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The Challenges of Building a National Army in Yemen

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BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Yemen's is an ancient civilization and Yemenis have been regarded as a distinct people since the time of the Prophet. It has been remarkably isolated from the outside world and "almost completely sealed off from modern influence" until the middle of the 20th century.¹ Even today, it is one of the most inscrutable Arab states as the title of a recent book, *Arabia Incognita*, readily conveys.² Much of Yemen's rapidly growing population – estimated at 27 million in 2016 and expected to grow to 60 million by 2050 – live in thousands of tiny settlements that are hardly accessible from the capital, Sana'a, and have been notoriously difficult to bring under a central administration either by political or military means. With an estimated more than three guns per citizen, the country also has the highest number of weapons in private hands in the world.³ Yemen had suffered from a number of calamities – depletion of oil reserves, water shortage, population explosion, well over 35% unemployment – long before the 2011 uprising and the subsequent civil war. It is the Arab world's poorest country and, quite possibly, the most corrupt. As one commentator recently wrote, the government in Sana'a "makes even the Karzai regime, in Afghanistan, seem like a model of propriety."⁴ For decades political leadership in Yemen has been a parasitic oligarchy synonymous with tribalism, patronage, nepotism, incompetence, and the reckless looting of state resources.

Is Yemen a failed state? According to many analysts, it is, although definitions of the concept vary greatly.⁵ The deep cleavages between the country's regions and their fierce competition for resources have prevented the evolution of anything resembling a united nation. Unlike in other Arab states, the armed forces have not been an agent of nation-building although they were a key factor for Yemen's unification. However, the Yemeni state, and its military have been unable to effectively counter at least three major and enduring threats to state stability – the Houthi rebellion in the Northwest, the separatist movement in the south, and terrorist forces emblemized by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – that emerged in the late 20th and early in the 21st century.

In this essay, I argue that if Yemen has been on the verge of state failure, its regular armed forces have certainly failed to execute their function of defending the state and, more importantly, protecting the regime. I also contend that the main reasons for this unflattering assessment of Yemen's military are primarily reliance on tribal, clan, and family networks, lack of professionalism, gross mismanagement, and deep-seated corruption, in other words, the very same ills that have done so much harm to the Yemeni state at large. Furthermore, I maintain, the political history of Yemen has been a near-constant struggle between those who wanted to increase state authority (most prominently, the central government) and those who privileged traditional tribal influence in politics. There is no better institution to observe this ongoing conflict between "centralizers" and "tribalists" than the armed forces. Moreover, as I will make plain with historical illustrations, these traits, as well as the fragmentations of and the divisions between various military forces, are long-standing attributes of armies in Yemen that are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Finally, it is impossible to understand contemporary Yemen without recognizing that its domestic conflicts are not binary, one foe opposing another, but multipolar with certain groups cooperating with one another on some issues but not on others. This is the main reason that the Yemeni situation is so

enigmatic, that it is so intractable, and, ultimately, that lasting peace has been and will continue to be so difficult to hammer out.

This paper is composed of three main parts. In the first, I consider the armed forces until the 1991 unification of the two Yemeni states, the Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. In the second part the focus shifts to Yemeni military politics in the two decades from unification to the resignation of President Saleh following the 2011 uprising. Finally, in the third section, I discuss the civil war and the various related security threats to the Yemeni state from 2011 until mid-2016 and the efforts of the Saudi-led coalition of forces tasked with reinstating President Hadi and defeating the Houthi insurgency.

I. YEMEN'S ARMIES FROM OTTOMAN RULE TO UNIFICATION

Yemen's ancient past is no less a fascinating subject than its Islamic history that began in 630 AD with the Prophet sending his cousin to Sana'a, which was then the most advanced part of Arabia. For the next 900 years, Yemen was governed by several dynasties until the arrival of the Ottomans. The Zaydi Imams (later kings) of Yemen's northern highlands did not recognize the 1905 Anglo-Ottoman border agreement. Zaydism is a branch of Shia Islam that stresses the presence and activism of an Imam, who is supposed to be not only knowledgeable of the religion but also the head of a community and, if necessary, a leader on the battlefield.⁶ They were sovereign rulers of their domain from about 1911 – based on an agreement with the Ottomans who withdrew in 1918 – until overthrown by their own army in 1962. Prior to unification in 1990, the armies of both pro-Western North Yemen and pro-Soviet South Yemen were often behind the seemingly unending cycles of political violence and civil war.

Soldiers in Yemen Under the Ottoman and British Empires

The Ottomans arrived in Yemen in around 1540 with the objectives of protecting the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and safeguarding the trade routes to India. Even then, Egypt's Ottoman governor described Yemen as a land in a condition of constant turmoil and anarchy.⁷

Northern Yemen became independent of the Ottoman Empire only after World War I; from then it was under the rule of hereditary Imams until the 1962 revolution. The toppling of the Imam heralded the beginning of a long civil war in which the old order were supported by conservative Saudi Arabia and the new by socialist Egypt. Several long-standing patterns of Yemeni military politics were established already in the Ottoman era or during the Imamate. First, the army formed by Imam Yahya (1904-1948) relied to a large extent on *tribal mercenaries* under the command of their own leaders, the colonel sheikhs. The tribal mercenaries were recruited on an *ad hoc* basis as military campaigns against Yahya's numerous enemies – various tribes, Saudis in the north, the British in the south, etc. – necessitated. Yahya's forces were complemented and, in large part, trained by former Turkish officers who stayed in Yemen following the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. Before the creation of this army there was only an Imamic bodyguard (*al-ukfah*) charged with the protection Yahya's regime.⁸

A second attribute of Yemeni military affairs that emerged already in this period and has continued to characterize them ever since is the *institutional fragmentation* of the armed forces. Owing to his fears regarding the reliability of Turkish officers, Yahya established a parallel army, the Army of Defense (*Jaysh al-Difa*) and appointed a Syrian officer, Tahseen Pasha as its head. Yahya created yet another force, the *Jaysh al-Barani* (the Desert Army), an irregular militia of tribesmen from the Zaydi highlands in the north, which were supplemented by two battalions of guards who were supposed to protect the Imam himself.⁹ In other words, by the early 1930s the Imamate maintained no fewer than four separate armed organizations, foreshadowing the multiple military entities of the future.

A third pattern, the reliance on violent *coups d'état* to resolve political conflicts, and leadership succession was also established early on. Owing, in part, to his capricious rule, Yahya's son and successor, Imam Ahmad (1948-1962) was the subject of numerous coup- and assassination attempts. In 1955, for instance, the Iraqi trained Colonel Ahmad Thalaya led an ultimately failed revolt to overthrow the imam. Like his father, Ahmad was profoundly conservative but he forged alliances with and received substantial military aid from socialist states (the USSR, China, and Egypt). In 1958, North Yemen even joined the United Arab Republic (a short-lived political union of Egypt and Syria) as a member of the United Arab State. Yemen's participation in the federation had little substance but it did ensure Cairo's goodwill toward the Imamate.

A fourth pattern, the *deep mistrust* of armed forces personnel – a problem the purposeful fragmentation of the military establishment was supposed to solve – was also illustrated by Imam Ahmad's tenure. As coup prevention strategies, he carried the keys to the arsenals on his person and kept the training and equipment of his soldiers to a very basic level.¹⁰ Under Ahmad, the royal guard had grown to about 3,000-4,000 fighters and became the core of a regular army, roughly organized along Western lines. In September 1962 he died of wounds received from an attempt on his life and was succeeded by his eldest son, Muhammad al-Badr. The new Imam's reign lasted merely a week. On September 26, 1962, Abdullah al-Sallal, whom Muhammad al-Badr appointed Commander of the Royal Guard only a few days earlier, staged a coup, named himself president, and proclaimed the Yemen Arab Republic.

Southern Yemen did not become independent for another five years. The British, after decades of engagement in the south of the country – particularly in the port city of Aden and in surrounding areas – turned it into a Crown Colony in 1937. In spite of opposition from the Imamate in the north, Britain established a Federation of South Arabian Emirates in 1959 with six sheikhdoms; nine others joined three years later. The rest of the tribal states formed the Protectorate of South Yemen. Their combined territories became South Yemen, also known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, following the British withdrawal in 1967. The boundaries between the two Yemens were not clearly demarcated until independence. In some areas, Yemen's eastern frontier with Saudi Arabia is still contested.

The Armed Forces of South Yemen (1967-90)

South Yemen arose from the four-year (1963-67) struggle against British colonial rule, also known as the Aden Emergency, that was inspired in part by the revolution in North Yemen.¹¹ The National Liberation Front (of southern Yemen) was formed in 1963 and consisted of nine organizations, one of which was the Secret Organization of Free Officers and Soldiers, mostly made up of Yemenis who fought in the Saudi armed forces.¹² At independence, on 30 November 1967, South Yemen's leading body, the General Command of the Political Organization of the National Front, or briefly National Front (NF), was composed of about 3,500 people. One of the decisive factors for the NF's political supremacy was the support it enjoyed from the officer corps of the armed forces that were significantly expanded in the last few years of British rule. The post-independence regime replaced the army established by the British with a national army.

The PDRY became a socialist state that throughout its quarter-century-long existence struggled to establish, enlarge, and safeguard central authority in what remained a society strongly influenced by tribal identities and affiliations. South Yemen's conservative society steadfastly resisted the type of close control its Marxist-Leninist regime was intent on exercising over a population with age-old tribal allegiances. Still, the PDRY leaders were not above "playing the tribal card." For instance, especially the higher echelons of the officer corps of its armed forces, known as the Popular Defense Forces (PDF), was dominated by the tribe of Abdul Fattah Ismail, the PDRY's *de facto* leader from 1969-80 (as well as president and the leader of the Yemeni Socialist Party in 1978-80). Neither could the country's leadership prevent tribal animosities from reaching the stage of violent conflict: for instance, a month-long tribal war in 1988 resulted in 10,000 deaths.

Civil-military relations in South Yemen followed the general trends in overall regime politics. In 1967-80 South Yemen had become progressively more leftist with the 1969 overthrow of Qahtan Al-Sha'bi, the country's first president; the 1971 ousting of the moderate Marxist Prime Minister, Muhammad Ali Haytham; and the 1978 overthrow of the radical President Salim Rubai Ali by the hardline Abdul Fattah Ismail who, in turn, established the Yemeni Socialist Party, a model Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. In 1980, Ismail was replaced by the more moderate Ali Nasir Muhammad who remained the YSP's leader until 1986. Because most of these leadership changes signified alterations of the regime's political course, they were accompanied not just by social and political upheavals of varying magnitude, but also, true to Soviet practice, by extensive purges of the security sector, especially of the military proper, particularly in 1969 and 1978.

Coup-proofing and the diversification of the defense sector took different forms in South Yemen. In 1972 the regime established a Popular Militia that in a few years became a major part of the defense establishment and by 1983 grew to nearly 30,000 members.¹³ The expressed goal of the Popular (alternatively referred to as People's) Militia was the defense of the regime. It focused its recruitment efforts in the provinces among committed National Front supporters and received training mostly from Cubans. The NF Secretariat created the Popular Defense Committees, in 1973. Their tasks, based on the Cuban model, were to solve people's problems on the neighborhood level. Still, their educational and welfare functions were complemented with security duties.¹⁴ The approximately 15,000-strong Public Security Forces, a cross between a police and a gendarmerie, was an effective supporter of the regime and a vigilant opponent of its enemies.¹⁵ The regular army, the People's Defense Forces (PDF), consisted of about 25,000 soldiers in the late 1970s. Conscripts, who were drafted for two years, made up the army's non-professional personnel. The PDF was divided into a mechanized brigade, ten infantry brigades, and an air defense regiment. Both the army and the small navy (a 500-person force) were equipped mostly with Soviet weapons. The air force was entirely dependent on Soviet trainers, aircraft, supervision, and technical support.

During its little-over two decades of existence, South Yemen's army saw action against foreign adversaries on several occasions. Once the Marxist regime consolidated its power within the country, it turned its attention to the Dhofar Rebellion (1962-76) in neighboring Oman. South Yemen supported the rebels, facilitated the transfer of aid originating from the Soviet Union, and sent volunteers – both from Yemen, and leftists

and Nasserites of all hues from other Arab countries, including Bahrain¹⁶ – to fight alongside the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf. Tensions between the two countries eased little even after the rebellion, in part due to the construction of a military air base by Soviet Bloc personnel in South Yemen at Al-Ghaydah, less than 60 miles from the Omani border.¹⁷ The PDF was also involved in separate border wars against the Yemen Arab Republic in 1972 and 1979 and performed fairly well. In 1979, especially, the PDF made quick gains, profiting from Soviet training, although once North Yemeni tribal militias joined the fight and the US began to airlift supplies to northern forces, a stalemate was quickly reached. The five-week long war ended in a ceasefire mediated by the Arab League in Kuwait, where both sides pledged to work toward the goal of unification.¹⁸

The PDF's increasing politicization reflected the regime's growing ideological rigidity in the 1970s and 1980s and the effective indoctrination efforts of the approximately 400-500 Soviet advisers in South Yemen. Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) organizations became more influential within the security sector and especially in the PDF. Political commissars were appointed to all major units, and proper Marxist-Leninist credentials had become progressively more important among recruitment and promotion criteria. By the end of the PDRY era, the PDF in many respects had become similar to other Soviet-type armies.

Given its increasingly Soviet style, structure, and the regime's political orientation, the army played a similarly important role in domestic politics as other Arab armies, but not as an agent of state-building but as an unwitting arbitrator of ideological currents. The political leadership was often deeply divided, frequently on ideological matters, and the commanders of military units, who supported different sides of the quarrel. The best example is the South Yemen Civil War of January 1986 that emerged as a result of ideological and tribal tensions between two YSP factions. The two-week long conflict was extraordinarily costly: as many as 10,000 people – mostly members of the party, the army, and the militia – were killed (the official figure was 4,330) and physical damages reached over \$140 million, roughly equivalent to a fifth of all foreign aid received since independence.¹⁹ The upshot was the defeat of Prime Minister Ali Nasir Muhammad, the death of Abdul Fattah Ismail along with 55 senior YSP figures, and the succession of Ali Salim al-Beidh, an Ismail ally, who took over the party leadership. Importantly, the USSR refused to assist either side, a position Moscow had increasingly embraced in the domestic conflicts of its allies during Mikhail Gorbachev's presidency.

The Soviet Union, the PDRY's Cold War patron, had a tremendous impact on South Yemen's economic development.²⁰ Moscow, eager to establish a strategic foothold on the Arabian Peninsula, also derived major benefits from its relationship with South Yemen. The USSR used Yemeni military facilities and was the source of most of the PDRY's weaponry.²¹ According to some estimates, in 1967-85 Moscow provided arms to South Yemen worth US\$2.2 billion.²² South Yemen's defense expenditures averaged 17.2% of the GDP in the mid-1980s, far higher than the corresponding YAR figure (10.8%).²³ Although the Soviet military did not maintain ground forces in the country, its navy used Aden as a refueling station and a convenient place to change crews. The Soviets also took advantage of Yemeni facilities to showcase their airlift capabilities – in October 1979, for instance, they flew in 10,000 troops with armored vehicles and artillery

pieces on temporary deployment in the PDRY and Ethiopia.²⁴ At the same time, thousands of Yemeni officers received training in the Soviet Union throughout the PDRY period. Soviet personnel worked alongside comrades from Cuba (as many as 600 advisers) and East Germany, the latter mainly responsible for training and advice on matters relating to police and internal intelligence.

The Yemen Arab Republic and Its Army

Abdullah al-Sallal was one of the thirteen Yemeni cadets who received military training at the Iraqi Military Academy in the late 1930s and returned to their homeland in 1940. At least half of the members of this group were later involved in conspiratorial and insurrectionist activities.²⁵ After overthrowing Imam Muhammad al-Badr, Sallal became president, prime minister, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the head of the Revolutionary Command Council. Sallal and his associates believed, similarly to their colleagues in Libya and the Sudan, that their modernization drive should roughly imitate that of Nasserite Egypt.²⁶ Nasser, a personal friend of Sallal, not only encouraged the 1962 coup – the culmination of a lengthy Egyptian-Yemeni conspiracy – but a few days after the Imamate was overthrown, landed 5,000 Egyptian troops in Sana'a to ensure Sallal's hold on power. In the meantime, however, the Imam refused to surrender to the Nasserite "revolution" and, became the leader of the opposition that soon received much-needed military and economic support from Saudi Arabia. An interesting twist of fate is, as we shall see below, that since the 2000s the Saudis have been fighting the descendants of the Zaydi Imam.

