

# Yemen at War

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## I. Overview

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Yemen is at war. The country is now divided between the Huthi movement, which controls the north and is rapidly advancing south, and the anti-Huthi coalition backed by Western and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies that President Abdo Robo Mansour Hadi is cobbling together. On 25 March, the Huthis captured a strategic military base north of the port city of Aden and took the defence minister hostage. That evening Saudi Arabia launched a military campaign, in coordination with nine other, mostly Arab states, to stop the Huthi advance and restore his government. Hadi left for Riyadh and will attend an Arab League summit on 28 March. No major party seems truly to want to halt what threatens to become a regional war. The slim chance to salvage a political process requires that regional actors immediately cease military action and help the domestic parties agree on a broadly acceptable president or presidential council. Only then can Yemenis return to the political negotiating table to address other outstanding issues.

The political transition, in trouble for some time, began to unravel in September 2014, when Huthi fighters captured Sanaa, toppling the widely unpopular transitional government. Neither President Hadi nor the Huthis (a predominantly Zaydi/Shiite group, also known as Ansar Allah) honoured the soon concluded peace deal. In January, conflict over a draft constitution led the Huthis to consolidate control in the capital, precipitating the 22 January resignation of the prime minister and president; the latter subsequently fled to Aden.

The Huthi-Hadi divide is the most explosive, but it is not the only conflict. Tensions are also unsettling the recent marriage of convenience between the Huthis and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who, after being deposed in 2011, has taken advantage of popular dissatisfaction and tacitly allied himself with the Huthis against their common enemies to stage a political comeback through his party, the General People's Congress (GPC), and possibly his son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh. Divisions in the south, which was an independent state prior to its 1990 union with the north, are rampant as well. Southern separatists are internally split and suspicious of Hadi, a southerner who supports continued unity with the north. Then there are al-Qaeda and a nascent Islamic State (IS) movement, both determined to fight the Huthis and take advantage of the state's collapse to claim territory.

This combustible brew has overwhelmed the UN-led negotiations in Sanaa, a legacy of the 2011 GCC initiative and its implementation mechanisms. Initially, the political process was promising: it removed Saleh and facilitated a ten-month National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that reached constructive conclusions on the political

future. But after three years, stakeholders have little confidence UN-sponsored talks alone will overcome the impasse or produce a lasting settlement.

GCC countries have lost faith as well and are increasingly committed to reversing Huthi gains at virtually any cost. Saudi Arabia considers the Huthis Iranian proxies, a stance that pushes them closer to Tehran. Throwing their weight behind Hadi, the Saudis moved their embassy to Aden and reportedly bankroll anti-Huthi tribal mobilisation in the central governorate of Marib and the south. They lead efforts to isolate the Huthis diplomatically, strangle them economically and, now, weaken them militarily. In turn, the Huthis denounce Hadi as illegitimate and offer \$100,000 for his capture. They have conducted military exercises on the Saudi border and likely will harden their position in response to Saudi military intervention. They are less dependent on Tehran than Hadi and his allies are on Riyadh, but on today's trajectory, their relative self-sufficiency will not last long. They are already soliciting Iranian financial and political support.

More than others, the GCC had the financial clout and historical ties with Yemeni stakeholders to incentivise compromise, but it ramped up pressure while pinching off the safety valve. In March, when Hadi asked Riyadh to host GCC-brokered talks, it accepted and set impossible preconditions for the Huthis: to recognise Hadi as president and withdraw all fighters from Sanaa. The Huthis and Saleh's GPC, which the Saudis partially blame for Huthi advances, refuse to move talks from Sanaa, insisting that the UN continue its mediation there.

Egged on by regional powerhouses Saudi Arabia and Iran, Yemenis may not be able to avoid a prolonged war. If they are to, the GCC should step back from the military path and harmonise diplomatic efforts with the UN, which still has a critical role in facilitating compromise. The UN Security Council ideally would condemn regional military involvement in Yemen and at a minimum should refrain from endorsing and promoting it.

The immediate priority should be a UN Security Council brokered and monitored ceasefire, followed by UN-led peace talks with GCC backing, without preconditions, focusing on the presidency and leaving other power-sharing topics until basic agreement is reached on a single president with one or multiple vice presidents or a presidential council. Agreement on the executive would enable further talk on other aspects of pre-election power sharing in the government and military, and on state structure, particularly the future of the south, where separatist sentiment is strong. Both have been core drivers of conflict since the NDC ended in January 2014.

