



## YEMEN AND THE HUTHIS: GENESIS OF THE 2015 CRISIS

Noel Brehony

To cite this article: Noel Brehony (2015) YEMEN AND THE HUTHIS: GENESIS OF THE 2015 CRISIS, Asian Affairs, 46:2, 232-250, DOI: [10.1080/03068374.2015.1037162](https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2015.1037162)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2015.1037162>



Published online: 09 Jun 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 484



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# YEMEN AND THE HUTHIS: GENESIS OF THE 2015 CRISIS

NOEL BREHONY

Having completed a PhD on Libya, Noel Brehony spent two years conducting post-doctoral research on the West Bank before joining the FCO, where he worked mainly on the Middle East with postings to Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan and Egypt. He later became Director of Middle East Affairs at Rolls-Royce plc. He has been chairman of a number of societies connected with the region, including the British Yemeni Society and the Anglo-Jordanian Society. His book on the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, *Yemen Divided: the story of a failed state in South Arabia*, was published by IB Tauris in March 2011.

The launch of air strikes on 26 March 2015 against targets in Yemen by Saudi Arabia, its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies and others marked a new and dangerous phase in a crisis in Yemen, signalling the final end of the political transition arrangements agreed in 2011. The rapid and unforeseen evolution of the Zaydi Shi'a Huthi movement from a regional insurgency in the 2000s to its coup on 6 February 2015 transformed the political landscape. On 21 February, President Hadi, who had resigned along with his cabinet on 22 January, escaped from house arrest in Sana'a to Aden, where he withdrew his resignation (parliament had not met to accept it as required by the constitution), condemned the Huthi coup and declared Aden as the temporary capital of Yemen. The Huthis, after taking control of military bases in the important city of Ta'izz, were close to entering Aden on 25 March, forcing Hadi to flee and leading to the call for international intervention. In this article, I examine the history and the events that have led to the intervention on 26 March.

## Yemen before 1990

Before unity in 1990, Yemen had rarely been ruled by a single regime. From the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Qasimi Imams, based in the northwest highlands, briefly extended their control into the south and east, but by

the time the British arrived in Aden in 1839 the tribes in what became South Arabia were organised in independent sultanates, emirates and shaykhdoms. As the British expanded their influence from Aden they encountered renewed advances by the Imams and the Ottomans (who occupied parts of Yemen for a second time in 1871–1918), leading to an agreement in 1904 to establish the borders of what became North and South Yemen. The Imam, weakened by the loss of his northern provinces to an expanding Saudi power, confirmed the borders in 1934.

The overthrow of the Imam by a group of military officers in 1962 led to the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), but it was wracked by eight years of civil war between republicans, assisted at one stage by up to 60,000 Egyptian troops, and the royalist supporters of the Imam, backed by Saudi Arabia. In the south, the National Liberation Front, backed by the YAR regime and the Egyptians, took power in 1967, renaming the country as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1970 and transforming itself into the Marxist Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP). The regimes in the north and south developed in starkly contrasting directions whilst remaining deeply entangled in the affairs of each other and continually proclaiming their commitment to the unity of Yemen.<sup>1</sup>

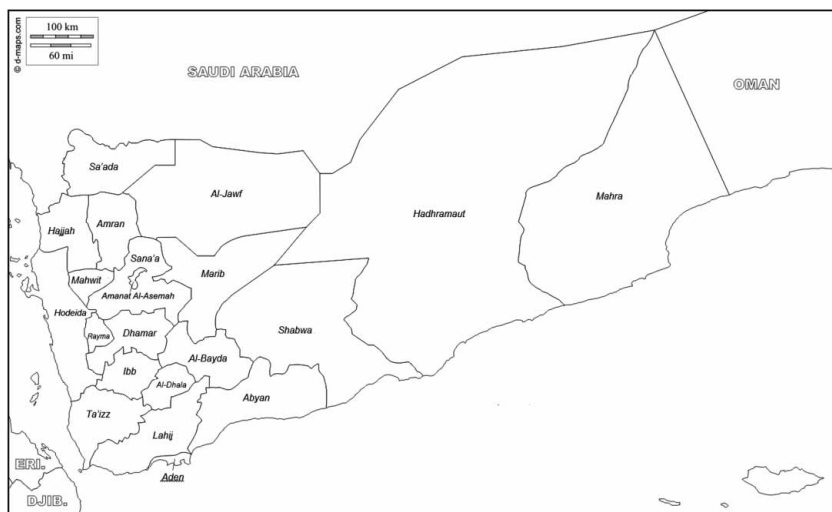


Figure 1 Provincial map of Yemen.  
Source: d-maps.com

## The YAR and the Saleh regime

Ali Abdullah Saleh was the architect of the YAR regime and remains one of Yemen's most influential politicians. He came to power in 1978 following the assassination of his two military predecessors in the previous nine months. After a very uncertain beginning he developed a control system that still endures despite his departure from the presidency. At its heart were networks of politicians, military officers, tribal leaders and businessmen, many linked to Saleh's family and his Sanhan tribe, part of the powerful Hashid Tribal Confederation led until his death in 2007 by Shaikh Abdullah al-Ahmar. The Saleh system embraced local elites and groups willing to support him and marginalised those that refused to be part of it. He kept a firm grip on the defence and security forces, commanded by relatives and close allies.<sup>2</sup> Saleh founded and used the General People's Congress (GPC) to win presidential and parliamentary elections. Oil revenues which flowed from the late 1980s helped finance the regime, which became increasingly corrupt.

