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Yemen's Houthis and former President Saleh: An Alliance of Animosity

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Despite six years of fighting between Houthi rebels and the Yemeni army under former President Ali Abdullah Saleh before his ouster in 2012, Saleh and the Houthis have formed a close political alliance. While old animosities make the alliance a fragile one, it has lasted since early 2015, throughout a war in which the Houthis and Saleh have stood together against domestic adversaries and a coalition of regional powers. Their shared sense of danger has allowed them to withstand the tremors of politics which at times have shaken their alliance.

Before the fall of the capital Sana'a on 21 September 2014 and the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen on 26 March 2015, all political efforts tended to deal separately with the Houthis and with Saleh. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative of 23 November 2011, for example, was seen as detrimental to Saleh but merely excluded the Houthis.

These two parties had not kept their distance from each other politically, however. They both participated in the National Dialogue Conference, which lasted from March 2013 until January 2014, to attempt to take advantage of a political agreement, no matter how fragile. Their connection has its roots in the composition and ideology of both parties: they are united in their tribalism, their common enemies, and their rejection of federalism.

Violence: a mandatory choice

Ideologically, the Houthis are a Zaidi group[1] that sanctions armed rebellion against an unjust ruler, and their understanding of political legitimacy is based on an idea of supremacy in a

[1] Zaidiyyah is a sect that emerged out of Shia Islam. The Houthis are a Zaid family that claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad.

radical, medieval sense. As a result, they feel threatened by any political development that departs from this concept of supremacy. In addition, the Houthis formed as a group through the course of six wars, heightening their military-security focus, but leaving their political wing weak and with no real weight.

The political and military leader of the Houthis, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, is also their spiritual chief. Meanwhile, Ali Abdullah Saleh's supporters see him as someone who can protect their interests in light of the chaos that swept the country after he left power. They believe that Saleh has the most rightful claim to power, and consider what happened in 2011 to be a coup and a conspiracy to be rejected. For his supporters, resorting to weapons is the most obvious option, particularly as a large portion of the Yemeni army has continued to support Saleh. They have backed Saleh for a number of reasons, most significantly because of the way Saleh's successor as president after his 2012 ouster, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, restructured the army, showing his animosity towards the Republican Guard. The Republican Guard, which had been under the command of Saleh's son, Ahmed, is considered the largest and most competent division of the army.[2] As a result, Saleh's supporters rejected any invitation to political participation, even under a quota system. This attitude was encouraged by Hadi's poor performance while in office and his reliance on corrupt and inefficient individuals in the military. Hadi quickly lost public confidence, particularly after he abandoned one of the largest brigades in the Yemeni military (Brigade 310) during its six-month battle against the Houthis in the Amran district north of Sana'a. The state did not send the armed forces any real air support, leading to the fall of the battalion and its commander, Hamid al-Qushaibi, who was killed on 8 July 2014.

Motives for revenge and hostility

In November 2014, the UN imposed sanctions against former president Saleh, his son Ahmed, and Houthi leaders Abdul-Khaliq al-Houthi and Abu Ali al-Hakim. The sanctions have contributed to bringing the Houthis and Saleh's supporters closer together in opposition to the international community and the regional parties sponsoring the GCC Initiative. Furthermore, both Saleh and the Houthis viewed al-Islah (a political party made up of a coalition of tribal and Sunni religious elements, including the Muslim Brotherhood and various Salafis) as a common enemy and a more pressing threat.

For the Houthis, al-Islah is their greatest political rival; historically, certain tribes have shifted their allegiances between Zaidiyyah and al-Islah. For Saleh, president of North Yemen since 1978 and of unified Yemen since 1990, al-Islah had long been an ally. This shifted after the 1994 civil war and the defeat of the Yemeni Socialist Party, when their relationship began to gradually weaken. This period was followed by the rejection of al-Islah and its military allies by some tribal leaders when it looked like Saleh's son, Ahmed, would inherit power.

