

Research Paper

Peter Salisbury

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Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State



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Summary

- Yemen's civil war has reached a stalemate in which an outright military victory by any of the many parties to the conflict is highly unlikely. Although widely presented as a war between two distinct coalitions, the conflict is in fact multipolar, fuelled by regional and international support for the various parties involved in the fighting.
- There is broad consensus among international policy-makers that the only way the conflict can be brought to a sustainable end is through political mediation. Yet the current UN-led peace process has not been structured in a way that reflects the complexity of the dynamics in play, and some policy-makers currently lack the capacity to develop a deep understanding of the situation in order to consider a more inclusive structure for peacebuilding and diplomacy.
- Maintaining the illusion that either the internationally recognized president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and his allies, or the alliance between the Zaydi Shia Houthi rebels and the supporters of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, are representative of all the warring groups in Yemen would be a mistake. Tensions are rife within both coalitions, and particularly so in the deeply divided anti-Houthi bloc.
- Because of the wide variety of local dynamics and grievances, Yemen risks seeing the 'big war' ended only to be consumed by a series of complex 'small wars' that are open to exploitation by national and regional actors.
- On the assumption that a durable ceasefire can be brokered and a political process initiated, policy-makers working on the Yemen conflict need to begin planning for a peace process that is more inclusive than were the abortive attempts during the transitional period of 2012–14, which prioritized elite-level mediation and security concerns – particularly counterterrorism initiatives – over the economic needs of the population.
- The new political process will need to give equal weight to bottom-up, grassroots local approaches to peacebuilding alongside top-down, national and elite-level interests; and ensure that the political, security and economic tracks of the transition are interlinked rather than dealt with separately.
- Failure to expand representation and to focus on local governance will almost certainly lead to renewed hostilities at a local level that could push Yemen a step closer to becoming a 'chaos state' – a country defined by little more than its borders, in which complex regional conflicts are deepened and prolonged by the interests and actions of external players.

1. Introduction

Unlike other wars that broke out in the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011, the conflict in Yemen did not come as a surprise. A civil war had been predicted long before the uprisings against incumbent regimes erupted elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. Fears that Yemen might become ‘the next Somalia’ or ‘the next Afghanistan’ had been mounting for years, as had been the possibility that the Yemeni state might fragment into a series of autonomous, rival geographic segments where local identity groups were strong enough – and well-armed enough – to sustain themselves.

These long-standing fears, coupled with concerns that Al-Qaeda or other jihadist groups might exploit the power vacuum arising from a breakdown of the state, were manifested most clearly in the international response to Yemen’s 2011 political crisis, when a split within the Sana’a regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh brought the country to the edge of civil war. A concerted international effort was made to broker a peace deal that prevented major conflict but left the status quo largely intact, most notably by providing immunity to the ousted Saleh; and by formalizing an interim power-sharing deal between the country’s major established political players, which allowed elite-level competition to continue while excluding other, more marginal groups from the new arrangement. The subsequent, abortive attempt at a two-year democratic transition, aimed at preventing the collapse of the state, ultimately represented the death throes of Yemen in its modern form.

At the National Dialogue Conference, a series of peace talks held in the Yemeni capital Sana’a over 10 months in 2013–14, a UN-appointed envoy and foreign powers attempted to marshal Yemen’s competing identities into a coherent whole. Physically if not psychologically, the talks succeeded in bringing together many – although not all – Yemeni factions. But the national dialogue also came to be perceived by many Yemenis as a sideshow – little more than a distraction from the real process of negotiation taking place within the country’s elite.

Yemenis contrasted the rhetoric of local and foreign champions of the dialogue, who hailed the transitional process as the beginning of a bright new future, with the reality they were experiencing: one of continuing deterioration in security, in the provision of essential services and in economic opportunity. The mounting scarcity of basic goods, services and decent work during the transition provoked local conflicts that metastasized in the absence of a functioning police force or judiciary, weakening the sense of national identity and calcifying local and ideological identities.

Yemen’s civil war was the all too predictable result of a decline that had been decades in the making and was not halted during the transitional period. A corrupt and increasingly weak central state that was either unable or unwilling to enforce its will beyond the cities, to act as a partner in development or to adapt to a more inclusive model of governance eventually collapsed under its own weight. Beyond governance, spoilers also played a key role. The civil war, it needs to be remembered, was ultimately sparked by the September 2014 coup against President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi led by the northern Zaydi Shia Houthi rebels, with the backing of former president Saleh.

The ensuing conflict has brutalized and polarized the Yemeni population to such an extent that it is now difficult to imagine that the country will return to any semblance of peace in the coming years. It seems all too likely that Yemen will soon join the ranks of the region’s ‘chaos states’, geographically

and socially fragmented nation states held together by little more than their formal borders, in which no single group holds the balance of power and the barriers to a negotiated settlement become ever larger because of the deepening divisions between competing regional and international interest groups.

The sheer destructive intensity of the conflicts raging across the region – especially in Iraq, Libya and Syria – highlights the cost of inaction in the early stages of civil wars. With Yemen there is still some hope that the international community can learn from recent experience. One important lesson is the need to understand who exactly is involved in the war, and who is supporting them locally and internationally, rather than attempting to corral the different parties to conflicts into two broad ‘sides’ that exist nowhere other than in policy-making briefs and news reports.

The reality is that most Yemenis do not support either the president or the northern rebels; rather, they are part of much smaller groups with their own identity, ideology, grievances and political goals, from secessionists in the south to Salafists in Taiz and Aden and tribal leaders in the north.

Such an approach reinforces a simplified narrative of the need for one ‘side’ to prevail over another, or for both ‘sides’ – each represented by a single interlocutor or small group of elite delegates – to reach an agreement on behalf of a complex and shifting mix of alliances and marriages of convenience that have little in common beyond mutual antipathy towards a rival faction. In Syria, efforts to shoehorn the opposition into a coalition made up of groups palatable to Western policy-makers but often with little real influence on the ground set back attempts to end the civil war there by months if not years. Libya now has three governments, no governance and a bewildering multitude of militias.

In the case of Yemen, the groups taking part in the civil war are routinely oversimplified into ‘pro-Hadi’ and ‘pro-Houthi’ camps. The reality is that most Yemenis do not support either the president or the northern rebels; rather, they are part of much smaller groups with their own identity, ideology, grievances and political goals, from secessionists in the south to Salafists in Taiz and Aden and tribal leaders in the north. Maintaining the illusion that either Hadi or the Houthi–Saleh alliance is representative of, or has control over these groups would be a dangerous folly.

There is a growing consensus among Yemen analysts and researchers that the transitional process of 2012–14 failed because of exactly such a gap in policy-makers’ understanding of Yemen, and because of the mismatch between the needs of the Yemeni people and the priorities of the transition’s foreign sponsors. Along with the Yemeni elites, the UN and the member states of the UN Security Council focused on political power-balancing at the elite level, reinforcing the power of these elites while ignoring local dynamics and historically marginalized groups such as the Houthis and southern separatists, and paying little more than lip service to addressing the collapse in services and standards of living.

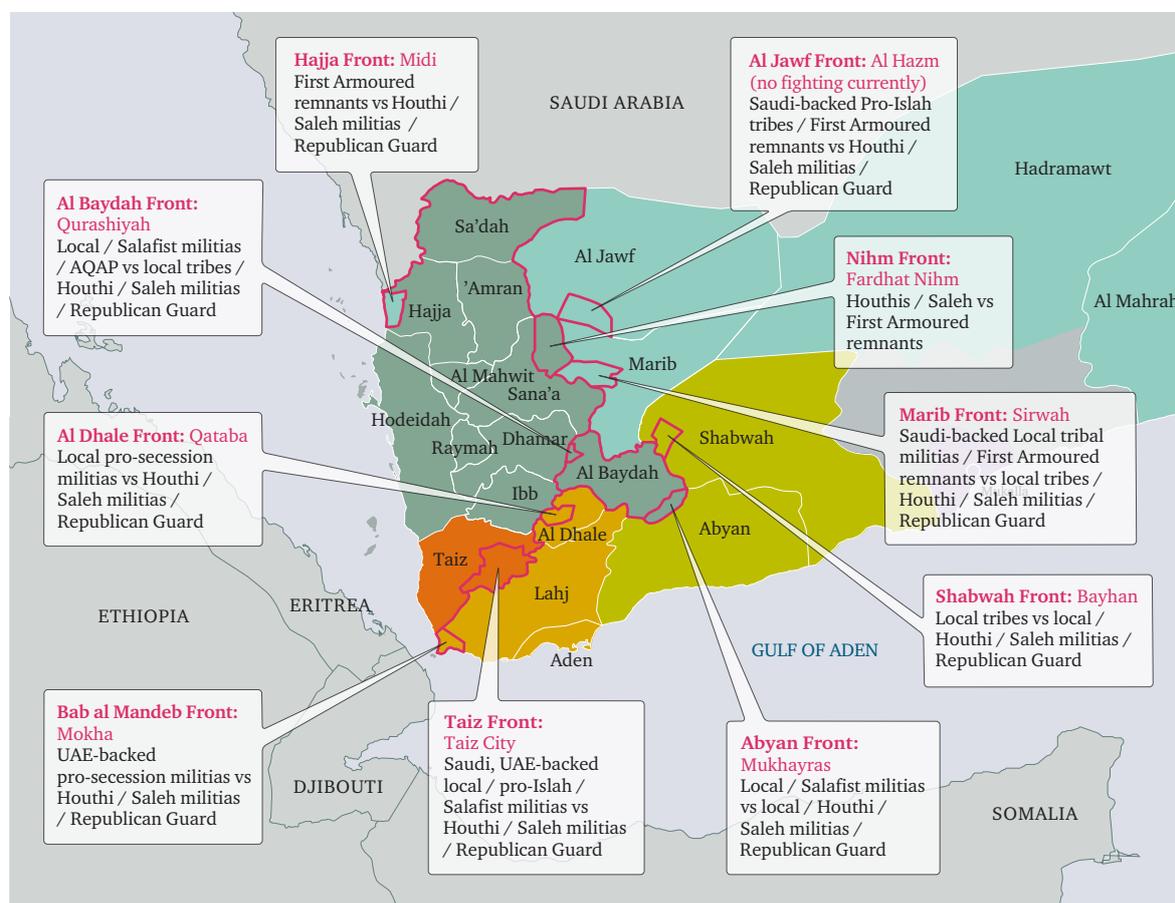
During research meetings and briefings held as part of Chatham House’s ongoing work on Yemen, policy-makers acknowledged this problem but argued that there was little they could do to address it given complexity of the conflict, the lack of readily available expertise on the country; and the paucity of resources and personnel available to those policy-makers who deal directly with Yemen. The country has been relegated to a lower order of priority than other, seemingly more urgent situations by already overstretched officials dealing with regional conflicts: the war in Syria, which has been

the source of a wave of refugees and the threat to the West of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda; or developments in Libya, a key conduit for refugee flows that is also a safe haven for radical jihadist groups with an eye on the West.

To address this gap, this paper, largely researched and written between October 2015 and April 2016, aims to help policy-makers and analysts deepen their understanding of the conflict in Yemen by building a narrative account of events in the country since the uprising and elite conflicts of 2011. It starts by explaining who is at war with whom, where and why. It then maps out the relationships between, and agendas of, key parties to the conflict, and identifies points of leverage that could be utilized in some form of ceasefire; and in a longer-term process that helps address grievances and create a roadmap for future political dialogue of the kind that is hoped will emerge from new peace talks.

The paper outlines the challenges that will face Yemeni and foreign officials in their attempts to restore security and build a lasting peace in the event of a successful mediation to end the war. Building on the author's experience of living and working in Yemen between 2012 and 2014, a Chatham House workshop held in London in November 2015, and field research by the author in Sana'a, Sa'dah and Aden in late 2015 and early 2016, the paper argues that engagement with local non-state actors who are party to the conflict – as well as developing a deeper understanding of the interplay between the many allegiances and rivalries involved in the conflict – are crucial to building sustainable peace in Yemen.

Map 1: Frontlines, April 2016



Mapping researched and compiled by the author. The boundaries and names on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by Chatham House.

In the event of an end to the ‘big war’, a replication of past patterns of behaviour – focusing on elite dynamics and ignoring localized issues – will most likely result in Yemen rapidly collapsing into a multitude of ‘small wars’: local conflicts that could in turn precipitate the resumption of hostilities at a national level. The international community should not abandon the current top-down approach to negotiating a political settlement, but should recognize the importance of pairing this high-level mediation track with a meaningful grassroots approach to local engagement aimed at understanding and addressing local grievances and conflicts and building peace from the ground up.

The window of opportunity for peace in Yemen is narrowing, and the cost of failure is rising. The Arab world’s poorest country is on the verge of total collapse, and one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world has the potential to deepen even further as the country descends into even bloodier, ever more complex war. Peace talks aimed at preventing Yemen from joining the ranks of the region’s chaos states began in April 2016 in Kuwait, although by early May the process had stalled as violence continued, and it was generally believed that a deal to end the war remained distant. Any negotiated agreement to halt the civil war would be the third of its kind in five years, and it would be unlikely that this would be the last required for Yemen this decade. A lasting peace in Yemen will require concerted international and local efforts to both ease elite-level hostile dynamics and address localized drivers of conflict.

2. Yemen's War in Brief Historical Context

A history of conflict

Yemen's civil war is not the first conflict to beset the Arab world's poorest country. Rather, it is the latest in a series of violent struggles dating back decades, if not centuries, for centralized political and economic dominance by a shifting succession of coalitions built around political expediency and backed by an ever-changing cast of regional and global players. For the sake of simplicity, this paper takes the revolutions of the 1960s in the north and south of Yemen – which until 1990 were separate states – as the starting point of a brief overview of the evolution of power and conflict in modern-day Yemen.

In 1962, an Arab nationalist revolutionary movement, formed within the northern Mutawakkilite kingdom of Yemen's armed forces, overthrew the country's ruler, the Zaydi Imam Mohammed al-Badr, declaring a republican state with the support of Nasserist Egypt and ending the millennium-long primacy of the Imamate over the northwestern highlands and central belt of the territory. Civil war broke out between the republicans and the royalists, who were backed by the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and other world and regional powers. The war ended in 1970 with a republican victory for the new Yemen Arab Republic (YAR).

As the war in the north was reaching an end, leftist revolutionaries in south Yemen were winning their own war in the Federation of South Arabia, a British protectorate. The war ended with a British withdrawal in 1967 and the formation of a socialist state, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The two Yemens began what would be inconclusive discussions over a potential unity pact after a north–south war in 1972. The respective northern and southern capitals, Sana'a and Aden, sponsored cross-border insurgencies in the hope of weakening each other and forcing through a hostile merger on preferential terms. Both countries were also beset by constant internal factional feuding; although in the YAR Ali Abdullah Saleh, a young military officer, seized control in 1978 with the support of his Sanhan clan along with powerful tribal and military backers. He would remain in power for more than three decades.

A 1986 civil war in the south, sparked by an attempt by then PDRY president Ali Nasser Mohammed to purge hard-left rivals from the southern state's leadership, resulted in the Nasser Mohammed faction fleeing north. Many displaced southern military officers, among them Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi (Yemen's future president), joined the northern military.

