



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk
Charity Registration Number: 208223

Middle East and North Africa Programme: Meeting Summary

Tribes, Conflict and Rural Livelihoods in Yemen

Nadwa al-Dawsari

Executive Director, Partners Yemen

Gavin Hales

Lead Researcher, Small Arms Survey - Yemen Armed Violence Assessment

Henry Thompson

Independent consultant on Yemen

Chair: Carolyn Hayman OBE

Chief Executive, Peace Direct

Monday 28 June 2010

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

Introduction

With renewed focus on al-Qaeda's activities in Yemen and conflicts rising in frequency and intensity, tribal areas are coming under increasing scrutiny. The lack of security, hindering donor assistance, coupled with weak state institutions, widely available small arms and deteriorating traditional conflict resolution systems all contribute to disproportionately intense challenges for tribal regions.

The speakers discussed what tribes represent in today's Yemen - politically, economically and socially - and current efforts to develop and stabilise tribal areas. They also examined the impact of small arms and light weapons proliferation on conflict in Yemen.

Rural livelihoods

Independent consultant **Henry Thompson** gave a brief summary of Yemeni rural livelihoods. He stated that the typical framework of environmental security theory does not fit the Yemeni context, as the majority of drivers derive from the economy.

Yemen is a resource poor country. It was a net food exporter until the mid-1970s, but after 1975 Yemen saw rapid population growth which led to the reverse case scenario; Yemen is now a net food importer.

To understand the nature of poverty in Yemen, it is important to look at the rural-urban divide. The majority of Yemenis live in the west of the country in valleys and along coastal areas, and 91% of households in the bottom decile are in rural areas. Infant and maternal mortality rates are extremely high in Yemen and especially in the countryside. Food security – availability, accessibility and affordability – is also a major issue and is a key factor in the situation of women, child nutrition and education. Over 45% of children are underweight in Yemen.

Looking at patterns of farming in relation to the use of water, there has been an incredible increase in well water usage. Rainwater is being used less and less as it is hard for farmers to collect, and on average Yemen only receives 50mm of rain a year. Qat, which requires large amounts of water, is still the most profitable crop in the country.

Small arms and violence in Yemen

Gavin Hales introduced the participants to the ideas contained in his recent paper on the drivers, dynamics and impact of violence in Yemen. In per capita terms, Yemen is the second most armed society in the world behind the US, with around 10 million weapons for a population of 23 million. This has a wide impact on its social and economic development.

Mr Hales split armed violence in Yemen into several typologies. *Political violence*, which includes electoral processes, governmental policies, civil wars such as the Houthi war in the North, the southern secessionists and al-Qaeda related violence. The second category is defined as *social violence*. This includes violence arising due to land and water issues (reported to account for 4000 deaths a year, four times as high as the official figure) or religious conflicts, such as in al-Jawf where many died during a battle for control of a mosque. Further typologies were *ransom-related violence* such as road closures and kidnappings, *criminal violence*, *domestic violence* (which remains a taboo subject), and finally *unintended violence* such as landmines exploding (though most have been cleared by the government).

Concluding the summary of his research Gavin Hales had three main messages regarding armed violence in Yemen:

- Though it may not be sufficient, it is a necessary step to tackle armed violence to secure social and economic development and reduce state fragility;
- The prevailing focus on counter-terrorism skews valuable resources;
- A comprehensive approach is required, recognising overlaps between the different types of violence described above.

Changing tribal structures

Executive director of Partners Yemen **Nadwa al-Dawsari** spoke about tribes and conflict resolution and how this fits into the bigger picture in Yemen.

So what is a tribe? A tribe is a social organisation consisting of a social contract between tribes, tribal members and sheikhs. Tribes offer protection from political pressure and are a means for tribal citizens to gain and demand services through tribal leaders. Furthermore, the tribe creates a sense of belonging and solidarity as well as building a social safety net. It is

responsible for any actions by its tribal members: if one tribesman does something bad, the entire tribe is considered to have done something bad unless it disciplines its members.

Despite misconceptions, tribes offer protection for women, especially during conflicts. Penalties are stronger and more severe when a woman has been harmed than a man; blood money is much higher.

Within tribes, sheikhs gain their status through the ability to resolve and prevent conflict. Tribes also offer tribal conflict management systems and today most conflicts are still resolved through the traditional system. Complex and sophisticated, the system provides options for tribal members to appeal to a higher tribal authority if one or all conflict parties disagree with the arbitrators' verdict.

