Middle East Insights
Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

Three keys to understanding the Yemeni war

By Susanne Dahlgren

Images of children’s bodies dug up from the rubble after the latest Saudi bomb raid in Sana’a caused outrage throughout the world, including Yemenis who stood alongside the Saudis fighting the Houthi-Saleh coalition. The war has slid into its third year without the world paying much attention to the Yemeni tragedy. Alongside a worsening food crisis and famine, the cholera epidemic has already claimed half a million victims, making the Yemeni case according to the UN, the worst humanitarian crisis today¹. To understand why the current war has become the longest inter-Yemeni conflict to date, I suggest looking at three key political elements that best characterize the conflict. They are first, shifting alliances internally and regionally, secondly, the varying tactics of waging war in the regions together with the emerging forms of local governance, and finally, the global politics of securitization that again, adds to the complex nature of the conflict.

As has been repeatedly told, the war started after the Houthi movement took over the capital Sana’a, sent president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi into exile, and violently invaded areas where they were unwelcome. These developments formed the pretext for Saudi Arabia to militarily engage in fighting and internationalize the war, and as per Saudi propaganda, to halt “Iranian expansion.” However, behind these events in 2014 and 2015 lurked an enduring power struggle which one of its key figures, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, decided to escalate with the risk of war. Politicians in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi today ask if the war is a result of a power struggle, and if the Saudis would be able to end the war (and the alleged Yemeni connection with Iran) if Saleh (through his son) is allowed to return to power. As images from pro-Saleh rallies in Sana’a continue to show, Saleh still commands a large following in the northern part of the country. As this might seem to contribute to ending the war, Saudi Arabia certainly would not settle for such a solution. After all, the Saudis dismissed Saleh’s pledge for help for him to avoid the international sanctions.² The dismissal was one of the key episodes that paved the way to war. Saudis are also said to be bitter towards Saleh for stopping them from building an oil pipeline on Yemeni soil³. To allow either Saleh or his son to hold power would mean that the international community would need to
rethink the sanctions. Considering how hated a person Saleh is on the other side of the civil war, restoring him or his son back to power should not remain an option. As the war endures, Saleh and his son and “crown prince” Ahmad have tried to take advantage of increasingly divided opinion on what to do with the war among Saudi decision makers and its main coalition partner, the United Arab Emirates. A definite split of views among the partners at war is the second scenario by which some Yemenis anticipate an end to war. Part of the disagreements have to do with the Emirati role in the South, a matter I will discuss below. It appears that the Saleh family is not the only one who could conceivably re-enter power; an Emirati plan on the table would see the internationally supported president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi step down and bring in his earlier vice-president and prime minister Khaled Bahah as the new president. This is not a new proposal, but putting Bahah in charge with Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh as his minister of defence reflects the recent regional developments.

Should Saleh through his son be restored to power as a peacemaker, Yemeni unity would hardly be secured. This is the main worry for both Saudi Arabia and the ‘Friends of Yemen’ group, that is the Gulf states, the US and EU. Southerners who throughout the unification of the two Yemens have felt marginalized, have viewed the war as the latest “North-South war.” Thus, going back under Sana’a rule, and most definitely Saleh’s regime, seems like an immediate call for independence. Allowing Saleh to regain power is hardly an option to the Houthi movement either, whose strategic alliance with Saleh has turned out to be a dance on the heads of snakes. The Houthi leaders maintain no illusions of Saleh’s intention to turn his weapons against them, having already experienced this during the six rounds of the Saada war from 2004-2010. Besides, it is said that the Houthis have become power hungry. As they have already proved, they have militarily advanced to entirely new territories and captured the capital Sana’a. These political ambitions cannot be crushed by empty compromises or outright violence. Thus, the fighting would hardly end even if the Saudis suddenly managed to pull out. Negotiating with the Houthis and disrupting the Houthi-Saleh alliance is not on anyone’s agenda. This option seems the least favourable to the ‘Friends of Yemen’ group too, who have embraced the ‘Proxy War’ concept of the ‘Iranian Threat’ as articulated by Riyadh.

The role of the Emiratis in the war has not just focused on keeping Saleh’s son Ahmad, Yemeni ambassador to the UAE, under house arrest, only to release him suddenly in March 2017. They have also sought to assist the Southerners in rebuilding a national army and provide humanitarian and development aid to territories under their command. The Emiratis’ attempts to empower the Southerners has led to outright armed conflict with Saudi efforts to support the weakening Hadi regime. Occasionally, the troops have clashed, among other places, over the control of Aden airport. Gulf partners are also critical of the UAE’s extended role in running the affairs of southern territory such as in Soqotra island, where the Emiratis are building a “Zayed Residential City.”

