



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Position Paper

# Yemen: Prospects of Total War and Expected Outcomes



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**Al Jazeera Center for Studies**

30 October 2011

Field indicators on the ground, the state of escalating tension and ongoing military preparations of the political regime and the popular revolution in Yemen illustrate that the situation is actually approaching the brink of war, and the prospects of a total confrontation accelerate more than ever. What really inhibits its eruption is a thin thread of hope for the possibility of reaching a settlement that will spare the country the woes of annihilation and the tireless efforts of international and regional powers that are keen to prevent susceptibility of the option of war.

It is clear that developments of the conflict between the revolution and the Yemeni political regime oscillate along two courses: either an agreement to bring about peaceful change that realizes the revolution's aspirations and simultaneously maintains the minimum interests of the political regime and the ruling elite, or the fall into total war which will not be in any case, in favor of the political regime, since war prospects will lead either to the victory of the revolution or endless violence and chaos in the country.

The only hope to prevent the eruption of war depends on the active international and regional powers' ability to apply serious pressures in order to reach a speedy settlement.

### **Factors of Descent to War**

There are several factors that indicate the preponderance of the military option. At the forefront is the conflict parties' mutual escalation which, after eight months of squabbling, reveals a common conviction that it is impossible for the situation to continue indefinitely and that it is necessary that the conflict reaches a decisive turning point. Each party is prepared, in its own way, to reach that turning point.

After the resounding success of the Libyan revolution and Gaddafi's humiliating escape, the Yemeni revolution adopted a program of nonviolent revolutionary escalation reaching eventually a point of decision, regardless of sacrifices. Such a move, which puts the revolution in direct decisive confrontation with the regime, was accompanied this time by a new development, namely that the military forces that support the revolution have indirectly indicated that if the regime moves on to use military power, they will not stand idly by as they do not lack the means or patriotic motives to defend the revolution.

The regime continues its earlier approach to confronting the peaceful revolution and holds firm the use of force, clinging to tools of violence and allowing itself to suppress peaceful protests no matter how long they persist. The regime has also resorted to bringing armed tribal groups to the capital, and increased the arming of its civilian supporters, just in case the situation develops into an open military confrontation.

Military preparations of the two parties in the conflict are well underway as the regime works unequivocally to increase its strength and military capacity, redistribute the latter in confronting revolution forces, and purchase new weapons and equipment. In fact, it recently signed a deal (that will close within two weeks) to buy weapons from Russia, and recruited more troops for the Republican Guard to balance out the revolution's manpower. In response to the regime's military driving force, the pro-revolution army led by General Ali Muhsin initiated a vast recruitment campaign among the revolution's youth as well as weapon training for civilian rebels.

The state of accelerating armed alarm and the two parties' attempt to acquire strategic sites in and around the capital indicate that matters are on the verge of explosion.

Certainly, the feeling that the path to a consensual solution is blocked and the hopelessness of its feasibility exacerbates the situation and strengthens the fervour for the military solution that is meant to be the final option for resolving the longest Arab popular revolution of the "Arab spring" to date. What explains the obstructive nature of the conflict between the two relentless opposing schemes is the fact that the popular revolution is persistent and unwilling to make concessions that will make it less significant than the other revolutions which succeeded in exacting their rights from their

tyrannical governments, and seemingly intend to proceed until their demands are met regardless of the sacrifices.

Although the Gulf initiative remains the only backdrop for a consensual solution, and although President Saleh himself had requested Gulf countries to meet the revolution, he shows intransigence at times and equivocation at others when it comes to implementation, perhaps relying on Saudi Arabia to support him and his choices, and for the inaccurate assessment that he remains in the lead and that the regime is capable of resolving the conflict in its own militarily favour if necessary. The so-called hawkish wing of the ruling party demotes the conflict in the presence of a limited number of political, military, and tribal forces hunting for power for if it is eliminated or undermined, the revolution will be suppressed without any concessions.

This wing pushes toward militancy in its positions, claiming that the youth revolution was undermined as a result of the politics of power and collective punishment challenging what remains of the revolution in the Yemeni public. It also finds that the regime's interest lies not in making concessions that were not approved of before the failed attempt to assassinate the president and senior state leaders, but in using the incident as a pretext and justification for the disposition of the greatest opponents supporting the revolution, Sheikh Hameed al Ahmar and General Ali Muhsin, Commander of the First Armored Division, whose official media claims are involved. Surely, filing charges in court indicates the regime's desire to complicate the prospects of resolution and to push toward an inevitable military clash.

### **Factors Preventing the Decline of War**

Some analysts regard President Saleh's decision to delegate Vice President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansour to initiate dialogue with the opposition (the parties that signed the Gulf initiative) to reach a unanimous mechanism to implement the Gulf initiative as a breakthrough symbol in the path of consensual resolution - even if some may disagree - and bring the two parties in the conflict together to achieve settlement. On the one hand, the decision gives the vice president's dialogue with the opposition the required official backing that even Saleh himself could not repeal and that would commit him to the outcomes in accordance with the delegation. More importantly, it isolates the path of negotiation from the influence of centers of military power within the regime; and in accordance with the delegation, Mansour has the authority to make decisions and sign on behalf of Saleh, and the dialogue, whose results cannot be circumvented, takes place through regional and international sponsorship.

