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Yemen on the Verge of the Abyss

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On the eve of the fourth year of unrest and instability in the Middle East, Yemen is on the verge of its own abyss. Elite power struggles, sectarian rebellions, tribal clashes, growing separatism, and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism have converged to create a chaotic reality in which alliances form and dissolve at a feverish pace. The intensification of the Houthi rebellion in recent months has heightened the sectarian dimension of the country's internal clash. Thus while the eyes of the international community remain focused on the struggle against ISIS, a challenge with local and international implications continues to intensify in Yemen. The primary concern has to do with the possible collapse of the Yemeni state, which is located close to the Persian Gulf oil producers and major shipping routes, and the ensuing ramifications that will transcend Yemen's borders.

The efforts to preserve the unity of Yemen and strengthen its sovereignty and the legitimacy of its institutions were channeled into the decisions of the National Dialogue Conference – first and foremost, the decision to transform Yemen into a presidential federal republic consisting of six regions, each having local parliamentary rule and extensive autonomous powers. According to the plan, the capital city of Sanaa would enjoy autonomous status and would not belong to any district, and the southern port city of Aden would enjoy the special status of an economic city. The federal regime would be headed by a president and elections for the national institutions would be conducted on the basis of proportional representation for each region. Although many elements within Yemen and the international community have joined forces to promote the federation plan, security and political challenges are a threat to chances of implementation.

The most immediate challenge is the Houthi rebellion, which has intensified in recent months and reached new heights in late September with the conquest of the capital city of Sanaa. The Houthis, known also as Ansar Allah – a Zaydi Shiite group from the Saada district in northwest Yemen, have transformed themselves from a religious ideological group into a classic guerrilla movement and have begun working to establish autonomous Shiite rule in the country's northern districts. Taking advantage of Yemen's political chaos and military weakness, the Houthis have achieved considerable success on the

battlefield, conquering Salafi and tribal strongholds and gradually expanding the area under their influence. Their success on the battlefield can be attributed primarily to the schism within the Yemeni military and the friction between loyalists of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and those loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who still pulls strings and apparently also supports the Houthi rebellion. Their accomplishments can likewise be attributed to Iran, which in recent years has supplied the rebels with arms and funding.

The Houthis opposed the federation plan: their home province of Saada was incorporated into a district that possesses no natural resources and no sea access, and was thus deemed an attempt by the central government to stunt their economic development. In response, they launched a broad offensive and began advancing toward Sanaa, sweeping through northern Yemen and pushing forces of the Yemeni army and tribal militias southward. In July 2014, the Houthis succeeded in capturing Amran (50 km north of the capital), and in September, after seizing control of roads and setting up roadblocks under the pretext of protesting rising oil prices, they took the capital. This advance spurred the government to conclude a reconciliation agreement.

The agreement, which was reached after a month of talks under UN auspices, provided the Houthis with unprecedented influence. It stipulates that the President must appoint advisors from the ranks of the Houthis at the expense of the ruling party, which is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and its military allies. Thus far, the Houthis have refused to withdraw their forces from the capital, and their military control over centers of power has endowed them with considerable influence. In practice, they dictated to President Hadi whom to appoint as Prime Minister. The Houthis have for some time attempted to gain direct sea access, and to this end, and despite the ceasefire, the rebels conquered the major port city of Hodeida on the Red Sea coast, which contains the largest oil refinery installation in the country. This achievement will make it easier for them to receive regular Iranian arms shipments and more difficult for Saudi Arabia and the United States to stop these shipments, as they have done in the past.

Another challenge to stability in Yemen is posed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a group frequently described in the United States as the most dangerous branch of al-Qaeda. In the past year, this group has launched an extensive campaign of terrorist attacks and assassinations against senior officials within the Yemeni security and intelligence apparatuses. Its operatives have blown up buses full of soldiers, attacked the Ministry of Defense in the heart of Sanaa, and broken into prisons in an effort to free its members. The attacks have been characterized by a high level of tactical capability and have included operations by small commando forces using powerful explosives. The group also resumed operations in the southern cities from which it was previously expelled, and is working resolutely to renew its footholds in the region. In July 2014, AQAP declared the establishment of an Islamic emirate in the Hadhramaut Governorate

and the application of strict regulations, such as a prohibition on the public movement of women without their husbands. The group was further strengthened by the Houthis' advance into central and western Yemen, as a number of Sunni tribes joined it in the hope of halting the Shiite takeover. Paradoxically, the force currently spearheading the struggle against al-Qaeda in Yemen is the Houthis, who, with the support of the Yemeni military, have launched a military attack against AQAP and its allies. Despite the ongoing pressure by security forces and the twelfth consecutive year of extensive assassination efforts by the American drone fleet, the group's power in southern Yemen constitutes a significant challenge to the possibility of stabilizing the southern districts and to the success of the model of anti-terrorist warfare that the United States seeks to implement in Yemen, without "boots on the ground."

The Houthis' momentum and the resulting weakening of the central regime play into the hands of those who support southern independence. Although representatives of the south have agreed to the idea of a federation, they called for the division of Yemen into no more than two territories: south and north. This demand was rejected by the north out of fear that such a division would constitute a first step toward partition, and the south was ultimately divided into two districts. Some claimed that the division of the south was meant to weaken it through an unnatural separation between the region's population centers and economic centers, located in the western district, and the oil reserves and minerals of the eastern district. The frequent demonstrations of southern separatists calling for the reestablishment of the People's Republic of South Yemen create the impression that South Yemen is close to achieving independence.

From the perspective of the Saudis, who joined the Yemeni government's battle against the Houthis in 2009-10 with little success, this group poses a significant threat due to its ties with Iran. Riyadh believes that Iran's current significant presence on the kingdom's southern border is a product of the achievements of the Houthis, who currently represent the major military force in Yemen. Indeed, Iran does not hesitate to express its support for the Houthis publically. Ali Akbar Velayati, an advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, stated recently that Iran supports Ansar Allah's just struggle, which is playing "an important role in Yemeni history," and that "Iran regards the group as part of the Islamic awakening."

Even after Saleh's removal from power under Saudi pressure, presidential elections that received international legitimacy, and a long process of national dialogue, the situation in Yemen remains serious and encourages the involvement of outside forces. Saudi Arabia, which is following the developments with great concern, regards the current instability as a direct threat to its national security and another sphere of confrontation between it and Iran, this time on its very doorstep. President Saleh's removal from power and Riyadh's distancing from forces associated with the Muslim Brotherhood has reduced Saudi influence on Yemen. Moreover, the kingdom has found it increasingly difficult to

influence Yemeni politics as a result of the death of the sultan's heir apparent, who held the Yemen portfolio for four years, as well as the need to contend with substantial challenges in other places. Nonetheless, if the situation along the border worsens, the kingdom will likely not hesitate to intervene once again, directly or indirectly.

Aside from the support of the international community, President Hadi has few resources to help him stabilize the country. The disbanding of the army's elite units due to their affiliation with political power groups, and the resulting comprehensive reorganization of the Yemeni armed forces, did significant damage to their ability to impose order and authority. This weakness constitutes a fundamental obstacle not only to the federation plan but to the achievement of unity and stability in Yemen. Furthermore, the process of disintegration will undoubtedly have implications that transcend the borders of this failed state.

