



YEMEN: A WAR WITHIN A WAR

By
Arhama Siddiq
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

February 26, 2018

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



At the end of January 2018, the self-purported Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Yemen demanded that Hadi dissolve his government over assertions of corruption and incompetence.¹ The Council is led by Aidarous al Zubaidi, once a governor of Aden who was forced out of his post by Hadi in April 2017.² The STC believes in secession and a return to the pre-1990 situation when there were two Yemeni states, and is backed by the UAE.

As the deadline was expiring, on the eve of January 30, the separatists and Hadi's forces pulverized each other using tanks, artillery and machine guns.

This illustrated the cracks present within the US-backed Saudi-led coalition supporting Yemen's president while fighting the Houthi rebels. This is not to be confused with the Saudi inspired Islamic Military Alliance. While the latter comprises of 41 nation states and focuses primarily on countering terrorism, the former comprises of 9 nations and focuses on extricating the Houthi rebels who are backed by Iran. The Saudi coalition that includes the United Arab Emirates as a key ally has been battling rebels in northern Yemen for nearly three years on behalf of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government.

¹ Bryant Harris, "Yemen's southern separatists take case to Congress," *Al-Monitor*, January 28, 2018.

² "How UN Negotiations on Yemen Exclude the South and Why That Must Change," *UN Tribune*, May 31, 2017.

The fierce infighting turned the southern port city of Aden into a war zone. The violence killed at least 36 people and wounded 185.³ The dispute revealed both the separatists' certainty in their strong position on the ground and their exasperation for a place in the political league. The clashes also exposed the friable position of the Yemeni President.

Forces loyal to Hadi have largely been defeated in Aden by the STC and its forces known as the Security Belt, which was formed, financed and armed by the UAE.

Since its freedom from the Houthis, Aden city has witnessed severe security challenges, economic and basic infrastructure problems, and most recently growing support for separation from the North. The city has also seen measured attempts to silence activists supporting the Hadi-allied Islah Party, as well as some voices within the Salafi movement with a number of imams gunned down in 2017.

The Saudis launched their campaign in Yemen in March 2015 after an appeal from Hadi for military assistance. The Saudis then pushed for UN Security Council Resolution 2216, that demands the Houthis hand Sanaa back to Hadi, along with all arms and ammunition they possess. It also definitely calls Hadi as Yemen's legitimate president, something the Saudis and the Hadi government are keen to highlight, because this then makes Hadi and his appointed officeholders the sole legitimate representatives of the Yemeni state. This further entails that any deal that is to be made to end the war will have to be made with the president, and by extension, his patrons in Riyadh. Essentially, Hadi, who is currently in exile in Riyadh, gives the Saudis' role in the Yemen war its political and legal cover.

The current clashes have sparked fears of a repeat of the 1986 South Yemen civil war, an unsuccessful socialist coup which killed thousands and helped pave the way for the unification of South and North Yemen. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia says restoring Hadi is its main objective in Yemen, but then conversely, the Saudi coalition spokesman avoided condemning the separatists and called on Hadi to "fix flaws" in his government. This implies that Saudi blessing was involved in the recent clashes.⁴

Yemen's civil war, meanwhile, shows no sign of ending.

³ "36 dead, 185 injured as tank battle rocks Yemen's 'coup-hit' Aden," *Pakistan Today*.

⁴ Associated Press, "Yemen's war within a war: What does new fighting mean?" *Business Insider*, January 30, 2018.

It has left more than 10,000⁵ people dead, displaced 2 million people and pushed the impoverished nation of some 28 million people to the verge of famine. On top of this, nearly 2,200⁶ more have died of cholera amid deteriorating hygiene and sanitation conditions, triggering what the UN has called the world's largest humanitarian disaster.⁷

Even though both parties issued a joint statement citing a united front and dismissing all claims of divides, the fault lines have already been exposed. Indeed, if this escalation of violence continues in Aden, it will weaken not just the course of the war against the Houthis, but the whole political process of the Gulf Initiative (which in 2011 established a caretaker transitional government in Yemen), the national dialogue (between the UN and the GCC), and the various United Nations Security Council resolutions aimed at emphasizing the territorial integrity of Yemen.

Furthermore, if the power struggle within the Saudi-led coalition carries on with fighting spreading to other cities, it could create a void that would allow extremists like al-Qaida and Daesh to rise again. The vacuum of power could even allow the Houthis to advance further. It is now time for all the parties involved: the Saudi-led coalition as well as the Houthi rebels, to obey the decrees of logic and reason and avoid lengthening Aden's suffering because in the end the final casualties are the Yemenis. Otherwise, the current escalation of conflict within the city could open a new chapter of unparalleled violence and volatility that the rest of Yemen and the Saudi-led coalition cannot afford.

⁵ Kareem Shaheen, "Yemen death toll has reached 10,000, UN says," *The Guardian*, January 16, 2017.

⁶ 85,000 displaced in 10 weeks of violence in Yemen: UN | ePaper | *DAWN.COM*.

⁷ Shuaib Almosawa, Ben Hubbard, and Troy Griggs, "'It's a Slow Death': The World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2017.