

Briefing – APRIL 2015

NAVIGATING YEMEN TO SAFE SHORES: PROSPECTS FOR NATIONAL DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

Sarah Bollinger

Summary

Since September, the situation in Yemen has descended rapidly from a domestic crisis into a major civil and regional war. The failure of the 2013-14 Yemeni National Dialogue Conference (NDC) has been confirmed by the escalating violence attending the gradual usurpation of power by the northern armed faction known as Houthis and its allies in factions loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Starting on 25 March, Saudi Arabia and a coalition of eight other Arab states launched Operation Decisive Storm, an air campaign against Houthi forces. Regional actors have begun [assembling troops](#) and ships for a possible ground offensive.

The Houthis initially hailed their takeover as a turning point that would “sail Yemen to safe shores.” On the contrary, the Houthi takeover has served as a tipping point for a war that has been driven far more by political failures than by sectarian divisions. Given the failure of the NDC, what new dialogue processes can be put in place to prevent further violence and state disintegration? This briefing provides an overview of the fractured Yemeni political landscape and provides recommendations for supporting renewed national dialogue.

Introduction

Since 21 February, Yemen has had two rival governments: the Houthi-led administration based in Sana’a, Yemen’s highland capital, and the administration of embattled President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, based initially in Aden and, since late March in exile in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. In the five months preceding Hadi’s flight from Sana’a, the Ansar Allah armed movement (better known as Houthis) broke out of its northern powerbase, rode a wave of public dissatisfaction with the government and overran Sana’a. Allying with the most potent units of the fractured security forces, in a matter of weeks they gained control of several government institutions, shelled the presidential palace, and placed President Hadi and several other government officials under house arrest. In response, opposition groups in the south of the country blockaded all entrances to the Aden province and flew the flag of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), which merged into the Republic of Yemen in 1990, from government buildings.

Despite efforts by the UN to broker a settlement to the crisis, the Houthis dissolved the Yemeni parliament and announced that a five-person Transitional Council coupled with a 551 seat National Council would act as President and Parliament respectively for a period of two years. The Hadi government and the international community swiftly [labelled](#) these developments a coup d'état. The UN [Security Council declared](#) its intent to impose sanctions upon the Houthi-led administration if the [political roadmap](#) facilitated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the wake of Yemen's 2011 Arab Spring uprising was not immediately resumed. The secessionist Southern Movement (better known as al-Hirak) pledged resistance to the Houthi government and opposition to the Houthis has intensified in several parts of the country. The Houthi appeal for a new National Conference has been widely boycotted as Saudi Arabia and its GCC and Yemeni allies have favoured a military response.

As the situation on the ground in Yemen continues to deteriorate it is clear that there is an urgent need for renewed national dialogue aimed at untangling the complex alliances and interests within the Yemeni political landscape.

A Missed Opportunity

Held between March 2013 and January 2014, the NDC represents a missed opportunity to renegotiate a workable and inclusive basis for Yemeni governance. At its inception, the NDC was lauded as an affirmative example of post-Arab Spring political transition. It was extremely inclusive and very much in the spirit of popular agency in that it brought together a broad spectrum of Yemeni civil society, from women's groups to the standard bearers of the revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islah party. Ambitious in scope, it sought to address issues burdening Yemen, from institutional reforms to social policy.

Despite the apparent buy-in of a wide range of Yemeni stakeholders, the NDC concluded four months past its original deadline with a failure to reach consensus on a proposed six-region federation and division of national resources. Southern leaders declared the status of the two southern Yemeni regions within the framework of the federal system unsatisfactory. The Houthi movement complained of marginalisation throughout the process, claiming that the post-2011 transition framework was driven by elites of the old regime and its GCC allies. These suspicions were reinforced when power was transferred from President Saleh to his vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. Heavy Islah representation within the NDC was also problematic for the Houthis as the Islah party, which carries strong Wahhabi influences, was a known client of Saudi Arabia before the 2011 uprisings. In its final stages, the NDC was plagued by wide disagreement between delegates and accompanied by political violence across the country.

Yemen is a maelstrom of regional power plays, endemic internal corruption, foreign interests, sectarian and tribal conflicts, extreme poverty, and dwindling resources. Expectations for the NDC may have been unrealistically high, but the immense costs of its failure are now apparent. Moving forward, active reengagement with national dialogue must seek a more targeted compromise that addresses the 'southern issue' as well as providing appropriate representation to the various Yemeni political, regional, tribal and sectarian actors.

