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Houthi Expansionism, Internal War, Geopolitics, and the Yemen Quagmire *

by Adam C Seitz

As Yemen's internal war continues to drag on with no end in sight, there is increased risk of miscalculations that may lead to further escalation and internationalization of the conflict. Increased regional and international geopolitical competition, continued efforts to combat the threat of international terrorism and Islamic extremism emanating from the region, and maritime security concerns that threaten the global economy and freedom of navigation have only increased Yemen's strategic importance to the national security agendas of regional and international actors alike.¹ Such considerations have not been lost on Yemen's domestic incumbent and insurgent elites, contributing, in part, to political and military strategies that seek to manage but not entirely eliminate internal security threats that pose challenges to the national security interests of regional and international actors. As such, Houthi expansionism and the ongoing internal war may be better understood in the context of the development of a domestic elite strategic culture that has contributed to perpetual insecurity and internal war in Yemen.

Strategic culture can be described as traditional practices and habits of thought by which military force is organized and employed by a society in the service of its political goals. When viewed through the lens of strategic culture, Houthi expansionism, and internal war in Yemen generally, should not be viewed as an aberration that seeks to change the status quo. Rather, it should be considered a continuation of established political norms and military-decision making institutionalized under the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, which seeks to balance a host of internal and external actors and potential threats within an environment dominated by elite competition and internal factionalization, in the absence of effective state institutions and a clear monopoly on the use of violence by the state.

Such a governing strategy has contributed to the proliferation of militias and other irregular and non-state forces, military factionalization, and increasingly the formation of civil-military relations akin to warlordism, in which military and/or tribal elites exercise civil power at a local or regional level through their influence and control of militias.² Within this domestic environment, the military has played a central role in linking a number of disparate groups to the regime, while at the same time factionalization has allowed for effective divide and rule tactics to shield the regime from reprisal. Furthermore, the dependence of the Yemeni economy on a combination of oil revenues, remittances, and, increasingly, foreign aid has left the Yemeni government vulnerable to external market forces and shocks associated with geopolitical competition. Within this geopolitical setting, internal war and perpetual insecurity threatening regional and international interests have supported a growing war economy and helped to prop up the armed forces as a central player in patronage politics and the economy writ large through its role in the tribal-military-commercial complex and the Yemen Economic Corporation (YECO)—formerly the Military Economic Corporation or MECO—, which has its hands in nearly all facets of the Yemeni economy and serves as a conduit for foreign aid.³

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A combination of British colonialism, eight-years of civil war following the 1962 Republican Revolution between Royalists supported by Saudi Arabia and Republicans supported by Egypt, and Cold War competition between the US and Soviet Union, has played a significant role in shaping Yemeni perceptions of regional and international players and in the development of strategic culture and narratives promulgated by Yemen's military, commercial, tribal, and political elites.

In a survey published by the EU in 2009, the most common response to the question "how is Yemen going to get out of these problems?" was "we'll blackmail our neighbors".⁴ The statement underscores both a domestic understanding of Yemen's economic dependence on external actors and factors, and foreign preoccupation with security challenges in southwest Arabia. Such thinking not only seems common vis-à-vis Yemen's neighbor Saudi Arabia, but can also be observed at the local level—with attacks on oil pipelines and power infrastructure—as well as the international level—especially when considering US and European national security and economic interests. Such interests include the threats posed by international terrorism and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), an expanding Iranian footprint in the region, and a variety of threats to maritime security and the global economy emanating from Yemen and the Horn of Africa.

Yemen's 1994 Civil War, its role in the "Global War on Terror", and the Sa'da Wars underscore the utility of internal war and insecurity threatening the interests of external actors in maintaining and rebalancing patronage relationships, both internally and externally.

