asked us – and that was at the very beginning of the events in 2011 – would you rather have a dictator or would you rather have AQAP members ruling the streets of Yemen? Our question has always been: should we always have either this or that? Can we have a different model?

On the 21st of September, just last year, many people were trying very hard to describe what was happening in Sanaa, when the Houthis came and took over the capital. Many people were questioning, is this a coup? Are we actually witnessing a coup, that the transition is over? Or actually are we witnessing some internal fighting between the many different players in the country that will actually lead to a transitional process in the end? When the coup was finally announced on the 6th of February, many people – including the international community – woke up to the fact that actually maybe what happened on the 21st of September was a coup.

For me, the coup actually happened before September 2014. The coup, I would say, actually started in Amran, which is the closest province to Sanaa. When the Houthis took over Amran, that was the main turning point in the events inside the country. We reached a situation where there was no going back. Amran is the closest province to the capital. The Houthis eventually took control over the city in June 2014.

What happened in Amran was very much the same pattern that would happen in Sanaa. Prisons were established in Amran. The main stadium in Amran was actually turned into being the main central prison in Amran, where many youth activists who weren't able to flee the city were arrested. A lot of the government offices were dissolved and were replaced by the Houthi militias. They took control over the security situation of the city. What happened is that President Hadi at that point decided to seek advice from the international community, like he always did. The advice was simply that any backing for the

formal forces in Amran would only make the Islah Party in particular stronger, and that will eventually lead that Islah would become stronger because simply they became the strongest political force in the country after 2011. So Hadi took the advice and went to Amran and announced that there was only some fights between several troops and that Amran is still under the control of the Yemeni government.

Actually, two days after Hadi's visit I decided, with a number of youth activists, to go and visit the city. There was almost no presence of even a single police station inside the city. It was totally controlled by the Houthi militias. The schools were used as places for prison. The government offices were totally closed. Yet we found that the UN Security Council came up with an announcement: we call for all forces fighting in Amran to calm down. They didn't describe the situation that was happening, that there was a Houthi takeover of the city that actually would lead eventually to the Houthis coming closer to the capital.

The political transition in general was always described to be a weak transition for the people, as it appeared very strong in the eyes of the international community, as there was a strong political process going on. There was a national dialogue going on, there was a constitutional drafting committee working. The people on the ground didn't feel much of that change. Until now, we have more than 50 per cent of the people are living on \$2 per day. People feel threatened every month that they will not receive their monthly wages. The private sector after 2011 have simply pushed out thousands of employees because they cannot keep people employed anymore. The government actually even have forecasted the cash flows until the end of the year. The yearly budget of the Yemeni government is \$14 billion, that it doesn't seem able to cover. It simply doesn't have the resources to cover the \$14 billion per year. There have been systematic attacks on the pipelines and power lines that actually affected the resources coming into the budget. So as there was a lot of spending going on, there was actually little coming into the government's pocket.

So Yemen's economy is actually on the brink for almost three years. Every time we reach the state that the government was not actually able to pay wages, we'd have the Saudis step in and literally bailing out the government in Sanaa every time. The Saudi government paid an amount of \$4 billion in the past two years to cover just the government's deficit. This deficit is – the interesting part about this deficit is that actually it is not a deficit that is actually used for infrastructure. In other words, the kind of project that will create growth and create new jobs for the people. It is for covering wages for the government. Usually the government would tend to start issuing some treasury bills or bonds to keep covering the deficit in its yearly budget. The bonds and treasury bills also come with a very high interest rate – we're talking about 15 per cent. I think that's maybe even bigger than most of the countries around the world.

So a lot of people do actually ask on a daily basis: was the GCC initiative a good plan? Did we have strong outcomes? I would always argue that even the greatest plans are always plans, if there was no real implementation on the ground. That's what the Yemeni people didn't feel for the past three years. They felt that there was a lot of talks going on at the political level. There was a lot of discussions, a lot of talks about the constitution. But the normal people on the ground didn't feel that these talks are meeting their aspirations. That's why I think it's very important to point out that when the Houthis first came into Sanaa, many people were welcoming because they felt that maybe finally they will achieve some of their demands and they will fight some of the corruption, before the Houthis started on their own attacking activists and putting into prison tonnes of people. Then people eventually feeling that they've lost hope.

Now we have a situation, I think, where Yemen is almost on the brink of a civil war. Yes, there are, as Kate just stated, troops in the south that are loyal to Hadi. Hadi will keep depending on non-state actors – this means the popular committees that he created in 2012 to fight Al-Qaeda – and he will also try to depend on the tribal forces that have announced their support for President Hadi.