The tribal structure has deteriorated and changed because of political, economic and social transformations throughout the country, especially with the introduction of government services and the extraction of oil and gas. The political transformation process has also affected the tribal structure profoundly. For example in al-Bayda a candidate who won the elections in 2006 was killed, sparking an ongoing conflict which has taken a further 47 lives. In addition some tribal sheikhs have become part of the country's elite, distancing themselves from their own tribes. All this change has led to what some tribal leaders call a new 'customary law' consisting of practices which are foreign to, but confused with, tribal traditions. These include revenge killings, road blockings and kidnappings.

What has the future got in store for tribes in Yemen? The situation could deteriorate further if the causes of grievances and poverty remain unaddressed, resulting in violent incidents such as bombings of oil pipelines and youth engagement in conflicts or other forms of unrest. Furthermore, opportunities might be reduced due to tribal conflicts. For example children will not be able to go to school because of the dangers of tribal conflict.

A more positive scenario envisages a narrowing of the gap between the weakening tribal system and already weak state institutions. Ways to combine the traditional system with the formal rule of law system to address this gap need to be discussed: this has a lot of potential and needs to be considered and taken seriously by the aid community.

Links to al-Qaeda?

During the Q&A session, a question was raised regarding the relationship between tribes and al-Qaeda. Nadwa al-Dawsari responded by saying that though there are claims that there is a connection between the two, there is no proof of it, and in fact there are significant divergences between them. Tribes for example kidnap, but do not kill people as it is considered shameful. On the contrary – and as acknowledged by the Government of Yemen (GoY) – the tribes have cooperated with the government in its efforts to fight extremists. Several examples were given of tribes condemning a tribesman who was linked to al-Qaeda. This is not to overrule the possibility of a connection: continued lack of development, grievances, and marginalization of youth in those governorates and many other ills increase people's frustration and the possibility that they will engage in violence.

International aid

Another question concerned the effectiveness of foreign aid in Yemen. Henry Thompson stated that subsequent to the Detroit bomber, there is finally a concerted effort to get consensus and bring in Yemen's neighbouring countries. The most worrying issue in Yemen is food insecurity, but most aid is aimed at issues concerning stabilisation and violence. Structures of aid distribution are also troubling.

A question was raised about the possibility of direct external financing from governments and others in terms of rural livelihood. Nadwa al-Dawsari did not consider it a good idea to give money straight to sheikhs, as there are existing institutions for this such as local councils and local NGOs. She added that giving money to tribal leaders in the past has contributed to distancing them from their tribes and money to the tribal leaders could exacerbate the weakening of tribal traditions and structure. Gavin Hales mentioned the need to distinguish between creating an environment to enable development and putting money into certain projects. The World Bank, for example, has been working on urban land reform, but has so far not addressed rural areas. There are still large gaps within the aid structure that need to be addressed. Most children are malnourished.

Typologies of violence

Questions were raised over how the violence in Yemen could be compared to daily violence in Europe. Gavin Hales responded by discussing the comparative low levels of criminality in Yemen, despite large numbers of

weapons. Nevertheless, around 4000 people are reportedly killed in Yemen every year due to social conflicts, primarily over land and water. Nadwa al-Dawsari suggested that it is deeply engraved in Yemeni tradition to preserve safety, and Yemen simply appears dangerous in the media, reporting on assumptions and stereotypes created by urban Yemenis without taking the effort to meet with tribal citizens.

From the audience it was stated that in the survey two typologies were missing. The first being symbolic violence, as the small arms should be seen as expressions of wealth and not actually as means for actual violence. Most of the violence is resolved through peaceful means, and a gun symbolises the value and preference of peace and maintaining that peace. The second typology missing in the survey is violence provoked by states – the ‘elephant in the room’. The financing of Salafi Muslim groups opposing Zaydis by the Saudis thereby fuelling the Sa’ada wars, for example, and the involvement of the US.

Until 40 years ago tribes and the states understood each other, and cleared everything up according to tribal values, where the winner has to compensate the loser. Formerly people would have trusted the state, as they would all be compensated. However, now they feel that their basic values have been ignored, disrespected and abused.

Role of tribes

At the end, questions were raised about the proportion of Yemenis with tribal affiliations, their role in the future of Yemen and reasons for the land disputes. An estimate of 70% was given for the number of Yemenis with tribal roots or affiliations. The many land disputes are mainly due to a combination of the rapid rise in population in the past 35 years, decreasing land plot sizes, and scarce water resources, which make the situation worse. In addition, giving money to tribal leaders has created a rift between them and their tribes, which further undermines the traditional structures. In future scenarios, tribal areas could be better off than non-tribal areas as they have always managed their own affairs and not relied on the state, therefore having a stronger position.