By the end of the Cold War the YAR and PDRY were on the brink of economic collapse, and the short-term incentives for unification had become so compelling that a hurried merger was quickly ushered through in 1990 by Saleh and Ali Salem al-Beidh, then secretary general of the southern ruling Yemen Socialist Party (YSP). But relations between the southern and northern leadership deteriorated rapidly after the unity pact. The southerners accused their northern counterparts of excluding them from executive decision-making and of directing a campaign of assassinations of security officials in the south. In a parliamentary election in 1993 northern parties won the majority of seats across the country.

In 1994 north–south tensions spilled over into an abortive secession attempt by the southern leadership, sparking a brief, brutal civil war. The southern military, which had not been properly integrated with its northern counterpart, was easily outmanned by the northern army, augmented by northern tribal militias and Arab *mujahideen* returnees from the civil war in Afghanistan along with southern military units from the losing side of the 1986 war.

The war left the northern elite in a position of dominance that would remain largely unchallenged until the uprising of 2011. Economic, political and military power lay with the country's Sana'a-based regime, an alliance between two broad networks, one built around President Saleh, who headed the country's biggest parliamentary force, the General People's Congress (GPC), and the other around the key sponsors of Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist party. The regime was underpinned by a deeply entrenched patronage system bolstered by growing oil output in the 1990s, and by higher oil prices, offsetting falling production, in the 2000s.

Saleh and the wider Islah network each had what effectively constituted its own military wing. Saleh held sway over the Republican Guard – in the 1980s and 1990s his praetorian guard, but later the biggest, best-equipped and best-trained part of the army. During the last decade of his rule Saleh oversaw the creation of a growing number of parastatal security organizations such as the Central Security Forces and National Security Bureau, as part of a concerted effort at coup-proofing the regime from both external and internal threats.

Islah's military strength came from the First Armoured Division, a military unit overseen by the conservative Sunni Islamist and Saleh's Sanhan clansman Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar. Mohsin is currently the deputy commander of Yemeni armed forces, and was appointed as Hadi's vice-president in April 2016. At the time of the 1994 war, the First Armoured Division, or Firqa, was the largest and most powerful military unit in the country. Islah also enjoyed the support of tribal militias loyal to the Al Ahmar family, the paramount sheikhs of the Hashid, Yemen's most powerful tribal confederation (and unrelated to Mohsin).

Personnel in the country's most important military, police and paramilitary units were largely drawn from the northern highlands, providing the regime with the ability to enforce its will elsewhere in the country without regard for local sensitivities. By filling the military with highlanders, the regime also ensured that a civil war or an internal schism would almost certainly lead to a nationwide breakdown in security, with the military, police and paramilitary forces withdrawn from the areas they both controlled and ostensibly protected.¹

The combined hard power of the two networks was sufficient to see off any threat to the regime, although not to enforce a nationwide monopoly over violence. From the early 2000s onwards a number of marginalized local and identity groups, excluded from regime patronage, began to mount challenges to the elite in Sana'a, from the violent uprising of the Zaydi Shia Houthis in the north to the peaceful secessionist movement in the south. These groups could do little more than foster local dissent and, in the case of the Houthis, carve out some local territorial control. Tribes in the hydrocarbon-rich provinces of Mareb and Hadramawt consistently complained that revenues from oil produced in their territories were not recycled into the local economy, and they occasionally clashed with the military. Oil revenues, bolstered from 2009 by the export of liquefied natural gas from Mareb, had become crucial to propping up the ever more costly patronage system, which had become

¹ For a detailed analysis of the Yemeni military and security services see Alley, A. (2013), *Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?*, Middle East Report 139, Brussels: International Crisis Group, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Yemen/139-yemens-military-security-reform-seeds-of-new-conflict.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Yemen/139-yemens-military-security-reform-seeds-of-new-conflict.pdf).

the main guarantee of peaceful cooperation between the Saleh and Islah networks, increasingly at odds over Saleh's apparent plan to pass power to his son Ahmed Ali.

Elite infighting

In 2006 Saleh was challenged for the presidency in a national election for the first time, with the Islah-led Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of opposition parliamentary groups, fielding a rival candidate. During the election period, public debate intensified over the nature of the regime and the lack of development in Yemen – a growing source of frustration among the country's educated urban middle class and rural poor. The regime was bolstered by considerable external support, however, during a period when Western and regional interest in Yemen was primarily driven by concerns over the local Al-Qaeda affiliate which, in 2009, merged with its Saudi Arabian counterpart in a new organization, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Washington still describes AQAP as the most dangerous Al-Qaeda affiliate to US national interests, following successive plots to attack the US embassy in Sana'a and to bring down airliners flying into the US.

External powers saw Saleh as a necessary evil, the sole figure whose rule could offer the level of stability required to maintain a consistent campaign against AQAP and its local affiliates.

Saleh was seen by his Western allies as an unreliable autocrat, and was widely acknowledged to be funneling training, support and equipment provided by foreign partners to military and security forces from his own network while slowly easing support for Mohsin's First Armoured Division. External powers saw Saleh as a necessary evil, the sole figure whose rule could offer the level of stability required to maintain a consistent campaign against AQAP and its local affiliates.

The regime was ultimately undone by elite infighting. By 2011 tensions between the Saleh and the Islah networks over the president's increasingly visible attempts to concentrate power around himself and his family had been growing for more than a decade. They came to a head as Yemeni demonstrators, inspired by protests movements across the region, took to the streets calling first for governmental reform and later for the Saleh regime to step down. This provided an opportunity for the Islah network to break from the regime and, arguably, attempt to seize power under the guise of supporting the protesters.² The breach in the regime led to fighting between military units and militias loyal to the two factions on the streets of Sana'a, as well as in Taiz, Ibb, Amran and beyond.

The power struggle in the northwest created a security vacuum elsewhere that presented an opportunity for a wide array of non-state actors to seize territory. AQAP expanded in the south of the country, while a sudden surge of activity in Sa'dah, home of the Zaydi Shia Houthi movement, which had been fighting the regime for the previous seven years, allowed the Houthis to seize control of the province in its entirety for the first time. The secessionist Hirak al-Janoubi, or Southern Movement, best known in Yemen as Hirak, intensified its four-year-old campaign of protests calling for a referendum on southern independence. Unrest grew in tribal areas of the country, particularly in Mareb province where local tribes repeatedly attacked a crucial oil export pipeline, placing mounting pressure

² Many members of Islah's youth movement had taken part in the early days of the protest movement and had initially been discouraged from doing so by the party leadership, until an attack by security forces on demonstrators in Sana'a on 18 March, which precipitated Ali Mohsin's defection from the regime in order to 'protect' the protesters.

on government revenues and foreign currency reserves. Fears that Yemen was about to collapse politically and economically, allowing Al-Qaeda to thrive, drove an aggressive diplomatic response to the political crisis, with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the UN, and Western and other embassies each engaged in attempts to prevent all-out war. In November 2011 President Saleh finally agreed to step down, under a deal proposed by the GCC states but brokered by the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar. The Saleh and Islah networks agreed to the deal because they had come to realize that neither faction could score a quick outright military win over the other.

Networks of influence

There is a tendency in Yemen, as in many countries, for analysts and the wider population to reduce key groups to simplified analytical units. This helps the casual observer understand the broad contours of dynamics between groups but often obscures their internal complexities.

Throughout this paper, the GPC and Islah, Yemen's two biggest political parties, are described as being at or near the centre of wider networks of political, tribal, military and economic influence. The GPC is located within the 'Saleh network', built around the person of the former president, while Islah sits at the centre of the network under its own name.

The decision to place the parties within wider networks of power is an important distinction and is aimed at moving beyond sometimes misleading rhetoric that can cause analysts to conflate political and ideological agendas of individuals or groups that may be part of a wider network for a variety of reasons – among them economic and personal. Both the Saleh and Islah networks are complex coalitions that include a wide range of ideologies and agendas, with the ultimate aim of serving network members' interests.

Saleh formed the GPC in 1982, in response to the rise of anti-authoritarian and leftist political parties in the north, and as an ultimately successful attempt to co-opt Local Development Councils, independent local authorities funded by remittances (the latter being a mainstay of Yemen's economy until the 1990s). The GPC also came to incorporate former rebels from the leftist National Democratic Front, which fought the northern regime during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Until 1990 the GPC was north Yemen's sole political party, in effect a broad tent for the regime. It was made up of a wide array of voices: Islamists, tribesmen, businessmen, Arab nationalists, Nasserists and civil society actors. Broadly nationalist and developmental in its outlook, the party served as much as a mechanism for distributing patronage and rewarding regime loyalists as it fulfilled any ideological function.

Islah was formed in 1990 to provide a tribal-Islamist alternative to the GPC and more importantly to the the YSP, which was to compete with the GPC in the multiparty elections that were agreed as part of the 1990 north–south unity pact. Islah, which was in effect carved out of the GPC, was made up of a mix of conservative sheikhs, business interests and religious groups including the Muslim Brotherhood and hardline Salafists.

Closely aligned with the Saleh regime in its early days, Islah eventually developed its own distinct identity and had considerable success in building a youth movement which included many reform-minded students seeking an alternative political voice to that of the regime. In the early 2000s, having split formally from the GPC after nearly a decade in coalition government, senior Islah figures helped form the collective of opposition parliamentary groups, the JMP, which fielded an alternative candidate to Saleh in the 2006 presidential election.

Yemenis tend to see anyone who is broadly pro-Saleh and liberal by nature as being ‘GPC’ and anyone who has ties to the Al Ahmars, Mohsin or Sunni religious groups as ‘Islah’, regardless of formal political affiliation. Normally, what they are describing is affiliation to the broader network of interests that each party represents, rather than formal party membership.

The Houthis and Hiraq

Yemen’s northern Houthi rebels and southern separatists rose to prominence during the early 2000s but did so through sharply different methods. The Houthis, an offshoot of the Zaydi revivalist Al Shabbab al-Moumineen or ‘Believing Youth’ movement, were quick to take up arms, while Hiraq’s leadership has since its inception been consistent in saying that the secessionist movement is non-violent.

Both movements were born of a shift in the Sana’a regime from the mid-1990s onwards, from a more traditional consensual and mediation-focused approach to governance to a more centralized and authoritarian model of rule. The 1994 civil war left the Saleh regime with access to considerable military and economic resources, and without a credible challenge to its authority that could not be put down through force. President Saleh became increasingly autocratic, splitting with Islah before parliamentary elections in 1997, for example, and appointing only GPC members to key government posts.

The Houthis

In the early 2000s Hussein al-Houthi, a young Zaydi cleric who had broken away from the Believing Youth movement to found his own, more radically inclined Zaydi revivalist movement, rose to prominence as a critic of the Saleh regime. He focused his ire on Saleh’s decision to cooperate with the Bush administration in its global ‘war on terror’. In 2004, after several failed attempts at coercion and mediation, Yemeni security forces chased al-Houthi to his home province of Sa’dah, where he was killed after several weeks of heavy fighting. Rather than crushing dissent in the north, the military campaign sparked an insurgency in Sa’dah, once a major seat of power in the Zaydi north but increasingly marginalized after the revolution of the 1960s. The so-called Sa’dah wars lasted for six years, eventually drawing in neighbouring Saudi Arabia.

In much the same way that the GPC and Islah are frequently conflated with the wider network that surrounds them, the Houthis as a fighting force are more often than not presented as a monolithic militia-cum-religious movement in the vein of Hezbollah. When Yemenis from beyond areas of Houthi influence discuss ‘Houthis’, they tend to mean the wider network of those who fought alongside the Houthis during six wars with the Saleh regime between 2004 and 2010, and assume that they follow the ideological teachings of Hussein al-Houthi and his younger brother Abdelmalek, who led the fight against government forces from around 2006. But a complex coalition of forces has underpinned the group’s hard power since the first Sa’dah war.

Many of those who joined the fight against the Saleh regime from 2004 were local groups, tribesmen and even military officers, who had long resented what they perceived as a deliberate policy in Sana’a of marginalizing the Zaydi heartland of Sa’dah, leaving the province underdeveloped and isolated in order to prevent the re-emergence of a power centre in the north; and of the promotion by the government of a Sunni Salafist doctrine in mosques and later also schools across Yemen. They also saw the replacement of Zaydi clerics at local mosques and the creation of a Saudi-backed

Salafist *madrassa* in the area as introducing an unwanted dimension of sectarianism and religious competition into the country, and as a direct attempt to weaken the appeal of local Zaydi leaders.

Once-powerful Sa'dah tribes from *sayyid* backgrounds, who claimed to be descended from the Prophet Mohammed, were scornful of Hussein's ideology, and later of the young Abdelmalek's claims to authority in a strictly hierarchical social order, and initially stayed out of the conflict. But the Sana'a regime adopted a 'scorched-earth' policy in the province, aided in 2009 by the Saudi Arabian air force, driving many local groups into fighting the government and joining the Houthi-led military alliance in the area. It remains unclear to this day how many of the Houthi movement – as the alliance is generally named by Yemenis – are part of the cause for purely ideological reasons, and how many joined the fight either to protect their home province or to increase their leverage with the Sana'a regime. But it is clear that the movement is as much energized by rhetoric around external threat – at first of the Saleh regime and later of Saudi 'aggression' – as it is driven by an internally coherent ideology or long-term political and military goals.

Hirak

Hirak emerged out of the frustrations of civil service employees and the southern military rank and file who were forcibly retired after the 1994 civil war boiled over in the early 2000s. It grew into a secessionist movement largely because of the Saleh regime's decision to quash the early protest movement rather than address its grievances. Formed in 2007 to call for improved pensions and the creation of more jobs in the south, Hirak evolved quickly into an independence movement with southerners, convinced that the 'northerners' of the Saleh regime, who had looted the south and seized swathes of land after the 1994 war, were stealing the south's natural resources and deliberately refusing to recycle the profits into local development.

Hirak has been riven by divisions since its inception, with a number of rival personalities attempting to claim leadership of the group. These include the winners and losers of an internal 1986 civil war; the Sultanly class who ruled the south in cooperation with the British until the uprising of the 1960s; and local leaders, self-made 'sheikhs' who attracted increasing interest from younger southerners frustrated by the inaction of their self-proclaimed leadership. More recently, the movement has also gained a religious wing, made up of conservative Salafist clerics and their pupils who see the regime in Sana'a as unjust. Since its inception the movement has struggled to build external support.

3. The Seeds of Civil War: Yemen in Transition

Shifting power dynamics and the role of international mediation

Several key shifts in Yemen's hard-power dynamics over the course of 2011 are crucial to understanding the country's subsequent trajectory towards civil war. The split between the Islah and Saleh networks ended a three-and-a-half-decade alliance that had provided the regime in Sana'a with the hard power required to maintain a stranglehold over national political and economic life, and the country at large with a modicum of stability.

The relationship between the two networks veered from uneasy alliance to full-blown rivalry, which in turn had a deeply destabilizing effect on national security: both Saleh and Islah affiliates would spend much of the next four years working to undermine and degrade one another's political, military and economic networks while jostling for influence in the government institutions they controlled, seriously undermining overall governance and security.