Shortly after unity with the PDRY was agreed in 1990 Shaikh Abdullah al-Ahmar set up a new political party, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (known as Islah). Though this was in opposition to the GPC, Shaikh Abdullah operated his own networks of influence and he shared with Saleh an interest in preserving the system from which both could benefit. From its foundation Islah, whose core membership is very similar to that of the GPC, took in members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis.

Saleh was skilled at divide and rule. In the 1980s and early 1990s he encouraged Sunni and tribal Islamic militias to counter the influence of Marxists. When these became too powerful in the 1990s he appeared to allow the Believing Youth, which later became the Huthi movement, political space to develop. Similar games were played in tribal and regional disputes. In the Huthi wars of the 2000s the brunt of the fighting was taken by General Ali Mohsen's First Armoured Division, a man from Saleh's village but one associated with Islah, leading to speculation that Saleh wanted to undermine a potential rival, whilst keeping other forces commanded by close relatives away from the front line.

The Saleh regime functioned as long as there was enough money to maintain the patronage networks and provide ordinary Yemenis with the hope, if not reality, of a better life. Oil revenues peaked in 2003 but have since declined rapidly. External aid was available but donors demanded

reforms that would undermine the corrupt system and opaque decision-making. Whilst Saleh and his cronies were enriching themselves ordinary Yemenis suffered declines in already low living standards.<sup>3</sup> People in Sa'ada and in the former PDRY were most affected by political and economic marginalisation, which contributed to the emergence of the Huthis and of the Southern Movement, known as al-Hirak.

After 2000 co-operation to share the spoils turned into competition for them. Islah joined with smaller parties to form the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), which opposed the GPC with much greater vigour. The strains were contained as long as Shaikh Abdullah al-Ahmar lived. His death brought into greater prominence his sons, notably Sadiq and Hamid, as potential rivals to Saleh, who was grooming his son Ahmad as his successor. Relations between Saleh and Ali Mohsen deteriorated over the control exerted by Ahmad over Special Forces and the Republican Guards and by Saleh's relatives in the security services and the Air Force.

### **The PDRY and unity**

The YSP provided its citizens with an effective and largely incorrupt administration able to provide the rule of law and relatively good government services to most parts of the country. Aden set out to abolish tribalism. The Soviet Union helped transform the PDRY's military whilst the regime's attempts to export its revolution to its neighbours alienated the Gulf regimes. In contrast the YAR regime until the early 1980s struggled to extend its authority over a deeply conservative and Islamic society, where tribalism and Saudi influence were strong.<sup>4</sup>

Despite their rhetoric, Sana'a and Aden gave priority to shoring up their own powers; each wanted unity only on its terms. They were so deeply entwined that each acted as if it had the right to interfere in the other's affairs. Border wars in 1972 and 1979 were followed by unity agreements that were never seriously pursued. Until the early 1980s, the two states were of roughly equal strength; the population of the YAR was four times larger but the PDRY was better organised politically and militarily in the 1970s.

During the 1980s the balance of power shifted to the north as the Saleh regime consolidated and the YSP was riven by internal divisions. Despite the PDRY's disavowal of tribalism, the principal leaders built

their power bases from tribes within their home regions. Having taken power by the gun political rivals used bullets on each other. In January 1986 the rivals fought each other in a civil war that killed up to 10,000 people and shattered the economy.<sup>5</sup> Ali Nasser Muhammad, the loser, fled to the north with his followers, leaving his surviving enemies in Aden to manage a system that had lost much of its legitimacy. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 deprived Aden of its major source of external support and exposed the bankrupt regime's failure to build relations with its wealthy Gulf neighbours.

YSP leaders concluded that their salvation lay in a federation with the YAR – spurred by the economic gains of being able to exploit oilfields that lay across their borders. A confident President Saleh could see that the time was right to press for unity. Instead of the expected confederation Saleh and the YSP leader, Ali Salim al-Bayd, agreed in private talks in December 1989 to full unity to be implemented within a year, later reduced to six months, fearing that if they did not move quickly opposition to the agreement, especially from Islamists in Islah in the YAR, would derail it.

