

# Yemen on the precipice

## Governing the ungovernable

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A logical and pertinent point on which to begin discussion consists of the fundamental question of whether or not Yemen is an inherently ungovernable country.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, there are enough looming threats at present to its continued cohesion and effectiveness to make this question obvious. The Republic of Yemen (ROY) government has pursued an ill-advised and ineffective war against northern Zaydi oppositionists. The war seems to have gone temporarily into abeyance thanks to a fragile cease-fire, but is by no means settled. The northern-dominated regime faces increasing (and increasingly violent) resistance from the country's southerners, whose accession to unity with the north in 1990 deteriorated into an unsuccessful attempt at secession in 1994. The subsequent domination, often naked and brutal, has driven many southerners into confrontation and the situation undoubtedly will only worsen. Finally, San'a's ambivalence towards Islamist extremism and its weakness *vis-à-vis* the tribes of the periphery have created a safe haven for extremist elements, particularly those gathered under the banner of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

These factors do not make Yemen a 'failed' state and it is debatable whether it should even be classified as a 'failing' state. Nevertheless, it seems unarguable that throughout modern history Yemeni states have been weak, unable to control much of their territory, forced to seek accommodation with tribes rather than integration, and unable to harness revenues to the business of efficient governing. A few illustrations will suffice.

### Background

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ottomans exercised a fragile hold over the major towns and some outlying areas of northern Yemen, while Britain had made Aden in the south a colony and had gradually extended its influence over the petty rulers in the surrounding hinterland, eventually coalescing these relationships into a loose protectorate. This intrusion into Yemeni affairs in the modern era by outside powers created two distinct halves to the Yemeni polity, the consequence of which reverberates even today.

With the retreat and demise of the Ottoman Empire, northern Yemen experienced the resuscitation of the Zaydi imamate (the Zaydis, or Fivers, were the first subset to break away from larger Shi'ism, and traditionally elected an *imam* from among the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad as their leader). Three successive *imams* from the Hamid al-Din family sought to deepen their control over the country, but they were excessively dependent on the key northern Zaydi tribes to maintain their rule.

The percolation into the country of outside influences and ideology precipitated the 'revolution' in September 1962. More a *coup d'état* than a revolution, the result was the creation of an Egyptian-instigated military government in San'a and the flight of the newly incumbent *imam* to the tribal strongholds of the north of Yemen. Eight years of civil war later, compromise was reached on a relatively conservative republican form of government, with some imamate supporters brought into the councils of the Yemen Arab Republic and the republic's leftist elements expelled, some to find refuge in the south.

Events in southern Yemen during this period turned equally violent as opposition to British rule intensified. By 1964, the city of Aden witnessed the beginning of urban insurgency while the outlying protectorate gradually fell out of the orbit of British control. The end result was British withdrawal and the formation of the quasi-Marxist regime known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Consequently, at this point there were two independent states both proclaiming to be the true representation of Yemen. There was little co-operation between them. As the north steadily fell more under the control of an alliance of military officers and tribal sheikhs, the south turned further to the left and increased dependence on the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, the two Yemens fought two brief border wars in the 1970s.

The unpopularity of southern leadership and the collapse of the Soviet Union gave Aden no choice but to capitulate to unity with the north on the north's terms in 1990, but it was not a happy merger. The attempt to secede in 1994 provoked civil war and ended with the north's crushing victory. With a background like that, how can it not be assumed that Yemen is inherently ungovernable?

## Means and methods of governance

Fundamentally, government's means and methods of governance can be said to be the usual elements applying in most countries. The government exercises authority in the form of police, courts, land registration, tax collection and similar activities. The government achieves—or at least seeks—legitimacy through the provision of expected services, such as roads, education, water supplies and electricity. Not surprisingly, most of these services are restricted to cities and towns. In more rural areas, people are overwhelmingly left to their initiative for basic development requirements.

The government also serves a vital function in providing a supra-tribal or supra-community authority. The ideal is creating and maintaining national cohesion through mediation between competing forces and alliance-building to extend the government's authority and power.

At the apex, of course, lies the regime's reliance on the nationalism card. The sense of belonging to the Yemeni nation instils a certain amount of allegiance to the state and expectations that it will defend the nation in whatever way is required. The president speaks in the name of the state, the country and its people, and serves as their spokesman. This assumes, of course, that he is seen as a legitimate leader.

The foregoing supposes that a rational, textbook view of governance actually obtains in Yemen, but more often the situation resembles smoke and mirrors. Ali Abdullah Saleh was re-elected president of Yemen in 2006 for another seven-year term by a resounding 77 per cent 'yes' vote. Parliamentary elections took place in 2003: the pro-government General People's Congress (GPC) won an overwhelming majority (75 per cent) of seats, while al-Islah (the conservative tribal/Islamist party) was the most successful of the opposition

parties, followed by the Socialists (the former Yemeni Socialist Party of South Yemen), and with a few seats won by Nasirist and Baathi candidates. The five principal opposition parties have made common cause in the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). Elections in 2007 and 2009 were postponed until 2011 to allow for the implementation of electoral reform, but the chaos of 2011 made the prospect of elections indeterminable. The country also boasts elected local government bodies and an ideologically diverse press. Still, none of these factors actually explain the workings of real governance in Yemen.

