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Chaos in Yemen: Implications for its Future and the Region

By Sigurd Neubauer



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Executive Summary

Less than three weeks after Houthi militants forced the resignation of Yemen's president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa evacuated its staff on Wednesday February 11 after UN mediation attempts failed to bring the country's various political factions to the negotiation table. It is, however, far from certain whether the Zaidi-Shiite clan's momentum to shape the country's politics is motivated by a sectarian agenda or by political aspirations to establish itself as the arbiter of the country's political process. What is clear is that despite the group's pronounced support for the National Dialogue Program that followed the ouster of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, the chain of events leading to President Hadi's resignation appear to have been part of a strategy meticulously executed by the group's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. The group, however, does not have significant governing experience nor does it have the ability to repair the country's battered economy. Despite being the country's strongest political actor, as the leading arbiter of Yemen's divisive and messy political process, the Houthis cannot govern alone and is therefore expected to explore a number of power-sharing arrangements beneficial to its positions and acceptable to its neighbors.

Unless the present Yemeni crisis is actively managed by Washington and Riyadh, in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, the Houthis and their inability to govern could throw the country into a civil war with wide ranging consequences for the region. A dangerous, but plausible scenario, is that the Houthis, like many revolutionaries before them, could implement a reign of terror as they find themselves unable to control their militiamen, let alone govern or provide basic government services for its population. Meanwhile, the collapse of the U.S. supported technocrat government could have significant implications on regional stability and for the security of Saudi Arabia in particular.

The rise of the Houthi movement has exacerbated fears in Riyadh, and elsewhere, that the group is nothing short of an Iranian proxy, adding a new and unpredictable element to an already volatile region plagued by increasing sectarianism, extremism and terrorism. For Washington, the collapse of the Hadi government could complicate its anti-terrorism policies against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and other regional terrorist groups.

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Policy Recommendations: Arab Gulf States

- The rise of the Houthi movement as Yemen's strongest actor leaves Saudi Arabia with little choice but to focus its immediate attention on securing its 1,700-km (1,060-mile) southern border by expediting the construction of a massive fence.
- Given the shared threats presented by the AQAP to Saudi security interests, it is critical that U.S.-Saudi counter terrorism cooperation on Yemen continues with Riyadh resuming its financial assistance to Sanaa.
- While Iran is expected to rhetorically and political exaggerate its influence over the Houthis, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries should make concerted efforts not to turn Yemen's conflict into a geopolitical showdown between Riyadh and Tehran.
- It would be a strategic mistake for the GCC to frame the unfolding crisis through sectarian terms as it could potentially drive disgruntled Sunni tribesmen to forge alliances with the AQAP as a response to the Houthis' ascent to national influence.
- Building on Oman's strategic alliance with the U.S. and its friendly relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Sultanate could help defuse regional tensions by facilitating backchannel talks between international stakeholders and Yemen's various competing factions.

Policy Recommendations: United States

- It is critical that Washington plays a more active leading role on Yemen, helping Saudi Arabia, the GCC and the United Nations to develop a coherent policy for an inclusive and stable Yemeni government.
- Despite the present limitations to U.S. influence in Yemen, Washington could request assistance from Oman, a well-known regional intermediary, to help assist UN Special Envoy Jamal Bin Omar with facilitating backchannel talks between Yemen's various political factions as part of an effort to help establish a roadmap to defuse the country's political crisis.
- Despite the present challenges, the Obama-administration must continue to carry out its signature drone strike policies against the AQAP and its regional affiliates.

Introduction

Less than three weeks after Houthi militants forced the resignation of Yemen's president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa evacuated its staff on Wednesday February 11th, 2015. The evacuation came after preliminary UN mediation attempts failed to bring the country's various political factions to the negotiation table with the goal of resolving the present political crisis. While the Houthis have nominally supported Yemen's national dialogue since the ouster of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, the country's strongman for 33-years, the group has simultaneously taken advantage of the weak post Arab Spring government by carrying out an extraordinary military campaign leading it to seize territory from its historical base in the northwestern provinces to resuming control over the capital of Sanaa in September of last year.

The Houthis, a Zaidi-Shiite clan, allegedly supported by Iran, now controls the northwestern border provinces of Saada and Al Jawf, including swaths of land in the Amran and Hajjah provinces; it also controls the strategic port of Hodeidah on the Red Sea coast, the country's second largest and the small Red Sea port of Medi and al-Dawaymeh island, both near the border with Saudi Arabia.¹ Fearing that the Houthis' next step could be to take control of Mareb province, where the country's energy resources are located, local Sunni tribesmen have reportedly mobilized 30,000 men to protect it from the Shiite clan.²

The rapid rise of the Houthi movement as the country's strongest actor could potentially not only trigger a nationwide sectarian backlash, but it could also force local Sunni tribes, including in Mareb, to forge an alliance with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The AQAP, like its affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, has long sought to frame regional turmoil through a sectarian lens as part of an orchestrated campaign to recruit disgruntled Sunni tribesmen for its extremist purposes.

