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Avoiding Yemen's Abyss

by Adam C Seitz

The January 22, 2015 resignation of the government of Yemeni President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi and the ensuing chaos have once again sparked both fears of the collapse of the Republic of Yemen as we know it and concerns about the effectiveness of international counterterrorism efforts in Yemen. The same combination of elite competition, military factionalization, and ever shifting alliances that contributed to Yemen's current political crisis and insecurity continue to provide al-Qaeda a foothold in Yemen. Any counterterrorism strategy by the U.S. and its international partners must take such factors into consideration, or risk further internationalizing the Yemeni crisis and plunging deeper into Yemen's counterterrorism abyss.

Competition Among Elites

The ascent of the insurgents led by Abdul-Malik al-Houthi and the resignation of President Hadi stand as glaring examples of the challenges that competition by Yemen's elite poses to security and stability in the country. Although faced with a number of daunting economic, political, and security challenges, throughout much of his three years in office, Hadi repeatedly attempted to wrestle power and influence from competing elite factions of the former regime, most notably from the faction of his predecessor, former-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, his son General Ahmed Ali Saleh and their rivals led by Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and the Islah party. While the initiative negotiated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in November 2011 transitioned the office of the President from Saleh to his then-Vice President Hadi, the former-president maintained much of his political influence as head of Yemen's largest and most powerful political party, the General People's Congress (GPC), and through the vast personal fortune he had accumulated over his 33 year reign. Although Saleh likely hoped Hadi would be his willing surrogate, reality soon set in as Hadi instead opted for an alliance with Saleh's rivals, the Islah party, who came to dominate the ministries, and General Ali Mohsen, whom he appointed to his military advisor. Although Hadi's inclusion of Ali Mohsen and Islah limited the potential challenges they posed, the alliance presented somewhat of a convergence of interests for the Salehs and the Houthis, as both factions saw their political and economic interests challenged by Hadi's alliance with General Ali Mohsen and the growing influence of the Islah party.

MES Notes

Upcoming MES Lecture

On 17 February 2015 Middle East Studies will host Dr. Steven Cook from the Council on Foreign Relations to discuss "Egypt: What Went Wrong" as part of the AY14-15 MES Lecture Series "Perspectives on Democracy Promotion and Democratization in the Middle East and North Africa."

Further information about the MES Lecture Series is available at the MES website at <https://www.mcu.usmc.mil> under Affiliate Programs, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or adam.seitz@usmcu.edu.

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There had been rumors of an alliance between Saleh and the Houthis well before the 2011 uprisings. During the six wars between 2004 and 2009, pitting the Yemeni army against Houthi insurgents in northern Yemeni Saada Province, a number of analysts and prominent Yemenis accused the Salehs of supporting Houthi forces against General Ali Mohsen. The wars in Saada were viewed by some as part of a broader power struggle between the Salehs and General Ali Mohsen. Adding to such suspicions, General Ali Mohsen was denied repeated requests for support to fight the growing northern insurgency.

Rumors of a Saleh-Houthi alliance have only grown over the last several months as Houthi militias have seen their ranks grow to include a number of Saleh loyalists that defected from the military in opposition to attempts by the Hadi government to restructure and reform the armed forces. Fueling suspicions further, over the past year Houthi militias fighting alongside factions of the Yemeni armed forces dominated by Saleh's old guard dealt a substantial blow to rival political factions. Militias formed by the Hashid tribal confederation, which had long served as Yemen's preeminent kingmakers and were also viewed as a conduit for pushing Saudi interests in Yemen, were handily defeated in Amran. Saleh's rival Islah party was pushed underground as the Houthis swept into Sanaa. General Ali Mohsen was forced to flee to Saudi Arabia in the chaos. And finally the Hadi government was forced to resign.

The struggle among competing elite factions dominated by the Salehs, President Hadi and General Ali Mohsen underscores the weakness of Yemen's institution and the difficulties of navigating a highly personalized patronage system. Within such a system of shifting alliances and elite competition the former president continues to see himself as the guarantor of Yemen's security and the only one who can manage Yemen's factions and internal power struggles. Over the past three years, Saleh has managed to retain substantial political influence, and his public image, at least in the eyes of some, has evolved from unpopular former dictator, to meddling party leader, and more recently to Yemen's potential kingmaker and savior of the Yemeni state.