Without minimum consensus within and beyond its borders, Yemen is headed for protracted violence on multiple fronts. This combination of proxy wars, sectarian violence, state collapse and militia rule has become sadly familiar in the region. Nobody is likely to win such a fight, which will only benefit those who prosper in the chaos of war, such as al-Qaeda and IS. But great human suffering would be certain. An alternative exists, but only if Yemenis and their neighbours choose it.

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## II. The New Political Landscape

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Recent developments promise to be at least as transformative as the 2011 uprising. The first three years of transition were guided by a political roadmap formulated through the GCC initiative.<sup>1</sup> By negotiating President Saleh's resignation, the initiative avoided a civil war, but the underlying factors that brought about the unrest – intra-elite rivalries, corruption and economic distress – were not addressed. Instead, the new leaders fought over political control and spoils, while average Yemenis saw their economic and security conditions deteriorate. The transition became one in name only, much to the frustration of almost everyone.

For a time, the NDC offered hope. Bringing together diverse stakeholders, it produced principles for a new constitution. Yet, its mostly vague conclusions failed to generate consensus on pre-election power-sharing arrangements or on the contentious issue of state structure, particularly the future of the south, where the desire for independence is prevalent and growing.<sup>2</sup>

As frustration with the transition mounted, the Huthis took advantage of the weakness at the state's centre.<sup>3</sup> Both during and after the NDC, they expanded their territorial writ, moving southward out of their Saada and northern Amran strongholds toward Sanaa. In September 2014, their fighters easily captured the capital, riding a wave of anger at the government and its unpopular decision two months earlier to lift fuel subsidies. No less important to the Huthi advance was the tacit support of Saleh's political allies.<sup>4</sup> When the Huthis entered Sanaa, large parts of the security services, many sympathetic to the ex-president and all frustrated with Hadi and the transition, either supported them or refused to fight.

In retrospect, the September takeover marked a sea change in the power balance and was the beginning of the end for the troubled transition. That was not initially apparent, as the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), signed shortly after the Huthis entered Sanaa, offered a chance to clarify and improve the NDC conclusions.<sup>5</sup> But the opportunity was lost, as neither the Huthis nor Hadi fully implemented the accord.<sup>6</sup> By January 2015, a new round of confrontation over the draft

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<sup>1</sup> After eleven months of protests, then-President Saleh signed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative and accompanying implementation mechanisms in November 2011. They offered him domestic immunity from prosecution in return for his resignation. The GCC includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>2</sup> For background on the southern issue, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°114, *Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question*, 20 October 2011; and N°145, *Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown*, 25 September 2013.

<sup>3</sup> For background on the Huthi movement's origins, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°86, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 27 May 2009. For its post-2011 evolution, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°154, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, 10 June 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Through a series of battles, they aligned with disgruntled tribesmen and Saleh loyalists against common enemies: Salafis, the Sunni Islamist party Islah, the Ahmar family and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a powerful commander (no relation to the Ahmar family) under Saleh who defected during the 2011 uprising. For an explanation of Huthi expansion and relationship with these groups, see Crisis Group Report, *The Huthis*, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> The PNPA provided for power sharing in a new, inclusive technocratic government; outlined steps for economic and military-security sector reforms, including disarmament; and reopened discussion of state structure, particularly the number of federal regions.

<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, the Huthis consolidated and expanded their authority in Sanaa and beyond, violating the spirit and letter of the accord. Hadi was no more faithful to the deal. He did not im-

constitution prompted the Huthis to surround the presidential palace, consolidate control of the capital and place Hadi and his government under house arrest. Rather than accept Huthi dictates, the prime minister and president resigned on 22 January. As UN-led talks to fill the power vacuum faltered, the Huthis moved unilaterally on 6 February, making a “constitutional announcement” that established a “revolutionary council”, “high security council” and other associated bodies, in clear violation of the constitution.<sup>7</sup>

This overreach galvanised resistance. In opposition, the Huthis enjoyed significant support from many parts of the political spectrum, largely because they relentlessly highlighted the transition’s flaws. But the steps they took in January were widely perceived, domestically and internationally, as a power grab.

