

## Report

# Yemen's Warring Parties: Formations and Dynamics

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**Yemen: Increase in armed groups as national army dwindles [Reuters]**

### Abstract

This report presents a brief description of the critical shifts affecting the Yemeni army post-coup and post-war. It sheds light on the country's military situation resulting from more than a year of war and examines armed groups resisting the Houthi coup and their ally, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, with a focus on the future prospects of each of these factions and the direction of events, as well as strategies to prevent undesirable ends.

### Failure to contain

A few weeks after the 21 September 2014 coup by Ansar Allah (also known as the Houthi group), the effects of the trauma suffered by the Yemeni army began appearing, and the idea of containing the coup with a flexible approach failed. Many military commanders and political leaders in the north believed it was in the national interest to thwart any confrontation with the Houthis so that the northern provinces would not enter into a war of attrition which would be exploited by southern forces with separatist tendencies. However, this strategy has failed, as evidenced by the current reality.

### Experience gap

The Houthis' increasing incursion into army leadership structures in the field and at the administrative level has revealed signs of discontent within army ranks, particularly given that many former leaders have been transformed to mere administrators or managers for work run by the youth. These youth are called 'supervisors' and ascribe to the Houthi Revolutionary Committees. Many army members and officers – who rejected the Houthi coup and the latter's control over state institutions without any confrontation – feel humiliated.<sup>(1)</sup> This has led many leaders and officers to leave the capital, especially southerners, in a process similar to that before the 1994 war. After President

Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's escape to Aden on 22 February 2015, this wave increased and included northern as well as southern officers.

This latest wave of displacement radically affected the army's structure, with an emerging gap in its management and conduct, as well as control of certain weapons, such as aircraft and the missile system. The Houthis only realised this after the first air strike launched by Operation Decisive Storm aircraft on 26 March 2015. They were unable to aim and fire what was left of Scud missiles. They failed to properly launch them on more than one occasion and the rockets fell within the country's territory. It is important to emphasise here that what happened is not due simply to a gap resulting from the departure of many experts, engineers and technicians who abandoned the Houthis, but relates to other factors, such as the Houthis' late response – launching a Scud missile at Saudi territory on 6 June 2015, more than two months after the first coalition air strike.<sup>(2)</sup>

What happened was due not only to a lack of northern engineers and technicians, but also other factors, such as serious lack in dealing with these missiles. The Yemeni army first used these missiles in the south before unification on 22 May 1990. Yemen then strengthened its capacity by secretly purchasing a number of them. One of these secret deals was uncovered when the Spanish Navy intercepted a North Korean ship off the coast of Yemen in December 2002, which was on its way to Yemen with fifteen rockets on board hidden under a cement shipment. The ship was released afterwards and the missiles unloaded at al-Hudaydah port.<sup>(3)</sup>

### **Aerial exposure**

After the first coalition air strike, the battles that followed introduced only minor changes in the matrix of war. In war literature, this is called 'strategic paralysis' and is devastating because it is designed to prevent the enemy from using its offensive and defensive abilities, reducing the duration of battle and lowering the cost of future confrontation with an opponent.<sup>(4)</sup> This was what actually happened. Everything was destroyed and not a single case was recorded in which a coalition aircraft was shot down. Aircraft were flying at low altitude, yet they were not met by an air defence system.

In general, the air strikes, which lasted for months, completely halted any activity within the vicinity of the targeted military sites and caused long-term paralysis, incapacitating most of the pilots, engineers, officers and soldiers, and exposing them whenever they tried to move. Some of them even left their jobs to farm in their villages.<sup>(5)</sup> If the strikes, firstly, had not taken place, and, secondly, had not continued, the war may have unfolded in the same way as the 1994 war, which Saleh managed to resolve a month and a half after its outbreak.

## **One year after the war**

A year later, the Houthis did not expect to find themselves on the pre-1990 borders, surrounded by an anti-military coup that supports the legitimacy of the president who was once detained by them, and then eluded them from the far north to the borders of the Gulf of Aden.

This section of the report draws the country's military landscape and dynamics one year after the start of the war.

### **First: national army**

#### **Leadership structure**

A few days after President Hadi's escape to Aden, the military institution became sharply and publicly divided in the field at an administrative leadership level. This was especially evident among those from the south and those who remained in Sanaa, such as the defence minister, major general Mahmoud al-Subaihi, who fled on 8 March 2015. The army is currently managed by the chief of staff, Major General Mohammed al-Mekdha, while the position of secretary of defence remains vacant after Major General Subaihi's kidnapping by the Houthis on 25 March 2015. The president, vice president and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar oversee military tasks in accordance with the constitution.(6)

The army's combat units are organised into four military areas across seven regions in accordance with the organisational structure set out by the 2013 Presidential Decree No. 104, on the division of military field operations in the Republic of Yemen, which designates military regions and the appointment of military leaders.(7) The military regions are located as follows: first in Hadramaut (Sayoun), second also in Hadramaut (al-Mukalla), third in Marib, and fourth in Aden, while the remaining three regions are under Houthi authority.