1994 Civil War: "Southern War of Succession"

Saleh used the threat posed by socialist forces of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) to unite a number of disparate forces, including members of the Ali Nasir movement—which had fled to the north following a failed coup and civil war in the PDRY in the 1980s—and returning veterans of the Afghan war against the Soviets—who viewed the war against the separatists as an extension of the war against the former Soviet Union and the spread of socialism in the Arab world—to combat southern military forces. Saleh rewarded these groups with political and military appointments that afforded them special access to the sources of wealth in Yemen. Furthermore, the decisive defeat of southern insurgent forces opened up new revenue streams for the regime, and the military in particular, as the armed forces and militias seized property throughout the south. Through their role in YECO, Yemen's officer corps and their tribal patrons have profited from lucrative deals with the lease and sale of seized southern assets.

Yemen and the "Global War on Terror"

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the start of the US-led "Global War on Terror", Saleh sought to manage his relationships with domestic Islamist elements, attempting to minimize his visibility in US counterterrorism operations by relying on a combination of US counterterrorism units, drone strikes and tribal militias to combat al-Qaeda, while at the same time reaping whatever economic and political benefit he could from an external patronage relationship with Washington. Following Saleh's ouster in 2011, Yemen's transitional government led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi doubled down on external patronage relations with Washington and Riyadh, as his domestic weaknesses pushed him to rely on external support to wrestle power from Saleh and his family, and establish his own domestic base.

The Sa'da Wars (2004-2010)

The Sa'da Wars between the Yemeni government and Houthi insurgents opened up new and significant revenue streams for incumbent and insurgent elites. These streams came from an increase in military aid from a number of external sources, a lack of oversight of military budgets and payroll—including the pervasiveness of "ghost-soldiers", who are listed on military payrolls but never or rarely work with the pay being pocketed by military elites and equipment being sold on the black market—and the smuggling of arms, food rations, and diesel benefiting a host of interconnected actors. Additionally, the Sa'da Wars served as a means to rebalance forces and political patronage relations, as evidence suggests that the Saleh family sought to use the Sa'da Wars to discredit, marginalize, and possibly eliminate General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who they increasingly viewed as the greatest threat to their rule and the empire they had created. The Saleh regime's reliance on a combination of regular and irregular forces under the command of General Ali Mohsen, tribal militias, and later Saudi Arabia to pursue the war against Houthi insurgents, allowed Saleh to escape much of the backlash associated with the tribal feuding and sectarian violence that ensued, and left much of the ire of the Houthis directed at those who engaged in direct combat operations against the Houthis, including Ali Mohsen, members of al-Islah party and the Hashid tribal confederation, and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, as mounting evidence surfaced that Iran was providing

support to Houthi insurgents—no matter the true extent of such support—Saleh, and later Hadi, seized on growing tensions between Riyadh and Tehran to garner greater military, political, and economic support from Saudi Arabia.

Ultimately, neither Saleh nor Hadi could withstand the constraints associated with their foreign alliances, and the narrative turned into something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, allowing popular movements, insurgent forces, terrorist organizations, and foreign actors, to expand their influence and challenge Yemen's incumbent elites. But the game seems far from over.

Houthi Expansionism and Internal War in Context

Within the ongoing civil war, the factors outlined above have manifested themselves in asymmetric military strategies that utilize a combination of irregular forces, assassinations and hit and run tactics, and rocket attacks that take advantage of the military and political weaknesses of and divisions between local, regional, and international actors. At the same time, while many Yemenis suffer, a host of intertwined military, tribal, and commercial elites have benefited from Houthi expansionism and geopolitical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran through the growth of a burgeoning war economy propped up by the external military aid to incumbent and insurgent forces alike.

In 2014, Abdul-Qader Hilal, then mayor of Sanaa, highlighted the threat Houthi expansionism posed to Saudi Arabia and regional stability, warning in an interview that “If the Houthis take Amran . . . they will take Sanaa,” and “If they take Sanaa, we will be talking about [stability in] Riyadh a year later.”⁵ For Riyadh, Houthi expansionism is tantamount to Iranian expansionism along Saudi Arabia's long and porous southern border and Iranian control of two of the region's most strategic waterways, which is a nightmare scenario. For Tehran, the conflict in Yemen is a low cost-high reward theater—requiring few resources and providing ambiguity, while distracting Riyadh from Iran's activities elsewhere and straining Saudi Arabia and allied forces, politically, economically, and militarily.

