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# Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention

**Jeremy M. Sharp**

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

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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, has collapsed. In its place is an alliance comprised of the Houthi movement and loyalists of former president Saleh. Current President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi is now in exile in Saudi Arabia, which launched a major military operation against the Houthi/Saleh alliance on March 25; the stated goal of this operation is to restore President Hadi to power.

To date, after more than two months of fighting that has resulted in as many as 1,400 Yemeni casualties and 500,000 displaced persons, Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners continue to conduct military operations against Houthi fighters and their allies. From a military standpoint, the Saudi-led coalition has conducted numerous air strikes in support of tribal allies and Hadi loyalists on the ground and blockaded Yemen's coastline and closed Yemen's airspace in order to prevent Iran from resupplying the Houthis.

In order to restore stability to Yemen, the Obama Administration has been supporting a United Nations-led process in Geneva to reach a negotiated settlement between Yemen's warring factions. The United States reportedly continues to provide unspecified military and intelligence support to the Saudi military efforts. As of mid-June, U.S. and international attempts to begin a political process have accelerated, and United Nations-backed peace talks are now underway in Geneva, Switzerland.

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. Nevertheless, the United States reportedly has been able to act either unilaterally or perhaps in concert with Saudi Arabian intelligence against AQAP and its associated allies. On June 16, AQAP released a video statement acknowledging that a recent U.S. strike had killed Nasser al Wuhayshi, AQAP's leader and the second-highest-ranking leader of Al Qaeda's international terrorist network.

As recently as fall 2014, the Obama Administration had 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), 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. 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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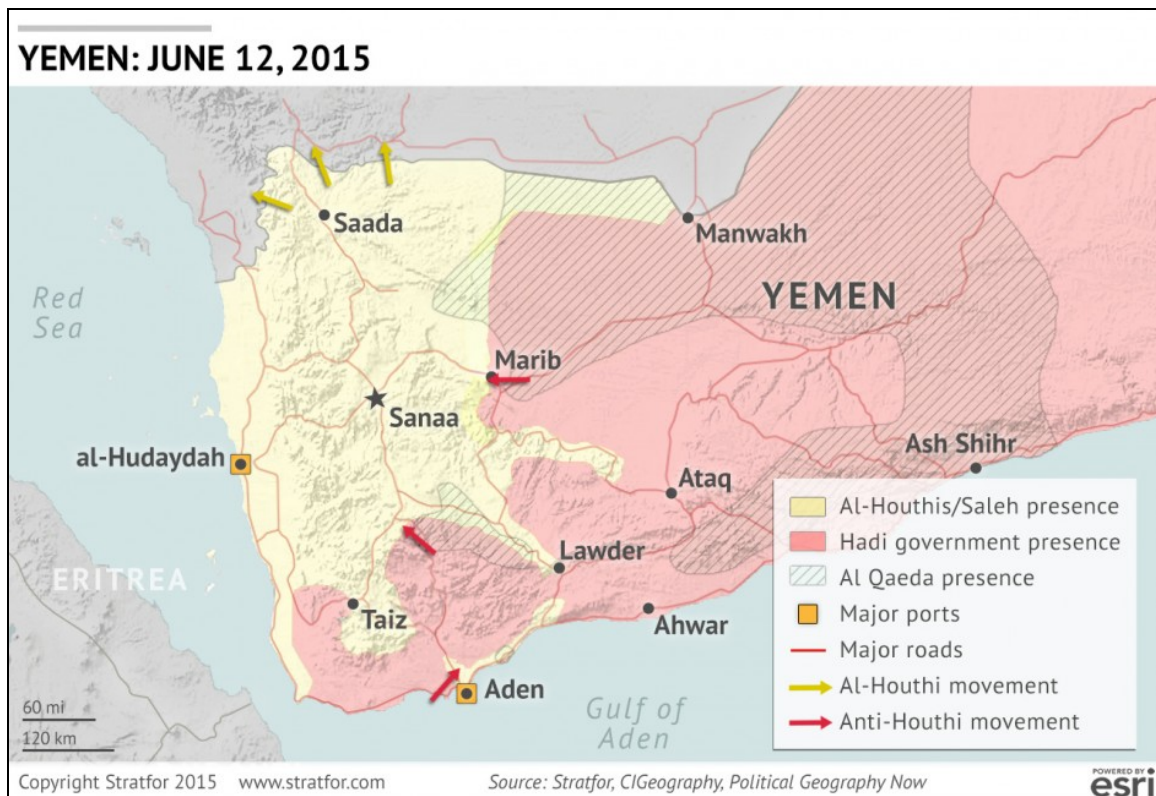
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## Latest Developments

After more than two months of fighting that has resulted in as many as 1,400 Yemeni casualties and 500,000 displaced persons, Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners continue to conduct military operations against Houthi fighters and their allies. Saudi Arabia launched what it refers to as “Operation Decisive Storm” in late March 2015 in order to restore the now-exiled President of Yemen, Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, to power and push Houthi rebels back from seized territories. The Saudi military changed the name of the operation to Restoring Hope in late April.

