

# War in Yemen: Revolution and Saudi Intervention

Yemen is once more at the focus of international attention: Internal power struggles continue in the wake of authoritarian president Ali Abdullah Saleh's relinquishment of power during the Arab Spring and the initiation of a national dialog. The power grab by Houthi rebels has prompted a military response by neighboring Saudi Arabia.

By Roland Popp

The military intervention by Saudi Arabia in Yemen's internal power struggle in March 2015 has brought southern Arabia to the attention of a global public once more. The situation in Yemen had begun to unravel in the summer of 2014. With the resignation and flight of President Abed Rabbo Mansur Hadi, the internal dispute finally escalated into a military confrontation at the beginning of 2015. Subsequently, the Shi'ite Houthi rebels took over power in the capital Sana'a and large swathes of northern and central Yemen. The Saudi-led military alliance aims to reinstate Hadi as president and to put down the Houthi rebellion. However, after several weeks of air strikes, the military balance remains largely unchanged. A ground offensive, an option that remains on the table, could have severe consequences for Yemen, but also for the stability of Saudi Arabia. Only a ceasefire and support for a negotiated solution can put an end to the violent clashes and prevent a disintegration of the state and a further increase of the terrorist threat from jihadist groups.

## The 2011 Compromise

After the "Yemeni Revolution" of 2011, power struggles among the country's political elites continued. Just as in Tunisia and Egypt, the opposition in Yemen also protested the authoritarian rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been in power in Sana'a since 1978. The conflict



A Houthi fighter stands guard in Sanaa and secures the site of a demonstration by Houthis against the Saudi-led air strikes (1 April 2015). *Khaled Abdullah / Reuters*

was temporarily resolved by an initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), to which Saleh agreed at the end of November 2011 under international pressure.

This initiative set in motion an orderly transition process and prevented a looming civil war. Saleh ceded power to the transitional president, Hadi, who as the only candidate on the ballot won more than 99 per cent of votes cast at the February 2012

elections. Additionally, a government of national unity was formed. Cabinet seats were split equally between the incumbent government party and a coalition of opposition parties. The most important supporters of the revolutionary movement, however – civil society activists and the youth movement – were not involved in the formation of the government. Equally ignored were the two important movements, autonomist and separatist respectively, of the

### National Dialog Conference

The NDC is a core component of the GCC initiative designed to negotiate a new social contract. It lasted from March 2013 to January 2014. In January 2014, the **565 delegates** from all groups and parties, organized in **nine working groups** (including on security and the military, the southern question, rights and liberties, and the question of federalism), agreed on a **final document with 1,400 recommendations** as the basis for the work of a constitutional assembly. The most important result was the introduction of a new federal structure with six regions.

Houthis in the north and Hirak in the south. The southerners are opposed to the dominance of northern Yemeni elites since the unification of 1990 and many desire the reestablishment of an independent South Yemen. The exclusion of important political forces from the negotiations cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the GCC initiative. An aggravating factor was the extension of immunity to former president Saleh and his family, a compromise decision rejected by the large majority of Yemenis.

One aspect of the transition plan, however, offered a chance for greater integration of the general population. A National Dialog Conference (NDC) that included all societal and political actors was to elaborate a proposal for a new constitution and suggest ways of pacifying the conflicts in the north and south (cf. box). Moreover, the NDC would deal with reforms of public administration and the judiciary system, measures against endemic corruption, the codification of the rights of minorities and women, and the future trajectory of the country's economic policy. On paper, this process should have led to some sort of re-founding of the republic – to democratization, federalization, and a power-sharing compromise between old elites and revolutionary activists. These aspirations for a comprehensive reform of the political system have also won the GCC initiative the support of civil society and activists such as Nobel Peace laureate Tawakkol Karman.

### Failed Power Handover

A fatal flaw, as it turned out, was the fact that former president Saleh remained in the country and refused to accept his loss of power. Saleh used his insider connections

and networks of patronage to sabotage the transition process, derailing the attempt by transitional president Hadi to overcome, as part of the agreed security sector reform, the split in the regular armed forces between pro- and anti-Saleh factions.

