

# The Yemen Imbrolio: Understanding the Many Layers of the Yemeni Civil War

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# **The Yemen Imbrogio: Understanding the Many Layers of the Yemeni Civil War**

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Imbrogio: a confusing, perplexing or bitterly complicated situation.

I can think of no more apt way to describe the current civil war in Yemen. While much American attention has been paid to the on-going Syrian civil war, this other piece of Middle Eastern real estate has been turned into a political and humanitarian crisis over the past decade, one that is increasingly pulling in and entangling the U.S. and other foreign powers.

The violence in Yemen has escalated in the wake of the Saudi-led air strikes over the past two years against the northern Houthi rebels. High civilian casualties have marked this campaign, with a March 2017 strike against a market, for example, killing 20 civilians along with 6 rebels. The Houthis too have targeted civilian populations. The total civilian deaths since Saudi Arabia and its 10 coalition partners, backed by the U.S., began their air campaign, according to U.N. estimates, have reached over 10,000 with another 3 million people, or 11% of the total population, internally displaced.<sup>1</sup> The crisis is worsened by a Saudi blockade of the country, resulting in medical shortages and an increasingly worsening famine threatening 17 million people.<sup>2</sup>

It appears that the conflict will continue to escalate as the Trump administration positions itself to provide greater military support and military presence in country against the Houthis. The U.S. is simultaneously ramping up operations in southern Yemen to combat Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), demonstrated in the failed Navy SEAL raid from Trump's first week in office that resulted in the death of an American servicemen and nearly 30 civilians. There have also been 17 drone strikes targeting AQAP during Trump's brief tenure.<sup>3</sup>

The Yemen civil war is based on decades, if not centuries, old fault lines and, with the involvement of foreign powers on opposing sides, the situation is becoming increasingly complex as multiple conflicts overlap with one another.

Let us try to unpack it.

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<sup>1</sup>Kareem Shaheen, "Yemen death toll has reached 10,000, UN says," *The Guardian* (UK), January 16, 2017.

<sup>2</sup>Les Roopnarine, Patrick Wintour, Saeed Kamali Dehghan and Ahmed Algohbary, "Yemen at 'point of no return' as conflict leaves almost 7 million close to famine," *The Guardian* (UK), March 16, 2017.

<sup>3</sup>See "Drone Wars Yemen: Analysis," The International Security Program, New American Foundation. <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/yemen-analysis.html>

## *History Matters: North vs. South, Center vs. Periphery*

Within Yemen's domestic sphere, the fault lines of conflict can best be understood in the context of two historical trajectories: first, the political and economic struggles between North Yemen and South Yemen; and, secondly, the conflict between the Yemeni central government and various groups emerging from tribal peripheries, such as the Houthis.

The Yemen of today is in fact a union of essentially separate political entities joined together in 1990.

North Yemen was the seat of the Zaidi Imamate that loosely ruled over the turbulent region for over one thousand years, from the late 9<sup>th</sup> century CE until 1962. The Zaidis are a sect within Shia Islam, which today comprises approximately 45% of Yemen's population. In 1918, after a brief period as an Ottoman Province that saw much resistance from the local tribes, North Yemen emerged again as an independent kingdom under the leadership of the Zaidi Imam Yahya Muhammad Hamid ed-Din with his capital at Sana'a. In 1962, the last Zaidi king, Muhammad al-Badr (Imam Yahya's grandson), was overthrown by revolutionary forces inspired by the Arab nationalist ideology of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the state was declared the Yemen Arab Republic. A brutal 8-year civil war quickly followed between the Republican forces backed by Egypt and the Royalist side with support from the northern Zaidi tribes and Saudi Arabia. The conflict, that saw the eventual defeat of the Royalists, would cost nearly 200,000 lives.<sup>4</sup>

South Yemen had been the British colony of Aden from 1839-1967. By the 1960s, the British were ruling over an increasingly dissatisfied population with fighting from the North's civil war beginning to spillover to the South. Following a four-year insurgency by Marxist forces against British rule, the People's Republic of Southern Yemen was declared as a communist state in 1967, largely backed by the Soviet Union. During the 1980s, at the same time as glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union, the PDRY began a process of political liberalization and reform, which resulted in the dissolution of the communist government and unification with the northern Yemen Arab Republic in 1990. The North Yemen president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled since 1978, retained the presidency over a unified Yemen.