The effect was to stick together in an impossibly short period two deeply contrasting systems, a sure recipe for the troubles that followed. On the face of it the south got a very good deal: the YSP and the GPC would share power for a transition period of two years despite the disparity in population, the Saleh regime bankrolling the large southern bureaucracy. Disillusion quickly set in. Southerners were marginalised and 150–200 YSP figures were assassinated.<sup>6</sup> When the YSP won only 20 per cent of the seats in the 1993 elections Saleh made it clear it could not continue to share power equally – the Islah founded in 1991 also got 20 per cent, enabling Saleh to play his usual game of divide and rule. Al-Bayd retreated to Aden and acted as if there was a separate government there. Northern forces (assisted by Ali Nasser Muhammad's allies) defeated the southern army in the inevitable civil war in April–July 1994.

President Saleh took over the south, extending his methods of rule to embrace initially supporters of Ali Nasser and amenable local elites, but soon favoured the interests of his northern clients, leading to what many southerners called “northern occupation”. The oil and gas in the south were exploited – mostly by associates of the regime – to help finance the extended patronage. Tens of thousands of southern military and security personnel were sacked, civil servants forcibly retired, state enterprises privatised and state land given or sold cheaply to regime

cronies.<sup>7</sup> Aden was not made the economic capital of Yemen as had been agreed in the unity deals. Southerners who co-operated were rewarded – most Yemeni prime ministers have been southerners. Many others have taken jobs in the north, accepting the reality of unity and trying to make it work.

Al-Hirak emerged from late 2006 in protests that were initially organised by former soldiers demanding reinstatement or full pensions. These were quickly joined by young people demanding an end to a perceived bias against the south in the provision of government jobs, hand-outs and services.<sup>8</sup> Overreaction by the security forces led only to greater protests and the emergence of a more organised but divided leadership that called for secession. The YSP, despite its status as the former ruling party of the PDRY, lost support, preferring to barter for a share of power and failing to represent the true feelings of the south.

### **The emergence of the Huthis**

The Huthis are Zaydi Shi'a revivalists. The Zaydis<sup>9</sup> have been in Yemen since the ninth century and dominate the northwest highlands, the origin and source of power of several regimes and the base of the most powerful tribal confederations. Their religious practices differ from those of the Twelver Shi'a elsewhere in the Middle East and are very close to the Sunni Islam of the Shafa'i school of law that spread in Yemen from the 12<sup>th</sup> century (though it arrived before Zaydism). Most estimates are that the Zaydis form 25–30 per cent of the population (the figure was closer to 50 per cent in the YAR – the PDRY was Sunni). The two have lived in harmony for centuries.

The Huthi movement originated in the early 1990s in an organisation called the Believing Youth set up by Hussein Badr al-Din al-Huthi.<sup>10</sup> In part it was reacting against the longer-term spread of non-Zaydi jurisprudence but much more against what they interpreted as the betrayal of Zaydi values by the Saleh regime, with the support of Islah and parts of the tribal leadership of the Hashid confederation, leading to the intrusion of Wahhabism/Salafism in their homeland in the Sa'ada governorate. Added to this was a bitter resentment at the economic and social marginalisation of Sa'ada exacerbated by the corruption of the Saleh regime.<sup>11</sup> Increasing militancy and government reaction led in 2004 to the first of six rounds of major fighting between the government and the Huthis, the last of which in 2009–2010 drew in Saudi forces. The Huthis were

never overrun and gained fighting experience and captured weapons from the Yemeni army. It was the First Armoured Division that bore the brunt of the fighting on the regime side, with support from militias associated with the Islah party and tribal militias organised by Abdullah al-Ahmar and his sons. The Huthis remembered this in their 2014 offensive.

## The Yemen Spring

The regime was fracturing by the time the Arab uprisings reached Yemen in February 2011 in the form of most massive demonstrations, with highly symbolic tented camps in the squares of Sana'a and other cities. Though they were organised by young activists, Islah and Sadiq and Hamid al-Ahmar provided logistic support. The key moment came on 18 March when plain clothes gunmen killed at least 50 young protesters. Many of Saleh's supporters abandoned him, including one-fifth of GPC members of parliament.<sup>12</sup> Ali Mohsen announced that his forces would defend the demonstrators. It seemed in mid-2011 (when Saleh survived an assassination attempt) that civil war might break out between Saleh's forces and those of Ali Mohsen, the Ahmar brothers and Islah.

It was this prospect – and a realisation by the protagonists that a civil war could destroy the system from which they all benefitted – that galvanised intervention by the GCC and the international community. Saleh, faced with the loss of support domestically and internationally, was induced to sign on 23 November 2011 the GCC Transition Deal. This required him to resign in exchange for immunity for him and his relatives; but he was allowed to remain in Yemen and continued to be the leader of the GPC. Saleh's Vice President since 1994, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, became interim president pending his election as a leader in a single-candidate contest – held in February 2012 – as part of a two-year transition.<sup>13</sup> A government made up of equal numbers of the GPC and the JMP was appointed. The deal provided for an inclusive National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that would make recommendations for a draft constitution to enable elections to take place in 2013. In parallel, the military and security forces would be re-organised to break up the power and the influence of the networks and make them accountable through professional leadership to an elected government.

