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YEMEN'S URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE AND THE ULTRA-LOCALISATION OF THE CIVIL WAR

Workshop Proceedings | July 2017

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Executive Summary

In 2015, civil war broke out in Yemen, swiftly followed by military intervention by a Saudi-led coalition intended to restore to power the deposed but legitimate government. Yemen was already the poorest country in the Middle East before the start of the fighting, with high levels of food insecurity, infant mortality and child malnutrition, and during the past two years, macroeconomic conditions have severely deteriorated. The majority of Yemenis live in rural areas, yet policy-oriented research and media reporting on the current conflict tend to focus on the situation in major cities.

On 29 March 2017, the LSE Middle East Centre convened a workshop to explore the scale of need of Yemen's population, and to look at the extent to which rural and urban livelihoods were directly affected by the fighting as well as changing market conditions. Eleven specialists on Yemen, including academics, activists and members of the NGO community, presented short papers and contributed to the discussion. Colleagues from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development were also present.

The workshop was split into four sessions. The first sought to provide an overview of macroeconomic conditions throughout the country. The second session explored the specific situation in Saada governorate, a predominantly Zaydi governorate in Yemen's northern highlands, bordering Saudi Arabia. The third session focused on Taiz governorate, Yemen's most populous governorate, located in the central highlands. The final session addressed micro-politics in Aden, Marib and Mukalla, three provincial capitals in governorates with majority Sunni populations.

This report provides a summary of the presentations, as well as the key themes that emerged during the discussions. Participants found that armed struggle for control of Yemen's institutions and economic resources is a key driver of conflict, and that alleviation of the humanitarian crisis requires urgent stabilisation of the commodity supply chain, which depends heavily on commercial imports of fuel and grain. Disruption to the commodity supply chain affects both rural and urban populations, but rural communities – due to their distance from commercial ports and main markets – are more adversely affected.

The Urban–Rural Divide: An Overview

Nineteen million Yemenis, more than 70 percent of the population, live in rural areas. Rural livelihoods are highly dependent on agriculture and since the late 20th century, also on remittances from male workers in Yemeni cities and Saudi Arabia. Rural living standards declined in the years prior to widespread anti-corruption protests in 2011, including in provincial capitals, and further deteriorated during Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi's interim presidency from 2012 onwards.

Due to a long-term shift in methods of crop cultivation from traditional rain-fed agriculture to irrigation-based systems as a result of policies promoted by international development institutions, Yemen relies heavily on the commercial import of staples, such as rice and wheat, to meet its basic commodity needs. Imported grains arrive at the coastal ports, from where they are trucked by road to remote rural towns and villages. Since March 2015, the commodity supply chain has been acutely disturbed: first, as a result of shipping restrictions and fighting for control over the ports; secondly, as a result of rising fuel prices, which affect the cost of transport, further inflating rising food prices; and thirdly, as a result of fighting and security rents extracted by armed groups who control multiple checkpoints on the main transport routes.

Coalition airstrikes on agricultural sites have further disrupted food production, including food processing and storage units. Data sets produced by the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation¹ for the period March 2015–August 2016, as well as the Yemen Data Project,² which covers strikes from March 2015 to March 2017, show that agricultural land was the target most frequently hit in every governorate with the exception of Shabwah and al Mahwit (where the road to Sana'a was the main target). A further study conducted by the International Labour Organization in January 2016 found that internal displacement mainly affected the rural population, and had caused the agricultural sector to lose almost 50 percent of its workers.³

¹ The Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation is based in Sana'a but the data came from extension officers in the respective provinces sent in on a form provided to them.

² *Yemen Data Project*. Available at <http://www.yemendataproject.org/>

³ 'Yemen Damage and Needs Assessment: Crisis Impact on Employment and Labour Market', *International Labour Organization* (January 2016). Available at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_501929.pdf

In August 2016, President Hadi moved the headquarters of the Central Bank of Yemen from Sana'a to Aden. Although this move brought the Central Bank under formal administrative control of the legitimate government, it also triggered widespread capital flight from the formal banking sector to the informal sector. As trust in the formal economy has collapsed, the black market has expanded exponentially, with profits accruing to the commanders of rival armed groups.

Case Studies

Saada Governorate

Saada city has functioned as the spiritual and political capital of Zaydi Shi'ism since the ninth century. The Ottomans occupied the Saada area in the 19th century but left Saada city untouched. Between 2004 and 2010, Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh prosecuted an erratic civil war in Saada against the Houthi family and their followers, who emerged as an offshoot of an indigenous Zaydi revivalist movement. Successive bouts of fighting caused significant internal displacement, property damage and disruption to agriculture.

Despite having fought the Houthis during the last decade of his presidency, Saleh formed an expedient alliance with the Houthis after leaving office and together, they forced President Hadi to flee first from Sana'a to Aden, and then from Aden to Oman and Saudi Arabia. In May 2015, the Saudi-led Coalition declared Saada city a military target, and pursued a strategy of collective punishment designed to weaken the Houthis' civilian support base. Operational challenges for humanitarian agencies working in Saada governorate, including those who maintained a presence during Saleh's presidency, have intensified. The bombing of hospitals has disrupted healthcare provision, while restrictions on movement – due to the risk of aerial bombardment, as well as the high cost and low supplies of fuel for transport – have affected aid agencies and local populations alike.

The current conflict takes place in the long-term context of religious nationalism. Since the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has sought to homogenise Islamic thought on the Arabian peninsula and Saudi-sponsored *da'wah* – or proselytising – in Yemen has centered on Saada and Marib, with the goal of destabilising indigenous social and religious networks, and undermining Zaydism. This, in turn, has provoked Zaydi revivalism, and the current war further inflames religious identity politics.

