
CFR Backgrounders

Yemen in Crisis

Author: [Zachary Laub](#), Online Writer/Editor

Updated: April 29, 2015

Introduction

Yemen faces its biggest crisis in decades with the overthrow of its government by the Houthis, a Zaydi Shia movement backed by Iran. As the Houthis captured the capital of Sana'a and advanced south toward the Gulf of Aden in March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition launched an air campaign to reinstate Yemen's internationally recognized government.

These developments have derailed a political transition following a 2011 uprising against longtime President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Amid factional fighting, [al-Qaeda's Arabian Peninsula franchise](#) has found new opportunities to capture territory. Meanwhile, the Houthi advance and Saudi intervention have provoked a humanitarian catastrophe, and many Yemenis have fled by land and sea.

The Saudi-led intervention poses a test for the country's new leadership. (Saudi King Salman came to power in January 2015, following the death of his half-brother, King Abdullah.) Analysts also worry that escalating foreign involvement could introduce sectarian conflict resembling fighting in Syria and Iraq. With numerous armed factions able to spoil any potential settlement, the prospects of a return to negotiations remain uncertain. Many experts question whether Yemen can once again be a viable, unified state.

How did Yemen become so divided?

The modern Yemeni state was formed in 1990 with the unification of the U.S.- and Saudi-backed Yemeni Arab Republic, in the north, and the USSR-backed People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, to the south. The military officer Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled North Yemen since 1978, assumed leadership of the new country. Somewhat [larger than the state of California](#), Yemen has a population of about twenty-five million.

Despite unification, the central government's writ beyond the capital of Sana'a was never absolute, and Saleh secured his power through patronage and by playing various factions off one another.

Under Saleh, Yemen faced numerous challenges to its unity. Al-Hirak, a movement of southern Yemenis who felt marginalized under the post-unification government, rebelled in 1994; they have

since pressed for greater autonomy within Yemen, if not secession. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the related Ansar al-Sharia insurgent group have captured territory in the south. The [Houthi movement](#), whose base is among the Zaydi Shias of northern Yemen, rose up against Saleh's government six times between 2004 and 2010.



Yemen's administrative divisions. (Courtesy CIA)

Washington lent its support to Saleh beginning in the early 2000s, when counterterrorism cooperation became Washington's overriding regional concern. The United States gave Yemen \$1.2 billion in military and police aid between 2000, when the USS *Cole* bombing in the Yemeni port of Aden first made al-Qaeda a U.S. priority, and 2011, according to the online database [Security Assistance Monitor](#).

Rights groups long [charged](#) that Saleh ran a corrupt and autocratic government. As the Arab uprisings spread to Yemen in 2011, the president's political and military rivals jockeyed to oust him. While Yemeni security forces focused on putting down protests in urban areas, al-Qaeda made gains in outlying regions.

Under escalating domestic and [international pressure](#), Saleh stepped aside after receiving assurances of immunity from prosecution. His vice president, Abed Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi, assumed office as interim president in a transition brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and backed by the United States. As part of the GCC's timetable for a transition, in 2013 the UN-sponsored [National Dialogue Conference](#) (NDC) convened 565 delegates to formulate a

new constitution agreeable to Yemen's many factions. But the NDC ended after delegates couldn't resolve disputes over the distribution of power.

What are the causes of the crisis?

Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, Hadi's government lifted fuel subsidies in July 2014. The Houthi movement, which had attracted support beyond its base for calling out faults in the transition process, organized mass protests demanding lower fuel prices and a new government. Hadi's supporters and the Sunni Islamist party Islah held counter rallies. Clashes broke out between them and the Houthis, who captured the capital by mid-September.

The UN brokered a peace deal in late September 2014 under terms seen as favorable to the Houthis. Under it, they would withdraw from Sana'a, and all Yemeni parties would agree on a [transitional technocratic government](#).

But Houthi advances toward the end of 2014 exacerbated Yemen's fractures: The Houthis clashed with forces loyal to Islah, as well as Sunni tribesmen that allied with AQAP. Southern separatists ramped up their calls for independence. Yemen's armed forces split as well. Deposed President Saleh continues to command the loyalty of some elements of the armed forces. They allied with the Houthis, contributing to their battlefield success.

AQAP, described by the U.S. government as the most dangerous affiliate, has benefitted from the chaos.

In January 2015, after a constitutional dispute between the Houthis and the government, the Houthis consolidated their control of the capital and placed Hadi and several members of the government under house arrest. Hadi's government resigned rather than submit to Houthi dominance. The next month, the Houthis issued their own constitutional declaration and established governing bodies, moves that provoked public backlash and international condemnation. The United States and several EU and Gulf countries closed their embassies. The UN Security Council called on the Houthis to [withdraw from government and security institutions](#).

