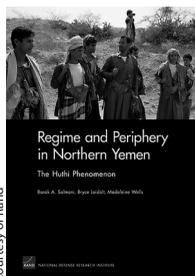


Book Reviews



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Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon

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Yemen has become a country of considerable concern to the West and especially to the United States since December 2009 when an individual trained by Yemeni terrorists attempted to destroy a US civilian aircraft on its way to Detroit. Given such conditions, it is only natural for US Defense Department leaders to seek additional information and insight regarding this country. This book is an unclassified RAND Corporation study prepared for the Defense Intelligence Agency on the Huthi rebellion in northern Yemen. As such, it seeks to provide a straightforward account of many of the key aspects of Yemeni society as well as the nature of the northern rebellion. While the northern part of Yemen does not currently face a major threat from al Qaeda terrorists, the conflict is still a major challenge to the Yemeni government. The ability of the government to manage this challenge is critical if it is to restore acceptable civil order and avoid dissipating Yemeni military and intelligence resources better spent on counterterrorism.

For those seeking a policy-relevant study, this is a truly impressive work with an insightful and fine-grained analysis of the political, religious, military, and regional aspects of the Huthi rebellion. This revolt involves the struggle of northern rebels against the authority of the central government. The Huthi rebels draw their name from the leading family of the region that has provided leadership for the struggle since it began in June 2004. Currently, the fighting is in abeyance, but there have already been six phases of combat in Sa'da province punctuated by cease-fires, with key issues remaining unresolved. The potential for this struggle to reemerge is serious and of immediate interest to United States policymakers concerned about the future of Yemen. Moreover, as this work makes clear, the conflict is not well understood in the West. Additionally, there is not even the faintest wisp of an agreed narrative on the meaning of the conflict as defined by the government and rebels. Yemen's government charges that the Huthis seek to reestablish a political/religious leader (imam) drawn from their ranks as the new head of state. Such a development would certainly undermine Yemen's current government which has an elected president and parliament, although the electoral process is often viewed as flawed. Conversely, the rebels maintain that they do not desire an overthrow of the government. Rather, they maintain that they only want to protect their traditional autonomy and receive a fair share of government resources.

Huthis strongly object to what they see as the Yemeni government's willingness to support Saudi clerics who challenge the legitimacy of the region's Zaydi religion. Zaydism is a form of Shi'ism, although it is much less militant than the politicized Twelver Shi'ism found in Iran. The authors provide an excellent overview of the conflict between this religious sect and the more rigid Sunni Muslims known as Salafis. They carefully document the natural resentment that Huthis harbor for the Saudi-supported expansion of Salafi activities in northern Yemen and the assertions of Salafi clerics that Zaydism is at best a deeply distorted form of Islam. To many northern Zaydis, these clerics (with lavish funding from Riyadh) are a serious threat to the future of their religion and way of life. The Huthi rebellion is closely linked to the backlash of anger resulting from resentment of these assertive religious figures. The important "Believing Youth" organization originated as a Zaydi counterweight to the proselytizing activities of Salafi clerics. Many of its members later became the backbone of the Huthi military forces. Additionally, while the president of Yemen is a Zaydi, he is only nominally so and has little respect for their traditional leadership, adding an additional aspect of personal animus to the conflict. The Yemeni government charges that the Huthis are supported by Iran. This is also explored in depth in this work.

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In sum, this book is exceptionally comprehensive and should be of particular interest resultant of an increased US concern regarding Yemen. While the focus of the book is the conflict in northern Yemen, it has a great deal to say about the country itself, including the Yemeni government, tribalism, and religion. It does an excellent job of drawing from Western and Arabic sources. It is well illustrated with an array of useful maps and pictures drawn from the Internet sites of various participants in the conflict. The work contains a good deal of background on Yemeni society including its gun culture. This is an important book because the current Yemeni president is entering what the authors refer to as the "twilight" years of his reign. President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been the president of North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic) since 1978 and the president of united Yemen since 1990. It remains to be seen how the country will do once he is no longer in office. Clearly, books such as this one will be extremely useful for US policymakers in the era of uncertainly following Saleh's rule.