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# Dancing on Snake Heads in Yemen

By

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May, 2009

Prepared for the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute

1600, 530 – 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3S8

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Iris Glosemeyer is a political scientist specializing in the states of the Arabian peninsula. She has conducted research and analyses for several international organizations and institutes, mainly on Saudi Arabia and Yemen where she carried out extensive fieldwork since 1992. Dr. Glosemeyer gained her PhD in political science from the Free University of Berlin, Germany, in 2000.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Yemen's government is faced with numerous challenges but apparently unaware of the dimension of the problems ahead. Its priorities are inadequate to tackle the actual political, socio-economic, and security challenges resulting from a combination of poverty, corruption, illiteracy and scarce resources. Squandering of public money is the overall trend affecting politics, economy and security.

In the political field, traditional mechanisms to deal with social unrest prove increasingly inadequate. Institutionalized opposition and civil society, though stronger than a decade ago, are still no match for extensive social and political networks. Skilled in balancing domestic actors against one another, President Salih follows a similar line in international relations, thus securing as much independence from the donor community as possible. In the economic field, the decline of water and oil resources remains the biggest challenge ahead, though at least in the medium-term gas will partly substitute oil. While income from hydrocarbon exports is on the decline, corruption keeps spoiling the investment climate, and military spending is unlimited. Yet, buying military hardware does not enhance Yemen's security, neither internally nor externally.



Source: [http://map.primorye.ru/raster/maps/atlas\\_middle\\_east/yemen\\_map.jpg](http://map.primorye.ru/raster/maps/atlas_middle_east/yemen_map.jpg)

## INTRODUCTION

Yemeni politics are characterized by contradictions and unexpected turns. The second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of three different Yemeni republics: the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR, North Yemen) that replaced the Zaidi Imamate in 1962; the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY, South Yemen) that was proclaimed after the withdrawal of the British colonial power from Aden and the Protectorates in 1967; and – since 1990 – the Republic of Yemen (RoY), an initially peaceful unification of the YAR and the PDRY and the only successful merger of two Arab republics.

The Republic of Yemen has been repeatedly categorized as a fragile or even failing state.<sup>1</sup> While the political and economic crises that have plagued the rather new state have not yet led to the complete collapse insinuated by some analysts in the mid-2000s, the situation is nevertheless serious. A large part of the population of 22 million is living according to its own tribal rules in regions that cannot be easily supplied with basic infrastructure or state services and thus remains out of reach for the central government; a decade old clientelistic system permeates all levels of state bureaucracy; high poverty, unemployment and fertility rates, low enrolment ratios and scarcity of water and energy make development an arduous task.

In a recent interview Yemeni President Salih said: "ruling Yemen is like dancing on a snake's heads,"<sup>2</sup> and indeed Yemen's weak central government is confronted with a number of problems that would pose a challenge to a much more developed state. Without claiming to be complete, this paper presents the predominant political, economic and security trends.

## POLITICS

### Background

With unification a multiparty system was introduced in the only republic on the Arabian peninsula to allow the survival of the two single-parties that ruled the predecessor states (the General People's Congress/GPC in the YAR and the Yemeni Socialist Party/YSP in the PDRY). Quickly, political pluralism developed its own dynamics and led to the emergence of dozens of new parties, most prominent among them the Tajammu' al-Yamani lil-Islah (Yemeni Congregation for Reform, Reform Party) founded by northern religious and tribal leaders in September 1990. The Reform Party integrated several religio-political and conservative currents, some of whom had split from the GPC, and was member of government coalitions from 1993 until 1997.

When the leadership of the YSP realized they were about to lose control over the former PDRY territory, now referred to as "the south," they tried to reverse the unification process. In May 1994 open warfare began between the northern leadership, represented in GPC and Reform Party, and the southern leadership, mainly organized in the YSP, who had begun to withdraw to Aden in summer 1993. The northern leadership not only employed their regular army supported by some former PDRY troops, but also militias recruited from among Islamist militants who had returned from Afghanistan and had taken up their fight against atheism in Yemen – in their view represented by the YSP.

By July 1994, the YSP leadership had fled the country, YSP-assets had been confiscated, Aden had been looted, civil liberties were back to pre-unification level and the economy was so weak that the government had to accept a structural adjustment programme. In spite of rising poverty, the 1997 parliamentary elections brought an overwhelming majority for President Salih's GPC.