### **Human capital and resources**

The national army's human capital consists of personnel divided between former army units that were not under Houthi control, as well as new recruits part of new military units in pro-Hadi areas. The chief of staff says the national army consists of 100,000 fighters spread across the four aforementioned military regions.(8)

Its resources include military equipment still held by army units that support former President Hadi. They are relatively strong integrated military units because they were not exposed to attacks by coalition aircraft and because they stayed far from Houthi hands during the group's expanded influence following the 21 September 2014 coup. The foremost of these units are the brigades of First Military Region in Hadramaut (both the valley and the desert) led by Brigadier Abdul Rahman al-Halili. Among its most

prominent brigades is the 37th Armoured Brigade led by al-Halili himself. In addition, a division of the 35th Armoured Brigade in Taiz, the only division that has withstood the Houthis, remains in control of some areas on the outskirts of the city.(9)

Coalition countries have supported the national army with various weapons, such as infantry weapons, armoured infantry vehicles, various artillery, air defence systems, communication devices, minesweeping equipment, military freight haulers, SUVs and trucks; as well as air support and training and rehabilitation of al-Anad Air Base into an advanced operations centre.(10)

**Deployment and spheres of influence**

National army units that were part of the former army are deployed in Hadramaut (valley and desert), al-Mahra, Marib, Socotra and Taiz. The new units are deployed in most of the southern provinces and a number of northern provinces under President Hadi’s authority, such as Midi, Harad in Hajjah province, most of Taiz province, the Naham region in Sanaa, and most of the districts of Marib and al-Jawf.

The national army’s areas of deployment and influence can be seen in Table 1. Table 2 describes the national army’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

**Table 1: Areas of national army influence**

<b>Full control</b>	<b>Limited control</b>	<b>Shared control</b>	<b>No control</b>
Aden, Lahij, al-Dali, Hadramaut, al-Mahra, Arjabeel Shaqtaree	Sanaa secretariat, Hijjah, al-Hadidah	Taiz, al-Jawf, Marib, Shabwa, Abeen	Sanaa (with exception of secretariat), Ibb, Thumar, al-Mahweet, Saada, Ibran, Reema

**Table 2: Current status of national army**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Strengths</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Young membership.</b></li> <li>• <b>Members believe in recovering the state and defeating the coup.</b></li> <li>• <b>Combination of eastern and western modern armaments.</b></li> <li>• <b>Modern air defence system.</b></li> <li>• <b>Dispersed in vital areas controlling energy sources.</b></li> </ul>
<b>Weaknesses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Members of newly created units have little combat experience.</b></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Financial corruption in some of its units.</b></li> <li>• <b>Disproportionality of methods and forces across areas of influence.</b></li> <li>• <b>Lack of geographic diversity makes it more of a regional army.</b></li> <li>• <b>Lack of young people present at the leadership level.</b></li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Receives monetary, weapons, training and rehabilitation support from coalition countries.</b></li> </ul>
<b>Threats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Dependence on external funding sources that may dry up.</b></li> <li>• <b>Likelihood that external third-party supporters will abandon it in the near future.</b></li> </ul>

## **Second: Houthi popular committees and supporting army**

### **Leadership structure**

This group includes the original version of the former army that identified with Houthi militias during the following four stages:

- The 21 September 2014 coup;
- President Hadi submitting his resignation and being put under house arrest on 22 January 2015;
- President Hadi escaping and then rescinding his resignation;
- The start of the Arab coalition’s air operations and the announcement of its intervention in Yemen.

During these stages, the Houthis were able to infiltrate the army’s structure and change the features of its leadership. They also managed to rearrange their fighters until they became the real engine of all that remains of the four branches: ground forces, marines, air forces and air defence forces. A few days after the coup, Hadi Zakaria al-Shami was appointed to the position of deputy chief of staff and promoted to the rank of major general. This appointment inaugurated the group’s incursion into the army and the complete control of the entity.

