



Commentary

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The Killing of Former President Saleh Could Worsen Yemen's War

The dramatic collapse of the Huthi-Saleh alliance is likely to prolong Yemen's war and the suffering of its people. After killing former President Saleh, the Huthis, viewed by their enemies in Riyadh as Iranian proxies, are firmly in control of the capital. Neither they, nor the Saudis, are in a mood for compromise.

What led up to this sudden twist in Yemen's devastating war, and what happened exactly?

On 4 December, Huthi fighters killed Yemen's former president and their erstwhile ally, Ali Abdullah Saleh. His violent death and the military defeat of his loyalists in Sanaa was the culmination of months of growing tensions between Saleh's General People's Congress party (GPC) and the Huthis. Before coming to blows, the Huthi-Saleh alliance had fought the Saudi-led coalition, which is backing the internationally recognised government of Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, to a stalemate. After nearly three years of war, including a punishing air campaign and a policy of economic strangulation, they still controlled the north, where the majority of Yemen's population lives. It came at a high human cost: Yemen is the worst humanitarian crisis in the world with seven million on the brink of famine, over three million internally displaced and an expected one million cases of cholera by the end of the year.

The Huthis and Saleh had a history of distrust and violence, fighting six rounds of conflict between 2004 and 2009. As partners against the Saudi-led coalition, they fought

over positions in the government, accused each other of corruption and engaged in an off-and-on again war of words in the media. Overtime, the Huthis consolidated control over the military-security apparatus, but the exact balance of power in the tribes and loyalties within some military units were unclear. By August 2017, when Saleh staged a rally in Sanaa to celebrate the GPC's 35th anniversary, the Huthis suspected he was planning to turn against them with the help of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). To his followers' disappointment, Saleh failed to act, but four months later he did, a decision that would cost him his life and confirm the Huthis' military superiority.

The trigger for the violence was a 29 November clash between Saleh fighters and Huthi loyalists over control of the Saleh Mosque, a major landmark in the capital that was built and opened by Saleh a decade ago. Local mediation failed to cool tensions and on 2 December, Saleh lit a match by calling his followers to take up arms against the Huthis. He also announced his willingness to "turn a new page" with the Saudi-led coalition, a statement that confirmed his treachery to the Huthis and played poorly with some of his base, who oppose the Huthis but Saudi military actions in Yemen even more.

For a brief moment, it looked like Saleh could win. The GPC and Saudi-led coalition media outlets reported victories in Sanaa, saying that Saleh's Republican Guard forces had taken over the airport, strategic military bases

and government buildings. But their euphoria was short-lived. On 3 December, the Huthis responded militarily and by 4 December a short, bloody battle on the streets of the capital had turned the tables on Saleh's forces. Critically, the tribes around Sanaa failed to come to Saleh's defense. Most remained neutral, allowing Huthi reinforcements to enter the city. While Saleh and his party enjoyed a great deal of popular support and sympathy, this did not translate into a hard-power advantage.

What has been local players' reaction to his death?

The most common reaction is shock. Saleh has been part of Yemen's ruling structure since he became president in 1978. He was known as a wily political survivor, hated by some and loved by others. Many had been calling on him to leave political life since the political uprising against him in 2011, but his violent death and the lack of any clear leadership for his party will likely complicate the conflict.

For the GPC, Saleh's death and his forces' military defeat in Sanaa are devastating political and military blows. Saleh's son and former Republican Guard Commander Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh is in exile. His nephew and former Special Forces Commander Tareq Saleh was also killed in Sanaa. The party had already suffered a series of defections in the popular uprising against his rule in 2011, and it is very possible that it will fragment even further. During the current war, some prominent members supported the Hadi government, although most stayed with Saleh. With Saleh gone, some may join Hadi's side, while many in Sanaa will support the Huthis, mainly from a mix of fear, lack of better options and common hostility to the Saudi air campaign.

For the Huthis, his death is viewed as a victory. Many in the group had long wanted revenge for the death of their leader, Hussein Badr al-Deen al-Huthi, at the hands of President Saleh's forces in 2004. Equally important, they see it as a justified response to Saleh's about-face against them.

Does this alter Yemen's local balance of power?

For the moment, the Huthis are the winners and it is possible that they will continue to consolidate military and political control of the north. They have defeated their only real competitor on the ground and in doing so have intimidated those who may want to oppose them in the future. But there also are important risks for them. Killing Saleh, his family members and high-ranking party members, plus continued Huthi raids on homes and detention of GPC officials suspected of taking up arms against them, is feeding future cycles of revenge.

The Huthis are aware of the political risks of alienating the GPC even further and are publicly making a distinction between Saleh supporters who took up arms against them and the rest of the party, whom they say they will not hold responsible for recent events and still consider brothers. But statements cannot undo actions. The majority of the GPC is afraid and deeply resentful, creating a situation in which the Huthis may increasingly have to rely on force and intimidation to maintain control.

There is a chance that the military balance in the north could still shift – albeit a small one. Some are pinning their hopes on Saleh's son Ahmed who vowed revenge for this father's death. The UAE kept him under "soft" house arrest in Abu Dhabi during the war to have him available as back-up, a kind of wild card, for a moment like this. While he is influential within the old Republican Guard, the most recent events demonstrated these forces' weakness and disarray. Opposing the Huthis militarily would require some reconstitution of these troops, support from the tribes around Sanaa and cooperation between Ahmed Ali and his bitter enemy, Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, the vice president under Hadi, who commands forces in Marib.

Thus far, and despite media bluster from Hadi calling for troops to march on Sanaa or for Yemenis to rise up against the Huthis, there is little indication that troops are prepared for such action. Instead, the coalition has

intensified its air campaign in Sanaa, something that will not dislodge the Huthis and works to their advantage by increasing anti-Saudi sentiment.

How does the splintering of the Huthi-Saleh alliance affect the regional actors engaged in the war and the prospects for peace?

It is difficult to see how this result plays to the advantage of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Their policy of trying to split the Huthi-Saleh alliance has backfired dramatically, resulting in a Huthi military victory. As Crisis Group warned in a September 2017 briefing, the result of a clash between the two sides would be unlikely to redound in Saudi's favor. More likely, it would produce a Huthi win or a protracted fight in the north.

If Saudi Arabia wanted to support a negotiated end to the war, the prospects for doing so now have become bleaker. The Huthis have said they are ready to talk, but their substantive demands will no doubt be even more out of line with what Saudi Arabia and their Yemeni allies are willing to accept. It is difficult to see Saudi Arabia encouraging compromise and negotiation at this stage now that the Huthis are clearly in charge.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE may try to find a silver lining in recent events. From their perspective, without the cover of Saleh's GPC and the veneer of nationalism that came with it, the Huthis will be exposed as the narrow, sectarian Iranian project that the coalition and their Yemeni allies accuse them of being. To some extent, they are right that the GPC provided important political cover and the appearance of political inclusion. But the narrowing of political support for the Huthis will not necessarily trigger the popular uprising that the coalition hopes to incite.

In fact, absent a clear military advantage for the anti-Huthi side or an end to the war and a return to politics, populations in the north are now far less likely to oppose the Huthis,

lest they face the same fate as Saleh. Over time, opposition to the Huthis may well rise, especially if they fail to govern adequately, but this does not guarantee revolt. Also, the split with Saleh's GPC does not erase widespread and deep popular resentment toward the Hadi government and the coalition for a brutal air campaign and economic blockade that are killing the country. As long as these policies continue, the Huthis will have the opportunity to stand behind the banner of nationalism and defending Yemen.

Iran once again stands to gain. While the Huthi-Saleh fighting was an internal power struggle not of Iran's making, Tehran will benefit if the Huthis succeed in consolidating their control of the north, including the capital. Politically isolated, the Huthis are allies but not puppets of Iran. There is increasing evidence of Iranian military support to the Huthis, including for their missile program. The 4 November rocket attack on Riyadh's international airport shows the significance of this capability. The Huthis have threatened the UAE as well, claiming to have launched missiles in its direction. Iran's relatively low-cost investment is paying off in spades, bogging Saudi Arabia down in a war that is unwinnable, costly and damaging to its reputation.

What can be done to advance the cause of peace in Yemen now?

At the moment, the prospects for peace are slim to none. That said, the need for a political solution is ever more urgent. Yemen is already the world's worst humanitarian crisis, but following the 4 November missile strike on Riyadh, the situation deteriorated dramatically as the Saudi-led coalition shut off all access points to Huthi-controlled areas. Then, just as they started easing up on the blockade, fighting broke out in Sanaa between Saleh and the Huthis, and this once again curbed even humanitarian flights into the country.

Regardless of the course of the war, all ports of entry should be fully opened to humanitarian

and commercial goods, including Hodeida port and Sanaa airport, which has been closed to commercial flights since August 2016. Saudi Arabia already had signalled that doing so will require additional security checks, but will be even more insistent now to address the coalition's concerns about weapons shipments to the Huthis.

At the political level, recent developments should confirm that the current military approach toward the Huthis is failing and that new thinking is needed. Attempting to shift the military dynamics against them would require significant ground troops and cohesiveness on the anti-Huthi side that has been absent thus

far. Most importantly, if attempted, it would come at an extraordinary human cost.

Yemen's war is going from bad to worse. Instead of watching the next chapter unfold, the UN Security Council should pass a resolution calling on all sides to agree to a ceasefire and political negotiations. This will require compromises from all sides. While this may be unappealing to the coalition and the anti-Huthi bloc, a return to politics, not a continuation of the war, is arguably the best way to counter-balance the Huthis. It is certainly the only way to avoid famine, the spread of cholera and further economic devastation – and the long-term instability that these will cause.