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# Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention

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## Summary

This report provides material on the latest crisis in Yemen and the U.S. policy response. For further background and analysis on Yemen, see CRS Report RL34170, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

Yemen's internationally backed transition government, which replaced the regime of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, appears to have fully collapsed. President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi went into hiding on March 25, 2015, after over a year in which his government and tribal allies have gradually been supplanted by an alliance comprised of the Houthi movement and loyalists of former president Saleh. Before disappearing, President Hadi had called on the international community and his Gulf Arab allies to intervene militarily, which Saudi Arabia and other nations did on March 25, bombing Houthi-Saleh forces.

There is a significant terrorist presence in Yemen, and U.S. policymakers are concerned that without a willing counterterrorism partner such as President Hadi, the United States may lack necessary intelligence cooperation on the ground to counter groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization that has attempted attacks against the United States on several occasions.

The White House issued a statement on March 25 blaming the Houthis for causing the crisis in Yemen. The United States recognizes President Hadi as the legitimate leader of Yemen, and President Obama authorized "the provision of logistical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations." The Administration claimed that while U.S. forces are "not taking direct military action in Yemen in support of this effort, we are establishing a Joint Planning Cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate U.S. military and intelligence support." For the international community, especially the United States, the concern may be over Yemen becoming a proxy war for wider Saudi-Iranian confrontation—a battle which could empower extremists on both sides, especially transnational terrorists allied with either AQAP or the Islamic State.

As recently as fall 2014, the Obama Administration expressed cautious optimism about Yemen's trajectory, though the 2014-2015 takeover of Sana'a by the Houthis, a clan from the Zaydi sect (related to Shia Islam) has upended Yemen's political transition. The State Department reports that the United States committed more than \$221.4 million in assistance to Yemen in FY2014, in addition to \$316.23 million in FY2013 and more than \$353 million in FY2012. U.S. military assistance to Yemen has focused on bolstering its unmanned aerial surveillance capabilities and training its armed forces. Current annual appropriations language includes a provision that would restrict U.S. funding of Yemen's military were it to be controlled by a foreign terrorist organization.

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## **Government Collapse and Regional War in Yemen**

Yemen's internationally-backed transition government, which replaced the regime of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, appears to have fully collapsed. President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi went into hiding on March 25, 2015, after over a year in which his government and tribal allies have gradually been supplanted by an alliance comprised of the Houthi movement and loyalists of former president Saleh. Before disappearing, President Hadi had called on the international community and his Gulf Arab allies to intervene militarily, which Saudi Arabia and other nations<sup>1</sup> did on March 25, bombing Houthi-Saleh forces.

Now, Yemen is yet another Arab state in the throes of a civil war enflamed by the regional Sunni-Shia rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran backs the Houthis while the Sunni Arab monarchies, along with other states such as Egypt, back President Hadi's internationally-recognized government. With the Houthi-Saleh alliance in control of a significant amount of Yemeni territory, fighting could last months, unless the prospect of facing an international coalition of forces brings combatants back to the negotiating table.

For the United States, the collapse of Yemen's transition government after two and a half years is an unwelcome development. There is a significant terrorist presence in Yemen, and U.S. policymakers are concerned that without a willing counterterrorism partner such as President Hadi, the United States may lack necessary intelligence cooperation on the ground to counter groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization that has attempted attacks against the United States on several occasions.

The White House issued a statement on March 25 blaming the Houthis for causing the crisis in Yemen. The United States recognizes President Hadi as the legitimate leader of Yemen, and President Obama authorized "the provision of logistical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations." The Administration claimed that while U.S. forces are "not taking direct military action in Yemen in support of this effort, we are establishing a Joint Planning Cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate U.S. military and intelligence support."<sup>2</sup> However, it is unclear if airpower alone would be sufficient to unravel the Houthi-Saleh alliance. It remains to be seen if the Saudi-led military intervention will deploy ground forces in Yemen. For the international community, especially the United States, the concern may be over Yemen becoming a proxy war for wider Saudi-Iranian confrontation—a battle which could empower extremists on both sides, especially transnational terrorists allied with either AQAP or the Islamic State.