## Elements of power

Until forced to resign in 2012, Ali Abdullah Saleh was the only elected president in the Arabian Peninsula. However, the circumstances of his election were ighly suspect and it can be said without fear of contradiction that his legitimacy did not approach that of the Arab monarchs. Indeed, it is undoubtedly true to say that he did not rule with the real consent of the Yemeni citizenry. Rather, he ruled because he held the power to do so. In essence, the elements of Ali Abdullah Saleh's power were the same ones that he relied upon when he first stumbled into power in 1978. Of course, over the years he has refined his means of control and expanded it beyond the core elements.

His principal—and original—power base was the armed forces. He began his career as a soldier and claims to have participated in the 26 September 1962 revolution as a sergeant. As an officer from 1963, he was wounded several times during the northern civil war and worked his way up the armoured ranks, eventually serving as chief of staff of the armoured forces.<sup>2</sup> After the death of President Ibrahim al-Hamdi, he received credit for leading the campaign against Abdullah Abd al-Alim, a Hamdi supporter in the Command Council and head of the Paratroopers, and forcing Abd al-Alim to retreat to exile in South Yemen.

Ali Abdullah Saleh's assumption of the presidency in 1978, however, was only indirectly related to his military experience or rank. In the aftermath of the assassination of President Ahmad al-Ghashmi (who succeeded Ibrahim al-Hamdi), Ali Abdullah effectively took charge in San'a over the ineffective chief of staff of the armed forces. He was subsequently elected as president by the People's Constituent Assembly, partly because of a lack of other serious candidates and allegedly because he received strong Saudi backing. Nevertheless, he would not have been in a position to win the vote had he not served first as the right-hand man of President al-Ghashmi.

Al-Ghashmi had been a member of the Command Council that seized power in 1974 and served as Ibrahim al-Hamdi's right-hand man as the latter strengthened his control in the following years, but Ali Abdullah Saleh served in much the same relationship to al-Ghashmi as al-Ghashmi did to al-Hamdi. Thus, there was considerable speculation that when al-Ghashmi decided to overthrow al-Hamdi, Ali Abdullah served as his executioner. When al-Ghashmi was himself killed (in a bizarre sideshow to the rivalry for power in Aden), Ali Abdullah was ideally placed to succeed him. As al-Ghashmi's number two, he was already in place to take over command of the armed forces. Through the following decades, he continued to command and control the armed forces, gradually shaping them to serve his purposes.

The relationship as al-Ghashmi's protégé served as the springboard to the top. Personal ties have been crucial to strengthening and maintaining his position. These ties flow outward in concentric circles based on family, tribal and patronage ties.

Ali Abdullah Saleh was born in 1942 in Bayt al-Ahmar, a village of the Sanhan tribe. He was not from the sheikhly family of the tribe, nor is Sanhan a large or important tribe. Thus Ali Abdullah's rise to the top was due to his own means. Once he had become president, he began to create a system of patronage. Foremost in the system are family members. Thus, soon after assuming the presidency, he placed his seven brothers in key positions.<sup>3</sup> Foremost among them has been his step-brother, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who commanded the 1st Armoured Brigade in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and then played a commanding role in the 1994 civil war. After the war, he was appointed military commander of regions in the north and west.<sup>4</sup> The president also relied heavily upon his older brother, Muhammad, as Deputy Minister of the Interior and later Commander of the Central Security Forces until his death in May 2001.<sup>5</sup>

In more recent years, Ali Abdullah Saleh has come to rely increasingly upon sons, daughters, sons-in-law and nephews. His eldest son, Ahmad, in his early 40s, has been most prominent. Ahmad received military training in Jordan and at Sandhurst, UK, as well as having studied in the USA. Following a spell as a member of parliament, he was appointed to head a new special forces unit in 1999. In the following decade, this unit grew into the 20,000-strong Special Republican Guard Force, with protecting the president as its primary role.<sup>6</sup> Three of Ali Abdullah's daughters and their husbands also figure prominently. The most important of these is his eldest daughter, Bilqis, originally married to one of the president's nephews, Yahya Muhammad Abdullah. Bilqis has served as a close adviser. His daughter Saba' married Muhammad Duwayd, member of an important sheikhly family in Khawlan (east of San'a) who runs the president's office. Another daughter, Fawziyah, is married to Abd al-Khaliq al-Qadi, the head of Yemeni Airways. The al-Qadi family, which has become inter-related with the president's family, has also acquired other important positions.<sup>7</sup>

With the attenuation in the ranks of brothers, Ali Abdullah has reached out to his nephews to fill their fathers' roles. Tariq Muhammad Abdullah Saleh is in charge of the unit within the Republican Guard charged with immediately protecting the president. His brother Yahya serves as Chief of Staff of the Central Security Forces, while another brother, Ammar, is Deputy Director of the National Security Bureau.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the extended family, the president relied heavily on the loyalty of two tribes: his own Sanhan and the Hamdan San'a. The interest of the first tribe is obvious. The second is the tribe of Ahmad al-Ghashmi, the late president and Ali Abdullah Saleh's mentor. Before the assassination of Ibrahim al-Hamdi in 1977, Ahmad and Ali worked together to diminish the influence of Hamdi and his fellow, relatively reformist, officer colleagues in the Revolutionary Command Council—as well as to consolidate their own positions by enlisting and promoting Sanhani and Hamdani tribesmen in the officer ranks of the military. Although the two tribes historically were small and unimportant, their ascendancy at this time was probably also helped by their proximity to San'a and therefore their ability to defend the capital against internal threats.