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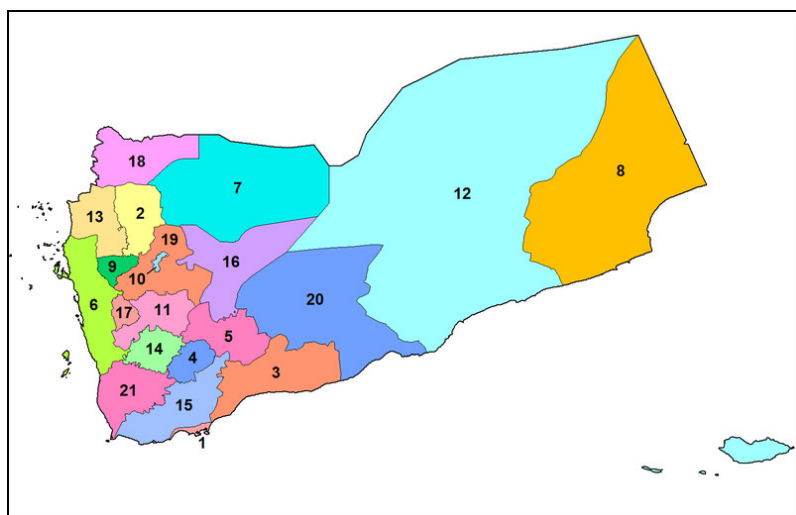
<sup>1</sup> See International Crisis Group, "Coping with Terrorism in a Fragile State," 2003 ([www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org)); Robert D. Burrowes, "Yemen: Political Economy and the Effort against Terrorism," in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa* (Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 141-172; Iris Glosemeyer, "Jemen: Staatsbildung mit Hindernissen," in Ulrich Schneckener (ed.), *Fragile Staatlichkeit* (Baden-Baden, 2006), 276-301; Jinny Hill, "Yemen: Fear of Failure," *Chatham House briefing paper*, 21 November 2008 ([www.chathamhouse.org.uk](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk)); the *Fund for Peace Failed State Index* ranked Yemen 8<sup>th</sup> among 73 states in 2005. In 2008, Yemen ranked 21 among 144 countries – without the situation on the ground having improved measurably ([www.fundforpeace.org](http://www.fundforpeace.org)).

<sup>2</sup> Interview in *al-Hayat*, London, 28 March 2009.

The Reform Party, its former coalition partner, became the biggest – and most benevolent – opposition party.

Relations between the Reform Party and the YSP had been tense – until the Reform Party found out in the second half of the 1990s that the GPC tried to marginalize its long-term coalition partner, just as it had done with the YSP in the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Thereupon moderate socialists and Islamists started efforts to bridge the gaps between the two parties. By 2005, five opposition parties, most important among them the Reform Party and the YSP, published a common political platform, and in 2006 they nominated a joint candidate for presidential elections. While the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), as the alliance is called, still suffers from numerous shortcomings, its presidential candidate, former Oil Minister Faisal bin Shamlan, presented the first ever challenge to President Salih. Shamlan gained more than 20% of the vote despite numerous violations of the election law by President Salih's supporters.<sup>4</sup>

That relations between two major opposition parties have turned from hostile – and sometimes even violent – to cooperative, has two important consequences. First, President Salih has lost one of his favourite instruments to secure his political survival via pitting the Reform Party against the YSP. Second, opposition parties have improved their bargaining power measurably, albeit not sufficiently. Municipal and parliamentary elections due in April 2009 have been postponed till 2011 after the opposition had announced its boycott because the government had failed to reform the election law.



Province	#
'Adan	1
'Amran	2
Abyan	3
ad-Dali'	4
al-Bayda'	5
al-Hudaydah	6
al-Jawf	7
al-Mahrah	8
al-Mahwit	9
Sana'a City (capital)	10

Province	#
Dhamar	11
Hadramaut	12
Hajjah	13
Ibb	14
Lahij	15
Ma'rib	16
Raymah	17
Sa'dah	18
Sana'a	19
Shabwah	20
Ta'izz	21

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yemen>

### **Domestic Succession**

Yemen's political system is characterized by fairly regular local, parliamentary and presidential elections. However, neither elections nor constitutional limitations have yet resulted in a change at the top level: General Ali Abdallah Salih, President of the YAR since 1978, has been

<sup>3</sup> See Jillian Schwedler, "The Yemeni Islah Party: Political Opportunities and Coalition Building in a Transitional Polity," in: Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamist Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, 2004), 205-228.

