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Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention

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October 2, 2015

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

R43960

Summary

This report provides material on the latest crisis in Yemen and the U.S. policy response. For further background and analysis on Yemen, see CRS Report RL34170, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia and members of a coalition launched a military operation aimed at restoring the rule of Yemeni President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who fled Yemen on March 25, 2015, after over a year in which his government and tribal allies have gradually been supplanted by an alliance comprised of the Houthi movement and loyalists of former president Saleh.

The White House issued a statement on March 25 blaming the Houthis for causing the crisis in Yemen. The United States recognizes President Hadi as the legitimate leader of Yemen, and President Obama authorized “the provision of logistical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations.” The Administration claimed that while U.S. forces are “not taking direct military action in Yemen in support of this effort, we are establishing a Joint Planning Cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate U.S. military and intelligence support.”

Although the Houthi-Saleh alliance had been gradually seizing control of Yemeni provinces and government/military installations for more than a year, in the winter 2015, they had rapidly outmaneuvered President Hadi, who had been under house arrest since January. Hadi eventually escaped from his Houthi captors and fled to Aden, where he denounced the coup against him and began to marshal the remains of the national military as well as loyal tribal militias to counter Houthi-Saleh advances.

As of early October 2015, the Saudi-led Arab Coalition has succeeded in retaking Aden and most of southern Yemen. What began as primarily an air campaign (referred to by the Saudis as Operation Storm of Determination or Decisive Storm) has evolved into a conventional ground conflict, with thousands of Arab coalition troops on the ground. Currently, the coalition and Houthis are battling in Taiz and Marib provinces, and airstrikes continue against targets around the capital Sana’a and other Houthi-controlled areas. As the coalition pushes northward toward the capital and attacks Houthi territory in northernmost Yemen, the war could continue and even intensify depending on the will of the combatants to keep pressing forward. Since hostilities started in March 2015, an estimated 5,000 people have been killed in the fighting, including 2,355 civilians.

There is a significant terrorist presence in Yemen, and U.S. policymakers are concerned that without a willing counterterrorism partner such as President Hadi, the United States may lack necessary intelligence cooperation on the ground to counter groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization that has attempted attacks against the United States on several occasions. Nevertheless, the United States reportedly has been able to act either unilaterally or perhaps in concert with Saudi Arabian intelligence against AQAP and its associated allies. On June 16, AQAP released a video statement acknowledging that a recent U.S. strike had killed Nasser al Wuhayshi, AQAP’s leader and the second-highest-ranking leader of Al Qaeda’s international terrorist network.