Both tribes belong to the Hashid confederation, but have never exercised much influence within it. Nevertheless, the Hashid have been a key component of Ali Abdullah's power base. The incorporation of Hashidi tribesmen into the armed forces and Hashidi sheikhs into the circle of patronage have built, at the least, an acceptance of the status quo. This has worked to a far lesser extent for the other major tribal confederation, the Bakil. Still, it should be kept in mind that Ali Abdullah does not command these tribes. Instead, he has cultivated allied sheikhs. The most important of these was Sheikh

Abdullah Husayn al-Ahmar. Sheikh Abdullah played various roles on the national scene from the civil war of the 1960s. His original power base was as paramount sheikh of the Hashid, which served him well during the 1960s war and the early years of the reconciled Yemen Arab Republic. Eventually he transformed himself into a San'a politician. To be sure, he was still highly influential among the Hashid, the leading tribal sheikh in the country, and one of the most important arbiters or mediators in tribal affairs large and small.

More importantly, however, he and his sons took up residence in San'a and they became involved in lucrative commercial enterprises. He struck an early alliance with Ali Abdullah Saleh, which won him the position of speaker of parliament, and he served as the regime's point man in relations with Saudi Arabia. Supporters in Saudi Arabia encouraged and perhaps assisted him in the founding of the Yemeni Reform Grouping or al-Islah. Al-Islah was used at first to bolster Ali Abdullah against the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) of the south, becoming junior partner in an alliance with Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC). When Saleh determined that he could do without the alliance, al-Islah was jettisoned into the opposition. This did not indicate a break between Ali Abdullah and Sheikh Abdullah, however, although there may have been friction. The sheikh was instrumental in rallying the northern tribes behind the regime during the 1994 civil war and he remained an important liaison between the Saudis and Ali Abdullah, with whom Riyadh has frosty relations—a major reason why Saudi Arabia quietly supported the south in the 1994 war.

Other sheikhs have been co-opted into the San'a web, both in politics and in commerce. Some have served as ministers in various governments. Mujahid Abu Shawarib of the Kharif tribe, a relative (and rival) of Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, rose from a minor tribal position answering to Sheikh Abdullah to a prominent military career and leadership of the Yemeni Baathi Party. Although he had some support from Hashid for the presidency following the 1978 assassination of Ahmad al-Ghashmi, he failed in his quest and had to settle for the relatively empty title of deputy prime minister and later personal adviser to the president. While a tribal sheikh, Mujahid's prominence and standing derived as much, if not more, from his military career and participation in the 1974 coup that put the Command Council in charge with Ibrahim al-Hamdi at its head.<sup>9</sup>

Although the formal ruling alliance with al-Islah has evaporated, its composition illustrates the regime's pervasive ties to both ideological wings of al-Islah: the tribes and Islamists. The status of prominent Islamist Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, the charismatic head of al-Islah and president of the private al-Iman University, within ruling circles points to the existence of a strong though informal relationship between the regime and Islamist figures. Both wings of al-Islah, the tribes and the Islamists, were crucial in the regime's victory over the south in the 1994 war and both gained immensely from the subsequent occupation. Even prominent 'Arab Afghan' Islamist Tariq al-Fadli was allied with Ali Abdullah during the 1994 war and for some time afterward.

To a large, if passive, extent, the country's urbanized populations can also be said to be grudging supporters of the regime. This is principally because they have little choice. The regime supplies essential law and order and generally protects the urban areas from tribal and Islamist extremist depredations, but the great majority of Yemen's population, whether urban, village or tribal, falls outside the patronage network. Within it, however, is situated the country's commercial elite, into which inner members of the ruling circle, including the president himself, have infiltrated, and which has been expanded by the penetration of younger sheikhs into the urban and business environment.

For the past two decades, the patronage system has worked well to underpin the regime's vitality. In large part, this has been made possible by the discovery and exploitation of oil and gas deposits. The income from these accrues to the state, which is to say that it is available for Ali Abdullah to distribute as he feels necessary to maintain his position. The problem for the future is that claimants for pieces of the pie are growing, while the pie is shrinking (oil production has been steadily declining and new liquefied natural gas [LNG] exports are unlikely to make up the difference) and the country's economic situation worsens. In addition to the inherent difficulty of governing a notoriously decentralized polity, the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh faces three serious threats to its control and perhaps even its survival.

