

# Whatever happened to Yemen's army?

by Florence Gaub

Yemen has lurched from a political to an outright military and humanitarian crisis. It has been subject to a month of airstrikes from an Arab alliance led by Saudi Arabia, and a political solution is nowhere in sight. The former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, his son, and Houthi military leaders have also now become the targets of an arms embargo by the United Nations Security Council.

Yet one actor has been conspicuously absent from the scene: the country's armed forces. Although parts of Yemen's military helped to bring about political change in 2011, they have played no decisive role in the events of 2015. The country's air space is now under the complete control of Saudi Arabia, and its military bases are either being overrun by Houthi rebels or bombed by the Arab alliance. The mere fact that the Arab operation was launched bears testimony to Yemen's military implosion. So what exactly has happened to the Yemeni armed forces?

## From power player to empty shell

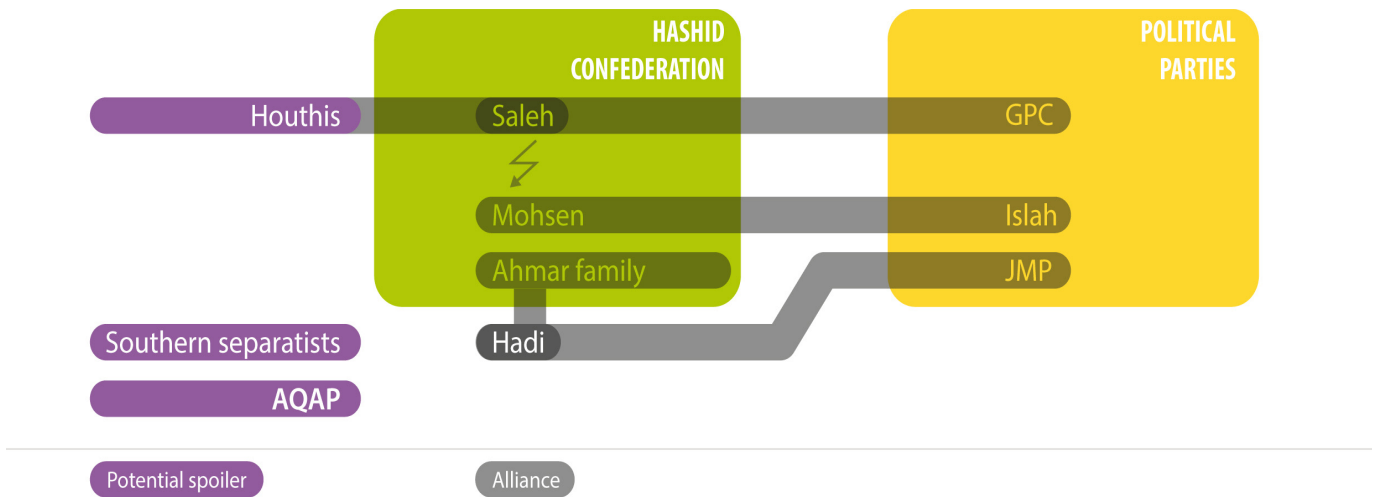
Over the last few decades, Yemen's military (and particularly that of North Yemen) has evolved from kingmaker, to regime change facilitator, to

a side-lined shell of an institution. It ended the imamate of North Yemen, ousted the country's first two presidents, and played a decisive role in the political rise of nearly all of their successors.

Saleh, who was overthrown in 2011, was first an officer, then a military governor and finally came to power in 1978. Under his reign, Yemen's armed forces grew quickly from 3,000 to 66,700 men and, at first, underwent significant modernisation. They fought a bloody war to prevent southern secession in 1994, carried out six campaigns against a Houthi insurgency from 2004 onwards, and conducted several counter-terrorism operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

The military was thought to be firmly under President Saleh's control, with his family members taking charge of core units. But when popular protests against Saleh gained momentum in 2011, key military officers turned against him, not least Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, commander of the 1st armoured division. Mohsen's siding with the protesters triggered the defection not only of other senior officers but of whole units as well, ultimately leading to regime change. Yet the armed forces emerged from the events of 2011 weaker than ever once they

## Yemen's complex politics



Source: EUISS

became a battleground for competing political forces.

Three developments have contributed to their current state of weakness: first, conditions in the army deteriorated significantly in the last decade of Saleh's rule; second, the fallout between Mohsen and Saleh (which split the ranks in 2011) continues to reverberate today; and third, the reforms implemented by Saleh's successor, Hadi, were flawed in several ways. When the Houthi rebellion finally arrived in the capital Sana'a, the armed forces were therefore unable to respond effectively.