In the North Yemen Civil War (1962-70) the main supporters of Imam al-Badr's Kingdom of Yemen were Saudi Arabia – whose King Faisal bin Abdulaziz was loath to see a pro-socialist state on the Arabian Peninsula – as well as Jordan and the UK. The royalist side consisted of tens of thousands of tribesmen to complement its smaller, perhaps 15-20,000 strong semi-regular troops. Expatriate French officers trained many of these tribal fighters in Saudi Arabia. The royalists also employed hundreds of mercenaries – many of whom served as instructors – from Belgium, Britain, France, Pakistan, and the PDRY. Sallal's Republican side mainly relied on a large Egyptian military contingent – that at times numbered as many as 70,000 soldiers²⁷ – supplemented by its own much smaller forces. The Republican air force leaned heavily on volunteer pilots from Syria particularly after one of the Soviet pilots supporting their cause was shot down, ending Moscow's participation.

The Saudis were concerned both with the large Egyptian buildup south of their border and the potential appeal of Nasserism to their citizens. Riyadh and Cairo negotiated a withdrawal from Yemen in August 1965. Egypt's intervention had far-reaching negative consequences for its stature in the Arab world.²⁸ The conflict revealed both that the relatively well-equipped and well-trained Egyptian army was unable to defeat a much smaller insurgency and that the seemingly ragtag tribal forces of northern Yemen should not be taken lightly. In addition, Egypt had paid a heavy price in both blood – all told, 26,000 of its soldiers were killed in Yemen – and treasure.²⁹ The last Egyptian soldiers left North Yemen on November 29, 1967, the same day the last contingent of British commandos flew out of South Yemen, symbolizing both country's independence.

Sallal lost power the way he gained it: by military coup. In 1967 while in Baghdad, he was overthrown by his colleagues who established a three-man Presidential Council and never permitted him to return. In the presidency, he was followed by Abdul Rahman al-Iryani, the only YAR leader who was not a military man. Al-Iryani opposed both Egyptian and Saudi intervention in Yemen's domestic affairs. During his seven-year tenure, "tribal penetration of all state institutions, including the military, reached its apex."³⁰ He supported the recruitment of tribal sheikhs and their soldiers into the military and other security sector organizations, appointing so-called "colonel sheikhs" to command a number of the YAR army's important units. In addition, Al-Iryani "institutionalized" many tribal-based armed groups formed during the civil war as components of the regular army that was just being developed. The rationale behind the policy to attract tribal leaders and their men into the armed forces was both the desire to nurture tribal loyalties to the new state and to expand the state's reach into tribal areas – particularly in the northern Saada Governorate.³¹ These measures amplified tribal presence and influence in the military. They had serious drawbacks, however, most importantly that tribal ties tended to trump every other relationship and color every interaction in the armed forces.

Like the reign of his predecessors, al-Iryani's presidency also ended in a coup led by Colonel Ibrahim al-Hamdi. In contrast to his predecessor, Hamdi represented the centralizing current in Yemeni politics, eager to expand state power and reduce the tribal forces' military and political influence. His objective, followed more or less consistently throughout his tenure (1974-77), was to build a modern army where the soldiers' primary loyalty was to the state not to their tribes. Hamdi called this valiant but ultimately unsuccessful effort "Revolutionary Corrective Initiative." Not surprisingly, tribal leaders observed this shift in policy with growing alarm. President Hamdi was assassinated, allegedly by Abdullah al-Ahmar, the leader of the Hashid tribal confederation and the most powerful tribal sheikh in Yemen at the time.³²

After brief stints by two interim leaders, in 1978 a 32-year old army lieutenant colonel, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was selected as the YAR's new president. Saleh came from the Bayt al-Affash clan of the Sanhan tribe, a sub-section of the Hashid tribal confederation. He became influential already during Hamdi's tenure and used his clout to place his tribesmen into strategically important positions in the army. Once Saleh ascended to the presidency, he continued this effort – facilitated, ironically, by the availability of positions left open due to Hamdi's centralizing initiative that reduced tribal personnel – and succeeded in creating a tight support base. At the top of this base was a clique that included Saleh's brother, Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar, his first (paternal) cousin, Ali Mohsen Saleh al-Ahmar (henceforth, Ali Mohsen), who was to play such an important role in the future, and a growing number of other family members.

Saleh was the main beneficiary of the cease-fire agreement concluding the aforementioned 1979 war between North Yemen and South Yemen. The accord allowed him to consolidate his power by building up his regime and cementing the support of the northern tribes in the Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations, the two most important tribal entities in northern Yemen.³³ In practice, this meant appointing low-ranking tribal leaders from his Sanhan tribe to head most military units; in a short time, they occupied 70% of the commanding post in various security sector institutions.³⁴ Within a few years

of taking power, the military had become for Saleh a critical tool of regime control and a major part of his patronage network. As in many other authoritarian states in the Arab world and beyond, professional competence had taken a backseat to other considerations in military careers. The main factors in appointment and promotion were first, loyalty to Saleh; second, membership in his tribe; and third, regional background (needed for some semblance of regional balancing).

Saleh also began to build parallel forces both as coup-prevention measures and to create positions for his family and tribesmen. He took control of the Republican Guard (RG) that was established in 1964 and modeled after its Egyptian namesake. The RG's heavily armed and well-trained forces – initially by Egyptian and then by Iraqi advisers – were concentrated around the capital indicating their primary function as defenders of the regime. In the late 1970s the RG was made up of about 5,000 soldiers, but once Saleh took over, its size began to expand rapidly. Equally astute – as he was to prove over and over again – in balancing and manipulating tribal allies and foreign states, a year after coming to power Saleh accepted a large Soviet military assistance package while also receiving arms, supplies, and training from Saudi Arabia and the United States.³⁵

The armed forces' involvement in economic activities began in the middle of the 1970s, at first mainly in the construction industry and as a participant in joint ventures. Soon after he came to power, Saleh began to enhance the military's economic role and shifted its profile to the foreign trade sector, including export-import activities and currency transactions. The army's main company – the Military Economic Corporation (MECO) renamed Yemeni Economic Corporation in 1999 – enjoyed tax-exempt status and had its separate (and undeclared) budget. The military's economic participation served several functions. It allowed Saleh to expand his capacity to dole out further favors, consolidate his patronage system, create new revenue streams for the army, and to enhance his personal wealth. In time it turned many senior officers in the security sector into millionaires.

Tribalism and the Military

Tribal, sectarian, and regional identities have been of paramount importance of and they are essential to understand Yemeni politics and military affairs. This is especially true to northern Yemen where tribal loyalties were manipulated and/or exploited by the central government for many decades. At the same time, tribal leaders were equally skilled in getting the best deal for themselves from competing bidders in the many conflicts in which their participation was sought.³⁶ During the civil war in the 1960s, for instance, many tribal leaders held key military commands, especially after Egypt's withdrawal in 1967. On the other side, however, the Imams did not grant tribal sheikhs administrative positions, perhaps because they understood better that their foremost allegiance would always remain to their tribes.³⁷ Socialist South Yemen was ideologically opposed to tribalism and did its best to eradicate or at least weaken it. Although this PDRY policy was by no means entirely successful, tribal loyalties and tribalism, in general, are less robust in contemporary southern Yemen than in the north. That said, throughout Yemeni history many areas of the country have remained essentially impenetrable to the reach of central authority.

One can distinguish between two kinds of tribal sheikhs in Yemen. The first group is composed of sheikhs based on blood ties and lineage (*Shukyukh al-Dam*) who are most prevalent in the mountainous regions of northern Yemen. The authority of the other groups' leaders, however, is based on territory (*Shukyukh al-Ard*). They dominate the agricultural plains where they have been, in essence, feudal lords to their tribesmen who traded farm-work for food, shelter, and protection.³⁸ These tribal identities often, but not always, coincide with sectarian differences. The people in the mountains of northern Yemen tend to be Zaydites, practicing a form of Shiism quite different from that practiced in Iran. The majority of Yemenis are Shafiites, one of the four sub-sects of Sunni Islam, who were considered inferior under the Imamate.³⁹ It is noteworthy that historically, sectarian differences were seldom a source of conflict, they never fought a religious war, and, in fact, in impoverished areas Zaydites and Shafiites even shared the use of mosques. Hostilities between them were magnified only relatively recently, given the northern Houthi tribes' Zaydi religion and the fierce Saudi opposition to Shiism, no matter what shape it might take. Although the sheikhs' tribal identity may only be one of several identities they possess – they could also be merchants, high-ranking military officers, political party leaders – ultimately, it tends to be the strongest. As Saleh himself once said, “As an army officer I can be sacked, just like any government employee can be sacked. As a member of my tribe, however, I remain forever.”⁴⁰

Such multiple roles well described perhaps the quintessential Yemeni tribal leader, Abdullah al-Ahmar (1933-2007). First and foremost, Ahmar was the influential head of the Hashid tribal federation, a position he inherited from his father, Husayn. For the last 14 years of his life Ahmar was also the Speaker of the Assembly of Representatives, the Yemeni legislature. He was one of the four founders of the Islamist Al-Islah Party, an organization that is better described as a loose coalition of tribal and religious components.⁴¹ Ahmar was also a multimillionaire businessmen and the chairman of the Al-Ahmar Commercial Group. The main focus of this enterprise has been the arms trade. According to a Saleh loyalist, the president encouraged Ahmar's commercial activities in order to prevent him from focusing his energies on politics.⁴² Abdullah al-Ahmar was widely considered the second most important political figure in Yemen. Upon his death in a Riyadh hospital, the *most* important person, Saleh, declared three days of mourning. Abdullah's son, Sadiq (born in 1956), inherited his father's mantle as head of the Hashid federation. He is also the leader of the Islamist Islah party. Sadiq's brother, Hamid (born in 1967), is also a politician – they both were members of Yemen's legislature – but his main endeavors have been business related.

As we have seen, the various iterations of the Yemeni state have attempted to recruit or attract tribal sheikhs and their fighters into the “official” army, usually with the hope that these soldiers – motivated by money as well as various kinds of benefits and perquisites – would shift their primary allegiances from their tribe to the Yemeni Army (YA) itself. This has *not* happened. In modern Yemen, up until after the 2011 uprising, most high-ranking military leaders came from Saleh's Sanhan tribe, regardless of their qualifications. Tribal leaders, particularly from Yemen's northern Saada Governorate, used to send at least one of their sons to domestic or foreign military academies to receive advanced training. Although few of them made their career in the military, many joined one of the security sector institutions as reserve officers.⁴³ On lower levels, tribal elders tend to identify youngsters whom they select to join the military, police, or another

institution in the regime's coercive apparatus. These individuals would become an important link between their tribe and the state.

II. FROM UNIFICATION TO THE ‘ARAB SPRING’ (1990-2011)

How did the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen affect the armed forces? What political and military threats emerged in this two-decade period, how did the state attempt to neutralize them, and how effective were its defense-security institutions? How did the growing instability in the broader Middle East affect Yemen and its armed forces? These are the main questions I will consider in this part of the essay.

Unification, the Civil War of 1994, and the Armed Forces

On May 22, 1990, the two Yemens, the YAR and the PDRY, became one as Republic of Yemen, six months after Saleh and Ali Salim al-Beidh accepted the draft constitution originally drawn up in 1981. In the intervening nine years the South became a lot weaker relative the North owing to the 1986 war, the damaging effects of another nine years of centrally planned economic malaise, and the loss of its main foreign sponsor, the Soviet Union. Saleh had his own reasons for pushing unification.⁴⁴ First, he wanted the political benefit that came from being the engineer of the merger, a long-standing goal of Yemenis. Second, a significant rent-seeking dimension of the unification was the northerners’ expectation to be able to exploit the oil deposits discovered in South Yemen. And finally, as a centralizer, Saleh thought that if he could control all of Yemen, he would be in better position to consolidate his authority over the troublesome northern tribes of Saada Governorate.

The unification process was supposed to be a balanced affair based on a power-sharing formula on a roughly 50-50 basis, but – given that the two countries were not equal in any significant respect – it was hardly a surprise that things transpired differently. Although the North was smaller by area, its population was four times larger and far more prosperous. Southerners, after a quarter-century of communist rule, were unprepared to participate in the more market-driven economy of the north and ill-equipped to take part on equal terms in politics because they were unused to the critical importance of tribal affiliations and unfamiliar with the patronage networks in the north. The political and institutional process of unification was rushed mainly because both Saleh and Beidh, representing their two political parties – General People’s Congress (GPC) and the YSP, respectively – were worried about the emerging opposition to the way unification was undertaken.

According to their agreement, Saleh became head of state and Beidh the head of government. Southerners did get a number of other important posts – including vice president and defense minister – but the GPC dominated politics. Many former PDRY leaders resented losing their clout and the general marginalization of the south and became alienated from the new central authority of Sana’a. They, along with southern tribal leaders, grew distressed about the disproportionate political and economic benefits gained by Saleh’s Sanhan tribe and, more broadly, the Hashid tribal federation.⁴⁵ On the other hand, northern elites were better organized and enjoyed more popular support as was evidenced by the April 1993 elections won handily by the GPC that gained nearly twice as many seats in the legislature as the YSP, its closest rival. After the elections, the

mounting political tensions were evidenced by strikes, demonstrations, and unrealistic YSP demands. The deepening chasm between Saleh and Beidh became more public and the situation gradually careened out of control.

At the time of unification, the northern army was 37,000-strong and possessed 664 tanks. The southern army's personnel numbered only 27,000 and had 480 tanks but it had a superior and relatively highly skilled, Soviet-trained air force.⁴⁶ To boost numbers and to boost his support in the south, Saleh reactivated many retired southern soldiers and returned them to active-duty status in the north. According to the unification agreement, several units were exchanged – although their commanding officers often were not⁴⁷ – between the South and the North. Nevertheless, the command structure was not unified and by and large, the two security apparatuses remained separate. Although the North let a southerner hold the defense portfolio in the cabinet, the post held virtually no real authority as Saleh loyalists controlled most important command positions. Quite simply, the North was willing to grant the South positions and even allow southern military officers some decision-making leverage as long as northern domination of the armed forces as a whole was not compromised. For instance, despite repeated Southern demands, the Saleh refused to allow the YSP any power over the Republican Guards that remained directly linked to the president.

To forestall the spread of enmity, in January 1994 the military leaders of North and South Yemen signed “The Document of Promise and Agreement” (DPA). The DPA stated that the military “should best reflect Yemen’s unification,” limited the military’s political role, brought the armed forces under the authority of the central government and banned the formation of armed organizations (such as militias) outside of governmental control, and called upon the army to distance itself from partisan, political, regional, and tribal affiliations. A rather telling DPA provision was the prohibition of more than one senior military officer with family relations to political or military leaders (president and prime minister and their deputies, the ministers of defense and interior, etc.).⁴⁸ The DPA did not reach its stated objective. The marginalization of the former YDPR army continued and southern officers became deeply resentful. To add insult to injury, their salaries remained significantly below what northern officers had received. The government told them that these inequities would be remedied but they were not. Some speculated that the contemptible treatment of southern officers served the northern objective to rid the unified army of them.⁴⁹ In response, southern radicals began to organize paramilitary training camps as early as November 1993 to prepare for the eventual showdown. The first clashes between the two sides began already on February 20, 1993, but full-scaled war only erupted on May 4.

The Yemeni Civil War of 1994 was rooted in the YSP’s miscalculation that if war broke out, it would be limited to skirmishes around the old border areas separating the former YAR and PDRY. Yet the YSP did not act with restraint. On May 4 its air force bombed Sana’a and later also fired Scud missiles into the city, killing dozens of civilians. Northern forces – most of the fighting was done by conscripts – soon seized the initiative, pursued an aggressive strategy, and they took the war to the south. Many YSP troops had low morale, were not willing to fight or fought poorly, or were bought off by the north. Worse, several large formations of YSP soldiers defected en masse to the northern forces.⁵⁰ The YSP’s leadership was divided, received limited popular support and hardly

any from southern tribes – who, of course, well remembered the anti-tribal policies of the PDRY. Northern forces, on the other hand, were highly mobile and enjoyed a great deal of public support. Their side was strengthened by the “Afghan Arabs,” seasoned combatants who volunteered to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s and had returned to Yemen. Saleh’s forces sacked Aden, the southern capital and, after nine weeks of fighting, utterly exhausted the YSP’s military capabilities.⁵¹

On July 7 the Sana’a regime offered amnesty to southern troops and their commander. A few of the YSP’s military leaders were tried for treason; five received the death penalty. Southern soldiers were disarmed, some of them received jobs in the public service. Saleh allowed his tribesmen and loyalists to confiscate the lands, homes, and assets of Southern landowners – particularly but not exclusively those owned by his political opponents. Most former YSP soldiers were not reactivated but were given some compensation – half-pay without benefits – while soldiers and policemen from the North took charge of their cities. Saleh distributed many high positions formerly held by YSP politicians to reward Islah Party stalwarts and the Afghan veterans for their support.⁵² These were just the first manifestations of Sana’a’s systematic discrimination against the south and the end of even superficial power-sharing.