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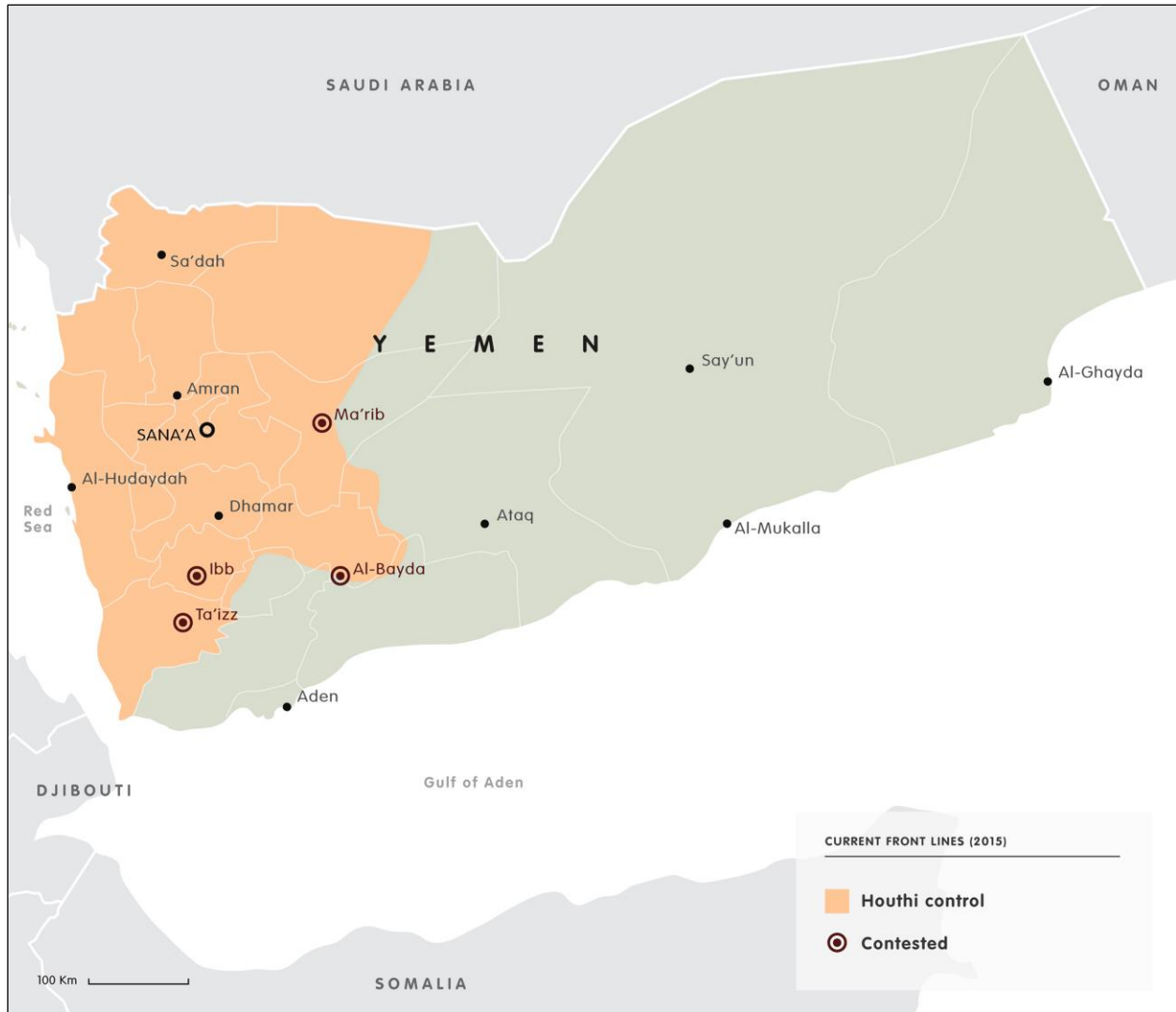
Latest Developments

As of early October 2015, the Saudi-led Arab Coalition has succeeded in uprooting fighters from the northern Yemen-based, Zaydi Shiite *Ansar Allah* movement (Partisans of God, aka Houthi movement)¹ and their allies from Aden and most of southern Yemen. What began as primarily an air campaign (referred to by the Saudis as Operation Storm of Determination or Decisive Storm) has evolved into a conventional ground conflict, with thousands of Arab coalition troops on the ground. Currently, the coalition and Houthis are battling in Taiz and Marib provinces, and airstrikes continue against targets around the capital Sana'a and other Houthi-controlled areas. As the coalition pushes northward toward the capital and attacks Houthi territory in northernmost Yemen, the war could continue and even intensify depending on the will of the combatants to keep pressing forward. If the Saudi-led coalition decides to attack the capital Sana'a using ground troops, casualties on all sides could rise significantly. Since hostilities started in March 2015, an estimated 5,000 people have been killed in the fighting, including 2,355 civilians. A Saudi airstrike in late September killed between 80 and 130 civilians at a wedding party, drawing criticism from human rights groups and other observers.

The Saudi-led coalition has "liberated" Aden, and President Hadi and some of his cabinet ministers have returned from exile in Saudi Arabia to the city. They have established a temporary headquarters there, but the war appears far from over. The Houthis and their allies (tribal forces aligned with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh) have managed to inflict damage on their opponents and still occupy significant population centers and strategic areas. On September 4, 60 coalition troops from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain were killed when a Houthi-fired missile struck an ammunition depot. To date, more than 100 Saudi soldiers and 50 UAE troops have been killed in the war—the highest death toll for the UAE in any military operation abroad since the country was founded in 1971.