The Warring Parties and their Stakes
The war has reconfigured power relations, both regionally and internally, that were earlier seen in March 2015. Just as Trump’s victory in the US challenged the position of key elite dynasties, the Houthis advance to the central and southern parts of the country ended the unhealthy compromise that Yemeni politics had been based on following the 2011 uprising. As per the Gulf deal of November 2011, the deposed president Saleh gained immunity from prosecution and was allowed to retain his assets and remain in the country. He was also allowed to remain the leader of the ruling People’s General Congress (PGC) party. The Arab Spring of 2011 influenced power relations as Saleh had lost his key ally and partner in power, General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, who in March 2011 joined the revolutionaries. Ali Muhsin also cut ties with the other mighty al-Ahmar family, whose members acted in leading roles in politics, business and the Hashid tribal coalition. In June 2011, these personalities and their respective armed groups ended up in military conflict in Sana’a, with Saleh seriously wounded. The fighting involved several army units with divided loyalties drawn from the provinces, leaving these areas without the army’s control. Both the Houthi fighters in the north and jihadists in the south managed to conquer large areas left weakly protected by the army. However, these facts were merely brushed aside once the Gulf deal was negotiated. Thus, the road to war was paved.

The 2011 uprising, locally called al-thawra, or revolution, came with an alternative model for post-Saleh succession based on citizenship and the openness of the political process, in Yemen called “the civil state” (al-dawla al-madaniyya). The content of this state ideal differed slightly among its northern and southern proponents, reflecting the different pasts from which the two former states entered into unification in 1990. While both proponents agreed that the state should exclude members of the military, tribal institutions and the clergy, the public role played by women in the south during the earlier Socialist regime has been celebrated even if women took active roles in the northern uprisings. For the activists of the 2011 uprising, the National Dialogue Conference provided a catalyst for civil discussion among different segments of the civil society. However, as the conference lacked the participation of some of the key personalities in the power struggle, it was doomed to fail. At that stage, these power mongers could not be side-lined irrespective of whether that would have weakened Hadi’s position. In hindsight, the activists felt that the civil war was a result of foreigners hijacking the revolution in the Gulf-mediated empty “transition process” that allowed Saleh to stay in politics.

The above-mentioned General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar is one of the key power mongers in the conflict. It is known that Saleh applied the method of “let your enemies fight each other” in ruling the country. In 2004, he sent Ali Muhsin, at that time his right-hand man while also a rival to his own son for presidency, to fight the Houthi Movement in the Saada Province. At that time, Muhsin, as Commander of the First Armoured Division, led fighting in six rounds, and in 2009 also managed to involve Saudi Arabia in making air raids on Yemeni soil. Houthis see Muhsin together with the Islah party, the Yemeni variety of the Muslim Brothers, as mere puppets of Saudi Arabia. Once the Houthis took over Sana’a, one of their first moves was to send Ali Muhsin into exile. They also ransacked the homes of some of the most visible Islah leaders, among them Ali Muhsin and Tawakkul Karman. But Ali Muhsin did not stay long
in exile in Saudi Arabia. In February 2016, President Hadi nominated him as his Vice President. Muhsin now took an active military role in the war against the Houthi-Saleh forces. His military efforts not only targeted the enemy of the Hadi regime, but also one of its allies, the southern secessionists, as the latter believe.