<sup>4</sup> European Union Election Observation Mission 2006, "Yemen 2006, Final Report, Presidential and Local Elections – 20 September 2006" and "Presidential and Local Elections – 20 September 2006, Preliminary Statement." Both reports available at [www.eucom-ye.org](http://www.eucom-ye.org).



President of the RoY since unification. In 2006 he was faced with a credible competitor for the first time but won the presidential elections nonetheless. The Yemeni constitution of 1991 (amended in 1994 and 2001) limits the presidential terms to two, but after every constitutional amendment the counting starts again.

President Salih, born in 1942, will be over 70 years old when his (current) second term runs out in 2013. Nevertheless, as his efforts to groom his son Ahmad as successor are met with stern resistance from inside and outside the President's family, he already suggested further constitutional amendments that might allow him two more terms. After all, President Salih is still younger than other Arab heads of state, for example in Saudi Arabia or Egypt.

### ***Civil Society***

Prior to unification, the representation of interest groups had been mostly informal or corporatist, i.e. was controlled by the political leadership. With the political opening in the early 1990s, new types of civil society organizations emerged.<sup>5</sup> Dozens of political parties and NGOs were founded, but of those that were really active, only few survived the closure of the political system in 1994. However, in the late 1990s donor support for civil society organizations began pouring in, and a decade later thousands of NGOs filled the public space. In particular, organizations concerned with human rights and press freedom – about a dozen are active – keep good relations with the donor community and therefore wield the power of shaping Yemen's image abroad – in direct competition with the government. NGOs also compete with the government for donor money because some donors are disappointed by the poor performance of government institutions and prefer funding NGOs. So far, the government's efforts to threaten, control, dissolve, supplant or undercut the most active organizations have been numerous but not really successful, not least because Yemeni journalists are increasingly connected to the international NGO scene and the international media community watches the Yemeni government closely.

### ***Social Unrest***

Public discontent caused by deteriorating living conditions is vented in sporadic demonstrations in the major cities, sometimes resulting in the death, injury or arrest of protestors, like after the partial lift of subsidies in 2005. Protest might also take a variety of other forms, depending on the specific regional socio-economic context: in the bigger cities university staff goes on strike and journalists hold regular sit-ins; in the northern tribal areas discontent is expressed as open rebellion or kidnapping of Yemenis and foreigners; in the south, where the perception is widespread that "the north is colonizing the south" and that oil revenues are distributed unfairly, protests are coordinated, regular, and increasingly violent. While some of these protests are triggered by (perceived or real) political discrimination or foreign policy aspects, rising prices for bread and fuel or the lack of public service almost always play a role. Therefore the government might be forced to postpone further lifts of subsidies planned for 2009, thus putting additional stress on the state's limited financial resources at a time when revenues are expected to decline.

Meanwhile, President Salih goes to great lengths to ensure cooperation of as many political camps as possible for the difficult times ahead. After postponing the parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2009 with the consent of the JMP, Salih promised to return some YSP

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<sup>5</sup> The most comprehensive analysis of the situation until the late 1990s is Sheila Carapico's *Civil Society in Yemen*, Cambridge 1998.

assets confiscated in 1994.<sup>6</sup> However, the YSP is no longer in control over the south where resentment against the central government is on the rise.

### **External Relations**

Relations with the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>7</sup> have improved measurably since 1990/91. They had hit rock bottom after the Yemeni government – then a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council – refused to give its blessing to the deployment of international troops to expel Iraqi occupation forces from Kuwait; however, since the late 1990s, cooperation especially with Saudi Arabia has intensified. In 2000 a border treaty was concluded, in 2003 an extradition agreement was signed, and once again Saudi Arabia has become Yemen's most important donor. In recent years, the GCC countries have increased their economic engagement and promised massive aid, but Yemen's continuous efforts to be admitted to the GCC have produced rather limited results. Moreover, aid and investment from the GCC might be affected by the current global economic crisis.