The fracturing of the regime had a second-order effect of giving space to marginalized groups such as the Houthis, Hiraq and tribes in resource-rich parts of the country, enabling them to provide an effective challenge to the central government for the first time, and hence advocate more powerfully for their group interests; and to AQAP, which seized swathes of territory in south Yemen over the course of 2011 and began its own experiments in local governance.

At a technical level, the transition was designed to prevent further unravelling of the state into fragments dominated by local and identity-based groups, while improving political participation in Sana'a and preventing further violence between the rival factions of the old regime. The approach owed much to Jamal Benomar, the UN envoy to Yemen from 2011 to 2015.

Benomar, a veteran of the UN-led efforts to broker a post-war consensus in the Arab world, has written widely on post-conflict peacebuilding. In a 2003 paper published in the run-up to peace talks in Iraq, he argued that deals that bring wars to an end should be separated from the processes that produce new social contracts such as constitutions.

Drawing on a study of peace processes in 14 countries, he argued that conflating peace deals with post-conflict settlements tends to produce barriers to institution building and reduce public participation, and that it was 'beneficial for the purposes of conflict resolution to broaden the number of groups participating in the constitution-making process. Exclusion of key actors from the drafting process may undermine the legitimacy of the final outcome.'³ Popular participation in the peace building and constitution-building processes, Benomar argued, lent 'indispensable legitimacy to the final document adopted. It also assists the definition of a national identity and the articulation of common popular aspirations for the future.'

This was the philosophy that underpinned the transitional process in Yemen – recognition that in order to prevent future fissures in the political sphere, the international community would need to mediate

³ Benomar, J. (2003), *Constitution-Making and Peace Building: Lessons Learned From the Constitution-Making Processes of Post-Conflict Countries*, New York: United Nations Development Programme, <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/blog/document/constitution-making-and-peace-building-lessons-learned-from-the-constitution-making-processes-of-post-conflict-countries/>.

the rivalry between the main elite players while transitioning to a more widely participatory system of governance.⁴ Benomar helped to broker a relatively simple initial peace deal under which Saleh stepped down and was replaced by a consensus candidate, his long-standing vice-president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. To lend his appointment legitimacy, Hadi stood as the only candidate in a February 2012 election that was widely regarded as a referendum on Saleh's presidency and the wider transitional process.

The ultimate collapse of the transition was due in no small part to the failure of the transition and its backers to address basic grievances at both national and local level, the worsening of living standards and service provision and, arguably, the lack of accountability or transparency imposed on Hadi.

A new transitional government was formed, made up of a 50:50 mix of GPC and JMP officials, with Islah occupying the most important posts in the JMP share of cabinet seats.⁵ Benomar ensured that a framework for a post-conflict transitional process was appended to the main peace deal – an 'implementation mechanism' that called for a broadly representative National Dialogue Conference encompassing not just the Sana'a elite but also the Houthis, southern secessionists and youth and women's groups, among others.

The UN envoy believed that if the transition was to be a success, he and others would need to foster a sense of optimism among Yemenis that the political dialogue would ultimately lead to improvements in security and living standards – particularly important in a country where, at the end of 2011, more than half the population lived under the poverty line. But it was also a gamble on the part of policy-makers that it would be possible to trade on optimism until governance and security improved.

As Stefan Wolff, professor of international security at the UK's University of Birmingham, noted in July 2013:

With hopes ranging from better living standards and a more open and fair society, to improved public services and higher levels of security, Yemenis have justifiably high expectations of the country's National Dialogue Conference, underway since March 18, 2013... Making a success of the conference is vital for the continued existence of Yemen as a state – literally, by offering a credible alternative to Southern secessionists, and more figuratively by avoiding a descent into a protracted civil war. In many ways, this is also the spectrum of success: a minimal version of avoiding violent anarchy and a contested state breakup, and a more maximalist approach that sees success defined by the more ambitious goals contained in those Yemeni hopes.⁶

Yet, as has now been widely acknowledged, the ultimate collapse of the transition was due in no small part to the failure of the transition and its backers to address basic grievances at both national and local level, the worsening of living standards and service provision and, arguably, the lack of accountability or transparency imposed on Hadi.

The transition was also undermined by the international community's reluctance to completely remove the former president from the Yemeni political scene. As part of the 2011 deal, Saleh, who

⁴ Root, T. and Salisbury, P. (2014), 'Jamal Benomar and the Fine Art of Making Peace in Yemen', Atlantic Council *MENASource* blog, 17 June 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/jamal-benomar-and-the-fine-art-of-making-peace-in-yemen>.

⁵ United Nations Department of Political Affairs (2011), United Nations Peacemaker, 'Agreement on the implementation mechanism for the transition process in Yemen in accordance with the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)', http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/YE_111205_Agreement%20on%20the%20implementation%20mechanism%20for%20the%20transition.pdf.

⁶ Wolff, S. (2013), 'Managing Expectations: Yemen's National Dialogue Conference', *World Politics Review*, 23 July 2013, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/13104/managing-expectations-yemen-s-national-dialogue-conference>.

had been threatened with UN Security Council sanctions including an asset freeze and a travel ban, was given parliamentary immunity from any crimes committed over the course of the previous year and was allowed to continue as head of the GPC. His son Ahmed Ali also retained command of the Republican Guard, which remained the best-equipped and best-trained unit in the military, and largely loyal to the Saleh family. In multiple interviews conducted for this paper, people involved with the deal attributed this decision to a belief that Saleh could continue to be useful to some Western powers, particularly given his family's stranglehold at the time over the security services tasked with counterterrorism initiatives.⁷

Hidden wars, governance grievances

The GCC deal prevented further escalation of the conflict but did not create accountability for those who had brought the country to the brink of civil war, inadvertently creating the perception of an incentive system that rewarded, or at the very least did not sanction, the use of violence as a political tool.⁸ Yemen's transitional period ran in effect from November 2011, when Saleh agreed to step down, until September 2014, when the Houthis, aided by the Saleh network, particularly tribal and military loyalists of the former president including senior officers from the ostensibly disbanded Republican Guard, seized Sana'a. During these three years, there were several interconnected and overlapping tracks of negotiation and competition, with different groups and actors cooperating publicly while privately attempting to strengthen their own position and weaken their rivals through informal and often violent means.

The public face of the transition was the National Dialogue Conference, a series of talks with a broad range of participants held between March 2013 and January 2014. The conference was aimed at fostering a national conversation among Yemen's many interest groups while producing the basis of a new constitution. From the outset, however, marginalized groups and civil society actors complained that the transitional process, while improving participation in the conversation over the country's future, did not translate into more transparent or accountable governance – a key demand of the protesters' movement of 2011. Nor did the transition produce any tangible improvements in living standards, already low before the crash in economic activity in 2011.

In a (European Union-sponsored) survey of public perceptions of the security sector and the work of the police, published in January 2013 by the Yemen Polling Center, a local non-profit organization, some 55.8 per cent of respondents expressed the view that the economy was worsening, while 68.8 per cent considered that the jobs situation was getting worse. Although the number of those responding that the security situation was deteriorating (38.9 per cent) was roughly equal to those for whom it was improving (38.2 per cent), 42.0 per cent of respondents considered that efforts to fight corruption were getting worse.⁹

⁷ In April 2011, two full months after the Obama administration had called for Egypt's Hosni Mubarak to step down, US officials told the *New Yorker's* Dexter Filkins that 'If Saleh goes, the two likeliest outcomes are anarchy or a government that is not as friendly', and worried that either outcome would embolden AQAP.

⁸ 'The message we got was if you demonstrate that you are strong enough to fight and cause trouble, you get a place at the table and if you do not then you basically get ignored,' a southern separatist leader recalled to the author in late 2014 with regard to the transition, as southerners began to mobilize armed groups in Aden for the first time. 'The Houthis learned that lesson and we resisted it.'

⁹ Yemen Polling Center (2013), *Public Perceptions of the Security Sector and Police Work in Yemen: Major Survey Findings*, Sana'a: Yemen Polling Center, http://www.yemenpolling.org/advocacy/upfiles/YPCPublications_Public-Perceptions-of-the-Security-Sector-and-Police-Work-in-Yemen--January-2013.pdf. Field work was conducted in November–December 2012, with responses from an actual sample of 1990 Yemenis aged 18 years and above (50 per cent male, 50 per cent female; urban 28 per cent, rural 72 per cent).

Table 1: Yemen economic indicators, 2010–15

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Real GDP growth (%)	7.7	-12.7	2.4	4.8	-0.2	-34.6
Public debt \$ billion						
External	6.1	6.1	7.2	7.2	7.3	6.9
Domestic	7.0	8.8	10.4	13.2	14.8	19.0
Total	13.1	14.9	17.6	20.4	22.1	25.9
State share of oil production (million barrels)	61.0	46.9	41.5	45.6	37.7	0
Government revenue (billion Yemeni riyals)	1,774	1,773	2,269	2,076	2,293	1,063

Sources: Government of Yemen (real GDP growth 2010–15, public debt 2015, state share of oil production 2010–15); IMF (public debt 2010–14, government revenue 2010–15). Data for state share of oil production refer to oil production accruing to the state under production-sharing agreements.

As the talks were taking place, the Saleh and Islah networks were vying for power, each seeking to establish dominance on the ground and through the country’s key government institutions. Throughout the transition, many civil servants and cabinet members blamed mounting government dysfunction on the rivalry between the GPC and Islah, and on attempts by both parties to hire unqualified loyalists in the ministries under their control.¹⁰ Partisanship between Saleh and Islah loyalists became more evident at the local level, with the two networks leveraging local grievances and political power across the country to increasingly polarize their supporters.

This rivalry was most evident in Taiz, a central Yemeni industrial hub where a respected businessman, Shawki Hayel Saeed, was appointed governor but found that initiatives aimed at reforming local government were constantly blocked by both Islah and Saleh’s GPC.¹¹ A civil society activist told researchers from the United States Institute of Peace in February 2012:

Taiz is the governorate most affected by partisan politics. The governor is good at the managerial and administrative sides of the job, but he’s less good at balancing the politics. It is not entirely his fault because the divide [between political parties] is so wide that it would be hard to satisfy everyone.¹²

The struggle for power also manifested itself in a series of violent attacks. In 2013 the local *Yemen Times* newspaper, citing interior ministry statistics, reported that 93 security officials had been assassinated in the seven months to October of that year.¹³ A number of prominent political figures were also killed, most notably Abdulkarim Jadban and Abdulkarim al-Khaiwani, respectively a pro-Houthi journalist and politician, both of whom had attended the National Dialogue Conference as part of the pro-Houthi Ansar Allah delegation.

After rejecting the GCC deal in general, and the immunity clause for Saleh in particular, the Houthis eventually agreed to participate in the dialogue. But they were also engaged from the

¹⁰ For a fuller account of some of the institutional issues created by the transitional setup, see World Bank (2015), *The Republic of Yemen: Unlocking the Potential for Economic Growth*, Country Economic Memorandum, Washington, DC: World Bank, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/23660/Yemen00Republi00for0economic0growth.pdf?sequence=1>.

¹¹ See Salisbury (2015), *Federalism, Conflict and Fragmentation in Yemen* for a detailed account of the issues surrounding the Hayel Saeed governorship.

¹² Gaston, E. and al-Dawsari, N. (2013), *Waiting for Change: The Impact of the Transition on Local Justice and Security in Yemen*, Peaceworks 85, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW85-Waiting-for-Change.pdf>.

¹³ al-Moskhi, I. A. (2013), ‘Targeting Officials: Assassination Toll Casts Shadow on Yemen’, *Yemen Times*, 19 November 2013, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1730/report/3145/Targeting-officials-Assassination-toll-casts-shadow-on-Yemen.htm>.

beginning of the transition in a series of battles with rival Sunni Islamists in Sa'dah and neighbouring provinces. Fighting between the Houthis and residents of a Salafist *madrassa* in Dammaj, a small town in central Sa'dah, had been ongoing for years but increased in intensity over the course of the transition as Salafist leaders across the country recruited fighters to take part in the conflict, allegedly with the support of the Islah network. Fighting also took part throughout the transition between Houthi militias and Islah- and Al Ahmar-affiliated tribes in Hajja and Amran provinces, which border Sa'dah.

Elsewhere in the country, tribesmen in Mareb repeatedly attacked oil and gas infrastructure, demanding payment for access to damaged pipelines and that some revenues generated by oil and gas production in the area be recycled into local development. Again according to the *Yemen Times* – this time citing a state-run oil firm – oil pipelines were attacked 41 times in the course of 2013.¹⁴ Tribes in the similarly oil-rich eastern province of Hadramawt agitated for the removal of northern military units from the area, and for local people to be hired to provide security and services to oil companies operating in the area. They also formed a tribal alliance, the Hadramawt Tribal Confederation, to bargain for their collective interests.

In Al Dhale province, which straddles the former north–south border, pro-secession militias clashed repeatedly with a military unit said to be loyal to the former president. Residents of Al Dhale complained of arbitrary attacks by the security services on local people, and increasingly turned for protection to local militias, which also fought AQAP militants in the area.¹⁵

Across the south, secessionists complained that they were being prevented from presenting their agenda. Most secessionist groups had refused to take part in the dialogue in Sana'a, arguing that their separatist agenda would not be accepted as part of the debate – the UN Security Council, among others, had issued language supporting the continued unity of Yemen. Most HIRAK factions interviewed during research for this paper believe that southerners should have been supported in holding a pre-dialogue series of talks on their own before attending a separate north–south dialogue.

In a move that served to deepen southern resentments, President Hadi arranged for a number of marginal southern figures to take part in the conference under the banner of southern representation. The most prominent of those he persuaded to take part, Mohammed Ali Ahmed, from Hadi's home province of Abyan, soon left the conference, complaining that southern calls for secession and two-state federalism were being ignored.¹⁶ A common theme emerged among representatives of the different groups taking part in the dialogue: the president would briefly turn his attention to each group when he needed their support, making promises that its grievances would be addressed, but would regularly fail to follow up with even a second conversation.¹⁷

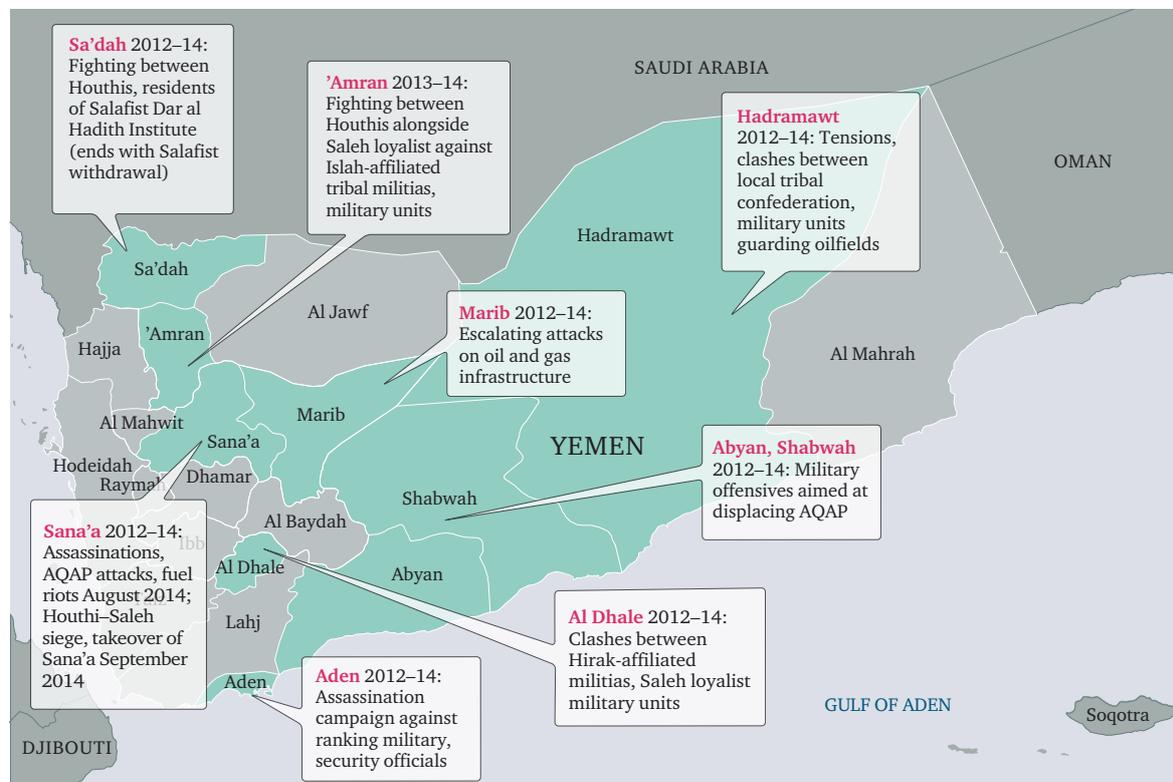
¹⁴ al-Moskhi, I. A. (2014), '2013 Oil Pipeline Chronology', *Yemen Times*, 28 January 2014, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1750/report/3397/2013-Oil-pipeline-sabotage-chronology.htm>.