A UN Special Envoy, Jamal Benomar, played a key part in negotiating and implementing the transition and continued to act as the principal mediator. Members of the UNSC have shown an unusual degree of



co-operation over Yemen, regularly discussing the country – even going to the extraordinary step of arranging one of its meetings in Yemen in January 2013. It has passed several resolutions, one (2140 of 2014) under Chapter Seven, and has set up a Sanctions Committee, assisted by a panel of experts, to monitor the activities of potential spoilers, with Saleh being first on the list; two others are senior Huthi leaders.

The GCC deal was a bargain within the elites of the Saleh regime. It solved the immediate crisis but proved to be a flawed deal that, despite the good intentions of the international community, marginalised the young activists of the Yemen Spring and gave Saleh the opportunity to undermine the deal.

## The NDC

The NDC was the latest example of a Yemeni practice of widely inclusive dialogues to negotiate solutions to divisive problems. Their recent history should have been a warning: dialogues to end the 1993 crisis between north and south and another in the late 2000s over the organisation of parliamentary elections both took many months and came up with solutions that had already been overtaken by events. On this occasion over 565 delegates participated, half from the south. 30 per cent of members were women and 20 per cent represented the young activists. The Southern Movement was given 85 places and the Huthis only 35, reflecting their apparent importance at the time.

The NDC did not begin until March 2013 and finished only in January 2014. It eventually came up with over 1,800 often conflicting recommendations, which were then passed to another committee to draft a constitution (completed with over 450 clauses in January 2015). Whilst it was successful in involving the delegates in detailed discussions about all aspects of Yemen it proved unable to deal with the crucial issues of meeting southern demands or coping with the expectations – and rising power – of the Huthis. The NDC agreed that Yemen should have a federal structure but President Hadi gave the task of defining those regions to a special (and, in the view of the southerners and Huthis, rigged) committee, which proposed that there should be six regions, four in the north and two in the south.<sup>14</sup> Southerners and Huthis accepted federalism but not the model proposed. Even so, the committee drafting the constitution was told to act on it – a move that the Huthis saw as merely the latest effort to marginalise them.

## **The incomplete restructuring of the military and security forces**

Real change in Yemen cannot take place unless the patronage networks are taken out of the armed services. President Hadi, with the backing of the international community, removed key figures including Ahmad Saleh and many other relatives of Saleh as well as officers linked to Ali Mohsen and Sadiq and Hamid al-Ahmar. The First Armoured Division, Special Forces and the Republican Guard were broken up but the loyalties and networks proved to be too deeply embedded. A very clear example of the problem is the way that Huthis since early 2014 have targeted brigades that are still clearly identified as being associated with Islah and other enemies whilst their takeover of Sana'a was assisted by units still loyal to Saleh. The effect has been to reduce military capability without achieving the stated objectives. This element in the transition has failed.

## **The Friends of Yemen**

The Friends of Yemen, with over 40 countries as well as international organisations, emerged out of a conference organised by Gordon Brown as Prime Minister of the UK in 2010 in response to the threat posed by al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which attempted to bring down a US airline on Christmas Day 2009. It was inspired by a counter-terrorist agenda but the Friends aim to deal with AQAP by helping to build a better Yemen that addresses the economic and social causes of discontent. The Friends agreed to make available nearly \$8 billion, mostly from the GCC states. Saudi Arabia deposited \$1 billion in the Yemen Central Bank to help stabilise the Yemeni Riyal and has provided oil free of charge to the Aden refinery, but much of the money has not been disbursed – reminding Yemenis of the failures of earlier conferences, notably in Paris and London in 2006, to deliver on promises of economic support. The reasons may be sound – donors need to show their taxpayers that money does not get absorbed in the corrupt networks and the security situation inhibits movement of foreigners around the country – but living standards of ordinary Yemenis have fallen to even lower levels since 2011. The Huthis have been able to exploit the discontent and claim to stand up for the rights of people against foreign interference that brings little tangible benefit.

## **Saleh remains important**

A major flaw of the transition process was that Saleh was allowed to remain head of the GPC (Hadi was his deputy in the party) and was

still able to manipulate his military and tribal allies to preserve his power. The GCC deal, based on an assessment of the balance of power in 2011, prevented civil war but had to take into account the reality of Saleh's power. It planned to contain him through the threat of sanctions. Though he and two Huthi leaders, including the head of its militia, have had sanctions applied to them these came late in the day and have failed to deter Saleh (or the Huthis) as he manipulates friends and foes whilst maintaining a low profile. He remains an important influence in the military<sup>15</sup> and demonstrations calling for his son Ahmad to become a candidate in future presidential elections indicate that he still sees himself as a potential king-maker.

