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The Security Sector in Yemen No State, No Problem?

Summary

- A new survey by the Yemen Polling Center reveals that the state's security establishment remains ineffective in cities and largely absent in rural areas.
- Yemenis do not equate the presence of the state's security establishment with greater personal security, indicating a high degree of popular trust in traditional, tribal security arrangements.
- Yet, many Yemenis also understand the limits of the tribal system, advocating for a more substantial role of the state as a security provider.
- Security sector reforms throughout 2012 have been limited to President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's recruitment of new leadership personnel.

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The Yemen Polling Center (YPC)—an independent think-tank in Sanaa—issued a report, on January 30, 2013, on the public perception of the Yemeni security sector.¹ In a country-wide survey, a questionnaire was distributed to 1,990 respondents, with an even number of male and female respondents. The report allows for an interpretation that is somewhat surprising. In a nutshell, Yemenis perceive the state's security establishment as notoriously ineffective, if not virtually absent. With ongoing civil wars in the North and South of the country, significant al-Qaida activism in the Southern governorates, frequent assassinations of security personnel and politicians, and the irregular kidnapping of foreigners, there is objectively no security at all in a country routinely described as a failed state by Western observers. Yet, the majority of Yemenis, whether in urban or in rural areas, do not necessarily feel insecure in an environment where public security arrangements are absent or dysfunctional.

Dysfunctional Security Service, But Safe

In theory, the domestic police force consists of the regular police, traffic police, firefighters, passport authority, criminal investigation, the Najda Police (a special force employed for the protection of government buildings and foreign embassies), and the Central Security Forces (CSF, a large paramilitary unit employed as an anti-riot police, an anti-terrorist force, and for the recruitment of security checks). Perhaps with the exception of the CSF, these police units are either ineffective—wherever they exist—or entirely absent, in particular in the rural areas of the country.

Even prior to the Yemeni uprising of January 15, 2011, state capacity has been extremely limited in the periphery of the country, but also in parts of the central highlands and bigger cities.

Yemenis are fully aware of the state's lack of capacity. The YPC survey reveals that 14.6 percent of all respondents perceive the police forces' engagement in their region as positive (13.9 percent as negative), while 49.5 percent maintain that the police are not active at all. The YPC survey implies a significant gap between urban and rural areas. In the major cities, the degree of security depends heavily on the presence of the military (especially the Republican Guard and the Special Forces) and more or less autonomous militias (tribal forces, the First Armored Division under the command of Ali Mohsen, and other private armies), sidelining the police forces reporting to the Ministry of Interior. In the cities, 75.8 percent of the respondents knew of the existence of a police station, while in the countryside 89.5 percent indicated the complete absence of police stations—and in one third of governorates 100 percent of respondents maintained that there were no police stations at all.

Wherever police forces do exist, people remain unimpressed with their performance. When asked who would offer security in the region where respondents reside, 21.9 percent mentioned the police—less than those resorting to tribal shaykhs (22.2 percent) and “the people themselves” (41.1 percent). Concerning people's confidence in the police 15.7 percent had “no confidence at all” and 43.8 percent “little confidence.” Among the reasons cited for a no-confidence judgment, corruption and favoritism are dominant, with 77.9 percent. According to the survey, the level of corruption was “high” or “very high” in the governmental court system (62 percent), the regular police (60.1 percent), the traffic police (55.7 percent), the investigative police (39.9 percent), the emergency police unit (38.9 percent), and the Central Security Forces (38.1 percent). The personal experience of Yemenis with the police is devastating: Only 6.9 of respondents maintained that police officers responded in a positive way when assistance was needed. Overwhelming anecdotal evidence suggests that Yemeni security and military forces are actively involved in criminal activities, in particular smuggling.