If government, opposition and population agree on one issue, it is the rejection of U.S. Middle East policy, especially under former President Bush jr., and the Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. In late 2001, rumours that Yemen might be "next to be bombed after Afghanistan" dispersed after Yemen joined the U.S. in its war on terror. Now the Yemeni government was caught between two stools. For many years it had followed a non-confrontation strategy in dealing with radical Islamists and Mujahedin returning from their fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, from among whom al-Qa'ida recruited many members. However, so far Yemen has managed the balancing act between external and internal security demands and is regarded as a sometimes difficult ally in the war on terror, but an ally nonetheless.

President Salih who stresses that "[Yemenis] are not obedient soldiers of the United States"<sup>8</sup> has intensified relations with Russia recently. A major arms deal whose full dimension might be up to USD 4bn was concluded in February 2009, and there is talk about letting Russia use Yemeni territory for naval bases. Again it seems that Yemen's president is trying to balance several actors, this time on the international level.

## **ECONOMY**

### **Background**

For centuries a large percentage of the Yemeni workforce has migrated, sending their earnings home to support their families. But the Gulf countries began replacing Yemenis with cheaper and politically less problematic workers from Asia in the 1980s, and right after unification the new republic suffered a series of economic shocks. First, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states expelled nearly a million Yemeni migrant workers in 1990/91 because of Yemen's refusal of employment of international forces to liberate Kuwait. The Yemeni labour market could not absorb the returnees from Afghanistan and much less so the hundreds of thousands returning from the Gulf. Second, the emerging tourism sector suffered from increasing instances of kidnapping of foreign tourists. And finally, the war of 1994 not only consumed much needed resources but also led to the damage of infrastructure in the southern provinces. To this day the former BP refinery in Aden has not been fully restored.

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<sup>6</sup> *Al-Wasat*, Sanaa, 8 March 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Oman.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Peraino, "Our Main Enemy is al-Qaeda," *Newsweek*, 27 April 2009.

Even though the macro-economic indicators have improved after structural adjustments, Yemen is one of the world's poorest countries. GNI per capita in 2007 was USD 870, about 40% of the population live below the poverty line, and more than half of the children suffer from malnutrition and its lasting consequences.<sup>9</sup> All the same, aid per capita (USD 13 in 2006) is very low,<sup>10</sup> and only 6% of the USD 5.7bn pledged during a major donor conference in late 2006 had been actually disbursed by early 2009.<sup>11</sup>

The majority of the Yemeni workforce is still working in agriculture, but most farmers live on the subsistence level or produce Qat, a bush whose stimulant leaves are chewed in the afternoon. Qat production is lucrative and partly explains the relatively low migration rate from rural to urban areas, but consumes 30% of the water used in agriculture; therefore, Yemen has to import 75% of its food, and its population was hit hard by the global rise of food prices in 2007/2008.

Rising global energy prices like in the first half of 2008 are double-edged sword for Yemen. While government revenues were higher than expected in 2008, so were expenditures: about one third of the 2008 budget was spent on subsidies. Previous cuts in subsidies, e.g. in 2005, led to violent protests because the social safety network is almost non-existent.

In anticipation of oil prices between USD 40 and 55 per barrel while oil revenues make for approximately 65% of state revenues, the government recently cut the budget for 2009 (the budget for 2008 was approximately USD 12.25bn). Only capital projects co-financed by the donor community are to be launched.<sup>12</sup>

Yemen has applied for WTO membership, and the legal framework regulating foreign direct investment, taxes and customs has been improved. However, the discrepancy between law and real politics is still a central feature of Yemeni politics, and corruption seriously affects the investment climate. The recent discovery of involvement of Yemeni officials, including the President's son who like other members of the family holds high positions in the military, in an international corruption case is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg.<sup>13</sup> Anti-corruption measures stepped up in recent years have obviously not yet reached the upper echelons of the administration.