[2] "Yemen Politicians Divided Over Military Control," Al Monitor, 17 Dec 2012. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/politics/2012/12/yemen-politicians-divided-over-military-control.html

Al-Islah had important allies within the Yemeni army – most significantly, with Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a commander in the Yemeni army. Ali Mohsen was from the same tribe and village as Ali Abdullah Saleh. Their relationship grew tense after the president's son was appointed to head the Yemeni army and became adversarial when Ali Mohsen split from the regime to join the revolution in 2011. Their tribal connections and longstanding overlapping interests increased their animosity, and explain Saleh's strong desire for reprisal.

This became clear during the Battle of Amran in February 2014, when the Houthis bombed buildings owned by Ali Mohsen, and targeted primarily President Saleh's enemies when they entered Sana'a. When the city fell, the Houthis stormed the house of al-Islah leader Mohammad Qahtan, while areas with a strong al-Islah presence in the far north of the country, and others known for opposing Saleh were similarly targeted.

The federalist project and its role in encouraging tribalism

In religious terms, much of the Yemeni population is divided between Zaidiyyah/Shiism and Shafi'ism/Sunnism. This sectarian split lies at the root of the country's regional division between the areas north and east of the Sana'a region, which are predominantly Zaidi, and the central, southern, and western areas, which are predominantly Shafi'i.[3] This division facilitated the formation of the alliance between Saleh and the Houthis, as the tribal regions that support Saleh's regime are Houthi regions and share both Saleh's tribal character and the Houthi's sectarian nature.

Yemen's army has been dominated by Zaidi tribes since its formation in the early twentieth century because of the Zaidi imamate's control of the country at the time, basing its legitimacy on tribalism.[4] This did not change drastically after the revolution of 26 September 1962; the revolution was led by the army and changed the country's system of government from an imamate-monarchy to a republic. With the noteworthy exception of Judge Abdul Rahman al-Iryani, who was not a member of the military, all the leaders of North Yemen were military men from Zaidi tribes. This situation was exacerbated when Saleh arrived to power in 1978 and appointed members of his tribe as military leaders.

The 2011 revolution led to the rise of regional powers within the country. This included the rise of the south (as a result of the Southern Movement), which was punctuated by Hadi's ascent to the presidency, marking the first time a southerner rose to power in Sana'a, as well as the prominent position of Taiz, due to its central role and activities during the revolution. This rise of regional powers caused great concern among the political leaders who benefitted from the existing regional structure of power in Yemen. This became evident when both the Houthis and Saleh's party rejected the proposal for a federalist division of the country on the last day of the National Dialogue Conference.

The form of federalism supported by some people in the South, Taiz, and other cities, has a strong and growing sense of regionalism that opposes the centralization of power, and

[3] Dresch, P. 1989. *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*. Ch 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

[4] Naji, Sultan, 1988, *Yemen's Military History*, p.115. Beirut, Dar al-Aouda.

would have weakened Sana'a's power. The phrase 'the sacred center' has gained prominence; it implies that Sana'a and the North are no better than the rest of the country, and expresses a general resentment and opposition toward Sana'a's authority. The federalist division of the country that was proposed to the National Dialogue Conference is clearly antagonistic to the vision preferred by Sana'a and the North, and sparked a backlash, furthering tribalist sentiments in these regions. The proposal would have divided Yemen into six regions; the Azal region, which would contain Sana'a, had a clear sectarian character, and none of the governorates with a Zaidi majority would have had any seaports. This showed a desire to isolate Zaidi areas which, with the exception of the capital of Sana'a, have limited economic resources.

Paths of alliance

After the Battle for Amran, it became clear that the Houthi-Saleh alliance was taking advantage of both the deteriorating domestic situation and opposition across the region to the Muslim Brotherhood after the fall of President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. One could argue that the Houthi-Saleh alliance began as no more than coordination between the two, with former president Saleh as the stronger party.