¹⁵ IRIN (2014), 'Limited humanitarian access to Yemen's Al Dhale Governorate', 11 March 2014, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/99769/limited-humanitarian-access-yemen-s-al-dhale-governorate>.

¹⁶ Ghobari, M. (2013), 'South Yemen leader pulls out of reconciliation talks', Reuters, 27 November 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-reconciliation-idUSBRE9AQORZ20131127>.

¹⁷ 'When he needed us, we would get urgent phone calls from Hadi's office,' one southerner who took part in the early stages of the dialogue conference told the author during a meeting in Aden in mid-2014. 'He'd tell us he cared about [whatever]. But when we needed him, we would call the office and he would completely ignore us. It was very clear that it was a one-way street.' GPC officials complained meanwhile that Hadi – a party member – would demand they appoint him party president in place of Saleh, but that he rarely attended party meetings and did not listen to GPC officials' grievances when he did.

Map 2: Conflict flashpoints, 2012–14



Mapping researched and compiled by the author. The boundaries and names on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by Chatham House.

Public anger

As the transition progressed, the government, feeling pinched by a weak and weakening economy and declining oil revenues, struggled to pay for the day-to-day running of the state, including welfare payments to the country's million poorest people. These were often months late, despite external funding explicitly for the Social Welfare Fund – which the government used instead to pay outstanding bills.¹⁸ Yemenis felt let down by both the government and the political process, and remarked on the widening gap between the rhetoric of the country's political class and the transition's foreign sponsors – that of a supposedly bright future – and their lived reality of a deteriorating economic and security situation, and of governmental dysfunction.¹⁹

Public anger came to focus on the person of the beleaguered president. In 2012 and 2013 Hadi had taken generally popular steps towards removing important Saleh and Islah allies from senior posts in the military, while the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Basindwah had moved to unravel unpopular business deals struck between the state and private companies under Saleh that were widely perceived as corrupt.

¹⁸ *Guardian* (2014), 'Yemen fuel subsidy cut drives poorest deeper into poverty', 26 August 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/aug/26/yemen-fuel-subsidy-cut-drives-poorest-poverty>.

¹⁹ The author spent several months based in Sana'a in 2012 and 2013 and was based in the city for the entirety of 2014, travelling regularly to the south of the country. This assertion is based on his own research and reporting, and private polling by a major Western government and several local and international NGOs.

The inability of the president and government to improve security, adequately combat the growth of Al-Qaeda – as evidenced by a December 2013 attack on the main defence compound in Sana'a that left scores of civilians dead²⁰ – or provide basic services such as water and electricity remained key points of contention, however; as did the perception that Hadi had come to rely excessively on Islah's military wing for support. In particular, he had made Mohsin a presidential adviser after relieving him of the command of the First Armoured Division and appointed Mohsin-leaning officers to key military posts during successive reshuffles. The government became increasingly vocal in blaming Saleh for the many problems it faced, repeatedly describing him as a 'spoiler' of the transition. But no local or international action was taken to neutralize the threat that the former president posed to the transition. A UN Security Council resolution sanctioning Saleh was mooted in 2013 but was not brought forward.

Saleh loyalists were among Hadi's most vocal critics, but rank-and-file members of Islah also complained that the president was not doing enough to combat Houthi expansionism into neighbouring provinces after a deal that resulted in residents of the Salafist *madrassa* in Dammaj being evacuated from Sa'dah.

Hadi's popularity briefly rose when, in March 2014, he announced an end to the dialogue conference and a new phase of the transition that would produce a new constitution, but it soon resumed its downward trajectory. The president came under fire for failing to implement political reforms agreed during the conference, and for pushing a plan to split the country into federal regions of his own division, without properly following guidelines set out during the transition, underpinning a sense that the 'real' decision-making process was taking place outside the formal transitional mechanisms for doing so; and for increasingly autocratic tendencies.

Saleh loyalists were among Hadi's most vocal critics, but rank-and-file members of Islah also complained that the president was not doing enough to combat Houthi expansionism into neighbouring provinces after a deal that resulted in residents of the Salafist *madrassa* in Dammaj being evacuated from Sa'dah.²¹ Southerners rejected wholesale the principles agreed during the conference, while the Houthis similarly rejected the federal plan agreed by committee after the conference ended. Members of Saleh's GPC argued that since, under the terms of the 2011 peace deal, a presidential election should have been held in February 2014, Hadi had lost legitimacy by overstaying his two-year term as transitional leader. (In November 2014 the GPC would vote to dismiss Hadi from the party.)²²

Mounting pressure

Events in mid-2014 placed Hadi under renewed pressure to improve governance. Riots broke out in Sana'a in June over fuel shortages, and in July the Houthis seized control of Amran City, 50 km north of the capital, consolidating their control over the province. The loss of Amran province was a blow to the Islah network's military wing, as it was the heartland of the Al Ahmars and the wider Hashid tribal confederation. In seizing Amran City, meanwhile, the Houthis captured and killed Hamid al-Qushaibi,

²⁰ Ghobari, M. (2013), 'Suicide bomber, gunmen kill 52 at Yemeni defense ministry', Reuters, 5 December 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-explosion-idUSBRE9B406520131205>.

²¹ Author interview, high-ranking Islah official, June 2014.

²² Salisbury, P. (2014), 'Yemen tensions rise as ruling party threatens to oust president', *Financial Times*, 6 November 2014, www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e1513f56-65c3-11e4-a454-00144feabdc0.html.

the commander of the 310th Armoured Brigade, which was held to be among the best-equipped and most proficient units of Ali Mohsin's First Armoured Division. Islah-affiliated media outlets published a number of articles accusing Hadi of conspiring to weaken Islah by allowing the Houthis free rein to operate, and called on him to announce a military campaign to push the group out of Amran.

Within Hadi's inner circle both events were seen as the result of machinations by Saleh, whom they accused of conspiring to unseat the president. They argued that he was commissioning the attacks on oil and gas infrastructure that led to the fuel shortages, while Saleh loyalists led the protests in Sana'a, and Saleh-affiliated media organizations implored Yemenis to take to the streets.²³ As the Houthis advanced southwards, it became increasingly clear that Saleh was at least tangentially involved in their explosive expansionism. The group's takeover of Amran was accelerated by the defection of Hashid tribes friendly with Saleh and his wider network. The tribes' decision to assist the Houthis may also have been motivated by their long-held grievances against both the Al Ahmars and Islah, who, despite wielding power in Sana'a, had done little to develop Amran.

Shifting perceptions of power

For much of the transition, the received wisdom among Yemenis had been that the political process had been made possible by an even balance of power of the Saleh and Islah networks, and the mutually assured destruction that outright war between the two would entail. As this perception changed, the sense of insecurity was heightened by a widely held belief that Saleh had joined forces with the Houthis, potentially creating a new alliance that was even more powerful than the previous Saleh–Islah cooperative, and creating a new pole in the country's hard-power dynamics.

Public anger over the deteriorating economic and security situation was further fuelled by the perception that Hadi was the recipient of unconditional support from the transition's foreign backers, who increasingly saw the president as 'their man' in Sana'a. This perception was not unwarranted: throughout 2014 diplomats and UN officials conceded to the author that despite his many shortcomings Hadi had become, in effect, the personal embodiment of the transition for many embassies, and was so sensitive to criticism that it had become difficult to convince him of the need for responsive action.²⁴

Members of the Islah network complained that Hadi was ignoring the Houthi threat. Many began to mutter that the president was hoping to spark an Islah–Houthi conflict that would weaken the two groups to the extent that he could consolidate his own power. Others believed that the international community was taking its lead from Riyadh – which under King Abdullah, influenced by the stance of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), had become aggressively opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood – and that it was therefore happy to allow the weakening of Islah, seen in the Gulf as the Brotherhood's Yemeni franchise.²⁵

²³ Salisbury, P. (2014), 'In Yemen, A Revolution in Reverse', *Foreign Policy*, 18 June 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/18/in-yemen-a-revolution-in-reverse/>.

²⁴ Salisbury, P. (2014), 'Yemen's Astonishing Financial Meltdown,' 11 December 2014, *Foreign Policy*, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/11/yemens-astonishing-financial-meltdown/>.

²⁵ Author interviews, senior Islah officials and Islah supporters, Yemen, March–September 2014.

4. The Road to War: the Houthi Takeover

Unrest and ‘revolution’

Perhaps the Hadi government’s greatest challenge during the second half of 2014 was a mounting fiscal crisis. The government was struggling to pay the civil service, cover a mounting debt service bill, and underwrite the cost of hefty fuel subsidies. During talks in Riyadh in July, Hadi was offered as much as \$2 billion in financial support on condition that he cut fuel subsidies under an IMF- and World Bank-backed reform programme. Accepting these terms, the government cut the subsidy in August far more sharply than these institutions had asked for. Officials calculated that any price hike would provoke public unrest that could be exploited by spoilers, and decided that a single subsidy cut and resultant wave of protests was better than allowing tensions to build over the course of a number of months.

But demonstrators again took to the streets of Sana’a and other cities to protest about the rise in the cost of living resulting from the sharp increase in fuel prices, which was introduced without advance warning.²⁶ Abdelmalek al-Houthi, the Houthi leader, issued a public warning that if fuel prices were not reduced to earlier, lower levels he would call for an uprising to overthrow the government. The Hadi administration saw this as a veiled threat by the Houthis to lay siege to Sana’a. But it struggled to offer a counter-narrative to al-Houthi’s populist stance, which essentially repurposed the rhetoric of the 2011 uprising to present the Houthis as the scourge of corruption and the voice of the Yemeni people.

On 17 August al-Houthi appeared on Al Masira, a Houthi-run television channel. He announced that his supporters would enter Sana’a the next day to set up camps and hold daily protests until his demands – the reduction of fuel prices, a government reshuffle and the implementation of a series of steps agreed during the dialogue conference – were met. The protesters would be peaceful, he said, but if they were attacked, the Houthis would ‘respond’.

The Houthi rhetoric offensive continued to escalate over the following month, while increasing numbers of protesters and northern tribesmen entered Sana’a and joined encampments on the city’s outskirts. Jamal Benomar attempted to broker a deal that would prevent a violent conflict around the capital, but in mid-September fighting broke out between Islah-aligned military units and Islah-affiliated militias on the one hand, and Houthi fighters backed by Saleh loyalist military units on the other.

The conflict reached the outskirts of Sana’a on 19 September, when Houthi fighters targeted the First Armoured Division compound, Mohsin’s military headquarters, in the west of the city. By 21 September hostilities had intensified dramatically, but Hadi would not be drawn into the fight, repeatedly refusing to send in military units under his control or to declare that the state was at war with the Houthis.²⁷ When Hadi refused a final request by Mohsin to enter the fray, the Islah network issued a general order to security forces and fighters in Sana’a to stand down and allow the Houthis to enter the city. Soon after, representatives of Yemen’s main political parties signed a peace deal, the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), with Houthi representatives.

²⁶ Ghobari, M. (2014), ‘Army breaks up protests as Yemen raises fuel prices’, Reuters, 30 July 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-budget-subsidies-idUKKBN0FZ1F020140730>.

²⁷ Author interviews with multiple Islah, government and diplomatic sources, September–October 2014.

Ignoring key elements of the agreement that called for the Houthis to withdraw from Sana'a, the group moved to cement its control over the city, entering key government ministries. As they did so, the complicity of the Saleh network in the takeover of Sana'a became clearer. 'Houthi' checkpoints set up across Sana'a were manned by local Saleh loyalists.²⁸

Many Yemenis feared that the transition had in effect come to an end, and that a new Saleh-backed regime was in the process of being formed. Concerns that the Houthi–Saleh alliance planned to impose its will on the entire country were compounded in October and November 2014, as the Houthis blocked Hadi's choice for the post of prime minister and later protested against the formation of a new, ostensibly technocratic government under the leadership of the consensus candidate for prime minister, Khaled Mahfouz Bahah.

Box 1: Unpacking the Houthi–Saleh Alliance

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when the Saleh and Houthi networks began to cooperate. In 2011, Houthi supporters had taken part in anti-Saleh demonstrations across the country, protesting alongside Islah in Sana'a and Taiz. People interviewed by the author suggest that some form of indirect contact was established through existing channels of communications in early 2012. For a number of years senior northern tribal and military leaders had quietly acted as mediators between Saleh and the Houthis. The same people would later help to reframe the Sa'dah conflict as one led by the Islah network, particularly Mohsen, the Al Ahmars and senior Salafist figures, rather than by the regime as a whole.

These mediators were often from prominent Zaydi and *sayyid* families and had close ties with Saleh. Over the course of 2012 and 2013 they helped to win over tribes and communities that fell under the aegis of the Hashid tribal confederation, convincing them either to agree to non-aggression pacts with the Houthis or to fight alongside them.²⁹ Yet it was probably early or mid-2014 before a direct channel of communication was opened between the Saleh and Houthi camps.

The initial driving force behind the alliance was a deep animosity towards the Islah network. As time passed, the relationship appears to have become more formal, with former ranking military officials from within the Saleh family creating a shadow leadership for the units still loyal to them and directly coordinating with the Houthi military command. Following the takeover of the capital, a number of long-time Saleh loyalists in the capital declared themselves 'Houthis' as they gradually took control of the streets. The groups' leadership began an uneasy yet increasingly close marriage of convenience. In the months after the siege of Sana'a, police and military leaders worked to integrate Houthi militias more closely into a security apparatus that was already dominated by northern highlanders of Zaydi heritage.

