YEMEN'S PIVOTAL MOMENT

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FEBRUARY 2014

A REPORT BY THE CRITICAL THREATS PROJECT OF THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

Yemen is at a pivotal moment today, three years after the outbreak of popular protests, and the future of America's strategy against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is on the line. Yemen is in the midst of a political transition process that will eventually reform and decentralize the government. But the success of the effort is by no means assured. The reforms will not, in any case, address the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions that provide fertile ground for al Qaeda. Moreover, the central state, never fully able to exercise its sovereignty throughout the country, is weaker than it was before 2011. Opposition groups, which have turned to violence in the past, may still seek to form independent states of their own, potentially collapsing the fragile Yemeni state structure entirely. American interests are bound up in this process by the fact that AQAP is among the most virulent al Qaeda affiliates that poses a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. Syria, Iran, and other foreign and domestic policy issues are distracting the United States and its regional partners from sustained engagement in Yemen. Without international support, the country is much less likely to ride this transition process smoothly and our security interests will be severely harmed.

Key Findings

- Yemen concluded a national dialogue in January 2014 that served as a forum for factions to debate key issues and eventually provide a set of recommendations for reform based on consensus. These recommendations still need to be implemented, and key powerbrokers still have the opportunity to inhibit progress.

- The al Houthis, an armed movement in the north reportedly supported by Iran, created a statelet in Yemen as the central state collapsed in 2011. They participated in the political process, but have withdrawn in protest. They have also expanded from Sa'ada government into the neighboring areas, at times violently, and it is not clear that they will cede authority to the central state.

- Certain factions from Yemen's fractious Southern Movement participated in the political process, but nearly all have backed away from supporting the six-region federal state. Some leaders have called supporters to arms and are renewing calls for secession.

- Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has the capability and the intent to conduct attacks against American interests abroad. It is targeting Yemeni military sites and personnel, and has benefited from political fallout over civilian deaths in drone strikes. A ruthless December 2013 attack in Sana'a caused public backlash, and the group issued a rare apology for the deaths of civilians.

Introduction

The United States has faced a persistent threat to its homeland from al Qaeda's Yemen-based affiliate since 2009. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), like other groups in the al Qaeda network, expanded its area of operations during the security breakdown in Yemen in 2011. It supported the development of an associated group in Egypt known as the Jamal Network in 2011 and 2012, while also fielding an insurgent arm in Yemen, Ansar al Sharia. AQAP's Ansar al Sharia declared an emirate in south Yemen in 2011 from where it threatened Aden, Yemen's second-largest city. Though AQAP no longer directly administers territory in Yemen, the group continues to have a strong presence throughout the south and east of the country and operates cells in the area surrounding Sana'a, Yemen's capital. Leadership attrition may have temporarily reduced AQAP's international operations capabilities, but the key components—its lead bombmaker and leadership intent to attack the U.S.—remain.

America's strategy to counter AQAP is two-pronged. The U.S. conducts direct action operations in Yemen to mitigate the immediate threat to the American homeland and interests abroad and supports Yemeni efforts to reduce the space in which AQAP operates in the country. This strategy relies on the Yemenis to combat and dismantle AQAP's network with limited security assistance. This is a challenging task even for the most capable militaries today. The Yemeni security forces have achieved mixed success and relied in part on local tribal militias.[1] A 2012 offensive regained control of territory from AQAP's insurgent arm, but the militants were not defeated and continue to challenge the state today. The Yemeni military is also fractured, and regular instances of troop insubordination are affecting its ability to conduct operations. As of July 2013, at least 22 different units had rebelled since February 2012.[2] The reliance on Yemeni efforts has bedeviled America's strategy in previous years because it requires sustained counterterrorism cooperation from the government and a certain prioritization of the fight against AQAP.

Yemen is at a critical point today. Its progress in the political transition process has been slow, but it is ongoing. Yet even as the country leaves behind the era of its long-time president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, there remain significant challenges ahead. There are two enduring security threats to the state in addition to the one posed by AQAP. Efforts to reform Yemen's government tempered parts of a secessionist movement in Yemen's south, but potential remains for civil unrest in the south. The al Houthis, a group that took up arms against the state previously, gained control of territory in the north in 2011 and 2012, and may directly challenge the state to protect those gains. In either case, a more exigent threat to the unity or survival of the state would force Sana'a to reprioritize the allocation of limited security resources away from AQAP. It also still remains conceivable that a political détente among the elite in Sana'a ends, and the ongoing struggle for power and access consumes the attention of the central government. Elite patronage networks still extend into the military, despite efforts at reform, and a security vacuum similar to the one that

permitted the rise of Ansar al Sharia in 2011 could occur. Poor socioeconomic conditions, a history of corruption, and disappearing natural resources, including water, compound these issues.

