

Yemen: State failure by regime support?

I. Introduction

This article considers the causes of conflict in Yemen and poses the following question: can the western states' strategy of providing financial, logistic and military support to the government under President Ali Abdullah Saleh contribute to stabilizing the country, or could it weaken the Yemenite state instead?

In matters of international security, the USA and other western states have been focusing their attention on Yemen since autumn 2009. At a London conference in late January, twenty-one foreign ministers of industrialized western states debated the matter of providing aid to President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his government.

II. Autocratic Regime

Yemen is currently confronted with multiple conflicts. Ever since December 25th, 2009 – the day of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempted terrorist attack on board a U.S. flight – Al-Qaida's increased presence on the Arabian Peninsula (*al-Qa'ida fi-Jazeera al-'Arab*) has been causing greater concern worldwide than the Houthi rebel conflicts in the Sa'dah Governorate. Potentially separatist conflicts in former South Yemen are receiving much less attention than the question of whether Yemen is turning into a training camp for international terrorists.

Though these conflicts each stem from distinct causes, they all have one thing in common: the political environment in which they occur – a weak, yet increasingly authoritarian state. This 'weakness,' however, is nothing new. It has always been the case for tribes in Yemen to have greater access to military resources than the state army, and tribal politics traditionally play an important role both locally and nationally (cf. Swagman 1988). Rather than existing alongside or in opposition to the Yemenite state, tribalism permeates it on various levels.

In the Arab world, Yemen is one of the few countries with a multiple-party system. After the 1994 civil war waged against Yemen Socialist Party members from the south of the country, President Saleh dispensed with coalition partners and gradually began repressing the opposition. As is the case in Syria, Libya and Egypt, political dynas-

ties within the presidential families are the norm. Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, commands the Republican Guards as well as a special anti-terrorist unit. For the past few years, the media has been setting him up as the legitimate presidential successor. Foreign critics of this advancing despotism are silenced with the argument of how important Yemen is to the region's "stability." Any form of armed opposition is denounced as being "terroristic."

The expansion of governmental authority correlates to a growing marginalization of peripheral regions in the north and south of the country. The failing of economic and sociopolitical state resources has been absorbed not only by tribal structures, but also by various organizations of political Islam, including Wahhabi and Salafi groups.

The influence of these groups has been growing since the 1990s, and is helping to shape Yemen's emerging economy. The IMF-decreed "structural adjustment" increased the influence of Islamic banks. Social and cultural anthropologist Paul Dresch, University of Oxford, writes:

"To generate a more active financial system, central government withdrew state accounts from commercial banks, raised bas interest rates, and allowed commercial banks to set their own rates. Money-changers were again cracked down on. The smaller operators were ruined; the larger, who combined exchange with commerce, so dominated the market, however, that their withdrawals threatened to leave commercial banks insolvent, and among these largescale investors and speculators were those who now committed capital to Islamic banks." (Dresch, 2000: 200f)

After the unification of Yemen in 1990, the new regime began to persecute the provinces of former South Yemen, whose widespread secularism conflicted with the current conservative/religious politics. Yet also parts of the Zaidis, who had been ruling North Yemen until the Imamate was overthrown in the 1960s, were now being ostracized both politically and economically. Sa'dah – described early on by Rudolf Strothmann as being the "main base" of Zaidiyya in the north (Strothmann, 1912: 4) – was especially affected by this process of marginalization.

III. Fighting the Houthi Rebellion

In recent years, the Zaidis – a Shi'a sect – began feeling threatened by Wahhabism and the rise of Sunni-Salafi groups, as well as the economic neglect of Zaidi regions in the north.

History provides the inspiration to the Zaidis' struggle against Sunni authority. Yemenite historian Muhammad Zabara described those who staged the revival of Islam (*mujaddid*, plural: *mujaddidin*) for the Zaidis as "restorers-by-the-sword," attaching to them the counterpart of "restorers-by-knowledge" (cf. Landau-Tasseron, 1990: 251). Archetypes like these are never the reason for conflict, but they play a role in the self-perception of present political actors.

Armed conflict in Sa'dah involving Zaidi insurrectionists – commonly referred to as Houthis (*al-Huthiyun*) – coincided with protests against the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. The government responded violently when former parliament member Hussain Badredin *al-Houthi*, then leader of the "religious youth" movement (*shabab al-muminin*), evaded his arrest. He was murdered in September 2004. His brothers, Yahia Badredin al-Houthi and Abdulmalik al-Houthi have since been leading the group. The Houthis enjoy the respect and support of the Sa'dah tribes. The past few years have seen numerous aborted truces between rebels and authorities, most recently in January 2010. After the failed armistice of August 2009, Yemen's military ravaged Sa'dah with a vengeance previously unheard of.

President Saleh publicly declared that he would not stop the war before eliminating the Houthis.