The discontent with this union in the South was evident in a 1994 civil war that saw the former communist leaders fail in their attempt to break away. Following unification, the South's economy struggled with its transition from a Soviet-backed communist system and was plagued by supply shortages. Many of the southern tribes would grow disillusioned with the government, increasingly seeing unification as a victory for the North and an occupation of the South. A major source of conflict was the seizure of land by northerners. One northern military commander, for example, "had helped himself" to a plot of southern land "nearly the size of Bahrain".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), pg. 246.

<sup>5</sup>Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam* (Brookings Institution Press, 2013), pg. 263.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the volatile southern region soon became a hotbed of terrorism. The region was pulled into America's "War on Terror" as Saleh gave the U.S. permission to conduct military operations against terrorist targets, in return for extensive military and intelligence support. Southerners were soon turning against Saleh and joining this opposition in response to many of the civilian deaths from Yemeni military operations and U.S. drone and cruise missile strikes.<sup>6</sup> Groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which formed in 2009, saw their ranks swell as tribesmen increasingly fought for an independent South and targeted Yemen's security services, including a number of suicide attacks against police and military forces.

Distinct from the problems in the South, the Zaidi tribes in the mountainous North, since the overthrow of the last Zaidi king, similarly felt marginalized by the Yemeni central government. In response, the Houthi movement, known officially as Ansar Allah (Supporters of Allah) emerged from among the Zaidi population in the 1990s to resist Saleh's government in Sana'a, initially through peaceful means such as providing educational and social services, promoting Zaidi thought and scholarship, and campaigning for greater regional autonomy.

The Zaidi religious leader and former Member of Parliament Hussein al-Houthi, after whom the group is named, initially led the movement. Saleh would accuse al-Houthi of attempting to overthrow the local government and re-instate the Zaidi Imamate. In 2004, following mass arrests and military operations, the Yemen Army announced that al-Houthi had been killed along with 20 of his aides by military forces. The initial violence between the central government and the Houthis, now led by al-Houthi's father and brothers, erupted following his death.

By 2006, Saleh had dispatched 20,000 troops to battle the Houthis in the northern mountains but three years later the Houthi forces had advanced to within 20 miles of the capital city. In response, Saleh launched "Operation Scorched Earth" in 2009 to target the rebels. Later that year, the United States launched cruise missile attacks against Yemeni "Al Qaeda" targets north of Sana'a to avert an "imminent attack" but the Houthis claimed the U.S. had in fact bombed Zaidi-affiliated tribes. In all, at least 120 people were believed killed in the U.S. strikes.<sup>7</sup> Saudi Arabia soon become involved as well, shelling Houthi targets after fighting spilled across the border. Houthi tribes attacked Saudi security forces and seizing chunks of Saudi territory in turn, accusing the Saudis of backing Saleh's forces.<sup>8</sup> In 2010, it was reported that 25,000 people had already been killed by the fighting in the North, with a further 300,000 internally displaced.<sup>9</sup>

The pressure on Saleh's government was now coming from two separate fronts.

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<sup>6</sup>See Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone*; Akbar Ahmed and Harrison Akins, "Making Enemies in Yemen," *Al Jazeera*, May 5, 2013.

<sup>7</sup>Brian Ross, Richard Esposito, Matthew Cole, Luis Martinez, and Kirit Radia, "Obama Ordered U.S. Military Strike on Yemen Terrorists," *ABC News*, December 18, 2009.

<sup>8</sup>"Saudi soldier killed in Houthi raid," *Al Jazeera*, November 4, 2009.

<sup>9</sup>"UNHCR worried about refugees and displaced people in strife-torn Yemen," UNHCR, June 3, 2011. <http://www.unhcr.org/4de8ec1d6.html>

## *The Arab Spring and its Aftermath in Yemen*

In the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Yemen and the many challenges stemming from simultaneously fighting two civil wars, Saleh ended his 33-year reign by handing power to his vice president and former general, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Hadi's original ascension to power was through a February 2012 election in which he was the sole candidate, receiving 99% of the vote. Many opposition groups would come to feel that they had no role or influence in the transitional government. The new regime under Hadi, in the opposition's view, was no different than that under Saleh who had politically marginalized and targeted political rivals.