Political Transition Process

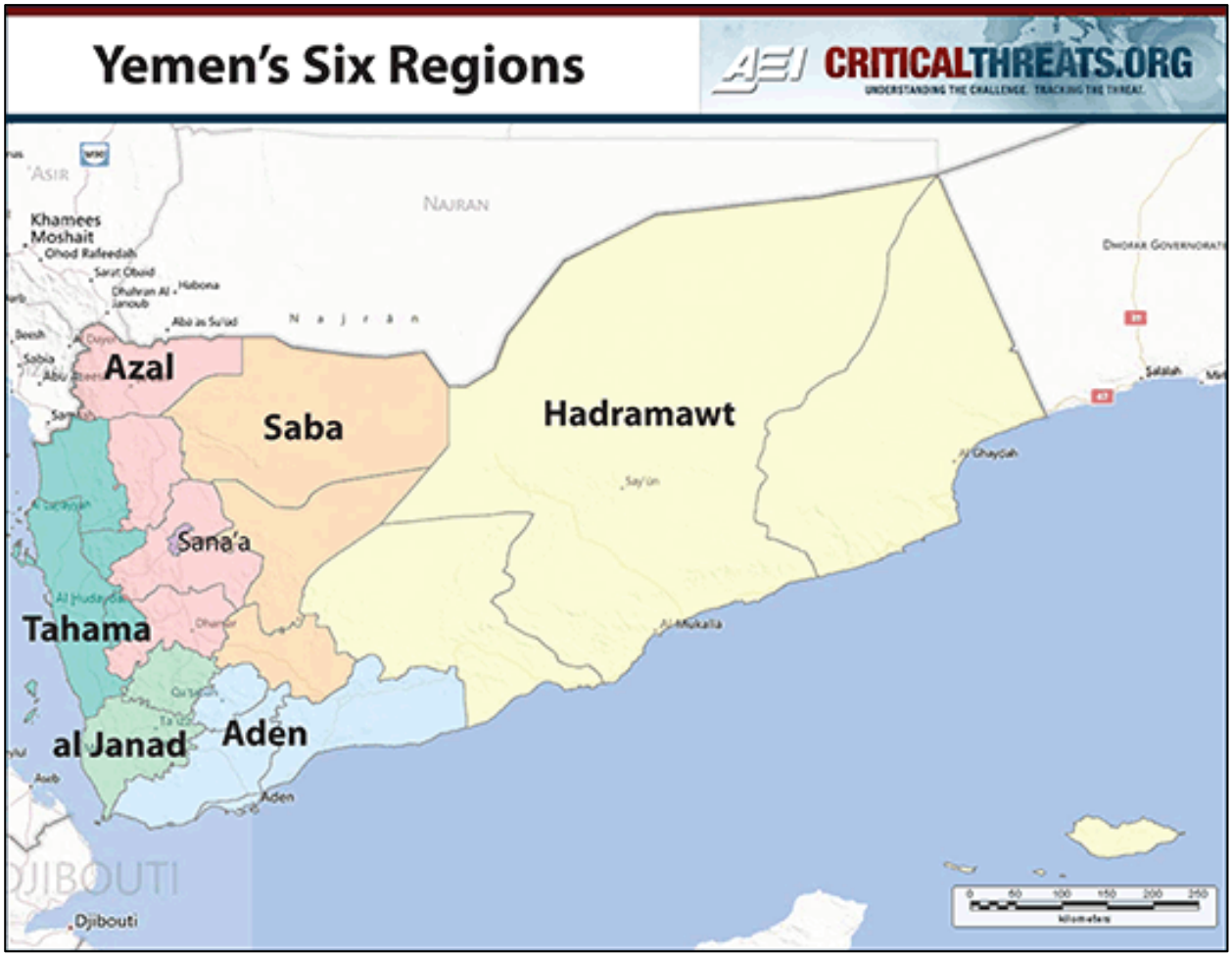
The protests that broke out in Yemen during the Arab Spring collapsed Ali Abdullah Saleh's ability to retain power in 2011. Saleh had ruled by carefully managing relations with Yemen's tribal leaders and developing a personal patronage network that extended throughout the main functions of the Yemeni state and economy. He placed family members in critical positions within Yemen's security forces and relied on them to meet the various security threats. His management of the tribes and political factions prevented any single group gained enough power to challenge the state's authority, which meant that as Saleh lost power, no single figure was able to dominate the space.