### **Prelude to the Conflict**

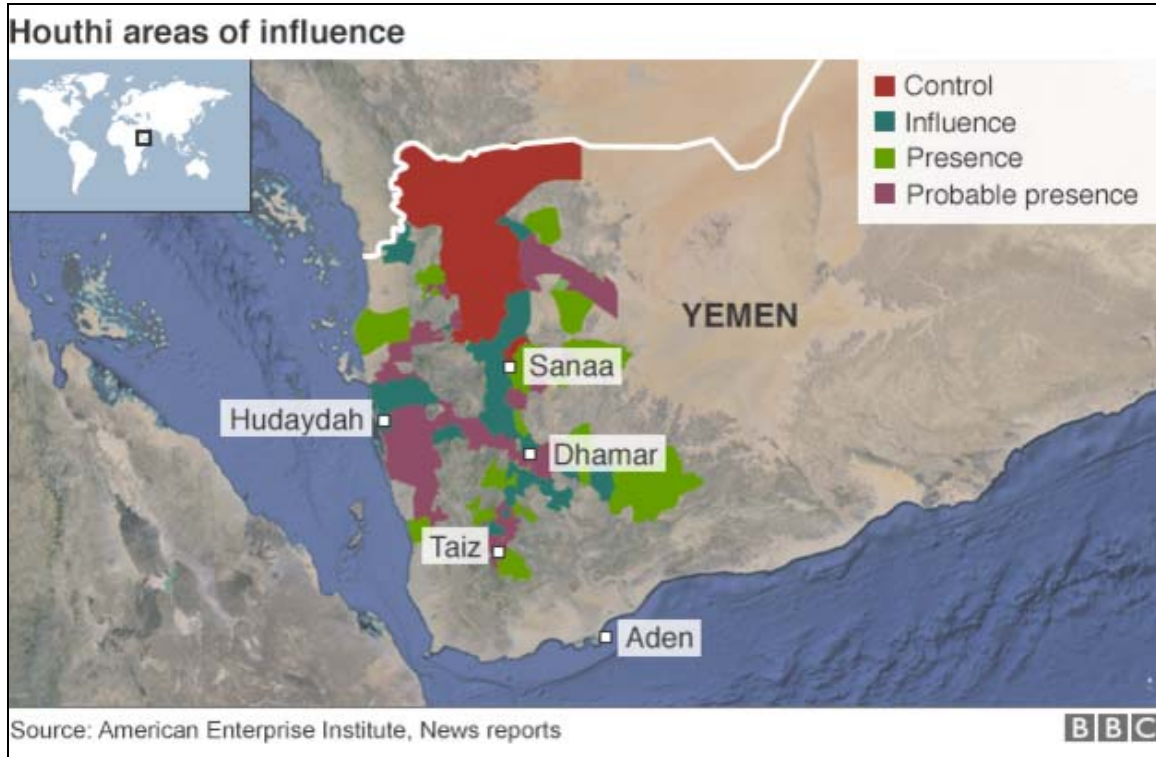
Although the Houthi-Saleh alliance has been gradually seizing control of Yemeni provinces and government/military installations for more than a year, over the past few months they have rapidly outmaneuvered President Hadi, who had been under house arrest since January. Hadi

<sup>1</sup> Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Jordan joined the Saudi-led operation. Oman declined. Egypt has sent naval support. Saudi news sources claim that Pakistan and Sudan took part as well.

<sup>2</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the Situation in Yemen, March 25, 2015.

escaped from his Houthi captors and fled to Aden, where he denounced the coup against him and began to marshal the remains of the national military as well as loyal tribal militias to counter Houthi-Saleh advances.

**Figure 1. al Houthi Areas of Influence**



**Source:** American Enterprise Institute, BBC News.

In mid-March, Houthi-Saleh forces engaged military units loyal to President Hadi around Aden’s airport, and President Hadi’s headquarters were bombed. Hadi called for United Nations and international intervention to buttress his forces, but mere days later, rapid advances of Houthi-Saleh forces closed in on Yemen’s second and third largest cities, Aden and Ta’iz. Saudi Arabia pledged to “take necessary steps” if no peaceful solution to the conflict was reached immediately. By March 25, Hadi’s military position had become untenable, as Houthi-Saleh forces took control of Aden’s airport and surrounding military bases.

As Houthi-Saleh forces advanced on Aden, Saudi Arabia moved its military forces close to the border with Yemen. In 2009, the kingdom confronted the Houthis inside Yemen using mainly air power. For the Saudi royal family, the Houthi ascendancy, aided by Iran, represents a challenge to the monarchy’s legitimacy.

### **Status of American Government Personnel in Yemen**

On February 10, the U.S. State Department announced that it was “suspending” (as opposed to terminating) Embassy operations in Sana’a and was relocating U.S. personnel elsewhere. As of late March 2015, all U.S. government personnel have been relocated, and Ambassador to Yemen Matthew H. Tueller is currently working out of the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. On

March 21, the United States withdrew the remaining 120 U.S. military personnel in Yemen, including Special Operation Forces, from Al Anad Airbase in Lahij province. The withdrawal occurred just a day after AQAP militiamen seized a town 20 miles from the airbase and terrorists claiming affiliation with the Islamic State reportedly killed 137 people inside two Zaidi mosques in the capital.

## The U.S. Policy Response

Although many observers believe that the departure of U.S. military and diplomatic personnel from Yemen may have limited the U.S. capacity to counter terrorism in Yemen, U.S. officials have attempted to reassure the public that the United States maintains ample capacity in the region to counter threats. According to the U.S. State Department, “We also continue to actively monitor terrorist threats emanating from Yemen and have capabilities postured in the area to address them. As we have in the past, we will take action to disrupt continuing, imminent threats to the United States and our citizens.”<sup>3</sup> According to one report, “Even after the withdrawal of American troops, the Central Intelligence Agency will still maintain some covert Yemeni agents in the country. Armed drones will carry out some airstrikes from bases in nearby Saudi Arabia or Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, as was done most recently on Feb. 20.”<sup>4</sup> However, according to another source citing an unnamed U.S. official, “CIA drone strikes will continue, but there will be fewer of them.”<sup>5</sup>

## Recent United Nations Security Council Resolutions

On February 15, 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted UNSC 2201, demanding that Houthi rebels in Yemen “immediately and unconditionally” withdraw from government institutions, release President Hadi and all others from house arrest, and engage in United Nations-brokered negotiations toward reestablishing a democratic transition. On February 24, 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted UNSC 2204, which extended existing sanctions against targeted individuals disrupting Yemen’s transition for another year. The United Nations Yemen Sanctions Committee, established in a previous resolution (UNSC 2140) is still searching for the financial assets of previously designated individuals, such as former president Saleh and two leaders of the Houthi movement.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. State Department, “Relocation of U.S. Personnel From Yemen,” Press Statement, Jeff Rathke, Director, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Press Relations, Washington, DC, March 21, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> “Out of Yemen, U.S. Is Hobbled in Terror Fight,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> “U.S. counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen Collapses as Country Descends into Chaos,” *PBS Newshour*, March 24, 2015.

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