

Policy Brief

The Death of a Dictator: Yemen's Miasma after Saleh

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Does the death of the former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, signify the end of the Yemeni crisis and the suffering of Yemenis or will aggravate them? [AlJazeera]

Introduction

Yemen's ex-president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, met his third demise on December 4, 2017: he is no more. He survived the wave of uprisings that swept several Arab countries, including Yemen, except politically. He was ousted from power in February 2012 – his first demise. His is largely the architect of his own death, a result of his second demise. In 2014, Saleh miscalculated by helping the takeover of Sana'a by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. Three years later Sana'a had its revenge. So did his former allies the Houthis who killed him in Sana'a for switching sides against them a days before his death. With his death, the war-torn country takes yet again a new dramatic turn. Yemen's descent into division, civil war and uncertainty seems unstoppable.

More complications are engulfing the Yemeni crisis, with a situation being open to irreconcilable bets. What impact would Saleh's murder leave on his loyalists? What political developments such a turning point would bring to Yemen and the 3-year old war there?

Houthi-controlled Sanaa witnessed the official announcement of the killing of Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president of Yemen. Leading figures in the Saleh-led General People's Congress (GPC) were confirmed dead, and others wounded, including two of Saleh's sons. On the same day, Tariq Saleh, Saleh's nephew and the commander of GPC-linked militias, was reportedly killed in a different conflict with Houthi fighters.

There are conflicting accounts of Saleh's killing. The Houthis, on one hand, reported that he was killed inside an armoured vehicle during crossfire with his motorcade. According to this version of events, the killing followed an interception of the planned escape from Sanaa to his birthplace in Sanhan. On the other hand, Saleh's loyalists and relatives

affirm that he was terminated by the Houthis inside his home. In this version, Houthi rebels broke into Saleh's house by midday, Tuesday, December 4, 2017. A third account suggests that Saleh was killed after leaving his house for the Serwah directorate in Marib in coordination with the Arab Coalition, only to be intercepted and killed by gunmen.

Whatever the truth is, the Houthis do not seem regretful at accusations of committing another murder, regardless of who the victim or victims might be. This holds particularly true as they have reportedly committed a series of violations since they took over the Yemeni capital and swept most of the country in the Fall of 2014. Rather, what matters is whether Saleh's absence from the Yemeni scene amidst conditions that are not short of a tragic crisis will change anything in the country's state of chaos and uncertainty. Maybe Saleh was already 'politically dead' before his killing. Nonetheless, his death may leave a political vacuum. He served as president of the Yemeni Republic for 33 years and continued to exercise heavy influence over the political affairs of his country as well as the Yemeni army after he stepped down in November 2011.

How far will Saleh's murder impact his military and GPC loyalists? To what extent can the Houthis celebrate victory over their ardent adversary, who was once their ally? Further, what does this turning point have for the Yemeni political situation and the war raging in Yemen for over two years now?

Very Short Uprising

The killing of the former Yemeni President wrapped up a short-lived armed uprising carried out by his loyalists since December 2, 2017, in the Yemeni capital against his ex-ally; the Houthis. What the former President said in his last speech, i.e., one day before he was killed, and the word among his loyalists is that inadvertent and sudden clashes erupted between Houthi forces and Saleh's supporters because of provocative actions by the Houthis during the celebrations marking the birthday of Prophet [Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him)] in a Sanaa-based mosque. According to those supporters, it was not the first time to endure such Houthi-led provocations. Nor was their forced seizure of the celebrating mosque the culmination of such provocations. Rather, the Houthis besieged the houses of key GPC figures and pro-Saleh senior military commanders.

On the other hand, the Houthis denied outright the narrative of the pro-Saleh camp, arguing that the former President and his loyalists went on a deliberate and pre-planned military mutiny. Such action was supposed to engulf Sanaa as well as other cities and the fighting fronts between the areas controlled by the Houthis, the pro-Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi's (the incumbent President of Yemen) forces and the so-called Yemeni legitimacy. The Houthis further argue that the former President started to communicate with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at least three months ago with a view to cutting a deal with the Saudi-led coalition, including, among other things, breaking away from the

Houthis and undermining their control over Sanaa and other pro-Saleh loyalist-controlled areas. Saleh's call for the Yemeni people in his last speech to declare a massive uprising against the Houthis is but a clear proof of his connivance with the UAE, which has been acting on behalf of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the Saudi-led coalition as a whole, the Houthis argue.

Ahmed Abdullah Saleh, Saleh's influential son and the former commander of the Yemeni Republican Guard, continued to live in Abu Dhabi since he was appointed Yemeni ambassador to the UAE four years ago. Despite Ahmed was sacked by president Hadi in 2013, he remained in the UAE, a member of the Arab Coalition, and helped both the UAE and KSA keep an open communication channel with his father as and when needed. It is likely that the UAE managed to establish serious communication with Saleh months ago after the deadlock reached in the Yemeni war and the escalating risks of Houthis rockets fired at Saudi mainland targets.

