A POLITICAL HISTORY OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN YEMEN

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ABSTRACT

Civil-military relations are power relations that encompass not only the relations between the military and political elite, but further all relations between the military and society at all levels. In the case of Yemen, the poorest, least developed and weakest political entity in the Middle East, such relations are articulated on the basis and within the context of a tribal state. This article analyzes the complex role played by tribal-military networks in shaping the current state-society relations in Yemen. The article highlights how, throughout its modern history, the central authority in Yemen has seen its power limited by its military weakness, in comparison to the armed strength of the tribes. The article argues that politics of survival and regional structural factors are at the heart of the failure of Yemen's military to perform its task as a modernizing agent. To achieve its objectives, the article traces the historical roots of the establishment of Yemen's modern army, marks the interventions of Yemen's military in politics, identifies the ideological currents within its officer corps, and analyzes the patterns of cooperation and control between the military, tribal elites and the political administration.

> *As an army officer I can be sacked, just like any government employee can be sacked. As a member of my tribe, however, I remain forever* (Ali Abdullah Saleh, President of Yemen).

In July 2009, the Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, celebrated 31 years in power, as the leader of North Yemen since 1978, and of unified Yemen since its inception in May 1990. This is indeed an impressive record in a country where governing is like dancing on the heads of snakes, and climbing the political ladder often leads to assassination and exile. Yet, in spite of the impressive durability of Saleh's regime, the Weberian notion of a state that enjoys a monopoly on violence is nothing more than a fantasy. The loss of the Yemeni state's infrastructural power is evident in the absence of the state in many parts of the country, in the inability of state institutions to counter lawlessness and social disorder in many 'ungoverned dark spaces', and in

the very limited impact of state controls. Unsurprisingly, Yemen today is one of best examples of political entities where the state is forced to perform the role of a 'self-cancelling state' (Fattah, 2009). What explains, then, the durability of Saleh's regime despite such severe state fragility? This article attempts to find an answer to this question through a histro-political inquiry into the complex state-tribe-military relations in Yemen. In what follows, I trace the roots of such relations.

The Formation of the Northern Yemeni Military: the Turks and the Infiltration of Political Ideologies

Prior to the Northern revolution of September 1962, which brought an end to the ten centuries of the Zaydi[1] Imamate system, the Yemeni military establishment passed through two main phases of formation. The first was during the reign of Imam Yahya (1905-48), and the second during the time of Imam Ahmed, Yahya's son (1948-62). The first phase began when in 1918 Imam Yahya entered Sana'a to announce the independence of Yemen from the Ottoman rule (1870-1918), and to proclaim himself as the ruler and the 'Commander of the Faithful'. Locked in his isolated theocratic kingdom, and surrounded by decentralized tribal forces in the highlands, the British forces in the South, and the expansionist Saudis in the North, Imam Yahya realized the importance of a central army capable of confronting these internal and external threats. At the time, Imam Yahya's poorly organized and poorly trained army of tribesmen was in no position to carry out tasks beyond collecting taxes and maintaining a degree of peace among the Zaydi tribes of the northern regions.

From Sana'a, Imam Yahya announced the opening of a door for Yemeni men to join a regular army. A few thousands were recruited and they became the core of Yemen's new army. Most of them were tribesmen who fought with the Imam against the Ottomans (Nagi, 2004; Daghr, 2008), and a few hundred Turkish officers and soldiers who accepted the offer of the Imam to remain in Yemen to train the newly established regular army. One of the interesting descriptions of the new Turkish-trained army was provided by the Moroccan traveler, Mohamed Al-Basiqi, who published his travel experiences of Yemen in the Egyptian Al-Ahram newspaper in the mid-1920s. In his column, "The Moroccan Tourist", he notes that the prime reason for the educational backwardness of Yemen was the Imam's total preoccupation with creating "an army

trained in military tactics". He continues, "To the advantage of the Imam in this regard were a copious number of men …with the famed Yemeni stamina and the ability to endure hardship and subsist on little food." Al-Basiqi notes that the Imam's soldiers wore no uniforms, but ordinary native costumes, and were a frightening sight. "Should you encounter a band of them you will find them armed to the teeth, their chests and backs weighed down with ammunition belts. Their heads are bare and their black hair is shoulder-length, such an astounding blend of savagery and order" (Rezk, 2001). It was dire poverty that drove many people to join the army of the Imam, which secured at least their daily food rations.

Under the leadership of Turkish officers, this core of a regular Yemeni army received its first primary military training. The Turkish officers convinced the Imam to shift from reliance on occasional armed forces, quartered in residences as they moved or living in their own homes, to a standing professional army housed in specific, dedicated facilities (Messick, 1993). It is worth noting that these Turkish officers and military trainers were heavily influenced by German military techniques. The book of the senior German military instructor of the dying Ottoman Empire, Colmar von der Goltz, had a considerable influence in the Turkish military academy. The book highlighted that the military is the most superior institution in society, and called for a strong national army that should intervene in politics when necessary (Hashim, 2003).

The fear of the military ideas of the Turkish officers might be one of the main reasons why the Imam established a new army parallel to the one trained by the Turkish officers, the so called *Jaysh alDifa*, or the Army of Defence. A Syrian military officer, named Tahseen Pasha, the man behind the idea of having a new army, was appointed by the Imam as the head of the army of Defence. The idea was to establish an army based on a compulsory military service for all physically able men. It was a successful move, and thousands of Yemenis received basic military training. Most of those who were enlisted were poor landless farmers. Wealthy and influential families were exempted. This army carried out not only security-related duties but also tax collection and governmental post delivery.