### **The Huthis advance**

The Huthis took an active role in the 2011 uprising and co-operated with the political transition without fully committing to it. They used the period between 2011 and 2014 to organise their military and political wings, with some advice and support from Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah,<sup>16</sup> and to extend their influence into neighbouring governments using their militias but also by persuading tribes to ally with them. They aimed to root out the influence of Islah, which in 2012/2013 seemed likely to be the most important player in the post-Saleh Yemen. During 2014 they took over Amran and then Sana'a, targeting military units associated with General Ali Mohsen and Islah and allies of the Sadiq and Hamid al-Ahmar family (who they thought had sent tribal militias to assist the fighting against them in the 2000s). In doing so they formed an unstated alliance with Saleh, who has used his still strong influence in parts of the army and in tribes north of Sana'a to assist or not impede the Huthi advance. This has the hallmarks of his divide and rule tactics – using Islah against the Huthis in the 2000s and since 2014 trying to use the Huthis against Islah. By September the Huthis had occupied Sana'a and controlled much of northwest Yemen.

### **Who are the Huthis? What do they want?**

At the heart of the movement is a group of prominent Hashimi (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) families and tribal leaders from Sa'ada held together by the Huthi family, which has been prominent

in Sa'ada for centuries. The leader, Abd al-Malik al-Huthi, still in his 30s, is as much a religious figure as a politician. He was educated almost exclusively in Sa'ada. There is a council of elders but Abd al-Malik seems to make the important decisions. Whilst part of the Huthi agenda is clearly religious it has not put this in the forefront of its public statements. It wants to restore the prestige of the Hashimi descendants of the Prophet. Some Huthis have become Twelver Shi'a.

Its military wing – which delegates considerable authority to local commanders – has become very powerful, seizing heavy weapons from the military units it has overrun. The political wing, Ansar Allah, has been equally successful, often working through local Popular Committees adopting populist causes – organising protests, for example, against cuts in oil subsidies – and campaigning against corruption. The majority of Huthis are Zaydis but Ansar Allah has branches and supporters in Sunni areas, where it presents itself as being untainted by the corruption of the previous regime. The slogans most associated with the Huthis call for death to America and Israel. The movement regards AQAP as an enemy and accuses it of being part of a conspiracy involving the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafi/Wahhabis, AQAP and, since early 2015, President Hadi and his associates.

Until Hadi's resignation, the Huthis used their militias and Ansar Allah to apply pressure on the government to implement its populist causes without themselves taking responsibility. Thus in September 2014 after capturing Sana'a they forced Hadi to sign the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), which granted them big political concessions in exchange for their agreeing to withdraw from Sana'a. As soon as Hadi had fulfilled his part of the deal the Huthis refused to withdraw, demanding even more concessions until Hadi's resignation, which the Huthis had clearly not expected. With Hadi gone, Ansar Allah is now being forced into the open and clearly finds it more difficult to define what it wants rather than what it does not want. Its leaders speak of political and economic reform, ending corruption, enhancing the role of the state and reducing the influence of foreigners in the economy. Ministers and officials have found the Huthi popular committees that now sit in all ministries lack much experience or understanding of how government departments work. They have repressed protests and abused the human rights of their opponents – just like previous regimes.<sup>17</sup>

## **Taking over other governorates**

The Huthi rejection of the six-federation plan was mostly because their Sa'ada governorate was included in the proposed Azal region, which included Amran, Sana'a and Dhamar (all were under Huthi control by the end of 2014) but did not provide them with access to the sea or to a share of Yemen's oil and gas resources. They now control much of Tihama, including the port of Hodeida, and have occupied much of Al-Jawf. The Huthis entered other governorates in central Yemen using the pretext of providing security for their inhabitants against AQAP terrorists and other enemies. In al-Bayda and Ibb provinces there has been heavy fighting locally often involving tribes with affiliations to AQAP leaders. AQAP is posing as a defender of Sunni Islam against Zaydi Shi'a invaders with the objective of trying to give the conflict a sectarian character. So far this has been resisted but the deeper that Huthi militias penetrate Sunni areas, especially in southern and eastern Yemen, the greater is the risk that the AQAP wish will be fulfilled. The Huthis realise this and seem likely to conclude that once they have removed Hadi from Aden they can negotiate with the tribes.

The Huthis took control of the city of Ta'izz in March 2015 as part of their campaign to drive President Hadi out of Aden. Earlier they had negotiated an agreement with the governor that he would provide security against AQAP and that there was thus no need for the Huthis to enter this highly populous Sunni city and governorate. Military units in the city appeared to be under the influence of Saleh. The Huthi entry was met with big protest demonstrations and the governor resigned, indicating the difficulties the Huthis will face in holding onto this city.

