Position Paper

Yemen's Houthi Movement:

Limiting Military Operations Via Political

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Translated into English by: ***AMEC***

22 September 2014

Yemen's Houthi movement is currently pursuing both military and political tactics to gain power [Associated Press]

Abstract

In Yemen's political arena, the Houthis are banking on their participation in the national dialogue to achieve various political gains while they simultaneously use military force and popular crowd mobilisation to realise objectives they are unable to achieve through their political participation. However, they would be obliged to reconsider their military actions if President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi and his supporters (both internally and externally) are able to adopt a dual political and military strategy to convince the Houthis that the collapse of the political process will cause them to lose their positions in the Yemeni state and prevent them from ever establishing an independent state.

Introduction

The Houthi strategy in the Yemeni political arena banks on their participation in the national dialogue to achieve certain political gains while simultaneously resorting to using military force and popular crowd mobilisation to attain other objectives that their political participation does not bring them. However, the combination of these two strategies does not guarantee results. The military confrontations may have unfavourable outcomes, such as the outbreak of sectarian civil war which would destroy the gains of political participation. Furthermore, the Houthis' military power, represented by a structured army of more than ten thousand fighters and dozens of tanks, sophisticated heavy weaponry and anti-aircraft weapons, constitutes an apparent threat to Yemen and its neighbouring countries' stability. There are also fears that the Houthis and their military arm could form the nucleus of an independent state based on sectarian

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doctrine that would, in turn, provide some legitimacy for the formation of Sunni Jihadist entities.

The Houthi problem

The Yemeni revolution saved the Houthis from some of their political opponents and helped them realise part of their demands, including the removal of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh who had launched six wars against them since 2004. They also achieved internal and external legitimacy through their participation in the national dialogue, which enabled them to participate in the central authority and gain administrative control of one out of the six regions within the federal system set up by the dialogue. However, these gains have not fulfilled all the Houthis' demands nor have they entirely calmed their fears. The Reform Party (al-Islah), which they see as a partner to their enemy Saleh, has become more influential in Yemen after the revolution. The Houthis now fear that the Reform Party's infiltration of state departments and its influence on the army may lead to its domination of decision-making bodies in Sana'a. They are particularly wary of its alliance with the former commander of the northern military region and the First Armoured Division, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who fought the Houthis and stood against Saleh and supported the revolution and the Reform Party. Consequently, the Houthis have mobilised their supporters to change the balance of power before the next elections.

After the division of Yemen into six regions, the Houthi region also poses problems, as it includes areas that are traditionally Zaydi but it does not possess sufficient power to make it independent from the centre in the future because the region lacks resources and ports. Consequently, the Houthis moved militarily to annex the area of al-Jouf which includes, according to a number of surveys, significant energy reserves, and they also moved toward Haja in order to acquire a seaport in Midi.

In short, the problem facing the Houthis is that they need to publicly commit to the national dialogue's outputs in order to achieve political legitimacy for their military gains. However, their military action threatens the entire political process and drives their internal and external adversaries to unite against them.

Possible scenarios

In light of the current crisis, Yemen is at a crossroads: it could head towards civil war that may destroy its unity and what remains of the state, or its opposing political parties could reach a political settlement to maintain the transition process. The following paragraphs address the two possible scenarios which may emerge.

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Scenario 1: Houthi force escalation and civil war

Following their recent military seizure of Amran, if the Houthis opt to escalate the current confrontations in the capital Sana'a by the use of force and as a means to pressure the government to accept their conditions, this could lead the Reform Party and its allied tribes to unite with the government administration. They would do this in order to prevent the Houthis from taking control of the central authority in Sana'a. The confrontations may lead to the outbreak of street warfare, but the Houthis would be wise to avoid this as they are likely to face multiple forces united against them out of fear. It is even possible that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula might join and support the forces fighting the Houthis since al-Qaeda regards the Houthis as a threat to Sunni doctrine, especially after the Houthi military campaigns against the Salafis in Dammaj. If the confrontations extend from al-Jouf to Sana'a, current president Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi's authority could crumble as a result of the collapse of the consensus that brought him to power.

