SHUYYUKH, POLICEMEN AND SUPERVISORS: YEMEN'S COMPETING SECURITY PROVIDERS

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As the war in Yemen enters its sixth year, plenty of new and traditional security providers operate, and compete, at the local level. Changes in security governance describe quick political fragmentation and reordering of security relations: in many cases, the agents of protection are, contemporarily, agents of coercion.[1] In the eyes of local communities, multiple security actors fill the same roles and perform similar or overlapped duties. As violence and instability persist, Yemenis have paradoxically had to deal with a rising number of local, "national" and foreign security providers in their everyday life, especially in areas held by the Houthi insurgents. Each territory has its own particularities; but some general trends can be identified, depicting a country where local communities fluctuate between *bottom-up decentralization and self-governance*.

Yemen remains fractured into three main competing political-military entities claiming legitimacy: the internationally-recognized government relocated in Aden, the "quasi-state" of the Houthi insurgents based in the capital Sanaa, and the self-proclaimed and secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Aden and surrounding areas. In the eastern part of Yemen, local authorities remain formally under the internationally-recognized government (as in the case of the Mahra governorate).

But beneath these rival "states", what happens at a community level? Who really provides security on the ground? And since

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2015 onwards, what has changed, or not, in terms of security provision and governance? Yemeni security providers have usually been hybrid, as during the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh: state-sponsored militias, most of them with a tribal matrix, used to support and cooperate with formal state actors (army; police; Republican Guard) in security governance tasks. At a local level, traditional authorities such as tribal chiefs (*shuyyukh*) and *aqils*[2] continue to represent "informal support structures" for territorial communities. In fact, they usually play a prominent role in security provision, with tribal chiefs replacing the central government or coordinating with formal actors.[3] Due to the civil war, hybridity has reshaped itself, showing a new face. In fact, not only has the growing hybridization between formal and informal military actors further confused the regular/irregular boundary but militias - and no longer the army - are currently at the center of Yemen's hybrid military structures.[4]

This analysis aims to reverse and complement that perspective, focusing on community perceptions of security in conflict-torn Yemen. Given the hybrid security-military structure, what about the agents of security at a local level? Which role for the tribal chiefs and the police? How much have the Houthis altered the established security provision balances, especially in the north-western areas? Taking into account myriad local layers and differences (Houthi-held areas/non-Houthi-held areas; urban/rural; northwest/northeast; coastal south/interior south), it is possible to outline who currently provides security in the country.

THESE ARE SOME TRENDS AND CHANGES IN YEMEN'S SECURITY GOVERNANCE SINCE 2015

Demystifying local forces: local does not mean apolitical. Local security forces (including police and the coast guard) have always had political allegiances and they are not "neutral", "third" parties in the conflict. As a matter of fact, political loyalty is the driving criteria of selection in recruitment policies. Therefore, local security forces are territorial chains of bigger patronage networks. Nevertheless, they are called upon by two agreements (the United Nations-brokered Hodeida Agreement, 2018; the Saudi-brokered Riyadh Agreement,

2019) to play a pivotal and non-biased role in the local implementation of transitional security arrangements (ex. the withdrawal and redeployment of military forces). This is the main misunderstanding: local security forces can't be balanced security providers *per se* since they are expressions of politicised environments. For instance, the Hodeida agreement states that the security of the city of Hodeida and of the Ras Isa and Al Salif ports "shall be the responsibility of local security forces". The Riyadh agreement (Annex II: Military Arrangements) commits the pro-government units and STC loyalists that moved towards the Aden, Abyan and Shabwa governorates since August 2019 to return to their previous positions and "to be replaced by security forces belonging to the local authority in each governorate". Therefore, the myth of the existence of local security forces clashes with the reality on the ground, complicating or even stopping the transitional process.

