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Yemen's Forever War: The Houthi Rebellion

by [Barak Salmoni](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Barak Salmoni](#)

Barak Salmoni is a visiting defense fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On July 13, 2010, Barak Salmoni, along with Christopher Boucek and April Longley Alley, addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Author of the recent study *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*, Dr. Salmoni has served as a political scientist at the RAND National Defense Research Institute, deputy director of the Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning, and assistant professor at the Naval Postgraduate School. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks on the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen. A summary of Dr. Alley's remarks appears in [PolicyWatch #1680](#), while Dr. Boucek's remarks, as well as the policy recommendations by all three speakers, will be distributed as PolicyWatch #1682.

Aside from Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen is perhaps the largest war the Arab world has seen in a decade. It has proven to be the single largest drain on Yemeni material and human resources, as well as a central government preoccupation for the past five years. Given the country's numerous economic, resource, and political crises, Sana can ill afford the conflict. Ironically, the rebellion also seems to be one of Yemen's most resolvable security challenges.

Background

The war between the federal government and the Houthi clans began in June 2004. It has been characterized by continuous fighting of varying intensity, punctuated by multiple ceasefires and mediation attempts (the government counts six phases of active fighting).

At its heart, the conflict is a power struggle between federal and local actors. The epicenter of the rebellion is Saada governorate in the northwest, adjacent to the Saudi border. Skirmishes have spread to Sana, and even Saudi Arabia has been militarily drawn into the fighting at times.

The conflict has reportedly caused between 20,000 and 30,000 casualties, including combatants and noncombatants. Distinguishing between these two categories is often difficult because both the Houthis and the

government-backed tribal militias fight from within the civilian populations. Estimates of the number of internally displaced persons hover around 150,000, and more than 3,000 people are reportedly under government detention in the north.

Current Ceasefire

The government's adoption of a February 2010 ceasefire indicates that its scorched-earth policy in the sixth phase of the war was unsuccessful. For their part, the Houthis sought to avoid a two-front war involving Saudi Arabia, whose military had begun to directly confront them prior to the truce. It is unclear whether ground forces were involved in these confrontations, but Saudi airstrikes on Houthi targets have been confirmed. The ceasefire also came at a time when the threats posed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and southern secessionists were on the rise, overstressing government security forces.

Among the reported ceasefire conditions were items such as the removal of roadblocks and landmines; an end to fortification of Houthi areas; the return of captured Saudi weapons and civilian goods; the release of Saudi and Yemeni civilian and military detainees; and an end to aggressive acts in Saudi territory. These conditions are tough to measure objectively, however, and may prove difficult to implement, given the north's views on territory. Cultural norms -- particularly the longstanding custom of males possessing weapons -- will also likely preempt any attempt at disarmament. Similarly, the cultural need for both sides to be viewed as equals in negotiations tends to conflict with modern concepts of state sovereignty. As a result, the ceasefire is likely to collapse like others before it; one can already find signs that a seventh phase of conflict is drawing close.

Government and Houthi Capabilities

Yemen's military has large numbers of heavy weapons but is conscription-based and unevenly equipped. Although the government claims to have undertaken precision bombing attacks against Houthi targets, these raids were actually carried out by Saudi and U.S. air forces. In addition, some equipment supplied by the United States to fight al-Qaeda has been used against the Houthis. Images of this captured or destroyed American equipment have provided the Houthis with a propaganda boost.

For their part, the Houthis fight as cells based on kinship and social network ties, linked by trust, and fighting on their own territory. They are loosely organized, ensuring that their leadership cannot be easily decapitated by government strikes.

The Houthis are also increasingly well armed. Open-source video footage of rebel fighters appears to show new rocket-propelled grenade launchers, including advanced RPG-29 warheads. They have also been able to capture government weapons in each phase of the war, including NATO-standard European- or U.S.-supplied weapons. Some Houthis have even captured and displayed Saudi laser rangefinders and night-vision equipment, though there is no indication they acquired significant quantities of such items or effectively employed the equipment.

Characterizing the Rebellion

It would be a mistake to call the rebellion a Shiite movement merely because the Houthis are Zaidis. Although Zaidis do venerate Shiite religious figures, their political theology is distinctly different from Twelver Shia; for example, the latter has adopted velayat-e faqih (Islamic governance) while the former has abandoned claims to a political imamate.

The rebellion's tribal aspects are complex as well. Although the fighting is not purely tribal in nature, tribal ties are now becoming a vehicle for mobilization, creating a self-perpetuating conflict based on tribal vendettas. In particular, government recruitment of local tribal levies to fight the war risks exacerbating the situation.

Moreover, upon closer inspection, the rebellion does not really seem like an insurgency, defined by U.S. doctrine as

an organized movement committed to usurping power from the established government. Nothing indicates that this is the Houthis' goal at present -- the conflict is between the state and a marginalized minority on the periphery of power who are accustomed to autonomy.

Regarding opponents' claims of covert Iranian assistance to the Houthis, no hard evidence of such links exists. The Yemeni rebels do not display the kinds of capabilities deployed by Iranian proxies such as Hizballah, Hamas, and certain Iraqi militias (e.g., 107 mm and 122 mm rockets; advanced roadside bombs). And the Houthis have no need to seek small arms from Iran, because such weapons are readily available in Yemen.

Also noteworthy is that despite boasting a decidedly unfriendly slogan -- "Death to America, Israel, curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam" -- the Houthis have not launched a single act of aggression against the United States or U.S. assets in the region. In fact, the Houthis share the same enemy as America: radical Salafi Sunni Islam, which helped instigate their emergence as a rebel movement in the first place.

What Next?

At present, the conflict's scale is taking attention and resources from Yemen's many other urgent problems. And as regional states are drawn into the fighting, resolving the problem may become more difficult.

The fighting is likely to continue until the Yemeni government invests in reconstruction and legitimizes Houthi affiliates as political actors in the reconciliation process. Tensions will also persist unless Sana legitimizes points such as Zaidism and northern tribal identity as distinct and integral parts of Yemeni identity. The propaganda war that demonizes each side is an obstacle to peace, as is the continued presence of military forces from both sides in disputed areas. An international presence may be necessary to monitor ceasefires, fairly impose terms, facilitate mediation talks, and help fund reconstruction.

Increasingly stretched thin, the conflict with the Houthis seems to be pushing Sana toward accommodation with local Sunni Arab militants. Until it can resolve the rebellion and end the ongoing drain on scarce resources, it is unlikely that Yemen will be a full partner in the U.S.-led struggle against militant extremism.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Andrew Engel. ❖

Policy #1681



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