The fall of Amran, which had long served as the capital for the Hashid tribal confederation, to the insurgent forces was a symbolic victory for the Houthis and dealt a significant blow to Riyadh. While Saudi Arabia provided substantial aid to the Saleh regime and continues to support the Hadi government militarily, financially, and politically, Saudi elites have also paid substantial subsidies directly to “tribal and factional leaders” outside of, and sometimes acting in opposition to, the Yemeni government, most notably elites within the Hashid tribal confederation.⁶ Just as alarming for Saudi Arabia were reports that forces loyal to Saleh had aided the Houthis in their military campaign, and less than two months after the fall of Amran, Houthi militias were in control of a number of government buildings in Sanaa, military installations throughout the north, and strategic posts along the Red Sea, including the port city of al-Hodeida. Such military advances by the Houthis and their allies were aimed not only at gaining concessions from the Hadi government and securing access to the sources of wealth but also at positioning themselves to effectively extort Hadi's external patrons. The loss of Saleh and later the Hashids left the Saudis with few viable partners for countering further Houthi expansion, and left Riyadh struggling to find credible allies in northern Yemen. This contributed to a situation in which Yemen's tribal and military elites have essentially been empowered to extort Riyadh, and others, gladly taking handouts in the form of weapons and cash, while providing little to no support to the Saudi-led coalition in return.

On the surface such developments seem to reflect a significant shift in the balance of power in favor of the Houthis, but upon second look Houthi expansionism, and the political and military gains of the insurgents, would not have been possible without the support of Ali Abdullah Saleh and his well-established political, military, commercial, and tribal networks. Military factionalization and the proliferation of militias have provided a great deal of ambiguity and deniability for competing factions within the conflict. This is most apparent in cross border rocket attacks and raids and the threats posed to the shipping lanes in the Red Sea. Cross border provocations and harassment of naval vessels transiting the region serve to reinforce the perception that Yemen's internal insecurity is a great risk for broader regional and international security interests, while also sewing division among the myriad of actors involved in the conflict. With forces loyal to the Houthis and Saleh controlling strategic territories bordering Saudi Arabia, and hugging the coastline of the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb, insurgent forces in Sanaa seek to negotiate from a position of power with those who they see as enabling incumbent elites in Aden—namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the US. With incumbent and insurgent forces essentially locked in a military stalemate, the targeting of external interests by insurgent forces can be viewed as an attempt to break the stalemate by dividing coalition forces and forcing the Hadi government to the negotiating table from a weakened position.

Although maritime attacks staged from Yemen's coast have often been attributed to militias allied to the Houthis—often with support from Iran—the operating environment makes it difficult to ascertain the identity of the

aggressors with great certainty. While protracted conflict has allowed the Houthis to avoid many of the challenges of governing, the Houthis may have less to gain from such provocative rocket attacks than other actors operating in the battlespace as they try to consolidate their power and domestic support around the threats posed by external aggressors, a reinvigorated secessionist movement, and terrorist groups such as AQAP. Rather, Saleh and members of his old guard may have the most to gain from such attacks, as Saleh seeks to reinsert himself as the most capable partner in securing the Red Sea coast and the freedom of navigation.