### **Trends in the Energy Sector**

Oil production started only in 1986, after Hunt Oil had discovered oil in Block 18 in Marib province. In the early 2000s production had reached nearly 450,000 bpd. By 2008, it has declined to little over 300,000 bpd, and Yemen is expected to run out of oil by 2020. Only 12 out of 100 concession blocks produced oil in 2007, and apart from Block 18 all major oilfields are located in the southern provinces Shabwah and Hadramaut.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> World Food Programme, "A Report from the Office of Evaluation," Rome, 2006, 8 (<http://documents.wfp.org>).

<sup>10</sup> Unless noted otherwise, the source of all data used in this paper is the World Bank ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)).

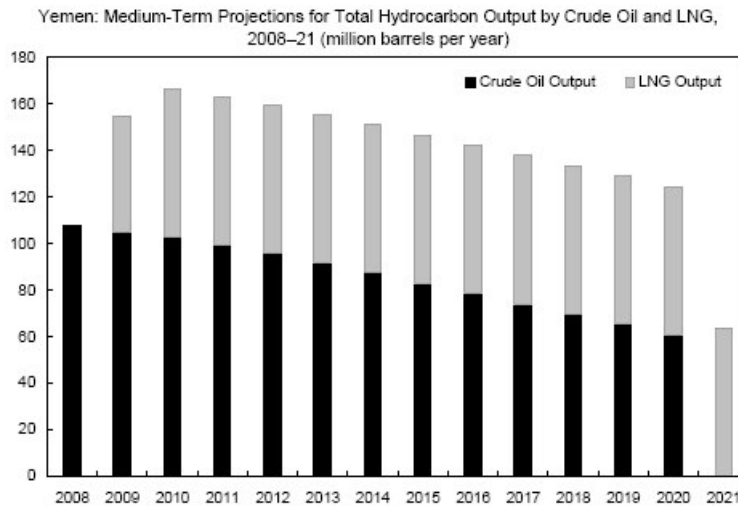
<sup>11</sup> The World Bank Group, "Yemen Economic Update (YEU)," Winter 2008, 13 ([web.worldbank.org](http://web.worldbank.org)).

<sup>12</sup> For details see "YEU," Winter 2008, 10.

<sup>13</sup> US Department of Justice, "Latin Node Inc., Pleads Guilty to Foreign Corrupt Practices Act Violation and Agrees to Pay \$2 Million Criminal Fine," ([www.USDOJ.GOV](http://www.USDOJ.GOV)). 7 April 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Petroleum Exploration and Production Authority ([www.pepa.com.ye](http://www.pepa.com.ye)).

Liquefied natural gas (LNG) export is to begin in mid-2009, thus offsetting the loss of oil revenues to some extent. According to TOTAL, the main shareholder in the USD 4bn YLNG project that includes a 340km Pipeline from Marib to Balhaf, the Yemeni government will receive up to USD 50bn in taxes during the estimated 20-25 years of operation.<sup>15</sup> Gas production will be equivalent to 180,000 barrels of oil per day.<sup>16</sup>



Source: IMF Country Report 09/100, March 2009 ([www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org)).

Nevertheless, and despite renewed efforts to increase income from hydrocarbon exports, revenues will not keep up with the population growth (3%). This increases the dependence on the non-oil sector at a time when the global economy is going through a recession. With half the population below the age of 15, social unrests are preassigned.

Little more than 20% of the rural areas are connected to the electricity net, and in the cities electricity blackouts occur regularly. So far, electric power is generated from diesel, but Yemen has only two refineries – the former BP refinery in Aden and a smaller one in Marib, operated by Hunt Oil – and has to import diesel. However, electricity shortages might soon be overcome as several power stations operating with natural gas are in various construction stages and the first one is expected to start production in 2009.

## SECURITY

### Background

Yemen seems prone to civil wars, though in several cases these were rather proxy wars or limited to specific regions. The war of 1994 that foiled the attempt of the former PDRY leadership to turn back the clock was in some respect a continuation of the border clashes between YAR and PDRY before unification and does not constitute a civil war in the strict sense. Nevertheless, the Yemeni government treats many originally socio-economic or political conflicts as threats to internal security and overreacts by deploying the military and/or hostage taking, thus often worsening the situation.

<sup>15</sup> Jad Mouawad, "Total's Audacious Path to Success, and More Oil," *International Herald Tribune*, 22 February 2009.

<sup>16</sup> *Saudi Gazette*, Jidda, 16 March 2009.