"Competitive security governance" in areas held by anti-Houthi forces. In the areas not controlled by the Houthis, many security providers (military and police officers; tribal chiefs) vie for local security governance in the same territory, thus shaping fluid patterns of security provision. This trend occurs in pro-government as well as in territories close to the STC, shedding light on the high level of political disunity of the anti-Houthi camp. In Aden, conflicts of interest between security providers affect urban circulation: a security clearance released by a security unit can be rejected by other security checkpoints due to competing security leaders. Rival political loyalties impact negatively on institutional presences and functioning at a local level too. For instance, heads of police stations in the Aden and Lahj governorates report to governorate-level police chiefs (belonging to the STC), rather than to the Ministry of Interior. Conversely, heads of police stations in the mostly pro-government city of Taiz report more frequently to the Ministry of Interior and they are generally linked to the Islah party, which also rallies around the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood.

"Monopolized security governance" in areas held by the Houthis: the role of the supervisors. In the areas controlled by the Houthis, tribal chiefs have lost their prominent role in security provision, as has the

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police. Currently, tribal leaders find themselves marginalized and subjugated by northern insurgents' new security apparatuses, headed by the supervisors. The Houthis monopolised security governance, also replacing many police officers of doubtful loyalty. The supervisors (*musharafeen*) receive reports and complaints from the population, working at the interplay between security provision and adjudication: for instance, permanent or temporary checkpoints have also become mobile security centres, including for imprisonment. Supervisors belong to Ansarallah (as the Houthis use to call their movement) and worked under the former Revolutionary Committee headed by Mohammed Ali Al Houthi,[5] coming predominantly from the northern fiefdoms of Saada and Hajja. The supervisors rule on a centralized and hierarchical "shadow system": in fact, their authority exceeds that of institutions (included the self-proclaimed government of the Houthis), since they answer only to the governorate-level supervisor[6] and report directly to the office of the leader Abdel Malek Al Houthi. In insurgent-held areas as Hodeida, the aqils also adapted their tasks, shifting from community-level security provision to acting like informants of supervisors.

Beneath the "states": personal connections and the primary role of trust. In a context marked by institutional uncertainty and security fragmentation, personal connections and "trust networks" survive, as observed in the case of local intermediaries in Syria.[7] This trend underlines the crisis of organized security patterns - also at a local level - and, conversely, the rise of informal networks of trust and support: these can be rapidly re-ordered, but are difficult to trace and monitor. Due to the existence of personal and trust networks, some local security providers communicate with each other, as in the case of pro-government Marib city. However, this phenomenon does not translate into regular meetings and coordination among police and military officers, tribal chiefs and aqils. This might eventually turn into more coordinated efforts only in the case of stabilization, thus opening the way for some sort of multilevel security governance.

Urban and rural areas: different security providers and sources of legitimacy. Institutional security providers, such as policemen, are mostly present in urban areas, while tribal chiefs remain influent

security players in rural areas (with the notable exception of the Houthi-held territories). The legal-institutional legitimacy of security providers matters more in urban contexts than in rural areas, where charismatic and kinship legitimacy prevails in the daily perception of locals. This is also the legacy of the state's presence or absence before the 2015 civil war started. In cities like Taiz and Aden, the police force is affected by lack of funding, training and equipment, as occurs in the rest of Yemen: however, it is more present here with respect to rural areas. In Hodeida, the police who did not defect after the insurgents seized the city remain formally in place, but its role is *de facto* overshadowed by the Houthi-appointed supervisors. In rural areas of Yemen, tribesmen and not policemen used to provide security: this occurs in communities close to self-governance. In the eastern region of Mahra bordering with Oman, tribal chiefs have traditionally had the upper hand in security provision, replacing central government authorities in one of the most peripheral governorates of Yemen.[8] Due to the rise of the Houthi movement, institutional security providers are absent from the northern governorate of Saada, especially after the 2011 uprising against the central government.

The role of tribal chiefs in security provision depends on political geography. In the areas held by the Houthis, tribal chiefs have lost much of their leverage in security provision if compared with pre-war balances. Instead, where the recognized government is nominally in charge, tribal chiefs have become stronger security providers with respect to 2015. Since tribal governance frequently replaces the absence or the ineffectiveness of the central state, this trend suggests two considerations. First, the centralized pattern of security governance organized by the Houthis managed to undermine, and divide, the local tribal structure, thus leaving little room for autonomous manoeuvre to the tribes, as in the case of north-western Yemen. Second, the competitive security governance scenario shaped by the recognized government and the STC enabled tribal chiefs to keep or gain influence in north-eastern (Marib) and southern Yemen (Hadhramawt and Mahra), capitalizing on security vacuums and loose governance structure. For instance, leading Mahri tribes successfully opposed the establishment of a Mahri Elite Force close to the United Arab Emirates.[9]