This was not the first time that Saleh had used the Houthis to get rid of his opponents. Although the Sa'da War in July 2004 began at Saleh's command, he sought to prolong it by covertly supporting the Houthis. He wanted to get rid of military commander Ali Mohsen and his troops by pushing them into war, in order to clear the way to power for his son, Ahmed.[5] This type of maneuvering was normal for Saleh, who had previously used Islamic movements against the Yemeni Socialist Party in the 1994 civil war.

This time, however, things gradually escaped Saleh's control. The Houthis emerged as a political and military power with enough influence for their leaders to be appointed in government positions. At times, they accomplished this through agreements with the national partnership government that was formed after the fall of Sana'a, and at other times they achieved this through force by sending their armed delegates across ministries and police stations under the pretext of monitoring and combating corruption.[6]

After the Houthis entered Sana'a – which was controlled by Republican Guard camps that were supposed to be loyal to President Hadi but in reality still followed former president Saleh – they began to take control of these camps, one after the other. This warned of an impending armed confrontation between the two sides, which eventually took place, albeit

[5] Salmoni, B. A. Loidolt, B. & Wells, M., 2010. "Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon," Ch 4. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG962.pdf

[6] "Mohammed al-Huthi meet with heads of the revolutionary committees in the ministries and institutions to discuss 'anti-corruption'," Sahafa24.net, 11 Feb, 2015. http://www.sahafah24.net/show81389.html

in a limited fashion, in al-Sabaha camp south of Sana'a when a few troops stationed there resisted Houthi authority.[7]

On 21 September 2014, the capital of Sana'a fell to the Houthis. Several important factors paved the way for this, including:

- The poor performance of President Hadi and his government;
- Saleh's own political actions after the 2011 revolution, which should have led to the dismantling of the regime.
- The drastic increase in corruption, which was so contrary to public expectations that had risen with the revolutionary discourse during the 2011 uprising, and which had subsequently been adopted by the official state apparatus during the period of the National Dialogue Conference.
- The severe deterioration in government services and economic conditions.
- Ongoing war in the northern governorates, which the National Dialogue Conference did nothing to address.
- The weak nature of the Yemeni state, which was shaped by former president Saleh's tendency to involve himself personally in its administration.

Political relations between the two parties became strained when the Houthis unilaterally issued a constitutional decree that suddenly dissolved the House of Representatives, which was predominated by members of Saleh's General People's Congress party.[8] Saleh's side opposed this decree as, from the start, they had hoped to undermine the political process in order to hold early elections.[9] Saleh was an expert at manipulating elections, given his control of local councils and the Supreme Commission of Elections, and his broad network of tribal and regional contacts.

As the Houthi's agreement with Saudi Arabia collapsed and the military confrontation continued, the Houthis and Saleh grew closer. On 14 August 2015, they announced the formation of a political council to govern the country. The Houthis rescinded their constitutional decree and the decision to dissolve the House of Representatives, and instead asked the House to convene for a vote on approving the new council. The Houthis' appeal to the House of Representatives was a clear attempt to undermine the Yemeni government's legitimacy with Riyadh, so that they themselves would be given international recognition as the *de facto* authority in Yemen. This explains Saleh's offer to let Russia use Yemen's ports and airports in the war against terror, an offer that was met with indifference.

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[7] "Houthi gunmen in control of the camp special forces in Sanaa," BBC Arabic, February 25, 2015. http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2015/02/150224_yemen_clashes

[8] "Yemen provinces and parties rejects Houthi coup," Aljazeera, 15.02.2015. http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/2/7/محافظات-وأحزاب-يمنية-ترفض-انقلاب-الحوثيين

[9] "'Constitutional Declaration' for the Houthis: the dissolution of parliament and the formation of a presidential council and a transitional period of two years," RT Arabic, 06.02.2015. https://arabic.rt.com/news/773258-الحوثيون-ينشرون-الجمعة-إعلانا-دستوريا-جديدا-لليمن/

Within Yemen, the Houthis are reliant on Saleh's experience and network of political influence. Outside Yemen, including for efforts towards a settlement with Saudi Arabia or the Saudi-backed Yemeni government, the influence of the Houthis is amplified, since their authority is strengthened by the regional and sectarian nature of the conflict.