All political parties, including Saleh’s GPC, immediately rejected the “constitutional announcement”. Huthi opponents organised protests in Sanaa, Ibb and Taiz. Several southern and central provinces, Aden and Taiz included, announced they would no longer take orders from Huthi-dominated Sanaa. International backers of the transition also reacted swiftly. Citing security concerns, the U.S. embassy suspended operations and evacuated its personnel on 15 February. The EU, UK, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates followed suit.

On 21 February, President Hadi escaped house arrest and fled to Aden, where he issued a statement reasserting his authority as president and accusing the Huthis of a coup. He is cobbling together an anti-Huthi alliance, including parts of the southern movement (Hiraak), a group demanding greater southern autonomy or independence; popular committees from his home Abyan governate, also in the south; and tribesmen and other political leaders, mostly from the south and historically Shafai/Sunni areas of the north. Yemen is thus split between the Huthi-controlled north and Hadi’s anti-Huthi coalition based in Aden.

But the Huthi-versus-Hadi divide is only one part of a complex conflict map. The Huthis have cooperated with Saleh’s GPC against Hadi and other adversaries, but Saleh and the Huthis have a fraught history, having fought six wars against each other.<sup>8</sup> Neither trusts the other; their recent cooperation notwithstanding, they are competing for political dominance, especially in the northern tribal highlands and the military.

The anti-Huthi bloc is also internally divided. It includes staunch unity advocates, especially in the north, as well as the Hiraak, which is overwhelmingly committed to southern secession. Hadi’s support within this group is tenuous at best. Southern separatists resent his pro-unity stance, while some pro-unity advocates suspect him of harbouring a hidden separatist agenda.<sup>9</sup> In the south, critics accuse him of siding

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plement provisions such as expanding the Shura (consultative) Council. His government sent mixed messages, at times publicly calling for security forces to cooperate with Huthi popular committees (security committees); at other times violently clashing with them. Neither side publicly proposed a clear plan to return authority smoothly to the state security apparatus.

<sup>7</sup> Huthi representatives argue that the announcement tried to preserve some main compromises discussed in the UN talks and give the GPC and their opponents something. For example, in the constitutional announcement, the new legislative body includes the current parliament, where the GPC has a majority, along with members from other groups, including Islah, Ansar Allah, southerners, youth and women. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2015.

<sup>8</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hiraak member, southern civil society activist, GPC member, Sanaa, March 2015; telephone interviews, Hiraak supporters, March 2015.

with Abyan and adjoining Shebwa province against their traditional adversaries in Lahj and Dalia.<sup>10</sup> After his unsuccessful three years in office, most groups view him as weak and ineffective. His support is a function of what he stands against, not for.

Also part of the fray are al-Qaeda and a possibly nascent IS movement, which announced its presence in November 2014 and claimed responsibility for the 20 March attacks that killed over 140 worshippers at Zaydi mosques in Sanaa. Both jihadi groups are dedicated not only to killing Huthis, whom they view as Shiite infidels, but also to attacking the state and seizing territory. Al-Qaeda is reportedly expanding especially in the south, benefiting from state collapse and anti-Huthi sentiment.

The overlap of geographic and religious divisions – in particular the predominance of Zaydis (Shiites) in the northern highlands and Shafais (Sunnis) in the central, southern and western parts – amplifies and complicates the conflict. Anti-Huthi resistance is strongest in Shafai areas, including the southern and central portions of northern Yemen, and in former South Yemen.<sup>11</sup> Yemenis from Shafai areas routinely invoke this historic divide, arguing that these areas are less amenable to Huthi influence and will aggressively resist their expansion.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, a previously absent Shiite-Sunni narrative is creeping into how Yemenis describe their fight. Zaydis-Shafais differences are less marked than those between Shiites and Sunnis elsewhere in the region, but their long history of coexistence is beginning to break down. Huthis and their political adversaries, especially the Sunni Islamist party Islah, at times portray each other in harsh sectarian terms. Opponents refer to the Huthis, improbably, as Twelvers (the predominant Shiite branch, including in Iran). The Huthis often refer to their enemies broadly as *takfiris* (Muslims who accuse other Muslims of being unbelievers), conflating Islah, which includes the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Given this rhetoric, it is not surprising that the Yemeni, regional and wider international media routinely and misleadingly reduce a complex struggle to one between a Shiite, Iran-supported militia (the Huthis) and Saudi-backed Sunnis (Islah and others).

