Yemen: in a security vacuum

The absence of functioning state institutions and weak security forces in Yemen provide a fertile ground for anti-government insurgency and terrorism. To date, the ongoing military conflict between the central government and Houthi rebels affects half of Yemen's 22 governorates. With 'Operation Decisive Storm' underway, many fear that we are witnessing a proxy war between regional powerhouses, with potential spillover effects across the region.

Yemeni security forces

Yemen's 1994 Constitution stipulates that the state is the only authority to establish armed forces, police or security forces, and prohibits the establishment of such forces by any other organisation, individual, group or political party. However, in reality, tribes, tribal law and conflict resolution practices provide security and social order where federal presence is weak. The main task of the Yemeni security forces – military and police alike – is the defence of the country's internal stability against two major threats: insurgency movements and terrorist organisations. However, since unification in 1990, the Yemeni military has remained fractured and weakened by corruption and political infighting, which in turn undermined societal trust. The transition of power from Ali Abdullah Saleh to Abd Rabbuh Mansour al-Hadi in 2012, resulted in a number of decisions to restructure the military, including disbanding the Republican Guard, the First Armoured Division and the removal of the Head of Central Security Forces. Aimed at unifying command, these reforms have failed. The key reason for this being the significant sway President Saleh, and his coalition with his former Houthi enemies, hold over parts of the Yemeni military.

The military's limited trust in central government also results in cases of insubordination and mutiny, making Yemeni security forces dysfunctional. The absence of effective security in rural areas also forces the population to seek security elsewhere, and strengthens tribal affiliations and their resolve to defend themselves. The sense of insecurity – in particular where tribes are weaker and more fragmented – has pushed some locals towards the influence of terrorist groups.

Anti-government insurgency

The political transition process, launched following the 2011 Arab Spring, has brought limited results, and the country's structural problems, such as corruption and inequality, have not been resolved. In the north, the central government authority has been challenged on numerous occasions by the Houthi movement, riding on a wave of popular dissatisfaction with the pace of reform, enabling it to secure local tribal support in Zaydi Shia territories. Stability in the south can also not be taken for granted. The Southern Movement and tribal leaders do not trust the government and demand more autonomy, including in managing oil-production infrastructure and a fairer share of the income it generates. Tribesmen from Hadramout and Shabwah, for instance, have attacked government forces, oil infrastructure and foreign oil companies. The six-region plan for the future federal division presented by President al-Hadi in February 2014 met with general disapproval and remains an additional source of friction.

Terrorism

The limited government presence, and absence of basic services, in many governorates fuel anti-government sentiment and create ideal conditions for terrorist organisations to thrive. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – a Yemen-based offshoot of Al Qaeda – remains one of the most dangerous terrorist organisations worldwide. Faced with the defeat of its insurgent arm Ansar al-Sharia in 2012, and stronger international counter-terrorism cooperation, AQAP's leadership shifted from the idea of all-out insurgency to high-profile attacks and an assassination campaign on Yemeni territory. AQAP's leadership has also exploited the country's volatile political situation. Cooperation with tribesmen and other Islamist groups assist AQAP in

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gaining control over large swathes of the country and in establishing safe havens, from which they launch attacks. The territorial advances made by the Houthis since January 2015 have strengthened AQAP's legitimacy in fighting alongside local populations, to stop what they view as Shia expansionism. In February 2015, AQAP seized one of Yemen's largest military bases and attacked prisons, liberating some key AQAP members. AQAP also receives support from al-Shabaab fighters joining the fight from Somalia. However, AQAP's position is undermined by the emergence of ISIL/Da'esh. In November 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of a group in Yemen. Since then, the group has carried out a series of coordinated bombings, including the attack on mosques in San'a on 20 March 2015. Some reports suggest that ISIL/Da'esh is active in at least three provinces in southern and central Yemen. Both ISIL/Da'esh and AQAP play the sectarian conflict card, which has a galvanising effect, in particular on Yemen's Sunni population.

External involvement

Faced with the failure of the Yemeni security forces to stop Houthi territory grabs, President al-Hadi requested intervention from the Gulf Cooperation Council based on Article 51 of the UN Charter, which allows for collective or individual self-defence. Following the request, on 26 March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition launched a series of airstrikes against rebel positions. Operation 'Decisive Storm' orchestrated by the GCC (except for Oman) and four other countries (Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan) was put in place to restore security and stability, and is the largest coalition of Arab countries since the 1990 Gulf war. **Saudi Arabia's** main concern is the protection of its territory against Houthi trespass – as was the case in 2009 – and broader implications of Yemeni instability for the balance of power in the region. Saudi Arabia

Figure 1: Areas of Houti and Al Qaeda strength

Houthi and Al-Qaeda areas: 1 April 2015

Source: BBC, based on data from American Enterprise Institute and news reports.

has already made plans to increase security around its oil and industrial facilities. **Iranian** support for the Houthi is interpreted as a proxy war with Saudi Arabia and another sign of the country's regional ambitions. Reports of an arms flow from Iran, if continued, could imply further destabilisation in Yemen. For the **United States**, Yemen remains AQAP's main stronghold and hence the primary battleground in the global fight against terrorism. The United States offers intelligence sharing, advisory and logistical support for the coalition. **Egypt**, on the other hand, joined the coalition to ensure uninterrupted navigation in the Gulf of Aden and minimise potential disturbance to Suez Canal operations.
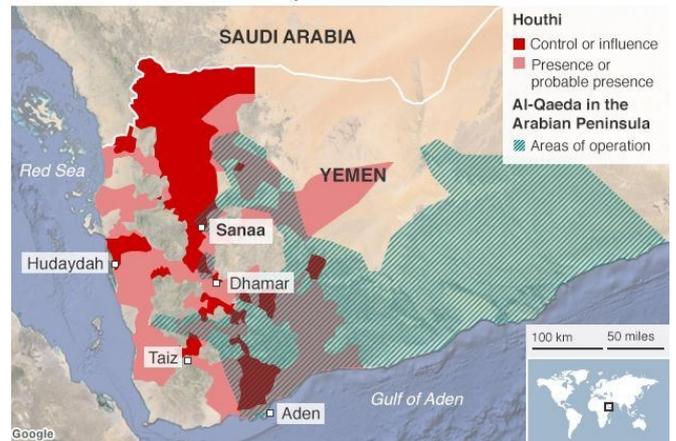
Moving forward

As the fighting continues – with no sides willing to make concessions – the humanitarian situation in the country is rapidly deteriorating. Médecins sans Frontières and the International Committee of the Red Cross report that closure of Yemen's seaports and airports renders delivery of medical supplies very difficult. This in turn has pushed the UN Security Council to discuss, at Russia's request, the possibility of 'humanitarian pauses'. Negotiations on the long-term stability of Yemen accompany discussion of immediate relief. Any future political settlement – brokered by the five permanent members of the Security Council, Jordan and GCC members, under UN auspices – will need to balance central government power with regional and tribal interests. The implementation of any such deal will depend on effective and capable Yemeni security forces, requiring not only further investment in security sector reform, but more importantly, economic reforms to help rebuild trust in the government. Ironically, all parties to the current conflict will need to work together to fight AQAP and ISIL/Da'esh. The only alternative is a prolonged civil war and instability in the region.

This is one of a trio of publications on Yemen; the others cover the political situation and socio-economic conditions.