From a military standpoint, the Saudi-led coalition has conducted numerous air strikes in support of tribal allies and Hadi loyalists on the ground and blockaded Yemen’s coastline in order to prevent Iran from resupplying the Houthis. As of June 2015, it would appear that Saudi efforts have yet to reverse Houthi gains, though the situation remains fluid and victories by either side would appear tenuous. For example, though the Saudi-led coalition has kept the southern port of Aden from falling to the Houthis entirely, the city remains divided. Moreover, in early June, clashes have continued along the Saudi-Yemeni border, as Saudi Patriot missile batteries intercepted a Scud missile fired by Houthi/Saleh forces into the kingdom.

**Figure 1. Conflict in Yemen**



Source: <http://www.stratfor.com>.

According to Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution:

After more than two months of conflict, the rebels have strengthened their grip on most of the country. Only in the far eastern region, in Hadhramaut province, have they failed to advance. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) controls Hadhramaut and its capital at Mukalla, Yemen's fifth largest city. This is AQAP's largest-ever stronghold. It is carrying out terror attacks on Houthi targets from its stronghold. Exiled president Abd Rabbu Hadi still has control of parts of Aden, the largest port on the Arabian Sea. But even in Aden, the anti-Houthi camp is not united. Some fighters are southern secessionists who want independence for South Yemen, not a restoration of Hadi's government in Sanaa.<sup>1</sup>

From a political standpoint, President Hadi remains in exile in Saudi Arabia, and though much of the international community considers him the legitimate head of state, the Houthis are in control of what remains of Yemen's government on the ground. Unless the Houthi movement can be rolled back to its home province of Sada'a in northern Yemen, it would appear that any future governing arrangement would come as the result of a compromise between Hadi and the Houthis.

From a humanitarian standpoint, Yemen, which under normal circumstances is an extremely impoverished country, is experiencing severe shortages of food, water, and fuel for electricity. Relief organizations estimate that approximately 60% of the population is without access to clean drinking water and sanitation. According to United Nations estimates, 78% of the population is in need of emergency aid. Saudi Arabia's air campaign has repeatedly bombed Houthi-controlled territory and infrastructure, causing significant collateral damage. The Saudi coalition's naval and air blockade, designed to thwart Iran's resupply of the Houthis, also has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Yemen by preventing aid shipments from quickly reaching the population. The Houthis also have intercepted aid shipments intended for civilians. The U.S. State Department has "urged all parties to allow the entry and delivery of urgently needed food, medicine, fuel and other necessary assistance through UN and international humanitarian organization channels to address the urgent needs of civilians impacted by the crisis."<sup>2</sup>

## U.S. Policy and Peace Negotiations

When Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm/Restoring Hope, it initially received U.S. political and military support. However, Saudi Arabia's ongoing military campaign in Yemen places the Administration in an apparent quandary. On the one hand, in the context of Saudi unease over the potential nuclear deal with Iran and preexisting U.S.-Saudi cooperation against terrorist groups in Yemen, U.S. officials deemed it important to publicly support Saudi military operations against the Houthis. On the other hand, as the operation has continued over time, Yemen has become increasingly unstable, creating opportunities for extremists such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State to increase their influence. Moreover, the conflict has enflamed Saudi-Iranian tensions, leading to confrontational statements between respective Saudi and Iranian government officials and near maritime clashes between Saudi and Iranian vessels in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "A Bleeding Wound on the Saudi Border: Why Yemen Peace Talks are unlikely to make Progress," *Brookings Markaz Blog*, June 15, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Saudi-led Naval Blockade leaves 20m Yemenis facing Humanitarian Disaster," *The Guardian*, June 5, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> "WFP [World Food Programme] says to Deliver Iran Aid Cargo for Yemen after Ship Docks in Djibouti," *Reuters*, (continued...)