¹ The *Ansar Allah* movement is a predominantly Zaydi Shiite revivalist political and insurgent movement that formed in the northern province of Sa'da in 2004 under the leadership of members of the Al Houthi family. It originally sought an end to what it viewed as efforts to marginalize Zaydi communities and beliefs, but its goals grew in scope and ambition in the wake of the 2011 uprising and government collapse to embrace a broader populist, anti-establishment message. Members of its Zaydi Shiite base of support are closer in their beliefs to Sunni Muslims than most other Shiites, and some Yemeni observers argue that the motives of the Houthi movement are evolving to include new political and social goals that cannot be explained strictly in sectarian terms. Skeptics highlight the movement's ideological roots, its alleged cooperation with Iran, and the slogans prominently displayed on its banners: "God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory to Islam!"

Figure I. War in Yemen: Battle Lines as of September 2015



Source: European Council on Foreign Relations

Despite the coalition’s losses, Yemen’s population faces far greater calamities. In short, Yemen, which under normal circumstances is the least developed country in the Arab world, is facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. According to the United Nations, more than half of Yemen’s 25 million people are designated as “food insecure” and depend on food assistance for their survival.² Six million Yemenis require immediate food assistance, and the United Nations warned that unless food assistance reaches Yemen in large quantities, Yemen may be on the brink of famine. To date, 1.5 million Yemenis are internally displaced persons (IDPs). Moreover, shortages of fuel used to pump water has led to a significant deterioration in public health, as dengue fever has broken out in Yemen’s third largest city of Taiz.

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Yemen: Humanitarian Snapshot as of 6 September 2015.

United Nations' efforts to jumpstart direct talks toward a lasting peace agreement between Yemeni President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the Houthis have not succeeded, perhaps because the Saudi-led Arab coalition may feel emboldened to continue combat operations. UN Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed has reported to the Security Council that while there has been positive movement toward talks, the coalition's position may be hardening.³

A joint U.S.-Saudi statement released during King Salman's September 2015 visit to Washington, DC, said:⁴

On Yemen, the two parties stressed the urgent need to implement relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions, including UNSCR 2216, in order to facilitate a political solution based on the GCC Initiative and the outcomes of the National Dialogue. Both leaders expressed concern for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. King Salman conveyed Saudi Arabia's commitment to continue to assist the Yemeni people; to work with coalition and international partners to allow for unfettered access to assistance vetted by the UN and its partners, including fuel, to the impacted people of Yemen; and, to that end, to work toward opening Red Sea ports to be operated under UN supervision. Both leaders agreed to support and enable the UN-led humanitarian relief efforts.

On September 29, President Hadi addressed the United Nations General Assembly, praising Saudi Arabia for its assistance, accusing Iran of seeking the destruction of Yemen, and calling upon Houthi forces to stop fighting and abide by United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2216 (April 2015), which, among other things, demands that the Houthis withdraw from areas they have occupied.

Iran's Role

Iran reportedly continues to support Houthi militias with weapons shipments. In late September, coalition naval forces, which have blockaded Yemen's ports, seized an Iranian fishing boat carrying, according to a coalition spokesperson, "18 anti-armored concourse shells, 54 anti-tank shells, shell-battery kits, firing guidance systems, launchers and binoculars' batteries."⁵ However, while the coalition's naval blockade has periodically intercepted or deterred Iranian arms shipments, it also has slowed the delivery of humanitarian aid. UNSCR 2216 authorized member states to prevent the transfer or sale of arms to the Houthis or to former President Saleh and also allows Yemen's neighbors to inspect cargo suspected of carrying arms to Houthi fighters. However, port cities still controlled by the Houthis, such as Hodeida on the Red Sea coast, have witnessed ships filled with food and fuel sitting off-shore, as Arab coalition vessels search them for illicit arms.⁶

³ Consultations on Yemen with UN Special Envoy Ould Cheikh Ahmed, What's In Blue, September 9, 2015. What's In Blue is a series of insights produced by Security Council Report on evolving Security Council actions.

