Yemen: A Mirror to the Future of the Arab Spring

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Ethnic, political, and religious rifts make Yemen one of the most complex arenas in the Middle East, even more so following the eruption of the Arab Spring, which in November 2011 ended the 33-year regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The disintegration of the delicate political balance Saleh created has brought Yemen to the brink of an abyss with competing elites, ethnic revolts, separatists, external intervention and fundamentalist terrorism threatening to divide the country while hindering the new regime's attempts to build a new political order and establish stability. Currently, the future of Yemen is still unclear, but the developments and processes it is undergoing may provide us with insights about possible scenarios in other Middle Eastern countries in the post-Arab Spring era.

Key words: Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Ansar al-Shariah, Houthis, Ali Abdullah Saleh, Arab Spring, Iran, National Dialogue Conference

Yemen, the poorest of the Arab nations, is in many ways a microcosm in which the tensions, challenges and hopes typical of the entire Arab world are amassed. Competing elites, international intervention, ethnic violence, tribalism, Shiite-Sunni tensions, fundamentalism and terrorism are all part of Yemen's intensive and chaotic reality, as it rapidly changes and develops. Yemen's complex situation allows an *in vivo* examination of processes such as the transition of power, reconstruction of security forces, federalization, national reconciliation, and the fight against al-Qaeda affiliates, all of which we can expect to be replicated in Syria, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere.

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Saleh's Arrangement and the Arab Spring

Poverty, violence, lack of personal security and government corruption were some of Yemen's hallmarks prior to the onset of the Arab Spring. The inability to create effective sovereignty and internal stability is, to a large extent, inherent in Yemen's reality, as it suffers from ethnic, religious and cultural heterogeneity, enmities among regions and provinces, and tribal structures carrying traditional hierarchies over into the 21st century. Over the years, these problems were exacerbated by the actions of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who during his 33-year rule cultivated and preserved a divided and conflicted political system in order to fashion himself as the only element capable of holding the country together.[1]

Saleh's regime relied on balancing the country's various power groups and elites. In order to ensure loyalty and enlist support, Saleh created a network of government patronage and economic benefits, preserving the delicate balance in the security forces and the distribution of power among the tribes; tribal leaders who promoted the regime's interests received significant benefits. Saleh even managed to bribe the opposition and cause it to change sides. He sought to placate the public, most of which was marginalized and kept outside political discourse and economic centers, along with his allies in the international community by means of extensive use of the democracy rhetoric, though this was no more than a cover for a regime sullied by a combination of terror and corruption.[2]

While Saleh's arrangement managed to preserve Yemen's political unity and create the appearance of stability for many years, the exclusion of large segments of the population from the political and economic systems eventually led to the regime's collapse. In January 2011, tens of thousands of young Yemenis took to city streets, calling to overthrow Saleh and establish a true democracy. The protesters, inspired by demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt and motivated by a profound sense of discrimination and hopelessness, called for justice, equality and opening the political and economic power centers, which until then were only accessible to the traditional elites. The protests grew more vigorous, and any attempt by Saleh to placate the masses with promises of reforms failed.

The protests in Yemen quickly generated chaos and violence throughout the country, as entire military units have even deserted and joined the protesters. In June 2011, an RPG was fired at the presidential compound. The missile killed four of the president's men, and Saleh himself was seriously wounded, and was forced to leave Yemen for medical treatment in Saudi

Arabia. In November 2011, under Saudi and US pressure, Saleh signed an agreement that regulated the ceding of authority to Vice President Abed Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, forcing the government to hold new elections within two years. The agreement also entailed a commitment on the part of the international community to provide Yemen with political and economic aid during the transition period. The signing of the agreement created hopes for positive change; however, most of them have yet to be realized.

Yemen outranks Iraq and Afghanistan on the list of failing nations.[3] The violence and chaos in the nation have spread while elements interested in weakening the country, or even in its dissolution, whether external or internal, are hard at work–sometimes in concert–to attain their goals. Nonetheless, 2014 has seen some developments that may signal the beginning of political stabilization, including the end of the National Dialogue process and the decision to turn Yemen into a federative nation.