After unification the national union of Yemenis remained “an imagined social contract” whose preservation continued to depend on the careful management of competition over economic and political resources.⁵³ Following the brief but fierce civil war – the number of dead was estimated between 5,000 to 7,000 soldiers and civilians – the chances for Yemeni democracy and for balanced development and equal status between the north and south plummeted. The civil war created the objective conditions of long-term northern domination as well as the rationale and validation for the southern separatist movement that would start in earnest in 2007.

Ali Abdullah Saleh and Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar

Saleh’s victory in the Civil War allowed him to politically restructure the country to reflect the North’s dominance. He enhanced his power by following earlier policies – blending politics with military affairs and continuing the targeted recruitment of Sanhan tribal members to the regime’s elites – and by reaching “a power-sharing agreement among the many Sanhani figures and their economic self-sustenance through smuggling, and control over state funds, land, and water resources.”⁵⁴ By far the most important partner in this concord was Saleh’s tribesman from the Al-Qadhi clan, cousin, childhood friend, and long-time confidant, Brigadier General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. Ali Mohsen – a fervent supporter of Saleh’s political career from the beginning – became prominent himself during the Civil War. As a commander, he won one of the major battles and secured the support of the Afghan Arabs (many of whom became converts to radical Islam). For most of this period, Ali Mohsen was widely considered the second or third most important person in Yemen (behind Saleh and Abdullah Al-Ahmar [who was not related to him]).

As the Yemeni politician, Muhammad Al-Mutawakel, pointed out, “No ruler in this regions sees himself as legitimate. So they all constantly look over their shoulders, scheming against their rivals, because they see no reason why their rivals should not be their in their place.”⁵⁵ Saleh was probably one of the Arab world’s most cunning and

capable strongmen who managed to stay in power from 1978 until 2012 in an extremely challenging environment by, as he liked to say, “dancing on the heads of snakes.” A master manipulator, Saleh was a genius at keeping potential challengers away from the center of power by bribery – his control of state resources enabled him to be generous – and/or intimidation. When his divide-and-rule strategies ran their course, and a showdown with his political opponents looked certain, mysterious accidents “resolved” the matter.⁵⁶

Even more essential was his reliance on family, clan, and tribal ties. Saleh was fortunate to have an unusually large extended family given that his widowed mother married a paternal uncle whose clan thus became Saleh’s own. He appointed his family members to the most sensitive political and defense-security sector posts. Saleh’s oldest son, Ahmed Ali, headed both the army’s Republican Guard and the Special Forces, his nephew Amar Saleh was deputy head of the National Security Bureau (interacting with Western counter-terrorism agencies), another nephew Yahya Saleh was a Chief of Staff of the Central Security Forces, a half brother was the army commander in Sanhan district, and so on.⁵⁷ Saleh’s son-in-law, Muhammad Duwayd, was in charge of the Secretariat of the Presidential Palace – a crucial position because unlike some Arab leaders like Sadat, Qadhafi, and Mubarak who liked to move between palaces, Saleh preferred to stay put. Altogether almost thirty male members of his extended family received plum jobs in the defense-security sector.

In the first direct presidential elections in 1999, Saleh won over 90% of the votes. In 2004 he announced that he would not run for re-election at the end of his seven-year term, but he changed his mind bowing to, as he said, “popular pressure and the appeals of the Yemeni people.”⁵⁸ In 2006, the first time he faced a serious challenge since he came to power, Saleh won another seven-year term – that would have run out in 2013 – by winning 77% of the vote. As the Arab Spring approached, Saleh was still holding on to power although he was losing the support of several elite groups as well as large segments of the population.

Although staying in power in Yemen’s cut-throat politics for over three decades demonstrates Saleh’s skills, he did make numerous “unforced errors.” One of his costly miscalculations was being the sole backer of Saddam Hussein – against the advice of fellow Arab leaders and US Secretary of State James Baker – in the first Gulf War in 1990-1991. The US stopped aid to Yemen, and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait expelled nearly one million Yemeni migrant workers who contributed over a billion dollars annually to the Yemeni economy in remittances.⁵⁹ This was a high price to pay especially given the country serious economic problems in the wake of reunification. Saleh’s pay-off was a gold-plated AK-47 assault rifle from Saddam. Saleh made an even more costly mistake when he began to groom his oldest son, Ahmed Ali, for the presidency. Ali Mohsen was widely rumored to have an agreement with Saleh to follow him as president, and the grooming of Ahmed Ali was a betrayal of this pact.

Ali Mohsen was an influential general in Yemen’s Army for decades. He played an important role in Saleh’s rise to power and benefited handsomely from their close association. Ali Mohsen’s position as the commander of the first artillery brigade in the primary lands of the Hashi and Bakil tribal federations made him an indispensable ally of Saleh. What truly distinguished Ali Mohsen among other generals and Saleh intimates is

his equally long engagement in and support of radical Islamist causes. Although originally a Zaydite like his Sanhani tribesmen, by the early 1980s Mohsen was a recruiter for Al-Qaeda, facilitating Osama bin Laden's enlistment of Yemenis for the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Ali Mohsen has been long rumored to be implicated in the October 2000 Al-Qaeda terrorist attack against the USS Cole in Aden Harbor.⁶⁰ After 2003 he eased the way of more than 2,000 Yemeni volunteers to Iraq to fight the US-led coalition; this was the third largest contingent of foreign combatants after the Saudis and the Libyans.⁶¹ Roughly at the same time, he negotiated a deal with Yemeni jihadists: in return for refraining from attacking Yemeni targets he promised to leave them alone and not to extradite them to the United States. Both sides kept their word and Yemen was essentially free of radical Islamist aggression in 2003-2007.⁶²

The rift between Saleh and Ali Mohsen originates in the late 1990s. The main source of this feud is Saleh's gradual concentration of power in his immediate family, more specifically, his decision to have Ahmed Ali, succeed him as president. In 1999 Saleh appointed the then 27-year old Ahmed Ali to command the Republican Guard, one of the most important military posts in the land, causing serious misgivings in the armed forces' leadership unsettling political elites. In the early 2000s the conflict between the two men became seemingly unbridgeable. By then Ali Mohsin was the commander of the First Armored Division (FAD), one of the Yemeni Army's most distinguished elements, but Saleh restricted US military aid to divisions controlled by his family members. Alienating the popular Ali Mohsen was a strategic mistake which was to have serious consequences in 2011. The powerful Al-Ahmars were also displeased with the planned succession as they had deepening conflicts with Saleh whose policies started to threaten their economic interests. Noting their commonalities—shared Islamist networks, Salafist views, interest in ousting Saleh—Hamid Al-Ahmar attempted to persuade Ali Mohsen to defect from Saleh's side as early as 2009.⁶³

The Military After the 1994 Civil War

A few days after the end of the Civil War the army's reorganization was the topic of a cabinet meeting held in Aden. The conference confirmed some of the earlier principles, most importantly, the illegality of private armies and militias. This imperative was directed against the activities of fundamentalist Islamist groups. Yemen did not have enemies with designs on its territory—Saudi Arabia desired only stability south of its border—and the protection of Saleh regime from domestic threats became the primary function of the army and the entire security sector. In this respect, Yemen was quite similar to other presidential regimes in the Arab world. The placement of the forces—a large proportion of them based in and around Sana'a and Aden—suggested their main purpose. The military and security forces were routinely deployed to break up protests, infiltrate opposition groups, and manipulate social movements. Even so, in spite of Saleh's continuing centralization efforts, his regime's coercive control remained "exceptionally limited, especially outside of the capital."⁶⁴

Under five regional commands, the armed forces were organized into eight armored brigades, 16 infantry brigades, six mechanized brigades, two airborne commando brigades, one surface-to-surface missile brigade, three artillery brigades, one central guard force, one Special Forces brigade, and six air defense brigades, which consist of

four antiaircraft artillery battalions and one surface-to-air missile battalion.⁶⁵ Ali Mohsen was the long-standing commander of the northwestern region that included Houthi tribal areas and the sensitive border region with Saudi Arabia. During Saleh's reign, the military was reformed and enlarged several times (in 1979, 1986, and 1988) although in the aftermath of the Civil War the president announced a reduction of personnel by 50,000.⁶⁶ Then again, these numbers were misleading because many of the personnel – by some accounts up to one-third – were “ghost soldiers,” i.e. soldiers who only existed on paper but for whom their commanders received salary and benefits.⁶⁷

According to the Western analysts, in 2010 the Yemen's regular armed forces were made up of 66,700 (60,000 army; 1,700 navy; 3,000 air force; and 2,000 air defense) complimented by paramilitary forces of 71,200.⁶⁸ Another source estimated the military's manpower at 176,400, including tribal reserve forces.⁶⁹ It is important to be aware of the limitations of *any* figures regarding Yemeni security issues. Writing on Yemeni military affairs, one expert hints at the limitations of data when, in the span of a couple of pages she qualifies her assertions with: “a point of great contention,” “shrouded in secrecy,” “Yemen's notoriously inaccurate self-reported statistics,” “extremely vague,” “an unknown quantity,” “casting further doubt on the reliability of any figures presented,” and “accurate figures are still impossible to obtain.”⁷⁰

Professional armed forces personnel (non-commissioned officers and specialists) were generally recruited from the northern tribes, especially from the Hashid Federation. For the staffing of the officer corps, however, the regime primarily relied on Sanhani tribal allies with the token representation of other tribes and regions. In order to be selected, aspiring officers had to have earned a secondary school diploma, pass an exam and an interview with the admission committee made up of the military college's faculty. Recruitment officers usually could determine a candidate's tribal membership by his name and residence. After 30 years of service and/or at age 60 officers could retire. Needless to say, if the president or his intimates wanted to keep a trusted officer in uniform, there was nothing to prevent them from doing so. In fact, some officers served for over 40 years while others headed their units for three decades or more.⁷¹

Among ordinary Yemenis, the professional military career was reasonably popular especially among the poor and the lower middle class, owing to its steady pay and benefits. Junior officers, as in many other Arab armies, were generally poorly paid and often mistreated by their superiors. Only their senior colleagues profited from the many corruption schemes available to them, from skimming their subordinates' pay to selling surplus arms to the highest bidder. As in most Arab states, officer promotion was based more on personal loyalty than on merit and professionalism. With presidential approval, a well-connected person could easily jump ahead in ranks. Perhaps the most egregious example is Khalid Ali Abdullah Saleh, one of Saleh's sons, who was given the command of a mountain infantry division and the rank of colonel upon graduating from the military academy in his early twenties.⁷²

From a professional standpoint, members of the regular armed forces were not held in high regard in Yemen, even if they were seldom used as tools of domestic suppression. The people understood that armed forces personnel were undistinguished, not just in terms of vague generalities but in terms of specific failures. The Yemeni military has not been able to master the challenges posed by the Huthi insurgents or to bring the other

conflicts under control. The country's notorious corruption affects soldiers, too, who often sell their supposed enemies their weapons and even change sides. Another reason for the modest public esteem of the Yemeni army is that soldiers, often with their entire unit, choose desertion rather than fighting. Desertion has been a serious problem in all of Yemen's conflicts. The defection of senior generals further demoralized the remaining soldiers and diminished their fighting capabilities.

Yemeni military personnel were closely watched by intelligence institutions to prevent them from turning against the regime. Officers, for instance, were not allowed to gather in large groups and in some cases individual officers who were suspected of engaging in political activities simply disappeared. On average, one out of ten Yemenis worked for the intelligence services. At the same time, army officers' loyalty was bolstered by opportunities to enrich themselves through smuggling and other technically illegal activities that also provided the regime with leverage were they to become unreliable. Although the level of military education and training was quite low, it was somewhat higher in the air force where personnel dealt with expensive equipment.⁷³

In 2001 the National Defense Council abolished the mandatory two-year conscription – introduced by Saleh soon upon gaining the presidency – and converted the army into a volunteer force. Although the decision was supported by the end of border conflicts, recruiting soldiers who wanted to be in the military also meant an army that was less likely to be interested in overthrowing the regime. In 2007 conscription was reintroduced in response to the growing threats of terrorism. The draft, however, was implemented with little consistency in general, and even less in southern Yemen where the Southern Movement and growing opposition to Saleh's rule made it more difficult to enroll reliable youths. Yemeni society also displayed some progressive traits that were reflected in the military as well. For instance, starting in 2007, the regime encouraged women to sign up, especially to the counter-terrorism units of the Central Security Organization where their training was mainly entrusted to British and American specialists.⁷⁴

The regime's coercive sector was comprised of several organizations in addition to the regular Yemeni Army (YA), and their number grew throughout Saleh's rule. By design, communication and interaction between these institutions and between the ministries that had authority over them was limited in order to deny them the possibility of joining forces were they intending to overthrow the president. The defense ministry was little more than an administrative appendage of the armed forces that disbursed salaries and managed pensions.⁷⁵ Regime preservation was the critical function of most of these elements, led by the elite Republican Guards (RG) whose personnel were recruited mostly from the Sanhan tribe. Saleh created the Central Security Organization (CSO) after the Civil War with the expressed goal of fighting al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).⁷⁶ The CSO was technically under the authority of the Ministry of Interior but in practice it was a more or less independent force, especially after 2001 when Saleh appointed his nephew, Yahya, as its commander. With Yahya Saleh at the helm, the CSO – composed of the Central Security Forces (CSF) and a Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU) that had extensive interactions with Western security agencies – became better staffed (reaching 50,000 men, according to reports) and resourced. Among the several intelligence agencies, the Political Security Organization (PSO), established in the late 1970s and run by one of Saleh's nephews, was the most influential. The PSO was a domestic

intelligence service (*mukhabarat*) that kept a close tab on opposition figures and monitored foreigners. According to Phillips, the PSO employed 45,000 people in Sana'a alone.⁷⁷ The National Security Bureau (NSB), a smaller outfit but with better trained personnel than the PSO, was formed after 9/11/2001. Unlike the PSO, the NSB was more or less devoid of "ghost workers" and received significant funding from the US and Jordan prior to the 2011 uprising.⁷⁸ Saleh's half-brother, Ali Saleh – who gave up his command of the RG for his nephew, Ahmed Ali, in 1999 – ran the Office of the Commander-in-Chief (OCC). The OCC was not in the Ministry of Defense' chain of command but eventually by-passed it in importance. It communicated directly with the RG and other key organizations.⁷⁹ By the late 2000s, the "Yemeni military" really meant a number of loosely interrelated organizations with negligible institutional cohesion.

The Yemeni legislature had minimal influence over defense-security matters other than, in theory, overseeing the budget. There was no tradition of ever posing more than pro forma questions about military expenditures, however, and legislators who tried would likely find themselves in trouble. In Yemen, as in other Arab parliaments, deputies usually treated defense and security matters as taboo. Whatever "civilian control" over the military existed, was exercised by Saleh, who watched over defense institutions with the help of his relatives who ran them. He established new security agencies through executive decrees bypassing government and legislative channels. He determined the number of soldiers, the recruitment methods and target areas, as well as where individual units should be based or deployed. Saleh's broad authority allowed him to confer military ranks on civilian (usually tribal) allies and their kin, expand or shrink individual units, and grant to or withhold from supplies and arms from them. Bound by family ties and a wide array of financial rewards and privileges, Saleh's clan remained remarkably united. Public criticism of security sector institutions and personnel was prohibited and punished because, according to Saleh, "they represent all Yemeni people."⁸⁰ A number of these institutions had overlapping authority which made it all the more difficult to establish clearly areas of responsibility or to hold them accountable.