Perhaps, the sudden meeting between the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman; to whom the war in Yemen is said to be his own project, and the Mohammad al-Yaddoumi, the secretary general of the Yemeni Islah (Reform) Party, on 11 November 2017 serves as the most significant indicator to how far the communications with Saleh have been. Al-Yaddoumi is in his self-exile, Riyadh, since the Houthis captured Sanaa. Yet, he has never been approached or cared for by Saudi authorities despite that fact that the Islah operatives assume a key role in the fight against the Houthis on front lines. Consequently, the said meeting between Bin Salman and Al-Yaddoumi was in preparation for an imminent transformation in the Yemeni war.

Although the agenda of the said meeting was almost kept within its room, Islah sources on front lines, particularly those near Sanaa, argued that the Arab Coalition equipped those front lines with tremendous amounts of arms and ammunition right after the meeting was concluded. Further, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, an ex-military officer known for being close to the Islah Party and the former vice president, paid field visits to the front lines to check on the ongoing preparations, stressing that the Sanaa liberation battle is looming ahead.

Accordingly, it can be said that certain parts of the Arab Coalition thought that Saleh's camp was strong enough to undermine the Houthi control over the Yemeni capital, and that the Arab Coalition and pro-legitimacy forces would be able to liberate Sanaa once the Saleh-led mutiny is declared against the Houthis. This led the Yemeni president, Hadi, on 4 December 2017 to order his army forces to proceed with the "Capital Liberation Battle;" i.e., at the time when the UAE and KSA believed that the situation in Sanaa was favoring the former president's camp.

Obviously, the UAE and KSA intelligence services did not have reliable sources inside Sanaa. Further, they even came to miscalculated conclusions regarding the short-lived faceoff between Saleh and the Houthis. For their assessments and estimates, those services were relying only on the former president. By turn, it is clear that the Houthis were expecting a confrontation with Saleh and holding the sufficient power to win the battle. It cannot be ruled out that the Iranians provided the Houthis with espionage equipment that enabled them to trace Saleh's communications with the UAE. Another possible explanation is that the Houthis managed to penetrate the closest circles of the former president. To the Houthis, and despite their alliance with him, Saleh was never the man to trust.

New Turning Point

Back in February 2011, the Yemeni crisis started with a popular revolution against the then president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, as part of the revolutionary wave across Arab countries since late 2010. Taiz, the Yemeni city with a Shafe'ei (a Sunni juristic school) majority, was the center point of the youth-led revolution from all political affiliations. So quickly, the revolution was joined by various intellectuals and political activists, including military personnel; most notably General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. The popular movement spread across most of the Yemeni territories, including Sanaa. In November 2011, Saudi Arabia imposed, in the name of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a settlement between Saleh's regime and the popular revolution. According to the said settlement, Saleh handed power to his deputy, Mansour Hadi, for a transitional period. Further, Saleh was granted full immunity. Under the settlement, leaving the country was not an option for him.

Over the following months, Hadi ran into many stumbling blocks either because of the Houthis, in whose favor the popular revolution worked; allowing them a room on the political arena, Saleh's loyalists in the Parliament and the army and the southern separatists. Despite the successful National Dialogue Conference, which managed to conclude a preliminary vision for the country, the transitional period came to a quick end by the Houthi armed control over Sanaa and most of the country in September 2014. The significantly smooth seizure of the tenures of power by the Houthis was effectuated by the Houthi-Saleh alliance; an alliance to which Saleh contributed through his loyalists in the army, district and central government departments. Yet, the Houthi-Saleh alliance was officially declared only after Saudi Arabia went to war to uproot the Houthis in spring 2015; i.e., less than three months after King Salman assumed the throne.

Consequently, the killing of Saleh marks the fifth turning point in the Yemeni crisis. Although a salvation is badly needed, no convincing indications are looming for a near end to the crisis. Those who urged Saleh to rebel against the Houthis have actually overestimated his potentials and capabilities. In fact, they allowed the Houthis to feel

more confident and victorious. In addition, the Saleh-Houthi confrontation, coupled with the declared support by the Arab Coalition to Saleh, revealed that the KSA and UAE no longer have much of a choice in respect of the war, nor are they ready to go to a direct land war in Yemen. Eventually, they would sustain heavy losses. Besides, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi know that they do not have the qualified military power to go to such a war.

It is obvious, however, that the KSA and UAE do not intend to leave the war behind and concede the Houthi control over Sanaa and most of northern Yemen not only because the Houthis are now real and present danger to Saudi security, first and foremost, but also because the Houthis are linked to Iran doctrine-wise. Since Iran backs the Houthis openly, the Houthis' control over Yemen would only mark another expansion of the Iranian strategic spheres of influence into the Arabic sphere around Saudi Arabia.

Yet, the Houthis no longer enjoy the wide-scale control over Yemen as they used to be over the last of few months of 2014 and early 2015. Over the few months since the outbreak of the war, the Houthis lost all South Yemen where they had no grassroots support. They have also lost various areas in the neighboring northern parts to Yemeni resistance and the pro-legitimacy armed forces. Considering the anti-Houthi masses inside the Houthi-controlled areas, any such control will remain unsecured. A decisive military resolution does not look feasible either; at least in the foreseeable future.