In the Aftermath of the Arab Spring: Searching for Stability

The transition government and the international community's efforts to preserve Yemen's unity and strengthen the legitimacy of its institutions and sovereignty were, to a great extent, channeled into the National Dialogue Conference. The conference, which met for the first time in March 2013 supported and encouraged by the Gulf states, the United States, the United Nations and the World Bank, consisted of 565 representatives from every political party and faction in Yemen. Emphasis was given to the inclusion of young people, who were at the heart of the popular protests, as well as the inclusion of women and minorities. Conference participants received a wide mandate to deliberate the core issues such as the nature of the regime, civil rights, the structure of the security forces, and the formulation of a constitution, in order to fashion a new Yemen and neutralize the loci of conflict and instability through dialogue and consensus.[4]

The beginning of the talks was accompanied by optimism, though it was not long before many of the protest leaders came to realize that the old elites were seizing control of the talks, many of which were held with notable lack of transparency. Over a ten-month period, the conference lost most of public support and trust, and many started questioning the legitimacy of its actions and decisions.[5] The conference's legitimacy was dealt a harsh blow when, four days before its end, the head of the Houthi delegation was assassinated.[6] This was the second assassination of a member of the

Houthi delegation, and it led to the group's withdrawal from the conference and doubts as to the legitimacy of resolutions reached in the conference.[7]

While the talks were plagued by many difficulties, it seems that the conference's resolutions, made public on January 25, 2014, will affect Yemen's stability and unity. The most critical decision refers to turning Yemen into a federal republic composed of several provinces with local parliaments and extensive autonomous authority. The federal regime will be headed by a president, and elections for national institutions will be held on the basis of relative representation for each of the provinces. The number of provinces and their borders were determined by a sub-committee headed by the president. It decided that, pending ratification by referendum, Yemen will be divided into six provinces. The capital city of Sana'a will be autonomous and not belong to any of the six provinces, while the southern port city of Aden will be given special status as an economic city.[8] Other than the decision on establishing a federation, the National Dialogue Conference also appointed a committee to formulate a constitution. This committee shall work for three months after which it will present a new constitution for a national referendum. Should the constitution be approved, general elections to all national and provincial institutions will be held within one year. Furthermore, President Hadi's term in office was extended by one year to allow him to promote and oversee the implementation of the National Dialogue Conference's recommendations.[9] These reforms, seeking to generate stability, are receiving widespread international support as well as the support of large segments of the Yemeni political system and public. But the road to this elusive stability is still long, and significant challenges, both domestic and external, threaten to bring about further deterioration.

Domestic Challenges: Multidimensional Splits

The Competing Elites

One of the key elements threatening the success of the reforms and Yemen's political stability is the struggle among the country's elites, a struggle that became more extreme and even violent after the fall of Saleh's regime. The Yemeni political system consists of a wide gamut of players and power groups competing amongst themselves for control of the political, security and economic power centers, in what they largely view as a zero-sum game. The dominant figure in these struggles is the ousted president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who received a full pardon in the transition of power

and managed to retain much of his influence and control even after he left the presidential palace. Saleh and his family have many loyalists in key government and army positions including from the time Saleh had served as head of Yemen's ruling party (of which President Hadi is also a member). In addition, Saleh controls a multi-branched network of contacts in the bureaucratic frameworks, religious institutions and tribal leaderships.