On the other side, I think the Houthis and the Salehs will try to keep expanding south in order to end this quickly and to eventually take control over the country. This unfortunately will come at the cost of the lives of the millions of Yemeni people.

So I come back to the main question, and I think a lot of people have been asking me this during the past few days: are you better off having the Houthi militias or Al-Qaeda? I think this is the same answer that we stated in 2011: why should we always have this or that? Actually, why do we either have to choose between those different players, those different people who are always fighting and fighting and fighting, and keep putting the country on the edge of a civil war?

I think we have to finally recognize that Yemen is far bigger than just Al-Qaeda, it's far bigger than just Houthis fighting and Saleh or Hadi. It's a nation of 25 million and I think we need to seek and work for their demands and aspirations. Thank you.

Sebastian Usher

Thank you, Baraa. For the significance internationally, what can be done internationally, Alistair.

Alistair Burt

Thank you very much. Thank you for the opportunity to speak again at Chatham House. Let me start with two disclaimers, if I may. First, a former minister always, I think, speaks with a greater degree of humility than a minister. You learn after you've been in office what it was you didn't know. You learn also that you wanted to know much more and now you do, simply by staying involved in a region that you became very fond of. I start with that sense of humility.

Secondly, you also develop or you realize the distinction in time, the concept of time, with which we deal with things. Ministers, whether it's in the United Kingdom, the United States, by and large Western Europe, Western states – our concept of time is developed on parliamentary cycles or economic cycles. They are relatively short, let alone news cycles now that are increasingly quick. People expect things to happen quickly.

The region we're dealing with, the region we're so engrossed in, doesn't work to that degree of time. Often what we're engaged in are mere snapshots of generational issues. Sometimes we either forget that or we simply can't afford to wait for generational things to move – we're engaged in something that is immediate.

I make those two points because I think in looking at the international perspective, it's important to know that some of us have noticed this. And secondly, I think it does give a different perspective to how you look at further events that [indiscernible] in the future.

I thought Baraa articulated very well one of the things that was present right at the beginning of the Arab Spring and led to some of us having optimism. That is, why should people in this region always have to choose between tyranny and chaos? Why is that? We wouldn't accept it for a second. Why is it that that is the choice? And it is the choice, it appears to be the choice. But it shouldn't be the choice. We should all be engaged in doing everything we can.

Looking back at what happened in Yemen in 2010, 2011, and the efforts made there, do accept that from some of us, there was an intention of working through the GCC and the National Dialogue to try and find

something different. I'm as disappointed as anyone else that we aren't quite there yet, though I remain a sufficient optimist to believe that this is a long way from being settled and finished. We have a long way to go.

But let me just say a little bit about the background that both Kate and Baraa have articulated and say something about that before looking at now. When I came into office in 2010, the issue of poverty and extreme poverty in Yemen was already well recognized. The Friends of Yemen grouping – built around joint leadership from Yemen itself, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom – was already up and running. The start of quite a lot of money being put into Yemen was underway. This money never reached the people, it's now blindingly obvious, but it wasn't through lack of trying. And it wasn't through lack of understanding either – that a private sector was needed, jobs were needed. People need jobs and they needed real things to do. The process in Yemen, as both of you accurately described and we understand very well, is a political process that is completely corrupt, which depends on patronage, and money was simply siphoned at various times to keep the warring factions away from each other. Sometimes they present a case to the West to say, 'I need more money, otherwise these people will do something bad to you as well as to me', and the money flowed. It was a poor system.

The events on the streets in 2011 provided a new opportunity. One of my regrets in my time as minister was I got to know Yemen so little. That was because it was practically the only place I couldn't get out of the car, was not allowed out of the car to go running around. You go into the centre of Sanaa, as I suspect many of you know far better than me, and it's extraordinary. It's beautiful. You read about Yemen and the Yemeni people and the history and the culture and the music and the poetry and everything else, and you just want to get engaged as any foreign visitor would. Still, I know I will get to know Yemen better over the years. There is so much in Yemen that's been crowded by the politics and everything else.