Yemen is famous for a high density of small arms. Estimates vary significantly, but as the male population is generally armed, 5-10 million weapons seems a realistic figure. These weapons are mainly used for status reasons, but are also regularly employed in tribal conflicts or in conflicts between tribes and the government. In other words: despite recently increased efforts to collect privately owned weapons, the state does not have the monopoly of violence.

### **External Security**

Although neither of Yemen's immediate neighbours appear particularly threatening, Yemen's military expenditure for 2006 was estimated at 6.6% of GDP.<sup>17</sup> The government seems to have difficulties following its own priorities and is a good customer to the Russian MiG Corporation. In February 2009, briefly after the Yemeni budget was cut due to the expected decline of oil revenues, President Salih went shopping in Russia and concluded another deal, worth USD 2.5bn.<sup>18</sup> In the last three years the RoY government spent about the same amount of money on military hardware – but not for the coast guard it seems – as it had secured at the 2006 London donor conference.

Yemen's most problematic neighbour is Somalia. Although the two countries share no common land border, state failure in Somalia has affected Yemen in several ways: the first ever documented terror attack in Yemen targeted U.S.-soldiers on route to Somalia in 1992; 50,000 Somalis sought refuge in Yemen in 2008 alone; also in 2008, more than 100 acts of maritime piracy have affected Yemeni harbours because shipping companies have begun avoiding the Red Sea route and the Gulf of Aden;<sup>19</sup> and finally, the Yemeni fishing industry, a major source of employment and foreign currency, suffers from frequent hostage taking by Somali pirates and the loss of the fishing boats.

In spite of improved equipment and qualification, the Yemeni coast guard, established with international support only in 2002, is simply too small to control the approximately 2000km of coastline. Surprisingly, the international community has so far paid rather little attention to this problem and prefers cruising the Gulf of Aden with its own warships, instead. Whether regional anti-piracy centres, established recently, or the "Djibuti Code of Conduct" to fight piracy will affect Somali pirates, remains to be seen.<sup>20</sup>

### **Internal Security**

#### ***Terrorism***

In spite of previous terror attacks in the 1990s, it was only the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000, followed by the attack on the French oil tanker Limburg two years later, that made the world aware of the fact that Yemen had become an operational ground for militant Islamists.

Borders on the Arabian peninsula are porous, and Yemen has only limited control over who enters and who leaves the country. Saudi, Iraqi or Egyptian militants returning from Afghanistan or Iraq and tens of thousands of African refugees have illegally entered Yemen.<sup>21</sup> Illegal migrant

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<sup>17</sup> CIA, *The World Factbook 2009* ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)).

<sup>18</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, London, 4 March 2009 (Mideastwire.com, 4 March 2009). For previous arms deals see the GPC website ([www.almotamar.net](http://www.almotamar.net)), 3 September 2006, and International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2009*, London 2009, 276.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Lennox, "Contemporary Piracy off the Horn of Africa," *CDFAI Nexen Papers*, 2009 ([www.cdfai.org](http://www.cdfai.org)).

<sup>20</sup> East Africa Forum, "Nine Countries Sign Agreements to Combat Africa Piracy," 30 January 2009 ([www.eastafricaforum.net](http://www.eastafricaforum.net)).

<sup>21</sup> *Al-Sharq al-Ausat*, London, 29 March 2009 (Mideastwire.com, 30 March 2009).

workers, children supposed to work or beg, drug- and gunrunners cross the border to Saudi Arabia, making use of trade routes established long before the concept of international borders was introduced to the Arabian peninsula.

Since the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1989, Islamist radicals have awarded Yemen a special status,<sup>22</sup> and repeatedly prompted their comrades to gather in Yemen.<sup>23</sup> One of the recent cases involved two Saudi Guantanamo returnees (Sa'id al-Shahri and Muhammad al-'Aufi) who crossed the border to build up a terror cell in Yemen in 2008, and five Saudis (among them Muhammad al-'Aufi) who were extradited to Saudi Arabia in March 2009.<sup>24</sup>

Those who claim to act on behalf of al-Qai'da<sup>25</sup> have announced their targets in Yemen to be oil facilities, foreigners and western interests in general and foreign embassies in particular, and Yemeni security services and its members.<sup>26</sup> All in all, they aim at isolating Yemen from the international community by cutting its economic, political, and cultural ties not only to the western world, but as attacks on South Korean nationals in early 2009 suggest, to the outside world in general, and turn Yemen into their safe haven. However, generally the Yemeni population is deeply rooted in its religious and social value system. Yemen has not been exposed to cultural shocks like foreign invasions and has only a limited experience with western colonialism. Al-Qai'da might find Yemenis more resistant against militant ideologies than expected.