Internal Divisions

Yemen's internal divisions are complex and heavily localised, hence the need for deep consultation and wide participation in any national dialogue process. For example, existence of distinct Southern and Northern Yemeni identities and a strong southern secessionist movement makes the escalation of violence between Northern and Southern factions highly likely. This stems also from the pre-1990 division of contemporary Yemen into the Shi'a-led Kingdom of Yemen and its successor the Nasserite Yemen Arab Republic (North) and the British Aden Protectorate and its successor the pro-Soviet PDRY (South).

The Houthis are a tribal political movement hailing from the northernmost tip of the country (Sa'ada governorate) and have been staging an insurrection against the central government since 2004. Houthi ranks are bolstered by factions loyal to former President Saleh, who has allied his family and his General People's Congress (GPC) party with the Houthis. However, the potential for a long term alliance between Saleh and the Houthis is not high, as the Houthi uprising began a decade ago as a revolt against his corrupt rule.

The Houthi affiliation with the esoteric Zaydi sect of Shi'a Islam has been presented as the defining characteristic of the group. However, it is more useful to define the Houthis on political rather than sectarian lines, particularly as Yemen has a relatively strong history of co-existence between various Sunni and Shi'a traditions.

This is not to say that local sectarian divisions do not come into play. The ascension of the Zaydi minority group is likely to be viewed unfavourably by some local Sunni elements, possibly bolstering the ranks of the Salafist al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) or the so-called Islamic State (IS). Currently the most actively anti-Western franchise of al-Qaida, AQAP enjoys a very solid base of operations in central and southern Yemen. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for March suicide bombings at two mosques in Sana'a that claimed the lives of 142 people.

The AQAP presence makes Yemen a focal point of Western counter-terrorism operations, including sporadic US drone strikes from Djibouti (and possibly from [Umm al-Melh](#), just across the Saudi border) and a covert operations base at Al-Anad, 50 km north of Aden. These drone strikes often result in [heavy civilian casualties](#), which generates sympathy for militant factions.

The presence of a powerful tribal element in Yemen will also need to be addressed, as state control of tribal regions has always been challenging. The tribe still carries great weight as a societal unit in Yemen, and the state and tribal units have long engaged in a symbiotic relationship where each depended on the other for influence. This is often misunderstood in that 'tribal' connotes lawlessness and chaos. On the contrary, the localised tribal system is arguably one of the factors that held Yemeni society together in the absence of a strong central state. Within tribal politics and tradition lies a framework for conflict resolution and mediation, sovereignty, and representation that, for many Yemenis, was otherwise lacking at the centre. While tribal leaders often depend on state patronage, the local influence of tribal leaders

continues to be a cornerstone to any successful national dialogue process and must somehow reconcile the strong tribal presence in Yemen with the national dialogue and state-building process.

The Proxy Element

Like many conflicts in the region, Yemen is considered an arena for Iran and Saudi Arabia in their battle for regional hegemony. While the current unrest in Yemen is far too multi-faceted to be reduced to a simple binary 'Shi'a-Sunni' issue, the sectarian dimensions are significant because of heightened Saudi perceptions of encroachment and encirclement by Iran. The extent of Iranian financial and military backing for the Houthi movement is murky at best, but the political capital and strategic benefits to Iran through the addition of Yemen to the Iranian sphere of influence are theoretically considerable. The establishment of a regime friendly to Tehran in Sana'a would not only place Iranian interests adjacent to Saudi Arabia's most populous southwest, but would allow Iran access to the Bab al-Mandeb, a strategic shipping chokepoint between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Given the Iranian threat to close the Straits of Hormuz (the entry/exit to the Persian/Arabian Gulf) in the event of conflict, Iranian influence on the Red Sea greatly unsettles Saudi Arabia.

The question of material support aside, the ideological 'Shi'a connection' between Iran and the Houthis is over-emphasised. Unlike Hezbollah in Lebanon or Iraqi Shi'a militias, northern Yemeni Zaydis, or 'Fiver' Shi'a, have more in common with Sunni Islam in matters of Islamic jurisprudence, or fiqh, than they do with the 'Twelver' Shi'a Islam predominant in Iran. Further, Saudi Arabia has historically adopted a very pragmatic approach to Zaydis that seems to transcend the simplistic hard sectarian divisions commonly presented between Sunni and Shi'a. This was manifested in Saudi support for the Zaydi President Saleh in his various struggles. Further, the Saudis and Zaydi militias cooperated militarily against Egypt during the 1960s North Yemen Civil War.