Members of the political elite such as General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar and the al Ahmar family (no relation) seized the opportunity to shift the balance of power away from Saleh.[3] General Ali Mohsen defected from the regime in March 2011 and consolidated his division of troops in the northwest of the capital. Separately, the al Ahmars rallied their Hashidi tribesmen to their support in Sana'a's northeast. The capital itself became divided between three centers of power as Saleh recalled troops to Sana'a, none of which could sufficiently tip the scales of power in their favor. And so Yemen's political elite entered into negotiations facilitated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to transfer power from Saleh to his deputy, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

The GCC initiative smoothed Saleh's step down from power and also developed a two-year transitional period plan for Yemen. That plan, set in motion at the end of November 2011 and backed by the international community, is proceeding, though with some significant delays. One of the first major benchmarks—the February 2012 election of President Hadi, the consensus candidate, and the formation of a national unity government—occurred in a timely fashion. Within the next two years, Yemen was to have also hosted a six-month national dialogue, a referendum on a new constitution, and the drafting of new electoral laws for national elections in February 2014. Yemen has not met these goals, but the political transition process is moving forward.

The delay in completing the stipulated national dialogue, a forum in which Yemeni political factions could air and seek redress for longstanding grievances with the central government, has pushed back Yemen's transition timeline. The National Dialogue in Yemen was not a new concept, but it had never quite gotten underway under Saleh. President Hadi managed to secure participation almost across the board, a feat in and of itself as this had prevented the start of a national dialogue in prior years. But agreement on the structure of the dialogue—especially the distribution of the 565 seats in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC)—postponed the start until March 2013. The NDC, tasked with resolving systemic issues, gave voice to Yemen's previously marginalized actors and to new political factions alongside the established political elite. Contentious issues, such as how to federalize the state, extended the planned six-month conference by four months.

The late conclusion of the NDC has prolonged the transition process, and it may be that even the new timeframe is unrealistic. The NDC final document includes an estimated 1,400 recommendations that have yet to be instituted and are to be guidelines for Yemen's new constitution. President Hadi will remain in office for another year to oversee the drafting of and referendum on the constitution.[4] Once approved, national elections are to be held within nine months. President Hadi established a 22-member committee on January 27, 2014, to determine the number of regions in federalized Yemen.[5] How the country is divided, and into how many regions, is a highly contentious issue because, for the south, it could be a mechanism for eventual independence. Many southerners sought a two-region state, while northerners pushed for six regions, only two of which would be in the south. A February 10 committee meeting approved the six-region federation.[6] Sana'a city will not be included in any of the regions and Aden, the capital of former South Yemen, will have special economic status. Southern leaders and the al Houthis have already rejected the decision.[7]



Map of Yemen's six-region federal state. Source: AEI's Critical Threats Project

Yemen's political elite, even those who traditionally formed the opposition, stand to lose as Yemen's decentralization process moves forward.[8] The old structure guaranteed them economic privileges through access to oil and petroleum contracts, international development project financing, and other such benefits historically run through the central government. As such, it is not in the elite's interest to see all of the NDC recommendations instituted, and in that, the various elite interests should be united. Though the NDC gave voice to the historically marginalized, the elite may still be able to influence substantially the final outcome in Yemen. It was, after all, an elite agreement that ultimately forced an agreement and led to the conclusion of the NDC.[9] As the political transition process moves forward, the elite may continue to attempt to mold the outcome favorably, which may undermine the entire process itself.

Underlying all of the political issues in Yemen are unaddressed socioeconomic challenges. The NDC process has done little to attend to many of the issues that drove Yemenis to the streets in 2011 and the security threats facing the state.[10] There are limited economic opportunities in Yemen, and a reduction of remittances as Saudi Arabia limits foreign workers. The UN has deemed over 10 million people as food insecure and over 13 million do not have access to safe water.[11] Localized conflict drives insecurity and prevents humanitarian assistance from reaching vulnerable populations. The ongoing conflicts also underscore the central state's limited ability to exercise its sovereignty within its borders. President Hadi will need to navigate the ongoing issue with the al Houthis in the north; the rejection of the NDC's outcomes, and of the process itself, by many southerners; the potential for a tribal uprising in Hadramawt and other anti-government currents; and the threat from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The al Houthi Conflict