From the very beginning of the Houthi-Saleh alliance that emerged in public in 2014, it was difficult to find any ideological or even political unity of goals. Nevertheless, it did not take long to see how Saleh used the alliance for his own purposes. The presence of Hadi in Aden in early 2015 may not have been reason enough for the Houthis to cross the former North-South border and enter a hostile area. Nevertheless, the 20 March 2015 suicide attack on a mosque in Sana'a that had been frequented by Zaidis, and which killed 137 people forced the Houthi leader to declare a military advance in the South, in the name of “fighting extremism.” Anyone following Yemeni politics could see that the suicide mission, attributed to “ISIS”, the group that suddenly popped up in the country, was an old political tactic used with the help of jihadists-for-hire. Having said that, I do not suggest that the Houthi leadership is without its own agenda or naïve in its relationship with Saleh. The six rounds of heavy warfare that Saleh launched against them taught Abdul Malik al-Houthi and his family a profound lesson. As the 2015 war progressed, we saw more power mongering typical à-la Saleh and less of a crack in the alliance. Making the Houthis fight the southerners sounded like a ‘dream come true’ for Saleh. If Saleh thought that he would destroy the Houthi militia by sending these tribal fighters to uncommon soil, he was wrong. The Houthi militia was formed by tribal men who gained their military excellence in the rough northern highlands. Fighting on uncommon ground in the lowlands and the desert which are inhabited by a people hostile to the call of reviving the Zaidi rights has not dampened their fighting spirit. As the commander of Ta’izz Resistance (muqawwama Ta’izz), the city under siege for months by the Houthis, has suggested, the Houthi militia is weak and it fights on uncommon ground. Thus, they require the superior military technology and skill of the Republican Guard and other units loyal to Saleh. However, as the war has proven so far, Houthi rule in most of the former North Yemen, including the western coastal area Tihama, the central fertile area reaching from Ibb to Ta’izz and al-Bayda, and the eastern desert of Marib and Jawf, has been strongly resisted by local militias, comprised of tribes and popular defence committees. In the south, Houthi presence has been fiercely resisted to the extent that local rulers in the southern city of Mukalla have been willing to make a pact with Al-Qaeda with the aim of protecting the city from Houthi invasion.

The fifth alliance I have focused on involves the ruling party, the People’s General Congress party. When Hadi took over the leadership following the Gulf deal that forced Saleh to step down from presidency, the latter remained the leader of the ruling PGC party. At that point, Saleh and Hadi were still allies. Political forces united in the Change and Revolutions Squares throughout the country strongly protested the deal. Not long after that, Hadi’s decision to remove members of Saleh’s family from key military, security and state positions paved the way for the split of alliances. Saleh now took Hadi as an enemy and made their common party the PGC challenge Hadi’s position. In the manner of ‘make your enemy fight your other enemy’, by sending Hadi to Aden, Saleh forced southerners to take a stand in the
Sana’a power struggle, something they had not bothered to do earlier. Southerners inspired by secession considered what happened in Sana’a a power game between members of the Sana’a elite whom southerners had politically and morally distanced themselves from. It did not take long before southerners unified in the Southern Movement realised that Hadi’s presence in Aden was an open call for the Houthis to enter Aden. The transformation from a peaceful movement into an armed vigilante militia happened almost overnight. More shifting alliances were to come.

Meanwhile, the war also galvanized southerners, many of whom earlier were hesitant to respond the call for independence launched by the Southern Movement known as hirak since the late 2000s. Hirak is only one arm under the umbrella of civil society activism commonly referred to as the Southern Cause (al-qadhiyya al-janubiyya). The war in these regions is known as the “North-South war” and the final ‘bolt in the coffin’ of Yemeni unity. If you browse southern newspapers, you can read in separate sections news on “Yemen” and “South”, two separate countries as it were. Parallel to this phenomenon has been a split of the eastern governorates of al-Mahra and Hadhramaut to look for provincial solutions on their own, differing from Sana’a and the rest of the south. Once the war started in March 2015, southerners stood alongside the Hadi regime and the Saudi coalition to resist the Houthi-Saleh invasion in the south. This alliance was largely forced upon the southerners for whom Hadi represented one of the masterminds of the 1994 civil war and the ensuing repression in the south. However, even this alliance was doomed to crack as I will discuss later.

The Role of the Jihadists

The southern revolt provided a prelude to the 2011 uprisings. Rallies initiated by young people rapidly united all social classes and the entire civil society, including tribes and jihadists. In the beginning, the forces resisting Houthi-Saleh invasion in the south comprised of local militias, called Popular Resistance (muqawwama, which initially came from Abyan province), and the part of the army still loyal to the Hadi-Saudi coalition. Here, we saw American and British military intelligence in operation through Saudi warplanes fighting, alongside Al-Qaeda, their common enemy in the Houthis. This was in line with the Obama administration’s approach in the Middle East, as explained some time earlier – and in reference to Syria – by Obama’s foreign policy aid in Middle East affairs Dennis B. Ross in the New York Times (11 September 2015) as “the new American strategy.”11 Ross explained that in order to reach some tactical gains, Islamists sometimes had to be seen as American allies. However, it did not take long before Al-Qaeda stopped targeting only Houthis, its declared number one enemy inside the country and which it referred to as “shia” and “non-Muslims.” During the invasion of the Houthi-Saleh troops in the southern governorates of Dhali’, Lahig and Aden, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, fought alongside the Southern Resistance, the national army loyal to Hadi, and the Saudi coalition to stop the invasion. The fear of the Houthi-Saleh invasion was the reason why the Hadrami
Tribal Alliance made a deal with AQAP and allowed the group to take over the eastern port city of Mukalla. However, when the troops were pushed back from Aden, AQAP refused to leave, irrespective of what its leaders had promised. At the same time, it intensified bomb attacks in Aden, aimed at security and military personnel and recruits fighting against the Houthi-Saleh alliance. Simultaneously, the new jihadist group ISIS whose “main enemy” since then had been the Houthis, suddenly turned 180 degrees and took the military command loyal to Hadi and southerners in the military and police force as its main targets. Since July 2015, the group has largely stopped targeting northern territories. Why are Houthis no longer enemies to ISIS and AQAP? One reason was suggested to me by a Yemeni from Abyan familiar with the history of jihadist presence in his home territory. He said that “they do it only for the money. ISIS is not a real group, it does what someone asks it to do, puts bombs or whatever and collects funds for that. It is only for the money,” he said.