Saleh and his loyalists are doing everything in their power to undermine the reforms and show that a stable Yemen is impossible without them. Dozens of army units loyal to Saleh have rebelled against their new commanders,[10] and when Hadi sought to dismiss the air force commander, Saleh's half-brother shut down Sana'a's international airport.[11] Saleh is also seen by many as being behind a wave of terrorism and assassinations that, since 2011, have cost the lives of many government and army personnel (some even say that he secretly supports the Houthis' rebellion in the north).[12] Saleh's subversive activities led the UN to impose personal sanctions (Resolution 2140) against persons attempting to damage the Yemeni reform program. While the resolution did not specify names, it was largely aimed at Saleh and his people.[13] At present, the threat of sanctions does not seem to moderate Saleh's subversive activities. In June 2014, members of the presidential guard surrounded a mosque belonging to Saleh in southern Sana'a, claiming that it was being used to hide weapons and that a tunnel had been dug leading to the interior of the presidential palace, to facilitate a violent seizure of the center of Yemen's governance.[14]

Saleh's main opponents in the struggle for power are his former allies who broke with him and are now seeking to consolidate their power and influence in the new Yemen. One important group is the al-Ahmar family, heading the Hashid federation, a large, powerful tribal coalition. The family has thousands of fighters at its disposal as well as a great deal of wealth, and it is working assiduously to solidify its power. Another influential figure is General Ali Muhsen, the former commander of the 1st Army and a key official in Saleh's regime. Although dismissed from his post by President Hadi, he still commands the loyalty of many powerful army personnel and wields considerable influence. Another player is al-Islah, Yemen's second largest political party and what passed for the official opposition to Saleh's regime (in fact, its leaders were coopted by Saleh and cooperated with him behind the scenes). The party, made up of a coalition of the Muslim Brotherhood, tribal elements (including the al-Ahmar family) and salafi

movements, is currently the president's main coalition partner, working hard to expand its influence in the power centers of both the army and the government.

Amidst all of these is the residing president, who was initially viewed as weak, though over time he has managed to establish his power and influence in the political system and the army. The additional year in office granted by the National Dialogue Conference positions him as the key person in forming the political structure of the Yemeni federation-in-the-making.[15] These players, all of whom cooperated with and were a part of the power structure of the old regime, are currently aggressively attempting to preserve and strengthen their power and influence in Yemen. It is unclear to what extent they care about the interests of the country and its people.

The center of gravity of the competing elites lies in the security forces. Even in Saleh's time, Yemen's army and security forces were never a homogeneous, professional institution, but rather a fragmented gathering of competing units serving as tools for political struggles between the various power groups. In the last years of Saleh's regime, the main split in the security forces has been between those supporting Ahmed Ali Saleh, the commander of the Republic Guard and the former president's son who was being cultivated as his heir, and the supporters of Ali Muhsen. This rivalry became even more contentious during the protests, almost culminating in a dangerous clash between the Republican Guard and 1st Army forces. Each side recruited thousands of soldiers and tried to entrench its relative power.[16]

Though the split within the security forces did not end in widespread military clashes, the politicization of the army has been a constant threat against any attempt at reform and political change. Therefore, when he came to power, Hadi began to neutralize the power loci in the security forces and establish a professional, unified army subject to the civil government. Hadi succeeded in exploiting the rivalries among the various army factions: making use of existing rounds of promotions, he transferred officers with rival political loyalties away from positions of command and influence. The height of the move was the dissolution of the Republican Guard and the 1st Army and assimilating those personnel in the ranks of other army units while dismissing Ahmed Ali Saleh and Ali Muhsen from their posts. The president also established new units and recruited thousands of soldiers to undermine the old elites.[17]

Hadi has focused most of his effort on minimizing his predecessor's influence. While he has gained some success doing so, it has also cost him dearly in terms of the Yemeni army's operational capabilities. The Republican Guard and the 1st Army were Yemen's military elite. They controlled the best equipment and included both the special forces and the anti-terrorism units, some of which received U.S. training. Their dissolution and replacement by new recruits means that Yemen is currently finding it hard to confront the terrorists and guerrilla organizations threatening the various parts of the country, including Sana'a.[18]

At present, it seems that the struggle among Yemen's elites and power groups is far from over. While Hadi has succeeded in weakening Saleh's loyalists, his rivals accuse him of following in his predecessor's footsteps, trying to wrest control of the army by inserting his loyalists into key command positions and recruiting soldiers primarily from among the ranks of al-Islah, his political ally.[19] Furthermore, there are those within his own party who claim that, in his attempt to weaken Saleh, he is handing Yemen over to al-Islah.[20]