When Elite Competition Meets a Divided Military

The North Yemeni armed forces have played a significant political role since a group of army officers led a revolution, ending the Imamate kingship and declaring North Yemen as a republic. Following the 1977 and 1978 coups that ultimately brought Saleh to power, the military's political clout has only grown, with the officer corps becoming a central player in patronage politics and elite bargaining. Even after Saleh's ouster in 2011, he and his son, General Ahmed Ali Saleh, still yielded a great deal of power and influence through their extensive ties to the officer corps of the Yemeni armed forces. This fact was not lost on President Hadi, who—just days after the GCC Initiative was signed—established a committee tasked with restructuring the Yemeni armed forces. The restructuring of the armed forces was not only a major demand of the Yemeni people during the 2011 uprisings and key stipulation of the GCC Initiative, but for Hadi it was also as a necessary step in disarming military factions controlled by the former president and his son, as well as their rival, and potential political wild card, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar.

Through presidential decrees intended to integrate the armed forces under a unified command structure, Hadi attempted to simultaneously loosen the Salehs' grip on the military while strengthening his own base by forging new alliances with old rivals, including General Ali Mohsen. The decrees, which reshuffled commanders and reorganized the overall command structure of the armed forces, were met with fierce opposition and mutinies from within the ranks. In the end, they appear to have been little more than window dressings covering a system dominated by informal and highly personalized elite bargaining beyond the reach of President Hadi's institutional changes. Although Hadi replaced a number of commanders with his own allies and appointed Saleh's family members

to diplomatic posts outside the country, the mid-level officers were still of the old guard, which remained loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh or his son Ahmed Ali through patronage relations and continued access to sources of wealth.

The Houthi's ascent stands as yet another example of Saleh's continued influence over the armed forces. The Houthi offensive was met with little military resistance in its push into Sanaa, with a number of commanders surrendering and handing over their units' armaments without a single shot being fired. In Amran some members of the armed forces were reported to have aided the Houthis against militias organized by the Hashid tribal confederation and its allies in the Islah party. Even as Houthi militias continued their military offensive following the signing of the "Peace and Partnership Agreement" in with the Hadi government in September, they met little resistance from the Yemeni armed forces. It was not until the army stood by as the Houthi militants shelled the presidential palace and stormed his private residence that Hadi likely realized that his efforts to restructure the armed forces and weed out the old guard had failed. In the end, the only unit to resist the assault was Hadi's own Presidential Protection Force. With the armed forces now seemingly under control of the Houthis and the former-presidents faction, Hadi and his cabinet likely saw no other choice but to resign.

AQAP Thriving on Competition, Division, and Insecurity

It is within this corrosive environment that al-Qaeda has made its home and now appears to be in better shape than ever before. The strength of al-Qaeda in Yemen has ebbed and flowed since the outset of the U.S. led Global War on Terror in late 2001. Between 2001 and 2005, the counterterrorism partnership between Washington and Sanaa pushed al-Qaeda in Yemen to its knees. These early successes, however, were short lived. In 2003, the Bush Administration's attention turned to war and stability operations in Iraq. The war in Iraq came at a time when al-Qaeda in Yemen and the international threat it posed appeared to be diminishing. As counterterrorism aid to the Yemeni government started to diminish, so too did the Saleh regime's resolve in the fight against al-Qaeda in Yemen. At the same time, the Saleh regime became increasingly distracted by a host of internal challenges; from combating a growing insurgency in the north, to putting down a resurgent secessionist movement in the south, to fighting off mounting political opposition in Sanaa. Within the deteriorating security and political environment and with the Saleh regimes apparent lack of resolve, al-Qaeda was able to stage a comeback in Yemen, and in 2009 the Saudi and Yemeni based al-Qaeda branches merged in Yemen as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Following the attempted downing of a Detroit-bound flight on Christmas Day 2009, Washington's attention turned once again to the terrorist threat emanating from Yemen. While drone strikes served as an effective tool in disrupting AQAP's ability to plan and execute attacks against the U.S. and its allies, al-Qaeda continued to exploit the regime's lack of control outside of Sanaa, allowing the group to maintain a safe haven in Yemen. In 2011, AQAP sought to capitalize on the security vacuum brought on by uprisings against the regime of then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and it moved to establish its own zones of control and authority over areas of southern Yemen. Rolling back the territorial gains by AQAP over the next year was the result of coordinated efforts by international, regional, and local actors, with local tribal militias playing a crucial role in both clearing and holding territories seized by AQAP and its local insurgent wing Ansar al-Sharia (AAS).