The Houthis were also able to integrate field leaders and give them high military ranks without objective and legal backing, appointing them to positions of leadership that can only be tasked to military academics with competence and merit. These field leaders ran the battles on some fronts and included Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim, also known as ‘Abu Ali al-Hakim’. According to United Nations Security Council’s sanctions committee, al-Hakim is one of the most prominent leaders. He holds the rank of brigadier and led the Fourth Military Region, which overlaps with the region led by major general Ahmed Saif al-Yafei

in the national army supporting President Hadi. The Fourth Military Region manages operations in the south and centre of the country.(11)

### **Human capital and resources**

Several factors make it difficult to determine the magnitude of personnel in the Houthi coalition and forces loyal to them and their ally, Saleh. Unlike during the six wars between 2006 and 2010, the Houthi militias have accumulated quite a bit of human capital in this war. In one year of war, their supporters have reportedly reached 20,000 fighters.(12) Many of these supporters participated in the initial stages during their advance towards Sanaa. However, one should keep in mind the frequent desertion of soldiers as a result of an increase in victims, as well as their continuous replacement and swapping. Still, some estimates cite the number of new recruits at about 130,000 soldiers in the military and police forces.(13)

Most fighters are under seventeen years of age. In December 2012, Houthi leader Abdul-Malik Badreddin al-Houthi made a commitment to the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict not to recruit children and to demobilise those who joined, but none of these promises have been fulfilled. Security Council Resolution No. 2216 of April 2015 called for a stop to the recruitment of child soldiers and to demobilise them from military ranks.(14) In a report issued on 12 May 2015, Human Rights Watch stated that there are Houthi fighters under the age of fifteen.(15)

### **Deployment and spheres of influence**

The Houthis are deployed and have control in most of the northern provinces. Groups of their fighters are based in the provinces of Shabwa and Abyan in the south, in tiny spaces within the common Mukeiras area between the provinces of Abyan and al-Bayda, and in parts of the two directorates of Aslan and Bayhan in Shabwa province, neighbouring the provinces of Marib and al-Bayda, respectively. These are the remaining areas within the pre-1990 borders that are controlled and influenced by the Houthis.

Table 3 shows the areas of deployment and influence of the Houthi popular committees and the army supporting them. Table 4 describes their current situation including strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

**Table 3: Areas controlled by the Houthis and Saleh's forces**

Full control	Limited control	Shared control	No control
Secretariat of Sanaa, Ibb, al-Bayda, Thumar, al-Mahweet, Saada, Ibran, Reema	Shabwa, Ibeen	Taiz, al-Jawf, Maarib, al-Hadidah	Sanaa (with exception of secretariat), Lahij, al-Dali, Hadramaut, al-Mahra, Arjabeel Shaqtaree

**Table 4: Current status of Houthi popular committees and their supporting army**

Variable	Description
<b>Strengths</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members are loyal to leader Abdul-Malik, giving them spiritual incentives which push them to survive and fight.</li> <li>• Control of a large weapons stockpile from the former army.</li> <li>• Distinctive guerrilla warfare tactics, such as raids and ambushes.</li> </ul>
<b>Weaknesses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young fighters with limited combat experience.</li> <li>• Lack of intellectual consistency among their fighters.</li> <li>• Some remain loyal to former president Ali Saleh.</li> <li>• Low salaries.</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has indicated a flexible attitude towards them.</li> <li>• Some of Saleh's allies from the coalition are tempted to keep him as a follower with no influence among fighters in their ranks or efforts to get rid of him.</li> <li>• Rearrange ranks and wait for any variables would change the balance of power in the war, benefiting from negotiations stalemate and perpetuating a no-peace, no-war stalemate.</li> </ul>
<b>Threats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forces from within may ambush them.</li> <li>• Collapse of their alliance with former president Ali Saleh.</li> <li>• Growing popular discontent due to their arbitrary practices.</li> </ul>

### Third: Popular Resistance parties

The Popular Resistance parties include factional, religious (Islamic), nationalist and left-wing parties, mostly part of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (al-Islah), the Salafists,



independent volunteers, the Nasserist party, and the southern provinces' movements. The resistance receives financial backing, arms and support from the government of President Hadi, internal parties, the coalition countries and unknown sources.(16) The resistance in the southern provinces enjoys more support from the coalition countries than that given to the resistance factions of the north, especially the resistance in Taiz, which represents one of the strongest bastions of resistance in the north, although it only has eight armoured vehicles, some SUVs and light and medium weapons.(17)

The following are the general frameworks of the umbrella resistance parties to which many secondary groups ascribe.