### The 'tribal-military-commercial complex': Saleh's legacy

Although Saleh tried to boost the strength of the military, he simultaneously sought to establish close control over an institution which had a long history of political interference. Under his rule, military appointments were made on the basis of personal ties or tribal affiliations, creating shadow structures tied directly to the president.

While tribal politics are part and parcel of Yemen's social makeup, Saleh's use of them in this case distorted structures and procedures in the armed forces. Tribes used the military to bolster their positions and secure patronage; military ranks conferred no authority without a link

to an influential tribe; and communication ran along tribal lines, not command structures.

Moreover, from the 1980s, Saleh encouraged placeholders to exploit their positions to enrich themselves; the armed forces are still involved today in the smuggling of food, fuel and other commodities, while they 'pay off' tribes with small arms. The government also admitted to illegally re-exporting weapons to embargoed countries such as Sudan. As in Iraq, 'ghost soldiers' (fictional staff whose salaries were doled out to officers) became all too numerous. Most brigades were staffed to a third or a half of their nominal strength, and levels of training and morale were low.

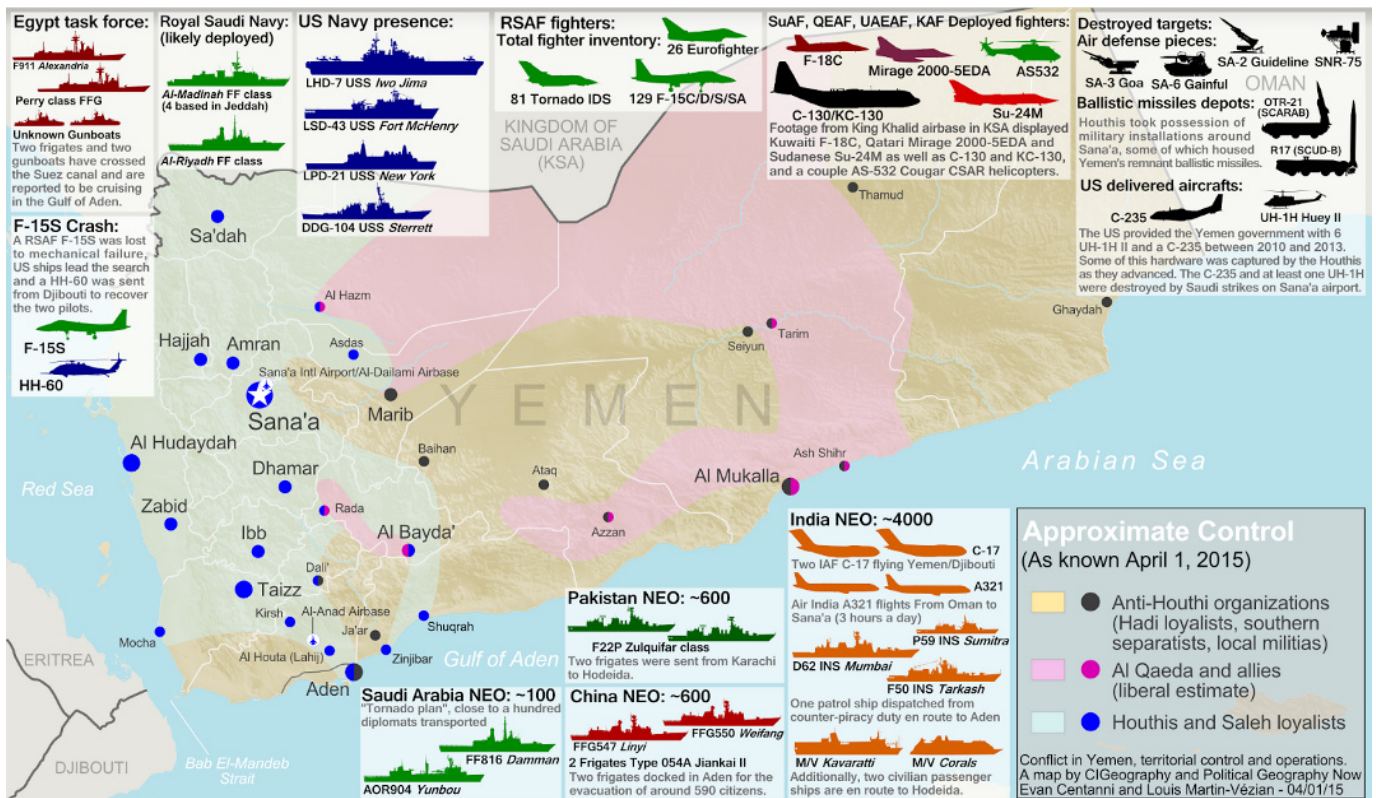
The most cohesive units were those which took part in the many multi-divisional campaigns fought against the Houthis under General Mohsen. In these units at least, military considerations appeared to outweigh tribal ones.