Relations between the government and Islamist militants are complex. On the one hand, the Yemeni government is serious about not allowing militant Islamists to destabilize the country as regular arrests or killings of terror suspects and cooperation with the Saudi and the U.S.-governments demonstrate. On the other hand, officials admit that the security apparatus has been infiltrated, not so much for ideological reasons but because their low salaries make members of the security apparatus vulnerable to bribery.<sup>27</sup> Even after the end of the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, the government kept communication channels to Afghan Arabs open, making use of former Yemeni Mujahedin or radicals who became leading members of the PGC (Tariq al-Fadhli) and the Reform Party (Shaikh az-Zindani) and were thus integrated into the formal political system after their return to Yemen.<sup>28</sup> High-ranking military officers – including a relative of the President – are said to entertain close relationships with militant Sunni Islamists. And finally, the Yemeni government has made concessions to militants, some of whom turned themselves in thereupon.

Overall, the regime strategy seems to be a mix of appeasement of those who pose no immediate danger to the government or its relations with either Saudi Arabia or the USA, integration of those who are ready to renounce violence, and arrest and execution of those who

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<sup>22</sup> See the section on Mustafa Kamil (aka Abu Hamza al-Masri) at [www.al-bab.com](http://www.al-bab.com).

<sup>23</sup> See also Nicole Stracke, "'Come to Yemen', Al-Qaeda in Yemen appeals to 'Saudi Brothers,'" Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 8 May 2008 ([www.grc.ae](http://www.grc.ae)).

<sup>24</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 30 March 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Several groups claiming affiliations to al-Qa'ida and/or Islamic Jihad have announced their existence over time: Al-Qa'ida in Yemen, Al-Qa'ida in the Southern Arabian Peninsula, Islamic Jihad in Yemen, Jund al-Yemen Brigades, Aden-Abyan Army etc.

<sup>26</sup> *Al-Sharq al-Ausat*, London, 29 March 2009 (Mideastwire.com, 30 March, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Deputy Prime Minister for Defence and Security Affairs reporting to the Yemen Parliament. *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 25 March 2009 (Mideastwire.com, 25 March 2009).

<sup>28</sup> For the situation in the late 1990s see for example Eric Watkins, "Can Yemen Crack Down?" ([www.al-khoeifoundation.org](http://www.al-khoeifoundation.org)).

pose an immediate threat. President Salih has demonstrated on other occasions that he does not spare former allies if they turn from an asset into a burden.

### ***The Sa'dah War***

Trying to make use of Western observers' general unawareness of the different Islamic sects and movements, the Yemeni government declares its military operations in the northwestern province Sa'dah part of the war against terror, and – dependent on the respective geo-political climate – promotes the idea that Libya, Iran, or al-Qaida supports the rebels.

In fact, what started in 2004 as clashes in the northern province of Sa'dah between security forces and the "Believing Youth," followers of a Zaidi cleric from the al-Huthi family,<sup>29</sup> has turned into an on-and-off civil war involving not only the military and the "Believing Youth" under the leadership of the al-Huthi family, but also tribal militias on both sides and, according to some reports, Sunni militants.<sup>30</sup> Mediation efforts even by a Qatari delegation have not settled the conflict, but President Salih's announcement of a ceasefire in summer 2009 has at least halted it. Reliable reports are scarce because the area has been blocked to journalists and researchers, but recent reports by Human Rights Watch reveal a very ugly picture.<sup>31</sup>

To understand the depth of this multi-layered conflict, a short explanation of the Zaidiya is necessary. Zaidis have so little in common with other Shi'a groups (Ja'faris, Isma'ilis etc.) that they are sometimes referred to as the "5<sup>th</sup> Sunni school of jurisprudence," and President Salih, himself from a Zaidi tribal family, says about them: "We don't have the Shi'a in Yemen, we have the Zaidiya."<sup>32</sup> Generally, Zaidis are nevertheless considered part of the Shi'a because they grant the descendents of the prophet Muhammad a special status; according to the classical (not the very recent) Zaidi dogma only a "sayyid", i.e. a descendent of prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali, can assume the leadership of the community. This leader, the Imam, has nothing in common with the "hidden Imam" of the 12er Shi'a (Ja'faris) in Iran and several Arab Gulf states and can be challenged by a competitor at any time.