The Houthis, for their part, have traditionally seen themselves as politically marginalized in Sunni-majority Yemen; as part of what appears to be a clear strategy to expand its regional influence, the clan has formed alliances with a number of political groups, including with the Southern Movement, a group that seeks to secede from Yemen. Moreover, as the Houthis solidify their access to the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia fears that Iran seeks to consolidate its regional influence through stalking tribal and sectarian tensions from the strategic Bab El-Mandeb Strait through the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. The Houthis, however, see Wahabi sponsored groups residing along the border as a strategic threat to their religious practices.

Abdul-Malik al-Houthi's Double Game

Despite the Houthis' pronounced support for the National Dialogue Program since its inception, the chain of events leading to president Hadi's resignation appear to have been part of a strategy meticulously executed by the group's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, to establish himself as the top arbiter of the country's messy and divisive politics. It began in January 2014 with the group's successful expulsion of thousands of Salafists from the city of Dammaj in Saada province - and the subsequent closing of an educational institution used for Al Qaeda training purposes.³ Six months later, their momentum continued with the defeat of General Ali Mushin, who along with the powerful Al-Ahmar family, are leaders of the country's most powerful tribe, the Hashid tribe. With the expulsion of the Al-Ahmar family from its home in Amran Province's Khamir district, the Houthis dislodged the family's grip on the leadership of the Hashid tribal confederation, a central political pillar of the Yemeni Republic since 1962. The expulsion also brought what appeared to be an end to the Islah Party, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate.⁴ From that point on, anti-government tribes reportedly loyal to former president Saleh joined the Houthis, bringing the Shiite clan to the outskirts of Sanaa. With the Hadi government announcing in July last year that it would lift fuel subsidies for the impoverished population, the Houthis were once again able to capitalize on the widespread outrage the policy shift had created.

Given that the Ahmar clan had rebelled against Saleh during the Arab Spring revolts of 2011, its defeat at the hands of the Houthis and Saleh loyalists reportedly suggest that Saleh and the Shiite clan formed

¹ Mohammed Ghobari, "Al Qaeda and Houthis clash in central Yemen: residents," *Reuters*, 16 October 2014

² Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki, "Thousands of Armed Tribesmen Mobilize in Marib," *Yemen Times*, 12 January 2015

³ Nasser Al-Sakkaf, "Salafis Forced to Flee Dammaj, Government Forces Unable to Protect Them, They Say," *Yemen Times*, 16 January 2014

⁴ Charles Schmitz, "The Fall of Amran and the Future of the Islah Party in Yemen," *Middle East Institute*, 25 August 2014

an alliance of convenience against the central government of President Hadi. The Ahmar family, for its part, had previously supported the Salafists of the Dammaj region in their battle against the Houthis in late 2013.⁵ Once the Salafists had been defeated, the Ahmar clan was next before the Houthi arrived at the outskirts of Sanaa, prompting the resignation of Minister Mohammed Salem Basindwa, who had also lead an alliance against President Saleh during the anti-government demonstrations at the time.⁶ Responding to the Houthi's position of strength, President Hadi had little choice but to sign a power sharing agreement with the group, prompting anger by Sunni tribes and by the AQAP in particular. But that power-sharing agreement was never implemented properly, Houthi rebels claimed.⁷ Houthi dissatisfaction with the power arrangement was a clear factor when it forced Hadi and his cabinet to resign last month.

No Love Story Between Houthis and Saleh

Although present events suggest that the Houthis have aligned themselves with Saleh, their relationship has never been rosy, to say the least: Since the 1960s, Saudi Arabia has provided urgently needed aid to its impoverished neighbor by granting various Yemeni factions generous government subsidies, in particular to tribes residing along the joint border. The Ahmar family of the prominent Hashid tribe benefitted in particular from Saudi generosity. At the same time, Riyadh also sought to influence Yemeni affairs by supporting a number of Wahabi educational institutions throughout the county.

Over time, however, as Saudi influence increased, and its Wahhabi institutions grew stronger, President Saleh sought to counterbalance his mighty neighbor - flushed with petrodollars - by incrementally supporting the Houthis.

Saleh also sought to consolidate his own power by plotting Yemen's many competing tribes and political factions against one and another. Until the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Saleh's strategy seemed to work, at least domestically. However, as Iran aggressively began supporting Iraqi sectarianism in a bid to advance its regional aspirations through the so-called Shiite crescent, Saleh's flirtation with the Houthis came to an abrupt end as he sought to arrest the clan's leader, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, Abu Malik's uncle.

The unsuccessful arrest not only led to a full-fledged war between Sanaa and the clan, but also dragged Saudi Arabia into the conflict after a Saudi border patrol was ambushed in a cross-border attack in 2009.

