Yemen: Between Cunning State, Regional Proxy War, and Chaos

Elham Manea

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Cunning State

Yemeni core elites often promoted chaos as a deliberate strategy for survival. This strategy became ingrained in the nation’s politics following the end of 1994 civil war, and is a factor in Yemen’s transformation into a “cunning state.” This term was first used by Shalini Randeria to refer to states “which capitalize on their perceived weakness in order to render themselves unaccountable both to their citizens and to international institutions.”

Today, Yemen is a cunning state because its competing core elites have used the state’s image of weakness as a pretext to avoid accountability to its citizens and international institutions. But perhaps more precisely, Yemen’s “cunningness” is characterized by ethnic core elites, who play on the tribal/regional/sectarian divisions within their own society; exploit the seams of international structures; and capitalize on the fear of the international community and their own citizens regarding the state’s perceived failure to maintain its grip on power.

There are three main features of the cunning state that are relevant to today’s Yemen:

4 This part is a summary of the main argument in Ibid, pp. 164-168.
1. **Yemen has been a state run by ethnic core elites, who exploit the divisions in their own society.**
   
The regime that has controlled North Yemen since 1978 and the Yemen Republic after the 1994 civil war is ethnic in nature. It has depended on the support and loyalty of a close network within its own sectarian and tribal group, at the same time playing on the sectarian, tribal, and regional divisions within society. This exploitation of the country's ethnic divisions has led to a constantly shifting interplay in which various political and ethnic groups are included at the expense of others at one point, only to be excluded at another point.

2. **Yemen is a state that is constantly engaged in the politics of survival.**
   
The word “survival” here refers to undertaking whatever is necessary for elites to maintain their hold on power and survive in the shifting sands of Yemeni politics. Two strategies have often been used. The first is one that endorsed certain Islamist groups and not others as a means of attaining religious legitimacy and/or delegitimizing their rivals, who include Islamist groups that posed a real challenge to the their leadership.\(^5\) The second is corruption, which the regime encouraged as a means of controlling those already included within the system.\(^6\) This system of co-option through corruption has meant that the state’s resources were often not directed towards the country’s development and the needs of its population. Inevitably, it also resulted in the mismanagement and misuse of those resources.

3. **A state that is constantly engaged in the politics of blackmail**
   
The politics of blackmail aptly characterizes the Yemeni cunning state’s constant exploitation of its perceived imminent failure or collapse to avoid real reform of the system and to continue the core elites’ grip on power. This has entailed, among other things, exerting pressure on the seams of regional and international structures.\(^7\) It has used two tools to that end. The first relates to the role Yemen has played since 2001 in the U.S.’s “War On Terror.” Isa Blumi argues that in the context of the “global war on terror, Yemen’s status as a ‘frontline’ state has given the regime a strategic option that simply expands instability in order to reiterate the

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\(^6\) According to Sarah Phillips, former president ʿAli Abdallah Saleh “was explicit in his distrust of people who “did not steal,”” and he “kept relatively reliable records of the corrupt activities of influential elites,” which were used as “a way of ‘putting a knee into the backs’ of those who were disloyal to him through the threat of prosecution,” Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), p. 61.

fundamental value of the regime to this larger concern of the United States and its allies.” The second tool plays on the fear that the Yemeni state will collapse at any moment. This fear is understandable, given Yemen’s close proximity to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States and its control over the Bab al-Mandab strait, through which an estimated 3.3 million barrels of oil pass every day. Chaos in Yemen would also provide a safe haven in the Arabian Peninsula for al-Qa’ida, which already has a strong presence in Yemen and is intent on destabilizing the Gulf region and beyond.

Civil War, Regional Cold War, and Chaos

Today’s dire conditions in Yemen are a product of these cunning state dynamics. It is a pattern of politics that has exhausted Yemen’s resources, divided its society, and brought it to the brink of collapse. These features of Yemeni politics are still at work in today’s crisis.