The Imam had a third army, the so-called *Jaysh al-Barani*, the tribal or desert army, which was a non-regular military force, comprised of tribesmen from the Zaydi highlands. It was

a kind of paramilitary force made up of tribal levies. This tribal army was divided into groups, each under the leadership of a sheikh. The latter was given the Turkish military title *a'reef*. From the viewpoint of the Imam, the Barani army, unlike the other two armies, was a pure traditional tribal army that could act as a buffer against the regular and defence armies, and create a balance in the newly established military institutions. The tribal army had a system different to that of the two new military institutions. For example, every solider in the *Barani* army should stay in service for one or two years, and be replaced by one of his family members. All members of this army were obliged to always be in a state of war, ready for action any time. Each tribesman in this army was paid four Riyals a month, out of which one Riyal went to the Sheikh in charge of his group (Dagher, 2008).

In addition to the three mentioned armies, the Imam had about two battalions of guards. They were charged with providing personal protection to the Imam, and carrying out military expeditions and weekly parades. They were the elite of the Imam's army. This historical review of the first phase in the formation of the military in Yemen reveals that the politically-motivated creation of overlapping chains of military institutions in the Middle East is not a new tradition introduced by post- independence military elites.

The repeated defeats of the Imam's regular army in the border conflicts with the British in the South, and over the Najran and Asir provinces with the Saudis in the North, made the Imam think about sending some of his military officers abroad to acquire new military knowledge. For help, he looked to Iraq, the country with which he signed, in 1931, a brotherhood and friendship treaty (Al-Amry, 1997). In 1935, the Imam sent the first group of cadets to the Baghdad Military Academy. Those sent for training were selected personally by the Imam. They were Zaydis, mostly in their teens, urban, non-Sayyid, of lowly birth, and with no roots in big tribal families. In fact, many of them studied at the orphan's school. The selection criteria reflect the Imam's concern to choose a group of harmless and loyal youth who would pose no threat to him (Ingrams, 1963). The Imam's calculations proved wrong, for among those who joined the first mission (1935-37) was Abdullah al-Sallal, the son of a blacksmith, who in 1962 led the revolution that brought an end to the Imamate system. Among the members of the second group sent to Baghdad (1936-39), was al-Thulaya, the leader of the 1955 failed coup.

In Baghdad, these Yemeni cadets learned not only new military ideas in terms of technology and organization, but also new political ideas about constitutions and republican governments. They also noted the extreme underdevelopment of their country, and the backwardness of the Imamate system. In recalling the conversations that he had with his fellow Iraqi cadets during his two-year training mission in Baghdad, Abdullah al-Sallal was quoted saying:

> *We talked about Arabism and the future of the Arab struggle. And I was thinking while listening to these discussions about my country…which was ruled by despotism, in ignorance, backwardness and underdevelopment. Hope began to stir in my chest…Why don't we spread the call for progress when we return to Yemen?* (Luqman, 2006).

On the 7th of September 1937, the first group returned to Yemen. They were received by the Imam and a big crowd of people. The Imam's insecurity and suspicion, however, made him avoid appointing any of the trained cadets in sensitive or important positions within the military. The 1936 military coup of General Bakr Sedqi in Iraq, which was the first military coup in the Arab world, increased the Imam's fear of any subversive influence on the Yemeni cadets during their stay in Baghdad. As a preventive measure, he ordered the termination of sending further cadets to Iraq, and requested that the Iraqi government send a military training mission to Yemen, so that the activities of the trainers and the cadets could be under his eyes supervision. Again, the Imam's calculations were wrong. Among the Iraqi military instructors was Jamal Jamil, one of the leading figures in the 1948 failed coup, known as the Coup of Constitutional Movement. In this coup, which was a civil-military coordinated action, Imam Yahya was assassinated, and one of the Sayyids, Abdullah bin Ahmed al Wazir was proclaimed as the leader of the country. The son of Imam Yahya, Prince Ahmed escaped to Hajja, from where he and his loyal tribal *Barani* army organized a successful countercoup. On the 14th of March 1948, Ahmed entered Sana'a, and all the revolutionaries were executed, including the Iraqi military officer, Jamal Jamil. As a token of reward to his loyal tribal soldiers, the Imam allowed them to loot and pillage Sana'a.

Observers of Yemen's modern history attributed the failure of the 1948 coup to the following two main factors. The first is the weak tribal support for the coup. The plotters, who were led by urban individuals and groups, collectively known as the Free Yemeni Movement, did not place very much importance on the need to attract the support of the highland Zaydi tribal confederations. Second were the weak and disorganized military units that were involved in the coup. Regular army troops who were mobilized by the Iraqi military instructor, Jamal Jamil, were reduced in number during the conflict by desertions of the tribal components of the army to their kinsmen beyond the walls of Sana'a (Stookkey, 1978).