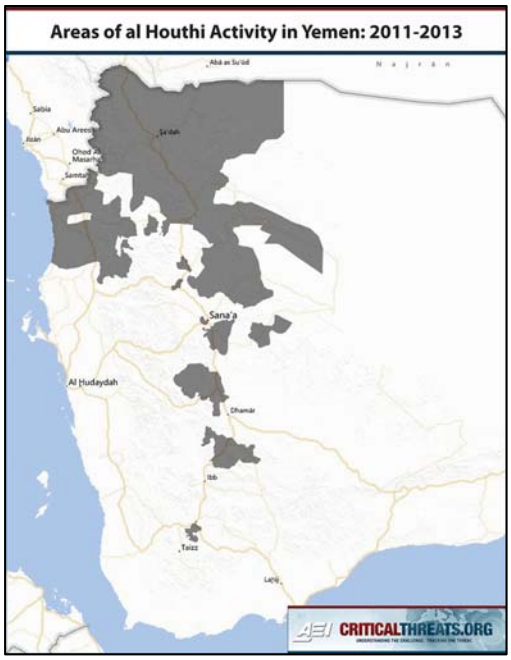
The al Houthi movement, which derives its name from founder Hussein Badr al Din al Houthi, draws support from members of the Zaydi Shiite population in north Yemen.[12] The group cites economic and political marginalization by the central state as primary grievances and also seeks to revive Zaydism in north Yemen. The 2004 death of Hussein Badr al Din at the hands of Yemeni soldiers militarized the movement, and his followers took up arms. The Yemeni state has fought six successive wars, commonly known as the "Sa'ada Wars," against the al Houthis in north Yemen.[13] The last war ended essentially in a draw in February 2010, despite the Saudi military participation in support of the Yemeni military. Low-level conflict continued throughout 2010 in Sa'ada and Amran governorates between the al Houthis and the Yemeni army or pro-government tribal militias.[14]

The 2011 challenge to the survival of Saleh's government and the subsequent retraction of the Yemeni state into Sana'a created an opening for Yemen's al Houthi movement to seize control of local administrations and secure its interests in the north. The group carved off Sa'ada governorate and appointed a new governor, arms dealer Fares Manaa, in March 2011.[15] The al Houthis expanded from there into parts of neighboring Hajjah, Amran, and al Jawf governorates.

Allegations of Iranian support for the movement became more frequent in 2012, though Tehran denied any involvement in Yemen.[16] The al Houthis, despite controlling their own statelet in the north, agreed to participate in the NDC in 2012. Ansar Allah representatives, members of the al Houthis' newly formed political party, became the al Houthis' delegates at the NDC in 2013.

Conflict with the al Houthis broke out again in fall 2013 in north Yemen.[17] The al Houthis' expanding influence in north Yemen has created a backlash. Unlike previous iterations, this violence is not against the Yemeni state, but is instead between local interests. Much of the fighting outside of Dammaj, Sa'ada, is over control of local administrations. The al Houthi expansion south in Amran governorate, for example, contests the local power of the al Ahmar family, which heads one of two tribal confederations in north Yemen. Sana'a has attempted to end the fighting by sending delegations to the affected areas to serve as mediators. A presidential delegation successfully negotiated a ceasefire in al Haradh in Hajjah governorate, for example, that called for Yemeni security forces to replace opposing militias' positions in early January.[18]

The fighting in Dammaj, centered on the Salafist Dar al Hadith school, is fundamentally different than the fighting in other parts of north Yemen because it is along sectarian lines. The al Houthis have repeatedly targeted the school because of its Wahhabi focus and also because it produces a steady flow of radicalized youths who are willing to take up arms in the name of Sunni Islam. Tensions had been brewing since the end of the al Houthis' siege of Dammaj in fall 2011. Fighting broke out again in early fall 2013. Thousands of Salafi fighters traveled to Dammaj to defend the school, and al Houthis once again besieged the town.[19] A government-negotiated ceasefire called for the withdrawal of both sides' forces from their positions in Dammaj, and also the departure of all non-local students from Dar al Hadith school.[20] Most of the students have resettled in al Hudaydah governorate, but there is the question as to whether the Yemenis who answered the call to protect the Sunnis in Dammaj will lay down their arms.[21]



Map of al Houthi activity from 2011 to 2013.

