

The current situation in Yemen: causes and consequences

By Noel Brehony

■ Executive summary

The war in Yemen reflects the failure of the 2011 transition deal to end the influence of the powerful patronage networks of the Salih regime and deal with the marginalisation of the Huthis and the south. Huthi leaders used militias developed in the 2000s, their skills in mobilising tribal support and a Faustian pact with Salih to defeat Islah and, in the process, force President Hadi out of the country. Hubris may have led to their attempt to move out of their Zaydi heartland, but this provoked a Saudi-led coalition to mobilise against them. Fighting has continued for six months with much destruction of human life, infrastructure and the economy. The war may soon culminate in battles to capture Sanaa and Ta'izz. The combatants are not ready for serious negotiations. When they do talk they will find it difficult to establish a regime that enjoys the support of a majority of Yemenis. The war has empowered local groups and created sectarian tensions that previously did not exist. The conflict will not lead to a clear victory: the Yemenis and the coalition will need to make some difficult compromises. Meanwhile, the destruction continues and al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and Islamic State terrorists are exploiting the situation.

Introduction

The ultimate causes of the 2015 crisis in Yemen can be traced to the way that President 'Ali 'Abd Allah Salih constructed his regime in the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) after coming to power in 1978 through:

- building up strong security and defence forces led by members of his family, his Sanhan tribe or loyal associates;
- mobilising the support of the powerful Hashid tribal confederations (of which the Sanhan is a part) and its paramount chief, 'Abd Allah al-Ahmar, through patronage;
- coopting tribal and local leaders throughout Yemen into the patronage networks and isolating those who would not participate;
- building the General People's Congress (GPC) as a means of mobilising political support to win elections; and
- using divide-and-rule tactics.

These methods worked well in the 1980s and 1990s when they were sustained by rapidly rising oil revenues.

PDRY and Yemen unity

The Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) ruled the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) from 1967, adopted Marxist policies and aligned itself with the Soviet Union. Compared with the YAR, PDRY citizens enjoyed good government services, the rule of law and little inequality or corruption. However, the YSP failed to find non-violent methods of settling divisions among its leaders, who collectively aimed to reduce tribalism while individually building their personal power based on tribal alliances. Their differences led to a virtual civil war in January 1986 that undermined the legitimacy of the state and damaged the economy. The PDRY was further adversely affected by the demise of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

Salih understood in late 1989 that the PDRY was ready for unity and he negotiated a deal directly with the southern leader, 'Ali Salim al-Baydh, that led to the unification of two very diverse states in six months. The flaws in the

unification process led to a civil war in 1994 that saw Salih extend his method of ruling to the south in the Republic of Yemen. To many southerners it seemed like occupation – that their good state had been taken from them. The abuse of northern power has been a major influence in the rise of southern separatism after 2006. However, the divisions of the past still plague the Southern Movement.

Emergence of Islah

One consequence of unity was that Salih encouraged the formation of the Yemen Congregation for Reform (known as Islah) led by 'Abd Allah al-Ahmar, but involving the Muslim Brotherhood (which had been introduced to Yemen in the 1960s by teachers expelled from Egypt and Syria) and Salafis (including many who had been educated in Saudi Arabia). Salih saw it as a counterweight to the YSP.

Although Islah was a rival and competed against the GPC in elections, its leaders shared with Salih an interest in maintaining the patronage systems to their mutual benefit. Islah, the YSP and several smaller parties formed a coalition in 2003 – the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) – to challenge the GPC in elections.

The Huthis

The Huthis have been part of the Khawlan bin Amir, a relatively small tribal confederation compared with the Bakil and Hashid, in the Sa'ada governorate where the Hashid, Bakil and Khawlan interact without any being predominant. The Huthis are one of several Hashimi families (descendants of the Prophet), who functioned as mediators and religious teachers among the Zaydi Shia tribes, marrying into them.¹ Under the Zaydi Imamate, imams were always drawn from Hashimi families. Following the 1962 revolution and the adoption of more secular values by successive regimes, the Hashimis were marginalised and their prestige fell. This was reversed as the Salih patronage system and its policies in the area allowed the Hashimis to re-emerge as voices for ordinary people.