Zaidi Imams originating from different sayyid-families ruled in the north of Yemen – and sometimes beyond – for more than 1000 years. Only in 1962 the Imamate was abolished and a group of revolutionaries established the YAR for the price of a civil war that involved Egypt and Saudi Arabia and lasted until 1970. Since then, the republican political elite viewed the Zaidi sayyid-families with a certain degree of suspicion. When the sayyid Husain Badr al-Din al-Huthi and leader of the "Believing Youth" publicly protested the government's cooperation with the U.S. in the war on terror, thereby implicitly questioning the president's leadership qualification, President Salih cracked down on them; however, historically the tribes on whose territory the sayyids live are bound to protect them and this is one of the reasons why the conflict escalated as soon as President Salih brought the military to the region. The original leader of the

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<sup>29</sup> Most Yemenis follow the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, but in the north-west, the Zaidis are the majority.

<sup>30</sup> See for example Muhammed bin Sallam's "More volunteers, soliders (sic!) to support army in Sa'ada". *Yemen Times*, 16 April 2007, or "New military reinforcements and army mobilizations threaten to start a sixth war in Sa'ada". *Yemen Times*, 9 February 2009.

<sup>31</sup> "Disappearance and Arbitrary Arrests in the Armed Conflict with Huthi Rebels in Yemen" (October 2008) and "Invisible Civilians" (November 2008) at [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org). For background information see Iris Glosemeyer: Local Conflict, Global Spin: An Uprising in the Yemeni Highlands". *Middle East Report (MERIP)* 232 (autumn 2004), 44-46; Sarah Phillips: "Cracks in the Yemeni System". *MERIP Online*, 28 July 2005; Sarah Phillips: "Foreboding About the Future in Yemen". *MERIP Online*, April 3 2006 (<http://www.merip.org>).

<sup>32</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 28 March 2009.

"Believing Youth" was killed already in 2004, but his relatives took over and began looking for support from abroad.

While this mix of modern and traditional loyalties and politics created a rather complicated situation, there is yet another dimension to it. For decades Saudi Arabia has sponsored the spread of its own official version of Islam in Yemen where its followers are known as Wahhabis or Salafis. From the Wahhabi point of view, members of the Shi'a are heretics because of the special status of the prophet's family. Accordingly, relations between the two groups, especially in the Zaidi heartlands, have been very tense.<sup>33</sup> Deploying Sunni militants, drawn from among the Wahhabi-inspired Salafis, in the fight against the Zaidi rebels not only saves the government the deployment of the regular military, but also keeps the Sunni militants engaged in a remote part of the country. President Salih thus managed to pit one group known for its anti-American and anti-Israeli stance against another with a very similar worldview.

### **CONCLUSION**

Few trends in Yemen are encouraging – be they political, economic or security related. Porous borders and limited state control over many regions make Yemen the chosen destination for Islamist militants whenever the pressure in Afghanistan, Iraq or Saudi Arabia rises; however, the most serious trend is the economic situation. Even though compared to the mid-1990s one is tempted to say it has been worse, further distribution conflicts are to be expected, and radicals of any kind might capitalize on growing poverty and discontent, especially in the south.

Traditional government strategies to solve domestic problems appear increasingly inappropriate. Moreover, and in spite of the desperate economic situation of nearly half the citizens, the Yemeni government spends more on its military and security forces than on social security or public health, leaving many projects in the civilian sector to the donor community.

This attitude poses a dilemma for the donor community. It has to choose between supporting projects under the current system that does not seem up to the task on the one hand, and withdrawal of support which surely will make matters worse, on the other.

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<sup>33</sup> Shelagh Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalisms: Wahhabism in Yemen," *MERIP* 204/27.3 (1997), 22-23, 26.



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