The debates within the NDC over the future political system, which lasted from March 2013 to January 2014, thus took place against the background of an ongoing power struggle among the traditional elites. Despite differences, the NDC succeeded in achieving agreement on the basic principles for continuing the transitional process, including the extension of Hadi's term in office by another year. The crucial bone of contention in this context was the future federal structure of the state. A commission specifically tasked with finding a compromise proposed that Yemen be divided into six main regions. However, both the Houthis and the southern secessionist movement rejected this proposal. Since issues such as the future constitution and power-sharing arrangements remained unresolved, the military skirmishes escalated. The Houthi movement, which had previously only operated locally in the far north, managed to expand its area of control. In a tactical alliance with Saleh's supporters among the security forces, they managed to defeat their main opponents in the north and become the de-facto rulers of the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014.

The Houthis' accession to power in Sana'a now threatened to bring down the entire transition process. An Peace and National Partnership Agreement, drafted by the parties to the conflict with help from the

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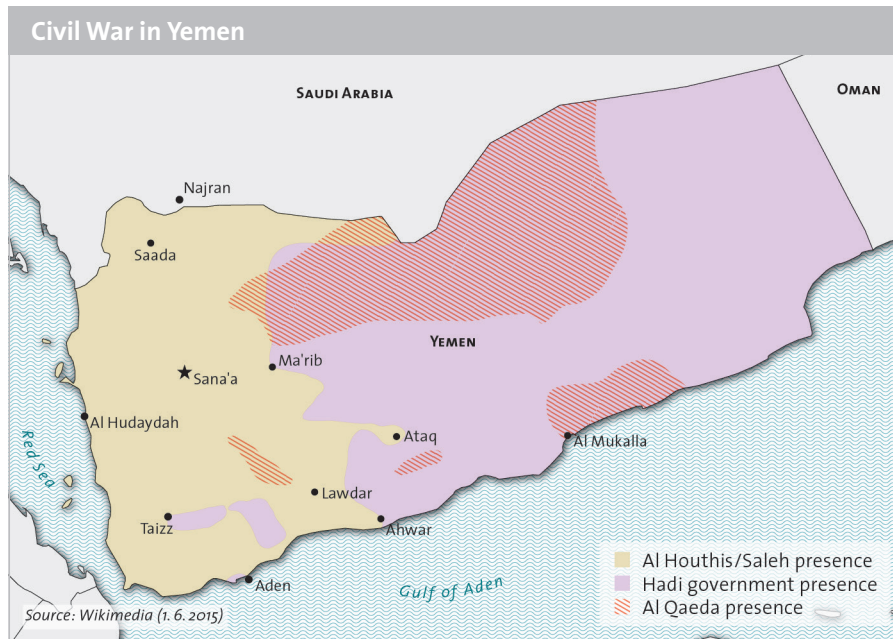
UN and signed on 21 September 2014, brought a superficial resolution of the conflict. A new government was appointed that included the Houthis, the Southern Movement, and also the activists of 2011. However, the deal was only partially implemented in the weeks that followed, both by Hadi and by the Houthis. Instead of initiating a retreat from the capital and preparing their own disarmament, the Houthis obstructed the work of the ministries and attempted to disempower the president. They sabotaged the government's operations, suppressed their political opponents,

and expanded their military power south of the capital. President Hadi rallied international support in opposition to this creeping coup, culminating in the US-led imposition of sanctions against leaders of the Houthis as well as former president Saleh. This made a peaceful resolution of the conflict impossible, and the dispute ended with Hadi being deposed. The rejection of a draft constitution published by the military in January 2015 caused a renewed outbreak of fighting in the capital, a consolidation of Houthi power, and finally the resignation of President Hadi and Prime Minister Khaled Bahah on 22 January 2015.

### The Rise of the Houthis

Hardly an observer had anticipated that the Houthi rebels would be so successful in expanding their power. The Houthis, named after their leading clan and also known by their official designation, *Ansar Allah* ("Assistants of God"), originated in the northernmost governorate of Sa'ada. In the 2000s, they were a protest movement of only local significance that opposed the marginalization of their home region and the social and political discrimination of the Shi'ite Zaidis who make up 35 to 45 per cent of Yemen's total population. This movement became radicalized and politically engaged between 2004 and 2010 in the course of six wars ruthlessly waged by the central government under Saleh. Hoping to win stronger international support, Saleh accused the Houthis of cooperating with al-Qaida. In fact, however, the Houthis were and still remain staunchly opposed to al-Qaida and Sunni Salafist movements. In reality, Saudi Arabia's support for Salafist teachings and financing of extremist centers in the home region Sa'ada was one of the key factors in the emergence of the Houthi movement.