In the early 1990s prominent Hashimis wanted to create new messages appropriate for the late 20th century.

The Believing Youth under the influence of Hussain Badr al-Din al-Huthi proved to be effective at organising people at the grassroots level, drawing inspiration from the revolutionary regime in Iran. It accused the Salih regime of betraying Zaydi values, even though Salih and his leading supporters were notionally Zaydis. Salih was accused of marginalising the Zaydis while allowing excessive Salafi influence on state policy. Increasing militancy and government reaction led in 2004 to the first of six rounds of major fighting between the regime and the Huthis. The last of these mini-wars in 2009-10 drew in Saudi forces. The Huthis acquired skills and weapons, and organised themselves during these wars, and developed a highly effective militia.

The current leader, 'Abd al-Malik al-Huthi, still in his early 30s, is supported by a council of elders, but makes the important decisions. While part of his agenda is clearly religious, he has not put this in the forefront of his public statements. Some Huthis have become Twelver Shia and a few want to establish a Zaydi-dominated state and roll back the advance in the last 60 years of Salafism – and secularism.

The movement has developed both a militia and a political organisation, Ansar Allah, modelled on Hizbullah in Lebanon, which since 2011 has participated in mainstream Yemeni politics. Ansar Allah calls for reform and clean governance. Huthi leaders have built alliances among tribes in the Hashid and other confederations and now have an effective political organisation, a well-equipped militia (with arms acquired from the Yemeni military), powerful alliances with former president 'Ali 'Abd Allah Salih and indications of Iranian support.

Since taking power in February 2015 they give the impression that, having fought to defeat their enemies, they are not sufficiently sure of themselves or their policies to be able to or want to rule alone. They would much prefer to have power without responsibility, acting as king maker, not king. Those under the Huthi "government" criticise its incompetence and indecisiveness.

Disintegration of the Salih regime

The death of 'Abd Allah al-Ahmar in December 2007 brought into the open rivalries between his sons and the sons and nephews of President Salih, who commanded the elite units in the defence and security forces. There was growing divergence between Salih and General 'Ali Muhsin, commander of the First Armoured Division and long his close Sanhan ally. 'Ali Muhsin's forces bore the brunt of the fighting against the Huthis, which led some of his allies to suspect that Salih was deliberately trying to weaken his power. Tensions were exacerbated by the decline in oil revenues after 2003 – leading figures had to fight for their share of the spoils. Rivalry between the GPC and Islah increased.

Impact of the Arab uprisings

The Arab Spring reached Yemen in February 2011 in the form of huge demonstrations and protest camps in Sanaa and other cities. Islah supported the protesters, providing tents and food. The Huthis took part, but kept themselves separate from Islah. When in March 2011 over 50 demonstrators were killed by plainclothes snipers in Sanaa, many of his allies abandoned Salih. 'Ali Muhsin announced that his First Armoured Division would protect the demonstrators.

1 Zaydi Shia, who are different from the Twelver Shia of Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, form 25-35% of the Yemeni population; the rest are Sunnis of the Shafa'i school.

The threat of civil war provided the opportunity for the international community to push Yemeni leaders into a political transition deal that had three main elements:

- the resignation of Salih and the election of his vice president (since 1994), Hadi, in an uncontested election;
- the formation of a coalition government of the GPC and JMP (dominated by Islah); and
- an inclusive National Dialogue Conference (NDC) to draw up a new constitution.

But the deal had several major flaws:

- Salih was allowed to stay in Yemen as head of the GPC. He was to be held in check by the threat of United Nations (UN) sanctions.
- Measures to break up the patronage networks in the armed and security forces were not fully implemented, enabling Salih to retain the loyalty of the elite forces.
- The Huthis and the Southern Movement were excluded from the coalition government and inadequately represented in the NDC.
- Large sums of international financial support were promised (via the Friends of Yemen set up in January 2010), but little was delivered.