## Elements of opposition

A major and age-old obstacle to governing Yemen has been the country's tribal nature. Tribes, almost by definition, are antithetical to the state. Ideally, they represent self-contained political, social and economic entities and thus, in theory again, are hostile to state control. Yemeni states have always sought to manipulate the tribes and the Imamate ruling North Yemen from the early twentieth century until 1962 depended on the power provided by the Hashid and Bakil tribes, the so-called 'wings of the Imamate'.

Thus, it is somewhat paradoxical that the Ali Abdullah Saleh regime was both bolstered by tribal support and threatened by it. As explained above, the essential or inner tribal backing is provided by a small selection of Yemeni tribes and the broader and looser tribal support that the regime generally enjoys was limited largely to the Hashid with some Bakil. There are substantial areas of the country, particularly in al-Jawf, Ma'rib and Shabwah provinces on the inland periphery, where government presence—let alone control—historically has been minimal. Thus, the regime's viability is dependent on manipulating many tribes rather than governing them. This is the key to understanding two of the current conflicts that threaten the regime.

The role of the tribes has become more complicated in recent decades as the role of their sheikhs has changed in relation to their tribes and to the state. Senior sheikhs, such as Abdullah b. Husayn al-Ahmar and Sinan Abu Luhum, became integrated into the national power structure. Younger sheikhs increasingly are becoming more urbanized, more involved in commerce, more dependent on the regime, and less connected to the tribe. In large part, the role and importance of the tribe holds more significance for the Zaydi north than for the more peasantized Shafii south.

Another potential and partially realized threat to the regime comes from the Islamist arena. Opposition has been expressed by both Zaydi and Sunni Islamists. Frequently, the line has become blurred, in part because of proselytizing by *salafis*, often called Wahhabis because of their presumed connection to Saudi Arabia.<sup>10</sup> While Ali Abdullah has courted Islamists throughout his rule and has included a number in his patronage circle, others have looked askance at the corruption and decidedly un-Islamic nature of the regime. Furthermore, the regime presently finds itself actively under attack from both Zaydi and Sunni extremists. These represent two of the three serious threats to the stability of the San'a government. The first of these to be considered is the Huthi imbroglio in the far north of the country.

## The Huthi war<sup>11</sup>

Since 2004, government security forces have been battling a shadowy organization known as 'the Believing Youth' (*al-shabab al-mu'min*) based in the mountains west of Sa'dah, the capital

of Yemen's most north-western province. Despite the loss of hundreds of lives, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants and damages amounting to millions of dollars, the conflict refuses to die. Leadership of the movement has rested in various members of the al-Huthi *sayyid* (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) family, most prominently Husayn b. Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a former member of parliament and son of an eminent Zaydi revivalist notable, Badr al-Din. Husayn played a leading role in the creation of the Believing Youth group, originally created to provide instruction in Zaydi traditions and principles to boys and young men of the region, especially those of the rural highlands. At some point, Husayn and the group became more aggressive, probably in response to increased 'Wahhabi' or *salafi* proselytizing in the area (combined with specifically anti-Zaydi teachings and activities). Leading lights of the movement began leaving Sa'dah and other cities to found *hijrahs* (sanctuaries) in the tribal mountains west and north of Sa'dah town. The group was said to have called for a restoration of the Zaydi imamate to defend Zaydi principles and to rid the country of the national government, which was deemed corrupt and unresponsive.

On 20 June 2004 Yemeni police and the army attempted to arrest Husayn al-Huthi, apparently on the authority of the president's step-brother, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the military commander in the north. His motives for acting are not known. Some would ascribe it to his ambition, that is, destroying the Believing Youth would enhance his reputation as a strong and capable commander. Others contend that, as a presumed *salafi* himself, he acted to destroy a Zaydi revivalist threat. In any case, the action sparked a long war marked by intermittent cease-fires and violent resumptions of fighting. After Husayn al-Huthi was killed around September 2004, his father, Badr al-Din, assumed leadership until he was reported to have died of an incurable disease in February 2006. Leadership then passed to one of Husayn's brothers, Abd al-Malik.

The army has proven itself incapable of destroying the Huthi movement, despite its 'scorched earth' policy of aerial and artillery bombardment in the remote mountains west of Sa'dah city. On various occasions the war has threatened to expand beyond its original boundaries. As a consequence, hostilities have taken place in al-Jawf province, around Amran to the south of Sa'dah on the road to San'a, and in Bani Hushaysh territory within earshot of the capital. Alarmingly, the Saudi armed forces were drawn into an unexpectedly protracted campaign against the Huthis in November 2009. Although it is impossible to be certain, it would appear that the Yemeni army received Saudi permission to travel through Saudi territory in order to attack the Huthis from the rear. The Huthis were forced to counter-attack to defend themselves and so opened a second front in Saudi territory. Under the direction of Prince Khalid ibn Sultan, the Deputy Minister of Defence and Aviation and essentially the official in charge of the Saudi armed forces during his father's prolonged absence from the country for health reasons, the Saudis struck back hard.