In general, the regime's armed forces were poorly trained and equipped particularly when compared to its Gulf neighbors. Careless maintenance of the air force's obsolete planes was usually behind the relatively frequent crashes.⁸¹ The YA seldom distinguished itself on the battlefield. More often than not, it was unable to convert its superior firepower and manpower into victories against its enemies. Several reasons explain this conclusion. Saleh was known to play off political enemies against one another hoping to benefit from a war of attrition that would exhaust the forces on both sides. A good example was the regime's withdrawal of support from Ali Mohsen's FAD (also known as *Firqa*) during the Houthi Wars. Deployments were often compromised by large-scale desertion and defection. In many cases, soldiers sold their weapons, ammunition, and supplies to the side they were supposed to fight. Most of the arms and equipment of the Houthi forces have been either captured booty or purchased from corrupt army officers and deserters.⁸²

The most critical problem that diminished the YA's effectiveness was the sorely lacking unity within and between its components. Cohesion within the army was seriously undermined by various tribal loyalties, the multiple parallel institutions some of which received preferential treatment from the regime, and generals who were at odds with one another. The most divisive factor emerged in 1999-2000, when Saleh's intention to pass

the presidency to his son became clear. At that point, the YA, in effect, broke down to two separate and often openly antagonistic parts, actually working to undermine each another. On the one hand, were the elements controlled by Saleh through his sons, brothers, and nephews, which included the RG, the special forces, the CTU, the air force and air defense, and a few other brigades. On the other hand, were the units under the command of Ali Mohsen and tribal leaders allied with him, which included the FAD as well as the brigades in the Eastern Region under the command of Brigadier General Muhammad Ali-Muhsin al-Ahmar.

Since the split between Saleh and Ali Mohsen in 1999-2000, the lion's share of state resources went to the RG which was increasingly viewed as Saleh's private army.⁸³ The president made sure that RG had no rival when it came to sophisticated armaments and training. A large proportion of the best weapons in Yemen were purchased by the US government and intended for counter-terrorism units. Many of these arms, however, were locked up in warehouses because Saleh refused to equip those units whom he feared might become a threat to him. The military's budget, despite its low effectiveness, was one of the highest in GDP terms in the Arab world. According to government figures, the Ministry of Defense received usually around 18% of the central government's spending but some unofficial sources claimed that the true figure was closer to 40%. United Nations Development Programme maintained that in 2005 the Yemen's defense outlays amounted to 7% of its GDP (vis-à-vis 1.3% allocated to healthcare), the 8th highest percentage of GDP spent on the armed forces in the world.⁸⁴

The YA's efficiency was further undermined by corruption. The aforementioned ghost-soldier problem sapped the regime's resources as did the over 60,000 people that, according to Saleh himself, were being paid for more than one position in the military and security institutions.⁸⁵ Pay packets usually were given to unit commanders who often skimmed off the top, distributing to their soldiers less than their full allotments. The lack of any independent governmental control over the military-security institutions encouraged fraud even more.

Weapon purchase programs gave Saleh's intimates another avenue for large-scale theft of state resources, often with calamitous implications. The US was rightly worried about the fate of the man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) it sold to Yemen. Within a few months of the sale, dozens were in the hands of arms dealers around the country as a result of "leakage" from the military's armories.⁸⁶ Saleh's relationship to the US was fundamentally a *rentier* rip-off arrangement: in return for letting American forces pursue terrorists in Yemen, he received choice weapons and was allowed to steal hundreds of millions of American tax-payer dollars with impunity. Saleh was said to be suspicious of his generals and loyalists who did not steal. As the former Prime Minister Abdul-Qadr Ba Jammal said in 2010, "a [person] who can't be rich under President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime can never be rich!"⁸⁷

Challenges: The Houthi Wars, the Southern Movement, and AQAP

The preferential basing of troops near the Sana'a and Aden for regime protection purposes created a security vacuum in border areas and other regions that Islamist, separatist, and terrorist forces could fill. By the mid-2000s three major challenges had

threatened the survival of both Saleh's regime and the Yemeni state. The Houthis' movement represented an existential threat to Saleh. The Southern Movement was yet to develop much muscle but it already identified secession as its key objective. In this period, Saleh considered Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula "a minor nuisance in a messy country."⁸⁸

The rebellion of the Houthis in the northwestern Saada Governorate began in September 2004. They started to organize to defend their Zaydi religion and traditions in response to the growing Wahhabism – pushed by Saudi clerics from across the border – and the promotion of Sunni Islam by Saleh's government, and the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, represented by the Islah Party. Their revolt was sparked by the state-sponsored killing of their clerical leader, Hussein Badr Eddin. The Houthis also had other long-standing grievances, such as the centralization of Saleh's authority and their increasing political and economic marginalization. The government was expected to quickly crush the rebellion but the Houthis had superior knowledge of their difficult mountainous terrain and were far more motivated. The next six years saw six rounds of fighting – the Houthi Wars – that claimed thousands of lives and caused the displacement of many more civilians and the destruction of much of the region's already feeble infrastructure.

At the peak of the conflict – in its fourth phase lasting from January to June 2007 – more than 30,000 YA troops were fighting. At that point Qatar negotiated a shaky cease-fire between the warring parties but violence returned in the following March 2008 and again in August 2009 going on until early 2010. The 2010 cease-fire agreement that temporarily ended the war between the Houthis and the government halted the fighting – although local confrontations never entirely stopped – but could not mask the drastically expanded power of the Houthis in northern Yemen. They controlled the majority of Saada and al-Jawf governorates and gained strong influence, but no military domination, over a third, Hajja.⁸⁹ The Houthis also managed to expand their support due to the popular perception that they were not tainted by corruption. Their anti-US, anti-Israel, and anti-Semitic rhetoric made them more popular still. They accused Saleh of recruiting fanatical supporters of Al-Qaida to fight them while Saleh blamed the ayatollahs in Tehran for financing and arming the rebellion.

One of the most important aspects of the Houthi Wars was its elite conflict dimension in Yemen's heavily militarized politics. Saleh assigned the main responsibility of fighting the war to Ali Mohsen's FAD but on numerous occasions, just as it looked to be nearing victory, the president withdrew support from *Firqa*. Behind this manipulation of the conflict was Saleh's intention to destroy Ali Mohsen's popularity and credibility as a military leader. By sentencing Ali Mohsen to fighting a war of attrition with diminishing resources, Saleh hoped to increase the relative standing of his son, Ahmed Ali, and his well-funded RG which was also involved, although to a much lesser extent, in the conflict. In fact, skirmishes *between* the FAD and the RG were not uncommon.⁹⁰

The clash between the Saleh and Ali Mohsen culminated in an aborted Saudi airstrike in 2009 when Saleh gave the coordinates of Ali Mohsen's headquarters for Saudi fighter pilots to bomb. The pilots sensed that something was amiss and did not hit the site.⁹¹ The Saudi intervention, in response to Houthi movements inside of Saudi territory, was the largest Saudi combat operation since the 1991 Gulf War. Saudi forces did not

distinguish themselves in this fight: at least 135 of their soldiers were killed in action against an enemy they appeared to know very little about. The Saudis' subpar performance was an important motivation for their military to begin to build-up a special operations capability.⁹²

Finally, the tribes in northwestern Yemen were not initially involved in the Houthi Wars but by the end of the conflict Saleh – who expended considerable resources to bring them into his orbit – managed to draw most of them in. In the Houthi Wars the colonel sheikhs were not deployed as members of the regular army but as leaders of pro-government irregular militias. This measure was justified to preserve unit cohesion, keep conflicting tribal interests out of the army, and the army out of potential tribal feuds.⁹³

The Southern Movement is rooted in the 1994 civil war and the state's subsequent mishandling of tens of thousands of dismissed and cashiered southern military and security personnel. At first, these veterans wanted little more than decent treatment, equal access to government jobs, reinstatement in the armed forces or the restoration of their full pensions, and the return of their property in many cases expropriated by Saleh's cronies. As time went on and Sana'a demonstrated no interest in their fate, their demands increased and eventually the veterans became the core of a full-blown secessionist movement. South Yemen former president, Ali Salem al-Beidh, emerged from years of silence to start actively advocating for southern independence.⁹⁴

In May 2007 they formed the Southern Mobility Movement in Aden – colloquially known in Yemen as *al-Hiraq* – and started to organize large-scale protests, roadblocks, and other related anti-regime activities. *Hiraq* is essentially an umbrella organization that is composed of numerous local associations originally founded by disgruntled military personnel. Members of the movement believe that Saleh's regime had marginalized the South while wresting control over its natural resources. In April 2010, one of the prominent representatives of the Southern Movement rejected Saleh's (probably disingenuous) call for a dialogue, saying "Our problem is a political and legal problem; the south is under siege and lives in a state of emergency. Our peaceful struggle will continue, as the unity they are talking about ended in the 1994 war. What is happening now is an occupation."⁹⁵ Although the movement had been overwhelmingly peaceful until 2011, by February 2010 over 100 protesters had lost their lives in clashes with the police and about 1,500 of its activists had been imprisoned.

Many Yemeni volunteers who fought alongside the Afghan *mujahideen* returned to their homeland in the mid-1980s with radical views. For them, Yemen, a site of numerous proxy battles in the past, was a fertile location.⁹⁶ They willingly fought against southern Yemen in 1994 particularly as the remnants of Marxist ideology in the south Yemeni leadership reminded them of the Soviet forces they fought a decade earlier. Two decades later, another group of radicalized Yemeni veterans returned from fighting the US-led coalition in Iraq. Al-Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP) was the result of a 2009 merger of Al-Qaeda organization in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Another organization, Ansar Al-Sharia also appeared in Yemen although it has been difficult to distinguish from AQAP.⁹⁷ AQAP's affinity with the Southern Movement permitted the regime to label the latter, incorrectly, a terrorist organization.

Prior to 2011 AQAP staged or attempted terrorist attacks both in Yemen and abroad – in 2009 alone against Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and in the US (Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit in 2009) – and added to the increasingly chaotic security situation in Yemen. Fighting AQAP in Yemen was a priority for the US Government but not for Saleh, whose hands were already full with other challenges. Just how low a priority fighting AQAP was for him was illustrated by the ill-equipped and poorly trained troops the government deployed against AQAP.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, Saleh adroitly exploited for his own benefit the terrorist threat AQAP represented. In the face of considerable domestic opposition, Saleh allowed the US to pursue AQAP combatants in Yemen via an extensive drone campaign and some unacknowledged American special forces presence in return for training, arms, and cash; much of the latter ended up in his bank account.⁹⁹

On one thing the Houthis, AQAP, and Ali Mohsen all agreed: they all decried Saleh's dealings with Washington. The forces that were the beneficiaries of US, UK, and Jordanian training were the RG and security organizations such as the Coast Guard and the CTU that were under the control of the Ministry of Interior. The regionalization of security threats represented by the Houthis and AQAP received increasing attention from the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC's considerable military aid to Saleh's regime targeted improving Yemen's capabilities, in order to more effectively protect Saudi Arabia's own border regions.¹⁰⁰

III. THE 'ARAB SPRING' AND THE UNFOLDING CHAOS

The revolutionary diffusion in the Arab world reached Yemen rapidly and the various social and political forces it has unleashed have yet to arrive at a stable solution. One of the key things to grasp about the Yemeni upheaval is that while in other Arab countries the revolt was mostly about reform and regime change, in Yemen it quickly turned into a showdown between competing elites. This third part of the essay is itself divided into two chronological periods: from the uprising to President Saleh's resignation and then from the point President Hadi took office until the time of this writing, in mid-2016.

The 2011 Uprising and the Military

During his long rule Saleh had encountered many challenges and survived them all. He thrived in chaotic situations, did not believe that any alternative power centers could threaten his hold on power, and was confident that he was the only person who could keep Yemen together and deal with international actors. Nevertheless, he realized when the protests began on January 15, 2011, that the test he faced this time might be more serious than earlier ones. Saleh responded by cutting taxes, hiking food subsidies, and promising to raise civil-service pay. More important, he pledged not to extend his rule beyond 2013 – when his second seven-year presidential term would have expired – nor to permit his son Ahmed to succeed him. The crowds, initially dominated by students but soon joined or explicitly backed by a wide variety of societal groups – including, by late February, both the Hashid and the Bakil tribal confederations¹⁰¹ – were not satisfied with these concessions and demanded that Saleh resign immediately. The ensuing violence—and particularly the massacre on March 18, when elements of the RG and the CSF killed

fifty-two protesters engaged in their Friday prayers—galvanized the opposition and divided the armed forces.

The demonstrations in Yemen were large, mobilizing tens of thousands of people. Young men and women protested together, a fact that Saleh opportunistically used to condemn them as un-Islamic referring to *ikhtilat*, the intermingling of the sexes. Some Islamist radicals used Saleh's denunciation of the protesters as an excuse to attack them even though the influential cleric, Abdul-Majeed al-Zindani, declared that attacking peaceful protesters was *haram* (prohibited by Islam).¹⁰² Although until March 2011 the protests were peaceful, their key demands – the elimination of Saleh's clan and their vested interests from Yemen's public life – obviously attracted the security troops' attention. Fraternization between the protesters and members of Ali Mohsen's First Armored Division was widespread.

The March 18 massacre brought the military-security sector to a breaking point. Three days later, the regime ruptured when General Ali Mohsen, who came as close as any Yemeni to being a charismatic military leader, announced his defection from the regime. To be sure, both the state's coercive apparatus in general and the army in particular were split in their attitudes toward the regime. In the background of this break, of course, was Ali Mohsen's long-standing feud with Saleh and his eldest son, Ahmed Ali, the RG's commander. Still, until March 21, 2011 Saleh had shrewdly avoided to irreparably fracture his defense sector. Ali Mohsen's proclamation changed all that. In essence, he exploited the unrest to launch his campaign against Saleh; by assuming a prominent role as the protector of the demonstrators, he was able to claim the moral high ground.¹⁰³ His defection also signified the growing militarization of the theretofore overwhelmingly peaceful protests and greatly diminished the prospects of the conflict's peaceful resolution. As the fight between the two sides dragged on, the roots of the revolt had gradually disappeared to become an increasingly irrelevant background.

A few minutes after Ali Mohsen announced his decision on national television to protect the demonstrators, a dozen regular army generals with their units joined him and his First Armored Division. They included the southerner, Abdallah al-Qahdi, who was fired by Saleh a week before for refusing to use force against peaceful demonstrators.¹⁰⁴ Several regional commanders and their troops (e.g. General Muhammad Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar of the Eastern Region), the Political Security Office (a security agency under the interior ministry's control), and a number of irregular tribal militias affiliated with the Islah Party (a traditional ally of Ali Mohsen) also enlisted in the anti-Saleh forces. By the middle of 2011, the alliance of anti-regime forces, all with their own grievances, also included the Ahmars, the Houthis, some elements of the Southern Movement, and the Joint Meeting Party, a coalition of five parties established in 2005.¹⁰⁵

Although Defense Minister Mohammed Nasser Ahmed insisted that “the military” was still faithful to Saleh, that was, strictly speaking, not true as the YA itself was deeply divided. To keep his hold on power, Saleh could only rely on organizations that were attached to the ruling family and its clan: the RG, the CSO, the NSB, the Presidential Guard (similar to the US Secret Service, whose function is to protect the president), most air force brigades, and some elite army units. As time went on, several generals who became disillusioned with the regime and a large number of ordinary soldiers who for a time stayed in pro-Saleh forces either went over to Ali Mohsen's side or simply deserted.

By late 2011 major defections culled the ranks of both the RG and the CSO in the capital; many of these soldiers went over to Ali Mohsen's headquarters in northwestern Sana'a.¹⁰⁶ To be sure, desertion affected both sides. That said, the two sides, at this stage of the conflict, avoided battling one another. Aside from the occasional minor skirmishes, little direct engagement took place between different Yemeni security troops.

Owing to the aforementioned problems of institutional cohesion, divisions within the armed forces could be easily anticipated. Even prior to the uprising, the constituent institutions of the defense establishment was split in its loyalties between those allied with Saleh and his family and those supporting General Ali Mohsen. These institutions had little contact with one another. The regular military was ostensibly charged with the external defense of the country, while the security forces were supposed to protect the regime, though in practice ensuring regime survival was the main mission of all these forces. Unlike the Tunisian and Egyptian armies, Yemen's military was highly under-institutionalized, largely lacking professionalism, and entirely dependent on the dictator's whims. Consequently, creating a unified defense establishment—or even a cohesive regular army—was not at all what Saleh wanted; his key objective was regime survival, which worked best with a fragmented force. The intentional break-up of the defense establishment and the ubiquitous spying on its components also served to isolate military leaders and diminish their decision-making authority.

