DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 27.08.2024 | Constantin Grund

What red lines?

The Houthis' methods are strikingly similar to those of the Taliban. Still, the West is letting them continue to define the rules of the game

In the Houthi-controlled north-west of Yemen, around 60 local employees of international and aid organisations are currently being held — or rather have been abducted. Their whereabouts… unknown. Their relatives… kept in the dark. No access to lawyers or to medicine. *Incommunicado*, as experts call it. The abductees include staff from the United Nations, embassies and humanitarian agencies who have been working for years towards improved water supply, decentralised governance and energy projects in Yemen.

While it's not uncommon for international staff to be intercepted and sometimes harassed in some other parts of the world, the Houthis' wave of abductions in the capital Sana'a since May is unprecedented. International workers had been unaffected… until now.

For years, the Houthis have been moving the goalposts when it comes to the behaviour that is tolerated on the international stage. They escalate, provoke and attack. All of this follows a well-thought-out plan. Ten years have now passed since the Houthis first occupied Sana'a. Harassment, expropriation, arrests of political opponents and the establishment of a bona fide regime of terror against the country's own population began. Some things are reminiscent of the Taliban. Previous achievements such as a functioning parliament, freedom of the press or universal school attendance have since been systematically rolled back, with blame mostly placed on alleged outside opponents.

Instead of focusing on the economic development of a country in ruins, new war levies have been introduced; those who don't pay up face imprisonment. At the same time, public servants in the territory occupied by the Houthis have been waiting for their salaries for years. The north-west of Yemen is being systematically impoverished, and experts now estimate around 90 per cent of people there to be living in poverty. A world record.

Escalation methods

In response to Israel's invasion of Gaza, the Houthis – as part of the so-called Axis of Resistance – have been deliberately disrupting shipping in the Red Sea since October 2023. Only this week they reportedly attacked the Greek oil tanker 'Sounion'. At least 30 ships were damaged by drone attacks, causing two of them to sink. The car transporter 'Galaxy Leader' was also seized; it now sits in Hodeidah harbour and can be visited for a fee of $5. Since then, the United States and EU partners have invested in shipping safety measures in the Red Sea.

On 19 July, the Houthis escalated the situation further, attacking Tel Aviv directly with a modified Iranian-made Samad-3 drone, killing one person. The Israeli Air Force retaliated the following day by destroying key oil reserves in Hodeidah, pushing back against the Houthis' attempt to establish themselves as a direct warring faction. Linking their campaign to the situation in Palestine was a shrewd move by the Houthis to counteract their dwindling support in Yemen.

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In recent weeks, the Houthis have increasingly targeted the international aid community, in particular partner associations in Yemen. Since 2018, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) has been complaining about the Houthis' systematic abuse and weaponisation of food aid. The Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (SCMCHA), which global humanitarian organisations have to register with in order to operate, was specifically staffed by Houthis and recently instructed the UN's aid partners to work only with Houthi-friendly organisations and even bring Houthis into their workforce. Some international organisations bowed in to the pressure.

In June, the Houthis announced they had uncovered an Israeli-American espionage network in Yemen and released videos of alleged confessions from former employees of the US embassy in Sana'a. They reinforced this with impressive visuals on social networks and their television channels, featuring logos of international partners, including German ones, as part of this espionage ring. Finally, in early August, the Houthis stormed the UN's Human Rights Office in Sana'a, confiscating vehicles, furniture and servers — something rarely ever seen. A wave of abductions swiftly followed.

Kidnappings aren't a new strategy for the Houthis: they've abducted local workers before in 2019 and 2023. But stepping up these abductions has had a massive political impact in Yemen. It is not so much about the 60 individuals the Houthis are currently using as bargaining chips, but rather about the doubts raised surrounding international partnerships as a whole. Yemenis working for international organisations are taking a greater and greater risk as each month goes by, not only in the north, but also in the south of the country under the control of the 'legitimate government'.

A tipping point

Clearly worried by the Houthis' latest provocation, the West has vocalised its concerns, repeated its reminders and stepped up its rhetoric. UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg accurately and powerfully summed up the situation before the UN Security Council on 23 July 2024: 'the trajectory of the development in Yemen [...] if left unaddressed could reach a tipping point.' Nevertheless, despite all the emotions, the global response to the Houthis' actions remains surprisingly moderate. What used to be red lines first became pink, before fading away completely.

In recent years, the international community has given in to any new demand the Houthis have made and routinely overlooked their violations of individual freedoms or stigmatisation of international aid. People cannot be left to fend for themselves in these disastrous economic and social circumstances, but equally, we don't want to keep the Houthis out of the ongoing political dialogue, it seems. Despite all this escalation, the West has continued to show understanding towards the Houthis and support them indirectly.

Appeasing the Houthis has only strengthened their power base and given them the impression that they are doing the right thing. They have been able to send emissaries to international gatherings and use informal backchannelling to have others take part in talks or negotiations on their behalf. This has led to even the smallest concrete agreements being consistently broken, while international partners stay silent.

We shouldn't be surprised if there is a two-state or even multi-state solution in the foreseeable future,

This brings the Houthis closer to their ultimate goal: establishing their own state under their control. Yemen has been increasingly divided for 10 years now — not through political negotiation, as in the case of Sudan and South Sudan, but step by step at lower levels.

without the involvement of the UN.

Communication networks are being separated, government offices divided into North and South, social security systems split, and the country's single banking and monetary system abandoned. Representatives of the Southern Transitional Council even avoid using the term 'Yemen'. We shouldn't be surprised if there is a two-state or even multi-state solution in the foreseeable future, without the involvement of the UN. The international community has indirectly supported this for years through its policy of appeasement towards the Houthis.

International political observers have become accustomed to the growing confusion and chaos. And getting used to the extraordinary or the unusual sometimes results in accepting it. For Yemen, this means a tribal religious movement consolidating into a state, as we watch Yemen fall apart and drift into the unknown in slow motion. We could actively put up with a country transitioning to another state of being, provided we don't lose sight of the consequences. Otherwise, only a massive diplomatic effort and robust security policy could bring this train to a halt. But we need to reinstate those red lines to what they once were: clear trigger points for a genuine foreign policy response that would make it easier to deal with the situation itself and muster up the courage to do so. The 60 abductees would certainly welcome a more proactive effort.



Constantin Grund
Kinshasa

Constantin Grund heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He was previously FES office director in Madagascar, Benin, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen.