

## Yemen Arabia Infelix

Ahmed A. S. Hashim\*

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

When the Roman Empire held sway over much of the Western world and dominated its near abroad, the Romans, quite familiar with this remote region, used to refer to Yemen as 'Arabia Felix,' or Happy Arabia. It would be an understatement to say that this moniker is hardly appropriate to Yemen in contemporary times. Indeed, Yemen has not been a happy place for the longest of times. Like most of its other Arab neighbors it lacks water, unlike most of them it has hardly any oil. It is the poorest country in the Arab world and currently as *The Economist* so felicitously put it recently: the Arab world's poorest country is being bombed by its richest, Saudi Arabia. It would not be remiss to call it 'Arabia Infelix,' or unhappy Arabia.

Poverty is not its only or even most pressing problem, seemingly endless civil wars and violent politics are. The country has suffered from a multitude of conflicts and civil wars as far as most people can remember. Its people fought the ruling Ottoman Empire in an insurgency at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a vicious insurgency that few people know much about. In the 1960s when the country was split into North and South Yemen, there was a civil war in the north between Royalists and Republicans. Saudi Arabia and the West supported the Royalists and the Egyptians and the Soviet bloc supported the Republicans. The latter won and they set up a republic in the North. Meanwhile, down in South Yemen, equally interesting things were afoot. South Yemen was a colony of the British, and then called the Aden Protectorate. The British had seized the southern part of the country because the city of Aden was one of the best natural harbors in the world and it was a port of call for the Royal Navy and merchant ships on the way to India, Britain's prize possession. In the 1960s the British faced an insurgency in South Yemen; this was one they did not win. Following the British withdrawal in 1967 – essentially a defeat – a government of radical secular nationalists took over. The country then became an avowedly Marxist-Leninist state, the only one in the Arab world. It began helping Marxist insurgents in Dhofar, the impoverished region of the Sultanate of Oman bordering Yemen. The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) as it called itself also engaged in machinations against other Arab regimes, including the republic in North Yemen, whose capital was Sana'a. The Saudis supported the North Yemenis against South Yemen because Riyadh was terrified of Marxists on its doorstep. In 1989 the Soviet bloc started to unravel and so did the PDRY. In 1990 it joined with the north to create the Republic of Yemen. For the longest time, Yemen developed some of the most democratic politics of any Arab country and there was a budding civil society. However, it was a superficial democracy as precious few, if any, strong state institutions were built. Politics revolved around personalities and their respective constituents. Under President Ali Abdallah al-Saleh, the elite power centers were represented by the presidency itself in the person of Saleh, the army under the control of General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and his relatives, and the Islamist Islah Party under Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar, which dispensed money and goods to the Sunni Arab tribes of the north courtesy of the deep pockets of the northern neighbor, Saudi Arabia, always seeking to ensure that the Yemeni state remained perpetually weak. In 1994 a civil war broke out between the recently united North and South Yemen. Southerners accused the northerners of political discrimination in jobs at the center of power in Sana'a and also of economic discrimination

because of Sana'a's failure to provide funds for economic development and social services. Major air and ground battles erupted with air force units from the south bombing the capital and the north retaliating by bombing Aden, the regional capital of the south. Missiles were also used against cities. The North won because it had a preponderance of military power and because when the south seceded nobody in the international community recognized it. Saudi Arabia supported the south not because of any ideological sympathy but because of a desire to keep Sana'a weak. In 2011 Yemen also underwent a revolutionary hiatus like several of its Arab counterparts. The revolution succeeded in overthrowing the famously corrupt regime of Ali Abdallah Saleh when he lost the support of the wobbly Yemeni military and security forces. The conservative Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia, were concerned by the collapse of a ruler whose political antics kept Yemen weak and quiet – just as the Saudis wanted – and the emergence of various political forces ranging from those calling for democracy, southern Yemeni separatists calling for a secular democratic republic in Aden, and Salafists calling for Islamic government.