It is not clear to what degree the violence in north Yemen is tied to the political decisions being made in the capital. But what is clear to all actors is that the al Houthis have created facts on the ground by expanding into new areas, greatly improving their bargaining position. One of the al Houthis representatives to the NDC, Ahmed Sharaf al Din, was assassinated on January 21, 2014, in Sana'a. The al Houthis announced their withdrawal from the NDC, citing the lack of respect shown to Sharaf al Din, the dismissal of their views in the final document, and the last-minute shift from consensus to majority voting.[22] The threat that the al Houthis would withdraw from the NDC had

always been present, since the process is one to which they chose to opt in. Though this could be a spoiler move, it is more probable that they are looking to gain additional concessions.[23] Recognition of "Houthi-land" in a federal system would codify the gains that they made over the course of 2011 and 2012, for example, as would a seat in a new cabinet or on the committee deciding Yemen's federal system. The ability to influence the shape of future Yemen would help the al Houthis codify the territorial and political gains that they made over the course of 2012 and 2013.

The Southern Issue

Yemen's fractious Southern Movement, parts of which have called for full secession from the state, continues to challenge the central government.[24] The uniting grievances have stemmed from the perceived political and economic marginalization of the south. North and South Yemen unified in May 1990, but the feelings of elation quickly subsided as southerners came to terms with a balance of power that favored the north and saw wealth moving from southern oil fields into the northern capital and southern land redistributed to northern beneficiaries. The South lost a brief, but violent, civil war in 1994. In 2007, southern military officers who had lost their pensions after the war, demonstrated to see them reinstituted. The demonstrations spread rapidly, encouraged by the former South's political elite, and the officers' movement became a faction of broad-based popular movement. The Southern Movement continued to gain support over the course of the next few years, and increasingly called for secession from the North.

Despite fairly unified grievances, there is still no single individual or body that speaks for the south, and little agreement within the Southern Movement as to what would address those grievances. The lack of consensus among southerners made drafting recommendations to resolve the issue more difficult. The NDC gave voice to those parts of the Southern Movement that chose to participate. It also dedicated an entire working group solely to resolving the southern issue. Southern demands for a federal state system, particularly the given redistribution of resource wealth from Sana'a to the south, do not resonate as well in the north, however.[25]

Unable to reach agreement by the September 2013 deadline, the Southern Issue Working Group created a subcommittee—termed the 8+8 because of the divide between northern and southern participants—to hash out a solution. The subcommittee skirted its duty, opting instead for the easier route of recommending a new technical committee to tackle the issue.[26] But the subcommittee did progress the NDC. Representatives from Yemen's political parties signed the subcommittee's "Just Solution" document in early January 2014 and the final NDC document stated that Yemen would move toward adopting a federalist system, which was in line with the Southern Issue Working Group's conclusions as well. The adopted six-region solution has not been accepted by southern leaders, however.

Yet the southern NDC participants do not carry the southern street, which either rejects the NDC process entirely or the negotiated outcome. Some of the lead "southern" delegates to the

NDC do hail from the south, but have long been seen as complicit with the north, undermining the South's sense of representation at the NDC. Moreover, leaders within the Southern Movement refused to participate in or withdrew from the NDC. Even these leaders are out of touch with the younger southerners.[27] The GCC initiative envisioned the NDC as the way to heal the deep fissures that run between the north and the south, but without southern participation and acceptance, the southern issue will remain.

Of particular concern is the potential for the low-level conflict in the south to gain traction. Before 2011, militant factions of the southern movement targeted government checkpoints and military positions in the south—physical indicators of Sana'a's authority there.[28] There were fewer attacks attributed to the Southern Movement in 2012, but violence flared in the south in February 2013.[29] The one-year anniversary of President Hadi's election was marked in Aden, a Southern Movement stronghold, by violent demonstrations that then spread to Abyan, al Dhaleh, and Hadramawt on February 22. Violence peaked in September 2013, when the NDC was scheduled to end. It is on the rise again.