## **The South**

The Huthis said they do not want to occupy the South. Their move on Aden was directed against President Hadi, not the Southern Movement. Hadi was clearly planning to organise resistance from Aden or another part of the south, perhaps his homeland in Abyan or further east. In the last year, tribal alliances in Hadhramaut, Shabwa and Mahra (which were to form a separate region under the proposal for a federal Yemen) have been organising themselves to protect their lands from Huthis and AQAP. These are very large governorates and

are not easy to control. Hadi will want to work with the alliances and prevent the Huthis from taking control of Hadhramaut oil and gas revenues. The Saudis may want to exploit the strong links that many important Saudi businessmen have with the region.

## The Southern Movement

Al-Hirak asserts that southerners want a return to independence, though some might be satisfied by an arrangement in which the south forms a single region in federal Yemen with a referendum after a period of years offering the choice of permanent separation. Divisions over strategy, organisation, and leadership have weakened the movement, and it has attracted little support from the international community. Many southerners, including those who live and work in the north and occupy leading positions in the civil service, the armed forces and the business community, want to remain part of a united country. Part of Hirak participated in the NDC, but all but a rump abandoned the dialogue when the final report called for a federal Yemen of six regions, two in the south. The Hadi regime apologised for the treatment of the south after 1994 and the NDC agreed a programme to reinstate southern officers and officials and address other grievances, though the money to pay for this had not yet been produced.<sup>18</sup>

The divisions within the Southern Movement have become more marked since the NDC, with one group organising a campaign of civil disobedience and the emergence of a militant group in Radfan (Lahij), where the 1963 uprising against the British started. Aden and Mukalla for several months. During and after the NDC the Huthis showed sympathy for the Southern Movement, indicating that they would support a single region for the south. However, recent Huthi advances towards the south has caused some consternation, with several parts of al-Hirak declaring support for Hadi.

In a curious move the Huthis in mid-March 2015 said they would give a visa to Ali Salim al-Bayd, the former PDRY leader. The timing – just as the offensive against Hadi in Aden was launched – suggested that the motive was to weaken support for Hadi. Al-Bayd has been based in Beirut for the last three years operating a television station from the same Hezbollah-controlled part of the city as has the Huthi TV station. Al-Bayd, however, will only accept secession and it seems very unlikely that the Huthis would allow the breakup of Yemen in

this way and the loss to Sana'a of Hadhramaut's oil and gas. However, they may agree to the south becoming a single separate region within a united Yemen – a move which would probably satisfy a majority of southerners.

### **A negotiated settlement?**

Until the start of hostilities on 26 March, Jamal Benomar had been trying to arrange negotiations first in Riyadh and then Doha. A National Salvation Alliance had been set up by the JMP, the southern part of the GPC and a number of other parties to mobilise the political opposition to the Huthis. These parties had been negotiating since late 2014 with the Huthis via Benomar. The real strength of this front is uncertain because of the loss of prestige and capacity of Islah as a result of the Huthi-Saleh attacks against them. Islah remains important at local level and has some capacity to mobilise tribal support as dissatisfaction with the Huthis grow and if there is any breakdown, which seems inevitable, in the Saleh-Huthi alliance. The Saudis have long had good relations with the leaders of Islah but these have been affected in the last two years by Saudi concerns over the influence of a section of Islah which is part of the Muslim Brotherhood (and put on a list of terrorist organisations in 2014). However, there have been signs that Saudi Arabia was revising its view of the Brotherhood and is likely to want to encourage and assist Islah as part of its anti-Huthi campaign.

The hope up to 26 March was that the Huthis would realise that despite their successes they were not strong enough to rule alone or tackle Yemen's dire economic and social problems – and AQAP – without external support. If they continued their expansion they were likely to meet increasing resistance, putting greater strains on their capacity and risking over-stretching their militias. Having taken power in February they would now be held accountable by the Yemeni people if they failed to deliver any better government than their predecessors. They must also have had doubts about the durability of their Faustian pact with Saleh. They would need each other in the immediate future. Saleh still led the GPC, which could provide the experience of government that the Huthis lacked. However, they would fall out sooner or later: tribal alliances can be fickle. Saleh is the most powerful influence in the armed services. He has – or had – presidential ambitions for his son, if not himself.

## Civil conflict?

In March 2015, Huthi control was being contested mostly by tribal alliances in several governorates. Any regime in Sana'a must control Marib with its strategically important oil, gas, pipelines and electricity generation and transmission lines. The Huthis (assisted by military units loyal to Saleh) had been threatening to enter this strategic area since the end of 2014. A powerful tribal alliance was determined to keep both the Huthis and AQAP out of Marib – one of the pretexts for Huthi threats was that AQAP people were entering Marib from al-Bayda. The tribes threatened to blow up oil, gas and power-generating facilities if the Huthis attacked. Saudi Arabia has been sending money into the region and the neighbouring Al-Jawf, to the north, which lies on the border with Saudi Arabia and where Huthi control has not been complete. The Huthis are already fighting in parts of al-Bayda and Ibb. If they mishandle the tribes in the large southern governorates they will stir up resistance and could thus face a series of conflicts, which the Saudis and AQAP will want to exploit for different motives.