The civil war initially led to deeper coordination between the two networks, although most observers believe that mutual mistrust means that a Houthi–Saleh split at some point is virtually certain. However, the increasing integration of the Houthi militias with the remnants of the Saleh military-security nexus may suggest otherwise, especially given that the alliance is now on the defensive rather than the offensive. It remains difficult to gauge the exact degree of integration of the Houthi and Saleh networks, with many Yemenis describing, with no little irony, former Saleh loyalists turned Houthis as *muthahawith*, in effect 'temporary Houthis'.

²⁸ 'The Peace and National Partnership Agreement' (2014), Yemen, 21 September 2014, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/darp/dv/darp20141204_05_/darp20141204_05_en.pdf.

²⁹ In 2014 and 2015 the author interviewed a number of people with close ties to both Saleh and the Houthi leadership, as well as keen local and foreign observers of Yemeni politics, about the evolution and nature of the relationship between the two camps. Around a dozen people helped provide a detailed account of its development. These interviews were conducted first for Salisbury, P. (2015), *Yemen and the Saudi–Iranian 'Cold War'*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150218YemenIranSaudi.pdf, and later for this paper.

Coup and conflict

Yemen is a country that for much of its history has been riven by a complex series of regionally bounded identities, and in turn by deep rivalries and animosities between rival centres of power. In the northwest, elites drawn from the Zaydi elite of *sayyids*, descendants of the prophet Mohammed and more recently from the highland's powerful network of tribes, have been the dominant group. It has drawn the ire of less powerful groups elsewhere in the country, particularly in areas where the Shafei and Sufi interpretations of Sunni Islam are predominant.

It is important to note, however, that these rivalries have largely been driven by ethno-geographical identity and class rather than sectarianism or religious hatred, concepts most Yemenis claim was alien until at least the 1980s. Many Islah members come from prominent Zaydi families and profess no antipathy towards Zaydism itself, but rather the doctrine of the 'Imami' system, which segregated ordinary Yemenis from *sayyid* families. It is entirely possible to meet northern Yemenis who see themselves as 'Zaydi-Sunnis' who care little for the niceties of religious doctrine but whose identity is at once Zaydi highlander and republican and anti-Imamate.

During the Sa'dah conflict of 2004–10 the Saleh regime had attempted to justify its war with the Houthis as a battle with Iranian proxies intent on creating an undefined hybrid of the pre-revolutionary Imamate and the Iranian revolutionary model in Yemen. These claims were accompanied by propaganda asserting that the Houthis had adopted the dominant Twelver strain of Shia rather than the Zaydism familiar to northern Yemenis. This rhetoric was, however, more to do with politicking for support from the United States and from Saudi Arabia – and, on Saleh's part, from Islah – than with any real belief that these were the issues at stake. (Iran, however, has unquestionably lent the Houthis some support, most likely through its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, since at least the mid-2000s.)³⁰

Among non-Zaydi tribes in the north, opposition to the Houthis is based less on religious intolerance than on memories of the Imamate, which dominated the north of Yemen for the better part of a millennium, and the marginalization of non-Zaydi areas under Saleh. Northern tribes largely conceived of the takeover of Sana'a not so much as a form of religious war but as the latest iteration of highlanders from the northwest, who were by coincidence Zaydis, attempting to rule by force.

Elsewhere, differences have historically stemmed from broader geographic identity. In the once-independent south, deep-seated grievances remain over the 1994 north–south civil war, when the Saleh regime maintained unity through force, and after which *mujahideen* looted Aden and strict conservative norms were imposed on what had been one of the more progressive states in the Arab world. Southerners often refer to 'northerners' as a largely homogeneous group and fit the Houthi takeover into their narrative of north–south polarization. The 'northern' Houthi–Saleh alliance posed a threat to the secessionist agenda, which is itself based on memories of a 'civilized' and 'educated' south pre-unity and the subsequent 'tribalization' of the south. For this reason, Houthi outreach to major Hirak groups in late 2014 was rebutted almost without exception.³¹ A similar narrative exists in Taiz, in central Yemen, where locals see the Houthi–Saleh alliance as being part of a 'highland' culture distinct from a very different Taizi tradition of a social order built around education and cosmopolitanism. AQAP was the exception in that it constructed a narrative that presented the Houthi takeover of Sana'a as a Shia plot to seize control of Yemen, invoking an increasingly sectarian rhetoric that called for Sunnis to protect themselves from 'Iranian' outsiders.

³⁰ For more detailed analysis of Houthi–Iranian relations, see Salisbury (2015), *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*.

³¹ Author interviews, Aden, October–November 2014.

The diverse array of groups that emerged in opposition to the Houthi–Saleh alliance did not, at least when the war started, perceive themselves as a unified resistance movement but as local identity groups protecting their areas from the incursion of the ‘highlander’ or ‘northern’ Houthi–Saleh alliance. There was no notable attempt to form a national anti-Houthi alliance, or any sense that the anti-Houthi groups would fight on behalf of President Hadi.³² Indeed, the war was in effect precipitated by Houthi expansion beyond the highlands, where they had a natural constituency, first into Al Beidah, a province where AQAP maintained a strong presence, and then to the Sana’a–Mareb border, into Hodeidah on the west coast and into Ibb and Taiz in central Yemen.

During the early days of the takeover Hadi remained, at least nominally, in power in Sana’a and maintained contact with key foreign embassies in the capital, in a bizarre arrangement whereby his continued presence in the capital provided some cover for the Houthi–Saleh alliance’s gradual consolidation of power. Western and other capitals were loath to call the takeover a coup as long as Hadi was to any degree still in power. Many Yemenis, rightly or wrongly, saw the PNPA as a tacit international rubber-stamping of the Houthi ascension to power; and the decision not to formally declare the events of September 2014 a coup as a reiteration of Western prioritization of domestic security concerns and counterterrorism over Yemen’s political development. (Had the US formally designated it a coup, for example, it would not have been able to continue providing support and funding for Yemeni counterterror initiatives.)

Initially, some stability was restored in the capital. A new national security council enabled the rapid integration of the Houthis into the security establishment. But in January 2015 a committee that had been preparing a new constitution for much of the previous six months announced that it had completed a draft document including a federal model for government that the Houthis opposed. The Houthis responded by kidnapping the president’s chief of staff and placing the government and President Hadi under house arrest. Khaled Bahah, the new prime minister, resigned along with the remainder of his cabinet, and Hadi followed suit shortly after. Several weeks later the Houthis completed what had become increasingly evident was a *coup d’état* by announcing a ‘constitutional declaration’ dissolving parliament and appointing a new Houthi-led presidential council.

The coup was possible in part because the main security units in Yemen’s major towns and cities were largely made up of Saleh loyalists and were in effect under instruction from the Houthi-controlled government in Sana’a from the outset, meaning that there no real need for the Houthis to expand militarily beyond Sana’a. But a few days after the constitutional declaration Hadi escaped Sana’a for the southern port of Aden. He announced that the city was Yemen’s temporary capital and declared war on the Houthis, while releasing a letter formally requesting military intervention by the neighbouring GCC states, which had taken a dim view of the Houthi power grab, seeing it as an Iran-backed coup.³³

Tensions mounted in the following weeks as militias from Hadi’s home province of Abyan, which he had positioned in Aden before and during the Houthi takeover in Sana’a, moved to seize key security installations in Aden from Saleh loyalists. The Houthi–Saleh alliance began to mobilize, sending militias and military units south under the guise of preventing an AQAP takeover in Aden. This led in turn to skirmishes between pro- and anti-Houthi and Saleh militias along the road to Aden, and in Ibb, Taiz and the southern province of Lahj, which borders Aden. Houthi–Saleh fighters also entered Mareb province, leading to a series of temporary ceasefire agreements – each of which was broken.³⁴

³² Author interviews with members of Islah, Hirak, Marebi tribesmen and others, late 2014.

³³ *Al Arabiya News* (2015), ‘Yemen asks GCC for military action against Houthis’, 23 March 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/23/Yemen-s-Hadi-calls-for-GCC-military-intervention.html>.

³⁴ Sources close to tribal leaders in Mareb believe that at least four truces were agreed upon, and broken, in the early days of the war.

When, in late March 2015, the Houthi–Saleh alliance arrived on the outskirts of Aden and a Yemen air force jet fired a missile at or near the local presidential palace, Hadi fled the country. Saudi Arabia announced the formation of a new coalition aimed at uprooting the Houthis and restoring him to power. On 26 March the coalition began an intensive aerial campaign in which the Saudi, Emirati and other air forces targeted Yemeni air force installations before turning their attention to key military bases and weapons depots across the country. Hadi called for a national uprising against the Houthi–Saleh alliance.

Box 2: Restructuring the Military: A Missed Opportunity?

One of President Hadi's most important mandates during the transition was the reconfiguration of the security services from a series of factionally affiliated units that operated autonomously from the central military command into a professionalized, non-partisan institution of the state – a deeply complex and challenging task. Alongside the National Dialogue Conference, security-sector reform was viewed as one of the successes of his early years in power. In 2012 and 2013 Hadi removed Saleh loyalists and family members from key positions at the head of crucial security and military institutions including the air force, the Republican Guard and the Central Security Forces, while removing Mohsin from the command of the First Armoured Division. He later announced that the Mohsin-led unit would be dissolved along with the Republican Guard.³⁵

There were complaints, however, that President Hadi was largely appointing to senior military posts people he believed to be loyal to him, rather than those people best qualified for the job; and that he was quietly empowering Ali Mohsin, who retained an influential position as a military adviser despite his formal demotion, in order to counterbalance the Saleh network. Among some military units, criticisms emerged of a new officer class appointed by Hadi; this was a mix of partisan grumblings from Saleh loyalists and genuine professional misgivings over the capabilities of Hadi appointees, particularly among elite units that required regular, disciplined and specialized training.³⁶

Foreign and Yemeni military officials, along with well-informed members of the Yemeni elite, observed, however, that below the surface the Saleh and Mohsin networks of power within the military and security services remained largely intact, and in competition with one another.

An analysis by Chatham House of the location and structure of military units across Yemen shows that the Mohsin and Saleh axes of influence within the military remained largely unchanged below the level of the senior officer class.³⁷ The main military units in Sa'dah, Hajja and Amran, the northwest corner of Yemen, were broadly speaking Mohsin loyalists, while Saleh-linked units remained the dominant force on the ground from Sana'a south to Aden. Most military units in Hadramawt, to the east, were seen as pro-Mohsin but with their own southern leadership (with the exception of Mukalla and Seyyun, the main cities in the province, where Saleh loyalists held the balance of power).

The September 2014 Houthi–Saleh takeover of Sana'a laid bare the failures of the attempted restructuring, and in moments of introspection Western and Yemeni military officials were blunt in their assessment of the cumulative effect of the 2011 intra-regime battles and the institutional struggles of the transition period. Yemen's military was characterized by a weak command-and-control structure from the top down, and deep partisanship towards non-state actors from within its ranks. Because the geographical placement of the military had remained largely unchanged, once Mohsin's men had been beaten in the northwestern provinces and Sana'a the balance of conventional military power across the entire western third of Yemen lay in the hands of Saleh-linked units.

Local security across Yemen was by and large provided by soldiers and military units from the northwest of Yemen, the bulk of whom either threw in their lot with the Houthi–Saleh alliance once war broke out or chose not to participate in the conflict at all. This in turn meant that the state bodies tasked with protecting and providing security to local populations in Aden and Taiz in particular joined hands with the Houthi–Saleh alliance when its fighters entered the two cities. It also meant that, in areas liberated from Houthi–Saleh control, formal state security institutions were almost entirely absent. This created space not just for anti-Houthi fighters but for jihadist and criminal networks to operate.

³⁵ For a more detailed account of security sector reform in the early years of the transition, see Alley (2013), *Yemen's Military-Security Reform*.

³⁶ Author interviews with senior Yemeni and Western military officials, Sana'a, December 2014.

³⁷ In 2015 and 2016 Chatham House mapped the affiliation and location of military units in Yemen pre-2011, during the transition and after the Houthi–Saleh takeover of Sana'a.

5. An Unfolding Conflict

Complex dynamics

When war broke out in earnest there were a number of barriers to proper analysis of the dynamics of the fighting on the ground, and of the different parties involved. There was first, from the beginning, a deeply oversimplified narrative of pro-Hadi ‘resistance’ fighters battling the Houthis–Saleh alliance, itself often simplified to the ‘Houthis’ despite the prominent role that Saleh military loyalists have played throughout the war. There was also a great deal of confusion over who was actually fighting in each area of the country, thanks to the opacity of terms such as ‘tribes’ and ‘Popular Committees’. (Different tribes in Mareb, for example, fought for and against the Houthi–Saleh alliance, while in southern Yemen ‘Popular Committees’ loyal to Hadi fled in the face of the assault on Aden as local ‘Popular Committee’ fighters stayed on to protect the city – see further below.)

Over time, however, it has been possible to build a picture of the key armed groups on the ground, their agendas and the degree to which they enjoy external support. This section of the paper, based on an in-depth mapping exercise conducted by Chatham House between October 2015 and April 2016, attempts to provide an overview of the evolution of the war, the different fighting groups on the ground, and the gradual division of the country into discrete areas of control and influence.

Box 3: Explaining the Saudi-led Coalition

Saudi Arabia’s announcement on 26 March 2015 that it had formed a military coalition to oust the Houthis and restore Hadi to power was a practically unprecedented move for the kingdom, upending the received wisdom among analysts that Riyadh was reluctant to play a leading military role in regional conflicts. The accession of the new king, Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, and his appointment of his son Mohammed as defence minister and deputy crown prince, are generally held to have been the driving force behind the change in approach.

Many Saudis had quietly complained of a lack of assertiveness under Salman’s predecessor, King Abdullah, in the face of what they saw as an expansionist Iran and a US retreat from the region following the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings. Salman and Mohammed bin Salman have rapidly restructured the country’s institutions, concentrating power around themselves and their wider Sudairi branch of the royal family. In response to fears of encirclement by Iranian proxies in Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad, the new regime appears to have seen an opportunity in Yemen to both push back against Iranian influence – despite open questions among the kingdom’s Western allies over the extent of Iran’s support for the Houthis – and to demonstrate its willingness and ability to fill the leadership vacuum created by less assertive and interventionist US policy.

The Saudis’ most energetic partner has been the UAE under the de facto leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who is said to share concerns with Riyadh over Iranian expansionism. The UAE’s military has become more tolerant of risk than other Gulf states, having sent soldiers to Afghanistan and taken part in the aerial campaign against ISIS in Syria. Abu Dhabi has also allegedly played an important role in arming anti-Islamist fighters in Libya, and has reportedly taken part in airstrikes against rival factions there.

In Saudi Arabia itself, some argue that Western responses to the war have been proof that the kingdom can do no right; where it has not intervened elsewhere in the region, it has been criticized for inaction, and now that it has done what the US and UK had long urged it to do it is condemned for alleged violations of international humanitarian law and other actions.³⁸

³⁸ Author interviews, Riyadh, January 2016.

In the initial phases of the war, resistance to Houthi–Saleh incursion into new territories was almost entirely led by local actors, occasionally supported by local military units.³⁹ There was little coordination in the early stages of the war between the different groups fighting on the ground; the conflict took on a peculiarly local character.