Saleh continues to wield a great deal of influence within the system he buttressed over the last three decades-plus and has used the opaque operating environment and other factors influencing strategic culture to his advantage. Amidst internal factionalization and geopolitical competition, his alliance with the Houthis has provided Saleh a great deal of ambiguity as to his role in the conflict, with the Houthis, Hadi, Saudi Arabia, and others taking much of the blame for the current crisis. In many ways, this is not so different from Saleh's strategy during the 1994 Civil War, the Sa'da Wars, or the "Global War on Terror". As such, Houthi expansionism is merely a means to an end for Saleh, much as previous instances of internal war and tacit alliances with General Ali Mohsen, the Ali Nasir movement, al-Islah, and members of AQAP, among others, have been at different points in time. The uncertainty that the operating environment offers may ultimately allow Saleh to be perceived as a rock of stability in a sea of chaos, both internally and externally, or at a minimum the least bad option, as his rivals and any credible partners are gradually being marginalized or removed from the political scene.

Conclusions: Geopolitical Competition + Internal War = Yemen Quagmire

While external actors are widely portrayed as waging a regional proxy war in Yemen, and many narratives frame the conflict in sectarian or regional geopolitical terms, in reality what is taking place in southwest Arabia is much more complex. Such characterizations of the conflict are misleading and do not adequately address the enduring role of domestic elite competition, warlordism, and the utility that Yemen's incumbent and insurgent elites place on regional competition and external intervention in pursuing their own domestic political and military agendas. As was the case in the 1994 Civil War, Yemen's role in the "Global War on Terror", and the Sa'da Wars, Houthi expansionism and the current conflict should be viewed as a means of shifting alliances and renegotiating patronage relationships—both internally and externally—and gaining or maintaining access to the sources of wealth. Furthermore, the situation outlined above highlights the utility of perpetual insecurity and internal war as a source of wealth in their own right.

The combination of military factionalization, the proliferation of militias, a burgeoning war economy, and geopolitical competition in a post-Arab Spring and post-Iran nuclear deal environment has empowered fringe groups, terrorist organizations, and warlords alike, making it all the more difficult to negotiate an end to the conflict. The challenge for external actors is how to protect their national security interests and support humanitarian efforts while avoiding costly miscalculations that may lead to further escalation and internationalization of the conflict. The reality is that a military solution to Yemen's internal war does not exist, and to avoid being perpetually trapped in the Yemen quagmire the international community must seek a political solution by applying coordinated pressure on warring parties to negotiate an end to the conflict.

Notes:

¹ For an analysis of the threat that jihadists pose to maritime security and freedom of navigation, including off the coast of Yemen, see Norman Cigar, "The Jihadist Maritime Strategy: Waging Guerrilla War at Sea", *MES Monographs* No. 8, May 2017, https://www.usmceu.edu/sites/default/files/MES/Monographs/MESM_8_MAY_2017_lo.pdf.

² Adam C. Seitz, "Ties that Bind, and Divide: The 'Arab Spring' and Yemeni Civil-Military Relations", in *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition*, Helen Lackner, ed. (London: Saqi Books, 2014).

³ For an examination of the role of the Yemeni armed forces in the economy and the tribal-military-commercial complex see Adam C Seitz, "Patronage Politics in Transition: Political and Economic Interests of the Yemeni Armed Forces," in *Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region*, Elke Grawert and Zeinab Abul-Magd, ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 157-174; and Adam C Seitz, "The Tribal-Military-Commercial Complex and the Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Yemen", in *Addressing Security Sector Reform in Yemen. Challenges and Opportunities for Intervention During and Post-conflict* (Bonn: Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient, Forthcoming 2017).

⁴ Neil MacDonald and Rana Khalil, "Report of the Assessment towards a 'Whole of EU' Approach to State Building in Yemen: Addressing Fragility to Prevent State Failure", July 2009, p. 35. See also Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 74-85.

⁵ April Longley Alley, "Yemen's Terrible War Is About to Get Worse," *Foreign Policy*, 12 October 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/12/yemens-terrible-war-is-about-to-get-worse-saudi-united-states/>.

⁶ See "Saudi can play a role in building a stronger Yemen", *The National*, 8 April 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/editorial/saudi-can-play-a-role-in-building-a-stronger-yemen>.