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Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen

The Huthi Phenomenon

Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, Madeleine Wells

Prepared for the Defense Intelligence Agency
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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The research described in this report was prepared for the Defense Intelligence Agency. The research was conducted in the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Department of the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Salmoni, Barak A.

Regime and periphery in Northern Yemen : the Huthi phenomenon / Barak A.

Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, Madeleine Wells.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8330-4933-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Yemen (Republic)--History--1990- 2. Civil war--Yemen (Republic)--History--21st century. 3. Yemen (Republic)--Politics and government--21st century. 4. Yemen (Republic)--Politics and government--20th century. I. Loidolt, Bryce. II. Wells, Madeleine. III. Title.

DS247.Y48S236 2010

953.305'3--dc22

2010003956

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Cover photo: Yemeni Huthi rebels supervise the reopening of a road in Sa'da, north of San'a, on February 16, 2010, following a truce between the rebels and government forces that ended six months of fighting. AFP/Getty Images.

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Published 2010 by the RAND Corporation

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Summary

For nearly six years, the Government of Yemen (GoY) has conducted military operations north of the capital against groups of its citizens known as “Huthis.” In spite of using all means at its disposal, as of the beginning of 2010, the GoY has been unable to subdue the Huthi movement. Along with southern discontent and al-Qa’ida–inspired terrorism, the Huthi conflict presents an enduring threat to the regime of President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Saleh and the stability of Yemen. As Huthi-GoY warfare began again in the fall of 2009, Saudi Arabia intervened as well, bringing a major U.S. ally into a regionalized conflict. The recent ceasefire of February 2010 by no means signals an end to conflict, as several such ceasefires have proven short-lived since 2004.

The Huthi movement is based on the family of the same name, which is native to the Sa’da governorate. The Huthi family is part of the Zaydi branch of Islam, theologically situated between Sunnism and Shi‘ism. Armed conflict commenced in the summer of 2004, after Huthi supporters started chanting anti-U.S. and anti-Israel slogans in the capital, San’a. Since then, the separate phases of warfare have become continuous conflict with short lulls. In spite of the full force of the GoY military and regional states’ attempts at mediation, fighting continues in the north. Clashes have occurred primarily in the Sa’da governorate but have recently been migrating southward.

The Huthi-GoY conflict pits a conventional military using heavy weapons against an unconventional opponent made up of small groups of temporary fighters. The costs to the north of the country have been significant. Casualty estimates range from hundreds to more than 20,000. Estimates of displaced persons reach up to 150,000 people throughout the country, and an estimated 3,000 people have been arrested for supporting the Huthis. At the same time, a news blackout obscures the ongoing destruction in the conflict zone.

At its base, the confrontation between the Huthi family and the Saleh regime is not a conflict among different tribal groupings. Likewise, at its origins, although the Huthi rebellion was inspired by Zaydi revival and led by charismatic Zaydi elites, it is not a confessional opposition movement challenging the legitimacy of the GoY—nor is it a local manifestation of the transnational “Shi‘ite Crescent.” Rather, it is a conflict in which local material discontent and Zaydi identity claims have intersected with

the state center's methods of rule and self-legitimation. As the conflict has proceeded, however, differences between the Huthis and the GoY have taken on the hues of both tribal and confessional strife, rendering a near-term resolution unlikely. Throughout, the Huthi family has been the spearhead of northern Yemeni opposition to the Saleh regime's domestic and foreign policies. The GoY has thus sought to eliminate the family as an influence in Yemen and has targeted sympathetic individuals, groups, and institutions.

The GoY has failed to eliminate the Huthi threat because it emerges from a much more richly textured sociocultural fabric than the government appears to have appreciated. It is this complex fabric that furnishes the multiple dimensions on which to fully understand the Huthi-GoY conflict:

- The first dimension is that of context—the dual context of regime governance techniques and local conditions.
- The second dimension on which to understand the conflict involves the roots of discord, emerging from the 1970s to the late 1990s.
- The post–September 11, 2001, conjuncture provides the third dimension. In this phase, regime calculations and Huthi actions resulted in mutual provocations, furnishing the proximate causes of armed conflict north of Sa'ā.
- The context, roots, and proximate causes act as the drivers of conflict between the regime and the northern periphery in Yemen. In attempting to subdue the Huthis, however, the GoY has pursued policies that can be considered a form of counterinsurgency (COIN) that has had an effect far beyond Huthi strongholds. GoY COIN has sustained the initial drivers of conflict, provoking a widening rebellion that shares the characteristics of insurgency. GoY COIN, therefore, is the fourth dimension illuminating the enduring nature of the Huthi issue.

In responding to GoY COIN, the Huthis have relied on the locally legitimate social bonds of kin networks (tribes) and religion (Zaydism). They have also benefited from the cultural tendency toward collective action in the context of group autonomy. Therefore, after five years of conflict as a combatant entity, the Huthis still exhibit the characteristics of a loosely connected organism—although the leaders of the rebellion are beginning to act in ways that suggest the coalescence of an organization, capable of prosecuting a sustained insurgency. The Huthi journey from resistance organism to insurgent organization will be shaped by enduring GoY approaches and regional conditions surrounding the conflict in 2010–2011.

The February 2010 ceasefire is a welcome development. Yet, over the six-year conflict, ceasefires have broken down several times, due either to the inability of the protagonists to resist targeting each other or to the GoY's tactical use of them as breathing spaces before launching a new offensive. Therefore, it is a reasonable proposition that in the absence of a fundamental restructuring of center-periphery relations, a change of

calculations among the protagonists, or a geometric increase of GoY force, this conflict will persist into the next decade in one of two principal forms. In the first form, the GoY will confront a smoldering level of violence that prevents unfettered access to the region, absorbs significant military attention, and results in a progressive destruction of the local means of existence. The GoY may perceive this situation as tolerable: The regime could appeal for support in countering “Shi’ite terror,” could justify ongoing military aggrandizement, and could engage in traditionally divisive and cooptative policies in the tribal region. Finally, as Saleh prepares to transition rule to his son at a time when his tribal elite allies are now represented by younger, less-tested leaders, a persistent Huthi insurrection could provide an element of unity. This scenario might be called *smoldering violence and GoY-benefiting chaos*.

In the second scenario, GoY COIN fails to counter the core enablers of Huthi insurgency while widening the geographic and social base of opposition to the regime. Over time, Huthi elements acquire more-sophisticated weapons and coordination capabilities, as well as transnational legitimacy. Here, a progressively contracting Yemeni economy—as oil prices falter and domestic oil production lags—reduces the coercive and cooptative resources at the GoY’s disposal, while foreign sponsors call more attention to San’a’s stalled democratization, disregard for human rights, and excessive accommodation of extremist Salafism. External powers might then push the GoY to accept more international mediation. Although more high-intensity GoY operations or a peaceful resolution based on reconstruction are also possible, this second scenario, *Huthi persistence and exhaustion of GoY capacity*, currently appears most likely. Combined with lingering discontent in the south and threats from al-Qa’ida, this conjuncture of events would cast a new light on the conflict in Sa’da—aiding the Huthi evolution from organism to organization—and could materially threaten the long-term viability of the Saleh regime.