In his role as president, Hadi worked to reform the government through forming the 2013 National Dialogue Conference in which Yemen would devise a plan to shift towards a restructured, 6-region federal system. Hadi's opposition, who also had consistently questioned his legitimacy to rule given the circumstances of his election, boycotted the conference as a protest. Southern leaders boycotted it from the beginning. The Houthis initially participated but their political leaders boycotted the final session following the assassination of one of their conference representatives, two months after another Houthi representative had been shot and killed. They would also reject the outcome. The Houthis, who experienced chronic economic underdevelopment in their northern areas, claimed the new federal structure would weaken their political power by separating the Zaidi tribes into different regional units and would further divide Yemen into poor and wealthy regions.

In September 2014, as the Houthis continued their fight against the government, the capital of Sana'a finally fell, forcing Hadi to flee. A year later, the Houthis declared the dissolution of parliament and placed their Supreme Revolutionary Committee in charge. Hadi, though, remains the internationally recognized president of Yemen. His government is currently in exile in the southern port city of Aden where he has been working on an elusive peace. The Houthis have demanded his removal from power, along with a deal that includes power sharing but Hadi refuses to relinquish his post. Negotiations continue to stall in the face of increasingly calcified positions on both sides.

The various terrorist groups operating in the South, which now includes a breakaway group fighting under the banner of the Islamic State, have taken advantage of the chaos, seizing territory and increasing their attacks against government targets. On August 29, 2016, for example, the Islamic State detonated a car bomb at a military recruitment center in Aden, killing 54 and wounding another 67.<sup>10</sup> The Islamic State group has also been attacking Zaidi mosques in revenge for Houthi incursions into Sunni areas of Yemen.

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<sup>10</sup>Nour Youssef and Saeed al-Batati, "Suicide Attack Kills Scores of Military Recruits in Aden, Yemen," *New York Times*, August 29, 2016.

## *A Shia-Sunni Proxy War and Beyond*

With the Zaidi Houthis on one side and the predominantly Sunni Yemeni government on the other, the Yemen civil war has become another proxy war for the cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This rivalry for hegemonic status in the Middle East has been a major driving force for a number of conflicts around the region, largely along a Shia-Sunni divide.

At the outset of the Saudi military campaign, King Salman argued their goal was to “wage a military campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen for as long as it takes to defeat the Iranian-backed group that has forced the country’s president to flee.”<sup>11</sup> They were viewing the conflict on their southern border through the prism of their struggle with Iran. It is this combined with the precarious security situation in Yemen that is their motivation for intervention. They fear any spillover of violence into the Saudi Kingdom, especially one orchestrated by Iran, as they have their own Shia and Yemeni populations with whom historical tensions exist.

With the third largest military budget in the world behind the United States and China, Saudi Arabia is also showing a more assertive and militaristic foreign policy within the region, though their Yemen campaign has drawn heavy criticisms, including from the U.S., for its high civilian death tolls. The untested 31-year old Prince Mohammed bin Salman has executed the war as Saudi Minister of Defense, and its lack of quick success has been a source of tension within the royal family.<sup>12</sup>

For Iran, Yemen is not as strategically vital yet support for the Houthis serves as an additional point of leverage against Saudi Arabia. Its support, according to reports, has thus far been largely limited to supplying weapons and equipment and placing a small number of officers on the ground to establish training programs for troops.<sup>13</sup> While there are conflicting accounts about the extent of Iran’s backing of the Houthis and whether the Houthis even want it, Iran could be poised to play a greater role after deploying a fleet of warships to the Gulf of Aden off the Yemeni coast in October 2016 following U.S. missile strikes against the Houthis. In March 2016, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces said Iran was willing to help the Houthis “in any way it can, and to any level necessary” to defend them against the Saudi-led coalition.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the U.S. has taken direct military action in Yemen against the Houthis. On October 15, 2016, the USS Mason, a U.S. destroyer stationed in the Red Sea off the Yemeni coast, came under attack by missiles from within Houthi rebel-held territory. This was the third time missiles were launched out of Yemen targeting U.S.