Saleh's ouster in November 2011, brought with it new opportunities and challenges for counterterrorism efforts in Yemen. On the one hand, it allowed for a renegotiation of the counterterrorism partnership between Washington and Sanaa, with newly elected President, Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi, taking greater ownership of counterterrorism operations, including controversial drone strikes. On the other hand, elite and regional competition, political paralysis, and military factionalization have all contributed to a deterioration of internal security conditions and increased

sectarian tensions, all to the net benefit of AQAP.

The tribal elites and militias have played a pivotal, yet often overlooked, role in countering al-Qaeda's influence in Yemen. Indeed, Yemen has a long history of tribal militias supporting the central authority in the absence of and in parallel to a standing army, dating back to the time of the Imamate. Furthermore, since the 1962 military revolution, tribal militias have not only played an important role in regime security, but also provided important checks and balances to what is often viewed by Yemen's elites as government overreach. Support, however, has always been rather temporary, with alliances in flux and under constant renegotiation. Today is no different. While the tribes played an important role in past offensives against AQAP and in denying the group refuge, the Houthis' recent ascent has pushed a number of tribes into the open arms of AQAP and AAS. A number of Yemeni tribesmen and elites increasingly view the terrorist organization as a bulwark to the Houthis' domination of the central government and further territorial expansion. Not only have such factors allowed for AQAP's resurgence, but over the past several months the loss of reliable local partners has limited the options available to the U.S. and its regional and international partners to counter AQAP's gains and the threat the group poses to international security.

Limited Options for the U.S. and International Community

The January 7, 2015 terrorist attack at the Paris based satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* brought AQAP back into the international spotlight. In the aftermath of the Paris attack French Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared that France was in a "war against terrorism, against jihadism, against radical Islam, against everything that is aimed at breaking fraternity, freedom and solidarity." His words were reminiscent of those of then-President George W. Bush following the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, who before a joint session of Congress declared that "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda but does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated." But nearly a decade and a half into the U.S. led war on terror al-Qaeda's Yemen affiliate continues to thrive and poses a significant threat to international security, raising questions as to the effectiveness of international efforts to combat AQAP.

Although there is renewed debate among western policymakers as to the effectiveness of international efforts to combat al-Qaeda and deny AQAP a safe haven in Yemen in the aftermath of the Paris attacks, in reality there may not be much that the U.S., France, or the international community can do. As the pool of reliable local counterterrorism partners continues to shrink in Yemen, so too do the options and tools at the disposal of the U.S. and its international partners. Furthermore, when regional rivalries such as those between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the overall threat perception of Yemen's neighbors are added to the mix the situation only becomes more complex for those trying to navigate the tangled webs of shifting alliances in Yemen.

The events leading to the collapse of Yemen's transitional government should serve as a reminder of the challenges that the U.S. and its partners face in combating AQAP, and the limited influence the international community has over political and security developments in Yemen. Before diving further into the abyss of elite competition, military factionalization, and ever shifting alliances, international stakeholders should understand that their options are greatly limited by conditions on the ground and that the same factors that limit their options have helped al-Qaeda to maintain its safe haven in Yemen. Thus, denying al-Qaeda a safe haven in Yemen becomes not so much a question as to the effectiveness of international counterterrorism efforts, but rather of Yemen's ability, and resolve, to save itself from itself.

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Dr. Amin Tarzi • Director, MES • amin.tarzi@usmcu.edu

Mr. Adam C. Seitz • Senior Research Associate, MES • adam.seitz@usmcu.edu