Thus, although the NDC after many delays eventually produced 1,800 recommendations, and a new constitution was drafted, by early 2014 Yemen had passed the point of no return.

One unintended consequence was to increase the power of Islah. Salih and the Huthis responded by working together to counter Islah.

The rise of the Huthis

While the Huthis took part in the NDC they simultaneously extended their influence into neighbouring governorates using their militias when necessary, but preferring to reach deals with tribes to support or not oppose them. They had reached an understanding with Salih, who ordered elite military units either to assist or not obstruct the Huthi advance. In July 2014 they took over Amran, ending the domination of the Al Ahmar family. The Huthis targeted military units linked to 'Ali Muhsin and Islah. They set up popular committees to control the areas they had taken over and Ansar Allah adopted populist causes – organising protests, for example, against cuts in fuel subsidies.

By September 2014 the Huthis were in Sanaa and forced Hadi to sign the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), which granted them major political concessions in exchange for their agreeing to withdraw their militias from

the city. The Huthis took over control of other governorates and then entered governorates with Shafa'i majorities, including Hudayda and Ibb, and threatened Ta'izz. As soon as Hadi had fulfilled his part of the PNPA the Huthis refused to withdraw, demanding even more concessions until Hadi's resignation on January 22nd 2015.

The Huthi Revolutionary Council took power on February 6th and laid out a series of proposed steps to create a new political system. When President Hadi escaped from house arrest in Sanaa to Aden on February 21st 2015, he withdrew his resignation and cancelled all measures taken by the Huthi regime. It reacted by mobilising militias to work with pro-Salih troops to take over Aden and the south as soon as possible and arrest Hadi, who fled to Riyadh.

It was this move that led to the launch of the Saudi-led coalition intervention on March 26th 2015. UN Security Council Resolution 2216, while not endorsing the attack, demanded in effect that the Huthis withdraw from Sanaa and other areas they had taken, hand over their weapons, and recognise the legitimacy of President Hadi's regime.

Progress of the war

The Saudi-led coalition's tactics are to use air power to degrade the military capacity of Salih and the Huthis while supporting a range of local militias in the Shafa'i areas to fight the Huthis. A naval blockade is in place. The coalition has trained Yemenis in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen itself to form forces that could fight alongside re-forming anti-Huthi military units and tribal militias. It has assembled a force of up to 20,000 men in Marib and is moving towards Sanaa. Ten thousand coalition troops may now be in Yemen; a UAE brigade helped to drive the Huthis from the south. The Huthis seem determined to retain their grip on the Zaydi-majority provinces and have launched small-scale attacks into Saudi Arabia.

The outcome of the current fighting in Marib is likely to have a decisive impact, as will the battle for Ta'izz, where pro- and anti-Huthi groups are of roughly equal strength. Neither side seems concerned about the growing number of casualties and displaced people, the threat of famine, and the immense damage being done to infrastructure and to what was already a very fragile economy.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

For decades Saudi Arabia used its money and influence to ensure that Yemen was too weak to threaten the kingdom but strong enough to maintain its own internal stability. Riyadh played an important but often passive role between 2011 and January 2015, when the newly crowned King Salman immediately gave the highest priority to Yemen as a theatre in its regional cold war with Iran. Riyadh asserts that the Huthis are Iranian lackeys, even though the available evidence is that Iranian backing for the Huthis has

been low cost and low risk, resulting in the enhancement of the Huthi organisation, but not in a significant increase in its military capacity. The declared aim is to restore the Hadi regime.

The UAE has played a key part, despite some differences with Riyadh over tactics. Other GCC states, apart from Oman, have provided aircraft and troops, with several other countries, including Egypt and Sudan, promising help. The U.S., Britain, and France are providing intelligence and logistical support, which seems to be motivated by national interests in backing the Saudis and countering Islamic terrorism.