Perhaps the most surprising result of the YPC survey is that the absence and inefficiency of the state's security arrangements does not result in the people's perception of a general lack of personal safety. 44.7 percent of respondents throughout the country feel “always safe,” while 27.7 percent feel “mostly safe.” On the question as to which actors would have a detrimental impact on the security situation, 50.3 percent responded with “no one.” Nearly 37 percent answered “nothing” when asked about the greatest threat to personal security. For personal protection, 28 percent of respondents admitted that they would rely on their own weapons—not surprising in a country with the second-highest density of small arms worldwide. Nearly 60 percent, however, said that they would not rely on any personal means of self-protection, which correlate with the equally high number of people who did not identify any particular threat to their personal safety. Only 10.3 percent of respondents maintained that they have become the victim in a crime during the past two years. Among those 74.3 percent reported to the police but 83.9 percent were dissatisfied with the help they received.

Yemenis' perception of the security situation obviously does not correspond with the Western perception of a failed state. In the Northern governorate of Saada, the center of the Huthi rebellion against the central government that led to six military conflicts since 2004, close to 80 percent of respondents evaluated their personal security situation as either “good” or “very good.” In a ranking of 21 governorates, Saada occupies the fourth place even though—or perhaps because—the region has completely slipped out of state control: 100 percent of respondents indicated that there was not a single police station in the Saada governorate. Even in the Southern province of Abyan, the hot-bed of al-Qaida activism in Yemen, around 60 percent of respondents assess the security situation as “good” or “very good”—more than in the cities of Sanaa and Aden.

Toward an Effective State Security Sector

The YPC survey, in conjunction with frequent assassinations of security and government personnel throughout 2012, reveals that police and security forces remain inefficient in the urban centers of the country, and they are almost entirely absent in the rural areas. A comparison between center and periphery implies that the complete absence of statist security forces does not necessarily increase the people's insecurity. People also do not feel more unsafe in those regions that slipped away from government control, such as in the Zaydi North (Saada governorate) or in the Southern governorate of Abyan, the center of al-Qaida activism. Neither does the YPC data indicate a significant difference between North and South in security perceptions. But it is apparent in the data that people do not feel more unsafe when the state is absent.

The reason for this phenomenon is that people throughout Yemen perceive tribal social structures as a largely efficient provider of personal security. The unwritten rules of tribal society (qabyala) envelope mechanisms of informal litigation and strengthen the role of tribal elders (shaykhs) and local committees for conflict resolution and prevention. People feel safe whenever the traditional social fabrics of Yemeni society remain intact, despite serious conflicts that may arise between their community and the central government. A forthcoming USIP report by Erica Gaston and Nadwa al-Dawsari maintains that tribal social mechanisms have been weakened in the Northern governorate of Marib,² an observation that is confirmed by the perception of its citizens: While YPC data on Marib indicates a substantial (compared to other governorates) feeling of insecurity, the neighboring Saada province does not, despite the protracted Huthi rebellion. People living in the cities of the country perceive a lack of personal security irrespective of the presence of police, military, and the state's intelligence apparatus. This is in part due to the erosion of traditional societal structures in the bigger cities, but also because the popular uprising and ensuing armed elite conflict in 2011 led to a deterioration of the security situation in Sanaa, Aden, and Taizz. When asked about the development over the past year, respondents indicated significant improvement in those governorates precisely because it is in those cities where the end of the armed conflicts in November 2011 was felt the most.

While the YPC survey reveals substantial insights into the importance of the traditional social fabrics, there is an understanding among many Yemenis—perhaps also admitted by many of those who feel generally safe—that a greater presence of the state's security establishment would be desirable: 63.5 percent of all respondents said that they would feel "more secure" with a stronger police presence, whereas only 29.4 percent would feel "more secure" with a greater role of tribal leaders. Despite the general understanding that state security arrangements are inefficient, 44.8 percent of respondents still believe that security should remain entirely in the hands of the state. In any case, most Yemenis share an understanding that security sector reforms and a strengthening of the police force are eminent.

Security for Whom?