In the south, for example, the so-called ‘Popular Committees’, the militias mobilized by Hadi before the war to defend Aden, largely left the city during the early phases of fighting, returning to Abyan to defend their home turf. Defending Aden fell to local pro-secession groups, which had been forming rival localized defence groups before the war began. Local fighters were backed by the small number of military units that were not aligned with Saleh. A largely southern military unit at the Al Anad military base in Lahj fought alongside local tribesmen to repel the Houthis. In Shabwah province, local tribes formed the majority of the fighters who mobilized against the Houthi–Saleh alliance, as was the case in Abyan. In Mukalla, AQAP quickly took over once the war was under way.

In Mareb the fight against the Houthis was led by two of the main tribal groupings in the province, the Abidah and the Murad, alongside the smaller Jidan tribe, although some Jidan and Abidah tribesmen took the side of the Houthi–Saleh alliance, as did the smaller Ashraf tribe.⁴⁰ In Taiz, local tribes and fighters fell under the leadership of an Islah-affiliated sheikh, Hamoud Saeed al-Mikhlaifi, who had fought Saleh loyalists in the city in 2011. Many of Taiz’s more liberal voices, civil society activists and political leaders left in the early days of fighting there, so it was more conservative tribal and religious groups who participated in the conflict, along with a number of socialist and politically independent young people.⁴¹

Mareb was not the only area where some segments of the local population joined the Houthi–Saleh alliance for a variety of reasons including expediency, religious or political ties or long-established relationships with Saleh; or enduring antipathy towards the Islah network. In Al Baydah province a number of pro-Saleh tribes and security figures refused to break with the former president. Similarly, in Taiz a key local military unit has fought since the beginning of the war alongside the Houthi–Saleh alliance, as have a number of local tribes and families, some of them long-time Saleh loyalists and others more recent Houthi supporters. In the south a number of tribes and local power brokers in Al Dhale, Abyan, Shabwah and Lahj with well-established ties to the Saleh regime either worked or fought alongside the Houthi–Saleh alliance during the early days of the war.

In other parts of the country there was a surprising lack of resistance to Houthi–Saleh control of territory, particularly in Ibb province, the home of a large number of pro-Islah tribes and Salafist leaders; and in Amran province in the north, again the base for a number of tribes affiliated with Islah and Hashid. This trend was part of a wider pattern of Houthi attempts to negotiate access to roads wherever possible rather than entering into violent conflict with local residents; and a belief among some groups that they were too heavily outnumbered for there to be any value in resistance.⁴²

³⁹ Author interviews with resistance leaders and people linked to resistance fighters in Aden, Taiz and Mareb, March–April 2015; and interviews in Aden, February 2016. Aden and Taiz were also discussed at a November 2015 workshop hosted by Chatham House in London. See ‘Yemen: Key Players and Prospects for Peace’ (2015), Workshop Summary, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/events/2015-11-07-yemen-key-players-prospects-peace-meeting-summary_4.pdf.

⁴⁰ Author interviews with Marebi tribesmen, Riyadh, January 2016; and with Yemen tribal expert, New York, November 2015. Mareb was also discussed at the November 2015 Chatham House workshop.

⁴¹ Author interviews with Taiz residents, April–May 2015, December 2015 and January 2016. The author also draws on the private January 2016 report by Deep Root Consulting, *Power Shuffle: A Map of the New Players in Taiz*.

⁴² Author interviews with senior members of a tribal family from Ibb, May and December 2015; and with Yemen tribal analyst, New York, November 2015. This was also discussed at the Chatham House London workshop.

Evolving coalition strategy

In the early stages of the conflict much was made of the role of President Hadi, who was said to be organizing fighting forces and directing strategy. However, interviews with local anti-Houthi militia leaders and senior regional and Western policy-makers have made it clear that planning for the war effort was from an early stage directed by Saudi officials from the inner circle of Mohammed bin Salman, the deputy crown prince and defence minister, with help from key Yemeni interlocutors including Ali Mohsin and the Al Ahmars.⁴³ Later, Emirati Special Forces would build their own networks in the south of the country.⁴⁴

The assumption among military and political leaders in Riyadh in the initial phases of the war had been that after a display of force the Houthi–Saleh alliance would be more hesitant and that anti-Houthi fighters, particularly the Islah network, would be emboldened into action and quickly form a coherent coalition under President Hadi. But neither of these things happened, and in fact building the networks necessary to influence the course of the war took considerable time and effort.⁴⁵ The Houthi–Saleh alliance pushed to take territory as quickly as possible and increased the tempo and violence of its campaign, while anti-Houthi fighters complained of a lack of communications from either Hadi or the coalition.

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During these early stages of the war the author was in direct and indirect contact with the leaders of anti-Houthi forces in Taiz, Mareb and Aden. In each case, from the beginning of the coalition campaign in late March until at least May 2015, they complained that they were not being properly supported, and that coalition jets often mistook their fighters for those from the northern alliance, suggesting a lack of basic communication between the coalition and fighters on the ground. The coalition struggled to mobilize what was left of the military despite repeated entreaties to the president; analysts estimated that, without Mohsin's First Armoured Division, Hadi could only count on the support of several thousand soldiers at most from Yemen's military.

In Taiz, the 35th Armoured Division announced its loyalty to Hadi early in the war, as did military units stationed in Lahj and Taiz. Other military units in Mareb and Seyyun, in Hadramawt, were said by the Hadi government to have remained loyal but did not enter the war. This led to conjecture that they were in fact Saleh loyalists biding their time, especially in the case of the unit in Seyyun.⁴⁶ Supposed Hadi loyalists in Mukalla, a port in the southeast of the country, fled the city in the early days of the war after an assault by AQAP that effectively left it in control there.

⁴³ Author interviews with senior Yemeni and Western officials, New York and London, 2015; and with Saudi and Yemeni officials, Riyadh, January 2016.

⁴⁴ Author interviews with southern resistance leaders, and Western and regional officials, New York, London, Amman, 2015.

⁴⁵ Author interviews with senior Yemeni and Western officials, New York and London, 2015; and with Saudi and Yemeni officials, Riyadh, January 2016.

⁴⁶ Author interviews with pro-Houthi and pro-Hadi officials, Western diplomats and Saudi officials, London and New York, 2015, and Riyadh, January 2016.

Between March and May 2015 the Houthi–Saleh alliance gained rather than lost ground, despite the coalition’s intensive aerial campaign. However, the coalition now began to organize a more coherent strategy for a ground campaign that would not involve its soldiers in frontline fighting – an option that had been considered but quickly rejected as most of the coalition countries were unwilling to take part in what was likely to be a bloody ground war. The new plan involved the leading coalition members, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, recruiting Yemeni fighters both in the Gulf and in Yemen, and providing them with training before inserting them into areas where a clear military strategy would be executed.⁴⁷

As the war progressed, the UAE concentrated its efforts first on winning control of Aden with the backing of southern fighters before moving into surrounding areas and gaining control of territory across the south and Taiz, while Saudi Arabia focused on the fronts in Mareb and Al Jawf where it largely backed fighters from the Mohsin and Al Ahmar military networks. It is not clear, however, whether this divided attack strategy had been agreed on at an early stage.

In May 2015, reports emerged from Aden of Emirati Special Forces operatives organizing the resistance and helping coordinate airstrikes with the coalition central command, gradually winning enough territory to provide a base for incoming Yemeni and coalition troops. In June and July an influx of fighters and a recalibration of the aerial campaign to target supply lines gradually turned the momentum in Aden against the Houthi–Saleh alliance. On 17 July the Hadi government declared Aden ‘liberated’ before entering Lahj and pushing the alliance out of a key military base, Al Anad.

Progress was far slower in Mareb, where tribesmen complained that the Hadi government refused to provide them with the assurances they asked for with regard to greater future autonomy and development in the area; and that Mohsin-affiliated military units would not engage in frontline fighting. In Al Jawf, clashes between Al Ahmar-backed militias and the Houthi–Saleh alliance were frequent but not particularly intense. Local tribes were unsure whether or not they should break a truce with the Houthis that had prevented an increasingly destructive conflict from entering the province (several tribes in Al Jawf are part of the country’s historical Zaydi elite, and of the wider Houthi network).

Taizi fighters became increasingly convinced that the UAE, which has a deep mistrust of the Muslim Brotherhood, was starving them of support because of the reputed affiliation of Islah with Hamoud Saeed al-Mikhlafi, the leader of the main resistance force in the city. In 2014 both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, at the height of their mutual animosity towards the Brotherhood, had designated Islah a terrorist organization because of its purported ties to the organization. After Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud’s accession in January 2015, Riyadh’s attitude towards political Islamists began to thaw, but a similar shift did not take place in Abu Dhabi.

In September 2015 Riyadh announced that a major push against the Houthis was imminent, and by October the Houthi–Saleh alliance had been forced out of Mareb City, but not entirely out of the province. Once in the heartland of its local allies, in the mountainous areas in the west, the alliance was better able to defend its positions, and at the time of writing the Mareb front had been stuck in effective stalemate for some months.

⁴⁷ Author interviews with Saudi observers and Western officials, conducted by telephone from New York, April–May 2015.

Since the beginning of 2016 the remnants of Ali Mohsin's First Armoured Division, backed by Hashid tribal militias and local fighters, have begun to make slow progress elsewhere in the north of Yemen, under the banner of the 'Yemen National Army'. They have taken much of the eastern two-thirds of Al Jawf province, which sits between Mareb and the Houthi heartland, Sa'dah. They have also entered Midi, a Yemeni port town near the Saudi border in the northwest, and in February they consolidated their control over the northeastern edge of Nihm, an area within Sana'a province. This led to regional media claims that an assault on Sana'a was imminent.

Emerging spheres of influence

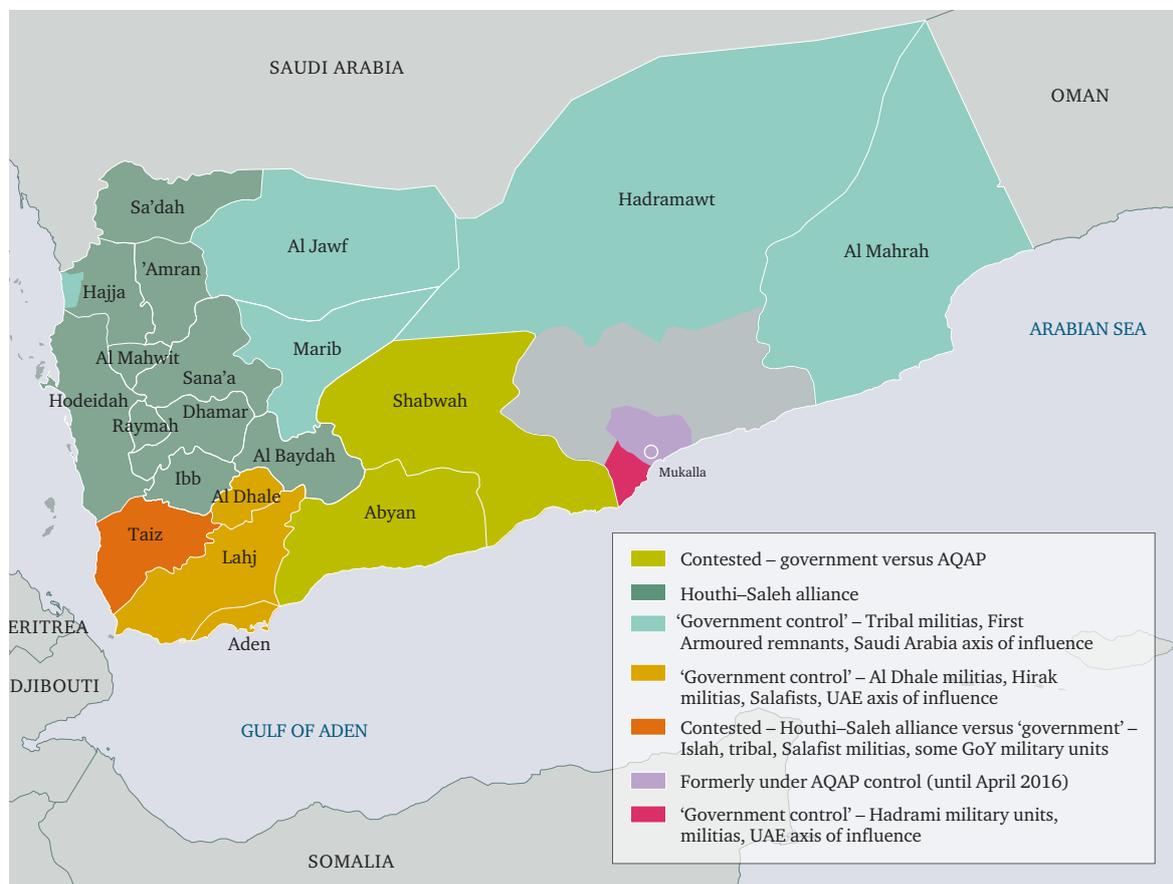
Over the course of the war, Yemen has gradually been divided into several broad spheres of influence. In the northwest highlands the Houthi–Saleh alliance – itself a deeply complex marriage of convenience between political, tribal and military factions that were once bitter rivals – holds the balance of military and political power.

In Al Jawf, in the central north of the country, local tribes, Mohsin-affiliated military units, and some tribal militias backed by the Al Ahmar family, are the dominant military force. In Mareb, local tribes supported by the remnants of Ali Mohsin's First Armoured Division, and backed by northern fighters from the Islah network, form an uncomfortable alliance. In both provinces, direct support is provided largely by Saudi Arabia. In Aden, Lahj and Abyan provinces – and to a lesser extent in nearby Shabwah province – pro-secession militias backed by the UAE are the dominant force on the ground. A specific faction of Hiraq, from Al Dhale province, has become the leading group among the southern militias, leading to mounting internal tensions. Salafist fighters could also play an important role in the south in the future.

In Taiz, Islah and Salafist militias appear to be playing an increasingly important military role, and local groups continue to complain that they are not properly resourced by either the Saudis or the Emiratis. Taiz remains a city divided, despite ostensibly having the most organized resistance, with anti-Houthi groups working under the auspices of the Coordinating Council for Popular Resistance (CCPR), formed in April 2015. Groups fighting under the CCPR include Islah, members of the Nasserist and Socialist parties, and dissident members of Saleh's GPC. Interviews with Islah supporters confirm the view that the UAE's anti-Islah stance is a point of contention within the coalition. Saudi Arabia is happy to support Islah if it will meet the ultimate objective of a military win, whereas the UAE openly backs other groups including southern secessionists and Salafists instead.

In Hadramawt to the east, AQAP, through a carefully calibrated agreement with local leaders, became for a time the de facto power in the south of the province, while to the north Islah-affiliated groups maintain the most important position. In Al Mahra, Yemen's most easterly province, no fighting has occurred, but tensions are said to be rising between a succession of Hadi-appointed governors and military units stationed in the area. These military units are largely made up of northern soldiers and are widely regarded as loyal to Saleh rather than Hadi.

Map 3: Key players and areas of influence



Mapping researched and compiled by the author. The boundaries and names on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by Chatham House.