In the end, outside forces helped determine the uprising's initial political outcome. International actors – mainly the EU, the US, and the GCC – agreed that Saleh should not play a role in Yemen's future. Between April and June 2011 the GCC, backed by the UN Security Council and the EU, negotiated three settlements whereby Saleh would resign in exchange for immunity but the president reneged on all in the last minute. On June 3, 2011, however, an explosion occurred inside the mosque inside the presidential compound that severely injured Saleh and killed or maimed some senior officials. (The president held the Ahmars responsible.) A couple of days later Saleh departed to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment and did not return to Sana'a until late September. In his absence, skirmishes—though not outright combat—between government and opposition forces continued until Saleh reluctantly relinquished his powers in November. Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi, took over the presidency in his absence, in concert with the Yemeni constitution. Exercising his authority was made more difficult by Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, who took up residence in one of the presidential residences.

The agreement that settled presidential succession was finally signed by Saleh and a coalition of opposition party leaders in November 2011, a few weeks after he returned from Riyadh. It was a deeply flawed document for it not only granted Saleh, his family, and his top officials immunity from prosecution but, crucially, it allowed him to retain the chairmanship of his ruling General People's Congress party and thus, a role in Yemeni politics. In return, the president would step down in 30 days, transfer power to Vice President Hadi, until elections could be organized. In the end, the ten-month long uprising that started with so much hope and inspiration, managed to destabilize the already shaky Yemeni state and wreck its armed forces.

By mid-2011, Yemen was approaching conditions of a civil war, with the military split, and the outcome of the conflict uncertain. The situation in Yemen was made more complicated by the presence of the three extant and long-standing armed conflicts

mentioned above. Ali Mohsen and his forces remained mainly on the sidelines. Importantly, he did not resign his commission in the army, continued to draw his salary, and bided his time. The fighting was mostly between the pro-Saleh organizations – the RG and the CSO – and the large and well-equipped tribal militia of the Ahmars. That said, a number of extraneous organizations also tried to exploit opportunities presented by the growing chaos to expand their influence. For instance, during the summer and fall of 2011 in Arhab and Hihm, two tribal districts north of the capital, irregular troops attempted to overpower poorly guarded RG camps in order to take their arms and stocks.

President Hadi, the Military, and the On-Going Crisis (2011-)

President Hadi, a southerner, is a retired general who was trained in Saudi Arabia, the UK, Egypt, and the Soviet Union. Crucially, in the 1994 civil war he sided with Saleh and was rewarded with the vice presidency. After 17 years in a mostly ceremonial job, in February 2012 Hadi ascended to the presidency in an election in which he was the consensus candidate. His presidency was endorsed by both by the Joint Meeting Parties of the opposition alliance and the GPC the party of Saleh supporters. Importantly, Hadi was also supported by the US – though far more so by the State Department than the Pentagon where he was thought to be weak and enjoying little backing within the armed forces – and the Saudis who could see no better alternative to him at the time. Many considered the election – the first in 33 years without Saleh’s participation – the end of the revolution that started a year before. Nonetheless, Hadi’s was a mostly thankless job and, in spite valiant efforts, he could at no point re-establish stability, security, let alone rule of law across the country. In his first coalition government, half the important positions – including the foreign affairs and defense portfolios – were in the hands of GPC politicians whose loyalty lay with Hadi’s predecessor.

The GCC Initiative that ended Saleh’s rule also provided for a National Dialogue Conference, a vehicle to bring about societal peace and reconciliation, resolve conflicts and discuss the structure of the future state.¹⁰⁷ After much planning the NDC was convened in March 2013 with 565 representatives from around the country. Former Prime Minister Abd al-Karim al-Eryani, a Hadi ally, headed the special committee that selected the participants in what was a contentious process and resulted in a skewed body; for instance, the revolutionary youth groups, without whom the uprising would not have occurred, were insufficiently represented. Those present fell into three major factions supporting President Hadi; the Ahmar family alliance, General Ali Mohsen, and the Islah Party; and former president Saleh. The NDC concluded in January 2014 and its members agreed to extend Hadi’s presidency, to have 50%-50% northern-southern representation in the new legislature, to create a six-region federal system, and to have a new constitution that reflected these reforms.¹⁰⁸ Southern politicians, however, were unhappy with what they perceived as the further diminished importance of the south in the proposed federal system and withdrew from the NDC. Just as importantly, the old elites – converged around Saleh on the one hand and the Ahmars and Ali Mohsen on the other had gained nothing from the NDC which was dominated by Hadi and his allies.

Hadi's Efforts to Reform the Military

In the meantime, Hadi also attempted to take control of and to reform the armed forces. He enjoyed the backing of the international community – primarily the GCC, the EU, and the US – although his conditional support in the military made his successful implementation of any defense reform doubtful at best. The only way he could make the military answer to him was to dismantle the traditional power centers within the security sector and, just as crucially, build up his own. Already in December 2011, when he was still vice president, Hadi formed a 14-member Military Committee (*al-lajna al-askariya*) to reform and reorganize the defense sector. Since contending military forces effectively divided Sana'a to separate security zones they controlled, Hadi's next move was to create a new unit composed of elements of these forces: the Republican Guard, the First Armored Division, the Central Security Forces, and the military police.¹⁰⁹

The key problem was that the troops' allegiances were to individuals (Saleh, Ali Mohsen, etc.) rather than to institutions (e.g., the army, or the Presidential Guards) let alone to their country. In this spirit, Hadi and Defense Minister General Muhammad Nasir Ahmad Ali reassigned or removed over 20 military commanders who were Saleh loyalists. Hadi's first target was the longtime Saleh loyalist, Brigadier General Mahdi Maqula, whom he moved from the command of the Southern Military Region to the general staff for human resources. The changes in personnel often met with intense resistance. In April 2012, for instance, Air Force General Mohamed Saleh al-Ahmar, the former president's half brother, refused to leave office for 19 days after he was dismissed by Hadi. The sacked general instructed his troops to occupy Sana'a's international airport and threatened to shoot down planes approaching the airfield if he was not reinstated. Troops loyal to President Hadi intercepted four trucks driven by General Al-Ahmar's tribal allies loaded with medium and light weapons leaving the air force base.¹¹⁰ In August 2012, when Hadi relieved from his command of the RG Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, the latter refused to leave his post for days. Once Ahmed Ali did leave, dozens of RG soldiers stormed the defense ministry in protest while a number of RG units staged mutinies against their newly appointed commander. Several major formations, such as large parts of the air force, went on strike protesting the firing of their commanding officers and, importantly, their low salaries. Replacing generals, it seemed, was not sufficient for Hadi to secure his control over the military and his government needed to take more drastic measures.

In December 2012 Hadi made his most important changes by disbanding the two most important military entities in the land, the Republican Guard and the First Armored Division. They were to be reorganized on a regional basis and blended into the new strategic reserve force. Although Hadi and Ali Mohsen were long-standing allies – Ali Mohsen had protected Hadi since 1986, they were both linked to the Hashid tribal federation, and Ali Mohsen had recently also sworn loyalty to the new president – his long-standing command of *Firqa* ended. Hadi offered Ali Mohsen to stay on as the president's military and security adviser. In May 2013, the president appointed Ahmed Ali Saleh as Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), an assignment that astutely removed him from Yemeni domestic affairs. At the same time, Hadi renamed the Central Security Forces to Special Security Forces and appointed an Inspector General whose office was charged with addressing human rights, corruption, and police violations in the

Ministry of Interior. Hadi was carefully and steadily building his own support base in the army. The large majority of new commanders hailed from his own Abyan Governorate.

Hadi and his Military Committee also intended to restructure the armed forces dividing them into five services (land forces, naval forces and coastal defense, air force and air defense, border guards, and strategic reserve) with corresponding sub-units (the land forces, for instance, were divided into seven military regions).¹¹¹ Their preliminary plan was to develop, based on who is telling the story, a 250,000 or a 375,000-strong military of whom 85% would be professionals (including officers, NCOs, and soldiers) and the rest would be in the strategic reserves.¹¹² According to this scheme, the percentage of officers could not exceed 7%, NCOs 25% and soldiers 65% with administrators and technicians making up the rest, and combat troops should constitute at least 70% of the armed forces' total manpower.¹¹³ US officers who helped formulate the defense reform with Hadi and his Military Committee claim that the Yemenis had only the vaguest notions of how many forces they actually had or where they were located.¹¹⁴

Given the dreadful security situation, these plans remained plans and could not be implemented. Furthermore, notwithstanding the effort to restructure the armed forces and to change their commanders, Saleh, Ali Mohsen, and other major political personalities (such as the Ahmars and other tribal leaders) continued to enjoy a great deal of indirect influence within the military. Although Hadi did his best to install his own loyalists in sensitive positions, his administration could not dismiss the many thousands of Sanhani officers with whom Saleh had staffed the armed forces for the previous three decades.

Throughout the entire period the conflict between the Houthis – who started to call themselves *Ansar Allah* (Supporters of God) – and various Salafist forces continued to flair up, occasionally leading to major combat with thousands of fighters on both sides. Aside from one instance, however, President Hadi did not deploy the armed forces against them probably because he realized that, in spite of his efforts to build up his support base, the officer corps' and the troops' loyalty to him was uncertain and their morale was low. It was highly questionable, then, that a seventh campaign against the Houthis led by the government would be successful.

Terrorist attacks, suicide bombers – one, in May 2012, killed 100 CSF soldiers – in the meantime continued to wreak havoc in major cities, especially Sana'a, Taiz, and Aden. In this chaotic environment the AQAP and the Southern Movement became increasingly active, trying to expand their political and military power, and lay territorial claims. Assassination attempts on virtually all major politicians had become everyday occurrences. For example, there were three attempts on Defense Minister Ahmad Ali's life in 2011-2012 alone. After several such attacks on Ali Mohsen – his house in Sana'a was a high priority target of Houthis – the general fled to Saudi Arabia. After his flight, whatever remained of the structure and cohesion of the government's forces was even harder to preserve, let alone maintain.¹¹⁵

In September 2014 the Houthis stormed and established control over Sana'a. By late 2014, the only military unit still loyal to Hadi and his government – who continued to enjoy the backing of the Sunni majority and the international community – was the Presidential Guards (PG). After two days of fierce fighting with Houthi insurgents, the

PG were driven out of the Presidential residence on 21 January 2015. Hadi was forced to resign and was held under virtual house arrest but on 20 February 2015 he managed to escape to Aden while dressed up as a woman and rescinded his resignation. A month later the deteriorating security situation compelled him to seek refuge in Riyadh. Nevertheless, Hadi continued to consider himself the lawful president of Yemen. Just as importantly, so did the international community.

Evolving Allegiances and On-Going Assaults on State Stability (2011-16)

Throughout much of the period between the resignation of Saleh and the onset of the civil war not only was basic, street-level security absent in the urban centers of Yemen but the country had fallen increasingly into the hands of a wide variety of militias and armed factions without the rise of a single dominant center of power. We must emphasize that the allegiances and affinities between the numerous sides remain both negotiable and fluid. In our interviews with participants and experts it was often stressed that individual grievances, real or imagined perceived slights, and especially various incentives (monetary payments, supplies, arms) can be and often are quite effective in persuading hostile parties to desert, desist, or even change sides. The main concern for the embattled President Hadi and the international community is that the longer armed factions that are outside of the government's control exist in the country, the more difficult it will be to re-establish central authority. It seems useful to offer here an annotated catalogue of the various forces contending for political power.

Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh

Allowing the former president to stay in Yemen and not to face prosecution nor the confiscation of his assets were the biggest flaws of the 2011 settlement. It was a folly to believe that a person like Saleh was going accept being taken out of power or to quietly stand by while his former subordinates were running what he considered *his* country. By March 2012 Saleh made it clear that he had no intention of removing himself from Yemen's political future. Saleh even conducted some of his meetings with tribal leaders as well as with key power brokers in the Presidential Palace. In a speech delivered at a Sana'a mosque, he said, "Our people will remain present in every institution. Two months have passed since this creation of this weak government, which doesn't know the ABCs of politics. It won't be able to build a thing or put one brick on top of another."¹¹⁶

Although Saleh has many enemies, his support, especially elite support, and his skillful manipulation of political environments should not be underestimated. He and his allies still control a number of media outlets – including a private television channel owned by Mohamed Shayef, the top leader of the Bakil tribal federation – that gives him favorable coverage. To be sure, Saleh's influence in the security sectors has significantly eroded, he continues to enjoy some support there especially on the elite level. In the GPC, which has important networks within the bureaucracy, religious circles, and some tribal leaders, Saleh still enjoys considerable clout.¹¹⁷ In over three-decades of leading Yemen, Saleh had made a lot of people wealthy and influential. Just as importantly, Saleh remains extremely rich. He is accused to have stolen \$60 billion throughout his decades in power

and his personal fortune is estimated as at least \$30 billion.¹¹⁸ The ever-cunning Saleh also developed close ties with some Jihadist organizations.

More surprisingly, Saleh was able to form an alliance with the Houthis, the side he spent years and billions trying to defeat during the second half of the 2000s. Their rapprochement and subsequent marriage of convenience began during 2014 when forces loyal to Saleh stayed in the background as the fight for the control of Sana'a raged on. It appears that *Ansar Allah* appreciated Saleh's neutrality, and later the two sides agreed that a post-conflict political settlement would include both of them in dominant positions. In essence, Saleh is using the Houthis to settle accounts, as it were, with Ali Mohsen and the al-Ahmars and fight in a costly war of attrition in exchange for his financial support. By taking the Houthis' side, Saleh foreclosed on the possibility of any future support from Riyadh – even though at the beginning of the uprising Saudi Arabia was cautiously backing him. Re-establishing his and his family's influence and, implicitly, paving the way for his son's presidency, are Saleh's ultimate objectives.

The Houthis (Ansar Allah) and the Bakil Tribal Federation

The Houthis are members of the second-most-powerful tribal federation, the Bakil, which has benefited from the ebbs and flows of the evolving balance of power and profited from the plummeting fortunes of Ali Mohsen and the Ahmars, key figures within the Bakil's main rival, the Hashid federation. Furthermore, the Houthis have also been the beneficiaries of the deep-seated discontent of other tribes in their native Saada Governorate with the state. The Houthis, and their neighboring tribes, have legitimate grievances: at least since the turn of the millennium, they have received minimal developmental aid, they have been politically and economically marginalized, and the state has not protected them from the aggressive Salafist agitation and provocation instigated by Saudi Arabia.

Since the beginning of the uprising, the Houthis have considerably expanded their political influence and support base, military power, and geographical control. In fact, they have constituted the most powerful threat to Yemen's stability. According to careful estimates, the number of Houthi fighters and active loyalists is in the neighborhood of 100,000 to 120,000.¹¹⁹ Although their rhetoric continues to be anti-Western, their goal is to expand and consolidate their power in Yemen. (Unlike Al-Qaeda or ISIL, *Ansar Allah* has neither the ambition nor the demonstrated capacity to attack Western countries in their own territories.) Since at least the beginning of the uprising, the Houthis have more or less fully controlled the four most important northwestern governorates (Amran, Hajja, Sa'da, and Al-Jawf) and have expanded their influence over several neighboring areas, including Hadramout, Marib, Hudaydah, and Sana'a. For many Yemenis, especially in the north, the Houthis have represented a less corrupt and more capable political alternative than Hadi's weak transitional government. Their avowed purpose of cleansing the crooked and inept political elites has not failed to resonate with large segments of embittered Yemenis.

Some of the Houthi clans have become more devout and their leaders have forged closer ties with Iran. Clearly they have received some financial aid and weapons that originated in Iran, but the Saudi and American governments' estimates of the Iranian aid appear to be greatly overstated.¹²⁰ Importantly, given their widespread marginalization and

religious isolation, the Houthis, unlike the other factions, have no alternative outside patron. Their shaky alliance with Saleh is a marriage of convenience that, for the time being, serves both sides' interests. To be sure, one might consider *Ansar Allah* and Saleh strange bedfellows, but their association just underscores the fluidity and negotiability of Yemeni politics.