Re-establishing a Hadi regime

President Hadi is re-establishing his government in Aden. But it will be a difficult task, because there are so many different players involved:

- The anti-Huthi resistance in the south is composed of local militias, many of which want southern independence.
- Throughout Yemen the fighting has empowered local groups who will be reluctant to cede control to a central authority, which is likely to be very weak.
- Hadi will struggle to persuade many in the Zaydi north to accept his legitimacy, given his dependence on Saudi Arabia for restoring his control.
- Islah appears to be the best organised political party and it has support in the armed forces fighting against the Huthis and in important resistance groups such as in Ta'izz. It will demand a significant say in any future government.

Added to this are the following factors:

- There is much disagreement over the likely shape of any future Yemeni state: centralised or federated.
- The Yemeni economy was in a very bad shape in early 2015 as a result of three years of an unstable transition exacerbated by falling oil revenues. The fighting has caused severe damage to infrastructure and the economy and immense harm to Yemen's people. Reconstruction will take years and require a massive input from the international community.
- Until the mid-20th century the Zaydi and Sunni Shafa'i had lived in relative harmony for centuries, even though Zaydis dominated most regimes. In the 21st century Zaydi reaction to Salafism seems to be driving them towards sectarianism. The current fighting will exacerbate the problem.

A role for Salih and the Huthis

Yemenis showed in the 1970s that they could compromise and work together after eight years of civil war. They will have to do so again. The draft constitution and the NDC arrangements could be the starting point for a new process.

Hadi, the Saudis and the international community agree that Salih can play no role in the future of Yemen. However, he remains a potent force, if now greatly diminished. Any deal will need to take account of his interests.

The Huthis have clearly shown that they are now a major political force and will need to be part of any successor regime. They control Sanaa and the main government institutions, even if they often seem unsure about what policies to adopt. They will be aware that they have support in the Zaydi north, where the terrain is likely to suit their methods of fighting and not those of their opponents.

Attempts at a negotiated settlement

The current UN envoy has been organising meetings of the main actors in Muscat – with some support from the U.S. His efforts have been inhibited by a lack of knowledge of Yemen and strains in the otherwise remarkable international consensus on Yemen since 2011. These will continue and provide a process for when the combatants are eventually ready for serious negotiations.

Hadi and the Saudis demand that the Huthis/Salih implement UN Security Council Resolution 2216 before negotiations; the Huthis want negotiations about how Resolution 2216 should be implemented. This might eventually lead to progress, since it implies that the Huthis accept Resolution 2216 in principle, but there is no other sign that the warring parties are ready for serious negotiations.

Two factors might influence the attitude of the international community. Firstly, several thousand people have died, tens of thousands have been wounded and hundreds of thousands displaced. The coalition is using a naval blockade to limit supplies; the Huthis use siege tactics internally. Relief agencies issue daily warnings of an impending humanitarian disaster. Britain and France, in particular, are looking for ways of responding to growing public concern about the human and physical costs of the war to an already impoverished Yemen. So far they have not been willing to put pressure on Riyadh, which sees the damage as a consequence of war or blames it on the Huthis, but this could change soon, especially if there is more public awareness of the situation.

Secondly, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is the most dangerous of the al-Qa'ida franchises. It has pursued both a global agenda (attempts to bring down Western aircraft and foment lone-wolf attacks) and a local one (the creation of Islamic emirates in south Yemen in 2011-12 using its insurgency arm, Ansar al-Shariah). Western

governments provided extensive assistance to the Yemeni counterterrorist forces – most of which were commanded by Salih cronies and have remained loyal to him. Drones are still being used to kill top AQAP leaders – most recently in September 2015. AQAP, working through Ansar al-Shariah, seized on the Huthi advance to “protect” Sunnis in parts of central Yemen, work alongside militias in the south and take partial control of coastal areas in Hadhramaut. Elements within AQAP have declared loyalty to the Islamic

State (IS) and have attacked mosques in Sanaa and claimed operations elsewhere. The longer the fighting continues the greater the danger that AQAP and IS will entrench themselves and possibly take control of some areas. The coalition says that it is aware of this and will soon move against the terrorists. The Huthis, their political opponents, the GCC, and the West share a common objective of eliminating AQAP and IS, which is one potential benefit of a negotiated settlement.

■ THE AUTHOR

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