Southerners have rallied in support of the people in al Dhaleh, where the conflict between Southern Movement supporters and the Yemeni central government has escalated. A Yemeni army tank shelled a funeral tent in al Dhaleh on December 27, 2013, killing upwards of 19 people.[30] The mourners were paying their respects to a young man who had been killed in clashes that broke out after Southern Movement supporters attempted to hoist the former South Yemen flag above a government building on December 23.[31] Hundreds turned out to protest what they termed a "massacre" on December 28. At least two more people were killed when troops from the 33rd Armored Brigade opened fire on the demonstrators.[32]

There is a formal inquiry underway into the incident,[33] but the escalation may have been predictable. The unit in al Dhaleh was also responsible for violence against civilians in Taiz in 2011, including the burning of the main protest camp there.[34] Taiz, Yemen's third-largest city, was a key part of the popular uprising against Saleh. Brigadier General Abdullah Dhabaan has remained in command of the 33rd Armored Brigade, which was transferred from Taiz to al Dhaleh by the end of November 2012.[35] Militant elements of the Southern National Resistance recently claimed responsibility for attacks targeting the 33rd Armored Brigade bases in al Dhaleh.[36] Such reprisal attacks will only serve to drive the conflict further, and Sana'a's effective silence is seen as tacit approval for military actions taken by the brigade.

Southern or Local Movements?

It is difficult to gauge the extent of support for the Southern Movement across Yemen's southern and eastern governorates because of the alignment of Southern Movement interests and local interests. The Southern Movement's opposition to the central government is mirrored in local tribes' and authorities' sentiments. Neither supports the idea of profits from local resources going to the

central government, and both highlight the extent to which Saleh and other political elite such as General Ali Mohsen benefited from various contracts.[37] Yet the Southern Movement has attempted to appropriate local anti-government movements and has at least rhetorically supported those that are rooted in former South Yemen.

Rumblings of a tribal uprising in Hadramawt governorate that began in December 2013 and have continued into 2014 exemplify the interplay between local movements and the Southern Movement. A prominent sheikh in the al Hamum tribe in Hadramawt died in clashes with Yemeni soldiers at a checkpoint outside of Sayun on December 2, 2013.[38] The Yemeni Defense Ministry and state news outlets characterized Saad Ahmed bin Habrish and his body guards as AQAP suspects, inciting an angry reaction from his constituents. Habrish had been the energy behind a July 2013 statement from a group calling itself the "Hadramout Tribes Confederacy."[39] That same body, the Hadramout Tribes Confederacy (HTC), issued an ultimatum to the government on December 10 calling for the withdrawal of all security forces by December 20 and that Hadrami tribes provide security services for oil companies in the governorate.[40]


Hadramout Tribes Confederacy

حلف قبائل حضرموت

بيان قبائل حضرموت في وادي تحب غيل بن يمين

Example of a statement from the HTC.

Both the HTC and the Southern Movement see the central government's security forces almost as occupiers and would like to capitalize on the oil wealth to be found in the region. Southern Movement leaders have openly supported the HTC and talk about the conflict in a north-south context. The Yemeni government's actions, in the eyes of the HTC and the Southern Movement, continue to feed this narrative: it failed to meet the HTC deadline and deployed additional forces into key Hadrami.[41] Hadramis demonstrated throughout the governorate and, in some cities, displayed the former South Yemen flag prominently.[42] But support for the Southern Movement has not penetrated Hadramawt the way it has in Aden, or even al Dhaleh. The events in Hadramawt must be seen in their local context.

Hadrami tribesmen seek authority to govern their own local affairs and access to the resource wealth in their territories. The HTC issued a January 10 warning to Norwegian oil company DNO to cease operations by January 11 or "assume responsibility for the consequences."[43] Tribesmen carried through on the threat and attacked oil installations on January 11.[44] There have been attacks on oil infrastructure or security forces since December 20. Additionally, tribesmen seized an oil ministry building in the governorate, demanding that the soldiers responsible for Habrish's death be turned over to face justice.[45] The tribal movement in Hadramawt is also inspiring a similar movement in neighboring Shabwah governorate, a historical safe haven for AQAP.[46] AQAP operated openly in 'Azzan town and its surrounding areas in Shabwah in 2011.[47] Should such low-level conflict expand, it will increase the space in which AQAP is able to operate in the two

governorates. The fact that the conflict has not escalated, despite the tribes' capabilities to do so, may be because the tribes are willing to be disruptive in order to gain concessions, but they are not seeking a full-blown fight with the central government.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda's Yemen affiliate remains active and will continue to exploit the security conditions in the country. Both the U.S. State Department and the Yemeni government had declared victory over Ansar al Sharia, AQAP's insurgent arm, in 2012 at the hands of the Yemeni military. The course of events over the past year has proven that that victory was not final. AQAP appears to have put off the idea of controlling territory directly and may be investing less in waging an all-out insurgency. But it has instead reverted to the line of operations that it ran before 2011: high-scale attacks targeting military sites coupled with an assassinations campaign against government, military, and intelligence officials.[48] AQAP has also not abandoned its efforts to target the United States and presents the highest direct threat to the U.S. homeland from the al Qaeda network.[49]

