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## Yemen: Secession Scenarios

LSE Ideas

By Christopher Swift

Three months after the failed bombing of Northwest Flight 253, terrorism has become the dominant theme in Yemen's foreign policy. On 29 March, Deputy Yemeni Planning Minister Hisham Sharaf Abdullah presented a five-year, \$44 billion aid plan to the so-called 'Friends of Yemen' group in Abu Dhabi. And earlier that same day, Yemeni Vice President Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi told a U.S. Congressional delegation that additional bilateral assistance would be necessary to confront the threat posed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

The linkage between economic malaise and Islamic militancy is credible. Thirty-four percent of Yemen's population is unemployed. Forty percent live below the poverty line. And nearly seventy percent is below the age of twenty-four. With water tables receding, oil revenues dwindling, and the population rapidly increasing, conditions are ripe for institutional collapse and popular radicalization. Yet strangely absent from this discourse are the injuries Yemen visited on itself. From endemic corruption to political repression, weak governance also contributes to Yemen's internal unrest.

These self-inflicted wounds manifest in two distinct insurgencies: a sectarian rebellion in the north, and a secular secessionist movement in the south. The former pits Yemen's Sunni regime against Houthi militants from the Zaidi Shi'a community. The latter perpetuates tensions lingering since the 1994 Yemen Civil War. Although the two conflicts have little in common from a sociological or even ideological perspective, each undermines the integrity and legitimacy of the Yemeni state.

Against that backdrop, Yemeni President Ali Abdullal Saleh's recent truce with the Houthi rebels is an encouraging development. That truce is tenuous at best. Since 2004, Sana'a and the Houthi have entered and broken four similar agreements. More significantly, the issues driving the rebellion – religious differences, political disenfranchisement, and economic dislocation – remain unresolved. Yet even a temporary respite from this recurring conflict would free Yemeni security forces for operations against AQAP. And to the extent that the truce quiets sectarian strife, it may also dissuade future interventions from Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Developments in southern Yemen are far less auspicious. Since 2007, the so-called Southern Movement has organized demonstrations and other forms of civil disobedience to protest Sana's policies toward the six provinces that once comprised the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). Yet starting in 2008, those protests grew increasingly violent, with government security forces killing and wounding scores of protestors. By 2009, armed factions within the Southern Movement were responding in kind, with sporadic gun battles breaking out in cities and towns across the south. With tensions mounting, a growing number of southern political figures now demand independence.

Those demands stem from three mutually-reinforcing sources of resentment. The first is the Yemeni government's alleged appropriation and misallocation of the south's oil wealth. The second is alleged discrimination against southerners with respect to government employment, educational opportunities, and other forms of political patronage. The third is the systematic and sometimes brutal repression of political dissent by the Yemeni security forces – repression that invites apprehension from Western donors and condemnation from prominent human rights organizations. These conditions undermine national unity. According to a poll conducted by the Yemen Centre for Civil Liberties in January 2010, seventy percent of Yemenis living in the former PDRY now favour independence.

History also informs secessionist impulses. Although the 1990 merger between the two Yemen's was initially amicable, integrating the two political and economic systems quickly proved contentious. By 1994, the Yemen Socialist Party had broken with the coalition government and reasserted independence. The resulting civil war produced unconventional alignments. Wary of Saleh's support for Iraq during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Saudi Arabia reversed its support for the more traditional north and intervened on behalf of the socialist South. The North responded by recruiting Yemeni veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War in a bid to crush the rebellion.

Those alignments are now reversed. Wary of Yemen's potential collapse, the Saudi government has stepped up bilateral cooperation with Saleh's beleaguered regime. Yemen's Afghan Arabs, in turn, have seized upon North-South tensions to advance their own agendas. Foremost among them is Tariq al-Fadhli, who broke a 15-year alliance with Saleh in April 2009 to join the secessionist movement. AQAP has also entered the fray, with leader Nasser al-Wahayshi calling for the south's secession and the creation of an Islamic state in the region in May 2009.

Working from that basis, some pro-government observers now allege collaboration between the Southern Movement and radical Islamist syndicates. Yet a common cause does not necessarily imply a common scheme. For the socialists, secession portends a return to political power. For tribal leaders like al-Fadhli, independence promises greater autonomy. And for AQAP, sustained civil conflict provides a means of radicalizing and recruiting ordinary Yemenis into its ranks. In this sense, the current convergence of interests masks a set of distinct and ultimately diverging agendas.

Those agendas offer some insight into both the character and consequences of civil conflict in Yemen. Although the Southern Movement may dream of an independent state, it lacks the institutional infrastructure and military apparatus possessed by the Yemen Socialist Party in 1994. And while Saleh's government may wish to preserve national unity, dwindling revenues and mounting resentments undermine the patronage system on which that unity depends. Thus neither the North nor the South is likely to realize its ambitions. And rather than fracturing into two independent polities, the steady erosion of social and political cohesion seems more likely to produce a Yemen that resembles neighboring Somalia.

That scenario may empower tribal leaders. To the extent that national governance becomes intolerable or ineffectual, traditional social and political structures will invariably fill the void. This observation may help explain al-Fadhli's break with Saleh and subsequent calls for independence. Yet the real beneficiaries are al-Wahayshi and his allies in the Hadhramaut valley. So long as Yemen's internal conflicts remain unresolved, the state will be unable to address the social and economic hardships that undermine public order. And so long as that order is in disarray, AQAP stands to profit from the discord.

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