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Get Saleh

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If you're gonna set somebody up, it's gotta be a surprise, you got that?

Chili Palmer, mobster-turned-movie-producer, in the 1995 film "Get Shorty"

The United States' war-of-choice in Iraq vanquished Saddam Hussein, but it did not end the plague of personality politics in the Middle East. It might, in the long run, prove to have been the beginning of the end, however. The war unleashed centrifugal forces in the region. Autocrats (Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, Muammar al-Qadhafi) have fallen, others (Bashar al-Asad) teeter on the brink, while a few (the Al Saud) have shown remarkable resilience. Among the latter, Ali Abdullah Saleh—despite stepping down in early 2012—remains the *bête noire* of Yemeni politics.

Our SOB?

Saleh is a thug. But this fact should not blind us to his considerable talents. Saleh idolized Saddam, and his early career mirrored his hero's. An Army officer, his path to leadership was paved by a fortuitous presidential assassination in 1978, and he maintained power through mob-style ruthlessness. Possessing little formal education, Saleh's street smarts enabled him to play faction against faction, tribe against tribe. He built a vast patronage network with oil revenues and protection money the ever-paranoid Saudis paid him to ensure Yemen remained sufficiently dysfunctional to neutralize any revanchist sentiments regarding lands "Happy Arabia" lost to the Kingdom in the 1930s.¹

Like Saddam, Saleh was susceptible to overreach. His disastrous decision to back Baghdad's 1990 invasion of Kuwait alienated the United States and prompted the Saudis to send nearly one million Yemeni workers back to the recently unified republic. Riyadh exacted further revenge by stoking southern Yemeni secessionist sentiments, igniting a brief civil war in 1994. Washington's cold shoulder persisted until shortly after 11 September 2001, when al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen became its most capable and successful franchise, Osama Bin Laden's ancestral homeland. The U.S. change of heart recalled Franklin Roosevelt's alleged 1939 remark about the wisdom of supporting Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1939: "He may be an SOB, but he's our SOB." The Saudis pragmatically followed suit.

MES Notes

Upcoming MES Lecture

On 21 October 2015 Middle East Studies will host Dr. Zeinab Abul-Magd to discuss "Egypt's Adaptable Officers: Army, Business, and Discontent" as part of the AY15-16 MES Lecture Series "A Survey and Analysis of the Armed Forces and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)."

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The Wasta King

Fortunately for Saleh, Yemen is a land where government matters little to ordinary citizens, particularly outside the capital. People rely on family and tribal networks for food, water, and essential services. *Qat*, a shrub whose leaves—like coca in the Andes—are chewed for a sense of elated stupefaction, suppresses hunger and provides daily relief from misery. In Yemen's remote highlands and *wadis*, fathers and *shaykhs* are the authorities. Sanaa might as well be on Mars.

Unfortunately for Yemenis, Saleh understood this and used intimidation and guile to ensure the powerful tribal confederations were beholden to him for any and all largesse he deigned to share. More than any other leader in the Middle East, Saleh exploited *wasta*—the Arabic term for sweetheart deals and influence-peddling from the verb to mediate or intervene—to make himself the indispensable personality. The security services were prime beneficiaries, and he installed his son and heir apparent—Ahmed—as head of the Army's elite Republican Guard force. Noncompliant tribes like the Houthis, the post-Saleh success of whose rebellion exposed the hollowness of Yemen's government institutions, were crushed.

Forced Out

By 2011, however, Yemenis had had enough. Dwindling oil revenues and rapid population growth cut into the already meagre flow of Saleh's trickle-down despotism. Inspired, in part, by the "Arab Spring" uprisings elsewhere in the region, citizens took to the streets to demand change. Months of protests and bloody confrontations ensued, with the president showing no inclination to tap the billions the United Nations Organization later alleged he amassed during 33 years in power. Led by Saudi Arabia, the six member-states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) finally forced Saleh—unbowed by an assassination attempt in June that seriously wounded him—to the negotiating table in late 2011. A weak and divided Yemen was one thing, Riyadh seemed to reason; chaos that gave al-Qaeda a freer hand quite another.

Saleh formally ceded presidential powers to Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, a Sunni, in February 2012. Critically, however, Ahmed and other Saleh relatives remained in key positions, and UN Special Envoy to Yemen Jamal Benomar (who resigned in April 2015) revealed that the terms of the GCC deal did not preclude either Saleh or his son from seeking office. By 2014, with the country's economic decline exacerbated by low oil prices, the Houthis—radicalized by the Iraq war and key players in the 2011 uprising—launched their rebellion, alleging the government cooperated with Sunni extremists and was hostile to Zaydi Shi'ism, the religion of some 35 percent of Yemenis, including Saleh. Tehran, has thrown its support behind the Houthis, but this does not equate to allegiance: A cliché about Yemenis holds that you may rent them, but you can't buy them. Many, if not most, Zaydis—like their Sunni Arab brethren—distrust the "Persians" for historical reasons and are not attracted to Twelver Shi'ism which is practiced by the majority of Iranians.

