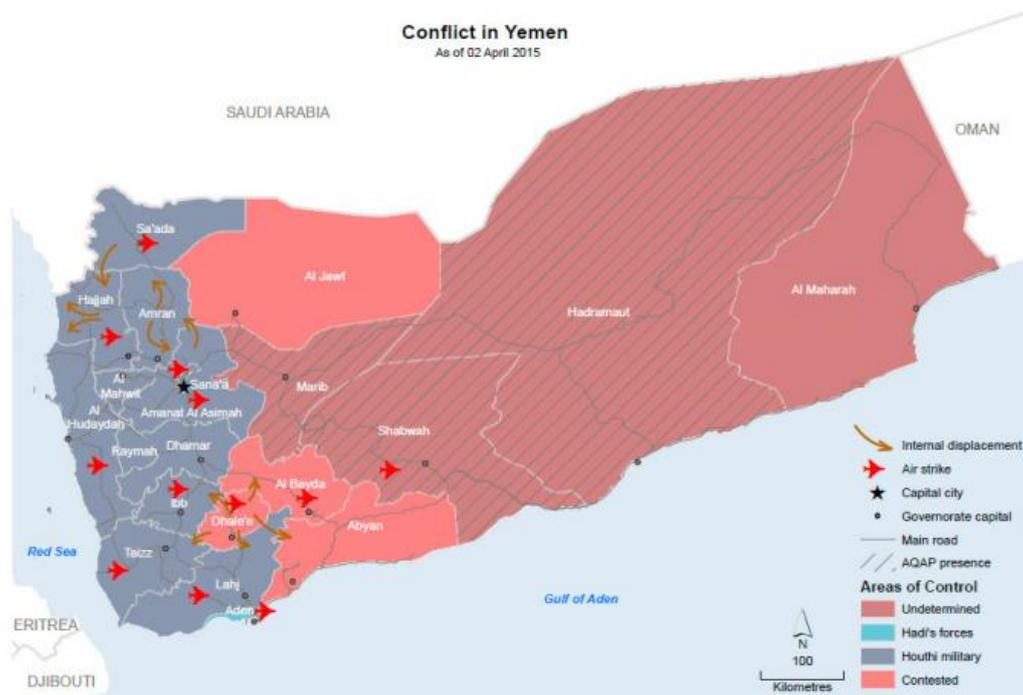


Editor's Note: Below is the second segment of a four-part regional document that includes analyses on MENA hotspots such as Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Tunisia. This note has been designed by *OTHER SOLUTIONS Consulting* research team as an overview of the ongoing crisis in Yemen.

2. Yemen

The on-going crisis in Yemen has become a pinnacle point of discussion globally. However there have been conflicting interpretations and analyses particularly after the beginning of air strikes by a Saudi-led coalition targeting Houthi rebels. The complexity of the situation on the ground with multiple factions struggling for power has left open ended question with regard to the future of the conflict. The vast humanitarian implications in addition to the intervention of regional powers and jihadist forces reflect the significance of current developments around the Arabian Peninsula.

2.1 Map



(Source: ACAPS 2/4/2015)

2.3 Key Players

The Houthis are a rebel movement from the north of Yemen who follow the Zaydi branch of Shiite Islam. Hussein al-Houthi is their glorified leader who led the first war against Yemen's central government in 2004. The current leader is Abdul Malik, Hussein's brother. This Shiite militia is fighting for more autonomy, economic resources and for the right to practice their religious beliefs. Arguably their marginalization from the central government previously based in Sana'a has led to this violent backlash. However, as numerous Yemeni-based political analysts have stated, this war cannot be understood mutually as a 'sectarian' war but rather one based on a powers struggle between different factions.

The Houthis have also been allegedly linked to other key players such as Iran and ex-Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Many have described the group as a clearly Iran-backed movement (like Hezbollah or the Shiite militias in Iraq) representing the augmenting influence of a "neo-Persian" empire. However, the extent to which

Tehran has supported the group still remains highly disputed. Western and mainstream Arab analysts have claimed that Tehran has funded, armed and logistically supported the group. None of these claims can be confirmed but what remains a fact is that Tehran sees the Houthis as a convenient irritant for its principal regional rival Saudi Arabia. Recent statements made by president Rohani accusing the Saudi-led coalition of committing 'genocide' against the Yemeni people, reflects their support of the Houthi rebellion. The country has even tried to convince neighbouring Pakistan not to participate in current air strikes; in an effort to weaken the international and regional backing of the coalition.

Yemen's ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh's role is also of importance in understanding the Houthis strong position in Yemen. Saleh maintains loyalty of approximately a third to two thirds of the Yemeni army which does not adhere to the rule of current president Hadi. Despite a turbulent past with the Houthis, Saleh has been accused of helping them undermine Hadi's government through military, political and tribal influence. These allegations do have a solid base considering that the Yemeni Air force bombarded Hadi's stronghold in Aden in support of the Houthi rebellion. Saleh has built a reputation of a purely self-interested politician who has not hesitated to shift alliances incessantly. The United Nations Security Council sanctioned Saleh in November 2014 over allegations that he had supported both the Houthi rebels and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in order to weaken Hadi's government, charges which Saleh denied.

The presence of key jihadist elements in Yemen has also been a central concern for the US and its western counterparts. In particular the activity of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)¹ and a newly formed IS faction² in the South has had detrimental effects on the country. Current concerns are that AQAP will take advantage of the power vacuum created by Houthi advancements and gain backing by numerous Sunni tribes. Some Sunni tribes have already sided with them and others have decided to support Hadi's government in Aden; in what seems to be an infinitely-divided country. The presence of secessionist movements rooted in the pre-1990 divide between north and south Yemen has further aggravated the current scenario.