### **The Yemeni Congregation for Reform Party youth:**

Youth from the Yemeni Congregation for Reform engaged in popular resistance early, rejecting the Houthi coup against President Hadi. Thereafter, some members of the youth formed groups of independent fighters to fight alongside the national army in Taiz, Marib, Aden, al-Jawf, Ibb, Thumar and the suburbs of Sanaa. Shaykh Hamoud al-Mekhlafi, the resistance leader in Taiz and commander of Hamza resistance brigade, is the most prominent leader of the popular resistance in Yemen. This party's youth are also the pillar of resistance in the northern provinces, including both the factions that declared their loyalty to the party and those that operate as independent factions. They are credited for their active role in lifting the siege on the city of Taiz with the support of the 22nd Brigade and the efforts of other resistance factions.(18)

### **The Salafists**

The Salafists entered the war alongside the national army as independent brigades. They were initially stationed in Aden and Taiz, and have become a very strong fighting force, driven by a spirit of revenge against the Houthis and a feeling of hostility resulting from various disputes. Some are students from the Salafi Dammaj region in Saada, where, in January 2014, the Houthis forced students to flee.(19) Salafists have been involved in resistance in the southern city of Aden since the intensification of fighting against the Houthis. Following the initial announcement of Resistance Council in Aden, it was their position to rally around President Hadi and avoid any tone or slogan of regional parties or separatist factions, or actions of public resistance across the country. One of their most prominent leaders in Aden, Hani Ben Brik, was elected as vice chairman for the Resistance Council. Nayef al-Bakri is a leader in the Yemeni Congregation for Reform Party.

### **The Southern Movement**

Since its inception in 2007, the southern political movement has demanded secession of the south and disengagement from the north, which was brought on by unification in 1990.(20) Throughout the past ten years, some of its factions have targeted army and

security units stationed in al-Dali and Lahij, claiming that they are northern occupation forces. They then took part in fighting the Houthis as well as military and police units supporting them in Aden, al-Dali and Lahij. Shalal Ali Shayea and Aidroos al-Zubaidi are its most prominent leaders; the former was appointed as the director of security in Aden and the latter as its governor.

### **The Nasserist party**

The Nasserist Unionist Party consists of opponents to the coup on the ground and at the political level. Its fighters have been engaged in the battle against the Houthis and their ally, Saleh. They have contributed to the defence of the city of Taiz, side-by-side with other resistance factions, and are in control of an entrance to the city.

### **Independents**

Naturally, they cannot be called independents on the whole, as some members belong to political parties, including the General People's Congress, which is controlled by the former president, Ali Saleh, who is allied with the Houthis. However, on the ground, their conduct overcame party agendas, as they took up arms against the Houthis and their allies in most regions of the country from the first day of the coup. Shaykh Arif Jamal, a well-known conference figure in the city of Taiz, is one example of this trend.

### **Fourth: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (Daesh)**

Like the Houthi group, al-Qaeda took a prominent place in the fighting with the Yemeni army. It began during the reign of former president Ali Saleh represented by the Ansar al-Sharia organisation in Yemen. Then, in 2011, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was announced in Yemen, seizing areas in Abyan, Shabwa and Hadramaut as centres for its activities and training. They also captured the town of Zinjibar and ruled it from May 2011 to May 2012. They then resumed taking control of cities along the Hadramaut coast, starting with al-Mukalla, ruling it from April 2015 to April 2016, before being forced to leave the city under the weight of a military campaign carried out by Second Military Region fighters. This included fighters from the national army, which was finally formed in Hadramaut and received air and sea support from the coalition forces.

Ansar al-Sharia fought the Houthis in Aden and Taiz, and the organisation's leader, Khalid Batarfi, openly declared its opposition to the Houthis after they took control of al-Mukalla. In this regard, they cut off supply routes to the Houthis occupying al-Mukalla, and while the city was in their hands, it became a centre of support for their fighters in battles against the Houthis.<sup>(21)</sup> The Islamic State group in Yemen remains uncertain in terms of leadership and rules, given its recent inception and limited deployment. Moreover, controversy surrounding its relationships with individuals or local groups so far lacks solid evidence.

## Conclusion

Given the above, the most likely scenario involves a drift towards two political units, if not three: two in the north and one in the south. The north has two armies: an army fighting for legitimacy, and the coup's army. The south has one army of legitimacy, but in reality, it follows the Southern Movement, which favours secession from the north. This represents a monumental risk for the future of Yemen because fighting between the two northern armies will drain the country and create an opportunity for the southern army to repeat the scenario of 1968 – that is, of provincial secession.

A power-sharing option would benefit all parties by achieving stability for all Yemenis. This depends on the outcome of the negotiations in Kuwait, which provide a valuable opportunity, if what is agreed upon is actually applied, under a federal system that provides an alternative to separation.

The armed groups, which invoke the logic of force and confiscation of rights, remain problematic. They are the same forces used to achieve the interests of other political entities. These groups will not achieve lasting political gains unless they put down their arms, but there is the question of whether they will actually do that. It is almost certain they will not give up arms in the near future, and this means a likely reproduction of the Iraqi model in Yemen, albeit with differences in terms of motives and outcomes.

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- (18) Mello and Knights 2016.
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- (20) On the Southern Movement, see <http://aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/movements>.
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