Ali Mohsen, the Ahmars, Islah Party, and Hashid Tribal Federation

Until his flight from Sana'a to Riyadh in September 2014, Ali Mohsen remained one of the most influential military leaders particularly in the northeastern part of Yemen. The wider Yemeni population does not consider him a unifying figure owing to his strong links to radical tribal chiefs and jihadist groups that go back to the 1980s.¹²¹ Ali-Mohsen continued to have close ties to the powerful and prosperous Al-Ahmars, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islah Party, as well as the Hashid tribal federation. He has also maintained his long-standing ties to AQAP. On the other hand, the Houthis' ill-will toward Ali Mohsen has eased little given his leading role – and some notable successes – in the six “Houthi Wars.” The Ahmars lost some of their influence among the northern tribes and were additionally weakened owing to the loss of Saudi support. That support from the north was also diminishing for Ali Mohsen, because of his connections to jihadi organizations. Nevertheless, with the beginning of the civil war in 2015, the ever-pragmatic Saudis were most interested in individuals and groups who were effective fighters against the Houthis and thus renewed their patronage of Ali Mohsen and his allies. According to a number of sources, Ali Mohsen has enjoyed Riyadh's full backing at least since mid-2015. In contrast, the Emiratis see him as a key backer of their foes, the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical Islamist forces in Yemen.

The Yemeni Army

It is indicative of the miserable conditions in Yemen that the army of the state – one might venture, the *failing* army of the *failing* state – is just one of the several warring sides in the country. The army is deeply divided between factions, units, and commanders some who actively oppose the president. Rivalries are intense between service branches and often among individual units for funding and for preferential treatment and assignments. All of these intra-military tensions cannot but diminish the fighting effectiveness of the YA. After the personnel changes and the breaking up of the Republican Guard and the Central Security Forces, Saleh and his camp has little support left in the Yemeni Army. It is fair to say that most of those with continued loyalty to the former president left the government's forces long ago. While splitting up these elements was politically necessary; there is no doubt that downgrading its most cohesive and competent forces caused long-term damage to the government's fighting ability.

Another problem that has become more acute in the last decade is the chronic rank inflation in the army whose rank structure resembles a reverse pyramid.¹²² According to one source, instead of the claimed strength of 450,000 soldiers, the YA is perhaps 150,000-strong.¹²³ Another analyst estimated the strength of the military loyal to the government at “about 200,000” in December 2015.¹²⁴ Some of my interviewees suggested that “Yemen has about 60,000-75,000 soldiers worthy of the name.”¹²⁵ The ‘ghost soldiers’ syndrome has yet to be eliminated. Only some of the ‘missing’ soldiers are ‘ghosts;’ many others have gone over to the enemy or deserted. The army does not

have a computerized database that could clearly establish manpower figures. Given the deep-seated corruption in the armed forces, such a database would be a major threat to the income stream of its many crooked commanders. The practice is not necessarily as simple as base commanders requesting more pay-packets than they have soldiers. It can also result from practices like this: an army commander in region X fighting the *Ansar Allah* asks the local tribal chief for, say, 1,000 men for two months (some to fight, some to work in logistics, others in transportation, etc.). The commander agrees to ‘register’ the men for one year, pays the tribal leader for 8 months and pockets the rest.

Until the civil war started in early 2015, the YA was the only armed force aside from the Houthis that engaged AQAP in combat. In some cases, Yemeni troops fought well against AQAP in 2011-12 in Abyan governorate and received supplies dropped by the air force. In many other instances, however, a large number of the soldiers supposed to fight the enemy simply ran away.¹²⁶ The air force, however, continued to attack AQAP bases until February 2015 when it was taken over the Houthis. AQAP responded to air force strikes by a flurry of assassinations claiming the lives of dozens of air force leaders and pilots.¹²⁷

The army’s spotty performance against the Houthis was one of the main reasons for the widening of the conflict as the Saudi-led coalition entered the fray. Some sources have claimed that elements of the YA fought not only “unenthusiastically” against the Houthis but, in fact, responding to presidential orders, YA units were actually withdrawn. This was the source of a public fall-out between General Ali Mohsen, who attacked President Hadi over his reluctance to deploy YA units. In any event, it is clear that most army units did not put up a serious fight against the *Ansar Allah*. Moreover, it is also clear that in some cases YA troops actually fought *with* the Houthis. One such incident occurred on 22 September 2014 – the day the Houthis captured Sana’a – when forces previously under the command the Ahmed Ali Saleh but at this point supposedly controlled by the Defense Ministry participated in the taking of the capital.¹²⁸

Popular Committees (PCs)

The so-called Popular Committees are not a recent phenomenon in Yemen, they already fought during the 1962 revolution in the north. The PCs are essentially tribal formations and are a manifestation of the age-old practice when tribesmen volunteered to defend their domain. Although many of the fighters come from tribes, some have weak or no tribal affiliation: the main *raison d’être* for the PCs is to safeguard the communities for various threats as they emerge (i.e., these are *ad hoc* groups rather than permanent formations). Some PC members find the term ‘militia’ offensive and derogatory as it does not express the community service – aside from safeguarding local facilities and infrastructure, providing public order in markets, manning checkpoints, etc. – they have been doing for a long time.¹²⁹

In the context of the current conflict, PCs were first established in Shabwa Governorate in 2010, then they started up in Abyan with the specific aim of fighting AQAP. In any case, these tribal forces have been in numerous cases critically helpful to the YA and often their contribution made the difference in the outcome. PCs fighting on the government’s side have received monthly salaries – mostly underwritten by the Saudis and disbursed by the government, an arrangement that has been the source of plenty of

misuse of funds – as well as food and shelter, depending on the location. The government's use of the PCs, in 2014 alone it hired some 15,000 new fighters, has proved to be a double-edge sword, however. The PCs often undermine the authority of local government institutions, rob people at checkpoints they man, make arbitrary arrests, abuse soldiers they fight alongside with – in one case a PC tribunal flogged to death a YA soldier caught drinking alcohol¹³⁰ – and refuse to fight (and occasionally even change sides) if they do not receive payments promptly. The government has promised many PC members that once stability is reestablished they would receive public sector jobs. These pledges will be hard to keep given that the government's already bloated payroll.

It is important to realize that the Houthis have employed their own PCs, sometimes referred to as people's committees or revolutionary committees. They have assisted Houthi campaign effectively, including the capturing and controlling of the capital in September 2014 and since. PCs do similar things for *Ansar Allah* that those paid by the government do: manning checkpoints, guarding government buildings (having taken over the responsibilities of the official security services they replaced), directing traffic, etc. What to do with them once the fighting is over presents the Houthis with the same dilemma facing the government and they have come up with the same panacea: public sector employment.¹³¹

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (Ansar al-Sharia)

The re-energized AQAP presented an additional security challenge to the central government. The more chaotic Yemen has become, the safer haven it has been for AQAP to operate and to fill the growing security vacuum. The increasing desperation and radicalization of youth has expanded the pool of potential recruits ripe for Al-Qaeda's picking. The 2011 uprising brought benefits for AQAP because during the upheaval Saleh surreptitiously released over 70 of its members held in Sana'a's Political Security Prison, perhaps as a kind of illustration of how dangerous Yemen had become to back up his claim for foreign aid.

Throughout 2011 and 2012 Al-Qaeda took advantage of the growing anarchy and had grown rapidly, scoring several victories against YA detachments and capturing their weapons and equipment, including tanks, air defense guns, and artillery pieces.¹³² Al-Qaeda fighters have been known to embed in tribal militias that are fighting the Houthis, a phenomenon that is not officially acknowledged but is, nevertheless, common knowledge.¹³³ The AQAP's clashes with the Houthis had intensified when the latter expanded into areas historically dominated by Sunnis. In February 2012 AQAP briefly gained control of several strategically important areas on the southeastern coastline but were not able to establish a foothold over them and were defeated by troops loyal to President Hadi (a combination of YA and PC fighters) four months later. AQAP's activities were concentrated in the southern part of the country, but they mounted successful attacks in most areas of Yemen.

Although AQAP's fortunes have been inconsistent, it continued to bring menace to security officials across Yemen and forced the closure a number of diplomatic missions in August 2013. On December 5, 2013, AQAO mounted a daring attack on the defense ministry hospital compound in Sana'a, killing 56 soldiers, third country nationals, and diplomats and wounding 162 others.¹³⁴ Five months later in an assault on the presidential

palace, AQAP fighters killed several more. In April 2015 AQAP seized control of the important southeastern port city of Mukalla and held it for a year. It was able to do so mainly because the Houthis, the YA, and other forces in the region were fighting one another and thus AQAP faced weak opposition as it entered the city.¹³⁵ Many claim that AQAP actually ran the city and the port more effectively and with far less corruption than civilians before them; AQAP, some residents say, provided something they had not experienced for years: stability.¹³⁶ Unlike AQAP – which has expanded its activities to provide some much needed social services – ISIL (or Daesh) has not been successful in establishing a major presence, has only a limited number of sympathizers, and has failed to recruit broadly in Yemen.¹³⁷ AQAP has itself been weakened by its own internal squabbles since the June 2015 killing of their top leader, Nasser al-Wuhayshi, by a US drone-strike. All in all though, in the last several years it has managed to increase its local, following, build up a war chest (estimated at \$200 million¹³⁸) and its arsenal, a significant portion taken from the YA and from seizing shipments intended for pro-Hadi forces. Most analysts concur that in the last couple of years AQAP has become stronger and richer.¹³⁹

Southern Movement (Al-Hiraq)

One of the few things most factions agree on in contemporary Yemen – as was clearly demonstrated during the National Dialogue Conference – that the country should not be partitioned neither should the south receive significantly more autonomy. The movement still retains its long-time prominent leaders, Ali Salem al-Beidh and Ali Nasser Muhammad. In early 2015 al-Beidh negotiated with the Houthi leadership regarding a possible federal state with a northern region headed by the Houthis and the southern one by al-Beidh.¹⁴⁰ Since the beginning of the 2015 Civil War, *Hiraq* has also organized localized militias to fight the Saleh-Houthi alliance.

Members of *Hiraq*, like the Houthis, are alienated from the post-uprising restructuring process in Yemen and consider themselves politically marginalized and robbed of the natural resources on their land. Unlike the Houthis, the Southern Movement is not a unified and, for the moment, possesses no obvious coercive capacity. Neither is the Movement invited to the numerous peace- and cease-fire talks; a mistake because their legitimate grievances ought to be addressed. Its leaders continue to disagree about such basic issue as *Hiraq*'s short- and even long-term aims – some would be satisfied with a single southern federal region while others would settle for nothing less than outright independence – and the methods and means of their struggle. More *Hiraq* supporters are no longer hopeful of significant reform within a unified Yemen and want outright separation.¹⁴¹

United States

President Hadi has openly encouraged American involvement in Yemen. Given that Hadi needed any advantage he could get against the numerous elements threatening his hold on power, he welcomed the expansion of US drone strikes, directed mostly against the AQAP. The US unleashed 148 drone strikes between 2002 and mid-2016 (causing 744 enemy deaths and 105 civilian deaths).¹⁴² Owing to the Houthis' takeover of Sana'a, the US evacuated its embassy in February 2015 and only a small number of US military advisors remained in the country and even they for only an additional month.

Washington, after many years of having been misled and fleeced by Saleh has made several mistakes. In particular the State Department under Secretary John Kerry misunderstood the civil war from the beginning and continued to support the Saudi airstrikes even after their counter-productive results have become clear. Had US diplomats sat down with the Houthis – who at first only wanted a place at the table to discuss the injustices they suffered – encouraged a compromise between them and Hadi’s government, and exerted some pressure for resolving the conflict, the situation might not have gone out of control the way it has.

The Yemeni Civil War (2015-)

In September 2014 the Houthis, aided by some allied Popular Committee fighters, entered Sa’ana and gradually consolidated their hold on the city. Armed mostly with automatic rifles and artillery pieces mounted on pick-up trucks, they promptly took control over strategic points, most importantly the state television building. The YA quickly buckled under the Houthi onslaught and, in effect, chose not to put up a fight. Whether YA commanders ordered their units to stand down as they confronted the Houthi offensive is debated. What is clear, however, is that YA commanders feared that their units would fracture or worse, their soldiers would desert en masse if they would engaged the enemy. The unwillingness of the YA to put up any serious resistance to the rebels was one of the direct causes of the Saudi-led coalition forces’ entry into the anarchical and muddy mess that Yemen had become by early 2015.

The Collapse of the Yemeni Army

The Houthis proved superior to the YA that responded mostly by inadequately coordinated shelling and trying to avoid direct confrontation with the rebels. Within a few hours, the YA units whose job it was to fight *Ansar Allah* “broke apart” while many government troops “appeared to side with rebels.”¹⁴³ Multiple sources indicate that the YA was demonstrably absent during the armed conflicts, that “local military commanders withdrew ... arguing that the conflict had nothing to do with the local population but was merely a fight between the Houthis and their enemies,” and that remaining YA units “were behaving ‘like mediators’ in the emerging conflict, rather than fulfilling their task of providing security ... and protecting the population.”¹⁴⁴ Prime Minister Mohammed Salem Basindwa, linked to the Islah Party and accused of corruption by the Houthis, resigned but President Hadi stayed on and promised a new cabinet that would reflect the emerging balance of power on the ground.

By early 2015 the Yemeni state had lost its capacity even to provide basic services to its citizens; its power to offer even a modicum of public security had eroded long before. Its armed forces were in shambles, according to one Yemeni analyst, “in January 2015, the military as well as security institutions collapsed. As a result, weapons fell into the hands of terrorists, tribal and militia partisans, and other non-state actors.”¹⁴⁵ The security environment has become so fragmented that, as several of our interviewees noted, it was often impossible to determine reliably which unit is allied with whom unless you are on the ground. Desertions and defections were rampant. From early on in the conflict, getting YA units to desert or, preferably, defect to their side, was a key priority of the Houthis. Young soldiers, who often had no personal stake in the conflict, were often easily persuaded to desert. Apparently, when *Ansar Allah* fighters encounter government

soldiers, they often give them the choice of “either you fight with us, in which case we promise you double pay or we will kill you.”¹⁴⁶

By early 2015 the chiefs of the army and navy in a number of governorates announced their loyalty to the Houthis. In many cases, where commanders refused to switch sides, the rebels killed them or simply refused to allow them into their camps and bases. The Houthis clearly understood that inducing YA commanders and their troops to defect or desert was far easier than to get the air force to switch sides. The air force – though of modest achievements, abilities, and arsenal when compared to its other Arab let alone NATO counterparts – was better trained and treated than other branch services of the YA. Morale among air force officers and NCOs tended to be higher and they also tended to maintain a more abiding loyalty not to Hadi’s regime necessarily but to the Yemeni state.¹⁴⁷ And of course, the air force had capabilities – i.e., conducting areal warfare – that the Houthis did not possess. Following their capture of the capital and President Hadi’s escape to Aden, Houthi commanders ordered the head and the chief of staff of the air forces, Generals Rashid al-Jund and Abdul Malik al-Zuhairi, respectively, to order airstrikes on Marib Governorate (east of the capital) and Hadi’s Aden residence. The generals refused, saying that they could only take orders from the president or the defense minister and there was no military rationale for these operations. The Houthis responded by blocking the generals’ access to their base and bringing in a general sympathetic to them, Khader Salem, who was willing to give the orders. Many pilots were insubordinate, but some did follow these controversial orders.¹⁴⁸

After the Saudi-led intervention, a number of government soldiers returned to their barracks and some YA units were reformulated. To be sure, these are only the remnants of the pre-uprising Yemeni military, but they seem to be willing to fight for the Yemen led by Hadi’s government. Members of the Arab Coalition forces, most notably the UAE, have been training young Yemeni resistance fighters who could join the Hadi government’s military.¹⁴⁹ At the same time, AQAP and Islamic State have been doing their best to limit Hadi’s forces with attacks on recruitment centers and training facilities. In May 2016, for instance, Islamic State suicide bombers killed at least 45 soldiers at an army recruitment center in Aden.

The Intervention of the Saudi-Led Coalition

Throughout 2014 the Saudis who have financially supported Hadi’s transitional government were biding their time closely observing developments. They have a long history of intervening in Yemen when political instability there threatened their interests. The Saudis also financed the spread of Wahhabism in Saada Governorate, the heartland of the Houthis, and tribal leaders with know anti-Houthi sympathies. The Saudi intervention in the Yemeni Civil War was triggered by three factors: the Houthis’ capture of Sana’a, their takeover of the Yemeni air force in March 2015, and the virtual collapse of the YA.