In former occasions, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi alleged that his movement has more than 100,000 fighters, but specialist Western military assessments reduce this number to a 20,000-strong movement. It is believed that the Saleh-Houthi alliance added another 20,000 army and Republican Guard personnel to the movement. In addition, the Houthis, supported by Iranian and Hezbollah experts, must have added several thousands to their power over the period that followed the outbreak of the war. For the other camp, the new legitimate government army, which is being organized and prepared under the supervision of the Arab Coalition and non-military Yemeni resistance, has an estimated 100,000 fighters, according to earlier government statements.

Considering the fact that the Houthis seized control over all camps and warehouses of the Yemeni army as early as their 2014 move, not to mention the Iranian major supplies to them despite the marine siege undertaken by the Arab Coalition, the scale of power was, to a large extent, not tipping for either party prior to Saleh's murder. Southern governorates were liberated from the Houthi control. With progressive liberation taking part in northern governorates to the east and south of Sanaa, the war was reduced to low-pace skirmishes – no key change was observed in geography control. The anti-Yemeni Islamist stance adopted by the UAE, coupled with its expanding influence in the southern parts of the country, helped weaken the fronts with Islamist activity as in Taiz. Clearly, Taiz is still smarting under the Houthi siege since the breakout of the war.

Therefore, to what extent would the thwarted Saleh-initiated mutiny change the scales of the crisis?

Conflicting Bets

Had the former president's declared mutiny been successful, Sanaa might have been taken back from the Houthis. Further, the Houthis would have been repelled back into the inhospitable mountainous areas to the north of the Yemeni capital, as those areas used to be their impregnable strongholds. But the thwarted mutiny and Saleh's murder open the door to several bets.

Few hours after Saleh's murder, the eloquent Houthi leader, Abdul-Malik al- Houthi, delivered a victorious and celebrating speech to mark the end of the mutiny. He stated that the killing did not serve as a defeat to Saleh only, but also the KSA and the UAE. Truly, Saleh's end was a fiasco and a bitter setback to a KSA-UAE bet, but it is equally true that the Houthis celebrated victory was too early.

In an attempt to contain the setback, the UAE seemingly urged Ahmad Abdullah Saleh to take action. Saleh Jr. rushed to issue a strongly-worded statement on 5 December 2017 to mourn his father and vow war against the Houthis until they are entirely wiped out. It would be no surprise to see the KSA and the UAE pushing Ahmad Saleh into the war field to mobilize Saleh's loyalists and the supporting tribal powers for an organized march to the anti-Houthi camp. However, it is not yet clear how far such an attempt may go. After all, no one knows the true numbers and equipment of Saleh's loyalists who are still in good condition and ready to side with the legitimate power. Nor does any party know how many personnel lost their morale and decided to turn their backs to the war or even how many decided to side with the Houthis either on doctrine-based or purely pragmatic grounds. What is truly known by now is that the Houthis have lost the political cover as well as the once-enjoyed tribal-populist cover, which was secured under their alliance with Saleh. The Houthis are now alone in the battle field, burdened with their doctrinal ideology.

Generally, the Yemeni crisis can be viewed from two different yet overlapping perspectives; (1) the Yemeni crisis is a purely domestic crisis where an armed doctrinal, ideological and racialist power confronts the republican style of government with all its political powers and the pan- Yemeni frame regardless of the unproudly cumulated legacy of republican government; and (2) the Yemeni crisis is a heavily-loaded regional conflict between two camps: the first led by Saudi Arabia and the second by Iran.

If the first perspective is adopted, the Houthis would be seeking absolute and major objectives to seize control over (at least) northern Yemen and establish a doctrinal, dynastic and racialist style of government. Such objective remains unattainable until the war decaded on them ends and the neighboring countries concede the Houthi control

over the country; but these two conditions seem unlikely in the foreseeable future. The republican legitimacy camp seems more flexible as it seeks to bring the Houthi military control to an end, while tolerating them as a political power and even as a party to government.

From the regional perspective, however, Saudi Arabia seeks to attain actual victory over the Houthis to open the door to its Yemeni allies to negotiate from solid ground and take Yemen away from the Iranian sphere of influence. In return, Iran seems more flexible with its goals compared with its Houthi allies, whom Iran uses as cards for a larger scale conflict, as well as to the Saudi objectives. From the Iranian perspective, a deal is welcome! Yet, such any deal must ensure the Houthis a significant role in the Yemeni system of government on one hand, and secure Saudi regional concessions elsewhere, on the other hand. Surely, such concessions would only be feasible if Saudi Arabia is so drained in Yemen into negotiation.

Until the wills of the Yemeni and regional conflicting parties meet somewhere, nothing produces an optimistic feeling of a near end to the Yemeni crisis and the sufferings of the people of Yemen.

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