Economic Weakness

In addition to the lack of political stability, Yemen is also suffering from deep-seated economic hardships. Saleh's tenure in office and the benefits he gave his supporters all but drained Yemen of its resources. Oil, the country's only natural resource and the source of most of its income, dwindles fast. In the absence of an alternate program for economic development, Saleh was, in the last years of his regime, forced to rely on financial aid from Saudi Arabia and the United States. Yemen is the most populated nation in the Arabian Peninsula and also the poorest country in the Arab world, with about half of its population living on less than two USD a day. Since the beginning of the protests in early 2011, the economic situation in Yemen has only deteriorated. Oil and gas exports received a lethal blow (drilling installations have become a favorite target for terrorist organizations),[21] and the economy has sustained other serious losses. Unemployment in Yemen hit new heights: according to several indices, it is past the 50-percent mark. Unemployment can be expected to worsen as hundreds of thousands of Yemenis working abroad may face deportation as a result of reforms in the Saudi Arabian labor market.[22] In addition, water has become a rare commodity; hunger is on the rise, as is the fear of contagious diseases.[23]

The political upheavals Yemen has experienced have also damaged the delicate tribal fabric that is so important to economic stability, and in several cases touched off armed confrontations between tribes over control of the country's dwindling resources. Economic considerations are liable to become a serious obstacle to the federalization program. In the north as well as the south, many claim that the proposed borders impinge on their economic rights and were intentionally designed to weaken them in order to maintain the dominance of Sana'a.

Insurgence from the North and the South

Yemen's stability and integrity are also–perhaps primarily–threatened by the national and self-determination ambitions of separatists in the north and south of the country. In the north, Yemen is facing a widespread Shiite revolt led by the Houthis (named after the al-Houthi family) concentrated in Sa'da province. The spark that ignited the armed struggle in 2004 was the killing of Hussein al-Houthi (the regime sought his arrest, in part for his links to Shiite communities in Lebanon and Iran).[24]

By 2009, the conflict had become full blown, to the point that Yemen embarked on a scorched earth operation against rebel cells in the north. The fighting spilled over into Saudi Arabia as the rebels crossed the border, capturing several villages and killing Saudi soldiers. The Houthi attack on its territory pulled the Saudi army into the fighting. In early November 2009, while the Yemeni army was fighting rebels in the south, the Saudis attacked from the north in a classical Pincer Move. For three months, the Saudis, equipped with the very best weapons the West could offer, worked to quell the uprising deep in Yemeni territory. In 2010, as the result of international pressure, the warring sides signed a ceasefire agreement.

The Houthi rebellion was reignited in 2011 when the rebels–some 7,000 according to various estimates–exploited the chaos, generated by the protests and the transfer of many army units from Sa'da province to Sana'a, to seize control of large tracts of land along the Saudi border. The Houthis reinvented themselves and turned their ideological, religious movement into a classical guerrilla movement seeking to establish autonomous Shiite rule in the northern provinces. The intensity of their operations rapidly generated a counter-response by Sunni tribes led by the al-Ahmar family and by salafist groups.[25] The attack on the city of Damaj, a Salafi center in the Sa'da province, by Houthi rebels in November 2013 led to the expansion

of the fighting and escalated the situation in northwest Yemen to ethnic warfare. During the fighting, the Zaidi Shiites had great success on the battlefield, conquering Salafist and tribal strongholds (including the city of origin of the al-Ahmar family), extended their area of influence, and managed to get to within 40 kilometers of the capital city.[26]

In February 2014, the sides agreed to a ceasefire; two of the warring parties agreed to withdraw to their original territories and approved the deployment of the army to maintain order in the region.[27] Nonetheless, it seems that the instability and tension in the north of Yemen have not been resolved. Elements among the Houthis have expressed fierce opposition to the division into provinces as outlined by the regime. The Houthis say that their region, Sa'da, has been included in a province that has no significant natural resources and no access to the sea. The Houthis view this as an intentional attempt on the part of the central government to damage their ability to develop economically and undermine their power.[28] It seems that the planned federative division already contains the seeds of the next round of violence. The first indicators have appeared in February when a Houthi force attacked an army position; 24 people were killed in the incident.[29]