Hadi went into exile in Saudi Arabia, but remains Yemen's internationally recognized executive. Meanwhile, the Houthis [continued their southward advance](#), and encircled the strategic port city of Aden by March.

On March 26, 2015, Saudi Arabia began air strikes against the militia group, intending to roll back advances by the Houthis, whom it views as a proxy of rival Iran and a threat to its southern border, and reinstate Hadi. The conflict is the first major one undertaken by the new king, Salman, and a test for his son, Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman.

Who are the parties to this conflict?

The **Houthis** began in the late 1980s as a religious and cultural revivalist movement among practitioners of Zaydi Shi'ism in northern Yemen. The Zaydis are a minority in the majority-Sunni Muslim country, but predominant in the northern highlands along the Saudi border, and until 1962, [Zaydi imams](#) ruled much of the region. The Houthis [became politically active](#) after 2003, opposing Saleh for backing the U.S.-led war in Iraq. Also known as Ansar Allah, the Houthis

repeatedly fought the Saleh regime—and, in 2009, an intervening Saudi force. In post-Saleh Yemen, the militarily capable but politically inexperienced movement gained support from far beyond its northern base for its criticisms of the transition. However, in its push to establish dominance, it has [alienated one-time supporters](#), writes the International Crisis Group.

Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, though deposed in 2011, has gained in popularity among some Yemenis who have grown disillusioned with the transition. He and his son Ahmed Abdullah Saleh command the loyalty of some elements of Yemen's security forces. Their alliance with the Houthis is a tactical one: Saleh is a secular nationalist, and the Houthis fought his regime for many years. In late April, Saleh called on his loyalists to [withdraw from captured territories](#), a demand of the [UN Security Council](#). Saleh's loyalists oppose Hadi's government and seek to [regain a leading role](#) in Yemen. Saleh's party, the General Peoples' Congress, holds a majority in parliament.

Iran is the Houthis' primary international backer and has allegedly provided the Houthis with economic support. But regional specialists caution against overstating [Tehran's influence](#) over the movement. "The Houthis are much less a client of Iran than Hezbollah or the Iraqi Shia militias," says Texas A&M University's [F. Gregory Gause III](#). "They're more homegrown." (Iranians and Houthis adhere to [different schools of Shia Islam](#).) The Houthis and Iran share similar geopolitical interests: Iran seeks to challenge Saudi and U.S. dominance of the region, and the Houthis are the primary opposition to Hadi's Saudi- and U.S.-backed government in Sana'a.

President Abed Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi, Yemen's internationally recognized president, has called his resignation null. He remains in exile in Saudi Arabia, however, and it is unclear whether he commands much authority on the ground. The Sunni Islamist party **Al-Islah** (Reform), which represents many tribesmen around the country, back Hadi's government. They are the Houthis' chief antagonist.

"The Saudis have dialed back their goals. They would claim victory for just a return to the table." —F. Gregory Gause, III, Texas A&M University

Saudi Arabia has led the coalition air campaign to roll back the Houthis and reinstate Hadi's government. Riyadh perceives that Houthi control of Yemen would mean a hostile neighbor that threatens its southern border. It also considers Yemen a front in its contest with Iran for regional dominance, and losing Sana'a would only add to what it perceives as an ascendant Iran that has allies in power in Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus. Riyadh's concerns have been compounded by its perception that [the United States is retrenching](#) from the region and its pursuit of an Iranian nuclear deal will embolden Tehran. Journalist Peter Salisbury writes that Saudi Arabia may be trying to restore its longstanding strategy of ["containment and maintenance"](#) vis-à-vis its southern neighbor: Keep Yemen weak, and therefore beholden to Riyadh, but not so weak that state collapse could threaten it with an influx of migrants.

Saudi Arabia has cobbled together a coalition of **Sunni-majority Arab states**: Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the UAE. (That includes all the GCC states except for Oman, a potential mediator.) The operation seems to [consolidate Saudi Arabia's leadership](#) over the bloc, which has split over other regional issues, and signals consensus against allowing Iran to gain influence in Yemen. But their assistance to the Saudi-led air campaign has been

limited. Both Egypt and Pakistan receive Gulf aid, yet neither volunteered the ground troops that Saudi Arabia requested. As a result, Gause says, “the Saudis have dialed back their goals. They would claim victory for just a return to the table, where Hadi has a seat and the Houthis have been pushed back from Aden.”

The United States’ interests include maintaining stability in Yemen and security for Saudi borders; free passage in the Bab al-Mandeb, the [chokepoint](#) through which [4.7 million barrels of oil per day transit](#); and a government in Sana’a that will cooperate with [U.S. counterterrorism programs \(PDF\)](#). In the current conflict, Washington has provided the Saudi-led coalition with logistical and intelligence support, as well as stationed warships in the Gulf of Aden. But while the United States continues to support coalition operations, by late April U.S. officials [pressed for restraint](#), warning their Saudi counterparts that the intensity of the bombing campaign was undercutting U.S. and Saudi political goals—namely, a return to the transition.

