

Yemen Put to the Test

Twenty years after its unification, Yemen is threatened with destabilization. • In the north, the Shiite Houthi movement continues defying central government rule, bringing Saudi Arabia and Iran into an already nervous border picture. • The oil-rich south, meanwhile, faces ongoing pressure from a well-organized secessionist movement. • How the future will play out depends on who gets the upper hand. • by Farian Sabahi

The Houthi movement of Yemen is derived from a family of the same name located in the governorate of Sa'ada, a province in northwest Yemen. Movement members are Zaidi rite Shiites who belong to the Seyyid elite, which claims direct lineage from the Prophet Muhammad. Armed conflict between the Houthis and the Yemeni government began in the summer of 2004, when Houthi supporters in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a began open protest against the United States and Israel. In September 2004, Houthi leader Hussein Badreddin was killed by troops loyal to Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. His brother Abdul Malik, who has called Saleh's regime illegitimate and "an ally of Americans and Jews," succeeded him.

Instead of co-opting the rebels, Saleh has adopted a strategy of low-boil military and ideological confrontation (for example, a bounty was placed on Hussein Badreddin). Saleh forged diplomatic alliances with local political leaders and has also used economic pressure to keep the rebels at bay.

The conflict has so far consisted of six "war" phases lasting between a month and 11 months, the last one oc-

UNDERSTANDING YEMEN

East contributor Farian Sabahi recently published "The Story of Yemen" (*Storia dello Yemen*, Bruno Mondadori, 208 pages, €18. In Italian only). The book represents an effort to make the country more accessible to general audiences. The only republic on the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is the land of the Queen of Sheba (as well as the bin Laden family). Its capital, Sana'a, is a UNESCO world heritage site. Until 50 years ago, the country was run by a Shiite Imam who belonged to the Zaidi movement, which now finds itself at bitter odds with the government. Yemen is a powder keg. The Houthi rebellion in the north is complicated by a secessionist movement in the south. Then there's Islamic terrorism. These movements intertwine with traditional tribal alliances.

Unlike Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, the Sunni-Shiite contest has predominated in Yemen for centuries. Sabahi, an Iranian-Italian academic who teaches Islamic history at the University of Turin, uses descriptions and accounts of the country by European travelers of the 19th and 20th centuries as well as more recent reports regarding civil rights, women's issues, and the state of the Jewish minority to enrich her account of Yemen's history. •

Farian Sabahi
Storia dello Yemen

Bruno Mondadori



curing between August 2009 and February 2010.

Violence between the two sides has intensified over the years. So have reported incidents of unconventional warfare. Humanitarian organizations place the dead at about 25,000, with 150,000 families displaced as a result of the fighting and 3,000 more arrested for allegedly supporting the Houthi cause.

Most of the fighting has been centered in Sa'da, which borders Saudi Arabia. Tensions have frayed relations between the two countries. Saudi Arabia actually entered the fight in 2009 after Houthi rebels stormed border checkpoints, killing two guards (133 Saudi soldiers have died in recent years, according to media reports). But the skirmish ended quickly.

Sa'da, a hotbed for tribal irredentism, has mostly repudiated central government authority. At first, two local sheiks close to Salah, al-Ahmar and al-Houthi, intervened to help keep the peace. Both were killed, howev-

The old flag of South Yemen is painted on bluffs in the south of the country, where secessionist sentiments are high.

er, leading to ongoing vendettas promoted by their children. The conflict was further exacerbated by the introduction of a religious ingredient and allegations of external interference. Iran has been accused of sending weapons and money in support of Yemen's Shiite community, while the Saudis are believed to clandestinely back the Sunnis. Both Qatar and Libya have tried to broker peace deals. In 2007, Qatar brokered an 18-point peace plan, but neither side accepted it.

Turmoil in the country's south has played to official advantage, diverting attention from ongoing government military pressure in the north. But at the end of 2009, the Saleh government committed a telling strategic error. A marauding Yemeni air force MIG-29 fired missiles at what it thought was a terrorist training camp in al-Majalah, in the remote region of Abyan. The explosives instead killed women and children. In February 2010, Saleh reached a ceasefire with the Houthi thanks to Sheikh Hussein Al-Ahmar, a powerful local figure.