Other than the ethnic conflict in the north, Yemen's stability and unity are also threatened from the south. Since the early 1990s, the unification between the south and north has been a source of friction and instability. The dominance of the north in the united Yemen created a sense of disenfranchisement among the southerners. In 1994, these feelings led to a civil war: the armies of the south and the north, which have never been integrated into a single army, clashed on the battlefield. After several months of fighting, the north held the upper hand, and many leaders of the south fled the country. The defeat in the civil war did not, however, put an end to the aspirations for independence of the south, and over the years the tensions between the two parts of the country only intensified. Southern groups regularly rebelled against what they viewed as political and economic discrimination and exclusion by the regime, and Saleh retaliated by using the security forces against the southern separatists. In 2006, the tensions between the sides escalated further when the Southern Liberation Movement was established. The movement was a loose confederation of different political and social movements seeking to expand the authority of the local government, perhaps even complete separation from the north. The establishment of the movement was a catalyst for an outburst

of demonstrations and protests in the south that were forcibly suppressed by the security forces; ultimately, the movement failed, largely due to internal power struggles.[30]

The fall of Saleh's regime and the struggles within the security forces and elites in Sana'a have reignited the south's attempts to separate. The latter has taken advantage of the revolutionary wave, and increasing numbers of southerners–even those who didn't necessarily seek to undermine the unity of Yemen but rather sought to rectify the prevalent situation–have expressed their support for the separatist movement that, unlike the Houthis' struggle, has not been violent. Since 2011, the movement has been conducting what resembles an intifada using peaceful means to arouse international support for southern independence. In May 2013, on the day Sana'a marked the 23rd anniversary of the unification of Yemen, the movement's leaders organized a huge demonstration in Aden, the historical capital of southern Yemen. According to the organizers, one million people from all the southern provinces attended the demonstration and called for separation from the north. The popularity of the separatist notion in the public had begun to trickle into the south's political elite, and many of its leaders have begun supporting the separatist idea.[31]

The southern separatist ambitions were a key factor in the decision of the National Dialogue Conference to turn Yemen into a federation. While representatives from the south agreed to the concept, their demand was that Yemen be divided into two parts–the south and the north. This demand was obviously rejected by the north as it was concerned that such a division would be the first step to a split into two nations. The conference determined that Yemen would be divided into six provinces, and that the historical south would constitute two of them. Although southern representatives went along with this proposal, it seems that many in the south are opposed, worried that the four northern provinces will act in concert against southern interests. In addition, some have claimed that the division of the south into two was meant to weaken it; the division artificially separates the population and economic centers in the southwest from the oil resources and mines in the southeast. Southern leaders, including the former president of South Yemen, Salim al-Beidh, have declared that the south will not be able to accept the plan in its current format, and that one cannot rule out the possibility of a violent reaction on the part of more extremist separatists.[32] While neither the Houthis nor the southern elites

showed opposition in principle to the idea of a federation, their opposition to the proposed division into provinces approved by the National Dialogue Conference could hinder the implementation of the federation plan and quickly lead Yemen back to chaos and bloodshed.

External Challenges: A Playground for Regional and Global Struggles

Other than the destabilizing influence of internal fragmentation, the vacuum left by the fall of the Saleh regime allowed external elements that had been active in Yemen in the past to expand their influence on events in the country and steer Yemen's future direction. Today Yemen is a key arena in regional struggles, the expansion of global jihad, and the US war on terrorism.