.What Are The Houthi Objectives?

With the clan announcing its commitment to the National Dialog immediately following Saleh's ouster, the group sought at the time to project an image that it did not have any aspiration to control the government, but rather that it could potentially benefit from greater autonomy, similar to the Kurds of northern Iraq. The present Houthi ultimatum in place, however, has left little doubt of its aspirations to influence Yemen's political future to its advantage. At the same time, between the group's lack of significant governing experience and its inability to keep the economy intact without foreign assistance, it is unclear how it will be able to secure international aid - in particular from Saudi Arabia, due to its historic strained relations with Riyadh. Given these obvious constraints, the Houthis are likely to attempt to reach a power sharing arrangement with the Southern Movement and a political figure acceptable to Riyadh.

⁵ "Houthi armed groups challenge Yemen power structure," *Al-Monitor*, 30 April 2014

⁶ "Yemeni PM Mohammed Salem Basindwa resigns amid reports of rebel advances," *Reuters*, 21 September 2014

⁷ Erin Banco, "Yemen's Houthi Rebels and President Hadi Reach Tentative Agreement On Power Sharing, Constitution," *International Business Times*, 21 January 2015

Proxies for Iran?

Given Iran's pronounced support for Syria's embattled Bashar al-Assad regime and for the former Nouri al-Maliki regime in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the GCC are increasingly feeling geographically and politically surrounded by Tehran's growing regional allies and influence. Beyond its persistent rhetorical support for the Houthis, it is unclear to what extent Iran has supported them militarily, either through lethal assistance or military training. With the Yemeni military providing evidence of alleged arms shipments to the group, documented when authorities seized weapons smuggled from Iran on the "Jihan 1" in 2013, many in the region believe it has. Iranian officials tend to categorically deny providing the Houthis with weapons, but a number of unnamed Iranian officials have also acknowledged having a "few hundred" military personnel in Yemen who train Houthi fighters.⁸ While Iran is expected to rhetorically and politically exaggerate its influence over the Houthis, its involvement in Yemen raises fears across the GCC that Yemen has become the next battle ground for the increasing sectarianism witnessed across the region. This comes as apparent U.S. fatigue with the Middle East has left the GCC countries feeling a declining level of U.S. support, adding to their fear of Iranian interference and its potentially devastating consequences for Sunni-Shia relations in Yemen and across the region.

Plausible Power Sharing Scenarios

A plausible scenario for a power sharing arrangement between the Houthis and the Southern Movement could be to appoint Ali Nasir Muhammad as president. Muhammad, a former president of South Yemen could be brought back from his exile in Cairo, Egypt, as he is widely respected in southern Yemen and is also known for his moderate positions. Muhammad, along with Saleh's former prime minister, Haider Abu Bakr Al-Attas, is another moderate figure with close ties to Riyadh. Al-Attas is also believed to have kept an open door to Iran. Between the Houthi's control over the northwestern provinces and Muhammad and Al-Attas respective constituencies in the south, a plausible power sharing agreement could entail Muhammad as president; Al-Attas as prime minister; and a Houthi leader, most likely Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, or one of his brothers, as vice president. If this, or a similar power sharing arrangement cannot be reached with the Southern Movement over its insistence for independence, the Houthis are likely to respond in kind by attempting to fortify the old border of North Yemen while seeking to drive out the AQAP from its territories. While the Houthis are unlikely to challenge the South's quest for independence, the group is likely to attempt, to whatever extent possible, to maintain some sort of cordial relations with whatever faction emerges as victorious in southern Yemen.

Could Mismanagement Lead To Reign Of Terror?

Given that Abu Malik Al Houthi has until recently declined repeated invitations by the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa to engage in dialogue, he appears as a paranoid leader unable to delegate responsibilities as no one else from his clan, including his brothers, have been allowed to meet with U.S. diplomats. Despite their impressive and successive military gains, the Houthis have clearly overextended themselves as they are unable to govern the country alone, let alone manage the economy. Given how quickly the movement has grown, it has become increasingly unclear whether its leadership has full control of its militiamen. Even in the event the Houthis reach a power sharing agreement of some sort with the Southern Movement, it is far from certain whether the clan can keep the country together.

⁸ Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, "Iranian support seen crucial for Yemen's Houthis," *Reuters*, 15 December 2014

A dangerous, but plausible scenario, is that the Houthis, like many revolutionaries before them, could implement a reign of terror as they find themselves unable to control their militiamen, let alone govern or provide basic government services for its population. Another plausible scenario driven by a paranoid leadership, fearing alleged foreign intervention, could be the gradual imprisonment and subsequent execution of perceived political opponents in the name of anti-terrorism policies. Unless the present Yemeni crisis is properly and actively managed by Washington and Riyadh, in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, the Houthis and their inability to govern could throw the country into a civil war with wide ranging consequences for the region.