On December 19, 2012, President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi issued a presidential decree aimed at reforming the military establishment and security sector. On first sight, the taken measures look promising. The decree called for Restructuring Committees to be formed in the ministries of Interior and Defense. The major challenge for reforming the Yemeni armed forces will be to dissolve the autonomous militias and special military units and strengthen the chain-of-command and corporate loyalty among soldiers and officers. Concerning the security forces that report to the Ministry of Interior, one sub-committee of the Restructuring Committee was tasked with collecting intelligence on existing resources across the country, while another sub-committee will be respon-

sible for legal revisions and training. One core proposal was the decentralization of the command structure, making the 21 governors directly responsible for regular police forces and the CSF. Other major challenges include combating widespread corruption (identified in the YPC report as one of the most eminent obstacles for an efficient security force); the integration of parallel security units in the military but also in the police forces (most importantly the two intelligence apparatuses, the Political Security Office and the National Security Bureau); and the professionalization of the police.

One year after the election of Hadi as the new president, concrete reform measures were largely focused on replacing top personnel with his own men. Like Hadi, the new minister of defense, Mohammed Nasr Ahmed, is from the Southern province of Abyan and a close aide of the president. Minister of Interior Abdel Qader al-Qahtan represents the Islah Party in an obvious attempt at consolidating a political alliance against the former president's loyalists in the General People's Congress (GPC). In the CSF, former Saleh loyalist Fadl al-Qawsi was replaced with the former security head in Taizz, Abed Rabbo al-Maqdashi. The new head of the National Security Bureau is Ali al-Ahmadi from the Southern province of Shabwa. Throughout 2012, President Hadi has replaced numerous army commanders, governors, and security officers. An informed observer estimates that up to 80 percent of the new appointments are recruited from the South.³ While it is too early to fully assess the results of the reform measures, those decisions point at the preference of the new president to consolidate his position in the existing security establishment vis-à-vis powerful political rivals, such as Ali Mohsen or the former president's son, Ahmed Ali Saleh, rather than embarking on substantial structural reforms. Security sector reforms so far have been primarily designed to increase the security of the presidential incumbent, rather than the Yemeni citizens.

Recommendations

The results of the YPC trigger an imminent question: are security sector reforms necessary at all? The answer is: yes. When asked in the survey, many people may have ignored the very real security challenges associated with a tribal society that defies penetration of a central government. Many respondents may not have implied a questionnaire focusing on personal security with tribal conflicts. Yet, many respondents also believe in the limited capacities of tribal security arrangements for maintaining peace and order. With traditional societies eroding in the modern nation-state era, security sector reforms in Yemen should have a high priority. Yet, they will certainly have to be accompanied by an awareness campaign, in particular in those regions where trust in tribal arrangements remains solid. The YPS data offers significant insights into a mapping of Yemen according to the need of such an awareness campaign. The state's security sector shall not replace, but rather complement local and tribal arrangements. Successful reforms will include the recruitment of personnel from among the regions where staff is on duty as well as the decentralization of command structures. Civilian security forces will have to be strengthened to the detriment of military units and private armies. Meaningful reforms will reach beyond the mere replacement of top officials in the security apparatus and include substantial measures of organizational restructuring. In order to support the professionalization of security forces, salaries will have to be raised significantly to curb endemic corruption. Throughout medium-term developments, there will be substantial needs for budgetary assistance by the international donor community.

Endnotes

1. Yemen Polling Center. Public Perceptions of the Security Sector and Police Work in Yemen. Major Survey Findings. (Sanaa: YPC, 2013). The survey is part of a larger EU-funded YPC-project

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief is based on the author's three-week research mission to Yemen in January 2013. Holger Albrecht is assistant professor of political science at the American University in Cairo and Jennings Randolph senior fellow (2012-2013). His main research focus is on political opposition in the authoritarian regimes, transition to democracy, and civil-military relations in the Middle East and North Africa.

implemented and supervised by Hafez Albukari (President of YPC) and Marie-Christine Heinze (University of Bonn, Germany).

2. Erica Gaston and Nadwa al-Dawsari. "Waiting for Change. The Impact of Transition on Local Justice and Security in Yemen." (Washington, DC: USIP, forthcoming 2013).

3. Interview with Yemeni military officer who asked to remain anonymous, Sanaa, January 15, 2013.



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