The local and mainly religious-cultural nature of the movement changed in the course of the Yemeni revolution in 2011. The Houthis used the transition process to enhance their popularity even outside of their core constituency. In doing so, they cast themselves as principled defenders of the authentic revolutionary goals and accordingly rejected the GCC initiative as an attempt by the Gulf Arabs and the US to ensure power remained with the traditional elites and to safeguard their own strategic interests. Nevertheless, they also participated in the debates as part of the NDC, where they cooperated with the civil-society activists and the youth movement while attempting to leverage the congruence of interests with the southern movement.



### Yemen: Facts and Figures

**Population** 24 million (75 per cent under 30 years of age)

**Life expectancy** 64.8 years

**Area** 527'968 km<sup>2</sup> (12 times the area of Switzerland)

**Religion** 99 per cent Muslim (35–45 per cent Shi'ite Zaidi, the rest Sunni)

**Corruption** 161<sup>st</sup> place out of 175 countries (Transparency International 2014)

**Oil production** 2001 – 440,000 barrels/day; 2014 – 127,000 barrels/day

**Reunification** 1990 reunification of North and South Yemen

**Form of government** Republic

Their steadfast opposition against the influence of the established power elite, and in particular their convincing stance against the ubiquitous corruption of the government bureaucracy, won the Houthis support from new and in some cases also non-Shi'ite population groups.

The opponents of the Houthis tend to emphasize their religious-fundamentalist origins and accuse them of secretly working to reestablish a Shi'ite theocracy modeled on the system of rule that was in place in Yemen until the 1962 revolution. The accusation that the Houthis are controlled from Iran and just a tool of Tehran's expansion policy may be attributed to the same motivation. However, the only evidence of close contacts between the Houthis and Tehran is of very recent date. Apparently, the Iranians supplied only very moderate assistance and had even tried to dissuade the Houthis from making a bid for power. The simplistic reduction of the conflict to an antagonism between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam is misleading anyway – the Shi'ite Islam of the Zaidiyyah sect is quite close to Sunni Islam in terms of religious practice. Nevertheless, the escalating conflict has taken on a confessional dimension that had previously been largely unknown in Yemen. The increasing antagonism is fed by the Houthis' expansion of military control to Sana'a and the predominantly Sunni regions of central and southern Yemen. Both the southern Arabian al-Qaida franchise as well as the newly founded section of the

so-called Islamic State (IS) are fighting the Houthis as apostates. The IS also took responsibility for the attacks on Zaidi mosques in Sana'a in which more than 140 people were killed in March 2015.

### Regionalization of the Conflict

In the south of Yemen, the accession of the Houthis to power was rejected by the population, and recognition of the revolutionary government in Sana'a was refused. Subsequently, Hadi fled to the southern port city of Aden, which he declared the temporary capital, and reneged on his withdrawal from the presidency. The attempted establishment of a counter-government in Aden collapsed, however, under the rapid military advance of the Houthis, who rapidly threatened the entire country apart from the thinly settled eastern parts of the country and also Aden itself. The imminent fall of Aden prompted neighboring Saudi Arabia to intervene militarily on 25 March 2015, ostensibly in defense of the legitimate government and president Hadi, who had fled to Riyadh. Despite massive air strikes by the Saudi-led military coalition, and despite financial and material Saudi support for local resistance committees, the Houthis managed to consolidate their territorial control over large parts of Yemen.

Two months after the start of the military intervention, the miscalculations of the new Saudi King Salman and the government in Riyadh are becoming apparent. Limiting the intervention to a maritime

blockade, air strikes, and logistical support for the anti-Houthi forces on the ground has not brought the desired reversal. Should Aden fall, all of the major cities of the country would be in the hands of the revolutionary government, and it is likely that only the use of ground troops could break the military superiority of the Houthis. The Saudi forces themselves, despite having purchased large quantities of the latest military equipment, can only be deployed to a limited degree, and only with considerable support from the US, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates as well as Sudan, Jordan, and Morocco are participating in the conflict with fighter aircraft; however, apparently contrary to expectations, Egypt and Pakistan have not contributed ground forces. On the other hand, the Saudis are traditionally well connected to the tribal associations and Salafist movements in Yemen. Besides, the intervention may also backfire and threaten the internal stability of Saudi Arabia itself. The patriotic fervor of the initial period has given way to increasing skepticism – within the kingdom, criticism of the leadership's strategy in the Yemen conflict is being voiced. Furthermore, there are growing concerns about the stability of the Saudi regions bordering on Yemen. They are considered underdeveloped economically and are home to a strong Shi'ite minority. The Houthis have already carried out isolated raids into Saudi territory.