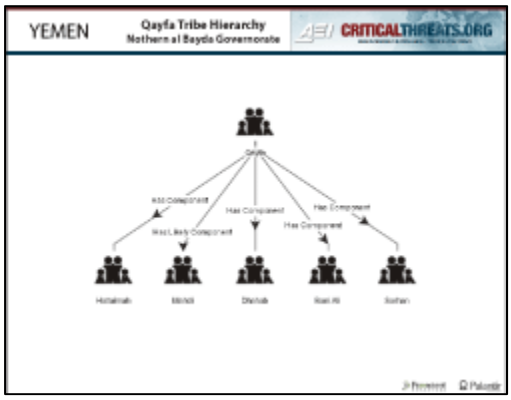
It is difficult to distinguish AQAP's assassination campaign from other parties' attempts, especially given the volatile political and security situation in Sana'a. Elements from the Southern Movement, for example, have also been accused of assassinating Yemeni officials. Media and government reports are often quick to attribute assassinations to either AQAP or the Southern Movement without offering evidence for the judgment. There have been over 125 attempts[50] on officials' lives in Yemen in 2013. The majority of these target intelligence and security personnel, though government and political officials also constitute a high number of the targets. AQAP officials have issued statements threatening the lives of security and government personnel, and the group is likely behind a significant portion of the deaths.

AQAP also resumed conducting coordinated attacks on Yemeni security facilities this fall, in addition to regular skirmishes at checkpoints. Between September and December 2013, AQAP hit targets in Hadramawt, Shabwah, Abyan, Aden, Lahij, and al Bayda governorates, as well as one in Sana'a. These attacks frequently include the use of a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) to gain entry into a secure area, followed by gunmen, sometimes armed with heavy weapons, on foot. Increasingly, AQAP has displayed the ability to hit multiple sites at once in the same general vicinity. Further, its depictions of the attack indicate an increase in its capabilities from prior years. Operational units appear to be assigned specific tactical tasks—in one attack, AQAP noted it had a B-10 recoilless rifle unit, a mortar unit, an assault unit, and medics and reinforcements on call nearby.[51] Limited reporting makes it difficult to verify AQAP's claims, but it has become more effective at conducting complex attacks over the past few years.

The group has taken efforts to avoid Yemeni civilian deaths and has publicized its leniency toward Yemeni soldiers who defect. AQAP officials regularly justify targeting soldiers and government officials and have called for current soldiers and officials to give up their posts. A

December 5, 2013 attack on the Yemeni Defense Ministry in Sana'a, a legitimate target according to AQAP, proved to be a gross miscalculation. An SVBIED attack at one of the gates to the ministry compound gained entry for a second vehicle filled with militants dressed in military uniforms. They entered the compound, sparking an hours –long gun battle. The attack killed 56 people and injured over 200 others, including doctors and nurses at the al Urdhi hospital within the compound.[52] Yemeni state television aired CCTV footage of a militant in the hospital methodically gunning down individuals.[53] Any ambivalence Yemenis held toward AQAP turned following this attack. Ten days after the video aired, AQAP's military commander Qasim al Raymi made a rare, direct statement apologizing for the civilian deaths. He claimed that a fighter went rogue and promised AQAP would pay blood money and any hospital expenses incurred for civilians.[54]

An airstrike in Qayfa in al Bayda governorate mitigated the potential fallout for AQAP following the Defense Ministry attack. The strike reportedly targeted and injured a mid-level figure in AQAP connected to the May 2012 and August 2013 plots.[55] Civilians were killed, however. It is not clear how many AQAP militants were among the casualties in the wedding convoy that was hit, but there were at least three children killed in the airstrike. Though the Yemeni government allegedly paid out $140,000 to families as compensation, AQAP has been able to play up the incident in its favor.[56] AQAP and its insurgent arm, Ansar al Sharia, have had a growing presence in al Bayda governorate, especially in Qayfa.[57] The area is dominated by the Qayfa tribe, of which a subtribe is the Dhahab tribe.[58] Tariq al Dhahab, among others in the subtribe, was a high-profile Ansar al Sharia leader. AQAP has used the strike to its advantage—featuring that and the incidents in al Dhaleh as propaganda against the Yemeni government.[59]



Graphic of the Qayfa tribe hierarchy.