Challenging the jihadists’ commitment to ideology rather than money is typical of the disbelief throughout Yemen directed at authorities and their American backers. As Yemeni specialists on Al-Qaeda have long ago suggested, Ali Abdullah Saleh and Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar used to be in direct contact with the group and ordered bomb attacks whenever such activity was needed instead of a more peaceful politics. It should be noted that AQAP has not made a single successful international operation outside the Charlie Hebdo-attack in 2015 and yet still continues to be identified as the “most dangerous jihadist unit globally” (Paul Bremer) and remains the target of the most intensive drone campaign sanctioned by both the Obama and Trump administration.

The US’s drone campaign has led to an increase in the number of AQAP soldiers from 300 in 2009 to 700 in 2012, according to the Washington Post. The WP article elaborates: “While AQAP has grown in strength over the last year, many of its supporters are tribal militants or part-time supporters who collaborate with AQAP for self-serving, personal interests rather than affinity with Al-Qaeda’s global ideology”. (…) “The portion of hard-core, committed AQAP members is relatively small.”

To end the section on alliances, let us see what happened to the Hadi-Southerners alliance and the Houthi-Saleh alliance as the war reached its third year. On 27 April 2017, Hadi sacked two members of his administration, Aden Governor Aidrus al-Zubaydi and Minister of State Hani Bin Burayk, accusing them of “conspiring with the Emiratis,” and for working with the Southern secessionist forces. It is true that Zubaydi, as Governor, worked closely with the Emirati army to protect Aden from extremist militias. Following the sacking, a huge rally gathered in Aden to demand that Zubaydi step up to the leadership of the Southern independence effort. He and Bin Burayk subsequently formed The Southern Transitional Council (majlis al-intiqaliyy al-janubiyy) and invited representatives from all eight southern governorates. Among the members in the presidium were five governors, two ministers from Hadi’s government, and members of the traditional elite such as shaykhs and son of a former sultan. The 26-member presidium included three women, all of whom were professionals such as lawyer Niran Suqiy. Global media has called the council a “third government” in Yemen with its declared aim to run the affairs of the eight governorates. There was an even larger rally called milliuniyya on 21 May in Aden to celebrate the final
unification of all southern areas under the slogan of final unification of all southern areas under the slogan of sovereignty and independence\textsuperscript{19}. Hadi was one of the first to reject the formation of the secessionist council. All this tells the story of split visions in the Saudi and Emirati partnership with the former still believing in Hadi and the latter actually empowering the southerners if not outright giving the green light for secession. Simultaneously, a crack has been deepening in the Sana’a alliance too, with mutual accusations between Houthi leaders and Saleh about “assassination attacks” and outright fighting\textsuperscript{20}. Throughout the war, Saleh has been pre-occupied with his own diplomatic concerns involving the interests of his family and assets. For the Houthis, this might soon mean a struggle for existence.

Local Governance

As the humanitarian catastrophe worsens on the ground and aid is blocked at port entries and by road blocks, it has been suggested that Yemen is sliding towards a collapse of the state, a process often referred to as “Somalization”. However, in Yemen, the state has barely ever managed to rule the entire territory in the Weberian manner, and when successful, has relied on a social contract with local civil society. Nevertheless, there are remarkable differences between different regions of the country, and between the cities and the countryside. If anything, the war has facilitated local governance in areas earlier run by state-financed municipal rule. Thus, the war has not presented a collapse of communities, even when electricity cuts have forced people to work without air conditioning and school classrooms to run without a single fan for ventilation. Civil servants and army officials have not been paid their salaries since Hadi’s ill-functioned decision to move the Central Bank to Aden.\textsuperscript{21} The absence of the state has strengthened local solutions for security and rule. Vigilante militias, local defence committees and creative solutions by individual citizens have flourished in areas deprived of state rule and security. Similarly, citizens have joined forces in neighbourhood crises as volunteers. In Marib, the oil-rich governorate in the east resisting Houthi-Saleh advance, local politicians have gained wide popular support.\textsuperscript{22} In the southern areas, the Emirati Red Crescent has already contributed to their rebuilding. Encouraged by local efforts, the World Bank has presented a plan to start rebuilding while the fighting continues, following similar experiences in African conflicts\textsuperscript{23}. Simultaneously, the war has benefited businessmen in the oil-rich southern Hadhramaut province who ensure that oil is distributed to both sides of the war.