While the impetus for the movement and the rebellion seems to derive from purely internal causes, the ROY government frequently complained that the group was receiving outside assistance. Primarily, this was said to be Iran, a predominantly Shi'a country, although of the Ja'fari (or Ithna Ashari) variety rather than the Zaydi form found in Yemen. There is little evidence to support this claim, however.

The continuing impasse in negotiations between the Huthi group and the ROY government prompted San'a to accept Qatari mediation, beginning in May 2007. While agreement on a cease-fire was reached in June 2007, it required a face-to-face meeting between Huthi principals and government representatives in Qatar in early 2008 to produce signatures on an implementation plan. This, however, was repeatedly violated—apparently

on both sides—in the following months, leading to increasingly heavy fighting. Qatar stepped in again at the beginning of 2010 to cajole the two sides to abide by the earlier terms, and fighting paused once more.

While the front has been largely quiet, there has been no real resolution of the conflict and incidents continue to pop up from time to time. The fighting has tied down the Yemeni armed forces and exposed their weakness. At the same time, the Huthis are said to have recruited followers from other tribes and to have purchased arms from the army, which has suffered desertions. It seems entirely plausible that the depredations that the army has visited on the civilian population of the region (there are an estimated 150,000–200,000 displaced persons from the conflict) has engendered at least a measure of support for the Huthis from large swaths of the Yemeni population.

### ***The Southern Movement*<sup>12</sup>**

Yemen has rarely been unified in its long history. The nineteenth century saw north Yemen fall under Ottoman control, although rather tentatively, while the British seized Aden and gradually expanded its hinterland into a protectorate. For this reason, an independent North Yemeni state emerged after World War I collapse of the Ottomans while an independent South Yemeni state had to wait until British withdrawal in 1967. The conservative Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the north and the quasi-Marxist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the south both claimed to be the legitimate state for all Yemen, leading to ideological clashes and several border wars in the subsequent decades.

Unity was finally achieved in 1990 when the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc left South Yemen isolated and bankrupt. The ruling Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) meekly went to YAR President Ali Abdullah Saleh and offered him their part of Yemen. Their reward was a partnership in the government with the ruling General People's Congress (GPC). However, real power remained in the hands of Ali Abdullah. Furthermore, the imbalance in population (the south has about 2 million people compared to the north's nearly 20 million) meant that the south would never be able to carry equal weight. In 1993 this was confirmed in parliamentary elections. The south, smarting from northern superiority, voted en masse for the YSP, something for which the southerners had had little taste when the YSP ruled the south. However, the YSP won only the seats in the south, giving Ali Abdullah a clean mandate for ejecting the YSP from the governing partnership in favour of the mostly northern al-Islah Party.

From that point on, many in the south regarded northern domination of the ROY as a form of occupation. This situation did not ameliorate over the years but instead remained tense. Southerners resented the fact that the great majority of oil income came from southern fields in Shabwah and Hadramawt provinces, but the money flowed north. All governors and many bureaucrats in southern provinces come from the north. The protests by southern officers over their exclusion from the armed forces and low pensions in August 2007 was an opening salvo in the emergence of the Southern Movement. For the next few years, protests and demonstrations by the movement and supporters took place with some regularity, particularly in Lahj, Abyan and al-Dali provinces, as well as in Hadramawt.<sup>13</sup>

A number of demonstrations ended in violence and over the next three years the government rounded up hundreds of suspects, arrested southern journalists, and placed some YSP leaders on trial for incitement and jailed them. In one particularly notorious incident in July 2009, government troops opened fire on a large rally in Zinjibar, close to



Aden, killing more than a dozen people. Similarly, southerners accused the government of shelling the town of al-Dali in June 2010, killing a half dozen people; al-Dali was shelled again two weeks later with resultant deaths.<sup>14</sup> More attacks on soldiers and government installations, including in Aden, started from July 2010.

As the movement grew in stature, exiled politicians including Ali Salim al-Bayd, briefly president of the failed DRY, took up the cry of independence, ruling out any possible compromise on the idea of autonomy. Former 'Arab Afghan' and GPC ally Tariq al-Fadli, son of one of the southern sultans before independence from Britain, cast his support behind the Southern Movement. In addition, AQAP announced their solidarity with the southerners and claimed an alliance. This seems doubtful and opportunistic, however, as many in the Southern Movement have little common ground with AQAP.

The southern rebellion in 1994 failed miserably. There is no reason to believe that a new rebellion will fare any better. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that it would collapse even faster and more thoroughly than in 1994. The northern regime is far more entrenched in the south now and the south can count on even less sympathy from the Gulf states than the quiet and incomplete support it received earlier. A more likely chain of events would be a growth in size and frequency of southern protests as well as an increase in sabotage. This most likely would be accompanied by a similar but stronger pattern of repression that has been applied to date. In the end, however, the success of the Southern Movement would seem to depend upon what happens in San'a. If Ali Abdullah Saleh's departure from the scene leaves a weakened regime, or if the combination of threats to the state grows to the point where central control over the south diminishes, only then would the south be able to reasonably expect greater autonomy.

