

# ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

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## Yemen in chaos: what does the end of Saleh's rule mean for the future of the Arabia Felix?

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The assassination attempt against Ali Abdullah al-Saleh and key political personae of the ruling elite in Yemen on June 3 2011 marked an important turning point in the political turmoil that the country has been witnessing since last February. This attack led to Saleh's subsequent departure to Riyadh for medical treatment, a development that the Yemeni opposition pursued all these months. But Saleh's departure can hardly lead Yemen to political stability, let alone a liberal political system. This assessment is based on the fragmented political landscape of Yemen.

In the last few months Saleh has repeatedly refused to step down, claiming that if he did so, his country would discern in chaos. His argument must be seen as a realistic assessment rather than as a political trick to remain in power. The reality on the ground seems to verify such a prediction. The West is deeply concerned about ongoing developments in Yemen and British efforts to deploy troops in key parts of the country reflect this view in western capitals.

Now that Saleh is out of Yemen, but still not out of the game, reality on the ground has dramatically changed. His vice president, Abd al-Rab Mansur Hadi, has temporarily replaced him, holding firmly the control of the government and security forces. Hadi is a skillful politician and administrator. Saleh sees him as the best man for the job in so turbulent times for his rule. Yet time is ticking out for Saleh and his administration; his various political opponents have gained ground in the last three months and apparently they will have the upper hand in the short-term. What is worrying though is that no political groups seem to be able to rule firmly in the post-Saleh period. Thus the prospect of fragmentation of the country in three or even four spheres of influence and regions of rule is emanating.

Political life in Yemen is based mainly on two principles: tribalism and religion. Tribal ties between the two major tribal confederations, such as the Hashids and the Bakils, have monopolized political power in the country. Although Yemen has a theoretically liberal democratic system, in practice Saleh and his factions within the Hashid tribe have created many enemies within the same tribe, notably the Ahmar family. Tribal ties are so strong that even religious differences seem to be of lesser significance in the power struggle. Saleh himself is a secular Zaydi Shiite politician but he is at odds with the Houthis, the Islamist leaders of Zaydi Shiites in the north.

The Islamic religion is the other major factor for political thought and action in the country. And here things seem to be less complicated when it comes to the struggle between Shiite and Sunni Islamists in Yemen. Sunnis and Shiites in Yemen are almost of equal size in terms of numbers amongst the population. The Sunni Islamists of Al-Qaeda (Wahabbis) in the south of the country have created their own strongholds, and they seem to be the main force behind the assassination attempt against Saleh. Al-Qaeda in Yemen forms the core of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, after moving to Yemen from Saudi Arabia a few years ago. The Wahabbis in the south are fatal enemies of the Shiites in the north (Zaydi Shiites) and other areas of the country (Twelver Shiites).

Both Shiite and Sunni groups are also at odds with the secular government in Sanaa. Less than two years ago Houthis in the north of Yemen and in the south of the Saudi Arabia, revolted against Sanaa, protesting against their political marginalization. Sanaa and Riad collaborated to counter the Shiite revolt but this was a costly war for both governments. Now that Saleh is temporarily (?) out, the Zaydis in the north keep a low profile, aiming to participate peacefully in the post-Saleh political landscape by forming tribal alliances with other key players in Sanaa. The Sunni Islamists in the south are not so flexible in their political perceptions. They keep their own strongholds of power and today's clashes in Taiiz seem to be under their leadership in a tribal framework. Al-Qaeda in Yemen pursues the policy of establishing an emirate in the south in order to create a bridge with their co-religionists in Somalia and East Africa as a whole.

Religion is a parallel force to tribalism. Both forces dictate current developments in Yemen. If Saleh's government loses control of the country, and the case seems to be, then the country can discern into chaos and fragmentation in the short term between at least three groups: the Houthis in the north, Al-Qaeda in the South and the secular tribal leaders in the central part of the country. The West does not seem to be in position to influence things effectively in a country where civil strife has been always the case. Such a development in Yemen will influence things in Saudi Arabia with unpredictable consequences for the geopolitical stability in the region.

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