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## Politics by Other Means, Yemeni Style

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A widespread depiction of the latest conflict in Yemen as a Sa'udi-Iranian proxy war is simplistic and misleading. In reality the conflict is complex and multi-factional. It is also predominantly domestic in origin and nature. State-sponsored disinformation and misinformation about the conflict is rife, compounding the effect of the wider world's lack of familiarity with a small and no longer important country.

While the spark for the conflict came from the Arab Spring and the attempted counter-revolution which followed, many of the underlying factors which fuel the war are the unfinished elements of previous conflicts. Further, as with most enduring situations, there have been splits, re-alignments and hardenings of positions on 'both' sides. A survey of the protagonists can reveal much about the conflict, and how it will play out.

Sa'udi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have led a slowly reducing coalition of peripheral Arab states backed by American, British and French military, intelligence and industrial assets. The initial driver for the Arabs' intervention appears to have been the imminent defeat of ex-Vice-President, now President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who was the Gulf Cooperation Council's counter-revolutionary placeman: the al-Sisi without the intervening Morsi. A hoped-for fringe benefit appears to have been to raise the martial profile of Prince Muhammad bin Salman, at the time little-known outside his father's diwan.

On the opposing side the Huthis turned initially to the Russians, as the enemy of the Americans, for support; but support was denied; so the Huthis then turned to the Iranians, as the enemy of the Sa'udis. While Iranian support was forthcoming, it has been limited – much less than bruted - and self-serving. It has increased, however, as Sa'udi costs have become apparent, to embarrass the Sa'udis and restrict their involvement in Syria, Iran's regional priority.

In the Northern Highlands, Ansar Allah, led by the sharifal Huthi family, are Zaydi revivalists. The sharifal family seeks to redress discrimination against the former sharifal aristocracy under the post-1960s Republic, while the wider movement seeks to re-empower the North's predominantly agrarian Zaydi community. Under the Republic the latter lost influence vis-à-vis the more mercantile Shafa'i Sunnis of the South and felt besieged after the Sa'udis started, in the 1990s, sponsoring propagation of Salafism.

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Overlaid on this religious tension is a less overt push for rebalancing from Bakil, one of the two main Zaydi tribal confederations. Bakil, having been more Royalist during the 1960s civil war, feels that it has lost ground to the more Republican Hashid confederation.

The Arab Spring brought to the surface splits within the then ruling (predominantly Hashid) regime. President Ali Abdallah Salih tried to transition to a *jumlukiyya* (hereditary republic), breaking the pact which had brought him to power. The General People's Congress (GPC) party – never an ideological formation - split along factional lines. Despite having fought six wars against Ali Abdallah Salih, the Huthis aligned with his faction of the GPC against Hadi, Ali Muhsin and the 10 brothers of the al-Ahmar family (the paramount shaikhs of Hashid), who are also leaders of al-Islah, the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood affiliate. The al-Ahmars themselves had tried to capture Sana'a in 2011, but were fought to a standstill; they subsequently decamped, and fight alongside Hadi.

While the GPC-Sana'a faction is not wholly aligned with the Huthis, especially since the killing of Ali Abdallah Salih, they have lost kin to the Sa'udi airstrikes and so want revenge. Also, they see the Huthis as being the least bad option / best chance of rehabilitating themselves. The Sa'udi-led Coalition has sought to peel this faction away from the Huthis - so far to no avail.

In the South, the anti-Huthi factions – anti-conservatives, Southern separatists, GPC-Aden and others – aligned to Hadi, who was 'elected' to the Presidency in February 2012. But Hadi has little personal support outside his Abyan homeland.

Hadi had been on the losing side of "The Events" in 1986 – a brief civil war in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) - and during the 1994 Civil War his *zumra* faction had fought alongside the North against secessionist Southerners. Many of the latter form the nucleus of the Hiraq, a Southern secessionist grouping, which became further embittered after the North's conquest and 'colonisation' of the South over the following 15 years.

In addition to the Hadi-aligned groupings, Transnational Jihadis, such as al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, and Islamic State, found sanctuary among the broken terrain and neglected tribes of the South.

Thanks to the lavish and indiscriminate provision of money and materiel, new actors have since had the wherewithal to emerge, predominantly in the South on the anti-Huthi side. Most vocal has been the Southern Transitional Council (STC), UAE-backed secessionists. The UAE has also set up, trained and paid several semi-autonomous forces in the South, to create "security belts".

Also enabled by Coalition's *largesse*, the Sunni tribes of the Tihama have mobilised as Tihamis for the first time since Sayf al-Islam Ahmad broke their power in 1928/29. And many Salafis have renounced their previous Quietist stance, and become active in both politics and combat, the latter particularly around Ta'iz. They make up a sizeable part of the Amaliqi (Giants) Brigade, which was used in the thrust North along the Tihama towards Hodeidah, and to attack Sa'ada from Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the Mahris, long the recipients of Omani soft-power, have seen their territory occupied by Emirati and then Sa'udi forces. Fuelling their discontent have been rumours that

the Sa'udis intend to establish a Salafi madrassa in Mahra and to create a Sa'udi land corridor to the Indian Ocean, dividing Mahra from the rest of Yemen.

Since the 14 September attack on Sa'udi oil installations, for which the Huthis claimed responsibility, there has been talk of a ceasefire. Any ceasefire is likely to be preceded by the various factions undertaking one last push to gain negotiating assets. The conference will probably have multiple sides: Hadi, Huthis, GPC-Sana'a, STC, Hiraq, GPC-Aden at least; and possibly Tihamis, Hadhramis and Mahris. Despite Coalition misgivings, al-Islah and the Salafis may also be able to get a seat at the talks table.

The likely outcome will be a federation comprising seven regions, each sending a member to a Presidential Council: South West, South East, Southern Uplands, Tihama, Northern Highlands, Southern Highlands and the Central area.

Whether such an outcome will lead to enduring peace is a different matter!

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## Insightful Reading

Helen Lackner's *Yemen in Crisis: autocracy, neo-liberalism and the disintegration of a state* (Saqi, 2017)

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