In fact, the tangled web of the Yemeni crisis can be understood as operating on two levels. The first is national: What we are witnessing today is a civil war between competing factions of Yemeni old core elites, each of which is allying itself with competing regional, sectarian, and Islamist groups. The second is regional: the civil war is taking place against the backdrop of the deepening regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This rivalry is geopolitical in nature, framed by sectarian (Sunni versus Shi‘i) and ethnic (Arab versus Persian) tropes. Each regional actor is supporting one side of the sectarian-ethnic conflict. A regional proxy war is taking shape, and its battlefield is Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has historically played a vital role in fostering the Yemeni cunning state politics and bankrolling its politics of patronage. It also supported ‘Ali Abdallah Saleh’s regime in spreading Wahhabi Islam (initially as a means to counter the socialist ideology of the former South Yemen), changing Yemen’s sectarian structure in the process.

The Saudi kingdom was also key in containing the Yemeni Youth Uprising of 2011, producing the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative on May 21-22, 2011. The Initiative, which succeeded in launching a national dialogue conference, left the power structure in Yemeni politics intact and did not substantively challenge the influence of Yemeni old core elites. In fact, the “new” president that was selected to replace Saleh after he was forced to step down was his Vice-President, ‘Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi – whom Saleh had appointed as a reward for his loyalty during the 1994 civil war.

Saudi Arabia has turned against its former ally, Saleh, and is now supporting President Hadi. Hadi is considered by many to be a lost cause because of his lack of credibility, yet he is supported by Islamists and tribal allies, who are keen to get back at their former ally, former president Saleh. While he was in power, Saleh tended to rely on his closest family members at the expense of others, which antagonised his former supporters who are now backing Hadi.

Factions in southern Yemen, on the other hand, are fighting Saleh’s troops and Houthi militias to defend their region, hoping to use this conflict to secede from north Yemen. Iran is supporting former president Saleh and his unlikely allies, the Houthi militia, a Zaydi Hashemi group. The spread of Salafi religious teachings, in addition to a combination of historical, social, and economic grievances, have played a role in the Houthi rebellion in the northern region of Sa’da and in the Houthis’ increasing radicalization. Their swift takeover of San’a and several major Yemeni cities since September 2014 was due in large part to Saleh loyalists, tribal and military, who facilitated their victories. Never mind that Saleh and the Houthis fought against each other in six previous armed conflicts – Today they stand as allies!

Iran has thus far been hesitant to provide the same level of support to the Houthis that it does to the Asad regime in Syria or Hizballah in Lebanon. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia and its allies’ constant framing of this conflict as a showdown that aims to stop Iranian encroachment and to protect the “Arab identity of the region” and “Yemen’s Arabness” may well goad Iran into going beyond its current level of support. In other words, both Saudi Arabia and Iran are parties to the Yemeni conflict. They are not neutral regional actors.

Yet again, cunning politics in its most cynical form is at work in the Yemeni crisis. The result is another civil war and a regional proxy war; both have destroyed

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9 Historically, the Zaydi imams, who established shaky political authority in small political pockets, claimed to be the descendants of ‘Ali Ibn Talib, the cousin of Prophet Mohammad. Translated into tribal terminology, they were members of the Adnani tribe, dominant in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, to which the tribe of Quraysh belonged to - the tribe from which Mohammad descended. They established themselves as a higher and closed ‘class,’ called the Hashemites. The Al Huthi family, who led the rebellion in Sa’da, a governorate some 240 kilometers northwest of the capital San’a, belongs to this Hashemite tribal category. Equally significant, the northern Yemeni tribes, who also embraced Zaydism, were members of the Qahtani lineage, called arab-阿里巴巴 or the “real Arabs.” They claim to be descendants of Qahtan, a son of Noah, and were dominant in the southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. They were divided into different tribal groups, most prominent among them being the Hashid and Bakil confederations. Former president Saleh belongs to Sanhan, a clan of the Hashid confederation. For more on the Adnani and Qahtani tribal groups, see: Manea, Regional Politics in the Gulf, p. 16. For more on Saleh’s tribal affiliation, see: Manea, The Arab State and Women’s Rights, pp. 94-96.

10 For example, see: Al Hayat, March 30, 2015; and AlSharq al-Awsat, May 19, 2015.
considerable portions of the country and left its population destitute, traumatized, “afraid, upset and struggling to meet basic needs.”

The involvement of the two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, will render any agreement that is produced by one party to the exclusion of other futile and not conducive to stability. The wild card remains al-Qaeda, which stands to become the real winner in this chaos. Ignoring it is bound to come back and bite us.

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