Attempts by Saleh-Houthi alliance to form a government have stalled, and at the time of writing, the formation of the political council was still just an additional negotiation card more than an actual step towards stabilizing the current situation. The formation of the council is unlikely to happen, however, given the fragile nature of the alliance and the suspicion that the two parties harbour for each other.

Iran and the Houthis

In the past, Yemen had fallen within Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence, but the rise of Iran as a regional power changed this, and Yemen became a battleground for regional sectarian conflict. Sectarian differences between the Houthis (a Zaidi Shiite group) and Iran (a Twelver Shiite regime) did not prevent them from forming an alliance. Iran has been a source of support for the Houthis during political negotiations. As a result, a peace and partnership agreement was signed between Iran and the Houthis just before Sana'a fell on 21 September 2014.

Iran considered the fall of Sana'a to be victory for them, and began conducting airlifts to Sana'a at the rate of two flights per day, even though commercial ties did not require this number of flights. Iran's growing role in Yemen led to strained relations between Yemen and the neighboring Gulf countries, and rendered the political situation more challenging. It also deepened the sectarian dimension of the conflict, which strengthens the role of regional powers in Yemen and weakens domestic actors.

Saudi and the Houthis

When Saudi Arabia first began to sense the threat of Houthi expansion in Yemen, it tried to win over Saleh and convince him to abandon his alliance with the Houthis. Several Yemeni diplomats and politicians have spoken about a meeting between Ahmed Ali Saleh and Mohammad bin Salman, Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister of Saudi Arabia, who led military operations for Operation Decisive Storm, the Saudi name for their military intervention beginning in 2015. The meeting took place just a few hours before the operation began, and was Saudi Arabia's last attempt to get rid of the Houthis. Although Saudi Arabia agreed to the lifting of UN sanctions on Saleh, the meeting was not a success.

Operation Decisive Storm indirectly strengthened the Saleh-Houthi alliance, as the two sides overcame their differences out of their shared sense of danger. It also helped them to gain more supporters, and take advantage of popular outrage in north Yemen against the Saudi-led military intervention.

More than a year after the start of Operation Decisive Storm, Saudi Arabia had still not achieved what it intended to accomplish, nor did it manage to stop Houthi attacks on its borders. The war began to drain Saudi Arabia's finances, as well as put it in a difficult

position before the international community because of the human rights violations and the ongoing suffering in a poor country like Yemen. Consequently, Saudi Arabia was forced to start secret negotiations with the Houthis in March 2016.

Although these negotiations broke down when the Yemen peace talks in Kuwait stalled, they did result in briefly halting Saudi-led air strikes, particularly in Sana'a. They also paved the way for the beginning of negotiations between the Houthis and Saleh's supporters on one side, and the internationally recognized Yemeni government, on the other.

Negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia meant recognition by the Saudis and by the regional powers of the Houthis as a political power in Yemen. They also meant isolating Saleh regionally and internationally. As outside players gained a more prominent role in Yemen, domestic powers became weaker, and the country grew more divided. This caused a dramatic change in the balance of power between Saleh and the Houthis, as some areas that had been under Saleh's tribal hold were now under the Houthis, who took control of state institutions, military camps, and weapons.

These negotiations caused significant tension between Saleh and the Houthis, particularly on 26 March 2016, the one-year anniversary of the start of Operation Decisive Storm. Saleh's call for his supporters to rally in al-Sabaeen Square on the anniversary[10] produced noticeable tension between the two parties. The Houthis had also intended to call for a rally and felt that Saleh had preempted them. In the end, the Houthis withdrew the call for a popular rally, out of fear that comparisons between the supporters of the two sides would be drawn.