### ***Al-Qa'ida and Islamist extremism<sup>15</sup>***

Islamist extremists have long circulated in Yemen, beginning with the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army that set off bombs in two Aden hotels in 1992 and kidnapped a number of foreign tourists in 1998, some of whom were killed when the Yemeni Army tried to rescue them. Subsequent extremist attacks on the USS *Cole* in Aden harbour in 2001 and on the French tanker *Limburg* in 2002 gained even more notoriety. The rise of extremism in Yemen has been ascribed in part to the influence of the 'Arab Afghans' returning from fighting as *mujahidin* against the Soviets in Afghanistan, as well as to an alleged systematic proselytizing effort by so-called Wahhabis. Some 'Arab Afghans' were welcomed into the Yemeni military and security forces on their return from Afghanistan and were used to help put down the 1994 secessionists, but it seems clear that the success of the Saudi Arabian government in crushing local al-Qa'ida there during 2003–7 drove the remnants of Saudi Arabian al-Qa'ida into Yemen, where they eventually reformed in 2009 under the rubric al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

For some time, al-Qa'ida and other extremist elements presented only a tangential threat to Yemeni, Saudi, or even US interests, but in the year or two before 2010, the organization grew tighter and its emphasis on and ability to find refuge with those tribes in outlying provinces that had never been subjected to effective government control began to pay dividends. Consequently, AQAP began to pursue policies similar to those activities that had bedevilled Saudi Arabia, including violent attacks on foreigners and assaults on government officials and installations. In a new development, AQAP—or, more precisely, Anwar al-Awlaqi (a US citizen of Yemeni origin enjoying refuge in

outlying Yemeni tribal territory)—allegedly masterminded several attempts to attack US targets. These included the shootings by US Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan at Fort Hood, Texas, in November 2009, and the abortive attempt by Nigerian Abd al-Farouk Abdulmutallab to blow up a Northwest Airlines plane on Christmas Day 2009.

By mid-2010, these last developments had generated considerable debate within the US government and policy circles.<sup>16</sup> Alarmist headlines posed the question of whether Yemen was potentially more dangerous than Afghanistan. Some advocated the extension of substantial security and military assistance to the ROY government—reportedly as much as US\$1.2 billion over a five-year period—to enable it to root out AQAP elements and, in the best case, put an end to AQAP. Others warned that concentrating on strengthening the Ali Abdullah Saleh regime in this way would either not be effective or would strengthen its ability to repress the rest of the country. Certainly, ‘inside the Beltway’ had not paid so much attention to Yemen since the revolution of 1962 and the spectre of Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasir (Nasser) gaining a foothold in the conservative Arabian Peninsula.

As if in direct response to this Washington debate, San’a initiated a siege of the southern Yemeni town of al-Hawtah in restive Shabwah province. In retaliation for an attack on the LNG pipeline running through the province to the Gulf of Aden, the ROY army surrounded al-Hawtah in September 2010 and launched an assault on the town using tanks, air raids and paratrooper landings. The local population fled while al-Qa’ida reinforcements stiffened the town’s defences. The five-day siege ended with the occupation of the town after many of the defenders escaped. Another siege and bombardment of nearby Mudiyah took place in October, driving civilians from their homes there.

Undoubtedly the provision of US training assistance for security operations can have a positive effect in countering and disrupting AQAP’s presence and operations. At the same time, however, several non-desirable results seem likely to follow as well. First, the more the USA provides direct assistance to the Ali Abdullah Saleh regime—and especially as it participates in one way or the other in ROY operations against AQAP<sup>17</sup>—the more it is likely to provoke resistance amongst the peripheral tribes and, very possibly, help turn general Yemeni public opinion even further against the USA (this in spite of presumably majority opposition to AQAP).

Second, strengthening the regime in any way is bound to have serious repercussions in other areas, such as renewing its attempt to put down the Huthis definitely or encouraging repression of the Southern Movement. The government already has shown its eagerness to implicate other powers in its problems: alleging widespread Iranian assistance to the Huthis and provoking a Huthi response against the Saudis. A build-up of tangible US support, which has more or less endorsed the government’s right to suppress rebellion (the Huthis) and to maintain unity (the south), will only encourage the San’a government to assert its control over the Southern Movement even more brutally.

A substantial increase in—and visibility of—US support for San’a is also likely to encourage the regime to continue along its usual path, i.e. patronage politics, narrow regime control over public affairs, and an inability or unwillingness to address, let alone correct, serious economic problems.

## Prognosis

The country’s political cohesion is also severely and adversely impacted by its freefalling economy.<sup>18</sup> Labour remittances suffered a huge blow in 1990, inflation has been

persistent through the years, and between one-third and one-half of Yemeni households live below the poverty line. The country's absorptive capacity remains limited. Much of the nearly \$6 billion in aid promised in an earlier round of pledges by donors in 2006 and at the first meeting of the Friends of Yemen (comprising 22 countries and various international organizations) in January 2010 has not been spent. The explosion of piracy in the Gulf of Aden has produced adverse consequences on the Yemeni economy as well.