*"We sacrifice many patriotic officers, soldiers and citizens every day. Therefore, no reconciliation, truce or stopping of the war is accepted unless the rebellious group in the Sa'dah governorate is exterminated."*¹

Saleh ordered a large-scale air force operation in which civilian areas were also systematically attacked. This led to a humanitarian disaster widely covered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In late January 2010, Dominik Stillhart, the ICRC's deputy director of operations, stated:

"The conflict in the north of Yemen has been neglected for far too long. The situa-

*tion is made even worse by poverty and a lack of water and food. Most importantly, security conditions have continued to deteriorate, which has also made our work that much more difficult and dangerous."*²

According to the ICRC,

*"Civilians – particularly women and very young children – are the primary victims of the conflict. Many people are trapped by the conflict and without vital assistance as humanitarian organizations cannot reach them because of the fighting. Others manage to flee to safer areas, where as internally displaced people (IDPs) they often stretch the already meagre resources of the communities hosting them. Existing IDP camps are not always safe and sometimes have to be moved."*³

It is practically impossible to acquire an objective view of the skirmishes from a local standpoint. Journalists are hindered from documenting the horrors on site. Mohammed al-Maqaleh, whose Socialist Party website had given an account of victims from Sa'dah's civilian populace, was arrested on September 18th, 2009 and detained without trial. The reporter's whereabouts remained unknown until January 2010, with the government denying his incarceration. Only at the end of January, relatives of al-Maqaleh told Yemeni journalists that security authorities had, for the first time, allowed al-Maqaleh to talk to his family on the telephone for merely a minute and a half.⁴ Numerous independent journalists have also been put under pressure in recent months. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information declared that on January 16th, 2010,

*"Yemen has witnessed the first female journalist to be sentenced to three months of imprisonment for insulting the president. [...] In addition, she was suspended from writing for a year and the editor of 'Al Wasat' newspaper where the articles were published, Jamal Amer, was fined to 10,000 Yemeni Rials."*⁵

The facts are that 5,000 people have died since the combats began, more than 150,000 civilians are on the run, and women have once again become victims of sexual assault in war. By the time Saudi Arabia got involved in November 2009, the situation had escalated into a transnational conflict.

¹ http://www.yementimes.com/defaultdet.aspx?SUB_ID=33028.

² <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/yemen-news-250110?opendocument>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ http://www.newsyemen.net/en/view_news.asp?sub_no=3_2010_01_31_40004.

⁵ <http://www.anhri.net/en/reports/2010/pr0117.shtml>.

It is not only Muslim civilians who are caught between the fronts. The war has also claimed Yemen's smallest religious minority, the few hundred remaining Jews. Ironically, Yemen's Jewish community is based in Sa'dah and Amran, the beleaguered provinces. It is known that Zaidi Imams – particularly Imam Yahya, who founded the modern North Yemenite state – interpreted their leadership position to include the protection of *dhimmi*s (cf. Klein-Franke, 1997: 208). Despite this, there are reports on openly anti-Semitic attacks upon Jews by Zaidi rebels, and the Jewish community is in danger of disappearing as part of the war's 'collateral damage.'

IV. Terrorists and Warlords

In the context of the global war on terror, Yemen's authorities have managed to convince the international media that its various conflicts with Houthis, local tribes and separatist movements in the south represent a 'terrorist problem.' The fact that Al-Qaida has chosen Yemen as its retreat – due to the country's weak state system – has turned out to be an opportunity for the government to mobilize international support, which it uses to achieve its very own political and military goals. The involvement of US counter-insurgency specialists and former Ba'athist secret service officers from Iraq demonstrates the extent to which Western states have let themselves be involved in a nasty local

feud. One is left to wonder whether it is despite, or perhaps because of their war crimes that they have been recruited.⁶

While Saleh's autocratic regime is receiving short-term foreign support in the areas of military, secret service, politics and economy, in the long run this policy can only lead to a faster collapse of the state. A weak government aiming to stay in power is compelled to be more inclusive in its politics and respect the interests of its various population groups, tribes and social classes. This strategy makes it possible to establish the basic structures of a state, and maybe even achieve some democracy. Yet when such a government is backed by Europe and the USA, it can implement sheer military force without concern for its own population. Being endorsed by the USA, the Gulf States and Europe can prove just as fatal as the oil revenue in Iraq or Sudan: untaxed income of a regime leads to a self-empowering authority that no longer needs the people's support, as it can simply buy itself into power. On the other hand, a government erected on the basis of sheer force and corruption is based on shaky premises. In the intermediate term, the rise of local warlords threatens to weaken the state in its entirety. Rather than retract its support and thereby force the government to select a more inclusive policy, the West has doomed Yemenite democracy to an early grave.

V. Bibliography

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⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/yemen/6943108/US-forges-alliance-with-Saddam-Hussein-officers-to-fight-al-Qaeda.html>.