The regionalisation of the conflict may be the most dangerous development of the past six months. Huthi foes have been receiving Saudi financial support, diplomatic backing and, reportedly (and well before the military intervention), military assistance, as Riyadh is said to be funding tribal mobilisation in both the north, especially in Marib, and the south through the popular committees. The Saudis cut direct funding to the Yemeni government after the Huthi takeover in September and now have upped the ante with military strikes.<sup>13</sup> Funds distributed to tribes could easily find

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<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hiraak supporter, southern civil society activist, Sanaa, March 2015; telephone interviews, Hiraak supporters, March 2015.

<sup>11</sup> There is also strong and growing resistance in the north, especially in Sanaa, where groups like the National Salvation Alliance, a coalition that includes members of political parties, especially Islah, and social groups opposed to the Huthis, as well as the Rafdh (Rejection) Movement, which is also part of the National Salvation Alliance, are organising protests against the Huthis. There are likewise dissenting voices among the Zaydi religious elite, who reject Huthis' violence and/or their movement away from traditional Zaydism. See Crisis Group Report, *The Huthis*, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, southern movement politicians, Sanaa, September 2014; Yemeni Socialist Party member, southern businessman, Sanaa, October 2014; southern movement politicians, Aden, October 2014; political independent from al-Baydah, Sanaa, November 2014; Hiraak member, GPC supporters, Sanaa, February 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Bernadette Meehan, a spokeswoman for the National Security Council, said the U.S. would provide "logistical and intelligence support" to the Saudi-led military operations. "While U.S. forces are not taking direct military action in Yemen in support of this effort, we are establishing a joint plan-

their way to extremist groups through tactical alliances, and the latter may benefit also from the recruitment potential that war and chaos provide. This in turn could widen schisms within the broad anti-Huthi camp and aggravate both north-south and intra-south divisions, with grave implications for the country's unity. Iran has openly entered the fray, pledging economic support to the Huthis in Sanaa and to support the country's unity, which their opponents interpret as Huthi domination.<sup>14</sup>

### III. A Beleaguered Negotiation Process

Yemen is heading toward a long war and extensive fragmentation, with no viable exit. The political process as conceived – even if it has produced agreement on some key issues – has proven incapable, at least by itself, of stemming the violence. The UN-led negotiations have been as politically contested as the transition they were designed to manage. After three years, all parties, with some justification, can point to moments when the process was manipulated, agreements unfairly implemented and commitments inadequately enforced. Over time, confidence has eroded, even as the UN remains an essential facilitator of any potential final settlement agreement.

The latest round in Sanaa, which began after the January resignation of the president and prime minister, was designed to fill the void left by their departure, through a broadly acceptable pre-election power-sharing arrangement that would return to the NDC's transition roadmap.<sup>15</sup> It made some progress, including an agreement for a national council (*al-majlis al-watani*) with two chambers: an upper house composed of the existing parliament, in which the GPC holds a majority, and a lower house with all NDC components, including the Huthis, Hiraak, youth, women and other groups. There is also agreement on forming a government of national unity that includes all main parties and in which the Huthis would take part, though details are unresolved.

The presidency issue is the main challenge. There is broad agreement on a collective body, achieved either by installing deputies to Hadi or choosing a presidential council on which he might or might not have a seat. Most parties seemed close to agreeing to a council – though the number of members and their identities was not decided – when Hadi fled to Aden and retracted his resignation. Backed by the Saudis, he has refused compromise.

While negotiators have made some progress, virtually the entire spectrum has lost confidence they can produce a fair, durable agreement. To avoid being cast as spoilers, the major parties have engaged, but simultaneously pursued other goals, including by force. For some, scepticism about the process is longstanding. From the start of the transition, Saleh's GPC has believed it was treated unfairly because of its promi-

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ning cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate U.S. military and intelligence support". "Egypt Says It May Send Troops to Yemen to Fight Houthis", *The New York Times*, 26 March 2015.

<sup>14</sup> "Deputy FM: Iran Supports Independence, National Unity in Yemen", Fars, 12 February 2015. Since a Huthi delegation visited Tehran in March, Iranian support has become more vocal, promising economic aid that includes expanding ports, building power plants and providing fuel. "Houthis say they have secured aid package from Iran", Al Jazeera English, 14 March 2015.

<sup>15</sup> This includes moving forward with a constitutional referendum and eventual presidential and parliamentary elections.

nence in the old regime.<sup>16</sup> The transition was rejected entirely by large parts of the Hiraak, which refused to send representatives to the NDC.