⁴ Joint Statement on the Meeting between President Barack Obama and King Salman bin Abd alAziz Al Saud, September 4, 2015.

⁵ "Weapons Bound for Yemen Seized on Iran Boat: Coalition," *Reuters*, September 30, 2015.

⁶ "Arab Coalition Navy Inspections Paralyse Yemen Food Shipments," *Reuters*, September 10, 2015. Reportedly, the United States has said that commercial vessels off the coast of Yemen should only be inspected when there are "reasonable grounds" to suspect illicit arms shipments. See, "U.S. tells U.N. it Wants to See Boost in Shipping into War-Torn Yemen," *Reuters*, September 30, 2015.

Terrorism

As has been demonstrated in the past, when Yemen is in the throes of domestic conflict and its military occupied, terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) are able to seize territory in outlying provinces. This has been the case during Operation Decisive Storm. In the early days of the conflict, AQAP militiamen, who already had been active in the eastern province of Hadramawt, attacked government installations, air and sea ports, and hydrocarbon facilities. AQAP seized the city of Al Mukalla in April, and the city's ruling body has "wrapped al Qaeda into local administration in order to avoid infighting."⁷ According to one report, "the residents of Mukalla said AQAP has refrained from imposing strict interpretations of Islamic law, such as banning Arabic music and Western fashions, as the group did when it briefly established an "emirate" in the Yemeni province of Abyan in 2011."⁸ It also has renamed itself as the "Sons of Hadhramaut" perhaps in order to identify with the local population.

Despite the apparent end to U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation as a result of the Houthi takeover of the government, the United States reportedly has been able to act either unilaterally or perhaps in concert with Saudi Arabian intelligence against AQAP and its associated allies. In recent months, the United States has allegedly carried out several strikes against AQAP targets. According to one report,

This indicates that the U.S. still has access to actionable intelligence on high profile targets, despite the increasing security vacuum in Yemen. As the US shut down their embassy in Yemen in February and evacuated its staff, forcing the CIA to significantly reduce its HUMINT capability in the country, it is likely that the Saudi intelligence, complemented by U.S. technical intelligence coverage, is providing the US with information on militants' movements and positions. The strikes also suggest that AQAP militants are becoming more vulnerable to precision airstrikes as the group advances in the open desert terrain of southern Hadramawt.⁹

In perhaps the most significant counter-terrorism operation in Yemen in the past three to four years, on June 16, AQAP released a video statement acknowledging that a recent U.S. strike had killed Nasser al Wuhayshi, AQAP's leader and the second-highest-ranking leader of Al Qaeda's international terrorist network. AQAP's military commander is now Qasim al Rami has been appointed as AQAP's new "Emir."

Although reports suggest that the United States and its partners are still able to conduct counterterrorism operations in Yemen, there is concern that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (IS/ISIS/ISIL) will be strengthened by the Saudi-led coalition's military operations against the Houthis. In late September, IS suicide bombers struck a Zaydi mosque in Sana'a, killing 30 worshipers. IS fighters continue to produce and release videos from Yemen depicting their battles with Houthi forces and casting themselves as defenders of Yemen's Sunni population. However, according to one expert, AQAP remains the dominant group, since "Al Qaeda has invested in Yemen much more than ISIS has; they have attempted to form a local, functioning government whereas ISIS just enforces things through violence."¹⁰

⁷ "Al Qaeda seen assuming Policing Role in Eastern Yemen," *Reuters*, May 14, 2015.

⁸ "Quietly, al-Qaeda offshoots expand in Yemen and Syria," *Washington Post*, June 4, 2015.

⁹ "AQAP's Infiltration of Yemen's Sunni tribes reduces Effectiveness of Precision Airstrikes, Sustains Jihadists' Expansion," *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, May 15, 2015.

¹⁰ "In Yemen, Islamic State is struggling to claim Mantle of Sunnis' Champion," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 2015.