Ailing Economy

Reinforcing the urgency for renewed national dialogue, Yemen is also experiencing a chronic economic and humanitarian crisis. In addition to widespread food insecurity, over half of the Yemeni population lives below the poverty line. The Yemeni economy is extremely dependent upon dwindling oil reserves. Crude oil sales currently account for 63% of government revenue. The US Energy Information Agency (EIA) estimates that Yemeni peak oil production was hit in 2001, with reserves and production steadily in decline since. The Yemeni government needs to fetch a price of [US\\$215 per barrel](#) of crude oil shipped to balance its current budget. This is wholly unrealistic: about double the best estimates and three or four times the current world price. Attempts at diversifying the Yemeni economy away from crude oil with liquid natural gas (LNG) exports have [been halted](#) due to the departure of foreign investors and workers due to security concerns and attacks on LNG gas export infrastructure.

Access to and distribution of the profits from these oil resources has been a chief concern of the various Yemeni factions within the NDC. The oil and gas resources in Yemen are primarily

located in the central Marib province and the former Southern regions. Both are dominated by tribal groups that rely on patronage systems to resolve conflicts and govern their territories. The proposals put forward at the end of the NDC placed complete control for the granting of exploration and development contracts in the hands of regional rather than federal authorities. This is of great concern to groups whose future regions lack access to oil and gas resources. These comprise the core of the highland territory that the Houthis and their allies now control.

Adding to the endemic dysfunction within the Yemeni state, the Saudis provided billions in aid that paid government salaries and facilitated the patronage systems which [characterised previous administrations](#). This made Yemen dependent upon Saudi aid to meet the basic needs of its citizens. The Saudi response to the Houthi takeover of Sana'a was to significantly decrease this aid. Given that approximately half of the population is food insecure, this will exacerbate the already severe humanitarian crisis, as well as the state's leverage over local/tribal leaders.

Conclusions

Where within this maelstrom of violence, division, conflict, and instability is the space for constructive dialogue? To avert humanitarian, political, and economic disaster Yemeni constituents and the international community need to kick-start a process of reengaging with constructive national dialogue that takes the complexities of the Yemeni political landscape into account. As the previous NDC has indicated, there is a willingness to come to the table for dialogue if the right conditions can be found. A national dialogue process that brings together both powerful factions and marginalised parties will benefit Yemen as long as there is confidence in the process.

A principal failure of the NDC was that it initially only allowed for six months between March and September 2014 for consultation prior to the issuing of recommendations that would shape the drafting of a new constitution. Considering the complexity of Yemeni politics and society, it was a feat unto itself to have the various committees and delegates engaged in the process. To only allow six months for an assembly of 565 delegates to chart the future course of a country with such a complex political and social landscape was daunting. Even with its extensions, the NDC was a rushed and compromised process. The allocation of a time period that is equal to the task at hand is crucial.

Operation Decisive Storm has added an international element to a conflict that is rooted primarily in power and influence between local political factions. The most likely result is the worsening of the humanitarian situation, a deepening rift between regional powers, and further opportunity for militant and jihadist factions to expand and entrench themselves. An immediate ceasefire is necessary not only on humanitarian grounds, but also to prevent further undermining of the local context and to allow Yemeni ownership of the dialogue process.

It is vital that any resurrection of the dialogue process be locally driven and without heavy sponsorship by regional players, particularly in light of the Saudi-led military campaign.

Proposals to hold talks in Riyadh have already been [soundly rejected](#). A GCC-sponsored initiative is likely to be viewed by the Houthis as yet another attempt by the bloc to determine the outcomes of any power-sharing deal. This is equally true of any Iran-led initiative, given the allegations of support for the Houthis. Oman and Turkey, which have stayed out of the current military campaign and tried to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia, might have greater potential as honest brokers. The challenge is enormous but so are the costs of failure as Yemen founders, fragments and combusts.

Sarah Bollinger is Programme Officer for the Middle East Programme at Oxford Research Group. Our publications are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please make a donation if you are able to do so.



Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Licence. For more information please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>.