As the events gathered pace and people on the streets and everything, it followed on from what had happened elsewhere. We were all acutely aware that everyone was watching everyone else, and the ways in which the Arab Spring was being dealt with in other states. It was pretty well certain it was going to happen in Yemen as well. Hence the efforts made to pull the president away from a situation where, challenged again by those who were seeking to take power from him, he was going to react in the way which he knew best and the Yemenis understood best. I give full credit to the incoming general secretary, Abdullatif Al-Zayani, and the GCC. It was indeed one of the first successes of the GCC after a very quiet period of making a real effort to try and get involved in a situation and work upon a deal that was designed just to end that immediate risk of people being gunned down in the streets in ever greater numbers. Of course, people lost their lives, but many more people could have lost their lives.

Although I'm not an expert in all sorts of things, I'm quite an expert in knowing what I thought at the time as minister – I'm good at that. I know that when I was speaking to our ambassador, the efforts that various ambassadors were making in Sanaa at the time to work with the GCC – I know what was being attempted, and it was to try and create a bit of space and say, could we do something different? President Saleh [indiscernible] and moved some distance away, and then we saw the events unfolding.

Of course, in hindsight, we know so much more. What was genuine and what could have given rise to something slightly different? The National Dialogue was different, and genuine. I remember going down to Aden and speaking to the southerners. We, from a distance, were trying to impress upon them that all options were open. Clearly, some wanted a straightforward division of north and south again, wanted their independence. Others were prepared to understand the concept of greater autonomy, provided it really was autonomy, despite all the doubt. But what was on offer was genuine, something different was on offer if people could follow it through. I'm convinced of that.

But the problem was, when push came to shove, no one is quite prepared to give up power. If you give up power, you take a risk, with your own supporters as well as [indiscernible]. It's clear from the talks that the Houthis did not [indiscernible] and there was an underestimation of the Houthis during this period. Therefore, what has happened in the last few months has been that much more of a surprise.

Without going through all the recent history, which everyone in the room knows and has been well articulated, I'll come to the bit about what do people do now. Having given that background – my point in the background is I think a genuine effort was made. I think it was a recognition of exactly what Baraa said, that the voices that had never been heard in Yemen's power struggles of the past – the voice of youth, the voice of women – but that's not unusual in the region. One of the terrible consequences of 2011 is we've learned conclusively that where there is no institutional process to transfer what's in the square, what's on the street, into a structure of power, it fails. Accordingly, it's all got to come back again. The institutions have to be built up, otherwise there's no transfer of that voice.

But where we are now and what we might do – firstly, on the political and democratic track, there is a conference proposed in Riyadh. I suspect the United Kingdom will back it. But what's in it for everyone? Well, firstly, I get a sense, having spoken to the GCC at senior level quite recently, there is a sense of an understanding that as the Houthis weren't well represented before, they've made their voice known. A conference that takes place now will incorporate their voice, there's no doubt about it. Accordingly, the pull for them is an opportunity to have what they have achieved by force of arms recognized in a more institutional way. That might be a pull for them into the conference. So I take Kate's point, what is there for anyone in talking – well, there is that.

Secondly, there is the avoidance of further civil strife. Civil war is not going to benefit anyone. It doesn't benefit any of the neighbours. The capacity of the people to absorb civil war is, of course, unending in the region. If we want to put an end to the misery, if we want to put an end to that equation that it's either tyranny or chaos, you've got to be prepared to try something different. I think the GCC does want [indiscernible] to try something different. An answer saying 'no, we prefer civil war' can't be the best answer to the available question, 'should we talk a little bit further?' So I think we will back that determination.

For some neighbours, will it suit them or not? This gets into the issue between Saudi Arabia and the Iranians. I think most people assume that the Iranians have an interest, but it's more of an opportunist interest than it is running the show. But you can never tell. I think the Saudis may not be prepared to accept that interpretation. We'll see. It can't be in either's interest for a proxy war to take place, least of all for the Yemeni people as well. So again, another reason to back the conference and discussion.

The Western powers – well, as we see from the withdrawal of United States security forces and ourselves, intelligence is lost. Yemen means lots of things to lots of people, but being very blunt about it, what it means for Western powers is an ungoverned space, and an ungoverned space threatens us in London as it affects people all over the world. Losing intelligence sources and vision is not good news.

So for all these reasons, the forces conspire to say: give it another go, but give it another go recognizing what went wrong with the initial dialogue process and can that be injected here. If people wish to reject [indiscernible], it would be terribly sad, because the voice that will be missed will be Baraa's. The people who want peace [indiscernible] politicians and international institutions, we should be backing the process and doing as much as we can.

Sebastian Usher

Thank you. It was always optimistic to think that we could set out these questions and issues in just half an hour. Hopefully we'll have time to give everyone who wants to ask a question, a chance to ask questions, so I'm not going to ask any questions.