U.S. Policy

The Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen presents the Administration with a number of challenges. On the one hand, the Administration is supportive of the overall Saudi goal of restoring President Hadi's government to power. The Administration, like Saudi Arabia, does not want to see Houthi fighters who receive nominal Iranian aid rule large swaths of Yemen.¹¹ Moreover, the Administration's position is that President Hadi is the legitimate internationally-recognized President of Yemen, and U.S. diplomacy between 2011 and 2012 was critical in transitioning Yemen from Saleh's rule to Hadi's presidency. Hadi's government was considerably more reliable than Saleh in countering terrorism, as President Hadi permitted the United States to conduct counterterrorism operations on Yemeni soil.

On the other hand, the Administration may question the Saudi-led coalition's methods for achieving the restoration of Hadi's rule, particularly as the civilian death toll continues to climb and the humanitarian situation devolves. Although the United States may be providing the Saudis and other coalition partners with key logistical aid and rearmaments, it is unclear how much leverage such support provides policymakers, particularly in the wake of the recently concluded Iran nuclear deal, which Saudi Arabia has tepidly approved.¹² Furthermore, U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Yemen still rely on Saudi cooperation, leaving U.S. officials who wish to see a political settlement in Yemen little room to maneuver if Saudi Arabia continues to press forward with military operations.

For now, the Obama Administration continues to provide logistical assistance to the coalition,¹³ though the United States has pressed Gulf countries to assist in ameliorating Yemen's humanitarian crisis and called on all parties to move toward a political solution to the conflict. The United States and Saudi Arabia continue to cooperate in countering terrorism in Yemen, as the leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was reportedly killed in a missile strike in June 2015.

Some lawmakers may be concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Yemen. In late September, Representative Ted W. Lieu wrote a letter to the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff advocating for a halt to U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition until it institutes safeguards to prevent civilian casualties.¹⁴ Other lawmakers could express U.S. displeasure with Saudi Arabia's conduct of military operations by delaying future U.S. arms sales to the kingdom. Reportedly, the Administration may notify Congress of a possible U.S. arms sale to Saudi Arabia that would restock supplies of munitions used in the conflict.¹⁵

Status of American Government Personnel and U.S. Citizens in Yemen

On February 11, the U.S. State Department announced that it was "suspending" (as opposed to terminating) Embassy operations in Sana'a and was relocating U.S. personnel elsewhere. As of June 2015, all U.S. government personnel have been relocated, and Ambassador to Yemen

¹¹ In late September 2015, two Americans held captive by Houthi fighters were released. The government of Oman reportedly served as an intermediary and helped secure their release.

¹² "Saudi Arabia Satisfied with Obama's Assurances on Iran Deal," *Reuters*, September 4, 2015.

¹³ "Saudi-led Yemen Air War's High Civilian Toll Unsettles U.S. Officials," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2015.

¹⁴ "Saudis Face Mounting Pressure Over Civilian Deaths in Yemen Conflict," *New York Times*, September 29, 2015.

¹⁵ "Saudi Arms Resupply Readied by U.S. as King to Visit White House," *Bloomberg News*, September 3, 2015.

Matthew H. Tueller is currently working out of the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. On March 21, the United States withdrew the remaining 120 U.S. military personnel in Yemen, including Special Operation Forces, from Al Anad Airbase in Lahij province. The withdrawal occurred just a day after AQAP militiamen seized a town 20 miles from the airbase and terrorists claiming affiliation with the Islamic State reportedly killed 137 people inside two Zaidi mosques in the capital.

Recent Congressional Action

The following is a summary of recent legislation concerning Yemen:

- Section 1209 of H.R. 1735, the National Defense Authorization Act 2016, would prohibit FY2016 Department of Defense funds from providing security assistance to an entity in Yemen that is controlled by members of the Houthi movement. The prohibition may be waived if it is important to the national security interests of the United States
- In the House Report accompanying H.R. 2772, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2016, lawmakers noted that “Due to the uncertain security environment and lack of a U.S. diplomatic presence inside the country [Yemen] to monitor assistance, there are significant challenges to providing economic, health, and security assistance. For this reason, the Committee has deferred consideration of the funding requested for fiscal year 2016. The Committee recommendation continues to support humanitarian assistance, as appropriate, but notes the difficult operating environment for implementers of such programs.”

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