The Saudis were reported to be supplying money and arms to tribes in Mahra, Al-Jawf, Shabwa and Hadhramaut from January 2015 to counter the Huthi advance. This suggests that Riyadh and its coalition partners will seek to stir up and exploit tribal groups in many parts of Yemen to fight the Huthis – with the help of Saudi Arabia and its allies.

## What is at stake?

### *Economic collapse*

The humanitarian coordinator in Yemen, Johannes Van Der Klaauw, recently summed up the situation.

Almost 15.9 million people, 61 per cent of the total population of Yemeni people, are in need of humanitarian assistance. At least 10.6 million people are suffering from food insecurity, half of them are suffering from severe food insecurity, and 13.4 million people are not able to get safe drinking water or adequate sanitation facilities. In addition, 8.4 million people lack adequate health care services.<sup>19</sup>

In the longer term the Yemeni population expanding at three per cent annually will reach 40 million by 2030. The populations of Sana'a and Ta'izz and Yemen's agricultural sector, which is still the main occupation



for most people, face an existential threat from Yemen's rapidly depleting aquifers.

Oil exports have fallen from a peak of 441,000 b/d in 2001 to about 160,000 b/d. The rapid expansion of gas exports (around 170,000 b/d of oil equivalent in 2013) has only partly compensated for the decline in oil exports. Hydrocarbons still account for a quarter of GDP and about two-thirds of government revenue, despite the volatility of oil prices. Exports are offset by Yemen's need to import various oil derivatives and the manner in which oil subsidies are implemented. In 2014, revenues from oil exports fell by 37 per cent. The current crisis is again interrupting output, with several foreign oil companies suspending operations and preparing to pull out. The Yemeni Central Bank had reserves of only \$4.5 billion at the end of January 2015, which cover the importing bill for only about four months. Jamal Benomar has warned that there is only enough money to pay for government salaries for another two to three months. Yemen's profound difficulties should provide an incentive for the Huthis to reach a rapid *modus vivendi* with their opponents and for the GCC, which will be most affected by a humanitarian crisis in Yemen, to help them to do so.

### *The terrorist threat*

AQAP was formed in 2009 when al-Qa'ida terrorists forced out of Saudi Arabia merged with the Yemen branch, which had been active since the late 1990s but had re-organised in 2006. AQAP has pursued a global and local agenda as shown by the 2009 Christmas Day attack and its pioneering use of the internet to inspire lone-wolf attacks in the West. It took advantage of the removal of security forces in Abyan in 2011 to create Islamic emirates using a newly set-up insurgency arm called Ansar al-Sharia. This was scattered by a returning military in mid-2012 (assisted by the Popular Committees that were helping Hadi in Aden in March 2015) but has since been active in southern provinces and Sana'a attacking military targets, assassinating senior security officers and robbing banks to finance its operations. US and other Western agencies assess that AQAP is the most dangerous of the al-Qa'ida franchises. They have provided extensive assistance to the Yemeni counter-terrorist forces (the key ones were commanded by Saleh's relatives) with the use of drones to kill leading terrorists.

AQAP working through Ansar al-Sharia seized on the Huthi advance to "protect" tribes in Al-Bayda and Ibb, in particular, working with tribes to

which AQAP had connections. The Huthis have so far got the better of the fierce fighting (both sides have suffered heavy casualties). AQAP aggression is being used by the Huthis as a pretext for entering new areas to “protect” its people from terrorists. The attack on two Zaydi mosques in Sana’a on 20 March killing 142 people is a bloody reminder of the terrorists’ capabilities. It was claimed by the Islamic State Group (ISIS): some AQAP figures announced allegiance to ISIS leader in late 2014.

If there is widespread civil conflict there would be little to stop AQAP from expanding and creating new Islamic emirates and returning to its global agenda. On the other hand, the Huthis, their political opponents, the GCC and the West share a common objective of eliminating AQAP. So far, it has not been possible to build on this because of the current problems, the anti-Western rhetoric of the Huthis, and the decision by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2014 to add the Huthis to a list of terrorist organisations – but it is one potential benefit from a negotiated settlement.

### *Foreign intervention*

The Huthis have isolated themselves by their actions and are now facing the consequences. Saudi Arabia, which had been more concerned by events in Iraq and Syria and countering AQAP, had returned Yemen to the top of its list of priorities in early 2015 and was signalling that it would support international efforts to back Hadi financially, politically and “even militarily”.<sup>20</sup> The Saudis do not want to see what they regard as Iranian lackeys controlling Yemen – although Abd al-Malik al-Huthi has said there have been informal contacts to control their shared border for the last two years.