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Security providers can be external to the community. Local security providers do not necessarily resemble the social fabric in which they operate. Such a dynamic can produce community tensions, increasing the occurrence of clashes. Moreover, the presence of non-indigenous security providers has spread since the start of the civil war. As mentioned before, the supervisors appointed by the Houthis, mostly in controlled north-western, areas come from Saada and Hajja, the upper north of Yemen which is mostly Zaydi Shia: this means they also work in predominantly Shafi'i Sunni areas, as occurs in Hodeida and Ibb, or in mixed urban centres like the capital, Sanaa. In areas held by the recognized government and the STC, military officers of southern origins often operate in neighbouring regions thanks to personal connections, tied in some cases to persisting allegiances to the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). In Mahra, the Saudis have formed pro-Riyadh local forces mostly recruited from other southern governorates such as Aden, Lahj, Abyan and al-Dhale.[10]

The police force is increasingly perceived as a security provider, but it lacks equipment and expertise. With the exception of the areas controlled by the Houthis, Yemenis' perception of policemen as security providers is on the rise since 2017, despite the fact that police forces are under-funded, under-equipped and with meagre expertise in all of the country. According to a survey conducted by the Yemen Polling Center (YPC) in 2019, 61% of the respondents across the country indicated they wanted the police to have authority.[11] However, there is no direct correlation between the police presence and services provision so far. In government-controlled Taiz city, police forces have been gradually reactivated with new recruitments after conflict defections and losses. Aden's police, controlled by the pro-Emirati STC, received arms, equipment and training from Abu Dhabi. Hadhramawt has also been working to build police station capacities with enough trained personnel and resources.[12] In some governorates, foreign or local authorities played a direct role in the (re)building of police forces, with minor connections with the competing Yemeni "states". In fact, the Emiratis and then the Saudis worked to reorganize the police in Mahra: new departments were opened in 2017 near the border with Oman.[13] Local authorities of Al Jawf (north-eastern

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Yemen) have established a functioning police force since 2018, paying personnel salaries and administrative costs with local taxes.[14]

In conclusion, if we analyse Yemen's security from a community-level perspective, hierarchies of power appear even more fluid and nuanced than assuming top-down and elite-centred lenses of study: Yemenis have to deal with multiple and competing security providers. According to a 2019 survey by the Yemen Polling Center, residents in non-Houthi-held territories recognize "the absence of the state", as well as "militias" and "armed groups", as main security threats in their areas. This suggests that, in public responses, the lack of a major state player is still perceived by the population as a driver of instability: in 2017, only 16% of the respondents nationwide mentioned the police/security authorities when asked who provided security in their area.[15] After five years of nested civil wars,[16] Yemen's local communities fluctuate between *bottom-up decentralisation* (quite autonomous but still connected with the recognized government) and *self-governance* (with minor or no connections with the recognized government), with security providers trying to strike a balance between these poles. On local communities' security perceptions and expectations will depend most of the "pendulum direction" in the future of centre-periphery relations.

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2. Aqils are locally-elected representatives linking state security providers with the community, who also perform police tasks in rural areas. Their role is recognized by Yemeni election law 13/2001, which defines them as justice enforcement officers: for this reason, in many cases aqils complement the formal state system.

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5. United Nations Security Council, Panel of Experts on Yemen-Final Report, January 2020.

6. Mareike Transfeld, "Police, Aqil and Supervisors: Local Security Forces in Ansarallah-held al-Hodeidah", in _The Yemen War. Actors, Interests and the Prospects for Negotiations_, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Policy Report, October 2019.

7. The intermediary is "an actor that connects a local community to outside authorities". See Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazour, "Building from the Wreckage-Intermediaries in Contemporary Syria", in Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazour (eds.), _Local Intermediaries in post-2011 Syria. Transformation and Continuity_, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 2019. For "trust networks", refer to Charles Tilly, Trust and Rule, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

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