Oil production declined steadily from 438,000 barrels per day (b/d) in 2002 to about 285,000 b/d in 2009 and it is feared that there may be only 10–15 years of production left. Adding to the volatility in oil prices, and thus usable government income (oil provides some three-quarters of government revenues), much of the oil bonanza has been squandered in the president's patronage networks. Exports of LNG from Balhaf on the Gulf of Aden began in late 2009 and a second train was put into operation in April 2010. While LNG is projected to provide some \$30 billion to \$40 billion in income over 25 years, it will not provide nearly enough income to offset the loss of oil.

In addition, a population growth rate of around 3 per cent means that more than 40 per cent of the population is under the age of 14, thus exacerbating the economic situation. Economic growth can barely keep up with population expansion. Water supplies are being depleted at an alarming rate and the government has been unable to exert any meaningful control over the drilling of wells. The lucrative production of the mildly narcotic stimulant *qat* continues to increase, thus exacerbating the diversion of Yemen's agricultural base away from food supplies and creating more demand for scarce supplies of water. In addition to the several hundred thousand Yemeni displaced persons in makeshift camps, Yemen finds itself playing host to even more Somali refugees.

Even for a fully legitimate and responsive government, the constraints on controlling—or even just maintaining—such a weak and decentralized country would be enormous. Add to this the narrow power base of the regime, its reliance on a contracting patronage network, the rapid decline in revenues that fund that network (not to mention fuel the economy), and its inability to deal effectively with three serious, persistent and quite different insurgencies, and the result is a recipe for potential disaster.

It was not improbable that Ali Abdullah Saleh would hang on to power indefinitely just as he had for the past three-plus decades, but what will happen after the dust clears from his leaving the scene remains a matter of conjecture. Whether he is succeeded eventually by his son, Ahmad, his half-brother, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, influential shaykh-businessman Hamad Abdullah al-Ahmar, or someone else in the inner circle, chances are that their control over the rapidly deteriorating political and economic situation will be even less secure. The present regime has been engineered to benefit a tiny clique. There are no viable alternatives for the transfer of power or power-sharing at present. Political institutionalization, with its veneer of democratic institutions, is painfully anaemic.

Yemen's immediate future is gloomy—perhaps even dire—but not terminal. The next few years are unlikely to see the emergence of a failed state, as in Somalia, but the medium term is murkier. Yemen's experience in surmounting immense obstacles in the past at least gives some cause for hope.

## Epilogue

Significant changes have taken place since the completion of the above text. In February 2012, strong external pressure led to the grudging resignation of Ali Abdullah Salih and

the temporary assumption of the presidency by his vice-president Abd Rabbu Mansur al-Hadi. This did not lead immediately to a resolution of Yemen's crises, however. Tension with the Huthis and the southerners remained constant. AQAP instituted a major campaign to exert its control over various southern towns, which prompted the Yemeni government – with the active military support of the United States – to strike back despite mounting casualties. Most of the contenders for the presidency remained in play while a large popular and vocal opposition continued to agitate against all of the presumed candidates. As seen from mid-2012, Yemen's situation is still as precarious as ever.

## Notes

- Recent general treatments of politics and the political situation in Yemen include: Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Robert D. Burrowes and Catherine M. Kasper, 'The Salih Regime and the Need for a Credible Opposition', *Middle East Journal* 61(2) (Spring 2007): 263–80; Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); J.E. Peterson, 'Tribes and Politics in Yemen', *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, APBN-007, www.JEPeterson.net (accessed December 2008); Iris Glosemeyer, *Dancing on Snake Heads in Yemen* (Calgary, Alberta: Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, May 2009); Lisa Wedeen et al., 'Discerning Yemen's Political Future', *Viewpoints* No. 11, June 2009 (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute); Christopher Boucek, 'Yemen: Avoiding a Downward Spiral' (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2009; Carnegie Papers, Middle East Program, No. 102); Ginny Hill, 'Yemen: Fear of Failure', Middle East Programme Briefing Paper, November 2008, updated January 2010 (London: Chatham House); Ginny Hill, 'Yemen: Avoiding Freefall', *World Today* (July 2010): 4–7; April Longley Alley, 'The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen', *Middle East Journal* 64(3) (Summer 2010): 385–409.
- The official biography can be found on the Republic of Yemen's Ministry of Information website, as an extract from the 1st edition of '20 Years of Giving', compiled by the Office of the Presidential Council (1998).
- J.E. Peterson, *Yemen: The Search for a Modern State* (London: Croom Helm; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 124.
- Dresch, 2000, 180, 195; *Yemen Times*, 28 September–4 October 1968; Stephen W. Day, 'Power-Sharing and Hegemony: A Case Study of the United Republic of Yemen', PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2001, 379. His son Muhammad was named commander of the eastern military region in 1999. Dresch, 2000, 202.
- He was said to have been in security and the Ministry of the Interior for a considerable time prior to Ali Abdullah's assumption of the presidency, perhaps brought in originally by Ibrahim al-Hamdi as a check on the powerful head of National Security, Muhammad Khamis. Interviews in Yemen, 1979–80. He was 61 at the time of his death in May 2001. Kuwait News Agency, 14 May 2001. Other brothers held the positions of deputy commander of the air force and command of an armoured brigade. *Financial Times*, 26 November 1984. A half brother, Ali Salih Abdullah, commanded the Republican Guard. Maternal uncles Muhammad Ali Mohsen and Muhammad Ahmad Isma'il were also named commanders of military regions after the 1994 war. Day, 2001, 379–80, 381, note 32.
- Associated Press, 20 September 1999; Reuters, 6 November 1999; Alley, 2010, 407.
- Dresch, 2000, 201–2.
- Alley, 2010, 407.
- Mention in this context could be made of prominent Hashidi Shaykh Sinan Abu Luhum and his cousins. They have, however, faded from the scene during the Ali Abdullah presidency. Mention could also be made of a number of leading Bakili sheikhs but they, like the Abu Luhums, have played only a marginal role in the power system.
- Laurent Bonnefoy provides a typology of Yemeni Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood (centred in al-Islah), *salafis*, *sufis*, Zaydi revivalists (as in the Huthis), and *jihadis* (al-Qa'ida and similar violent extremists). 'Varieties of Islamism in Yemen: The Logic of Integration Under