The fact that one of the leading figures in the 1948 coup was an Iraqi military instructor, plus the memory of the 1941 military coup in Iraq by nationalist military officers who set up pan-Arab nationalist Rashid al-Gailani as prime minister, made Imam Ahmed turn his attention to non-Arab powers. Italy, the country to which he made trips for medical treatment and with which his father signed a friendship treaty in 1926, was the first country that he asked for assistance in improving the limited equipment capacity of his army. The construction of a small Italian factory for producing ammunitions and for repairing small arms was Italy's only major response to the Imam's request.

In 1955, another coup attempt took place, led by yet another cadet trained in Iraq, Colonel al-Thulaya. Although it initiated a massive military protest against the Imam, the coup was drawn to an unsuccessful conclusion[2], and military schools were closed down. The 1952 Egyptian revolution, and the post-1956 rise of Nasserism in the region, however had reshaped the Imam-military relations. In 1957, Egypt responded to the Imam's request to send a military mission to revitalize Yemen's deteriorated military institutions. By approaching Nasser, the Imam thought to give the impression to his people that he is inclined towards reforms, and at the same time protect himself from being engulfed by the strong wave of Nasserism. The Egyptian military mission arrived to Yemen carrying a gift from Nasser- a cargo of weapons (Al-Bidani, 2008). In a period of months, the mission established a number of training centres and military schools. But the marriage of suspicion and fear from outside military trainers in the mind of the Imam has hampered the efforts of the Egyptian instructors. However, it did not take long for the Yemeni cadets trained at the hands of Egyptian officers to be influenced by the spirit of Nasser's

revolution, and by the rising ideology of pan Arabism. Secret cells started to flourish inside the Yemeni military, among them a group called itself the Yemeni Free Officers. Three of these officers plotted the assassination of Imam Ahmed in Hodeida. The officers were later executed, and Imam Ahmed died of his wounds, on the 19th of September 1962, eighteen months after the assassination attempt. The influence of political ideologies of the Egyptian officers on Yemeni officers reached an apex seven days after the death of Imam Ahmed, when army tanks rumbled into Sana'a to bring an end to the ten-century-old Imamate system. The Iraqi trained cadet, and Nasser admirer, Abdullah al-Sallal was installed as the president of the new republic.

September Revolution: Officers and the Creation of a Tribal Republic

The onset, escalation and de-escalation of the long post-revolution civil war (1962-70) determined that modern Yemen would be a tribal republic. The incubator of such a republic, known as the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), is Yemen's domestic political arena, which is dominated by powerful tribal leaders, and an arrested state. The latter refers to a state that is severely limited in terms of its ability to exercise power and authority. According to Burrowes (2008), this condition of arrested statehood in Yemen is both "cause and effect of the predominantly tribal-military regime that remains firmly in place today". This arrested statehood made it easy for external powers, mainly Saudi Arabia, to penetrate the socio-political structure of post-revolution Yemen, and to turn Yemen into a neo-tribal state.

Most observers of modern Yemen agree that without the heavy Egyptian military support to the republican officers, Yemen's revolution could have ended as a failed military coup similar to the ones that took place in 1948 and 1955. The failure of these coup attempts, despite the assassination of the Imam, is a testimony to the fact that traditional tribal forces were stronger than modern forces in the military. From the beginning of the republican revolution, it was clear that the military was weak and disorganized, and that there is a wide gap between the political ideas espoused by the republican officers and the particularities of Yemen's society, which is fiercely tribal, decentralized and deeply steeped in tradition. Reading the first communiqué and the objectives of the revolution reflects such a gap. The communiqué and the objectives of the Yemeni military-led revolution were clearly an extension of the principals of the Egyptian Free Officers. In other words, the republican officers attempted to literally duplicate Egypt's

revolution, without taking into consideration the vast socio-cultural, historical, geographical, economic, demographic and political differences between Egypt and Yemen. On the economic front, for example, the communiqué stressed the firm commitment of the new revolution to the promotion of national capital, and the prevention of the monopoly of capital. These economic principals were completely out of place in Yemen. They were issues of concern to Egypt and Egyptians, not to Yemen and Yemenis. Yemen at the time of the revolution had nothing called "national capital" and "monopoly of capital".

Unlike other Free Officers in the Arab world, the Yemeni ones had neither a powerful military institution to rely upon, social classes to mobilize, nor grand national projects of land reform, industrialization or political mobilization. Following the departure of the Egyptian forces in 1967, a coup led by sheikhs and the military took place, on the 5th of November, which ousted al-Sallal, and replaced him with Qadi al-Iryani, the only non-military ruler of Yemen since the revolution. According to a longstanding western observer of Yemen, this coup marked the end of Egyptian influence on the events in North Yemen (Halliday, 2000). During the period of President al-Iryani's government (1967-74), tribal penetration of all state structure, including the military, reached to an apex, hence the name given to that period: the 'republic of sheikhs'(Al Zeeb, 2005). However, the conciliatory nature of al-Iryani's government which, according to Peterson (1984), was seeking to reconstruct the Imamate system without the figure of the Imam, was doomed to failure. On the 13th of June 1974, Colonel Ibrahim al-Hamdi led a successful coup, which announced not only the direct re-entry of Yemen's military into the political arena, but also a new vision of political and social modernization.

