

Four years ago I wrote of my quiet optimism for Yemen (says Charlie Pratt. See *A quiet optimism for Yemen?* published in *Defence Viewpoints* 13th September 2012). Its nascent, idiosyncratic democracy, powered by tribal shaykhs and patronage, had conspired to produce a relatively fair and free election. Out of it had ascended a President from the marginalised and underdeveloped South of the country; a potent symbol of the unified Yemen and a hopeful portent of practical unity to come.

The problems that Hadi faced were colossal. The writ of the government extended only a few miles outside of the capital Sana'a, at which point a patchwork of tribes and political systems took over. His civil service was full of ghost employees and the country was still struggling to recover from the endemic corruption and patronage of his predecessor as President, 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih. But at the same time a political dialogue featuring all parts of Yemeni society had begun, the elections had still occurred and a strange and unique civil society still existed.

In retrospect, the question mark was prescient. All that is positive is gone now, wrecked at the hands of a rebel Zaydi Shi'a tribal grouping, the Huthis from the Northernmost province of Yemen, and their alliance with Salih. Both were stung by their continued marginalisation from the political dialogue and, in response, an alliance of Huthis and Yemeni soldiers still loyal to Salih broke out of Sa'dah and rode south. Pushing at an open door, they found Yemen to be a real facade state with just as much blame for its precipitous downfall - no military or unified government opposed the Huthi/Salih alliance. Their crusade stopped only in the South of the country, when their ambition and supply lines ran out. In response, a Saudi led coalition eviscerated Yemen from the air, bombing the Huthis and Salih to a dialogue table in Kuwait.

There they still sit, an achievement in itself after all the blood shed in this nasty, and pointless, little war. My optimism is, however, gone, and now seems hopelessly naive. Yemen is at a crossroads. Should the talks fail, so too will Yemen, under the crushing reality of economic collapse, famine and warlordism - the only solution being, perhaps, enough horror that the protagonists seek proper peace. But even if they succeed, the prospect of re-building Yemen is a terrifyingly huge one - every failing of the state has been brutally exposed, and its positive aspects destroyed.

The political talks may still succeed. Both parties are recalcitrant, but Saudi Arabia remains engaged. If they can engineer a deal, including the departure of Salih from Yemen, a faint glimmer of progress presents itself. Yet even talk of rebuilding the Yemeni state is facile. A territorial state in the academic, Westphalian sense has never existed in Yemen. Instead, the

state has been one locus of power amongst many - a provider of limited resources to the Yemeni citizen that existed in both competition and co-existence with tribes, political movements and patronage networks.

What once existed is even more fatally weakened now. If a peace deal is signed, President Hadi and his cabinet will have the colossal undertaking of staving off famine and restarting the Yemeni economy, including reintegrating it into the global economy. No doubt they will have Gulf money backing them, but faced by a state torn apart by regional rivalries between provinces, a resurgent Southern secession movement, powerful tribes and patronage networks linked to the political movements of Islah and GPC, it will be near impossible to use it efficiently or effectively: Yemen may not completely collapse, but large swathes of its population will live in endemic poverty and near starvation.

That condition makes it near impossible to build a sustainable political settlement. Hadi will no doubt restart the political dialogue, but its success is now utterly imperative. Only with some form of politics agreement amongst the various Yemeni groupings can the economy be restarted and international support properly flow across Yemen. Its success will rest on some form of regionalism or federalism - both of which challenge the sacred notion of unity and will take long to negotiate. Even with time, the deal will be difficult. The roots of the current conflict lie in the failure of previous rounds of political dialogue, founded on rocks of self interest and power hunger.

The politics of the North may be easier to solve. In time, once a permanent ceasefire is found, the Huthis may become a political movement represented in Sana'a, and the Government may reach accommodation with the tribes, Salih loyalists and Muslim Brotherhood Islahis. But long ignored and marginalised, the South will continue to burn. Its principal city, Aden, is an object lesson: a city of endemic insecurity, where neighbourhood ghettos fortified by the UAE and allied troops jockey alongside neighbourhoods ruled by Southern Secessionist, Al Qa'ida and Daesh/ISIL: A city where Mayors have been assassinated and Daesh executions videoed in broad daylight. The Emirates may have driven Al Qa'ida out of the second Southern city, Al-Mukalla, but the insecurity and terrorist problem is growing - and with it a lack of faith in the ability of a government to spread here, or development to take root. The idea of Yemen is absent here, replaced by a battle for survival.

What then can we hope for? At best a return to the state of the late 1990s. A state with just enough oil wealth and international backing to reach an accommodation with various power groupings, and a capable enough security and military sector to provide some security. But even this seems unlikely as the destructive trends of counter terrorism, economy, insecurity and

intra-group competition all intensify. Instead, power will be eviscerated, shared out amongst groupings and Yemeni territory apportioned out to the most powerful group. For the average Yemeni, life will be nastier, more brutish and shorter.

If any hope remains it is with Yemenis themselves. Long masters of staring into the abyss without falling into it, they are an incredibly resilient people. Even now, the vast majority of Yemenis soldier on, often brave enough to protest the structures of Al Qa'ida or Huthi rule and resilient enough to organise NGOs and social networks where tribes and state are weak. Yemeni civil society is weakened but still is more vibrant and challenging than anything else on the Peninsula. And somehow, under the carpet of bombs, Yemen remains. So do the tribes, strong because there is nothing else to replace them. In time, perhaps the networks of self help and organisation can provide the basis of a state and civil service. It is a forlorn hope, almost crushed beneath the reality of Yemen. What best we can hope for now is some form of accommodation amongst the various groupings, enough to guarantee some form of security and stave off famine, and just enough to keep them on the edge of the abyss, staring in.