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Yemen: Between Iran, al-Qaeda, and the West

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Although for the most part the Arab Spring has not had a major impact on countries that over the past twenty years have experienced extended civil war or deep internal polarization, Yemen is a notable exception. The civil unrest that has gripped the nation since January 2011, inspired by the upheavals elsewhere in the Arab world, has intensified existing trends and accelerated processes liable to lead to state failure. The hope had been that Saleh's resignation as president would contain the Yemeni revolution and, more importantly, the serious situation of the country, but so far the hoped-for stability has not materialized. On the contrary, the Yemeni revolution has further weakened the central government and resulted in increased Iranian and al-Qaeda influence.

The Yemeni revolution has encouraged Iran to boost its political and military support for opposition elements in Yemen, first and foremost the Shiite Houthi rebels. Iran's support, however, does not end with the Shiites: the weakness of the current Yemeni government has prompted Iran to support other elements in the Yemeni arena, including those with different agendas, such as the southern separatist Hirak movement and, at least according to Saudi sources, elements associated with al-Qaeda. The goal is to make it even more difficult for the central government to impose its authority on various parts of the nation.

Among the Yemeni groups receiving Iranian support, the scope of military aid for the Shiites is the most significant, and includes activity by the Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and perhaps assistance from Hizbollah as well. Similar to its involvement in Iraq, Lebanon, and to a lesser extent the Gaza Strip, Iran is making use of its proxies here too. Arms shipments from Iran (automatic weapons, batteries, anti-tank weapons, and cash, usually shipped by sea) are not, in and of themselves, significant relative to the quantities of weapons already found in Yemen, but they allow Iran to buy influence. Moreover, the assistance is steady and ongoing, indicative of the importance Tehran attributes to the Shiite revolt: a way to increase influence in a divided nation and damage the stability of Saudi Arabia, its main adversary in the region.

The rebels have taken advantage of the chaos existing in Yemen since 2011 to expand the areas under their control, so that they now control most of Saada Governorate as well as

extensive areas along the Saudi border. From an ideological-religious movement struggling against the Yemeni government, ostensibly because of longstanding government discrimination, they have become a classical guerilla movement exploiting the mountainous terrain in northern Yemen to its own advantage. Iran benefits from its involvement in the conflict by bringing in a third party to display its growing regional power and extent of military influence. For its part, Saudi Arabia worries that the growing destabilization of Yemen will afford Iran, its primary adversary, the opportunity to continue to intervene in Yemen's affairs.

Iran seeks to demonstrate that it is impossible to resolve Yemen's political issues without Iranian intervention. Iran will benefit from establishing a land-based stronghold in northern Yemen through which it can leverage its influence to pressure Riyadh, while using its ability to be a military nuisance to Saudi Arabia whenever necessary. Iran would gain access to the Red Sea and thus ensure the ongoing supply of arms by sea to its proxies in the region. It would also enable a continuous Iranian presence near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and from there to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has also exploited the internal chaos generated by the Yemeni revolution and steadily expanded the areas under its control. In the course of a year, it has taken control of many towns and cities and most of the Abyan province. In practice, Ansar al-Sharia forces, identified with AQAP, serve as the local administration in a number of regions where the central government is absent. Tribes with treaties with the Ansar al-Sharia keep trying to expand their control to the Lawdar District, which controls access to areas such as Hadhramaut, al-Bida and even Aden, Yemen's most important port city. The nature of the organization's activity has shifted accordingly, and it has increasingly assumed the form of an insurgency.

Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi is fighting against al-Qaeda because he is convinced that unlike the past, the organization is now threatening the stability and the territorial integrity of Yemen. He also views this struggle as a way to earn legitimacy for his positions and gain financial support from the West and the Gulf states. Indeed, since assuming the presidency, he has accelerated the struggle against Islamic extremists and reaped some significant rewards. On May 12, 2012 an extensive land and air offensive was launched with American help, and tribes loyal to the military fought al-Qaeda in southern Yemen. During this fighting, most of the strongholds in Abyan and Shaboa, including Zinjibar and Jaar, held by al-Qaeda for more than a year, fell; the organization is now on the defensive. Since taking office, Hadi has expanded cooperation, particularly intelligence gathering, with the Americans, and accordingly the number of targeted killings (usually by drones) of "terrorist suspects" has jumped. Since the beginning of the year, attacks for the first time have outnumbered the attacks in Pakistan. Given the increase in the rate of targeted killings, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between terrorists and those fighting against the government for their rights.

American financial aid to Yemen is also growing as an incentive to the Yemeni government to fight al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, perhaps the United States aid to the Yemeni army should be made conditional on its not being transferred to units working against the President's regime or units that have clearly harmed innocent civilians. In the past, the equipment and training of Yemeni army units were shown to be ineffective and a means of promoting personal agendas. Western nations and the Gulf states must also make their foreign aid to Yemen conditional on accepted standards of basic human rights, to make sure that Yemen is going forwards rather than back. Indeed, Washington is measuring the success of its policy in Yemen by the number of al-Qaeda operatives it can reach, rather than on the comprehensive situation of the nation. Because of the virtually non-existent authority of the Yemeni government in the geographical periphery of the country, and consequently also the rise of new forces due to the unrest, there are now many loci of power that the United States must confront. In other words, it will take more than targeted killings of terrorists to confront this strategic threat.

Hadi is a partner in the war against al-Qaeda and is seeking to limit Iran's involvement in his country. He will stay committed to these goals to ensure that foreign aid continues. At the same time, he must carefully balance the ongoing influence of Saleh's family, tribe, and allies so that they do not feel their interests are threatened. What is exacerbating the situation even more is the fact that many are unhappy with the agreement that allowed Saleh to step down, which ensures the former president immunity to prosecution and leaves the formulation of the new constitution in the hands of the old elites. The process of reform in Yemen has yet to lead to the full ouster of the reigning political party or even the ouster of the reigning family. Saleh continues to play an important role in Yemeni politics because his family and loyalists still hold key positions in the country's leadership and the military.

The next few months will be crucial to Yemen's future, as they will determine whether Islamic elements, headed by al-Islah, will complete the symbolic conquest of the "Square of Change" in Sana'a, and how the national dialogue, supposed to create the new constitution, will be conducted. Either way, each of the groups comprising the Yemeni mosaic has a different vision for shaping the nation. The result: local groups are teaming up with external forces in order to improve their domestic standing. That alone makes Yemen into another arena of struggle – a most important one given its geostrategic location – between Iran and al-Qaeda on the one hand and the West on another.

