



Yemen after the Storm

Academic Workshop

Saturday, April 25, 2015

Introduction

The capture of the Yemeni capital Sanaa by the armed militia which calls itself “Ansar Allah”, and which is more commonly known as the Houthi militia, on September 21, 2014, added a new dimension to an already convoluted situation. The Houthis, who have revealed pro-Iranian political and confessional inclinations, have made use of a political fracas typical of the type of transitions which Yemen is witnessing to extend their on-the-ground influence and to forcefully seize state institutions and assets.

During the last 12 months, the Houthis have pushed their Salafi rivals out of Saada—after having previously evicted them from Damaj. They later pushed out the tribal chieftains (“Sheikhs”) of the Bani Ahmar from the Omran area before their final assault on Sanaa. Once the capital was in their hands, the Houthis expanded to the south and the east. Their forceful takeover of the country was sealed with their storming of the presidential palace in January of 2015 and the forced resignation of president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and his cabinet. After six military campaigns spread over a decade, the Houthis had brought their conflict with the Yemeni state to a crossroads.

Local contexts and political complications

The protracted conflict which pits the Houthis against their country’s central government is only one part of a multi-faceted conflict and complete ruin which plagues Yemen, a country which is burdened by poverty and debt and a shortcoming in the provision of health and educational services. Yemen is riven by multi-layered divisions: inter-tribal and intra-tribal conflicts for power; geographical and regional conflicts that pit mountain dwellers against the coastal population and the populations of various regions against each other. These divisions were reflected across the state apparatus. Former president of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh was able to leverage these differences to create loyalists across the institutions of power, particularly in the military and security services.

Additionally, in the long period which predated the country’s reunification (1990), Yemen was home to two distinct forms of government and development models. In the North, tribalism remained the main form of social organization while the market dominated the economy. This contrasts with South Yemen (“the People’s Democratic Republic”) where tribal forms of social organization were weakened and the economy was given over to centralized planning. In the 25 years since reunification, the central government failed to do away with these differences and at one point, the South, long subjected to policies of marginalization, came to be gripped by strong rumblings for secession.

Following the success of Yemen's revolution (2011) and the ousting of Saleh, a new conflict pitted remnants of the *Ancien Regime* against emergent political forces which jostled to secure political influence in the country. While none of the previously active political parties and formations succeeded in winning the support of the youthful revolutionaries who deposed Saleh, a new government, formed after the "National Rally" consensus, was paralyzed by the fact that members of the old guard boycotted the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Islah Party which was one of its main components. In this context, the emergence of the Houthis and their embrace of Iran and of political Shi'ism added additional complications by introducing the element of sectarianism to the Yemeni political scene, a novelty for contemporary Yemen. The rise of the Houthis had also rekindled the conflict between the Zaidi Shia Imamate and the central government, which many had assumed had been consigned to the 1960s.

Regional and global context: another proxy war

Yemen was a battleground for regional conflict even before the Arab Spring. Following the seizure of numerous Iranian weapons shipments, the Sanaa government accused Tehran of supporting the Houthi secessionist movement as far back as 2004. Saudi Arabia supported the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh as a counterweight to this Iranian support for the Houthis, even engaging the rebels in direct combat through border skirmishes from 2009 to 2010. Meanwhile, the United States used drones to wage war against Al Qaeda on Yemeni territory. An understanding with the Sanaa authorities allowed the Americans to maintain this campaign in isolation from the other conflicts that were ravaging the country.

With the birth of the Yemeni revolution, regional conflict in Yemen transformed into an all-out proxy war, with Iran treating the country as one more arena in its pitched conflict with Saudi Arabia and the other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. By controlling Yemen, Iran would be able to encircle the Arabian Peninsula, since it already controlled Syria and Iraq. The behavior of the Houthis did not help calm Saudi's fears. The strengthening of their alliance with Iran left Riyadh with no other option but to intervene preemptively to prevent an Iranian takeover in Yemen, hence Operation Decisive Storm.

The collapse of the state and the rise of militias: the Lebanonization of Yemen

With the gradual diminishing of state power, the rise of tribal allegiances and the transformation of Zaidism by the Houthis from a religious confession into a sectarian identity, Yemen is headed towards a state of affairs marked by parallel systems of government. Indeed, it is possible that such a militia could strip the central government of any real meaning, leaving only a superficial set of institutions in place. A host of domestic and foreign circumstances have allowed the militia allied to the Houthi movement to bolster their military prowess. Analogous to the rise of Lebanon's Hezbollah, the Houthi militia now has the capabilities of a conventional army and the ability to conquer and hold wide swathes of territory—and, just like their Lebanese counterparts, who seized their country's capital in 2008, the Yemeni militia is now in control of Sanaa and huge parts of the country. This turn of events can also serve to foreshadow what will happen in other parts of the Middle East region.

Given the generally tolerant tendencies of Zaidi Islam, and the group's lack of a sense of historical injustice, it is possible that the Houthi movement will not come to be the sectarian representative of Zaidism in Yemen. Another risk which remains distinct and continues to be a threat, however, is the propensity for regional conflicts to become conflated with the fault lines which exist in Yemen: tribal; regional; and the inability of the state to control the army and the ambitions of the military officers, a majority of whom remain loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The moment at hand will be decisive in deciding the future of Yemen and the country's national and social cohesion. If Yemeni political forces are able to arrive at a series of compromises, they may be able to save the country from destruction, fissure and anarchy.

Out of an awareness of the above and its importance to the future of Yemen and to the security of the Arab region and the Gulf states in particular, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies will convene a one-day academic workshop on Saturday, April 25, 2015 in Doha, Qatar. "Yemen after the Storm" will examine:

- The dynamics of Yemen's domestic conflicts
- The regional and international contexts of the Yemeni conflict
- The collapse of the state and the rise of the militia