Colonel al-Hamdi was a populist military modernizer, who advocated for the centralization of state power, marginalization of tribal and feudal forces, and strengthening of Yemen's independence and sovereignty. Under al-Hamdi, the centralizing momentum appeared, for a while, stronger than ever before in the modern history of Yemen. Al- Hamdi believed that the military was the only national body that was capable of weakening the tribal institution and its sheikhly symbols. Reorganizing and equipping the military, as well as weakening Saudi political influence on the northern tribes, were Hamdi's top priority. Thus, he began removing influential tribal elements inside the army and state structure, including paramount sheikh

Abdullah Al-Ahmar, and forming closer relations with the Marxist republic of South Yemen, known as the People Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). However, in his pursuit to build a strong central state in the YAR, al-Hamdi was constrained by the heavy dependence on Saudi financial aid, which in particular included helping out Sana'a government to pay the armed forces personnel. The YAR's financial reliance on Saudi Arabia forced Al-Hamdi, therefore, to waver between a Saudi orientation and a rapprochement with the PDRY. For example, in exchange for the continuity of the Saudi aid and a freer hand in dealing with northern tribal forces, Colonel al-Hamdi dismissed a number of ministers in his government of whom Saudi Arabia disapproved, and announced the freezing of relations with the Soviet Union and the Communist camp (Walt, 1990; Lapidoth, 1982). However, at the height of his good relations with the Saudis, al-Hamdi, in 1976, paid a visit to Peking and signed an agreement for technical and economic development cooperation (Safran, 1988), and he continued to maintain a dialogue on unity with the leadership in the PDRY. In light of increasing Soviet military support to the PDRY and in an attempt to break the Saudi control over the YAR military dealings[3], al-Hamdi called for a new friendship between Sana'a and Washington. The Americans responded to his call by advising the Saudis that a weak central government in the YAR could be disastrous for the security of the region and that, therefore, the Saudi government should provide their support to al-Hamdi's regime, and swiftly act to bolster his armed forces. In February 1976, the YAR, the US, and Saudi Arabia signed a trilateral agreement in Riyadh to provide al-Hamdi with a large military package of modern US arms to counterbalance the growing Soviet military support to the PDRY. However, on the basis of the traditional Saudi policy that north Yemen should never be too strong, the Saudis feared that strengthening the military of the charismatic al-Hamdi might pose a future threat, and they were reluctant, therefore, to implement the agreement. Instead, the Saudis opted to tame the PDRY. On the 10th of March 1976, Aden and Riyadh announced their intention to normalize their relations, and to create an environment of mutual understanding to serve the causes of both countries and those of the region. The broadcasted Aden-Riyadh communiqué emphasized the desire of the two entities to cooperate on the basis of 'good neighbourliness', 'unity of destiny' and 'non-interference' in the internal affairs of each other.

In addition to acute domestic economic and political problems, the leadership in the PDRY was pushed towards cooperation with the Saudi kingdom because of its concern over the

growing activities of the Iranian navy in the Arabian Sea, and the military presence of Iranian troops in Oman (Al-Madhagi, 1996; Safran, 1988). The positive change in the Riyadh-Aden relationship provided the Saudis with the excuse to argue with Washington that the tension between the YAR and the PDRY has been diffused, and thus that the US military package to Sana'a was not needed. These developments made it clear to al-Hamdi that the Saudis were not willing to support him in his efforts to reorganize and equip his military to establish his central authority over the tribes armed to the teeth in the highlands. During the night of 12 October 1977, al-Hamdi was killed, few hours before he was scheduled to visit the PDRY to announce a new step towards the unification of the two Yemens.

Following the announcement of al-Hamdi's murder, army units took control of strategic buildings and main streets of Sana'a while political power passed to yet another colonel, al-Ghashmi. The three years of Colonel al-Hamdi reflected in a very clear manner how the Saudis used the YAR to undermine the PDRY, and used the PDRY and northern tribes to prevent the consolidation of a strong central authority in the YAR. In this sense, the Saudi royal family has acted in each of the Yemens through the other Yemen.

Despite the pro-tribal and pro-Saudi policies of al-Hamdi's successors, Colonel al-Ghasmi (1977-78) and Saleh (1978-today), the Saudi policy toward the reorganization of Yemen's military did not change. In fact, Yemen's army became even weaker than it was during al-Hamdi's presidency (Al-Madhagi, 1996). Since the birth of the revolution, the Saudis have been determined to keep Yemen as a tribal republic with a weak military that lacks an institutional face, and a strong tribal structure that dominates the political system and the military. Robert Burrowes (1987) concludes that one of most important outcomes of this Saudi-sponsored policy after al-Hamdi is the extensive tribalization of the military, which made north Yemen's armed forces "the linchpin of the system of tribal power".

In short, in post-revolutionary north Yemen, the military at its top levels has turned into a base for tribal power, while at its lower levels, it has turned into a wide arena for recruiting tribesmen as a part of the regime's politics of survival and co-optation. Compared to all state institutions, the military in former north Yemen was the major employer. Even in today' united

Yemen, the military continues to keep the title of the largest employer in a country where the unemployment rate exceeds 40 percent.

The Formation and Role of the Military in Marxist South Yemen

While the officers in the north carried out a fragile military coup that was saved only by the 70,000 Egyptian troops, in South Yemen, however, the post-independence regime replaced the old army established by the British with a new national military. The objective of this move was the destruction of the old British colonial state structure before building a new socialist state. One of the distinguishing features of the political system in former South Yemen, or the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), is the absence not only of structural continuity within any section of the state apparatus but also of personal continuity in the pre and post independence state. This is due to the fact that in addition to colonial and pro-colonial officials and administrators, western companies and foreign civil servants, many top military officers fled the country after independence. Compared to all Arab republics, the ideological foundations of the new state went beyond nationalist revolution to a social revolution, and thus the state's political, economic and social skeletons were designed in such a way that they represent the interests of the oppressed classes within the South Yemeni society. What was the impact of such foundations on civil-military relations in the PDRY?

