Yemen's Forever War:

Political Instability in the South

Jul 19, 2010

Brief Analysis

On July 13, 2010, April Longley Alley, along with Barak Salmoni and Christopher Boucek, addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. A research associate at the National Defense University's Center for Applied Strategic Learning, Dr. Alley served as a Yemen expert for Gen. David Petraeus's U.S. Central Command Assessment Team and for a U.S. Agency for International Development conflict assessment. The following is a rapporteur's summary of her remarks on the southern secessionist threat to the Yemeni government. Mr. Salmoni and Mr. Boucek's remarks will be distributed as PolicyWatches 1681 and 1682.

Yemen's southern movement poses an existential and territorial threat to the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Even a partial secession could accelerate the collapse of the weakening Yemeni state because the south's concentration of hydrocarbon assets and ports is a vital source of revenue.

Discussing the secessionist movement is problematic: events on the ground have been changing rapidly and conducting research there is difficult for academics and journalists. Nevertheless, recent fieldwork and Arabic press reports offer insight into the history of the movement, with an emphasis on underlying grievances, violence, and trends that are critical to understanding Yemen's dynamics and their impact on the country's unity and stability.

Background

The secessionists are based in what used to be the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), the Marxist state that existed in the south prior to the country's 1990 reunification. Discontent with the hurried reunification led to a short civil war in 1994, with the northern forces triumphant. Southern grievances have persisted ever since.

The current iteration of the southern movement began in spring 2007, when a group of PDRY military retirees protested inadequate pensions and forced demobilization. In 2008, activism spread to other disgruntled southerners who wanted greater access to government services and employment, improved rule of law, better resource management, plus economic and political decentralization.

The government repeatedly promised reform but failed to deliver. As a result, the southern movement's narrative shifted from calls for reform to demands for independence. Protests now tend to occur on symbolic dates: unity day, the outbreak of fighting against the British, and during funerals of martyrs. Meanwhile, a 2009 Human Rights Watch report documented government troops firing on unarmed civilians, unlawful killings and detentions, and repression of media and free speech by security forces, resulting in a climate of fear, bitterness, and alienation. Heavy-handed government reaction to protests has further alienated southerners and energized a militant cadre within the secessionist movement.

Increasing Violence

Since the February 2010 ceasefire with Houthi rebels in the north, the government has focused its attention on the south, diverting military resources to contain the area's growing unrest. Yet Sana's repressive divide-and-conquer

strategy has only made the southern movement stronger, resulting in tit-for-tat violence that may develop into a nascent insurgency. Animus is growing steadily between northerners and southerners: the south is alive with rumors of vigilante militia attacks by both camps, and a palpable undercurrent of tension can be felt in Aden, the area's largest city and former capital of the PDRY. Varying degrees of frustration and alienation mean that many southerners -- not just radical fringes -- are reconsidering the value of being part of Yemen.

Some of the southern violence has been well documented. For example, 2008 data from Small Arms Survey shows twenty-one instances of political violence in Lahij province, eleven in Abyan province, and fifteen in other southern governorates within the same year. Such incidents seemed to increase significantly in 2009-2010; the spike in violence has been clearly evident in al-Dali and Lahij, with the federal government resorting to heavy weapons to curtail southern militancy. Both provinces were notoriously difficult for the British to control in the pre-independence period, and southern militants are likely to display considerable staying power. Although a military solution to the problem is not possible, the government may nevertheless be forced to take on yet another resource-expensive and open-ended military mission in the south.

Profiling the Movement

The southern movement can be characterized as a grassroots phenomenon, representative of local grievances but disorganized in key respects. Its leadership is fractured among domestic and exiled figures, with five different councils claiming to speak for it. In addition, tensions remain from 1986, when internecine fighting erupted in the south. Divisions are visible along regional and tribal lines and between rural groups and the Adenese, while loosely structured militant cells are emerging under a new crop of younger leaders.

Unsurprisingly, the movement is divided over how to achieve independence and has no plan for governing afterward. It has insufficient military capability to defeat the federal government but could probably conduct extended guerrilla warfare. Southern militants could also try to recruit external supporters.

In 2009, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula threw its rhetorical support behind the movement, but the southern secessionists quickly rejected it. While the goals and ideologies of al-Qaeda and the southern movement differ, tactical cooperation could conceivably occur in some areas. As one member of the southern movement claimed, the movement would align with "Iran, al-Qaeda, or even the devil" in order to achieve its objectives. Although this view may not be widespread, it hints at the dangerous synergies and alliances that can develop at the nexus of Yemen's overlapping conflicts.

Conclusion

Like the battle with the Houthis, the conflict in the south has metastasized over time and cannot be dispelled militarily. The government is left with limited opportunities to engage the movement constructively. Although such outreach has potential to succeed within the framework of Yemen's national dialogue, Sana is losing the credibility needed for unilateral reforms, and third-party mediation may be required. The government is increasingly using military coercion to contain unrest, yet violence against civilian protesters has only broadened support for secession and narrowed the space for compromise.

The status quo is no longer tenable. Only political and economic reform can resolve the issue -- an approach that will require serious government concessions, increased accountability, better resource and land management, and power sharing through a federalist arrangement.

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

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