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Things took a turn for the worse in 2000 when Saleh made his son Ahmed Ali the head of the Republican Guard, who then transformed it into a highly-trained and well-equipped eight-brigade force. This move divided the armed forces into

three: a highly effective force under Ahmed Ali, a reasonably capable 1st armoured division under General Mohsen, and a tired and depleted regular army caught somewhere in between. At the same time, all three elements of the armed

## Battleground Yemen



Source: PoliticalGeographyNow

forces were fighting an intense series of campaigns against the Houthis; almost half of the country's brigades were involved, and tribal volunteers had to be enlisted to strengthen an increasingly fatigued force.

In political terms, the move undermined a tribal agreement which had both paved the way for Saleh's rise to power in 1978 and named Mohsen as his eventual successor. Since both Mohsen and Saleh hail from the Sanhan tribe (but not the same clan) – which is, in turn, part of the powerful Hashid confederation – their split led to larger intra-tribal rifts, which became particularly visible when the armed forces disintegrated in 2011.

### Yemen's army: ground zero for political struggles

Struggles for power in the armed forces are always manifestations of wider political malaise.

For example, Yemen's civil war in 1994 erupted mainly because of disagreements over the division of posts between northern and southern factions in the military. After Saleh's fall, opponents and supporters of the former president sought, respectively, to seize or retain control. Southerners, who had largely been excluded from the military since the civil war, did not take part in this struggle. Neither did the Houthis, although they did take advantage of the ensuing security vacuum.

Reuniting the armed forces was always going to be difficult given the political split. That Saleh has now allied with the Houthis, who he once fought, has complicated the picture even further. This explains why army units, mainly from the disbanded Republican Guard, can be found fighting alongside the insurgents.

Although two committees were established in 2012 to oversee the belated reform of the military, President Hadi (himself a former general of the Southern Yemen army) has bypassed both



of them in executing his most far-reaching decisions. Hadi was pressed by the reform camp, including the Islamist party Islah and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), to purge all Saleh-supporters from the armed forces, but excessively radical steps were bound to provoke strong resistance.

The president's decision to sack 20 officers close to Saleh was, at least initially, either ignored or actively opposed. Air force chief Mohammed Saleh, half-brother of the former president, threatened to shoot down aircraft landing at Sana'a airport if he was not reinstated. Elsewhere, new commanding officers were physically prevented from joining their units.

Although Hadi removed a substantial number of Saleh supporters, he could not get rid of all of them – doing so would have crippled the armed forces and, in any case, the negotiated departure of Saleh did not warrant an all-out purge.

In late 2012, Hadi finally dissolved the two rival units commanded by Mohsen and Ahmed Ali, later reassigning both men: Mohsen became his special advisor, and Ahmed Ali was appointed ambassador to the UAE. Yet both continued to play a role in the armed forces; Mohsen returned from retirement in contravention of presidential orders to command the remnants of his units against the Houthis' assault on Sana'a in late 2014, while Ahmed Ali has been accused of being linked to those army units allied to the Houthis. His name has also been put forward as a potential successor to Hadi.

## Civil war in the military?

The main mistake in Yemen's military reform was that personal ties began to trump other concerns. This not only fuelled political tensions, but also ran counter to the technical committee's recommendations. These largely focused on the implementation of the law concerning retirement and rotation of generals, the ghost soldier issue, and the balancing of units in terms of both size and equipment. In managing the armed forces in line with personal loyalties, Hadi repeated the errors which Saleh had made before him.

Meanwhile, the battle-hardened Houthis, empowered by their alliance with Saleh and by popular support for their anti-establishment

narrative, have reinvented themselves as the country's new army. It was no coincidence that, in Sana'a, they specifically targeted the armed forces general command, the ministry of defence, and the headquarters of military region VI. Moreover, the dozens of tanks and masses of heavy weaponry which they have managed to acquire all came straight from those elements of the Yemeni army which either defected or deserted.

The current air strikes may weaken the Houthis militarily, but they will do nothing to resolve the underlying problem: state implosion brought about by intense political infighting. Should a political solution be found, reunifying the remnants of Yemen's military will be a priority. This task, however, will be even more difficult than before given that units have now been fighting each other openly.

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