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YEMEN'S HOUTHİ TAKEOVER: DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL REPERCUSSIONS

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Two weeks ago, the Zaidi Shiite-Houthi march to control the Yemeni state triumphantly arrived at its destination in Sanaa, and forced the resignation of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the country's two-month old government headed by Prime Minister Khaled Bahhah. The withdrawal of the President and Premier was the natural end of an aborted political process that was derailed by a gradual Houthi military advance that brought their militia, *Ansar Allah*, to the streets of the capital. With the Houthis welcoming both resignations and proposing to form a pliant provisional Presidential Council, the country seems to be heading towards more domestic instability and disunity that will generate regional uncertainties. More importantly, perhaps, the pro-Iranian Houthi triumph in Sanaa is nothing short of a coup d'etat that may, in the end, deliver yet another Arab capital to the Islamic Republic of Iran.



*Sanaa, Yemen, is considered by many historians to be one of the oldest continuously-inhabited cities in the world.
Photo: Dr. John Duke Anthony.*

An Unpredictable Yemeni Domestic Scene

In justifying their military putsch, the Houthis accused President Hadi of subverting an all-party agreement at a National Dialogue Conference in 2014 – part of a November 2011 initiative proposed by the Gulf Cooperation Council in answer to widespread pro-reform protests.

Participants in the dialogue had agreed to write a new constitution, the draft of which still awaits ratification by popular referendum. The new charter creates a federated Yemeni state composed of six regions to replace the current 22 administrative divisions.

Desiring autonomy and eventual independence, the Houthis, who currently comprise about 30 percent of the population, prefer a condominium between a northern and a southern region that many believe would be demarcated along the pre-1990

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division of the northern Republic of Yemen and the defunct southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Such a division would presumably give the Houthis control over the north where their numbers would not be excessively diluted by Sunnis. With the desired division, they could either simply enjoy long-term self-rule or await propitious circumstances to declare independence in a northern rump state that would be a re-incarnation of the old Imamate that died over half a century ago. As for the southern secessionists, whose leader Ali Salem al-Beidh resides

in Beirut as a guest in Hezbollah's southern suburbs, the dissolution of the current union would help them realize a long-held desire to re-establish a state they believe would free them of the oppression of northern politicians.

The Houthi takeover comes at a time when Yemen is fighting a war with the local branch of the al-Qaeda franchise, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Over the last three years the government of President Mansour Hadi succeeded in driving AQAP and its local affiliate *Ansar al-Shariah* out of their strongholds in Abyan and Shabwa Governorates and cities along the shores of the Gulf of Aden. Subsequently the organization's fighters relocated in 2014 to Hadramawt Governorate that abuts Saudi Arabia. As the Houthi takeover of state institutions deepens political divisions in the country, the ideological and material support to AQAP's militant extremism is likely to increase and allow the group to more easily recruit disenchanted Yemeni youth. Indeed, al-Qaeda may quickly become seen as the only hope for fighting the Houthis who, in turn, are widely accused of being the vanguard of Iran's ideological and strategic positioning on the Arabian Peninsula.

Regional and International Contingencies

The immediate outcome of Yemen's fall into the hands of pro-Iranian Houthis will, in the least, be a rollback of the country's historical relations with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council countries. These relations are political, tribal, religious, and economic.

Politically, Saudi Arabia and the GCC have been mediators between Yemeni factions and political parties. The GCC's initiative in 2011 to end the political crisis in Sanaa led to a promising political process that could have put Yemen on a peaceful path for development. Many Yemeni tribes have deep blood and cultural roots in Saudi Arabia while Saudi Arabian salafism has many adherents in Yemen. Economically, Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries have contributed billions of dollars in financial assistance to Yemen, not least as part of the Friends of Yemen initiative set up by the United Kingdom in 2010, while millions of Yemenis and the Yemeni economy depend on remittances of Yemenis working in the GCC.



Saudi Arabian Prince Khaled Al Faisal (third from right) surveys the southern province of Jizan, near the border with Yemen, in November 2009. Photo: Saudi Press Agency.

The Houthis' military control over areas abutting the Saudi Arabian southwestern border raises serious concerns in the kingdom. In 2009, Houthi rebels crossed the Saudi Arabian-Yemeni border and attacked military positions and personnel, prompting military confrontations in which a reported 80 Saudi Arabian soldiers died. That Saudi Arabia needed then, and needs now, to be vigilant in that area adds unwelcome complications to an already complex Saudi Arabian security environment. There are already 30,000 Saudi Arabian troops guarding the northern border with Iraq, where pro-Iranian Shiite militias and the so-called Islamic State operate. Coming as Saudi Arabia is in the middle of a political transition in Riyadh after the passing of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, the Houthis' control of Yemen will, in all likelihood deprive Yemen of Saudi Arabian financial, military, and political assistance.



Yemen's physical features. Map courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries.

Further, given Iran's ideological and military support to the Houthi rebels, there is a danger that Yemeni territory may become a base for clandestine Iranian activities that might place the kingdom in an unenviable position. The Islamic Republic already has a friendly regime and militias in Iraq, plays an essential role in Syria, and controls Lebanon's Hezbollah. Not only would an Iranian base in northern Yemen help to tighten a strong vice around Saudi

Arabia, it would bring Iran in reach of Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia, which the kingdom considers to be within its vital circle of strategic interests.

The Houthis' success in Yemen also gives them and Iran a major strategic advantage in the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Generally, such an advantage can be used to impose a chokehold on oil shipments to the United States and Europe through the Suez Canal. More specifically though, at this juncture of negotiations over Iran's nuclear program such an advantage may be used to force the P5+1 to accept a less-than-ideal negotiated settlement. Indeed, the timing of the Houthi takeover couldn't be more propitious since the current round of negotiations, slated to reach a framework agreement by March 1st, may be the last. The Houthis have handed Iran another card to play, in addition to those it already has in Syria and Lebanon, at a critical point in the negotiations.

Finally, the Houthi takeover of Yemen, if unreversed, together with the collapse of legitimate state authority in Sanaa and the danger of Yemen's partition, are likely to weaken American efforts to fight militancy in Yemen and Somalia – a prospect that may lead to further instability in the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Horn of Africa. Yemen has for years acted as a pivotal player in regional efforts to fight AQAP and (former) President Mansour Hadi permitted American clandestine operations against AQAP in the country. If Sanaa remains in the hands of the Houthis, who have long utilized the slogan "Death to America," it is unlikely that American military efforts will continue, which will have serious repercussions, again, on Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

Just as Hezbollah's military action in Beirut in 2008 stymied purposeful and effective governance in Lebanon, the Houthis' takeover of Sanaa's institutional life will lead to political inertia and inaction. Worse, if unreversed it may lead to the de facto partition of Yemen, and create conditions for continued divisions and possible civil war. As the Houthis lack the requisite political, economic, and technical skills to govern a country where half the population is under the age of 30 and 40 percent live in poverty, it is paramount that a regional and international effort is yet again mustered to help Yemen pursue a path toward peace and development. Left unresolved, Yemen's troubles are likely to lead to further domestic divisions and violence, and increased chances of regional instability.

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