

## Is Partition Becoming a Reality in Yemen?



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**T**roubling tidings are emerging out of Yemen as that country's war grinds to a virtual stalemate. While the insurgent Houthis dug their heels deeper in the capital, Sanaa, and the northern part of the country, they felt emboldened enough to [attack](#) a Saudi Arabian pipeline and two oil pumping stations, causing a temporary halt to the flow of oil from the east to the exporting platform at Yanbu on the Red Sea, in the west. They also twice [attacked](#) a Saudi airport in Najran on the Yemeni-Saudi border on May 21 and 22. In the meantime, leaders of the Southern Transitional Council—supported and helped by the United Arab Emirates—are taking advantage of the war to consolidate their control over the south, thus advancing their plans for secession. This would be a devastating blow to the legitimate Yemeni president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, whose authority Saudi Arabia is ostensibly helping to restore. These and other developments call into question whether Riyadh should continue its fruitless war in Yemen, now in its fifth year, considering that Abu Dhabi is seeking to serve its own ends by supporting the southerners.

Additionally, the Houthis' attacks on Saudi Arabia strengthen their resolve not only to visit destruction on Saudi installations in order to raise the kingdom's war costs but also to insist on a political settlement that gives them a paramount position and role in Yemen's future, to the detriment of Saudi interests. Whether Saudi Arabia gets the message that its war against the Houthis may not end in its favor or serve the goal of returning a friendly regime to Sanaa is still ambiguous. But what is clear is that the war in Yemen may have become too heavy of a burden that must weigh Saudi foreign policy

down and cast doubt on the ability of the kingdom's leaders to extricate themselves from the debacle they caused. Perhaps more serious is whether Saudi rulers properly understand the challenges that a partitioned Yemen may present to Saudi Arabia in the future and act quickly to protect their long-term interests.

Saudi leaders must also recognize the reality that the Houthi attacks cannot be separated from the overall tension gripping the Arabian Gulf and threatening the kingdom's stability and prosperity. This situation only complicates the kingdom's objectives in Yemen and introduces new and undesirable elements. Neither can the attacks be isolated from the fact that Houthi successes in resisting the Saudi-Emirati onslaught will, by default, accrue strategic gains to Iran which, for years, has used the Yemeni insurgents' cause to its benefit and encouraged them in order to bleed its rivals on the Arabian Peninsula.

### **Yemen's Military Debacle Persists**

Developments in Yemen today help paint a picture of military stalemate. The Saudi-Emirati intervention of March 2015 has bogged down as the Houthi rebels consolidate their control over Sanaa and other areas. As the [latest report](#) from the International Crisis Group (ICG) makes clear, the Stockholm Agreement that was signed in December 2018, which governs a ceasefire and other matters regarding the western city of Hodeida, has run into trouble. The city's port is a key entry point for humanitarian assistance in the country and its control has become a sticking point of contention. Both sides wish to control it, first for its strategic significance and second for its centrality for securing humanitarian assistance to their areas of control. Most importantly for the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition, however, is that ending Houthi sway over the port facility closes a [smuggling route](#) through which the Houthis allegedly secure weapons from Iran. The government and the coalition have also accused the insurgents of hoarding international assistance and preventing its distribution to areas outside their sway.

Nonetheless, the United Nations envoy, Martin Griffiths, reported to the Security Council in mid-May that the Houthis have withdrawn their forces from Hodeida; however, according to the ICG report, disagreement continues on how to maintain security and order inside it. If this and other problems that arise from lack of trust and confidence persist, Yemen is looking at yet more stalemate and continued fighting. Other military confrontations are ongoing in other areas of the country without any sign that there will be a clear winner. Moreover, the air campaign waged by the Saudi-led coalition seems to be killing more innocent civilians, such as in the [latest attack](#) on Sanaa and other areas in which six died and 60 were injured, according to the Houthis' media arm *Almasirah*.

Military operations also continue to have their toll on humanitarian conditions in the country. According to the [World Food Programme](#), 15.9 million Yemenis awaken hungry every day, the rate of child malnutrition is one of the highest in the world, and almost one-third of all families have gaps in their diets and hardly consume nutritious food. The executive director of the United Nations Children's Fund, Henrietta Fore, [told](#) the UN Security Council on May 15 that half of Yemen's five million children under five have irreversible stunted growth. Around 360,000 are suffering

from severe malnutrition. Mark Lowcock, the UN humanitarian chief, lamented that not enough food is arriving in the country to feed those in need and that famine is a possibility. He added that 300,000 people have contracted cholera so far this year as compared to 370,000 in all of 2018. Doctors Without Borders [announced in April](#) that since the beginning of this year, the number of cholera cases has risen from 140 to 2,000 per week and that the total number of cases has reached 1.4 million since the outbreak began.

As the war continues, its toll rises. The UN Development Programme [recently published](#) a report predicting that if current conditions persist, 233,000 Yemenis could die by the end of 2019 because of combat, food shortages, and disease. The Armed Conflict and Location Event Data Project (ACLED), a database for tracking violence, [reported](#) on April 18 that 70,000 people have died in Yemen since January 2016—7,600 of whom in 2019 alone—and that both sides are responsible for civilian deaths in combat.