Taiz Governorate

Taiz is Yemen's most populous governorate, with a notable commercial and industrial sector. Taiz city is the third largest metropolitan area in the country. Socially, Taiz straddles the traditional fault line between areas of Zaydi Shi'a observance to the north and Sunni Shafi'i observance to the south. Since summer 2015, Taiz has formed the frontline between Saleh–Houthi forces and Coalition-backed resistance forces, and in recent months, the battle has intensified for control over the western coastline, including the Red Sea ports of Mokha and Hodeidah, and the Bab al Mandab Strait, a global maritime choke point.

The majority of the population in Taiz governorate is under 18. Young Taizis played a significant role during the nationwide street protests that led to Saleh's departure from power in 2011–2012, and supported the subsequent transition process. However, in the absence of a viable political process, there is no longer a political context within which they can participate. Insecurity, rising poverty and high unemployment further restrict their ability to contribute to public life. As a result, Taizi youth activists have shifted their focus to grassroots relief activities.

Youth and civil society groups in rural areas face additional challenges, such as high levels of conscription into fighting forces and high levels of displacement. Both of these factors have disrupted community cohesion in rural areas, and for these reasons, urban community groups inside Taiz City have proven more resilient. At the same time, Taiz City – which is densely populated, and the site of heavy fighting itself – absorbs high numbers of displaced people from the rural areas, including those who come for treatment in the city's struggling hospitals.

Cities in Sunni-Majority Areas

Micro-politics in the cities of Aden, Marib and Mukalla are highly localised. Aden, Yemen's second largest city and a deepwater port, is home to a 'green zone' style complex hosting Yemeni government ministers. Marib, strategically located as a gateway to the oil and gas fields in the western desert provinces, functions as a supply hub for Coalition and resistance forces entering Yemen from the Saudi border to the north. Mukalla, briefly controlled by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in alliance with local tribal leaders, was recaptured in coordination with Emirati forces in 2016.

Aden

The supply of basic services, such as water, has been severely affected, leading in turn to outbreaks of cholera and acute diarrhoea. De facto decentralisation has enabled local authorities to deliver some services on the ground, with the result that local authorities are often more active and effective than the relevant line ministries in President Hadi's government. The recent Central Bank relocation has disrupted civil service salary payments because employee payrolls have not yet been transferred from Sana'a to Aden.

Marib

A similar process of de facto decentralisation is taking place in Marib, with tribes and local administrators assuming many functions of the state. Marib is hosting high numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs), which places strain on the small number of hospitals and schools in this sparsely-populated governorate. Security challenges remain acute, including missile strikes targeting Coalition forces and the assassination of military commanders.

Mukalla

The inhabitants of Mukalla, the provincial capital of Hadhramaut, hold a strong sense of frustration at the degree of centralisation during Saleh's government, as well as a tangible sense of Hadhrami identity. There are rising expectations that Mukalla, and Hadhramaut, will be afforded more autonomy, including a greater share in revenues of Hadhrami oil, in any future peace agreement.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Yemen is mired in a complex civil war with multiple domestic drivers, creating unique conflict conditions at the local level. This is complicated by competing regional interests, including the struggle for real and perceived power projection between the Arab Gulf states and Iran. Notably, in the course of a full day's expert-level exchange of views and information, Iran's role was barely mentioned. While Iran was understood to maintain leadership-level ties with Saleh and the Houthis, Iran's material impact on conflict at the local level was assumed to be minimal, or lay beyond the specific expertise of the group.

One clear cross-cutting theme that emerged during the workshop is that while a political solution remains elusive, Yemen is fragmenting by default. This issue of de facto decentralisation will have to be addressed, if not formalised, in any final peace agreement – and to a certain extent, the outcome is likely to be influenced, if not determined, by the preferences of neighbouring Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. However, their ultimate strategic objectives in Yemen, and the wider region, remain opaque.

Another cross-cutting theme was the question of gender, especially in relation to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), the role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and how to support genuine scope for women's political participation at all levels, as well as in civil society activities. The majority of Yemen's IDPs are women and children, and one recent study on the impact of the current conflict on women revealed that Yemen's IDPs are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, including prostitution and underage marriage. Reports suggest that armed groups are also using SGBV as a weapon of war.⁴

Conclusion

The state of the economy in Yemen remains a matter of high importance, both in the sense that armed struggle for control over the country's remaining institutions and economic resources is a key driver of conflict in itself, but also in the sense that alleviation of the current humanitarian crisis requires urgent stabilisation of the macro-economy. Disruption to the commodity supply chain affects both rural and urban populations, but rural communities, due to their distance from commercial ports and main markets, are more adversely affected. Meanwhile, Yemen presents a challenging operating environment for humanitarian actors and famine is imminent. The country further faces a looming environmental crisis, driven by falling oil production, chronic water shortages and the inability of the land to sustain a growing population.

⁴ Marie-Christine Heinze and Marwa Baabbad, 'Women Nowadays do Anything.' Women's Role in Conflict, Peace and Security in Yemen', *Saferworld Report*, June 2017. Available at <http://tiny.cc/xqtzmy> (accessed 28 July 2017). At the time of the workshop, the report was yet to be published but some key findings were shared verbally.

In the short-term, there is a need for better understanding of the informal coordination mechanisms that exist between local authorities and individual powerbrokers in cities like Aden, Marib and Mukalla that fall under the nominal control of the legitimate government but effectively operate independently. Longer-term negotiations over fiscal decentralisation will require a meaningful and lasting agreement on the contested issue of revenue sharing. Failure to achieve binding consent for any such bargain – like President Hadi’s failure to attain agreement on his draft federal constitution in early 2015 from key armed groups, notably the Houthis – will likely drive yet another cycle of conflict.

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