In February 1978, Ali al-Baidh, the minister of defence in Socialist South Yemen, upon his return from his first official visit to Moscow, ordered the dismissal of the British technicians serving with the armed forces (Halliday, 2002). One month later, the first Soviet military delegation paid a visit to the PDRY. In the years to follow, South Yemen turned into a Soviet satellite on the Red Sea. The harbour of Aden, for example, became a submarine facility for the Soviets, and received regular Russian military shipments to the army of the PDRY. In addition to the 800 to 1,000 Soviet advisers, there were also about 600 Cuban advisers, and more than one hundred East Germans. The latter were mainly recruited inside the internal security intelligence (Dresch, 2000). By the year 1983, the size of the armed forces in the PDRY was estimated to be 25,500, in addition to a popular militia of 30,000 (McNaugherr, 1985). Both the armed forces and the militia were led by the veterans of the anti-British guerrilla struggle. About 60% of the members of the popular militia were peasants, and 30% workers. They were all trained for 20

days a year, and were paid for this period (Halliday, 1979). The organizational structure of the army and the PDRY's political elites' interest in socialism made the military play a less important role in political life than in other Arab political entities. However, civil-military relations in South Yemen were negatively affected by factional disputes within the civilian political apparatuses. These factions have their roots in the four groups involved in the anti-colonial struggle: the Popular Socialist Party, the Sons of Southern Arabia, the National Union Party, and the Nationalist Front.

Disputes between these four groups were continuously reflected inside the armed forces. For instance, one of the explosive issues in the 1969 and 1978 intra-ruling party disputes was regarding the demotion and promotion of military officers (Halliday, 1979). The new progressive Arab Marxist-Leninist republic of South Yemen was beset by factional strife, although, from a traditional Marxist perspective, such strife should not exist in socialist states. The most fatal of the incidents of factional infighting in the Arab world's lone 'proletarian' revolution was the horrific events of the 13th of January 1986, in which President Ali Nasser's bodyguards opened fire on a rival faction in the politburo, prompting a bloody coup d'état of civil-war proportions in which thousands of people, including 55 senior party figures, were killed. Ali Nasser prepared for the murder of his opponents by issuing leaflets in advance of the politburo meeting, claiming success in defeating an alleged attempted coup. The *Ahdath Jana'yir*, or January Events, exposed the cross-cutting regional cleavages and tribal rivalries, which members of the ruling elite had injected inside the military. During the events, different military units took different sides. For example, the navy backed Ismail's group, and started firing into the streets of Aden and government buildings. The Soviet military advisors, on the other hand, refused to provide either side with weapons or munitions (Cordesman, 1993). As a result, Ali Nasser flew to Ethiopia and asked Mengistu to rush in supplying arms and troops, but his request was denied. He was forced, therefore, to flee to the YAR requesting asylum.

The roots of the January Events are traced in the divided leadership after the 1967 British withdrawal from Aden. One year before the withdrawal, the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen looked for a time as the most likely anti-colonial movement to establish itself as successor to the British. It was, however, the National Liberation Front (NLF), that took over in

November 1967. In less than a year, splits within the NLF prompted a 'corrective movement', which led to the exile of the PDRY's first president to Egypt. Conflicts within the NLF[4] continued, resulting in the killing of the second PDRY head of state President Salmayn in 1978, and the exile to Moscow of the third head of state, Abdul Fattah Ismail, in April 1980. Power struggles expanded when the pragmatic Ali Nasr Muhammad replaced Ismail. His pragmatism regarding, for example, the relations with neighbouring countries, economic affairs, his performing of the *umra* in Mecca, and attending an Islamic summit, made him clash with a group of hard-liners in the party. The clash was intensified when hard-liners succeeded in engineering the return of Ismail in February 1985, to be appointed as the secretary of the ruling party. The January Events were, therefore, the culmination of a long and complex factional strife inside the PDRY. Despite the claim of the ruling party that their Socialism and Communism-based mode of governance prevents military interference in civil politics, and that politics are superior to military action, the role of the military in January events exposed the politicization of the PDRY's armed forces. Although the history of Marxist-Leninist systems illustrates that their militaries were also politicized institutions, there has never been, however, a case in these systems where the military has overthrown the party by coup d'état. The bloody factional strife in South Yemen resulted in the weakening of the PDRY's army and the ruling elite, which subsequently paved the road for the unification of the PDRY and the YAR, and consequently to the northerners' victory over the south, militarily, politically and ideologically.

The Military of Unified Yemen

How was a unified Yemen to merge the two separate and very different military apparatuses of the YAR and PDRY? This was one of the most critical questions that the leaders of North and South Yemen had to find an answer to in order to make the North-South unity come true. At the time of unification, in May 1990, the northern army had the advantage of having a larger number of troops and tanks, with more than 37,000 troops and 664 tanks. The southern army had 27,000 men and 480 tanks, but it had a superior air force, both in terms of skills and number of air fighters.