The Saudi led coalition has championed the narrative that Iran is trying to surround Saudi Arabia and meddle in Arab affairs. A military campaign was authorized in Yemen on March 26 2015. For the last couple of weeks, Saudi Arabia along with its allies have conducted airstrikes against Houthi targets but have not yet ruled out a ground offensive. The countries either carrying out airstrikes or contributing to the effort include the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Egypt and Sudan. Jordan, Morocco, Turkey and Pakistan have also declared their support for the coalition.

The intervention of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries in this Yemeni affair has raised many eyebrows across the international community as first reports of civilian casualties and massive displacements have reined in. Nevertheless, the US has provided logistical and intelligence assistance to its Gulf allies further legitimizing the campaign. The coalition supports the Hadi government and has repeatedly pointed out that the Houthis have refused to open dialogue resulting in this sharp display of force. The multitude of interests and parties involved in the Yemeni theatre has indeed been a recipe for instability for decades. In 2015 at its zenith, there are implicit sectarian and regional dynamics that have added more fuel to the fire in what is now one of the most pertinent humanitarian crises in the world.

¹ The group is one of AQ's central and most active branches. AQAP launched large offensive in Yemen in 2011- 2012 and captured significant amount of land until it was pushed back by government forces. The group has conducted suicide operations in Yemen and against western targets. AQAP has repeatedly threatened the national security of the US and was most recently involved in the notorious Charlie Hebdo killings in Paris. Also maintains training ground for jihadist globally.

² On 10th November 2014 members of AQAP defected from AQ and declared allegiance to al-Baghdadi and IS in Syria and Iraq. IS affiliates in Yemen have since claimed responsibility for a series of coordinated suicide bombings targeting mosques in the capital Sana'a killed 137 people and injured 345 others.

2.3 Latest Developments and Forecast

From a humanitarian perspective since the recent escalation in fighting after the Houthi advancement and later Saudi-led airstrikes, the situation has only gotten worse. The Ministry of Health and Population reported that the death toll has reached 1,042 while injuries are estimated to be over 3,700. These figures include those from the ground battles in Aden, which alone have resulted in 185 deaths and 1,700 injuries according to the same source³. The number of Internally Displaced People (IDP) is also on a sharp rise surpassing the 100,000 mark as the conflict spreads. Even before the start of this crisis around 16 from the 25 million Yemeni people were in need of humanitarian assistance to meet their most basic needs.

On 12th April 2015 The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), reported a rise in people fleeing by boat across the Gulf of Aden to countries in the Horn of Africa. Ironically this route has been historically travelled by refugees and migrants headed in the opposite direction. The UNHCR said that it is making plans to be able to receive up to 30,000 refugees in Djibouti over the next six months and up to 100,000 people in Somaliland and Puntland, Somalia. Inside Yemen, UNHCR's operations to protect and assist the 250,000 refugees continue where possible.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) announced on 12th April 2015, that at least 16,000 foreign nationals are stranded in Yemen, adding that it has evacuated 143 people. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has pleaded for the resumption of peace talks in the war-torn country; nevertheless security challenges continue to be immense in Yemen. There are identifiable challenges for aid agencies as well as media networks to access conflict-inflicted populations. The widespread need for humanitarian assistance is not being met despite the incessant efforts of aid community members such as the ICRC to gain access.

The United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen warned that the situation is getting “worse by the hour in Yemen”⁴. He added that the ground attacks and airstrikes are quickly unravelling “anything there was left” of basic services including health care, safe water and availability of food. In the city of Aden for example, one million people risk being cut off from access to clean drinking water within a matter of days. Thus the question is what happens next, is Yemen going to continue spiralling into chaos?

From a security perspective intervention in Yemen has historically been a daunting task. As the Egyptian learnt the hard way in the past, today the Saudi led coalition is likely to be unsuccessful. Even if the Houthis are weakened the presence of government loyal factions, secessionists and jihadist elements such as AQAP and IS will be sufficient to break down any form of sustainable negotiations in Yemen. Criticism will mount on the coalition as the humanitarian crisis continues to grow and civilians continue to die. More importantly, Saudi Arabia may bring instability to its own Kingdom as the violence in Yemen spills over. On 12 April 2015 three Saudi officers have been killed and two others wounded after Houthi fighters in Yemen fired a mortar round at a Saudi border post. This is the second attack in a month signalling at the increased security risk facing King Salman's country.

The role of Iran in the conflict will also be of interest as negotiations with the U.S over nuclear non-proliferation issues seem to be gaining momentum. The lifting of sanctions and re-emergence of Iran, not as a rogue state but as an internationally accepted regional power may help the Houthi position later. Meanwhile as this ‘Sunni vs Shia and Arab vs Persian’ dynamic plays out al-Qaeda and IS will also compete for influence in the south of the country. Alliances to Sunni tribesmen may increase during the conflict to consolidate a power base to counter/resist the Houthis advancement from the north. Confrontation between AQ and IS, as witnessed in the Syrian theatre is also likely to happen particularly if IS is successful in overshadowing AQAP. All in all, from multiple angles the Yemeni crisis is set to expand rather than the opposite.

Yemen: Human Impact

- **16 million people in need of humanitarian assistance**
- **8 million lack adequate healthcare**
- **12 million need food assistance; 840,000 children**
- **13 million do not have access to safe water and sanitation**

³ Reliefweb, Online Report by the International Federation of the Red cross and Red crescent societies, available at : <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IB080415Yemen.pdf> (Accessed 10/4/2015)

⁴ UN News Centre, Online at : <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50538#.VSsd4V3F-28> (Accessed 12th April 2015)