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<sup>11</sup>Ian Johnston, “Yemen crisis: Saudi Arabia ready for long campaign against Houthi rebels across the border,” *The Independent* (UK), March 29, 2015.

<sup>12</sup>Patrick Cockburn, “Prince Mohammed bin Salman: Naïve, arrogant Saudi prince is playing with fire,” *The Independent* (UK), January 9, 2016.

<sup>13</sup>Mareike Transfeld, “Iran’s Small Hand in Yemen,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 14, 2017. <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/67988>

<sup>14</sup>Mohammed Ghobari and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, “Houthis, Saudis discuss ending Yemen war, sources say,” *Reuters*, March 8, 2016.

warships in only a week. The U.S. launched retaliatory strikes against three coastal radar sites. Under the Trump administration, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has sought to remove Obama-era restrictions limiting military support of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, positioning the U.S. to take a more active military role.<sup>15</sup>

The Houthis, on their side, have made overtures to Russia, stating in August 2016 through their now ally former President Saleh, “In the fight against terrorism we reach out and offer all facilities. Our airports, our ports... We are ready to provide this to the Russian Federation.”<sup>16</sup> Earlier in the month, Russia blocked a U.N. Security Council proposal to condemn the Houthis and, in the previous April, had abstained from a U.N. Security Council vote placing an arms embargo on the Houthis. In December 2016, there were also reports of a Houthi delegation meeting with the Russian deputy foreign minister.<sup>17</sup>

Where this process can lead is difficult to tell. But it is clear that as the conflict escalates and more powers and interests overlap, the situation becomes that much more difficult to resolve.

### *The Lessons of History*

This is not the first time the internal struggles of Yemen have drawn in and entangled foreign powers. Egypt deployed nearly 70,000 troops in the North Yemen civil war, resulting in 20,000 Egyptian casualties and massive war debts. This is considered a factor in Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War with Israel and is often referred to as “Egypt’s Vietnam”. Nasser’s Field Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, who committed suicide following Egypt’s defeat to Israel, summed up Egypt’s mistakes in Yemen: “We did not bother to study the local, Arab and international implications or the political or military questions involved. After years of experience we realized that it was a war between the tribes and that we entered it without knowing the nature of their land, their traditions and their ideas.”<sup>18</sup>

In the previous century, the Ottomans had a number of failed military expeditions into Yemen, which became known as “the cemetery of the Turks”. An Ottoman official remarked, “Yemen has become now the graveyard of Muslims and money.”<sup>19</sup> More than a decade after his exit from Sana’a, the last Ottoman pasha in charge of Yemen administration echoed the sentiments of Field Marshal Amer: “In my opinion, this is what happened, from the day we conquered it to the time we left it we neither knew Yemen nor did we understand it nor learn [anything] about it, nor were we, for that matter, able to administer it.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, “Trump administration weighs deeper involvement in Yemen war,” *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2017.

<sup>16</sup>“Yemen’s ex-president says could work with Russia to ‘fight terrorism’,” *Reuters*, August 21, 2016.

<sup>17</sup>“Russia receives Yemen Houthi delegation,” *Middle East Monitor*, December 15, 2016.

<sup>18</sup>Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen*, pg. 262.

<sup>19</sup>Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (Yale University Press, 2010), pg. 43.

<sup>20</sup>Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, pg. 44.



The lessons of history are clear in the futility of long-term success through military intervention especially when local social and political dynamics are not fully understood. The use of military force is unlikely to easily achieve its objectives. It is far more likely to lead to the continued suffering of Yemeni civilians and, given Yemen's proclivity in drawing further foreign powers into its civil wars, an expansion and escalation of the conflict, with multiple sides pairing off against one another. This is something that has proven disastrous in the on-going Syrian Civil War and underlines the need for diplomatic solutions.<sup>21</sup>

In order to effectively address and resolve this complex situation, policymakers need to be aware of and understand the different causal strands that led to the current conflict. They must not only address the struggle with the Houthis but also what continues to drive terrorist activity in the South. Without addressing all of these issues, the prospect for any long-term resolution to the violence in Yemen is unfortunately bleak.

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<sup>21</sup>See "Syria war: A brief guide to who's fighting whom," *BBC News*, April 7, 2017.