As a symbol of their unity, southern military units moved into the northern governorates, and northern units moved into the southern ones, and the first minister of defence in united

Yemen was Haithem Taher, a southerner who had served as chief of armed forces in the PDRY. This appointment was meant to reduce the worries of the southerners. On the ground, however, suspicion and mutual distrust were such that both sides were reluctant to cede their control over their armies. For example, the artillery unit, which was positioned in Sana'a, was put under the leadership of one of Saleh's relatives. The 5,000 Iraq-trained republican guards and the air force remained under the direct control of Saleh and his close relatives. Since 1991, the republican guards were among the disputed issues between the Northern and Southern ruling parties. The northern ruling party, the GPC, demanded that the republican guards be directly linked to the president, while the southern ruling party, the YSP, demanded that these units be under the direct responsibility of the minister of defence, in order to avoid the split of the army into multiple forces.

In the first three years after unification (1990-93), political disputes between the northern and southern political elites continued to be reflected in the military of united Yemen, resulting in the creation of multiple command structures and loyalties, and hostility between northern and southern officers. In July 1993, General al-Bashiri, a northerner and the Chief of Armed Staff, submitted his resignation in protest at the minister of defence who was a southerner. The resigned general cited the promotion of thousands of southern officers based on nepotism and the authoritarian leadership style of the southern minister as the motivating factors behind his resignation. The situation inside the military of united Yemen gave the impression that elite-promoted political pluralism has turned into armed pluralism, which increased the possibility of a violent northern-southern conflict.

In an attempt to diffuse the conflict over the military, leaders of North and South Yemen signed in Amman, on the 20th of January 1994, in the presence of the late King Hussein of Jordan and the Secretary General of the Arab League, the so-called 'The Document of Promise and Agreement' (DPA). According to the agreement, the military should best reflect Yemen's unification. The document limited the political role of the military, brought the armed forces under the direct control of a central unified government, and banned the formation of any organized armed forces or militia outside the scope of government control. It called for the re-organization of the military of united Yemen into only three forces -infantry, navy and air force,

and the prohibition of the establishment of any armed unit outside these three forces. Furthermore, senior officers in the military and security apparatus were not to remain in their positions for a period more than 5 years, and the army was to distance itself from partisan, political, regional sectarian or familial affiliations. The Amman agreement reflected the concerns of the southern leadership about Saleh's influence in the army, through his family and tribal links.

The agreement also prohibits the presence of more than one senior military officer with family relations to the president, vice president, prime minister, deputies of the prime minister, minister of defence, minister of interior, and chief of armed staff. If more than one head of a military unit had family relations with any of the former, then the others should be sent to early retirement, given a civilian post, or retire before the re-organization of the military took place. The agreement had a short life, as a few months later, on the 5th of May 1994, the war of secession took place. In the war, the northern and southern armed forces, positioned in each other's governorates, hit many of each other's most important economic cornerstones- airports, ports, power stations and oil facilities. The latter were vital to the country's economy, bruised after the Gulf War.

In the war of succession, Saleh's tightly sealed family-tribal based military commanding structure proved to be one of the major factors behind the victory of the northern army. Other suggested that factors behind the northern victory include the following: 1) legitimacy: North Yemen forces were highly mobilized because they were fighting to protect and keep the gained benefits of unification. 2) Popular support: unlike in the south, where people have lost the trust of their leadership, the northern forces enjoyed massive popular support. 3) The low morale of the southern troops. For example, during the war, and in one single day, the 56th Infantry, the 122nd Mechanized, the 22nd Infantry, the 4th Artillery camps, as well as the rocket base in Shabwa, all defected and joined the northern forces. In *al-Daleh* and *Al-Eend* regions, however, southern army units fought as local militia not as a national army, as they put up much resistance simply because most of the troops were originally from these areas. 4) Buying allegiance. According to al-Saqqaf (1994), millions were paid out to unit commanders and officers in the southern army to facilitate the advance of the northern forces. 5) The divided leadership in the YSP. 6) The lack of

support from the tribes in the south, which is an expected reaction from a segment that has been mocked and suppressed by the southern political elites. 7) Finally, President Saleh's utilization of Islamist fighters, known as the Arab Afghans. These experienced Islamist fighters carried out many successful insurgency-based operations. It is worth noting here that, a few months before the war, Sheikh Abdel Majeed al-Zindani, an influential Salafist leader, was granted a permission to preach inside north Yemeni military compounds. In a number of his speeches to the northern troops, al-Zindani attacked the government in the south, accusing it of representing 'infidel communist separatists'. In one of his speeches inside a northern military unit, al-Zindani considered fighting for Yemen's unity to be a *jihad* against those who divide and break the cohesion of the Islamic community.

If the war of succession reflected the violent consequences of the inherent tensions in wedding a socialist system with a tribal-dominated one, the northern victory in the war, on the other hand, reflected the regime's orchestrated power of growing tribal-Islamist orientations inside the military of united Yemen.