### No Alternative to Diplomacy

The conflict has now killed over 1'000 people and dealt massive damage to the already inadequate infrastructure of Yemen. Due to the war, Yemen is heading towards a humanitarian disaster. In view of the col-

## Switzerland and Yemen

Relations between Switzerland and Yemen are dominated by **humanitarian aid and development policy**. Switzerland has been engaged in Yemen since 2007. In 2011, Switzerland opened a program office of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in the capital Sanaa. Its focus is to assist the country in **managing the large numbers of refugees arriving** from the Horn of Africa, especially Somalia. In addition to the 545'000 internally displaced persons, approximately 250,000 African refugees also live in Yemeni refugee camps today. In November 2014, the SDC office has been closed due to security concerns and its work has been guided from Berne. Switzerland's total budget for Yemen currently stands at about **CHF8 million per year**, making it one of the larger international donors.

Since March 2013, Switzerland has been a member of the "Friends of Yemen" group. It brings together about 40 countries and various organizations and supports the political transition process. Moreover, the Swiss federal government also supports the UN's mediation efforts. Since December 2014, Switzerland has also enforced the **UN's financial and travel sanctions** against Houthi leaders as well as former president Saleh, based on UN Security Council Resolution 2140 (2014). Additionally, sanctions have been in place for some time against a number of members of al-Qaida, which has long been active in Yemen.

lapse of the energy supply, an alarming lack of water, and the nearly complete dependence on food imports, relief organizations are warning against an extended maritime blockade of the country. In the middle term, the bombardment of regular forces by the alliance air forces and the simultaneous support for local warlords undermines the state monopoly on violence – Yemen is in danger of becoming a "failed state".

The intervention, initiated by Saudi Arabia, has added to the difficulty of resolving Yemen's internal conflict. On the one hand, the military resistance of the Houthis remains undeterred, and apparently, large parts of the population regard the operation as an attack on the nation of Yemen herself, with the revolutionary government casting itself as her defender. On the other hand, assisted by the Saudis, President Hadi and his supporters have assumed an uncompromising stance. His preconditions for negotiations are unacceptable to the Houthis.

Currently, the only winner in the war is the local al-Qaida franchise, which has been able constantly to extend its control over territories in the east of the country.

With a military solution unlikely, only the option of a diplomatic resolution remains. In order for a compromise to be attained, the parties must give up the maximal positions they have hitherto adopted: The Houthis must stand by their repeated assurances not to challenge the core agreements of the NDC and accept a division of power. The credibility of President Hadi within Yemen has suffered severely due to his own power ambitions and his support for the Saudi-led war. Therefore, the next steps might conceivably be to nominate a new transitional president – Khaled Bahah, who has been appointed vice president, is regarded as a credible candidate – or to create a presidential college with the participation of all main factions.

Oman, the only GCC country not to have taken part in the attack on Yemen, might be an acceptable mediator. Resolving the most urgent social and economic problems of the country requires a compromise solution based on the NDC final document and a power-sharing agreement for the transitional period, as well as the adaptation of the planned federal structure to the wishes of the Houthis and Hiraq, if possible including a pledge for an independence referendum in the south. If an internal Yemeni compromise is to succeed, the neighboring countries must pledge non-intervention – especially Saudi Arabia, which has a decades-long history of manipulating the political system of the only republic on the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, a change of course is urgently required in the international community's policies vis-à-vis Yemen. The prioritization of counterterrorism especially by the US has strongly contributed to the destabilization of Yemen. Only the restoration of functioning state structures and the participation of all relevant societal actors in the formulation of policy will create the opportunity to build a legitimate system of

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state government in the Republic of Yemen, which would also facilitate a sustainable effort to eliminate the terrorism threat.

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