Meanwhile, another faction regards the delegation decision as a new kind of equivocation and an attempt to avoid the Gulf initiative, and the repudiation from previous understandings reached by Mansour during talks with the opposition took weeks to reach a mutually accepted suggestion for an executive mechanism for the initiative presented by UN envoy Jamal bin Omar. An agreement was reached from three perspectives: it requires that Saleh issue a decree in which he calls for early presidential elections towards the end of 2011, allocates all of his presidential powers to the vice president, and necessitates the formation of a government of national unity and the restructuring of military institutions.

This very faction believes that reaching a settlement requires not more dialogue, but Saleh's signature of the agreement, and the delegation decision is merely an attempt to go back to square one and risk the time factor to abort the revolution. Also, Saleh's delegation of Mansour to sign the Gulf initiative is futile because it requires the signature of Saleh himself as he can annul any agreements his vice president makes with the opposition if he feels that they are not to his advantage. What is more critical is that initiating public dialogue with the opposition before the initiative will push the revolution towards crisis as the regime seeks to divide the opposition and the revolution's youth.

Nevertheless, the position of regional and international forces rejecting the war remains the central restraining factor of this option. It appears that these forces are insistent on

avoiding it owing to their interests in Yemen and realize that a settlement would be the best option to protect them. Hence, they pressure both sides to reach an agreement, warning that instigating war will lead to the loss of regional and international support. European diplomacy warned military leaders candidly during recent tensions that they can be taken to the International Criminal Court if they aggravate conditions militarily. The Saudi position is still more restraining than any other as it possesses the tools for pressuring both parties.

Other factors preventing the choice of war are demonstrated through the semi-parity of the balance of power and human interference in the two camps, and the belief that war is a risky venture with high material and human costs that will exacerbate the country's poor economic and security conditions, thus making revolution forces moderates in the ruling party more keen on avoiding this fall.

### **Expected Outcomes of the Military Option**

It may be difficult to assess the immediate outcomes of war in the short run, the time it will take due to the balance of power and multitude of components of both parties, the potential shift of their internal and external alliances, the possibility of dissent in the regime's military units, or the shift of loyalty of tribal leaders. The general view of the conflict suggests the inevitability of the revolution's eventual victory as it is difficult to terminate a popular revolution that is certain its demands are just with military force as Arab revolutions proved that the chances of repressive regimes to resist are unlikely. The matter is determined by time and the required financial and human costs for the realization of the revolution's victory.

The stability of conditions is not an option without change, whether peaceful or violent, and otherwise the country will live an unending state of chaos and instability.

Despite the regime's military superiority, its forces have no real incentives and motives to fight, with the exception of a small number of those who are driven by familial and tribal solidarity. Also, the regime's lethal point of weakness is its need for a fair issue to fight for, one that would validate to the government's soldiers the sacrifice of their lives. This was clearly the case for the Libyan revolution, unlike the former party which believes it fights for just a religious and national cause it is prepared to sacrifice its life for. Hence, it is expected that when war erupts, more army units will announce joining the revolution, and more division led by national figures rejecting the war will take place within the ruling party.

Analyses conclude that waging total war may enable the regime to further damage systematic forces of the revolution immediately due to its superior air force. However, this will not be the case for long, and a part of the conflict will soon transform into a war within the cities, which will undermine the advantage of a superior air force and become a decisive factor for the fighters' morale. The conflict will be limited to the main cities for control of vital installations and the presidential palace in the capital, and although the war may be limited to three main cities, it will probably expand to reach all of the major cities in the northern governorates. It is also expected that whole cities and governorates will fall into the hands of the revolution in the first days of the war. The two parties will then engage in extensive war for an unpredictable period of time. The revolution will accomplish its final victory over the political regime according to a number of considerations, namely early division in the regime's military structure, the resources available for each of the parties, and the revolution's ability to mobilize the people toward the war option.

Also, the longer and more expansive the war is, the higher the human cost and the more dangerous the economic and social impacts will be. A number of analysts display their fear that the country may enter a state of chaos if the war is prolonged. However, what somewhat relieves this fear is the fact that regional and international forces will not be pleased with Yemen's deterioration to such a state as it will conflict with their interests. Some bet that this will cause many of the forces to resolve their options and support the

revolution because it is the only possibility of ending violence in Yemen; and in any case, they acquiesce to the revolutionary trend in the region. Hence, supporting the regime would be swimming against the tide and a lost cause.

Linked to the scenario of a prolonged war are the fears of the quest of southern movement forces to establish control over the southern governorates, the announcement of separation, and the coercion of any regime after the war to accept separation as fait accompli in addition to the potential exploitation of the Houthis through the preoccupation of the political regime and the revolution's forces in the war, and the expansion of their influence in the northern governorates by way of Iranian support. Nonetheless, the chances such a scenario will occur are slim as it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia will allow the expansion of Houthi Shiite influence on its northern borders with Yemen and, thus, it will intervene early on to prevent this in every way possible.

Furthermore, the war will not undermine the revolution's forces as commonly believed but will gradually strengthen them due to vast human and military mobilization as a result and the evidences of such are numerous. After disposing of the regime, the revolution's force will be able to find just consensual solutions for the case of the south without neglecting unity by seeking help from southern forces supporting the revolution and rejecting the notion of separation.