Sheikhs and Officers in United Yemen

The Yemeni contest between a weak state centre and a fragmented heavily armed tribal periphery produces a situation that allows tribal sheikhs to acquire political power far beyond the boundaries of their tribes (Peterson, 1984). Since the 1970s, the political role of tribal sheikhs in Yemen has been institutionalized. Instead of being representatives of their tribes to the state, tribal sheikhs of Yemen have become representatives of the state to their tribes. Worth noting here is that there are two types of tribal sheikhs who are currently integrated into the regime's web of patronage. The first, and most influential in the political-military scene are the so-called blood tie and lineage-based sheikhs, or *Shuyukh al-Dam*. This type is dominant in the Zaydi dominated mountainous regions of north Yemen, and differs from territorial-based sheikhs, or *Shuyukh al-Ard.* The latter are feudal lords, found in the agricultural plains of Yemen, and who have their tribesmen work in their lands as farmers in return of food, shelter and protection.

Comparing the role of these sheikhs during the Imamate system with their role since the establishment of the republic reveals how Yemen's tribal sheikhs have been transformed from the

armed wings of the political system to a professional political elite supporting politicians in office in return for benefits. As mediators between the central government and their tribesmen, sheikhs were absorbed into Yemen's post-revolution tribal state, which is founded on personal and kinship relations, and the loyalties that these inform. In this regard, Phillips (2008) correctly argues that sheikhs are "easily targeted points of co-optation", which gives the opportunity to the weak Yemeni state to push its agenda outside Sana'a without carrying out state-building efforts in the rural areas.

The current regime of Saleh is one of the most active post- revolution regimes in institutionalizing the political authority of sheikhs, and in linking them to the center through a patronage system. The form of the patronage varies from monthly payment distributed by the Department of Tribal Affairs, to gifts such as business deals, vehicles and houses. In his Yemen Chronicle, anthropologist Steven Caton (2005), records his observations about the changes that took place, after his twenty-year absence from Yemen, regarding the status of tribal sheikhs: "The charisma of these sheikhs was apparent in their faces, in their bearing, in the circumspect way their followers approached them or disengaged from them, all of which I had noticed about them twenty years before; what was different was their newfound wealth, resulting from government subsidy and capital accumulation, evident in their big cars, expensive guns, and many retainers". The socio-political reality of today's Yemen teaches us that tribal elites draw their power from two sources. First, from being a 'veto group' that is capable of blocking plans and decisions of central government. The second source of power has been established as a result of the sheikhly infiltration of the military structure. In united Yemen, the gaps between state and non-state power are filled by a military-tribal complex of patron-client relationships. From this complex, politically relevant sheikhs and high-ranking officers draw considerable benefits. In fact, the complexity of united Yemen's reality defies the separation of the military, tribal, political and economic elites in all trajectories. In united Yemen, one may find a tribal sheikh who is a party persona and a businessman, or a high ranking military officer who is a tribal sheikh and a merchant, all at the same time. The al-Ahmar family is the most obvious example. Hamid al-Ahmar, for instance, who is one of the sons of the late Sheikh Abduallah al-Ahmar, the most powerful tribal sheikh in the modern political history of Yemen, is an influential tribal leader, a member of the parliament, and the chairman of the Al-Ahmar Commercial Group,

which has commercial activities that cover, among others, the import of military, police and air force equipments, crude oil and natural gas, telecommunications, investment, and the import of food products and construction materials[5]. It must be noted, however, that merchants are not terribly influential in the Yemeni government unless they are bolstered by tribal and/or military status. In other words, the influence they derive from their business activities is usually a function of the influence that they derive from their tribal or military status. For instance, many urban businessmen without tribal backing or military background often add to their business cards the title of "sheikh" to gain prestige and influence. According to al-Zahri (2009), this new Sheikhly phenomenon is encouraged by the regime's attempt to breed and hatch sheikhs. Such breeding and hatching has the objective of fomenting disputes between the real sheikhs and the manufactured ones.

In fact, the social background and political profile of President Saleh clearly reflect the dialectical and complex socio-political interactions between military officers and tribal sheikhs in united Yemen. President Saleh was born on the 21st of March 1942 into a family within the Sanhan section of Bayt al-Ahmar of the Hashid tribal confederation. At the age of 18, Saleh left his place of birth to join the Sana'a Officers Training School. Two years later, he participated, as a sergeant, in the anti-theocratic imamate revolution of 1962. He was promoted to adjutant military officer. During the civil war (1962-1970), he joined the School for Armoured Troops, where he was trained at the hands of Egyptian military trainers, and later promoted to the position of the commanding officer of an armoured battalion in the Bab al-Mandab sector. Saleh's military career profited from the post civil war climate, which secured him, through the influential Hashid patrons, a commission as the commanding officer of the important Ta'izz military battalion. One of Saleh's most important tribal patrons during his military service in Ta'izz was Colonel Ahmad Husayn al-Ghashmi, who was destined, because of the Hashid tribal confederation's support, to become the army's chief-of-staff and, briefly in 1977-1978, the president of North Yemen. Ali Abdullah Saleh al-Ahmar was a protégé of al-Ghashmi, and as such his military and political stars rose steadily. In 1978, following the assassination of President al-Ghashmi, Saleh was appointed as a Member of the Provisional Presidential Council and the Vice-General Commander and Chief of Staff of the Armoured Forces, and later took over the presidential office. It is worth noting here that before and after the assassination of al-Hamdi,

al-Ghashmi paid his attention to diminishing the influence of al-Hamdi and his reformist colleagues in the military. To achieve this, he adopted the policy of enlisting and promoting soldiers and officers from sections in the Hashid tribal confederation.