The Enemy of My Enemy...

Saleh and his son (who was fired by Hadi but remains popular within the military) allied with the Houthis, their erstwhile enemies. They provided the muscle, in the form of breakaway Army units and tribal militias, enabling the Houthis to conquer Sanaa and much of the rest of the north, displace Hadi (who in March 2015 fled to Saudi Arabia), and threaten Aden. Saleh is motivated neither by love of Zaydi Shi'ism nor of country. Rather, as repeated revenge attacks on those who supported his ouster demonstrate, he seeks to return to power. Assuming this cannot be accomplished directly by his restoration as president, then—as rumors in Sanaa long have maintained—Saleh would be content for Ahmed to take the helm while he calls the shots behind the scenes, effectively establishing his dynasty.

Hadi and his rump government are backed by the Saudis. Since late March, Riyadh has led a coalition in conducting air strikes against Houthi/Saleh targets in Yemen and blockading the country's ports. In June, representatives of Hadi's government and the Houthis undertook indirect talks in Geneva, ostensibly to discuss implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2216, which, among other things, calls for the Houthis to withdraw from Yemen's major cities. The hope for a "breakthrough", about which UN Special Envoy Ould Cheikh Ahmed enthused during an interview with *Al-Jazeera* on June 8, did not materialize.² Indeed, the same day, Hadi pointedly ruled out both negotiations and reconciliation with the Houthis, reiterating his position that the Geneva sessions

were “just a discussion” and calling Iran “more dangerous than al-Qaeda.”³ The talks ended days later with no appreciable progress having been made.

Efforts to impose a UN-brokered “humanitarian truce” during Ramadan proved equally feckless. At the end of the fasting month in mid-July, the Saudi-led coalition launched a ground offensive featuring the introduction of armor and 3,000 troops from the United Arab Emirates. Apparently reenergized, pro-Hadi forces—including Southern Resistance fighters—quickly recaptured Aden and pushed north to engage the Houthis at Ta’iz, Yemen’s third-largest city, and Ibb en route to lay siege to Sanaa. Saudi and Emirati aircraft, meanwhile, have continued to pound the Houthis, including at al-Hudaydah, the capital’s primary port and one of the few entrepôts for deliveries to 14 million Yemenis residing in the north. Despite optimism in Riyadh that the Houthis soon could be surrounded and forced back into the highlands near Sa’da, north of Sanaa, it remains too early to celebrate. The Southern Resistance, comprised of secessionists who seek the reestablishment of an independent southern state, helped push the Houthis out of Aden in pursuit of its own agenda, not the Al-Saud’s or Hadi’s. More disturbingly, al-Qaeda, elements of which reportedly also cooperated with the Saudi coalition, has asserted control over key parts of Aden.

Danse Macabre

By any measure, Yemen is a failed state. Even before the current fighting began, it was the Middle East’s poorest nation, with a per capita GDP of \$3,900 in 2014, according to the CIA’s 2015 *World Factbook*.⁴ It faces a severe water shortage; the UN estimates that 9.4 million of the country’s 26 million people have little or no access to water. On 1 July 2015, the UN declared Yemen to be a Level-3 emergency, putting it on-par with Iraq, Syria, and South Sudan. UN officials report that more than 21 million Yemenis need aid and nearly 13 million face a food-security crisis.⁵ Death and dispossession abound: Yemen’s Ministry of Health claims that, between 19 March and 15 June alone, 2,800 Yemenis were killed and 12,500 injured in fighting;⁶ the *BBC* reports that some 5,000 people, including 2,355 civilians, have been killed since 26 March.⁷ The country has 1.3 million internally displaced persons, according to according to a top UN humanitarian affairs official.⁸

For all his truculence and disregard for the suffering of citizens amid the ongoing Saudi-led airstrikes and blockade, Hadi—who on 22 August proposed for a 15-day humanitarian ceasefire on condition the Houthis withdraw from all provinces, cities, and government and military facilities that they hold—is a bit player in Yemen’s *danse macabre*. Tehran deserves credit for lending credence to Saudi fears of Persian predations in the Arabian Peninsula. The Al Saud, apparently oblivious to the U.S. experience in Iraq and proving once more that history rhymes, launched their war-of-choice in the mistaken belief most Yemenis would welcome liberation from the Houthis. Instead, the conflict has intensified Yemenis’ longstanding loathing of their northern neighbors, exacerbated the country’s regional divide, and earned the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia worldwide opprobrium for—among other things—its use of cluster munitions. Princes in Riyadh, in particular thirty-year-old Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Muhammad bin Salman—architect of the war and third in line to the throne—appeared to have abandoned hopes for a quick victory and doubled down on the use of overwhelming force.