Civilians have also been unsafe in Houthi-controlled areas. Human Rights Watch [reported](#) on May 9 that 15 civilians were killed and more than 100 were wounded in an explosion of weapons stored by the Houthi militia Ansar Allah in populated areas in Sanaa. In December 2018, the Associated Press [related](#) that the Houthis recruited some 18,000 child soldiers since the war began in 2014, many of whom have died. The Houthis have also been accused of widespread corruption. CNN [reported](#) on May 20 that the United Nations and an undercover investigation discovered that the Houthis have purloined some of the international assistance to the country and distributed it to their fighters and supporters.

### **The Quickening Pace of Partition**

The political process for ending the conflict does not appear to be succeeding. UN envoy Griffiths has expressed great worry about the level of mistrust between the Houthis and their opponents, making his job more difficult. To be sure, his position is not different from those of UN envoys to other hot spots such as Syria and Libya, where domestic and international actors try to realize their narrow interests at the expense of needed political solutions. In the Yemeni case, while the Stockholm Agreement was hailed in December as a good solution to the Hodeida issue and upon which other agreements could be built, it has [bogged down](#) because of competing interpretations of what is expected from it by the Houthis and the Hadi government and its backers. Moreover, no other agreement has been reached that can supersede Stockholm or expand its provision of a ceasefire to other provinces. The Houthi attacks on the Saudi pipeline and the airport at Najran will undoubtedly add their own dynamics and complications.

But all these specific problems do not obviate the reality of Yemen as a proxy battlefield for regional actors. Whatever the connection between the Houthis and Iran—only the United States seems to have [concrete evidence](#) of a military one—the perception in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the Hadi government is that the Houthis are but a tool in the Islamic Republic's hand. On the other hand, Iran sees the Houthis as a cheap strategic alternative in order to bleed the Saudis and Emiratis (especially Saudi Arabia, [at \\$50 billion annually](#)) without suffering any direct consequences. The fact

that the Houthis belong to a distant Shia sect ([the Zaydis](#)), and not Iran's Twelver denomination, appears to be a moot point in the current sectarian atmosphere of the Gulf and wider region.

The regional influence is also manifesting in [different approaches](#) to the Yemeni factions opposed to the Houthis, thus weakening the overall effort to confront them. While the Saudi government has so far stood behind President Hadi as the representative of legitimate authority in Yemen, the UAE has preferred alternative leadership that guards its own long-term interests in the country and its surroundings. Abu Dhabi sees the country as a node in a carefully designed strategic plan that gives it access to, and control over, pivotal bases from the Gulf of Oman to the Mediterranean Sea. The way things are slowly developing in Yemen shows the Emirati plan to be nearing completion, to the detriment of a united Yemen and its legitimate government.

Over the last few months, Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC), which the UAE helped bring into being following its entry into the Arab coalition's war, has taken some important steps toward establishing itself as a sovereign authority in Aden and the country's south. The STC's leader, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, [declared](#) in December 2018 that southerners should begin steps toward self-determination. His was not the first call, since southern secessionists have been agitating for separation from the early days of Yemen's unification in 1990. What Zubaidi has going for him is what appears to be full-fledged Emirati political and material support, despite Saudi assistance to and recognition of Hadi.

The UAE has even gone a step further when it [landed separatist forces](#) on May 6 on Yemen's Arabian Sea island of Socotra. On April 30, 2018, [it landed](#) Emirati tanks and troops there, which led to a standoff with Hadi loyalists that was only resolved when Saudi Arabia mediated the dispute. On February 9, the STC [announced](#) the establishment of a radio station in Aden, to be independent of the central government; and on May 13, a television station [was inaugurated](#) as part of the south's media effort. But what was especially worrisome—because it could lead to open warfare and a final breakup of the country—is the [announcement\\*](#) of the STC's military mobilization to take over the large province of Hadramawt in the southeast, which abuts the Saudi and Omani borders. Hadramawt had belonged to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) before unification in 1990.

The UAE's plans for the south of Yemen do not appear to be registering much Saudi criticism or warnings about negative repercussions in the future. In fact, Yemen's President Hadi was said to be practically [under house arrest](#) in Riyadh in 2018. Recently, he [attended a meeting](#) of the country's parliament in the southeastern city of Siyoun instead of the declared interim capital of Aden. This means that he may have lost his battle with the UAE and the southern secessionists who control Aden. In other words, with the continued military and political stalemate with the Houthis, the world may be looking at the reemergence of an independent South Yemen—the UN's Griffiths's mission to find a political solution for the entire country notwithstanding.

If this is the case, then it is possible to think that the Saudi-led coalition's insistence on completely controlling Hodeida is but one important part of an elaborate plan to compensate Hadi and his government for the assured loss of Aden, which will be the seat of a new south Yemeni state controlled by the UAE. Such a state may not see the

wisdom of continuing to fight the Houthis and may very well let the north bleed in a war between the insurgents and Hadi supporters for control over Sanaa. In that eventuality, Saudi Arabia will be left with only two equally problematic choices: committing to support Hadi's attempt to return to the capital—thus perpetuating the drain on its economy and moral standing—or abandoning the fight and letting the Houthis control what, to Riyadh, would most definitely be a state controlled by Iran.

**Image Credit**

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