On March 26, 2015, the day after pro-Saleh forces took the Aden International Airport and forced Hadi’s flight, the Saudi-led air campaign against the Houthis began *at the same time* as Riyadh informed Washington of its action. Thus far the greatest success of the war for the pro-Hadi side has been the Battle of Aden that ended, July 22, 2015, with regaining full control over Aden, the surrounding towns, and the airport. This victory

also allowed the return President Hadi in September. On the Houthis' side, the belligerents included the forces of their own government (the so-called Revolutionary Committee), remnants of the RG, and various troops allied with former President Saleh. Fighting for President Hadi's side were security forces (which included units that survived the YA's collapse), Popular Committees, irregular resistance fighters affiliated with the Southern Movement, and the Saudi-led coalition, most importantly the UAE. After the battle, President Hadi appointed Major General Jaafar Mohammed Saad who commanded pro-government forces as Aden's new governor. Saad, an officer who fought for the south in the 1994 civil war, was in office only for a couple of months when Islamic State assassins killed him in December 2015.¹⁵⁰ The civil war has been accompanied by growing anarchy that allowed ISIS, an organization with no major presence in Yemen prior to 2015, to acquire growing influence.

In October 2015 a numerous tribal leaders, mostly from the six governorates that surround the capital, signed an agreement to put aside disagreements and to join together in confronting the Saudi-led coalition. This accord hints at the growing popularity of *Ansar Allah*. Former President Saleh's fortunes – personal, political, and financial – were closely tied to those of the Houthis. He may well be expected to fight till the end as other than a Houthi triumph there is no positive political outcome for him. At the same time, the Hadi government has become extremely dependent on its external supporters.¹⁵¹ In early 2016 a large ground force made up of troops from nearly twenty Arab countries – including a newly deployed 1,000-man mechanized battalion from Qatar and 700 ground troops from Egypt – began a campaign in the north, attempting to take the battle to the Houthi heartland. The operation restricted the *Ansar Allah's* room for maneuver and caused untold additional damage to civilian infrastructure but failed to subdue the enemy.

The objectives of the Saudi intervention was to defeat the Houthis as a military force, reinstate President Hadi, and help him consolidate his control over the entire country. At first, the Saudis thought they would make quick work of the Houthis but it has not turned out that way. As the Saudi minister of information, Adel al-Toraifi admitted in March 2016, "We hoped at the beginning it would be a quick thing, and that the Houthis would come to their senses that attacking Saudi Arabia has no purposes for Yemenis. Now there is no endgame."¹⁵² In fact, by February 2016 – with Saudi casualties and costs mounting and an end to the conflict still elusive – the kingdom's aims had been downgraded to reducing the territory held by the Houthis.¹⁵³ The Saudi obsession with the Iranian "takeover" of Yemen has blinded policy-makers in Riyadh to the complexities of the situation. In fact, the Iranian financial and military aid to *Ansar Allah* has been limited although there is little doubt that Tehran wants to have a strong influence in Houthi areas, bordering on its archenemy. As of July 2016, Iran has no proven military presence in Yemen though Iranian elites are hardly displeased with the Saudis being bogged down in a war of attrition that strain their resources and create growing ill-will toward them.¹⁵⁴ Most Yemenis do not view the conflict as a holy war against the Shia – the Saudis' preferred narrative – but as an effort to increase Riyadh's influence in their country. As I noted above, the Houthi movement – until the Saudis started to support aggressive Salafism from across the border – has been all about marginalization, not sectarianism.

The problem with the Saudi strategy has been that it privileges short-term, limited, often *ad hoc* tactical alliances with a number of different and often rival tribal and institutional partners. Fundamentally, as long as an armed group is willing to fight the Houthis and Saleh's supporters – whether they are AQAP, a tribal militia, the Muslim Brotherhood, or remnants of the YA – the Saudis are willing to finance, train, and equip them. Put differently, the Saudis would rather work with extremist Sunni Muslims than with moderate Shia entities. This sort of strategy, while certainly pragmatic, is hardly conducive to achieving long-term stability in Yemen. It has been criticized even within the Saudi elite. Moreover, managing these “fair-weather friends” has been a tricky and controversial process and is one of the several reasons for the Saudis' failure to wind down the conflict.

One Riyadh's relatively more long-standing ally is Ali Mohsen. In February 2016 President Hadi who is also the Supreme Commander, promoted Ali Mohsen to Lieutenant General and named him Deputy Supreme Commander. A few days after his promotion Hadi bestowed the title of Vice President on Ali Mohsen, quite likely a step that was strongly encouraged by the Saudis. In any event, Ali Mohsen's new rank and position are particularly important because they make him the highest ranking military man in Yemen (and the only lieutenant general) and the *de facto* boss of the Minister of Defense Major General Mohammed Nasser Ahmed and the YA's Chief of Staff Major General Mohammed Ali Al-Maqdeshi. The chief reason the “restoration” of Ali Mohsen was a good move was not because there was much of a Yemeni Army left at that point, but because he retained his sway among his highland traditional tribal allies, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Islah Party supporters in the north of the country. The cooperation of these tribal forces seems indispensable for re-taking Sana'a from the Houthis. Riyadh was compelled to mend its bridges with the Brotherhood that it neglected prior to the beginning of the war, in order to keep the anti-Houthi coalition together.

Such an overly pragmatic backing of anti-Houthi groups, whether extremist or not, has had numerous drawbacks. The Saudis have been supporting some of the southern tribes and their militias who are willing to fight the Houthis but these tribes also harbor separatist sentiments and will not be appeased until either Yemen breaks up or the south becomes autonomous. Both of those outcomes are opposed by virtually all other political actors, even the Saudis whose ideal Yemen is united, stable, and weak. The Saudis have also been in cahoots with AQAP – because AQAP, perhaps the Houthis' most implacable enemy in Yemen, has fought them effectively. This is the key reason that Saudi air force has mostly spared AQAP camps in Yemen.¹⁵⁵ Still, the AQAP happens to be the main adversary the US and the West see in Yemen. The greatest threat to the security of Saudi Arabia and, Riyadh maintains, to the larger Gulf region, however, is represented by the Houthi insurgency, not AQAP.

The Saudis' alliance policy has even been questioned by the UAE, their closest ally in the coalition. The anti-Houthi coalition – supporting Popular Committees and whatever pro-Hadi formations of the Yemeni army remain active – is composed of numerous countries, including the all GCC states minus Oman, Jordan, Morocco, Senegal, Sudan, with material, logistical, and intelligence support from France, Turkey, the UK, and the US. The most active Saudi coalition member on the battlefield has been the UAE that has

suffered many casualties. In July 2015 the UAE sent a 1,500-person brigade of its own troops to Aden. The UAE also dispatched 450 Latin American mercenaries – mostly former soldiers from Colombia but also from Chile, El Salvador, and Panama – hand-picked from the 1,800 training in the Emirates for the past five years.¹⁵⁶ In mid-June 2016 the UAE announced the end of its military operations in Yemen, citing the lack of unified vision for the country after 50 days of peace talks in Kuwait, and the rise of Al-Qaeda with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁵⁷

The record of the Saudi armed forces in Yemen has been unimpressive. Even with its sophisticated weapons they have encountered major difficulties defeating the Houthi insurgents. In 2015 Houthi fighters completely eliminated an entire Saudi Special Forces platoon – i.e., killed all the soldiers – when they effortlessly infiltrated the borders and neutralized them on Saudi soil. One of the main problems regarding the intervention was the inferior performance of the Saudi military, particularly its air force. Saudi pilots were not only inexperienced but also so fearful of enemy ground fire that they were flying at much higher altitudes than they needed to. Consequently, the accuracy of their dropped pay-loads, whether bombs or supplies, was greatly reduced. No matter how high-tech the aircraft Saudi pilots flew, they could not use their weapons properly. Two important reasons for the lackluster Saudi combat record is inadequate training and leadership on the ground – the best indicator of military careers in the kingdom is still links to the royal family rather than ability and expertise.

The Saudi air force's incompetence directly harmed the war effort both in terms of increasing casualties and delivering arms to the wrong hands. They *often* hit peaceful neighborhoods and non-military targets. On *many* occasions, Saudi airdrops containing weapons and ammunition missed their target (Yemeni government troops) and destroyed markets, medical facilities – including a Doctors Without Borders hospital in January 2016 – homes, factories, and ports or fell in the hands of Al-Qaeda fighters.¹⁵⁸ This is the reason behind some observers' claim that no other actor has benefited from the Saudi intervention in Yemen than extremist groups, particularly AQAP and ISIL.¹⁵⁹ In fact, their frustration over Saudi airdrops to an AQAP affiliate led the UAE forces on the ground to delay their advance in August 2015.¹⁶⁰ In early June 2016, the UN went to the extent of blacklisting Saudi Arabia for committing “grave violations” against children in Yemen. Although following some intense diplomatic activity the kingdom was removed from the list, the Saudis' heavy-handed war-fighting and wildly imprecise targeting is widely known.

The Civil War and Yemeni Army in mid-2016

Sixteen months after the Saudi intervention began the Civil War, notwithstanding numerous cease-fire agreements, is far from over. The Houthis still control a large part of the country – including its capital – and President Hadi's government is non-functional. At the time of this writing (June 2016) the key targets of Saudi airstrikes – Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi and former president Saleh are believed to be unharmed. The conflict has resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and a humanitarian disaster, complete with malnutrition, displacement, and the destruction of the country's already poor infrastructure. More specifically, by March 2016 the Civil War was responsible for more than 6,200 deaths and 30,000 injured and, according to the World

Health Organization, 82% of Yemen's population were in need of humanitarian aid and more than 14 million in need of urgent health services.¹⁶¹

Yemeni army units along with the Popular Committees have participated in some successful operations beginning with late 2015, in most cases along some coalition troops. In April 2016, about 2,000 government and UAE troops wrested back from AQAP control of the southern city of Mukalla and the country's largest oil terminal nearby. According to coalition officials, about three-fourths of the country were under the control of pro-Hadi forces in mid-2016 but the liberation of Yemen, announced as "imminent" by Ali Mohsen in March 2016, was anything but. In fact, Hadi's position itself is shaky: his trump card is his constitutional legitimacy but he has been a weak and ineffectual leader, he has no major support base to speak of, and without the continued backing of Saudi Arabia and the United States he will not be able to hold on to his position.

A number of cease-fire talks have been convened but were soon aborted owing to non-compliance. In April 2016 peace talks faltered even before they could start because the Houthis refused to attend the meeting. On June 10, 2016 a Saudi cease-fire proposal was said to have been accepted by both sides in Kuwait. The four-point proposal establishes the organizational structure of the truce committees and beginning a ceasefire, sets up field teams on all fronts of each governorate, connects all truce committees with one another on all fronts and identifies buffer zones on the ground.¹⁶² Owing to the exclusion of key participants in the conflict – most glaringly the Southern Movement – and the differing agendas and interests of numerous warring factions this peace agreement is also unlikely to hold. Another major problem has been the acceptance by external actors – including Riyadh and Washington – President Hadi's wildly unrealistic assertion that his governments leads and represents all anti-Houthi-Saleh forces.¹⁶³

IV. CONCLUSION

In this essay I argued that the Yemeni armed forces – perhaps more than any other Arab armies with the possible exception of Libya's – have been fragmented from the very beginning of Yemen's independent statehood. The tremendous weight of tribal, clan, and family networks has made it exceedingly difficult to create an army whose foremost loyalties are to the state and its constitution. Although Yemeni leaders – including Saleh, Hadi, and the erstwhile leaders of South Yemen – tried to overcome tribalism and establish the state's central authority, given Yemeni history, society, and geography, they could not succeed. This on-going tension between the pull of tribalism and efforts directed at centralization is one of the fundamental underlying themes of not just Yemeni politics but also of Yemeni civil-military relations. An entire group of very different leaders all failed to build an army free of tribal influences and were ultimately dependent on the help of tribal fighters to achieve their objectives.

The tribal-central dichotomy has had far reaching consequences for the defense sector. Owing to the great influence of the tribes – which are inherently archaic, informal, unregulated, and makeshift – institutionalization efforts in Yemen did not succeed. Even in South Yemen, which was for decades under socialist rule that put a priority on developing institutions amenable to central control, success was elusive in this regard. Allegiances in this kind of complex and often volatile environment that prized tribal/clan/family ties above all else have remained negotiable and fluid, and the only predictor of shifting loyalties was the amount of pay-offs and bribes. This context practically demanded a fragmented defense establishment with numerous rival institutions that could be, if necessary, played off against one another.

This was a suitable setting for Saleh who, in the last decade of his long rule, actually prevented the institutionalization of the military sector by relying increasingly on tribal alliances and informal arrangements. He began to wreck the unstable system he built for the previous two decades earlier, in 1999, when he resolved to pass the presidency to his son. By doing so, he caused irreversible damage to the edifice he created.¹⁶⁴ Political succession in Yemen has traditionally been determined by coups and the armed forces have played a primary role in these events. The military could only have a major role in the overthrow of former leaders because it was a disjointed institution. One or the other cliques in the military elites could always be counted on to support rival power centers.

There was virtually no civilian control over the YA – aside from al-Irayni, all of Yemeni leaders were active or former military men – other than through family members who commanded them. Corruption in this kind of environment was not surprisingly rampant which had a major impact on the armed forces. Corruption robbed the troops of some of their salary, it compelled them to fight and train with substandard equipment and facilities. At the same time, the military's elites enriched themselves to a degree all the more improbable given the overall poverty of Yemen.

Throughout its existence, the YA has failed to distinguish itself. When push came to shove, many of its soldiers (and commanders) defected or deserted, refused to fight, and even sold their weapons and equipment to the foes they were supposed to fight. Little wonder, then, that armed conflicts in Yemen have often been terminated as a result of foreign intervention. Whenever the civil war will be over – likely when all sides are

exhausted enough not to want to fight any longer – the Yemeni army will have to be rebuilt, pretty much, from scratch. Yemeni politicians and soldiers I have talked to hope that this will be done by American and British trainers and financed by Saudi and GCC money. The United States, although interested in a Yemen free of terrorist organizations, cannot finance the building of a new Yemeni Army. Western governments seem to think that this should be the job of the GCC, after all, as Saudis note, “Yemen is considered a geo-strategic extension of the GCC countries’ security.”¹⁶⁵ US Army personnel who participated in the drawing up plans for a post-conflict army believe that in an optimal scenario, the process would take 5-15 years and would require more than \$20 billion. Nevertheless, it is unclear why the GCC would spend this kind of money on Yemen, given that Gulf funds pledged during the 2012-2014 transition have been released and distributed very slowly and Riyadh’s attention has turned toward reforming the kingdom’s economy. Besides, Yemen’s historical record of converting foreign investment and aid into results desired by the donors inspires little confidence.

A stable, professional, Yemeni Army overseen by a freely elected parliament and government is, at this point, difficult to foresee in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the high stakes and the many ways the continuation of the conflict hurts different concerns on the Arabian Peninsula and beyond urge resolution. Neither solving the “Yemen problem” nor rebuilding the country – that, according a Red Cross official, after five months of civil war “look[ed] like Syria after five years” – will be successful without compromises that recognize the influence and grievances of parties such as the Houthis and the Southern Movement, that were marginalized or persecuted in the past. At present, there is no real *national* army in Yemen. Although building one is indispensable for a post-conflict Yemen, there are few reasons to be optimistic.

NOTES

¹ Eliezer Be'eri, *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 223.

² Sheila Carapico, ed., *Arabia Incognita: Dispatches from Yemen and the Gulf* (Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2016).

³ Jonathan Schanzer, *Al-Qaeda's Armies* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005), 74.

⁴ Dexter Filkins, "After the Uprising: Can the Protestors Find a Path between Dictatorship and Anarchy?" *New Yorker*, 11 April 2011, 42

⁵ See, for instance, Morten Bøås and Kathleen M. Jennings, "Insecurity and Development: The Rhetoric of the 'Failed State'," *European Journal of Development Research*, 17:3 (2005): 385-395; and Charles T. Call, "The Fallacy of the 'Failed State'," *Third World Quarterly*, 29:8 (2008): 1491-1507.

⁶ See Gabriele vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), especially 29-63.

⁷ Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 43.

⁸ Marieke Brandt, "The Irregulars of the Sa'ada War: 'Colonel Sheikhs' and 'Tribal Militias' in Yemen's Huthi Conflict (2004-2010)," in Helen Lackner, ed., *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition* (London: Saqi, 2014), 214.

⁹ See Khaled Fattah, "A Political History of Civil-Military Relations in Yemen," *Alternative Politics*, 1 (November 2010): 28; available at <http://alternatifpolitika.com/site/dosyalar/arsiv/Kasim2010-OzelSayi/2.khaled-fattah-a-political-history-of-civil-military.pdf>

¹⁰ J.C. Hurewitz, *Middle East Politics: The Military Dimension* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 255. This coup prevention strategy is practiced to the present day. Equipment is held in storage or is only sparingly distributed for fear of uprisings or empowerment of specific military groups and units.