Drawing the Curtain

But the undisputed star the Yemen tragedy is Saleh. Without his deep pockets and web of well-placed, well-armed cronies, the Houthi movement likely would still be a tribal mutiny confined to Sa’da. The former president’s keen understanding of his own countrymen—not to mention his unparalleled knowledge of how to push the Saudis’ buttons—have ensured the failure of all efforts to reach a negotiated settlement. Although he publicly backed June’s Geneva talks, Saleh—under UN sanctions for supporting the Houthis—likely advised his allies privately to take a hardline in order to reinforce his role as Yemen’s indispensable personality. Absent an agreement setting the stage for his restoration or providing a pathway for Ahmed to become president, Yemen—at least on Saleh’s watch—will not experience peace anytime soon.

Indispensability, as Saddam’s demise demonstrated, is a two-edged sword. By keeping himself at the center of the mess that is Yemen, the former president has provided his enemies with a clear—albeit difficult-to-accomplish—option for cleaning it up: Get Saleh. No doubt the Saudis and others have him at or near the top of their most-wanted card deck. But it is less certain they grasp how

fundamentally the capture (or killing) of Saleh and his son would alter the situation on the ground. First, those beholden to Saleh's considerable financial clout are unlikely to continue fighting for free. This includes the breakaway armed forces units as well as the various tribal militias that have sided with the former president and the Houthis. Second, the Houthis—though backed by Iran—rely heavily on Saleh's wealth. Without it, and the men and matériel it affords, the movement would be unlikely to maintain effective control over the country. Third, and perhaps most importantly from the Saudi perspective, getting Saleh (and *fil*) would redeem, and hasten the end of, a military venture the Kingdom can ill afford amid depressed oil prices. Riyadh could cast the decades it spent alternately rewarding and punishing their incorrigible client as a herculean exercise in forbearance brought finally and decisively to closure.

Unquenchable Thirst

Saleh almost certainly understands the stakes. He no doubt is alert to stratagems intended to draw him into the open and can count on his network to provide safe-havens throughout Yemen as well as operational security sufficient to stay one step ahead of his enemies. But there are two vulnerabilities the Saudis can exploit. First, for all his wealth, Saleh is a pauper compared to the Al Saud. They have the means to hire the services of the priciest of the former president's loyalists. Second, as a past master of personality politics, Saleh—like his late Iraqi idol—has an unquenchable thirst for recognition. If power corrupts, then fame intoxicates even the most savvy, seasoned survivor; Saleh, lying low at the moment, will be unable to resist the limelight's siren song forever.

The element of surprise, something for which the normally cautious Saudis—as illustrated by King Salman's unexpected shuffling of royal succession after assuming the throne in January—seem to have acquired a taste, could be used to set Saleh up. Does Muhammad bin Salman, whose matinee-idol looks belie a reputation for aggression and ambition, have the chops to play Chili Palmer? Perhaps Elmore Leonard can send him the script.

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Notes:

- ¹ Editor's Note: Arabia Felix (Happy Arabia) is Latin the term used to describe southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula, namely Yemen, but also parts of what is today Saudi Arabia in ancient times.
- ² Faisal Edroos, "Q&A: Geneva talks 'could end Yemen conflict'," *Al Jazeera*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/qa-geneva-talks-yemen-conflict-150607213351055.html>.
- ³ "Yemen's Hadi says 'no negotiations' with Houthis in Geneva," *Middle East Eye*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemens-hadi-says-no-negotiations-houthis-geneva-1930209846>.
- ⁴ "Yemen," *CIA World Factbook*, last modified September 24, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/ym.html>.
- ⁵ Edith Lederer, "UN declares highest-level humanitarian emergency in Yemen," *Associated Press*, July 1, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/un-declares-highest-level-humanitarian-emergency-yemen-163209288.html>.
- ⁶ "Yemen conflict: WHO and partners striving to prevent collapse of Yemen's health system," World Health Organization, June 19, 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-conflict-who-and-partners-striving-prevent-collapse-yemen-s-health-system>.
- ⁷ "Yemen conflict: Wedding attack death toll rises to 130," *BBC*, September 29, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34388463>.
- ⁸ Jethro Mullen, "Civilian death toll in Yemen conflict rises above 1,500, U.N. says," *CNN*, July 8, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/08/middleeast/yemen-conflict/>.