The main concern of the Saudis as well as the international community was the seeming re-emergence of the al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which naturally took advantage of the chaos to enlarge areas under its control. Though it met with a bloody nose on some occasions, it did manage to render vast areas 'no-go' zones for the Yemeni state. The other group, the one that worried the Saudis even more was the Houthi movement, formidable Zaidi Shia guerrillas from the most northern part of Yemen – thus bordering Saudi Arabia. The Houthis are members of a rebel group, also known as Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), who adhere to a branch of Shia Islam known as Zaidism. Zaidis make up one-third of the population and ruled North Yemen under a system known as the imamate for almost 1,000 years until 1962. The Houthis take their name from Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi. He led the group's first uprising in 2004 in an effort to win greater autonomy for their heartland of Saada province, and also to protect Zaidi religious and cultural traditions from perceived encroachment by Sunni Islamists, who were being provided with greater leeway in politics by the Sana'a government. After Houthi was killed by the Yemeni military in late 2004, his sons took led another five rebellions before a ceasefire was signed with the government in 2010.

In 2011, the Houthis joined the protests against then President Saleh and took advantage of the power vacuum to expand their territorial control in Saada and neighboring Amran province. Saleh fell from power in a coup orchestrated by outside powers and was replaced

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\*Corresponding author: Ahmed A S Hashim, Associate Professor, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Tel: 65 6790 4909, E-mail: [isashashim@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:isashashim@ntu.edu.sg)

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by Abdel Rabo Mansur Hadi, a southerner with no constituency or power bloc in the north. The Houthis subsequently participated in a National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which led to President Hadi announcing plans in February 2014 for Yemen to become a federation of six regions. The Houthis however opposed the plan, which they said would leave them weakened and without resources for their province or sufficient access to power at the center. They rose up again.

The current round of perpetual war in Yemen pits the Houthis on one side against the remnants of the Yemeni state, Sunni tribes in the north who adhere to Salafist ideas and are suspicious of the Houthis, and of course AQAP, which is concurrently fighting what remains of the Yemeni state. AQAP detests the Shia, but not on the level of the Islamic State, some of whose warriors have allegedly infiltrated into Yemen to fight the Shia Houthi movement. As if this not convoluted enough, it seems that the southern separatist movement is also involved in the fighting, but on whose side nobody really knows. Ali Abdallah Saleh, the former president and ever the opportunist told his supporters to take the Houthi side.

From the above it becomes quite clear that whatever happens in Yemen does not stay in Yemen. Others get involved because Yemen is strategically located and because its weaknesses attract all sorts of 'miscreants' such as the infamous and deadly al-Qaeda affiliate known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) who scare the regional powers and international community. Currently though, it

is the multi-level civil war dominated largely by the struggle between the Houthis and the ineffectual Hadi that has caught the attention of regional powers and the international community. After Houthi forces closed in on the president's southern stronghold of Aden in late March 2015, a coalition led by Saudi Arabia responded to a request by Hadi to intervene and launched air strikes on Houthi targets. The coalition comprises five Gulf Arab states and Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and Sudan. The conflict between the Houthis and the elected government is a proxy war between Saudi Arabia, a conservative Sunni Arab state, and non-Arab Shia Iran. Relations between the two powers have deteriorated sharply in recent years due to many factors, most of which have nothing to do with Yemen. The crisis in Yemen has, of course, been a further aggravating factor. Gulf Arab states have accused Iran of backing the Houthis financially and militarily, though Iran has denied this, and they are themselves backers of Hadi. Yemen is strategically important because it sits on the Bab al-Mandab strait, a narrow waterway linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, through which much of the world's oil shipments pass. Egypt and Saudi Arabia fear that if the Houthis consolidate control over all of Yemen, they would most likely ally themselves unofficially with the Islamic Republic of Iran. If the IRI is present in Yemen that is a threat to the soft underbelly of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The conflict is likely to go on indefinitely because regional and international attention is focused primarily on the events in Syria and Iraq.