Saleh can still draw a turnout in Yemen due to his continuing popularity as a political leader. Despite the failed assassination attempt against him on 3 June 2011, and the fact that he has repeatedly been targeted by Saudi airstrikes, he came out to give a speech among his supporters in al-Sabaeen Square. This is something that neither his rival, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, nor his opponents, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, have done. In the absence of alternative political leaders and the general weakness of his opponents, Saleh's public appearance at a time of war somehow strengthened his position. Saleh remains relatively charismatic, and can give an impassioned, populist speech. Furthermore, his popular base has grown as a result of public anger about the Saudi military intervention and weariness with the war and instability that have plagued the country since Saleh was forced to leave power.

The tables have turned

The Yemen peace talks in Kuwait in July and August 2016 revealed that when it came to the Saleh-Houthi alliance, decision-making was entirely in the Houthis' hands. This is due to several factors:

[10] "Yemen peace negotiations start in Kuwait," Al Arabiya, 21 April 2016.
http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/yemen/2016/04/21/ضمانات-دولية-لانطلاق-مفاوضات-الكويت-بشأن-اليمن-الليلة.html

1. The Houthis were able to take control of state institutions, particularly the security institutions, through their Revolutionary Committees.
2. The Houthis were able to win over several senior military officers by taking control of some military bases, aided in this by the tribal and regional structure of the army, which fits well with the sectarian nature of the Houthi group.
3. Saleh was excluded by the regional and international community from any settlement in Yemen when he was no longer backed by Saudi Arabia. As a result of Saleh's own political volatility, he has no more allies in the region. The United Arab Emirates has attempted to forge an alliance with him, without much success, although this may likely change in the future.
4. The Houthis are seen by the international parties involved in Yemen as more suitable for the country's next political phase. They represent a sect or group of Yemenis, while Saleh stands for an era of a single ruler.

Nonetheless, Saleh still remains a force to be reckoned with. He is someone who is able to disrupt the upcoming political phase if he is pushed aside. While he is now less powerful after having lost part of his military force, some military units – particularly low-ranking soldiers – are still loyal to him.[11] Saleh still has significant popularity: his broad tribal alliances are not strongly ideological, and his supporters come from diverse regional and sectarian backgrounds.

The Houthis may succeed to win over some of Saleh's supporters that belong to their sectarian sphere of influence, but others will move to join other parties. Extremist religious groups will also be able to win over many of Saleh's supporters. This is clear from the rise of various Salafi movements in the South and in Taiz, especially as the role of Yemeni political parties has diminished.

The next period in Yemen's history may prove to be one of extreme sectarian polarization, especially if the entire country plunges into the battlefield after remaining on the sidelines through the fall of Sana'a and the start of Operation Decisive Storm. The Houthis are currently trying to exclude Saleh from politics for two reasons. First, they do not have faith in him. As president, he waged six wars against them, and the founder and former leader of the Houthis, Hussein al-Houthi, was killed on Saleh's orders. The Houthis are also wary of Saleh's known vicissitudes. Second, Saleh has sought to weaken the Houthis in regions where they have influence at a time when the Houthis are working to monopolize representation of Zaidi regions in order to strengthen their political position.

All indications point to that fact that the end of Saleh-Houthi alliance – either through a direct conflict between the two sides or a regional intervention – would be in the Houthis' interest. This would exacerbate the sectarian nature of conflict in Yemen.

Given the current situation in Yemen, political parties (as the last remaining organized political forces in the country) must reduce their reliance on foreign support, and instead work more closely with the Yemeni people. To do this, they must examine their past

[11] "Hundreds of soldiers chanting their loyalty to "Saleh" in front of Mohammed al-Huthi and Abu Ali Hakim," 2 June, 2016. Al Mashhad Al Yemeni, http://almashhad-alyemeni.com/news76688.html.

mistakes, restructure their ranks, and address the issue of their aging leadership. They must also take advantage of the rise of certain social groups, like women and the youth, who represent a formidable alternative to the traditional political classes in Yemen.

Doing so could potentially end the sectarian aspect of the conflict, realign parties on political (rather than sectarian) grounds, and sooth social divisions based on strict concepts of identity. The current conflict would instead become a political one, which could be resolved through inclusive political solutions.

About the author

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