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The Rise of Yemen's Houthis

From Guerrillas to Governors

by MICHAEL HORTON

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‘They move like ghosts through these canyons and caves. One minute we think we have their position on a hill side and moments later they’re firing on us from the opposite direction.’ This is how a senior Yemeni Army officer described what it was like to fight the Houthis when I visited the northwestern governorate of Hajjah in 2009, which was then the scene of a brutal war between the Houthis and the Yemeni government. By 2010 the Houthis had largely defeated both the Yemeni Armed Forces and elements of the Saudi Armed Forces that were sent across the Yemeni border. They showed themselves to be tenacious masters of guerrilla warfare. Since 2011, the Houthis have proved themselves to be just as adept at navigating Yemen’s labyrinthine politics.

The Houthis coalesced as a movement in the early 1990’s and were initially dedicated to reviving and defending the Zaidi sect of Shi’a Islam to which roughly thirty-percent of Yemenis belong. By 2004, the Houthis were at war with the Yemeni government, a conflict which would persist until 2011 when popular anti-government protests began. From their spiritual, martial, and political heartland in the governorate of Sa’da, the once fringe movement has determinedly and methodically expanded its power base and its territory. The capstone of the Houthis’ expansionist campaign was their largely uncontested seizure of Yemen’s capital, Sana’a, in September of 2014. Fast forward to 2015 and the Houthis are responsible for the resignation of

Yemen's president and his government. The Houthis are now first among Yemen's power brokers.

How did a fringe movement come to control a significant percentage of northern Yemen and neuter the Yemeni government? In short, the answer is by applying what they learned during their prolonged war with the Yemeni government. First and foremost, the Houthis are a well-organized and capable fighting force, one that now has access to an abundance of heavy weaponry thanks to the effective dissolution of the Yemeni Army in late 2014. The Houthi leadership understands that the key to political success in Yemen, or at least in northern Yemen, is to make sure that you have the biggest stick. They have shown that the key to maintaining power and influence is to use the stick as carefully and as little as possible, something that former president Saleh forgot. To this end, the Houthi leadership has worked assiduously to build relationships with the leadership of many of Yemen's northern based tribes.

The Houthis have also demonstrated that they can provide a measure of security and stability in the areas that they control. Houthi controlled governorates like Sa'da and al-Jawf, once the most restive governorate in Yemen, enjoy relative security. In the case of al-Jawf, the Houthis have largely eradicated al-Qaeda and are working to diffuse the blood feuds that were one of the primary sources of instability in the governorate. Via a growing and relatively sophisticated media network, the Houthis routinely highlight these successes.

However, the Houthis' may benefit most from the sheer desperation of many Yemenis who have endured years of insecurity and declining standards of living. 'The Yemeni people are exhausted. The economy is a disaster. More people than ever go hungry. With conditions like these, even some of those opposed to the Houthis are ready to give them a chance,' says a Yemeni MP. 'What choice do we have? There is no government and there is no army. Who's going to stop the Houthis?'

In his speeches, Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi has emphasized that the Houthis do not want to rule Yemen. Given the moves on the ground this may be somewhat disingenuous, but Abdul Malik al-Houthi is an astute strategist who realizes that officially taking up the reins of power in Sana'a could well be ruinous for the Houthis. While the Houthis have broadened their power base to include many Sunni tribal leaders and politicians, both in the north and the south, they are still viewed by most Yemenis as a Shi'a organization. A Houthi led government would be viewed as a return to the Zaidi dominated imamate that ruled north Yemen up until the 1962 revolution, and, as such, it would be deeply unpopular with the majority of Yemeni who are Sunni. While senior Houthi leadership undoubtedly recognizes the dangers of officially leading some kind of future government, Hadi's resignation and the power vacuum in the nation's capital may leave the Houthis with no choice.

So what would a Houthi led government look like? It might be surprisingly diverse. The Houthi leadership has cultivated relations with segments of Yemen's southern leadership, with youth groups, and of course with those power blocs associated with the Saleh regime. While the Houthis have never clearly articulated their political agenda, the leadership does back the strong federalization of Yemen. The federalization of Yemen has been demanded by southerners for nearly twenty years and is likely the only viable solution for keeping south and north Yemen

together. One of the Houthis' demands issued to the government of President Hadi was for the government to include more representatives from the south as well as more Houthi representation.

The Houthis' journey from a poorly equipped and at times desperate band of guerrilla fighters to a group that now governs large swaths of north Yemen, has produced a leadership that is cautious and methodical. It would be a mistake to underestimate the Houthis' political and martial acumen. It would also be a mistake to assume that the Houthis will only add to the chaos that threatens to engulf Yemen. Regardless, the international community and the West in particular will have to engage with what, for now at least, is the best organized and most cohesive power bloc in Yemen.