Assessing support for President Hadi

An important yet difficult question facing political mediators working in Yemen is the level of support for President Hadi. Conversations with supporters and officials of most of the key groups involved in the conflict or with established civil society groups paint a picture of, at best, deeply limited faith in Hadi’s ability as a leader and, in some cases, outright contempt.

In northern Yemen, most of the anti-Houthi forces on the ground are drawn either from local tribes defending their territory or from the remnants of the Islah military network – Al Ahmar-led tribal militias and soldiers from Mohsin’s First Armoured Division. The military leader overseeing the campaign in Mareb, Al Jawf and Sana’a, Major General Mohammed Ali al-Maqdashi, enjoyed a long career in the First Armoured Division before being sidelined by the military reshuffles of 2012–14. He is said to be working alongside Hashem al-Ahmar, a leading member of the Al Ahmar family, to build a hybrid military/militia fighting force of pro-Islah highlanders which, according to two interviewees, operates under the banner of ‘fighting to go home’ and whose leaders rarely refer to themselves as Hadi supporters. Local tribal leaders tend to complain, however, that the Islah-affiliated forces are not taking part in frontline battles, amassing their men far from the battlefield, and that a victory for anti-Houthi forces could simply establish Islahi hegemony in areas previously marginalized by the Saleh–Islah alliance.

In the south, meaningful support for Hadi beyond a symbolic position of leadership is largely limited to a number of groups from his native Abyan. Several military units in the south and one unit in Taiz are more closely tied to the president. However, the appointment in December of two leading militant Hiraki leaders from the central province of Al Dhale with strong ties to the victorious faction from the civil war of 1986 is widely perceived by southerners as recognition that Hadi did not command sufficient respect locally to build local security forces. The appointments were perceived to have been driven by the UAE, with well-informed southerners arguing that Abu Dhabi has lost faith in Hadi's ability to lead and restore security in the south of the country.

Southerners complain that while Hadi enjoys widespread support as the 'legitimate' president, he seems to have little interest in the actual business of government in the south: restoring basic services, providing security or employing local people with what is assumed to be considerable Gulf largesse. They accuse him of strategic gamesmanship and factional politics aimed at ensuring that no rival southern group becomes more powerful than him.⁴⁸ Southerners also complain that months after declaring Aden liberated, Hadi and his government have yet to move to the city – which Hadi designated the temporary capital in February 2015 – in a demonstration of their commitment to the area.⁴⁹ Hadi's appointment of Mohsin – hated in the south as much as Saleh and the Houthis thanks to his role in the 1994 civil war – as vice-president in April 2016 led to protests in Aden and elsewhere in the south.

Southern divisions

Divisions in the south can be traced back to the overthrow of British colonial rule there in the 1960s and the 1986 civil war within the socialist regime that succeeded it, as well as to the 1994 north–south civil war.

The 1986 war, which left thousands dead after a few short months of fighting, was precipitated by the attempted assassination of one faction within the socialist Politburo. It resulted in the defeat of the faction behind the attack, mainly made up of Abyani leaders and led by then president Ali Nasser Mohammed, which subsequently fled north. The winning faction, mainly comprising people from Al Dhale, Hadramawt and Yafei, had lost many of its top leaders, and elected Ali Salem al-Beidh as Secretary General of the ruling YSP. He would rule the PDRY until unification.

The military units that fled into exile were largely assimilated into the Saleh-era military. Among their number was Hadi. When al-Beidh attempted to unwind the unity pact in 1994, Nasser Mohammed loyalists joined in the northern campaign to enforce unity. Hadi was made defence minister during this war. As a result, mistrust of his faction – generally associated with Hadi's home province of Abyan – runs deep in the south, especially among hardline secessionists. The failure of the militias that he formed before the war to protect Aden, along with his continued public support for a unified Yemen, has led many southerners to see the president as a means to an end, and as someone who will ultimately have to be replaced if the goal of secession is to be achieved.

⁴⁸ Author interviews with southern resistance fighters and observers, December 2016; and with local officials, Aden, February 2016.

⁴⁹ 'It is of course much more comfortable in a hotel in Riyadh,' a southern leader wryly noted to the author in early 2016 in a comment that is not uncommon not just among southerners but also in most of the groups fighting against the Houthi–Saleh alliance. 'We don't have water or electricity here and room service isn't as good either. But maybe they could change that if they came.'

The emergence of Salafist fighting groups

One of the less closely examined consequences of the war has been the emergence of hardline Salafist fighting groups of the kind that first appeared during battles between the Houthis and residents of the Salafist Dar al Hadith institute in Dammaj from around 2005 onwards. Early in the battle for Aden, local militias noted the presence of Salafist fighters both from the south and elsewhere in Yemen, remarking that they were both well organized and disciplined. Although some were initially reported to be affiliated with either AQAP or Yemen's incipient ISIS group, they were part of a network of Salafist mosques and groups that had historically shared loose affiliation with some parts of Islah and that had recruited fighters for the battles with the Houthis in Dammaj and later helped absorb and resettle Yemeni and foreign students and fighters from the Dar al Hadith network.

Several people with knowledge of the Aden fighting claim that when the UAE Special Forces first entered Aden they noted that the Salafists were among the most disciplined and best-organized fighting forces in the city; and that they cooperated with them closely both in the fight for the city and in efforts to distribute aid across Aden during and after the fighting.⁵⁰ Once Aden had been secured, a number of these fighters moved on to fight in Taiz where they quickly established themselves as a dominant force, surpassing the Islah-affiliated forces led by Hamoud Saeed al-Mikhlaifi.⁵¹

Media reports have suggested that the Salafist fighters have fought alongside AQAP and that there is some crossover between the two groups. The author has reason to believe that this may be the case but has not seen definitive evidence proving meaningful ties between the Salafists and jihadist fighters.

There are also some divisions between the different component parts of the Salafist network. Many southern Salafist leaders have increasingly favoured secession over the past decade, and a Salafist sheikh became a leading figure in the pro-secession 'square', a protest encampment in Aden set up in the wake of the Houthi takeover of Sana'a. Other Salafist leaders, including those in Taiz, remain pro-unity and maintain close ties with some Islah leaders; Islah is widely reviled in the south for its role in the 1994 civil war.

AQAP, ISIS and the need for the restoration of government

While the liberation of Aden was the coalition's first major success in the war, the government and the Emiratis have struggled to place their stamp on the former southern capital or the wider south. Security has declined rapidly; ISIS launched a dramatic bombing campaign and AQAP expanded its territorial control westwards towards Aden from Mukalla, which it seized in March 2015. In April 2016 local militias led by military commanders from the province, backed by the UAE military, forced AQAP out of Mukalla.

The local ISIS branch, first announced in 2014, has launched more than 25 attacks across the country since early 2015, at first concentrating on nominally Houthi-affiliated institutions including mosques but, since the liberation of Aden, also targeting high-profile officials. An October 2015 attack on the Al Qasr hotel in Aden, at the time the temporary barracks for senior Emirati officers and the headquarters for returned government officials, caused the UAE to begin a troop drawdown and Prime Minister Khaled Bahah to quit Aden for several months. In December 2015 another ISIS

⁵⁰ Author interviews with regional officials and local fighters, October–November 2015.

⁵¹ Author interviews with residents of Aden and Taiz, October–November 2015.

bomb killed the recently appointed governor, Jaafar Mohammed Saad. Since then the group has repeatedly targeted the south's incipient security forces. Despite losing a number of senior leaders to US drone strikes, AQAP has continued to battle the Houthis in Al Beidah province while moving west from Mukalla into Shabwah and Abyan provinces (where it has historically had a strong presence), and consolidating control of a city in Lahj province, which borders Aden to the west.

AQAP has been one of the biggest winners from the war, expanding territorially while continuing the process of rebranding itself as local alternative to the Hadi government and the Houthis. After capturing Mukalla it helped put in place a local council, led by AQAP-leaning local clerics, and a security force, the so-called 'Sons of Hadramawt'. Neither the council nor the security force is purely AQAP although they include many AQAP members. The group has also worked to provide basic services including water and electricity, as well as justice and law enforcement. AQAP is said to have been among the best-prepared groups for cyclone Chapala, which hit southern Yemen in November 2015. AQAP men evacuated residents from the coast and afterwards helped repair damaged infrastructure. AQAP has even reportedly pressured universities in Hadramawt to resume classes, offering to provide financial support to keep them running.⁵²

In April of 2016, militias in Aden stormed the Mansoura district of the city, a base for local AQAP leaders and fighters, leading to several days of fighting. Since then, southern fighters have pushed AQAP out of key positions in Lahj and, most notably, have retaken Mukalla after AQAP effectively withdrew from the city. AQAP militants are now said to have returned to their historical bases in Abyan and Shabwah provinces, and to be planning a counterattack.

Many southerners see AQAP as a long-term threat to their hopes for a stable, separate and well-governed south. But some residents of Aden and Mukalla told the author that, for the time being, it seemed to be the group best able to restore some basic stability to the areas that it controls. Several interviewees said that AQAP had learned the lessons of its past experiments in territorial control, applying conservative social rules more sparingly and carefully. Given the choice between Houthi–Saleh dominance, the anarchy of weak government and the structure and stability of AQAP rule, some southerners have become tempted not by AQAP's ideology but by its new brand of governance.⁵³ It may be that the withdrawal from Mukalla is a calculated gamble aimed at demonstrating the government's weakness as an administrator of the territory it holds.

Such sentiments contain disturbing echoes of northerners' embrace of the Houthis in 2014 when the group presented itself as an anti-establishment alternative to decades of weak and corrupt governance. This underscores the urgent need for Hadi's government or its successor, and the coalition, to restore security and basic services in the south, if they are not to find themselves in a position of having won the south from the Houthis only to lose it to AQAP or even ISIS. In the future, competition between the state and non-state actors will have to be fought not just through hard power but by offering a better governance alternative.

⁵² Almasdar Online (2016), 'Tanẓīm al-qā'ida yargham 'idārat jāmi'at ḥaḍramawt 'ala 'isti'nāf ad-dirāsa fihā' [Al-Qaeda compels Hadramawt University's administration to resume classes], 16 February 2016, <http://almasdaronline.net/article/79707>.

⁵³ Author interviews, November–December 2015, and during a reporting trip to Aden, February 2016.

6. Another Time, Another Country: the Social and Security Impacts of the Civil War

Polarization and brutalization

The civil war has had a profound effect on Yemeni society, sharpening or calcifying pre-existing divisions and turning hitherto largely unimportant differences into serious rifts, a series of competing narratives of victimhood that will have to be addressed as part of a future political process.

Marieke Brandt, one of the foremost scholars of the Houthis wars with the central state between 2004 and 2010, has noted that the brutal tactics that became the norm in Sa'dah during six years of wars were an aberration from, rather than a result of, tribal society:

During the battles, tribal customs increasingly came to be ignored (as did the norms of the Geneva Convention) as a result of the presence of various sectarian elements in the fighting forces and, perhaps above all, because of the internationalization of the conflict, which led to bombings by the Yemeni and Saudi air forces of markets and villages ... The brutalization of the war was not caused by tribal norms, but rather by their erosion. In its later stages, some battles of the Houthi [sic] conflict included mass violence, and even massacres. The brutality was of a kind and on a scale exceeding local rules of engagement, and clearly went far beyond the maximum escalation level of tribal conflict as defined by Raymond Jamous, resembling instead what Antonius Robben and Mary Kaldor have identified as 'new wars'.⁵⁴

During the civil war this process of brutalization and normalization of 'new war' has expanded beyond the borders of Sa'dah and engulfed the country as a whole while socio-geographical and sectarian divisions have become ever more deeply entrenched. Lowland and southern Yemenis have long seen their identities as distinct from those in the historically dominant northwestern highlands. Taizis set themselves apart from what they see as a culture of corruption, patronage and violent dominance in the northwest, and often couch their descriptions of the highlands in terms of oppositional identities, in which sophisticated, educated, cultured and civic-minded Taizis are contrasted with an uneducated and vulgar tribal society.

Southerners – who argue, with some justification, that the process of brutalization Brandt describes stretches back to the 1994 civil war – share this narrative, talking often of the 'civil state' they enjoyed under British and then socialist leadership, and their 'subjugation' by tribalism and brutishness in the north – yet many see Taizis as part of the 'northern' nexus of power. This enrages Taizis, who fear that in an eventual peace deal southerners would happily sell their fellow anti-Houthi fighters in exchange for separation. This perception has been underpinned by the violence visited on these areas: Aden and then Taiz suffered the worst fighting of the war: the Houthi–Saleh alliance besieged both cities, cutting off food, water and fuel supplies while arbitrarily shelling densely populated civilian areas. Anti-Houthi fighters in both cities, and in Mareb, are said to have visited horrific reprisals on the northern fighters they have captured during different periods of the war.

In the northwest – the centre of power for the Houthis and Saleh but not necessarily an area of unquestioning loyalty for the alliance – the narrative of a Saudi-led war against Yemen has gained

⁵⁴ Brandt, Marieke, 'The Irregulars of the Sa'dah War: 'Colonel Shaykhs' and 'Tribal Militias' in Yemen's Houthi Conflict (2004–2010)', in *Why Yemen Matters: a Society in Transition*, SOAS Middle East Issues, July 2014.

increasing currency. So has the narrative of a war against Salafi or 'Wahhabi' jihadists, generally placed under the banner of *Da'esh*, the Arabic acronym for ISIS that the Houthis also apply to AQAP and in fact any group that fights them. Many northern Yemenis whose only experience of the war has been the coalition's aerial campaign now state as fact the belief that Saudi Arabia aims to dominate Yemen and spread hardline Salafism.

Eroded civil society

The war has also led to a worrying erosion of Yemen's civil society; this was formerly a thriving segment of the population, relative at least to Yemen's Arabian Peninsula neighbours. Networks of rights groups, NGOs and highly educated technocratic-minded government workers played a key role in the 2011 uprising and in the subsequent dialogue conference and associated debate over future policy choices for the country.

Since the beginning of the war many prominent civil society leaders and educated young people have fled the country, out of fear of the war in general or of persecution by the groups that hold the balance of power in their areas, or because of the total collapse of economic opportunity in the country. Sana'a, for example, was the main hub for such people but has become the site of a vicious crackdown on freedoms and a key target for the coalition campaign. Similarly, in Taiz, which many Yemenis consider the most educated, civic- and reform-minded part of the country, a large number of development-minded and liberal local leaders have fled the city for villages outside the conflict zone or – as in the case of the technocratic governor of Taiz, Shawki Hayel Saeed – have left the country entirely.

There are some exceptions to this trend: aid workers report that, were it not for the dedication and bravery of many local NGOs, basic humanitarian supplies would not make their way to people who need them most, and basic services such as water and medical clinics would have deteriorated far more even than they have done during the war. Nevertheless, many well-educated Yemenis who had played a role in the transition process or had worked in government before the civil war now worry that they will struggle to find a place in a country where hard power – or 'men with guns', in the words of one interviewee – has come to be seen as the defining dynamic on the ground.

The conflict has also sparked one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. In August 2016, according to the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, 'Yemen after five months looks like Syria after five years.' The only reason why it has not created a greater mass of refugees than the wars in Iraq, Syria or Libya is that Yemenis caught in the war do not have access to borders or sea routes that would allow them to enter and transit through neighbouring states.