In Yemen's civil-military relations, there is a clear paradox: strengthening the military so that it can protect and enforce the will of the weak polity, but at the same time preventing the military from becoming a threat to the weak polity. Some observers of Yemen argue that the military-tribal structure of Yemen resembles in many ways the Iraqi fashion of control put into practice during Saddam's era. Such an argument, however, can be strongly refuted. To begin with, the Yemeni tribes are far more powerful than the Iraqi ones, and have always played a crucial political role. Furthermore, unlike in Iraq of Saddam, Yemen's military is composed mainly of tribesmen. This means that the feeling of tribal allegiance inside Yemen's military is, at least, as equal to their military allegiance. Unlike the hyper-authoritarian Iraqi government of Saddam, the central government of Saleh does not and can not exert ultimate authority and control across the country. In addition to Yemen' harsh topographical factors and the very poor and fragile national economy, the inability of Yemen's central government to exercise ultimate authority is related to the fragmented and autonomous tribal nature of Yemen's society. This fragmentation at society level is compounded by the weakness of institutions at state level. As a result, Saleh and Yemen's political administration cannot enforce their will without the participation of tribal forces. Another major difference between Iraq and Yemen's civil-military relations is the absence in Yemen of a strong ideological party like the Iraqi Baath party. As Saddam Hussein once put it "With party methods, there is no chance for anyone who disagrees with us to jump on a couple of tanks and overthrow the government"(Hirst, 1971). Finally, unlike in Iraq, the military in Yemen is not a vehicle for a new middle class, which, according to the classic view of modernization, can substitute a weak bourgeoisie. Yemen has the lowest urbanization rate in the Middle East, and lacks, therefore, the large urban middle class found in other Arab republics.

Conclusion

For many centuries, religious institutions and theocratic authority produced the ruling elites of Yemen, who adopted conservatism and isolationism. However, Imam Yahya's efforts in

building a military establishment in the north and the colonial British-made army in the south have created the first nucleus of a new type of ruling elite - the military officers who joined tribal institutions in the process of manufacturing elites. Tracing and analysing the roots of civil-military relations in Yemen illustrate the following:

First, a tribal-military mind-set dominated the modern political history of the Yemeni state. At the heart of this mindset lies the Zaydi principal that there could be many claimants to the seat of the Imam. As a result, oaths of tribal allegiance were withdrawn from one claimant and given to another. Throughout the modern political history of Yemen, tribes and groups frequently contested the very nature of the Imam's moral authority. As a result, the Imam had to depend on troops to keep his domain of spiritual and political obedience.

Second, the principle limitation to the power of any central authority in Yemen throughout its modern history has been its military weakness in comparison to the armed strength of the tribes. Yemeni leaders have traditionally relied on the tribes to provide them with the forces required to impose and maintain their authority over the country. As a consequence, the process of mobilising military support has necessitated the development of an important element of consent in the relationship between the tribe and state. Today, the military in Yemen continues to lack an institutional face and the coherent ideology to legitimize its rule and attract support from the masses.

Third, tribal leaders and their men penetrated the military and occupied strategic positions inside, cementing the tribe and military links.

Fourth, the penetration of political ideologies into the military of Yemen was very different from the typical political penetration model in other Arab tribal republics- Iraq of Saddam and Libya of al-Qaddafi. In these two republics, regimes created politicized and ideological armies in order to ensure the military's non-involvement in the political process. This approach follows Mao-Tse-Tung's assertion that "the party controls the gun and the gun shall never be allowed to command the party", and Michel Aflaq's belief that "there is no real

revolutionary party in the world whose leaders are military men continuing to command army units" (Hashim, 2003).

Fifth, the military in Yemen is not the production of the tribe. Instead, it is a reflection of the complexity and hegemony of clans and tribes coalitions in the Zaydi high mountains. All the five presidents of North Yemen were Zaydis, four of them with military backgrounds, two of them assassinated, and two forced to abdicate and seek asylum abroad.

Sixth, studying civil-military relations in Yemen provides a window not only into the paramount importance of the Saudi role in shaping such relations, but also into Yemen's unstable political life, and how such instability has, as Lisa Wedeen (2008) put it, "compromised whatever loyalty might have existed for either fledgling nation-state". For example, the participation of the military in the bloody internal fighting among party officials in former South Yemen sapped many Yemenis' confidence about the possibilities for a successful Marxist-Leninist nation-state there. In the North, on the other hand, the civil wars, political assassinations, prolonged absence of law enforcement and order, severe economic hardships, and the overall political instability have undercut the potential allegiances of many segments of the society to the Yemeni nation-state. The Yemeni case of civil-military relations demonstrates clearly that, in addition to regime's overwhelming politics of survival, structural, economic and geo-strategic regional factors are at the heart of the failure of Yemen's military in performing its task as a modernizing agent.

END NOTES

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[1] Zaydism is an offshoot of Shia Islam, founded more than one thousand years ago, and it is unique to Yemen.

[2] For a lengthy discussion of the coup, see. Douglas, J. (1987)

[3] Military equipments to the YAR were channelled through the Saudis. In 1974, for instance, the Saudis forwarded to the US the YAR's list of new weapon requirements. In these dealings, the Saudis have often played political football, mostly in the form of delaying either the payments or the delivery.

[4] The NLF was transformed into the current Yemeni Socialist Party, the YSP.

[5] See the Website of Al Ahmar Group at: http://alsalamest.com/Ahmar_profile.pdf

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