According to a Rand Corporation monograph titled "Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen. The Houthi



Phenomenon,” the conflict has seen “claims of Zaidi identity and disgruntled local sentiment cross swords with questions about the legitimacy and governing style of Yemeni authorities.” Over time, RAND report continues, differences between Houthi and government began taking on the nuances of both tribal and sectarian strife, all but canceling out the possibility of any short-term solution. The Houthi family has instead evolved into a point of reference for north Yemen’s opposition to government policy, whether regarding domestic, foreign, economic or religious affairs. The Salah government, aware of this, has responded by targeting the Houthi and their sympathizers for elimination.

In recent years, the government has shut down mosques, schools and institutions linked to the Houthi. Graves have been desecrated. Adding fuel to the fire, the government has also opened schools and summer camps in traditionally Zaidi areas. Some Sunni sermons and court rulings have been openly hostile toward the Shiites, producing bloodshed between the two sides. On the information front, the government has barred the publication of Houthi texts, speeches and press releases, both in print and on the Web, describing the insurgency as “an anti-republican movement eager to revive the Shiite imam system.” Ceasefire aside, the government’s failure to neutralize the Houthi threat stems from the far-reaching contours of the conflict and the fact that the discord dates back to the 1970s, though its severity didn’t fully manifest itself until two decades later, taking full shape in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

To understand the scope of the conflict must demands an understanding several key factors.

The first is the lack of monitoring exercised by the central government on the outlying areas of the traditionally autonomous Yemeni North, where the population is limited and scattered in across mountain and desert areas. Resources are scarce and penetration local traditions and lifestyles difficult. The failure to co-opt the movement stems from the Salah government’s inability to win influence among local tribal leaders, the traditional way for regional leadership to subvert insurgency in the absence of territorial control.

That the Zaidi branch of Islam, theologically situated between Sunnism and Shi’ism, has its epicenter in the north, particularly in the city of Sa’da, literally removes

it from the government seat of power in Sana’a. Though Salah, a former military officer, is a Zaidi, his people refuse to recognize legitimacy of his government.

Another ingredient of the conflict concerns the origins of tensions that date back to 1970s, when Yemen’s republican government overlooked the desolate areas between Sa’da, ‘Amran and Hajja. Infrastructure, social welfare, education and security all fell by the wayside.

In the decades since then, the gap between the north and the rest of the country increased more notable and became evident to the indigenous population. Travel and trade became difficult. The male population, which formed the backbone of leadership, became increasingly aware of the discriminatory tendencies. At the same time, the Zaidis found themselves facing Salafi infiltration and the growing influence of Saudi Wahhabism, promoted by emigrant workers returning from stints in Saudi Arabia.

In the meantime, widespread intermarriage between different groups was producing new tribal networks, becoming vehicles for multi-layered expressions of conflict. This helped produced a more formal Zaidi Shia separatist group that went by the title Ash-Shabab al-Muminin, which means “Believing Youth” or “Youthful Believers.”

The events of September 11 also played a major role. After he terrorist attacks, the Sana’a government decided to enter into open conflict with the Houthi, presenting itself as partner of the United States in the so-called War on Terror. The U.S. military began furnishing the Salah government with weapons and training assistance. From the perspective of Sa’da’s residents, Salah’s opening to Washington in concert with the U.S.-led campaigns against Afghanistan and Iraq gave Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi all the argument he needed to advertise the Yemeni regime as working in collaboration with the West in a crusade against Muslims. Public resentment took the form of slogans condemning the United States and Israel, creating complications for Salah, whose modest social and educational background was tested by the venerable Zaidi spiritual leader and ideologue Yahia Badreddin al-Houthi, among the most respected theologians in Yemen. Born in 1928, Yahia represented link to the era of the imamate, which lasted through 1962.