Iran's involvement in the Yemeni arena is not a new development; evidence of Tehran's involvement goes back to Saleh's regime. While in the past this involvement was perceived by the US administration as a marginal phenomenon that entailed weapon shipments to Shiite groups in Yemen, today it seems that Iran's involvement there is of strategic significance and is expanding as the central government weakens. In April 2012, former US Ambassador Gerald M. Feierstein declared that "we do see Iran trying to increase its presence here, in ways that we believe are unhelpful to Yemen's stability and security."[33] Similar sentiments were expressed by Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman after a meeting with President Hadi.[34] The vehement US rhetoric went hand in hand with an increase in cooperation between Yemeni and US security forces on preventing and foiling Iranian weapon shipments to Yemen.[35]

The pressure on Iranian activity in Yemen increased through 2012. In July of that year, Yemen's Interior Ministry announced that an Iranian spy ring, apparently based in Sana'a, had been discovered and that an officer in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards was arrested on suspicion of having been its leader. In addition, a Yemeni court sentenced crew members of a vessel found with an arms shipment by the Yemeni Coast Guard and the US Navy in a joint operation and in January 2013 to prison terms ranging from 3 to 10 years, on charges of collaboration with Iran and weapons smuggling.[36] President Hadi made a public demand that Iran stop interfering in his country's domestic affairs, saying that Iran would "pay the price"

should it continue to do so. "We will expose them to the world," said the president, adding, "They will fail in Yemen."[37]

For Iran, involvement in Yemen is an important front in the "cold war" it is conducting with Saudi Arabia over hegemony, influence, and prestige. Iran makes extensive use of Shiite communities to surround Saudi Arabia with instability (Yemen thus joining Iraq and Bahrain). Its influence among the various factions operating in Yemen provides Iran with a presence on the ground on the southwestern border of the Saudi kingdom it can use as political pressure against Riyadh, and as means to harass Saudi Arabia at its pleasure. A steady foothold on Yemen's western coast would give Iran access to the Red Sea, a fact that could help it continue its regular arms supply to its local allies and maintain a contiguous presence near the Bab el-Mandeb Straits offering access to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean. In addition, its involvement in Yemen allows Iran to demonstrate its regional might and the reach of its military influence.

Iran's locus of involvement in Yemen is the military support for the Houthi rebels. This support, similar to Iran's involvement in Iraq and the Levant, is effected through the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force and, according to various reports, with the help of Hizbollah.[38] The Quds Force concentrates on creating proxies to promote Iran's interests in their regions. Iranian arms shipments intended for the Houthis (assault rifles, explosives, anti-tank weapons, and large amounts of cash, usually transferred by sea) are not significant in and of themselves compared to the weapons already flooding Yemen, especially the north, but they do allow Tehran to buy influence in Yemen and challenge Saudi Arabia's hegemony in the peninsula.

Not only does Iran assist the Houthis, but it also operates to strengthen its influence on other Yemeni factions, including the southern separatist movement and, according to the Saudis, on groups affiliated with al-Qaeda.[39] The Yemeni regime claims that Iran even tried to undermine the National Dialogue Conference. In May 2013, the Iranian ambassador to Sana'a met with head of the political branch of the Houthi movement; sources in Yemen say that this was not the first meeting between the two and that during the meeting the Iranian ambassador tried to persuade the Houthis to withdraw from the conference.[40] In addition, Hizbollah and Iran support and finance the activities of the former president of South Yemen, Salim al-Beidh, operating from Beirut and constantly promoting

the south's secession from the union.[41] By withdrawing from the Yemeni arena, Iran may quell some of the Saudi concerns and create the basis for a certain détente between the sides. This, however, would not seem to be the path Iran is choosing; Iranian involvement in Yemen continues to this day. At the end of March 2013, President Hadi accused the Islamic Republic of deep-rooted involvement in the various conflicts besetting Yemen and of supporting both the Houthi insurgents and the southern separatists.[42]

