



Fact Sheet: Yemen



American Security Project



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Introduction

Yemen has entered a new phase of instability and uncertainty, as a conflict between the Houthis and the country's government led by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi eventually forced him and his cabinet to resign in January 2015. On January 25, Hadi then withdrew his resignation, but there is no official confirmation of his status yet.¹ As of February 2015, the Houthis are threatening to take over the government in Sana'a, while the southern Al-Hirak movement has pulled out of the Yemeni political transition process and is actively calling for southern Yemen to secede.²



While Yemen has been “a cluster of civilization” going back to the ancient days, the country has always been fraught with divisions.³ Yemen today continues to suffer from the struggle between many competing groups divided along regional, tribal, and sectarian lines, the dominant groups being President Hadi and his government in the capital city of Sana'a, the Houthis (Zaidi Shiites in the north), and the Hiraks (a grouping of southern secessionist movements). Many other groups exist, including foreign militants and terrorists, such as Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In addition, Saudi Arabia and Iran are competing for influence in Yemen, with Tehran supporting the Houthis and Riyadh supporting the Hadi government. Yemen is also one of the most important areas for U.S. counterterrorism operations, as AQAP is considered the most dangerous al-Qaeda franchise by the U.S. government.⁴

Main Players

- **Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi** succeeded Ali Abdullah Saleh as Yemen's president in 2012. Hadi and his government have much of the international community's support, including that of Saudi Arabia and many Sunnis, but are also perceived to be weak and inefficient.⁵ As of late January, Hadi has resigned, although he reportedly withdrew his resignation soon after.⁶ His current status is unknown.



Defense Secretary Hagel and Hadi

- **The Houthis**, based in northern Yemen, are the minority Zaidi Shias who feel marginalized and make up the most powerful and best organized opposition

group in the country. Allied to Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and Iran, they are also hostile to both the United States and AQAP. While denying their ties to Tehran, the Houthis claim that they are fighting against corruption and are seeking an inclusive government.⁷ Many believe that the Houthis are the real rulers in Yemen, as they wield enormous influence in the north and in Sana'a, although not in the south.⁸ In September 2014, they took over the capital city and, since January 2015, have been controlling the political transition process in the country. While the Houthis are not seeking secession, their aims are unclear, as is the true extent of Iran's influence and connection to the group.⁹

- **Al-Hirak (The Southern Movement)**, formed in 2007, is a loose coalition of Yemen's southern secessionist factions who have historically resented the Sana'a government in the north and see the Houthis as threats.¹⁰ Some members of the al-Hirak coalition see the Houthi takeover of Sana'a as an opportunity for southern Yemen to secede.¹¹ Unlike the Houthis, al-Hirak consists mostly of Sunnis.
- **Ali Abdullah Saleh** is Yemen's former president. Allied to the Houthis, he still remains highly influential in Yemeni politics, particularly within the Yemeni military. The United States has accused him of working with the Houthis and of supporting their power grab in Sana'a.¹²
- **The Iranians** back the Houthis and assist them with funding and weapons.¹³
- **The Saudis** back the Hadi government against the Houthis which Riyadh sees as Iranian proxies. In 2009, the Saudis conducted air strikes against the Houthis and then designated them a terrorist organization in 2014.¹⁴
- **AQAP (Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula)** is a branch of al-Qaeda based in Yemen and is considered the most dangerous franchise by the U.S. government. AQAP is hostile to the Houthis, the Hadi government, and the United States, and claimed to be behind the Charlie Hebdo murders in France.¹⁵ The U.S. government, however, has stated that there is no evidence of a direct link between AQAP and the Charlie Hebdo attacks as of now.¹⁶
- **ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)** is a radical Islamist militant and terrorist group that is currently occupying a large amount of territory in Iraq and Syria. At least since January 2015, ISIL has had a presence in Yemen and is reportedly recruiting, although AQAP remains the dominant jihadist force in the country.¹⁷



President Bush and Saleh

History and Current Events

- Yemen, as indicated on the map today, is the result of the 1990 unification which brought together North Yemen and South Yemen.
- North Yemen was originally part of the Ottoman Empire's southern territory. When the Empire collapsed in 1918, the territory became the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, and later the Yemen Arab Republic after a 1962 coup that deposed Imam Muhammad al-Badr.¹⁸ The ensuing conflict between Nationalist and Royalist forces witnessed both Egyptian and Saudi intervention and continued into the next decade.¹⁹ President Ali Abdullah Saleh consolidated power in 1978.²⁰ Colloquially referred to as North Yemen, this region contained modern-day Yemen's capital, Sana'a.
- South Yemen was a British protectorate formed in 1839, centered around the port city of Aden. Upon British withdrawal in 1967 after years of combating guerilla forces, it became the People's Republic of Yemen and later the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, a Marxist, one-party state controlled by the Yemeni Socialist Party.²¹
- North and South Yemen had strained relations for a long time following the 1990 unification, exacerbated by the economic crisis resulting from Yemen's support of Iraq during Operation Desert Storm.²² Tensions culminated in a bitter civil war in 1994, won by forces loyal to Saleh. Today, Sana'a and Aden continue to remain the two major poles of Yemeni politics.
- When the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, Saleh, a northerner who had ruled Yemen for decades, was eventually convinced to resign and transfer power to his southern vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.²³
- In March 2013, Yemen's National Dialogue Conference (NDC), seen by many as the cornerstone of the political transition process, began and ended in January 2014. The dialogue brought together representatives from various the political and social groups to address the numerous crises afflicting the country and pave the way for elections in 2014.²⁴ The NDC Document, which resulted from the conference, ended up extending Hadi's presidency for one more year for him to oversee the on-going political process in Yemen and divided the country into six regions.²⁵ The conference, however, was unable to satisfy the interests of all parties involved, including those of the Hirak movement in the south.²⁶
- In September 2014, disgruntled Houthi rebels took over Sana'a without much resistance and became the most powerful force in Yemen. The incident eventually resulted in the Peace and