- Pressure', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA) 13(1) (March 2009), distributed electronically. It should be emphasized that only a small minority of Yemeni Islamists advocate or practice violence. See also April Longley, 'The High Water Mark of Islamist Politics? The Case of Yemen', *Middle East Journal* 61(2) (Spring 2007): 240–60.
- 11 The most extensive study of the Huthi affair is Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, National Defense Research Institute, 2010, prepared for the Defense Intelligence Agency). See also Bernard Haykel, 'A Zaydi Revival?' *Yemen Update* No. 36 (Spring–Winter 1995): 20–1; J.E. Peterson, 'The al-Huthi Conflict in Yemen', *Arabian Peninsula Background Note* APBN-006, www.JEPeterson.net (accessed August 2008); International Crisis Group, 'Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb', *Middle East Report* No. 86, 27 May 2009 (San'a/Brussels); and Christopher Boucek, *War in Saada, From Local Insurrection to National Challenge: Avoiding a Downward Spiral* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2010; Carnegie Papers, 'Yemen on the Brink', *Middle East Program* No. 110).
  - 12 Treatments focusing on the Southern Movement include: April Longley and Abdul Ghani al-Iryani, *Fighting Brushfires with Batons: An Analysis of the Political Crisis in South Yemen*, Policy Brief, No. 7 (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, February 2008); Stephen Day, 'Updating Yemeni National Unity: Could Lingering Regional Divisions Bring Down the Regime?' *Middle East Journal* 62(3) (Summer 2008): 417–36; Stephen Day, *The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2010; Carnegie Papers, 'Yemen on the Brink', *Middle East Program*, No. 108); and Nicole Stracke and Mohammed Saif Haidar, *The Southern Movement in Yemen* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center; San'a: Sheba Center for Strategic Studies, 2010). The latter gives a useful listing of the various southern groups that have emerged.
  - 13 Interestingly, a good deal of the unrest centred around al-Dali and Radfan, the areas that saw the first outbreaks of dissidence against the British in the 1960s.
  - 14 One report claimed that two presidential convoys meant to take Ali Abdullah Saleh back from Aden to San'a in May 2010 were attacked by southern insurgents. The president prudently had travelled by helicopter instead. *Gulf States Newsletter* No. 878, 4 June 2010.
  - 15 On al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and Islamist extremists, see Sarah Phillips and Rodger Shanahan, *Al-Qa'ida, Tribes and Instability in Yemen* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, November 2009); Sarah Phillips, *What Comes Next in Yemen? Al-Qaeda, the Tribes, and State-Building* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2010; Carnegie Papers, 'Yemen on the Brink', *Middle East Program* No. 107); and Alistair Harris, *Exploiting Grievances: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2010; Carnegie Papers, 'Yemen on the Brink', *Middle East Program* No. 111).
  - 16 Recent examinations of US policy towards Yemen include J.E. Peterson, 'The United States and Yemen: A History of Unfulfilled Expectations', in Robert E. Looney (ed.), *US-Middle East Relations: Formative Factors and Regional Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2009), 502–12; and Jeremy M. Sharp, *Yemen: Background and US Relations* (Washington: US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, CRS Report RL34170, 13 January 2010).
  - 17 A pertinent example of the pitfalls in such involvement occurred in December 2009 when Yemen carried out attacks on villages identified as AQAP-training camps in Abyan province, killing as many as three dozen extremists. News reports indicated that the USA had provided firepower, possibly missile strikes, intelligence and other support in these attacks. One US air strike killed dozens of innocent villagers. See Sharp, 2010, 4–5, for more details.
  - 18 For a recent summary of Yemen's economic problems, see Nora Ann Colton, 'Yemen: A Collapsed Economy', *Middle East Journal* 64(3) (Summer 2010): 410–26. Figures in this and the following paragraphs are based on this and previously cited articles, as well as various news reports.

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