Today sceptics have expanded to include virtually all political groups: the GPC, Islah, the Huthis, Hiraak, Hadi supporters, youth activists and others. Islahis believe the Huthis participated with them in the UN-led negotiations only to gain time to seize Sanaa; they and others consider that the subsequent Peace and National Partnership Agreement (21 September 2014) did little but legitimise the Huthi takeover.<sup>17</sup> The Huthis contend that their 6 February constitutional announcement responded in part to a rigged negotiation process engineered to extend, not resolve, the stalemate and so guarantee continued political paralysis and the accompanying economic and security crises, for which they, as the de facto power on the ground, would be blamed.<sup>18</sup>

The UN has weakened its hand. It no longer has, if it ever did, sufficient leverage to encourage or enforce agreements. The UN Security Council's ill-timed January 2015 decision to sanction two Huthi commanders and Saleh after the September takeover was particularly costly. Imposed only when support for the transition already had waned, sanctions have been criticised domestically, including for coming too late and focusing too narrowly on only one set of spoilers. The Huthis wear them as a badge of honour, unaffected by UN travel bans or asset freezes. They have had little to no impact on Saleh's domestic popularity, which is rising in some circles, especially within the GPC and among those who want a return to the relative security of his rule.

The U.S. was blinkered by its counter-terrorism priorities. Satisfied with Hadi's cooperation on this front, it and other Western governments failed to pressure him sufficiently to move ahead with the political and economic reforms agreed in the NDC. Including other groups in government or implementing anti-corruption measures could have taken the wind out of the Huthis' sails and strengthened the political process. Even more damaging, those with most influence – the Saudis and Iranians in particular – are taking steps to undercut the negotiations. Their apparently unconditional support respectively for the Hadi and Huthi coalitions, as well as seeming opposition to compromise, is hardening the main camps' positions.

With Hadi on his way to an Arab League summit and Huthi and Hadi spokesmen debating how much of Aden the Huthis have seized, the status of negotiations is as unclear as the reality on the ground. No sooner was a new round of talks announced, to be held in Doha, when Hadi's foreign minister proclaimed there would be no further dialogue in light of the Huthi push southward and called for GCC military intervention. Now that Riyadh, in coordination with the GCC, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, has used force, the space for negotiation is as narrow as it is urgent to take advantage of it. Oman, the only GCC country not to publicly back military action, could be a useful channel for de-escalation.

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#### **IV. Conclusion**

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Yemen has yet to descend into the mass communal violence and sectarianism seen in Syria or Iraq. Given the parties' longstanding, if sceptical, participation in talks, there is reason to believe they could return to the table if the right formula is found. But

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<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interviews, GPC party leaders, Sanaa, September 2014, February 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Islah members, November 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Ansar Allah representative, Sanaa, February 2015.

the situation is rapidly worsening, with more fighting in more places, and external intervention is aggravating the potential for protracted violence. Unless this deterioration is halted, the result is likely to be a war similar to those decimating other Arab countries.

The regional tide, of course, is not flowing in a helpful direction. The upheaval in the Arab world in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the intensification of the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry have made all parties reluctant to compromise. The challenge for Yemeni negotiators is to find a path to de-escalation even as fighting rages in other theatres. Yet, the regional mood should also give the parties, particularly the domestic ones, who have the most to lose, incentive for restraint. Sectarian-inflected proxy wars have produced few winners. A compromise political agreement would be a much less costly way to achieve reasonable ends.

Ideally, de-escalation would come in the form of an immediate UN Security Council brokered and monitored ceasefire, followed by revived talks sponsored by the UN and backed by the GCC that aim at resolving first the most basic issue: executive authority. The GCC, and particularly Saudi Arabia, could help to resolve this issue by encouraging Hadi to accept, at a minimum, collective leadership – or even better to resign as part of a broadly accepted agreement on executive leadership to enable a fresh start. Oman, which has not overtly taken sides in the dispute, could serve as a possible venue or quiet facilitator.

If the parties resolve the presidency and de-escalate tensions, Yemenis then could move on to negotiate other crucial transition elements: further details on pre-election power sharing and a framework for addressing state structure. Progress already made in talks indicates there may be plausible, peaceful solutions, but, so far, Yemenis and their backers seem to prefer a fight.

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