In order to stabilize the situation, reduce Saudi-Iranian tensions, and possibly provide Saudi Arabia an exit strategy from Yemen, the Administration has been supporting a United Nations-led process in Geneva to reach a negotiated settlement between Yemen's warring factions. The joint statement issued during the President's recent summit with various leaders of the GCC states, said that "With regard to Yemen, both the United States and GCC member states underscored the imperative of collective efforts to counter Al-Qa'ida [Qaeda] in the Arabian Peninsula, and emphasized the need to rapidly shift from military operations to a political process..."<sup>4</sup>

As of mid-June, U.S. and international efforts to begin a political process have accelerated, and United Nations-backed peace talks are now underway in Geneva, Switzerland. The U.S. State Department<sup>5</sup> recently acknowledged that Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Anne Patterson and U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Matthew Tueller led an American delegation to Oman and Saudi Arabia where they conducted talks with various Yemeni figures, including Houthi leaders, in order to jumpstart a U.N.-led political process.<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Houthis released American Casey Coombs, a freelance journalist who had been detained by Houthi rebels for two weeks. The United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, also has reportedly been involved in shuttle diplomacy.

Currently, the Houthis and President Hadi have agreed to send delegates to the talks. Previously, President Hadi and his Saudi backers had insisted that they would not participate in peace talks until the Houthis adhered to United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216, which the United States voted in favor of back in April 2015. UNSCR 2216 demands that the "Houthis withdraw from all areas seized during the latest conflict, relinquish arms seized from military and security institutions, cease all actions falling exclusively within the authority of the legitimate Government of Yemen and fully implement previous Council resolutions."

## Terrorism

As has been demonstrated in the past, when Yemen is in the throes of domestic conflict and its military occupied, terrorist groups such as AQAP are able to seize territory in outlying provinces. This has been the case during Operation Decisive Storm. In the early days of the conflict, AQAP militiamen, who already had been active in the eastern province of Hadramawt, attacked government installations, air and sea ports, and hydrocarbon facilities. AQAP seized the city of Al Mukalla in April, and the city's ruling body has "wrapped al Qaeda into local administration in order to avoid infighting."<sup>7</sup> According to one report, "the residents of Mukalla said AQAP has

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(...continued)

May 22, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, U.S.- Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement, May 14, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> The U.S. State Department has stated that it "welcomes the June 6 announcement that the UN-facilitated consultations among Yemeni stakeholders will begin in Geneva on June 14. We reiterate the call of the Security Council for Yemenis to attend these talks in good faith and without preconditions.... We further condemn the June 6 missile attack on Saudi Arabia, in addition to other recent attacks on Saudi Arabian territory by forces affiliated with the Houthis and former President Saleh. We recognize Saudi Arabia's right to defend its territory, its borders, and its people." See, U.S. State Department, "United States Welcomes UN-facilitated Consultations on Yemen," June 8, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> "U.S. Met Secretly With Yemen Rebels," *Wall Street Journal*, June 1, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> "Al Qaeda seen assuming Policing Role in Eastern Yemen," *Reuters*, May 14, 2015.

refrained from imposing strict interpretations of Islamic law, such as banning Arabic music and Western fashions, as the group did when it briefly established an “emirate” in the Yemeni province of Abyan in 2011.”<sup>8</sup> It also has renamed itself as the “Sons of Hadhramaut” perhaps in order to identify with the local population.

Despite the apparent end to U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation as a result of the Houthi takeover of the government, the United States reportedly has been able to act either unilaterally or perhaps in concert with Saudi Arabian intelligence against AQAP and its associated allies. In recent months, the United States has allegedly carried out several strikes against AQAP targets. According to one report,

This indicates that the U.S. still has access to actionable intelligence on high profile targets, despite the increasing security vacuum in Yemen. As the US shut down their embassy in Yemen in February and evacuated its staff, forcing the CIA to significantly reduce its HUMINT capability in the country, it is likely that the Saudi intelligence, complemented by U.S. technical intelligence coverage, is providing the US with information on militants' movements and positions. The strikes also suggest that AQAP militants are becoming more vulnerable to precision airstrikes as the group advances in the open desert terrain of southern Hadramawt.<sup>9</sup>

## AQAP Leader Killed

In perhaps the most significant counter-terrorism operation in Yemen in the past three to four years, on June 16, AQAP released a video statement acknowledging that a recent U.S. strike had killed Nasser al Wuhayshi, AQAP’s leader and the second-highest-ranking leader of Al Qaeda’s international terrorist network. AQAP’s military commander is now Qasim al Rami has been appointed as AQAP’s new “Emir.” According to Jane’s:

Of the four senior founding members of the group [AQAP], only Raymi [Rami] remains operational within AQAP. The series of US UAV [Unmanned Aerial Vehicle] strikes since the start of the year have all but wiped out the generation within the group that was most closely associated with Al Qaeda’s central leadership, and with Bin Laden in particular. The attrition of this generation within AQAP may have significant consequences that extend beyond the group’s inner workings, as it is seemingly facing inevitable change with the coming to the fore of a generation that emerged after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US.<sup>10</sup>

## Status of American Government Personnel and U.S. Citizens in Yemen

On February 11, 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

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<sup>8</sup> “Quietly, al-Qaeda offshoots expand in Yemen and Syria,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> “AQAP’s Infiltration of Yemen’s Sunni tribes reduces Effectiveness of Precision Airstrikes, Sustains Jihadists’ Expansion,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, May 15, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> “Alleged US UAV strike kills AQAP leader in Yemen’s Hadhramaut,” *Jane’s Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, June 16, 2015.



June 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.

A group of Yemeni Americans from southeast Michigan is suing the United States government in U.S. court in order to compel the government to evacuate 37 Yemeni Americans stranded in Yemen. The plaintiffs are represented by the Michigan branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. In its defense, the U.S. government claims that it has been warning Americans not to travel to Yemen for years and that an evacuation amidst the current fighting would put American personnel at risk. According to U.S. State Department spokesperson Marie Harf, “American citizens overseas are one of our top priorities... We've always said that. But in this case, there's reasons we've been telling people not to go to Yemen, and in this circumstance, we believe this was the best course of action, using third parties and other countries to evacuate our citizens rather than sending in American assets, which, as you all know, in Yemen could be even more of a target.”<sup>11</sup> According to a U.S. State Department fact sheet, “As of April 28, the U.S. Embassy in Djibouti had assisted more than 500 U.S. citizens arriving from Yemen, plus their family members.”<sup>12</sup>

H.R. 1735, the House version of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization bill, includes Section 1273, a “Sense of Congress on Evacuation of United States Citizens and Nationals from Yemen.” This section finds that “over 550 Yemeni-Americans have registered as being unable to leave Yemen after the closure of the United States Embassy in Yemen in February 2015.” It includes a sense of Congress that the “President should exercise all available authorities as expeditiously as possible to evacuate United States citizens and nationals from Yemen.”

## Other Recent Congressional Action

The following is a summary of recent legislation concerning Yemen:

- S. 1376, the Senate version of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization bill, includes Section 1207, which states that no FY2016 Department of Defense assistance to Yemen may be used to provide assistance to “an entity in Yemen that is controlled by members of the Houthi movement.” However, this prohibition does include a national security waiver.
- In the House Report accompanying H.R. 2772, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2016, lawmakers noted that “Due to the uncertain security environment and lack of a U.S. diplomatic presence inside the country [Yemen] to monitor assistance, there are significant challenges to providing economic, health, and security assistance. For this

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. State Department Daily Press Briefing, June 1, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. State Department, “Assistance to U.S. Citizens in Yemen,” Fact Sheet, Office of the Spokesperson, May 6, 2015



reason, the Committee has deferred consideration of the funding requested for fiscal year 2016. The Committee recommendation continues to support humanitarian assistance, as appropriate, but notes the difficult operating environment for implementers of such programs.”

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

President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi fled Yemen 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 fleeing, President Hadi had called on the international community and his Gulf Arab allies to intervene militarily, which Saudi Arabia and other nations<sup>13</sup> did on March 25, bombing Houthi-Saleh forces.

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>14</sup>

Although the Houthi-Saleh alliance had been gradually seizing control of Yemeni provinces and government/military installations for more than a year, in the winter 2015, they had rapidly outmaneuvered President Hadi, who had been under house arrest since January. Hadi eventually 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.

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. To date, Operation Decisive Storm/Restoring Hope has been almost exclusively conducted using air power, though Saudi forces have not ruled out the introduction of ground forces. For the

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<sup>13</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>14</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the Situation in Yemen, March 25, 2015.

Saudi royal family, the Houthi ascendancy, aided by Iran, represents a challenge to the monarchy's legitimacy.

## **Author Contact Information**

Jeremy M. Sharp  
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs  
jsharp@crs.loc.gov, 7-8687