What is the role of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula?

AQAP, described by the U.S. government as the [most dangerous al-Qaeda affiliate \(PDF\)](#), has [benefitted from the current chaos](#). It has suffered some battlefield setbacks at the hands of Houthi forces, but the Houthis’ rapid advances have led some Sunni tribesmen to align with al-Qaeda against a perceived common threat. A distracted Yemeni army has eased pressure against the militants.

Though U.S. [drone strikes](#) continue, in late March Washington [withdrew special operations forces](#) that were training and assisting Yemeni troops, and the Saudi air campaign has reportedly [destroyed military installations](#) belonging to U.S.-trained Yemeni counterterrorism units. In April, AQAP captured much of the city of Mukalla, and sprung [three hundred inmates](#), many believed to be AQAP members, from the city’s prison.

What is the humanitarian situation?

With a [poverty rate](#) of more than 50 percent, Yemen was the Arab world’s poorest countries prior to the Houthi offensive and Saudi air campaign. The conflict has pushed the country into humanitarian emergency, UN agencies and relief groups warn.

The civilian toll has been high, with nearly one thousand dead and 3,500 injured, by the World Health Organization’s count, and critical infrastructure destroyed, according to international aid groups.

The [UN refugee agency](#) reports that upwards of 120,000 Yemenis have been internally displaced since the start of the Saudi intervention and shelter is scarce. Humanitarian groups anticipate possible mass outflows across Yemen’s land borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman, and across the Gulf of Aden to Somalia and Djibouti.



A boy

pulls containers of water amid an acute shortage in Sana'a. (Photo: Mohamed al-Sayaghi/Reuters)

As of mid-April 2015, the UN's World Food Program estimated that [twelve million Yemenis](#) do not have consistent access to adequate food. Shortages of staples such as food, water, and fuel—necessary for water pumps and sanitation—sent prices surging, and fighting has hampered their distribution.

Saudi Arabia has enforced a UN arms embargo by air and sea. This has exacerbated these food and [fuel shortages](#); Yemen relies on imports for both. The country imports more than [80 percent of its food](#), including 90 percent of staples such as wheat and all of its rice, according to relief group Oxfam. Enforcement of the embargo could also [hinder delivery](#) of emergency aid supplies, the [UN warned](#).

Meanwhile, the aid group [Doctors Without Borders](#) reports the near collapse of Yemen's health-care infrastructure.

What are the prospects for a solution to the crisis?

The Houthis' assertion of power and the Saudi-led air campaign have militarized the divisions between the parties, and in the short term, conditions may militate against a negotiated settlement.

The Houthis, who long felt marginalized from Yemeni politics, “think that if they even compromise, that will mean defeat and their [eventual elimination](#),” journalist Adam Baron told PBS *Frontline*, while southerners believe that the Houthis pose a reciprocal threat to them. As Iran and Saudi Arabia increasingly perceive each other meddling in Yemen, they will likely up their support to their respective clients. That could [introduce a sectarian dimension](#) to Yemen's civil conflict, making the conflict even more toxic.

These factors will make it more difficult for Yemen's many parties to return to the negotiating table. In April 2015, UN special envoy Jamal Benomar, who had brokered the GCC-sponsored transition in 2001, [resigned](#) from his post. Ould Cheikh Ahmed, a UN veteran who previously coordinated the Ebola response, was [appointed](#) Benomar's successor.

But while the Houthis have established their dominance over Sana'a and beyond, they cannot govern Yemen on their own. Without buy in from Yemen's numerous other parties and financial support from its Gulf neighbors, Yemen faces financial collapse, protracted civil conflict, and an escalating humanitarian crisis.

Additional Resources

The International Crisis Group [discusses the groups at war](#) in Yemen and the prospects for deescalation. A previous report offers a [deep dive](#) into the Houthi movement.

The *New York Times* [maps the Saudi air campaign](#) and Houthi territorial gains.

A UN Security Council panel [assessed developments in Yemen \(PDF\)](#) in February 2015.

Journalist Peter Salisbury [discusses](#) how actors in Yemen's internal conflict are influenced by the Saudi-Iranian "cold war."

More on this topic from CFR

[China, Tibet, and Religious Oppression](#)

Speaker: Ellen Bork, Director of Democracy and Human Rights, Foreign Policy Initiative

Presenter:

[Irina A. Faskianos](#)

, Vice President, National Program & Outreach, Council on Foreign Relations

[Economist: Render Unto Caesar](#)

[Economist: The Party Versus the Pope](#)

View more from [Peace, Conflict, and Human Rights, Yemen](#)

[Back to backgrounders home](#)