Looking Ahead

It has been three years since the outbreak of countrywide protests in Yemen and nearly two years into a political transition process. President Hadi shepherded Yemen's various political factions through the national dialogue process, but whether that process will succeed in resolving the core issues has yet to be seen. The recommendations from the NDC must be turned into actions. Yet there are indications that the political elite, who stand to lose the most in Yemen's decentralization process, are playing shadow politics. Saleh, General Ali Mohsen, and the al Ahmar family continue to hold considerable political sway in Sana'a and have all pursued fostering the loyalties of other factions.[60] These moves will undoubtedly come to light as the constitution-drafting process and eventually, the elections, get underway. Such ongoing politicking may also be evidence that more periods of political instability are coming.

The hope is that the political transition process addresses many of the drivers of conflict in Yemen, such as political and economic grievances. But reforming Saleh's state is an arduous task and the time required to negotiate reforms may not match Yemenis' expectations. Popular demands, such as those cited by the HTC, include reforms in the oil sector and a review of all oil contracts. Local stakeholders are seeking access to the wealth from their lands, which they perceive to be lining the pockets of Yemen's political elite. The HTC, among other regional groups, has used violence to back up its claims, attacking guarded oil installations to disrupt operations. President Hadi is faced with the decision to re-enforce security around the sites and exert the state's sovereignty over its lands, or to acquiesce to local demands. The first option may escalate the conflict while the second shows the weakness of the central state. The Yemeni army has moved against tribal checkpoints in Hadramawt, which may provoke a response.[61]

The Yemeni state faces fragmentation should significant factions withdraw from the political transition process, such as the al Houthis did at the end of the NDC. They may still choose to participate again, but the al Houthi problem remains. The movement created facts on the ground over the past three years and will not readily relinquish its local authority to the central state without significant guarantees of protection. The al Houthis administer Sa'ada governorate, negotiated ceasefire outcomes have favored the al Houthi position, and they have extended their influence south into Arhab district in Sana'a governorate, where they recently fought against tribesmen loyal to the al Ahmar family.[62] The inclusion of the al Houthis' political party in the transition process legitimized the movement in the Yemeni political sphere, but if the group is unable to negotiate favorable terms, it will probably continue to function as an autonomous region, rather than as part of federalized Yemen. As President Hadi and the delegates move forward with the federalization and decentralization process in Yemen, they need to be aware of the potential fallout with the al Houthis, the South, and other political movements. The transition process will only be successful if it is able to carry all factions with it.

Conclusion

Yemen is unlikely to succeed on its own, and all of the progress so painstakingly achieved could be erased rapidly. The central state faces multiple challenges on multiple fronts. It will have to continue to devote energy to furthering the political transition process. There is a possibility that the political elite will block the process when it becomes time to turn recommendations into concrete actions. They are not likely to cede power without a fight. The central state will also need to begin to address the economic conditions that drove many Yemenis to the streets in 2011. The conditions are worse today than they were three years ago, and political uncertainty and a poor security environment compound the issue. Finally, the state will need to be prepared to address multiple security threats, including the continued threat from AQAP, even as it reforms its security forces. Such is the task ahead.

Yet Yemen risks being forgotten in the milieu of crises in the Middle East, all of which are dwarfed by the one in Syria. Saudi Arabia has fundamentally shifted its attention from its southern neighbor to the Levant. It invested in a wall to restrict movement across the long Yemen-Saudi Arabia border, and is in the process of restricting the number of foreign workers in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia may not bail Yemen out as it has in the past, though some disengagement may benefit Yemen (Saudi Arabia did not always act with Yemen's best interests in mind). The same is true for the other GCC states, whose attention has turned to Syria as well.

But now is the not the time to abandon Yemen, even when other issues demand attention. The risk is that Yemen fails to transition smoothly, and recent gains are lost. There is a very real danger that should Yemen falter, AQAP will once again seek to expand. The much-touted Yemeni military "victory" against AQAP's Ansar al Sharia in 2012 was not decisive.[63] Though AQAP may have learned its lesson against attempting to govern,[64] it benefit from increased operating space. Such a development would be a boon to the most dangerous al Qaeda affiliate. International focus and support for Yemen will limit this danger. The United States, working in conjunction with regional partners, must remain actively engaged in Yemen.

The author would like to thank Remy Bourget and Dylan Clement for their research contributions.

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