Yemenis protest against then-President Saleh during the Arab Spring in 2011. Image credit: Email4Mobile / Wikimedia Commons

National Partnership agreement which called for a more inclusive government in Sana'a and distributed much power to the Houthis and the Hiraks.²⁷ Furthermore, since their takeover, the Houthis have continued to maintain their military presence in the capital city. In response to the Houthis' growing power in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has halted most of its aid to its southern neighbor.²⁸ However, in November, the United States used intermediaries to begin giving logistical and intelligence support to the Houthis to better deal with AQAP.²⁹

- As of January 2015, Yemen has entered a new phase of instability and uncertainty, as a new conflict between the Houthis and the country's government led by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi eventually forced him and his cabinet to resign on the 22nd. On January 25, Hadi then withdrew his resignation, but there is no official confirmation of his status yet.³⁰ The Houthis reportedly are seeking "a peaceful transfer of power," but the stability of Yemen is clearly in question. With the Hadi government's collapse, the United States has also been forced to partially suspend its counterterrorism operations in Yemen.³¹ At the same time, Washington is reportedly seeking further intelligence cooperation with the Houthis.³² As of February 2015, the Houthis are threatening to take over the government in Sana'a, while the Al-Hirak has pulled out of the Yemeni political transition process and is actively calling for southern Yemen to secede.³³

Yemen is important to U.S. commercial interests

- Yemen sits near major shipping lines that carried more than 3.5 million barrels of oil per day in 2010.³⁴ Though Yemen has its own oil industry, production is down and it is in decline.³⁵ While there is no immediate threat to those lanes from insecurity in Yemen,³⁶ policymakers remain worried about possible spillover.
- Deep water ports such as Aden are indicative of Yemen's past and future potential as a regional commercial center should the country's security environment improve.

Yemen is economically, socially, and environmentally vulnerable

- Yemen is facing an unprecedented water shortage, and when supplies reach critical levels the shortages could potentially spark a new round of instability.³⁷ Water and food shortages are, in part, tied to the extensive cultivation of *qat*, a narcotic regularly consumed by approximately 7 million Yemenis³⁸ and the primary income source of an estimated 2.5 million people of the country.³⁹
- Yemen's economy is shackled by an extremely high rate of unemployment (40% among Yemeni youth according to the World Bank)⁴⁰ which could further inflame social instability as the jobless take to the streets in protest.⁴¹

America actively engages with Yemen economically and militarily

- The United States has expanded its foreign assistance to Yemen every year for more than half a decade: from \$62 million in 2006⁴² to \$346 million in 2012.⁴³ It was part of a global \$7.5 billion pledge to assist the country.⁴⁴

- \$117 million of Yemen's 2012 foreign assistance package was slated to support humanitarian efforts, with an additional \$68 million provided for development and transition programs.⁴⁵ The remainder was designated for security assistance: approximately \$49 million from the Department of State and \$112 million from the Department of Defense.⁴⁶
- According to the most recent statistics from July 2014 by the United Nations, there are more than 300,000 internally displaced people within Yemen, approximately a quarter of a million refugees, and more than nine thousand asylum seekers in the country.⁴⁷ The U.S. development and transition programs go towards supporting the development of political parties, increasing political participation amongst women and youth, reforming the electoral system, supporting micro-finance and infrastructure projects, rebuilding medical clinics, and training medical personnel.⁴⁸
- US troops have a long-standing training relationship with the Yemeni army.⁴⁹ After a temporary stall in cooperative counterterrorism efforts, the US has renewed training missions to combat the threat of violent extremism in Yemen.⁵⁰ In order to facilitate this mission, the White House has exempted Yemen from the provisions of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act, which would otherwise severely restrict the assistance the United States could provide to the Government of Yemen.⁵¹
- Yemen is a critical area for U.S. drone operations. The George W. Bush administration conducted only one drone strike operation in Yemen in 2002.⁵² Extensive drone operations in the country began in 2009 under President Barack Obama. According to an on-going study by the New America Foundation, the United States, as of February 2, 2015, conducted a total of 120 drone strikes (1 under Bush and 119 under Obama) and killed between 717 and 955 militants (mostly members of AQAP) and between 81 and 87 civilians in Yemen, the number of deaths peaking in 2012.⁵³ While U.S. drone strikes have been continuing even after Hadi was forced out of power in January 2015, whether the Houthis will cooperate with Washington on further drone operations, particularly with regard to intelligence, is unclear.⁵⁴



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