At the time of writing, it is not clear whether the Saudi-led operation will involve putting Saudi and GCC boots on the ground. The history of the Egyptian intervention in the 1960s and Saudi Arabia’s brief involvement in the anti-Huthi fighting in 2009/2010 show the risks. The aim may be to encourage and support Yemeni opponents of the Huthis to bear the brunt of fighting and to persuade the Huthi leadership that if they want to play a significant role in the future of Yemen they should do so through negotiation. Saudi involvement may provoke Iran to react. Until the Huthi coup, the Iranian investment in the Huthis was low-risk and low-cost. Since 6 February Iran has agreed to provide financial aid to Yemen and to invest in developing Hodeida port and some power stations. A Huthi

military delegation visited Iran and there were reports in mid-March that an Iranian ship was delivering military supplies. The initial reaction from Tehran to the launch of the Saudi-led operations suggests that the Iranian leaders are likely to be very cautious about increasing the risk and cost for an uncertain gain at a time when they are in the final stages of negotiations with the USA and its allies over its nuclear ambitions. It may provide some financial support and military advisers either directly or via the Lebanese Hezbollah. It seems unlikely that it will want to put a major effort into fighting a proxy war not only just with Saudi Arabia but also with a coalition that has substantial naval and air power. Iran's best course of action might be to persuade the Huthis to negotiate now whilst they are in a relatively strong position and not wait until protracted fighting exhausts all participants and inflicts even more suffering on the Yemeni people. Regrettably that seems unlikely. The civil war of the 1960s lasted eight years.

## Conclusion

For a period after 2011 Yemen seemed to be one of the successes of the Arab uprisings with its former president toppled and with the young activists given a voice in reshaping the country in an internationally organised transition. Sadly, much of the Saleh system remains. The transition, despite the good intentions of many of those involved, proved to be little more than an elite pact that did prevent a civil war in 2011, but which, by not giving sufficient attention to the Huthis and the southerners or forcing the removal of Saleh, has ultimately failed. The economy remains in dire straits. AQAP is stronger in 2015 than it was in 2010. On 26 March it seemed that the future of Yemen will be decided, once again, by conflict that will not only cause immense damage to Yemenis and their country but also put at risk Yemen's long history of sectarian co-operation – which is the agenda of AQAP.

## NOTES

1. See S. Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
2. For the history of Yemen see P. Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
3. A report prepared by the UN Panel of Experts to the Yemen Sanctions Committee under UN resolution 2140 (2014) gave details of how Saleh and his associates enriched themselves. It noted that Saleh "is alleged to have amassed assets estimated between

- \$32 and \$60 billion". It detailed how his regime worked and how he exploited the system. Letter dated 20 February 2015 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014) addressed to the President of the Security Council" Available from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/256789321/UN-Panel-Of-Experts-Report-on-Security-Council-Sanctions-Yemen>.
4. For more details on the PDRY see N. Brehony, *Yemen Divided: the Story of a Failed State in South Arabia*. London: IB Tauris, 2011; and H. Lackner, *PDR Yemen: Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia*. London: Ithaca, 1985.
  5. There are still echoes in rivalries among southern politicians of the divisions that led to the fighting of 1986.
  6. At the time these killings were blamed on the Saleh regime but they were later shown to be the work of Yemeni militants returning from fighting in Afghanistan.
  7. The NDC accepted the validity of the southern grievances. President Hadi apologised to the south for the way it was treated.
  8. There are several good descriptions of southern grievances and the emergence of al-Hirak. See for example: S. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: a Troubled National Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
  9. The name derives from Zayd ibn Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Ali, a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through Muhammad's daughter Fatima.
  10. For a detailed description of the origins and rise of the Huthis, see B. Salmoni, B. Loidolt and M. Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2010.
  11. S. Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen*. London: British Museum Press, 2007.
  12. M. Poirier, 'Imaging Collective Identities'. *Arabian Humanities*, 1/2013, 6 March 2013.
  13. The Yemeni government estimates turnout to be 66 per cent but it was much lower in the south.
  14. The two southern regions are Aden (Aden, Lahij and Abyan) and Hadhramaut (Hadhramaut, Shabwa and Mahra). The four northern regions are Azal (Sa'ada, Sana', Amran And Dhamar), Saba (Marib, al-Jawf and al-Bayda), Al Janad (Ta'izz and Ibb) and Tihama (Hodeida, Hajjah, Mahwit and Rayma).
  15. See the Panel of Experts report cited in note 2.
  16. See P. Salisbury, *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*. London: Chatham House Research paper, February 2015.
  17. See the Panel of Experts report cited in note 2.
  18. This was to be funded by donors. One donation was received from Qatar but it appears to have been diverted to pay salaries and meet other costs of the Yemeni government.
  19. See <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/us7475-million-needed-deliver-humanitarian-assistance-82-million-yemenis-2015>.
  20. Prince Turki bin Faisal at Chatham House on 18 March; [http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/middle-east-2015-view-gulf-0?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=5476172\\_Newsletter+-+20150320&dm\\_i=1TYB,39DFW,BIUSNB,BO4Z2,1](http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/middle-east-2015-view-gulf-0?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=5476172_Newsletter+-+20150320&dm_i=1TYB,39DFW,BIUSNB,BO4Z2,1).