7. Current Approaches and Prospects for Peace

Ceasefire first, peace later

Thus far, internationally backed UN-led mediation efforts have been focused on brokering a ceasefire between the Hadi government and the Houthi–Saleh alliance. Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, who replaced Jamal Benomar as envoy in early 2015, has been working on the basis that once a temporary *détente* has been agreed a more lasting political solution can be worked towards, meaning that talks ongoing in Kuwait at the time of writing were more of a ‘ceasefire process’ than a ‘peace process’.⁵⁵ Two rounds of meetings were held in Switzerland in 2015 along with a series of back-channel negotiations before the third round of talks began in April 2016 in Kuwait.

Among the most important criticisms of the current approach are the widespread perception that the Hadi government does not have the authority to agree to or implement a ceasefire, given the wide array of groups fighting the Houthi–Saleh alliance and the tenuousness of the government’s links to them; and that Saudi Arabia, which has been a driving force behind the anti-Houthi war effort, is not formally participating in the talks. Several people involved in the process say that Ould Cheikh Ahmed is largely of the view that the government of Saudi Arabia, which is much more intimately involved in the day-to-day running of the war and has a stronger command-and-control relationship with the different groups on the ground, will be the party to actually instruct them to halt their activities in the event of a lasting ceasefire. Any agreement made between the different parties will therefore be subject to an effective Saudi veto while the Hadi government, which is deeply dependent on Riyadh for financial support and continued international recognition, is likely to accept whatever terms the Saudis consider reasonable to end the war.

An end to the current ‘big war’ will not necessarily prevent the outbreak of a series of complex and little-understood ‘small wars’ across the country, including a southern push for secession.

But it is in no way certain that the different groups on the ground will accede to whatever political settlement is agreed upon by Riyadh and the Hadi government. Given that the envoy is not in direct contact with all of these groups, mechanisms put in place during the Kuwait talks to de-escalate frontline fighting do not address tensions in areas not being contested by the two ‘sides’.

This is particularly worrying given the deep polarization the conflict has created, and the fact that in many cases local groups have fought for both factions in the war, making a ‘withdrawal’ by either party from contested areas much more complex than if this were a conflict being fought between two conventional militaries. An end to the current ‘big war’ will not necessarily prevent the outbreak of a series of complex and little-understood ‘small wars’ across the country, including a southern push for secession. In fact, an end to national-level hostilities would almost certainly spark local reprisals, bloodletting and the emergence of new conflicts, and AQAP and ISIS are likely to exploit the ensuing chaos.

⁵⁵ Author interviews with senior UN officials, December 2015 and February 2016.

Despite public support for a political solution, there is a widespread perception that Saudi Arabia, the main sponsor of the anti-Houthi war effort, and deputy crown prince Mohammed bin Salman in particular, still needs a ‘win’ in order to justify the war to the wider Saudi public. A peace deal that leaves the Houthis – widely presented in Saudi and pro-Riyadh regional media as Iranian proxies – armed and in political power, or in control of Sana’a, is unacceptable to the kingdom’s rulers. At a minimum, some observers in Riyadh believe, the Saudi government needs to push the Houthi–Saleh alliance out of Sana’a in a symbolic victory to justify a formal ‘end’ to the war in what could well be a repeat of the decision by the United States to declare victory in Iraq in 2003 before facing a long and bloody insurgency.⁵⁶

In February 2016, reports emerged that the Saudis had entered into direct talks with the Houthis, focusing on prisoner swaps and a deal to secure the border. At the time of writing, these had been surprisingly productive.⁵⁷ Yet a number of diplomatic and other sources with knowledge of the talks believed that they were being sponsored by Mohammed bin Nayef, the Saudi interior minister who has been marginalized by his uncle, the new king, and cousin, the new defence minister, since Salman’s ascension to power.⁵⁸ It was unclear whether or not the talks would lead to any diplomatic breakthrough at a national level if Mohammed bin Salman did not achieve the ‘win’ he needed. The Houthis and Saleh are highly unlikely to hand over the capital without a fight.

The Houthi–Saleh alliance has responded to each wave of coalition gains in Yemen by launching counterattacks, including reprisals across the Saudi border, and pro-Houthi media regularly announce territorial gains, disputed by Saudi Arabia, in the south of the kingdom. The alliance, despite regular predictions that it will collapse, has held solid for the better part of a year and is likely to do so as long as the threat of a coalition win outweighs internal disagreements. Given its dominant position on the ground in the northwest of Yemen, it is difficult to foresee a coalition campaign to take Sana’a that is not deeply destructive and bloody, and that does not deepen the social polarization that has already damaged the country.

Box 4: Aden – A Case Study of Post-conflict Governance

Beyond the challenge of ending the war is the question of restoring stability to Yemen and rebuilding its shattered infrastructure. The June 2015 liberation of Aden, the first major city in the country to be freed from Houthi control, was widely seen as an opportunity for both the government and the coalition to demonstrate their commitment to the restoration of security, the provision of basic services and the reconstruction of areas worst affected by the war. But the opportunity has, thus far, been squandered.

In the months after the Houthi–Saleh retreat from Aden, the UAE pledged to rebuild schools and hospitals and help the government restore electricity and water while funding local police. But by February 2016 the coalition had withdrawn from the streets of the city to a heavily fortified base on its outskirts while the port was marked by deep factionalism and a lack of uniform security provision.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Author interviews, Riyadh, January 2016.

⁵⁷ Gladstone, R. (2016), ‘Saudis Announce Prisoner Swap with Houthis in Yemen Conflict’, *New York Times*, 28 March 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/middleeast/saudis-announce-prisoner-swap-with-houthis-in-yemen-conflict.html>.

⁵⁸ Author interviews with high-ranking Western diplomat, senior UN official and others, March 2016.

⁵⁹ Author visit to Aden, February 2016.

In comments later corroborated by Western officials, local sources and coalition officials argued that, rather than focusing their energies on governing Aden and building goodwill among the local population, the Hadi government had been largely inactive in the city. Asked why so little had been done, they pointed both to a deepening rivalry between Hadi and his then vice-president, Khaled Bahah, who was later replaced by Mohsin, and to Hadi's caution over building an effective security sector in the south that might later be able to challenge his authority in the only major Yemeni city he fully controlled.

The December 2015 assassination of the Hadi-appointed governor of Aden had led the UAE to the conclusion that the Hadi government could not be trusted with bringing security to the city. Abu Dhabi, the main coalition player in the area, made the unilateral decision to appoint Shelal Ali Shayea and Aydrous al-Zubaidi, the leaders of two most powerful militias in the south, both from Al Dhale province, as the head of security and governor of Aden respectively, effectively forming a parallel government there. Hadi is said to resent the newfound power of the Al Dhale faction, which fought against military units he ostensibly led in 2013 and 2014. Zubaidi and Shayea both say that they have little interaction with the Hadi government and cooperate more closely with the coalition. Both complain of a lack of support from the government.

Perhaps because of the factional differences inside Aden, Al-Qaeda nevertheless retained a highly visible presence there. They had been aggressively recruiting in and around the city and appear to be far more widely accepted by the local populace than before the war. As of April 2016, the UN and major aid organizations had yet to establish a meaningful presence in Aden owing to unresolved fears over security. Some Adenis worry meanwhile that divisions between the different militias that emerged in Aden during the war – principally local secessionists and pro-unity Salafists – and the Al Dhale militias, and with Hadi loyalists stationed around the presidential palace, could lead to infighting between the groups that helped oust the Houthis from the south.

Unless the governor and head of security can rapidly increase their reach, or the government applies itself to restoring order and improving living standards, the potential for unrest and violence remains extremely high, with many in Aden worriedly predicting an inter-factional struggle for control of the city.

8. Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Conclusions

Yemen's war has reached a stalemate in which outright military victory of any kind is highly unlikely, and would come at an intolerably high cost, particularly for people already on the brink of starvation. It is widely agreed – and has been stated even by Saudi and Iranian officials – that a political solution is the only way for the war to end. But what are the prospects for peace?

The civil war is multifaceted, rather than a conflict between two distinct coalitions, and is being fought by a wide array of actors with deeply divergent interests and agendas. It is best described as a 'big war' made up of many 'small wars' that will all need to be ended if a sustainable peace is to be built in the future. To achieve this will require a different approach by the international community from that taken in the political transition of 2012–14. While that process ultimately collapsed because of the Houthi–Saleh coup, various factors made the coup possible: not only the machinations of the northern rebels and the former president, but also the fact that the transition's sponsors accorded higher priority to elite-level negotiations than to the grievances and needs of local and identity groups, including their urgent economic needs.

Local grievances and divisions have only deepened since the war began, not just between the highland alliance and these local and identity groups, but also between anti-Houthi fighters and the Hadi government, and between the different factions themselves. Should the physical conflict be brought to an end, failure to begin the reconciliation process early on and directly address local grievances as part of any settlement will be likely to result in the 'big war' ending only for the many 'small wars' to continue, which in turn could lead to a rapid resumption of national-level hostilities fuelled by regional support.

Yet at present, while the Houthi–Saleh alliance is represented at the UN-brokered talks, its counterpart is a delegation appointed by President Hadi that bears little resemblance to the forces fighting on the ground, or the civil society groups that have effectively been excised from the political process because of their unwillingness to take part in armed conflict. While the Hadi team may be able to negotiate a deal with the Houthis, it will need Saudi and Emirati leaders – increasingly divided over the role of Islah in the country's future and over the role of southern secessionists – to try to convince the combatants to bring the fighting to a halt, to observe the terms of the truce and to participate in the subsequent political process.

It is still unclear what incentive there will be for these groups to stop fighting or to take part in another transition process, especially if it does not meet their expectations. 'We support Hadi because he represents the outcomes of the National Dialogue, and because the dialogue gives us regional autonomy and calls for development of the regions,' a Marebi tribal leader told the author in an interview in Riyadh in January 2016. If the autonomy and developmental assistance he and his fellow tribesmen require is not forthcoming after the conflict, he said, then 'we will go to war again until we get our rights'.

Many of the forces currently participating in the war are made up of unsteady and divided alliances: between local tribesmen, socialists, and Islahi and Salafist forces in Taiz, or the different southern and Islamist factions in Aden. The Mareb tribes are said to be nervous that Islah-backed forces will seek

to control their territory in the event of a peace deal, and that revenge killings between aggrieved pro- and anti-Houthi tribes will lead to a war in the province. AQAP is also likely to attempt to exploit anger among Sunnis that a deal has been done with the Houthis.

Given the rise in levels of poverty and pre-existing resource constraints, as well as animosities between different local factions, the probability of localized conflict is high. The government is very unlikely to be able to deal with these issues effectively. The Saleh regime structured the security forces to ensure that northerners provided the bulk of the army and police, such that the pull-out of Houthi–Saleh forces has led to security vacuums in Aden and elsewhere. The Hadi government, which proved to be administratively weak before the war and is currently internally divided, has unsurprisingly struggled to restore order.

Lessons for the future

A meaningful political settlement will need to address a highly complex and interconnected matrix of issues, not least the hard power dynamics on the ground, the wide variety of demands from the different armed groups that have emerged during the war, and the interests of regional players who have become party to the conflict. It will need to take into account the sensitivities of different Yemeni actors to the involvement of the international community in any future political process. These sensitivities include – but are not limited to – the grievances of northwestern Yemenis who, while critical of the Houthi–Saleh alliance, primarily experienced the war through the lens of the Saudi-led coalition’s aerial campaign. Many northerners firmly believe that the United Kingdom and the United States played an important role in supporting and arming the coalition, and as a result will not see the Gulf states, Washington or London as honest brokers in future political mediation efforts.

The question of Saleh’s future will be a key sticking point. Arguably, by allowing the former president to remain in Yemen and continue as the head of the country’s biggest political party, the brokers of the 2011 peace deal sowed the seeds of the later conflict. Yet the war is unlikely to end without Saleh’s approval.

Any negotiated settlement will also need to strike a balance between finding the compromise necessary to end the war while satisfying regional and local interests. Any settlement that takes into account or recognizes the Houthi–Saleh alliance’s de facto control of the highlands and western coastal strip is likely to be extremely unpopular among its rivals. The question of Saleh’s future will be a key sticking point. Arguably, by allowing the former president to remain in Yemen and continue as the head of the country’s biggest political party, the brokers of the 2011 peace deal sowed the seeds of the later conflict. Yet the war is unlikely to end without Saleh’s approval.

It is for these reasons that a political settlement will require, at a minimum, a three-track process: an international mediation process that acknowledges the role of the Saudi-led coalition in the war and the need for a transparent process that involves the coalition; a peace process between the Houthi–Saleh alliance and the Hadi government; and a broader political dialogue that brings in all of the key local groups that have been party to the conflict and have a stake in Yemen’s future, drawn along the same lines as the National Dialogue process but with genuine southern participation.

This third track of mediation and negotiation will be the most difficult to coordinate, but should over time become the focus of long-term mediation efforts. The formation of local councils, for which existing Yemeni law provides a framework, as part of an ongoing peace process would be one way of allowing local groups to organize and express their grievances in a constructive manner; it would also create a mechanism for Yemeni and international actors to mediate in localized conflict. A future transitional process that again focuses on elite-level dynamics and does not see the transitional government make meaningful progress in respect of governance, basic services and the economy is likely to be doomed to fail. A repeat of 2012–14, where local issues were ignored and the transition's backers focused on counterterrorism initiatives and elite balancing, cannot be countenanced.

While Yemen's war is of course unique in terms of its overall composition, there are lessons to be learned from other conflicts, especially those in states where the central government has limited capacity and local governance is often provided by non-state actors: from Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria; and from the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the formerly unitary state of north and south Sudan. Past peacebuilding efforts in these countries provide experience – both positive and negative – that can be usefully applied in the Yemeni context to prevent the war reaching a similar scale, intensity and duration. A wealth of scholarship, policy expertise and analysis can be shared between the officials working not just on Yemen but also on other such 'chaos states'.

If the Yemeni war cannot be brought to an end, however, the recent histories of these countries provide a sobering view of the country's likely future. Yemen may not be a Western policy priority today, but if it is allowed to descend into deeper chaos the humanitarian crisis and the rise of jihadist groups like AQAP will eventually force it further up the international policy agenda.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
CCPR	Coordinating Council for Popular Resistance
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPC	General People's Congress
Hirak	Al Hirak al-Janoubi/Southern Movement
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JMP	Joint Meeting Parties
PDRY	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen
PNP	Peace and National Partnership Agreement
UAE	United Arab Emirates
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic
YSP	Yemen Socialist Party

About the Author

Peter Salisbury is an independent journalist and analyst whose work has appeared in *The Economist*, the *Financial Times* and *Foreign Policy* as well as Vice News, among others, and who has worked as a consultant and a political economy analyst for the UK's Department for International Development, the UN and the World Bank. He has been an associate fellow of Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme since September 2015. The former energy editor of MEED, the *Middle East Economic Digest*, he holds an MSc in international politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He has worked on Yemen since 2008, and was based in Sana'a between October 2013 and December 2014.

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Cover image: The rubble of a traditional mud house pictured in the early evening, Old City, Sana'a, 26 September 2015

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The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
contact@chathamhouse.org www.chathamhouse.org

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