Al-Qaeda and the Threat of Radical Islam

Since 2009, and with added momentum since the beginning of 2011, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its affiliate, the Ansar al-Shariah militias have become key players in the Yemeni arena, exerting strategic influence. The Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda consists mostly of Yemenis and Saudi Arabians who found refuge in Yemen, but is augmented by men who have participated in armed conflicts in Iraq and Syria, fighters from Afghanistan, and former Guantanamo detainees. According to Washington, the organization is the most dangerous of al-Qaeda's affiliates.[43] In 2012, John Brennan, former counterterrorism advisor to President Obama and current Director of the CIA, said that AQAP is al-Qaeda's most active cell and that this represented a very serious problem for Yemen.[44] The organization's extensive international activities include an attempt on the life of Muhammad Bin Naif, the Saudi Minister of the Interior, the attempt to detonate a US airliner in the skies of Detroit on Christmas 2009, the attack on the Japanese oil tanker in the Straits of Hormuz,[45] and another attempt to blow up a US plane, thwarted by Saudi intelligence, in April 2012.[46] An analysis of AQAP's behavioral pattern since the 2011 revolution shows that the organization possesses both strategic and tactical flexibility and is capable of effectively adapting itself to opportunities and pressures on the ground and rapidly adjusting to changes in the volatile Yemeni environment. Over the past two years, the organization's ability to move efficiently and quickly along the axis from classical terrorist group to guerrilla and insurgency group seeking to hold and control territories and populations has been especially prominent.

When the political crisis in early 2011 led to the Yemeni army's focus on events in Sana'a and many military units streamed to the country's capital, the organization quickly exploited the vacuum created in the country's periphery and managed–through the use of violent raids, suicide attacks

and assassinations–to seize control of several areas in the southern part of the country, including Shabwah, Abin and Zinjibar. The organization's power and audaciousness reached a peak in April 2012 when, in an attack described as the most sweeping in the organization's history in Yemen, it captured a military base, its personnel and arms, including artillery, cannons, and tanks. Hundreds of Yemeni soldiers were killed in the attack that was only part of the organization's attempt to seize control of the Lawdar District controlling access to other key locations such as Hadramaut, Bida and Aden.[47]

As the organization grew more entrenched in southern Yemen, it initiated a strategic process of transitioning from classical terrorism to an attempt to gain a permanent hold on the area and promote a governing system in the spirit of the Shariah. This operative change was accompanied by a conceptual change regarding the treatment of the population under the organization's control. Organization members, and especially the Ansar al-Shariah members, showed relative flexibility and moderation in applying Shariah law. They began functioning as the local administration, supported and allied themselves with tribal leaders, instituted a system of settling inter-tribal conflicts, and even provided services such as defense, water, food, basic healthcare and religious schools. This was meant to generate tribal and local community support and exploit the resentment towards the central government in Sana'a. Nonetheless, within a short period of time and as the organization's control of the area deepened, al-Qaeda members reverted to their traditional behavior and began enforcing their fundamentalist Islamic values aggressively and cruelly. This caused thousands of local resident to flee the al-Qaeda controlled areas and establish so-called popular committees[48] that sought to fill the governmental and security vacuum left by the state and to protect the population against al-Qaeda.[49]

Al-Qaeda's hold on parts of southern Yemen continued until May 2012, when Hadi ordered a comprehensive military attack against al-Qaeda's strongholds. More than 20,000 regular soldiers, supported by mercenary militias from the southern tribes, participated in the operation. US advisors were involved in planning the attack, while the Saudi regime provided a significant part of the financing. Ground forces received extensive aerial support; while the president attributed this support to the Yemeni air force alone, the backroom talk was of extensive US unmanned aerial vehicles' involvement. The operation lasted about two months. Many al-Qaeda

activists were killed and the organization was driven out of the areas it had controlled, pulling back to its natural hiding spots in the center of the country.[50] As a result, the organization reverted to its classical mode of terrorist activity before 2011. Its members embarked on a serious campaign of deadly attacks and assassinations aimed at senior figures in Yemen's security and intelligence communities, army units operating in the area, and tribal and community leaders cooperating with the regime. The organization succeeded in rebuilding its force and set up an extensive network of terrorist cells, acquired advanced technological capabilities, and created effective intelligence gathering infrastructures to provide support for its attacks. The organization also expanded its involvement in criminal activities to finance the reconstruction of its force. Its members take part in robberies, extortion, blackmail, smuggling, and abducting foreign citizens.[51]