If this happens, the international and regional powers which sponsored the national dialogue may move against the Houthis because they threaten the continuation of the ongoing political process. They would look for a state in the region that is capable of deterring the Houthis. Saudi Arabia may assume this role, given its vested interest in averting a takeover of Yemen by the Houthi movement, labelled a terrorist organisation by the Saudis in March 2014. Riyadh wants to prevent the expansion of Iranian influence in its immediate neighbourhood, to avoid being surrounded by Shia governments, such as that controlling Iraq in the East. Another Shia power controlling Yemen to the South would dismay Saudi Arabia, and the Kingdom would probably react by using air strikes to curb the expansion of the Houthis in Yemen and restore the balance between opposing forces.

While the Houthis could achieve some temporary military gains through this scenario, in the longer term they would face a protracted guerrilla war of attrition, which would ultimately result in expanding the front of their enemies. In addition, the Security Council could consider them a threat to international security. If they push Yemen towards disintegration, this could enhance the influence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, near Bab al-Mandab strait, which in turn might help establish links to the Somali Youth movement, posing a threat to Western powers and to international navigation in the Red Sea. It is also possible the Houthi movement might coordinate with the Islamic State in Iraq to prevent Saudi Arabia from participating in the international coalition that has been formed to fight it.

It is improbable the Houthis will choose this scenario, because it is likely to destroy the gains they have obtained from the political process, raise the cost of their military

operations and expand the their enemies' blocs internally and externally, with regional actors likely to enter the fray against them. The movement's forces would be scattered across several fronts, and since they lack the capacity to defeat multiple forces on multiple fronts, the Houthis will find themselves in a weaker position than their current situation when they eventually return to the negotiating table in search of a settlement.

Scenario 2: political negotiation

In this scenario, the Houthis avoid slipping into open confrontations with their opponents and with Yemeni forces in Sana'a, and continue their popular pressure. The current strategy of the organisation in Sana'a appears to confirm this. The Houthis have refrained from armed response despite the fact that security forces killed a number of their supporters when they tried to take control of government headquarters in Sana'a. It seems that they will continue to avoid conflict in the capital. Consequently, President Hadi would use the Houthi's popular pressure tactic to force the Reform Party to hand over important positions in power, strengthening his role as an arbiter of the dispute between two of the largest political players in Yemen. In return, Hadi will postpone talks about expanding the Houthi territory, which they seized control of by force, to avoid undermining the credibility of the national dialogue.

What enhances the chances of this scenario is that international powers in the Security Council want to keep Yemen united as a coherent state which will not disintegrate and become an arena for jihadist forces or a breeding ground for groups similar to the Islamic State. Saudi Arabia would likely concur, in line with the statement by the ambassadors of the ten sponsors of the Gulf initiative, which blamed the Houthis for the Sana'a crisis. It is not in Saudi Arabia's interest to have a failed state in the south. However, at the same time, Riyadh doesn't want one force to dominate Yemen's future. It considers the Yemeni Reform Party as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which it has labelled as a terrorist organisation, and since it views the Houthi political project as a threat to Saudi security, it also views the Houthi movement as a terrorist organisation. It is in Riyadh's interest to counterbalance the power of the Reform Party with that of the Houthis, so that each prevents the other from expanding their power base, and Saudi Arabia doesn't need to intervene militarily to achieve this.

A settlement emanating from this scenario would likely be fragile because it only addresses participation in the government and administration, while other sensitive issues remain unresolved, including the exact geographical area of the province over which the Houthis want control, and the consequences that could result from that.

This leaves quite a few questions, however: What form would this control take; would it be similar to the Kurds' control of the Kurdistan region, essentially implying the nucleus

of an independent state? What is the future of the Houthis' military capacity; will a number of Houthi fighters be integrated into the army or will they request the Yemeni state to recognise Houthi brigades and incorporate them as units within the army, given that some of these forces will fight only in their own regions, like the Peshmerga which operates primarily in Kurdistan? There are also differences regarding the division of wealth. Under this scenario, the situation in Yemen will, for the foreseeable future, continue to swing between confrontations which stop short of civil war on the one hand, and fragile and temporary settlements on the other.

Taming armed operations

The Houthis, with their multi-pronged strategy of adherence to political participation along with the mobilisation of public pressure and the expansion of military operations, are seeking to increase their influence in Yemen's central authority while simultaneously expanding the territories they control. However, they would be obliged to rethink their military movements if President Hadi and his supporters (both internally and externally) adopt a dual political and military strategy to convince the Houthis that the collapse of the political process will cause them to lose their positions in the current Yemeni state and prevent them from ever establishing an independent state.