¹¹ See Jonathan Walker, *Aden Insurgency: The Savage War in Yemen, 1962-67* (London: Pen & Sword, 2015).

¹² Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 18.

¹³ Fattah, 35.

¹⁴ Fred Halliday, *Revolution and Foreign Policy: The Case of South Yemen, 1967-1987* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25.

¹⁵ On this organization, see Ruth Lapidoth, *Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden* (Amsterdam: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 68; and Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 62; and

¹⁶ Interview with Abdalnabi Hasan Alekry (Manama, 3 December 2015).

¹⁷ Lenore G. Martin, *The Unstable Gulf: Threats from Within* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1984), 60.

¹⁸ Martin, 59.

¹⁹ Halliday, 42.

²⁰ See A. S. Guskov, *Demokraticheskii Iemen: 20 let revolyutsii* (Moscow: Mysl, 1983), 48; and Norman Cigar, "South Yemen and the USSR: Prospects for the Relationship," *Middle East Journal*, 39:4 (Autumn 1985): 378-379, 385.

²¹ Stephen Page, *The Soviet Union and the Yemen: Influence in Asymmetrical Relationships* (New York: Praeger, 1985).

²² Halliday, 202.

²³ Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 257.

²⁴ Halliday, 194-195.

²⁵ Be'eri, 225.

²⁶ Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 96.

²⁷ Hurewitz, 111.

²⁸ See Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²⁹ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 56.

³⁰ Adam C. Seitz, "Ties that Bind and Divide: The 'Arab Spring' and Yemeni Civil-Military Relations," in Helen Lackner, ed., *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition* (London: Saqi, 2014), 124.

³¹ Brandt, 216-217.

³² Brandt, 217.

³³ Brehony, 114.

³⁴ Adil Al-Shurbagi, "The Restructuring of the Yemeni Army," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (Doha, Qatar), June 2013, 1.

³⁵ Martin, 28. For the early years of Saleh's regime, see Robert D. Burrowes, "The Yemen Arab Republic and the Ali Abdallah Salih Regime: 1978-1984," *Middle East Journal*, 39:3 (Summer 1985): 287-317.

³⁶ Robert D. Burrowes, "The Yemen Arab Republic's Legacy and Yemeni Unification," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 1:4 (Fall 1992): 43.

³⁷ Brandt, 215-216.

³⁸ This paragraph draws liberally on Fattah, 40-41.

³⁹ Martin 86. See also Maria Louise Clausen, "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen: Evaluating Competing Narratives," *International Spectator*, 50:3 (September 2015): 16-29.

⁴⁰ Cited by Fattah, 25.

⁴¹ Mona Yacoubian, "Engaging Islamists and Promoting Democracy: A Preliminary Assessment," in Daniel Brumberg and Dina Shehata, eds., *Conflict, Identity, and Reform in the Muslim World: Challenges for U.S. Engagement* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 431.

⁴² Cited by Gabriele vom Bruck, Atiaf Alwazir, and Benjamin Wiacek, "Yemen: Revolution Suspended?" in Fawaz A. Gerges, ed. *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 288.

⁴³ Brandt, 218-219.

⁴⁴ Charles Dunbar, "The Unification of Yemen: Process, Politics, and Prospects," *Middle East Journal*, 46:3 (Summer 1992): 469.

⁴⁵ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 125-126.

⁴⁶ Halliday, 37.

⁴⁷ Interview with Yahya Alshawkani, Deputy Chief of Mission, Yemeni Embassy (Washington, DC, 27 February 2009).

⁴⁸ Fattah, 39.

⁴⁹ E-mail interview with a Yemeni general (Summer 2008)

⁵⁰ Fattah, 39-40.

⁵¹ See Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 195-197.

⁵² Seitz, 126.

⁵³ Stephen W. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 14.

⁵⁴ Holger Albrecht, "Cain and Abel in the Land of Sheba: Elite Conflict and the Military in Yemen," in Holger Albrecht, Aurel Croissant, and Fred H. Lawson, eds., *Armies and*

Insurgencies in the Arab Spring (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 9 (pre-publication print-out).

⁵⁵ Cited in Robert F. Worth, *A Rage for Order: The Middle East in Turmoil, from Tahrir Square to ISIS* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2016), 7.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Day, 212-213; Albrecht, "Cain and Abel," 10; Al-Shurbagi, 2.

⁵⁷ Several sources list the positions of Saleh's kin. See, for instance, Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Head of Snakes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 281; Day, 89; and Hendrik Jan Kraetzschmar, *The Dynamics of Opposition Cooperation in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2013); 65.

⁵⁸ Owen, *The Rise and Fall*, 106. As Owen points out, other Arab presidents, like Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika, also agreed to extend their rule in response to popular demand.

⁵⁹ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (London: IISS 2011), 67. For a slightly different account, see Clark, 136.

⁶⁰ See for instance, John F. Burns, "Yemen Links to bin Laden Gnaw at F.B.I. in Cole Inquiry," *New York Times*, 26 November 2000; and Jane Novak, "Yemen Strikes Multifaceted Deals with Al-Qaeda," *Long War Journal*, 11 February 2009.

⁶¹ See Clark, 159, 227.

⁶² Clark, 282.

⁶³ Mareike Transfeld, "Political Bargaining and Violent Conflict: Shifting Elite Alliances as the Decisive Factor in Yemen's Transformation," *Mediterranean Politics*, 2015, 5.

⁶⁴ Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 75.

⁶⁵ *Country Profile: Yemen* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, August 2008), 23; available at <https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/profiles/Yemen.pdf>

⁶⁶ Ahmed Abdel-Karim Saif, "The Politics of Survival and the Structure of Control in Unified Yemen, 1990-1997," M.A. Thesis, Department of Politics, University of Exeter, September 1997, 19.

⁶⁷ Joana Cook, "Yemen's Patronage Problem," *Sada* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), 30 July 2015.

⁶⁸ *The Military Balance, 2010* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2010), 277.

⁶⁹ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008), 69.

⁷⁰ Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy*, 69-71.

⁷¹ E-mail interview with a Yemeni general (summer 2008).

⁷² Al-Shurbagi, 4.

⁷³ This paragraph draws on numerous interviews with active and retired Yemeni Air Force personnel outside of Yemen (in December 2014 and November 2015).

⁷⁴ “Yemeni Women Sign Up to Fight Terror,” *BBC News*, 2 April 2007.

⁷⁵ Yezid Sayigh, “Security Sector Reform in the Arab Region,” www.arab-reform.net, accessed 14 December 2007, 17-18

⁷⁶ “European Union to Support Yemen’s Central Security Forces,” *Yemen Post*, 24 February 2013.

⁷⁷ Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy*, 69.

⁷⁸ International Crisis Group, 9.

⁷⁹ Michael Knights, “The Military Role in Yemen’s Protests: Civil-Military Relations in the Tribal Republic,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36:2 (May 2013): 273.

⁸⁰ Jamal Mohammed Al-Ja’abi, “We Respect the Military and Security Institutions,” *Yemen Times*, 28 January 2008.

⁸¹ Interviews with Yemeni Air Force officers (outside of Yemen, November 2015).

⁸² See “The World’s Next Failed State?” *Economist*, 12 September 2009, 49.

⁸³ International Crisis Group, 8.

⁸⁴ All figures in this paragraph come from Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy*, 70.

⁸⁵ Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy*, 69.

⁸⁶ Gregory D. Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda, and America’s War in Arabia* (New York: Norton, 2013), 153-154.

⁸⁷ Cited by Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (London: IISS 2011), 61.

⁸⁸ Johnsen, 154.

⁸⁹ Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics*, 27.

⁹⁰ Clark, 252.

⁹¹ See, for instance, Day, 218; Seitz, 137; and Knights, 276.

⁹² See the comments of Prince Sultan bin Khaled Al Faisal, Inaugural Commandant, Royal Saudi Naval Forces Special Forces Training Center at “A Saudi Arabian Defense Doctrine for a New Era,” (Washington, DC, at CSIS, October 5, 2015), available at <http://csis.org/event/saudi-arabian-defense-doctrine-new-era>.

⁹³ Brandt, “The Irregulars of the Sa’ada Wars,” 213. For an extensive discussion of the tribal dimension of the wars, see Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2016).

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⁹⁶ Jonathan Schanzer, "Yemen's War on Terror," *Orbis*, 48:3 (Summer 2004): 517-518.

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⁹⁹ See, for instance, Christopher Swift, "The Boundaries of War? Assessing the Impact of Drone Strikes in Yemen, in Peter Bergen and Daniel Rothenberg, eds., *Drone Wars: Transforming Conflict, Law, and Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 71-88.

¹⁰⁰ Ulrichsen, 150.

¹⁰¹ Knights, 278.

¹⁰² Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics*, 125.

¹⁰³ vom Bruck, Alwazir, and Wiacek, 288.

¹⁰⁴ Tom Finn, "Yemen Showdown Looms as Army Loyalties Divide," *Guardian*, 21 March 2011.

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¹⁰⁶ Knights, 279.

¹⁰⁷ See, for instance, Charles Schmitz, "Yemen's National Dialogue," *Middle East Institute Policy Paper*, 2014-1 (February 2014).

¹⁰⁸ The legislature was elected in 2003 and its mandate expired in 2009. It was dominated by the GPC and lacked representation by the Houthis, the Southern Movement, and other newly influential political forces.

¹⁰⁹ See Ginny Hill, "Yemen's Presidential Gambit," *Foreign Policy*, 16 May 2012, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/05/16/yemens-presidential-gambit/>, and vom Bruck, et al., 303.

¹¹⁰ Ali Saeed, "Dismissed General Al-Ahmar Finally Leaves Office," *Yemen Times*, 26 April 2012.

¹¹¹ See Al-Shurbagi, 15-17. (See particularly the diagram on p. 16.)

¹¹² Al-Shurbagi cites the 375,000 figure which is highly likely to be wrong. I prefer the 250,000 figure, given by Major Zahi Bourjelli, who was the US Chief of the Office of Military Cooperation at the time and participated in the work of the reorganization committee. (Phone interview with Bourjelli, 24 June 2016).

¹¹³ Al-Shurbagi, 17.

¹¹⁴ Interviews with US officers who participated in the meetings on defense reform.

¹¹⁵ Interviews with American government experts on the Yemeni military (13 December 2014 and 18 August 2015).

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¹¹⁷ Thomas Juneau, "Yemen and the Arab Spring: Elite Struggle, State Collapse, and Regional Security," *Orbis*, 57:3 (Summer 2013): 411.

¹¹⁸ Stephen Snyder and Christopher Woolf, "The Man Accused of Stealing \$60 Billion from Yemen is Still There and Wielding Power," *Public Radio International* (The World), 2 April 2015; available at <http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-04-02/man-accused-stealing-60-billion-yemen-still-there-and-wielding-power>

¹¹⁹ *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, UN Security Council (S/2015/125-1500193), 20 February 2015, 21.

¹²⁰ See, for instance, Terrill, 429; and Gareth Porter, "How False Stories of Iran Arming the Houthis Were Used to Justify War in Yemen," *Truthout*, 31 December 2015, available at <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/34240-how-false-stories-of-iran-arming-the-houthis-were-used-to-justify-war-in-yemen>.

¹²¹ Al-Shurbagi, 5.

¹²² This figure was revealed accidentally by a Yemeni general to my source (a US military officer).

¹²³ For extensive documentation for these claims, see Cigar, *Triabal Militias*, 42, and endnote 110 (pp. 87-8).

¹²⁴ Amat Alsoswa, "Assessing Yemen's Post-War Challenges," Arabian Gulf States Institute in Washington, 1 December 2015; available at www.agsiw.org/assessing-yemens-post-war-challenges.

¹²⁵ Confidential interviews with Yemeni officers (November 2015).

¹²⁶ See Johnsen, 277; and Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 117.

¹²⁷ Al-Muslimi, "Yemen Air Force," 2.

¹²⁸ "Army 'Plotted with Houthis'," *Gulf Daily News*, 6 October 2014. This story, originally reported by *Al Jazeera*, did not surprise any of our Yemeni interviewees.

¹²⁹ For an excellent analysis of PCs, see Nadwa Al-Dawsari, "The Popular Committees of Abyan, Yemen: A Necessary Evil or an Opportunity for Security Reform?" *Middle East Institute*, 5 March 2014.

¹³⁰ See Cigar, *Triabal Militias*, 41.

¹³¹ See Farea Al-Muslimi, "The Popular Committee Phenomenon in Yemen: Fueling War and Conflict," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 1 April 2015, 1-2.

¹³² See, Bill Roggio, "AQAP Overruns Yemeni Army Bases, Kills 32 Soldiers," *The Long War Journal*, 7 May 2012; available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/05/aqap_overruns_yemeni_1.php.

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¹³⁴ See Nasser Arrabyee and Ben Hubbard, "Attack on Yemen's Defense Headquarters Is Linked to Al-Qaeda," *New York Times*, 6 December 2013; and "Al-Qaeda Apologizes for Yemeni Hospital Attack," *Aljazeera*, 22 December 2013.

¹³⁵ See Saeed Al Batati, "Yemen: The Truth behind Al-Qaeda's Takeover of Mukalla," *Aljazeera*, 16 September 2015.

¹³⁶ See for instance the Reuters investigative report by Yara Bayoumi, Noah Browning, and Mohamed Ghobami, "How Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen Has Made Al Qaeda Stronger – and Richer," *Reuters*, 8 April 2016, available at <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>.

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¹³⁸ Peter Salisbury, "Yemen Talks Must Cement Cease-Fire Before Peace Process Can Begin," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 13 June 2016

¹³⁹ Bayoumi, et al.

¹⁴⁰ Asher Orkaby, "A Passing Generation of Yemeni Politics," *Middle East Brief* (Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University), No. 90/March 2015,

¹⁴¹ Alley, 80.

¹⁴² See *The Long War Journal*, accessed on 7 June 2016 <http://www.longwarjournal.org/multimedia/Yemen/code/Yemen-strike.php>. Importantly, no civilian death were caused since 2014.

¹⁴³ Shuaib Almosawa and David Kirkpatrick, "Yemen Rebels Gain Concessions From Government After Assault on Capital," *New York Times*, 21 September 2014.

¹⁴⁴ *Final Report* (UNSC), 21.

¹⁴⁵ Alsoswa, 2.

¹⁴⁶ Interviews with Yemeni soldiers (October 2015).

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Yemeni air force officers and NCOs (November 2015).

¹⁴⁸ This paragraph draws on Farea Al-Muslimi, "Yemen Air Force Falls Into Grip of Houthis," *Al-Monitor* (CEIP), 29 April 2015.

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¹⁵⁰ Kareem Shaheen, "Isis claims responsibility for assassinating governor of Aden," *Guardian*, 6 December 2015.

¹⁵¹ Nasser Arrabyee, "Saudi Arabia's Unholy War," *Sada* (CEIP), 16 March 2016.

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¹⁵³ According to some estimates, the anti-Houthi war is costing \$200 million per day, much of which is picked up by Saudi Arabia. See Glen Carey, "The Saudi Town on the Frontline of Yemen's War," *Bloomberg*, 21 December 2015; available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-21/in-one-saudi-town-gunfire-all-day-brings-yemen-war-near-home>.

¹⁵⁴ See, for instance, Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki, "Iran's Envoy in Sana'a: Sorry for Saudi Losing Its Resources through Attrition Warfare," *Yemen Times*, 16 March 2016.

¹⁵⁵ See Neil Patrick, "Saudi Arabia's Problematic Allies Against the Houthis," *Sada* (CEIP), 12 February 2016. One might speculate that given the lacking accuracy of Saudi aerial attacks, the AQAP might not have much to fear.

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¹⁵⁷ Awad Mustafa, "UAE Announces End of Yemen Military Operations," *Defense News*, 15 June 2016.

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¹⁵⁹ See, for instance, Nasser Arrabyee, "Rising Extremism in Yemen," *Sada* (CEIP), 19 February 2016.

¹⁶⁰ Arrabyee, "Rising Extremism," 2.

¹⁶¹ Rick Gladstone, "Saudis Announce Prisoner Swap with Houthis in Yemen Conflict," *New York Times*, 28 March 2016.

¹⁶² See "Riyadh Presents Four-Point Truce Plan for Yemen," *Gulf News*, 11 June 2016.

¹⁶³ Salisbury, "Yemen Talks."

¹⁶⁴ Alley, 77.

¹⁶⁵ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 15 May 2012 cited by vom Bruck, et al., 304.