Through marriage, the imamate period produced a coalescing of social groups and classes, creating important alliances. In addition to keeping in mind the depth of Zaidi solidarity in the context of tribal and religious ties, it’s

also important to note that the Houthi didn’t start as an organization but a far larger body of people with informal but inextricable connections with larger Yemeni society. Despite the repression directed at the Zaidi, the Shiite resistance remained resilient, eventually transforming the Houthi into a dissident organization. The conflict eventually took on an increasingly sectarian flavor, destroying the mechanisms that traditionally helped reach compromises among warring tribes.

Following the border conflict between Houthi and the Saudis in late 2009, the disturbance took on a transnational dimension, threatening to involve other nations, including Iran. This meant an increased threat to U.S. regional interests, already focused on Iraq and Afghanistan in military and diplomatic terms on in Iran in terms of the development of nuclear weapons and human rights issues. According to the Rand Corporation report, the Salah government has actively tried to link Houthi activities with Iran, saying it is a puppet of Shiite Tehran, in effort to have the group added to the global terrorist black list. In reality, the situation is far more complex. For years, Iran explicitly avoided expressing its support for the Houthi. But in late 2009, soon after the Saudi incident, Iran began a slew of trenchant statements regarding the breadth of ongoing violence in Sa’ada.

Unsettled by the border skirmishes and Saudi incursions in response, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki criticized both the Salah government and the Saudis and called on all states to respect Yemeni sovereignty, volunteering Tehran as a peace broker. Meanwhile, the Iranian defense minister reiterated that there could be no military solution to the conflict.

Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani also criticized Saudi involvement and drafted a resolution officially condemning it. Chief of Staff Hassan Firouzabad cited what he called “Wahhabi state terrorism” and Iranian media assailed the use of banned weapons against Yemeni civilians. In December 2009, president of the Iranian National Security and Foreign Affairs Committee appealed to Islamic organizations to intervene in northern Yemen, criticizing Salafi “currents” that it said threatened Islamic unite. It also criticized Saudi involvement, which it said only prolonged the conflict.

Beyond verbally attacking the Saudis, an integral part of the regional rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh, Iran

don’t seem interested particularly interested intervening in the northern Yemen conflict. It is already spread thin on other diplomatic and political fronts.

The secession movement, whose leader is former South Yemen President Ali Salim al-Beidh, insists the south should have its own state. His supporters meet every Thursday to protest against central government rule. The south hosts a third of the country’s 20 million people. Twenty years after unification of, which was hastened by the collapse of the Soviet Union, most southerners are skeptical about the worth of national unity. According to a survey conducted by the Yemeni Center for Civil Rights, in collaboration with the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy NGOs (funded by the U.S. Congress to promote global democracy) and published in January 2010, 70 percent the country’s southern population favors secession, citing economic discrimination and political marginalization. The south also has 80 percent of the country’s oil resources, though the oil industry profits end up in Sana’a. As was the case during the 1994 civil war, when secession advocates were Socialists, the redividing the country is out of the question, since to do so would put Yemen’s survival at risk. But despite repeated unity appeals from Salah, southerners have taken to the streets to protest rising prices and lack of infrastructure. The response has been swift and repressive, so much so that international human rights organizations have denounced the Salah government. On April 15, 2010 in the southern town of Daliya, riot police clashed with secessionist movement protesters, causing dozens of injuries.

According to Qatar-based TV network Al Jazeera, thousands of separatists took to the streets of southern cities on July 8, 2010 to protest the Sana’a government’s arrest and imprisonment of secessionist militants. On July 23, the interior minister responded by releasing 183 people charged with orchestrating secessionist demonstrations throughout the south. According to Al Jazeera, Salah, fresh from a trip to the restive south, had issued the pardons.

But demonstrations followed, once again demanding the release secessionists held by national authorities. Many secessionist militants have been accused of complicity with Al Qaeda. Some have been charged with attacking security forces based in the south. Even though the Cold War is dead and gone, communism remains a specter in some parts of the Islamic world, if not the Western one. ●