Securitization and the Yemeni Crisis

Finally, I want to briefly address the third factor that I suggested as key to understanding the Yemeni situation, that of securitization. This is a rather recent term in political science that refers to state policies, applied increasingly transnationally, that transform subjects into matters of “security”, allowing extraordinary and illegal means of control in the name of security\textsuperscript{24}. Due to the American obsession with AQAP, which for Yemenis represents a minor,
although evil section of violence currently operative in the country, the entire nation of Yemen has become a target of securitization. American drones turn countryside areas into killing zones where residents going to sleep at night cannot be sure if they will wake up the next morning. Furthermore, no single postal parcel has been allowed to be sent from Yemen since 2010. When I visited the country in 2013, I volunteered to carry with me cancer tissue samples to be mailed to a foreign laboratory. Yemeni citizens have no freedom of movement and the job market in the Peninsula is largely closed off to them. Securitization theorists show how terrorism becomes a top priority in security discussions, even though Yemenis are much more likely to be killed by Saudi and Houthi-Saleh bombs, famine or cholera rather than by terrorists. A shift in American focus on what the source of danger is could indeed save lives.

Conclusion

As I have suggested, the three key notions of alliances, local governance and securitization help us to analyse the Yemeni situation better instead of focusing on the endless rounds of unsuccessful peace talks or the ‘Saudi-Iranian proxy war’ thesis. In between the lines, the careful reader will realise that the situation could be quite different if only the key power mongers described in the paper are removed from the scene and brought to the International Criminal Court. A good step in that direction was the European Union meeting held in September 2017 in Geneva that gathered representatives of the civil society from tribes to the Southern Transitional Council rather than representatives of the two disputing regimes. While the complexity of the war and the ensuing problems seem difficult to solve for the moment, it does not mean that a truly Yemeni solution to end the war is not in sight, like what happened in 1972: the massive inter-Yemeni war ended with a surprise unity declaration. What is clear is that a viable solution to the Yemeni political crisis calls for respecting the will of the people in the regions, whether united behind the Houthis, units of local governance or the Southern Transitional Council.

Susanne Dahlgren is an anthropologist interested in moral questions, law and politics. She studied anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the University of Helsinki where she received her PhD in 2004. Her PhD project was published as *Contesting Realities. The Public Sphere and Morality in Southern Yemen* (2010). Her recent work has involved theorizing the Arab revolutions and civil society activism in Yemen. A photo essay was published in Muftah.org on ‘Rebels without Shoes: A Visit to South Yemen’s Revolution Squares.’ At MEI, she has worked on a project entitled ‘Post-Socialism in the Arabian Peninsula: The Politics of Islam and Modernisation in South Yemen.’
Notes

3 http://www.middleeasteye.net/essays/saudi-war-yemen-oil-pipeline-empowering-al-qaeda-1386143996
4 http://www.almogazyemen.com/yemennow/975.html on 2 September 2017 (For these reasons Riyadh prevents Hadi from returning to Aden, and extensive plans with the Emirates to isolate him, accessed on 9/2/2017).
7 https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/society/2017/1/9/emiratis-build-zayed-residential-city-in-yemens-socotra-island Emirati plans are feared to create unsustainable tourism in this island of unique biodiversity and which UNESCO has included in its World Heritage List, see http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1263.
10 During 2011 uprising, the protest square in Sana’a was called Change Square while those in the south and which to some extent function even today are called Revolution Squares.
12 The leader of al-Qa’ida in Hadhramaut, Shaykh Khalid Batarafi explains in a press interview that the group wanted to safeguard Mukalla from a Houthi-Salih advance, http://adenghad.net/news/163382/#.VY0Goka2Uj4
14 Ibid.
15 Personal communication through email.
17 In 2012 CIA thwarted a similar underwear bomber and in January 2015 attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine office was claimed by AQAP even though there was no direct link to Yemen.