The weakened state of Yemen's security forces–the result of reforms and structural changes–has provided al-Qaeda with breathing room and maneuvering space. It seems that they are not afraid of attacking government institutions even in the regime's home court. Its operatives blew up a bus transporting soldiers, attacked the Defense Ministry officess in the heart of Sana'a, and broke into detention facilities in order to liberate their comrades. These attacks were especially bold and indicated highly developed tactical skills: they included complex operations that combined the use of powerful explosives and assaults by commando units.[52] The organization swung back into action in southern cities and carried out several successful raids in Hadramaut and Bida. It seems that it is trying to reestablish itself within the population and discontinue its cooperation with the regime and security forces. Two years after it was dealt a serious blow, and despite the ongoing pressure exerted by the security services and the extensive US assassinations in Saudi Arabia, AQAP's determination and operational flexibility have contributed to its rising power.

Conclusion

Yemen, one of the most complicated of the Middle Eastern arenas, is currently undergoing an intensive process of reconstruction with no clear indication of when and how it will end. An analysis of the process may provide some insight as to possible processes and scenarios elsewhere in the Middle East in the post-Arab Spring reality. Yemen's location in the periphery of the Middle East has to some extent marginalized it in the context of the

international strategic discourse. This could be a missed chance because, as has been said before, the route taken by Yemen since the beginning of the Arab Spring allows an examination and understanding of key processes taking place–or likely to take place –in other Arab countries as well.

First, the Gulf States, the United States and other elements in the international community played a role in arranging for Saleh to step down from the presidency and the transition of authority to the interim government. An analysis of this involvement could provide important insight as to the effectiveness of international arbitration in resolving the political and military crises rocking the nations of the Middle East. Developments in Yemen show that the combination of intensive mediation on the part of Arab elements, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab League and Arab nations, on the one hand, and pressure on the part of the superpowers and the international community on the other, could serve as a catalyst to setting a process of political arrangement in motion. However, external intervention can by no means serve as a guarantee for the success of such a process or the stabilization of a country and its political system. The experience and lessons learned from the intervention in Yemen may also generate insight relevant to the effect and limits of international intervention in Syria, though the international constellation around the Syrian arena is more complex since the involvement of players such as Russia and Iran creates a split in the international community.

Second, an analysis of the Yemeni political system since Saleh stepped down also provides insight about the challenges created by the redistribution of the loci of power among the various elites. Developments in Yemen indicate that a formal change in government is not enough to bring about stability because the influence of the old elite is tied to informal connections and loyalties that prevent real reforms and change. In addition, one can generate many insights from an analysis of the Yemeni national dialogue and the reorganization of the security services in terms of the reconstruction undergone by the nations that experienced the Arab Spring.

Third, an examination of the conduct of al-Qaeda in Yemen sheds light on the strategic changes taking place within the global jihad movements in the course of the Arab Spring. The main change we can point to is al-Qaeda's shift in focus from classical terrorism to an attempt to establish a long-term hold on regions where the weakening of the regime has created a governmental vacuum. AQAP is a pioneer in this trend; it had even

published an official document of recommendations to other al-Qaeda affiliates in which it suggest a comprehensive strategy for action for seizing control of a territory and holding onto it.[53]

The Yemeni arena has much to teach us about the dangers posed by al-Qaeda and the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies, such as comprehensive military attacks or assassination campaigns using drones. Nonetheless, the dynamics reviewed in this paper indicate that, even at its weakest, the state is still the most dominant and powerful element in its territory and that the radicalization in the attempts of subversive forces to damage its sovereignty can only be expected to be met with determined, forceful countermeasures.

Finally, Yemen–after the unification of the emirates–is the first Arab nation expected to take the federal route, a process that may be repeated in other countries as well, such as Syria, Libya and Iraq. Keeping an eye on the implementation and development of the federal process in Yemen may provide important insight on the effectiveness of this political configuration for creating governing stability and preventing widespread violence.

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