



Yemen in Crisis



# The Role of Local Actors in Yemen's Current War



Sama'a Al-Hamdani  
Adam Baron  
Maged Al-Madhaji

## OVERVIEW:

As civil war persists in Yemen, it is crucial for international and local policymakers, as well as military leaders, to expand their understanding of the role of local actors, and the dynamics at play between them, in order to reach an inclusive long-term peace agreement. In the absence of this awareness, Yemen risks remaining in a state of conflict and in the

face of a tenacious humanitarian catastrophe for the foreseeable future. This policy brief is the second in a series of policy briefs issued by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) aiming to bring better understanding of Yemen's multiple current crises.

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### The current context:

In September 2014, fighters from Yemen's Houthi Movement took over the capital, Sana'a. During his years in power Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh had subjected the Houthis to a series of six brutal wars, but following Yemen's Arab Spring-inspired uprising in 2011, Saleh's departure and the subsequent weakening of state institutions, the Houthi Movement became resurgent. The group established an effective state within a state as they expanded south from their bases in the far northern province of Saada. After the Houthi capture of Sana'a, a UN-brokered deal, the Peace and Partnership Agreement (PNPA), was inked stipulating the creation of a new cabinet and the appointment of a new prime minister. Nonetheless, tension emerged between the Houthis and the government shortly thereafter, which led to Houthi forces placing Yemen's president, prime minister, and several members of the cabinet under house arrest.

On January 21, 2015, President Abd Rabbuh Hadi resigned after armed men associated with the Houthi Movement abducted his Chief of Staff and

General Secretary of National Dialogue Conference Dr. Ahmed Awadh Bin Mubarak, further escalating tensions. A month later, Hadi fled house arrest to the southern port city of Aden, whereupon he rescinded his resignation. The situation reached a turning point when the Houthi Movement used the Yemeni Air Force to bomb the Presidential Palace in Aden on March 19. This marked the beginning of Houthi encroachment towards the South Yemen. Before long, they had seized control of most of Aden and arrested Minister of Defense Mahmoud Al-Subayhi. Hadi then fled to Saudi Arabia, where he has set up a government-in-exile in Riyadh.

Violence around Yemen was amplified on March 26, when the Saudi-led coalition launched ‘Operation Decisive Storm’ - entailing a widespread bombing campaign, a ground, sea and air blockade of Yemen, and the arming of Yemeni groups opposed to the Houthis - with the declared intent of forcing a Houthi retreat and reinstating Hadi in office. Ground battles between the Houthis and the ‘Popular Resistance’ materialized in the governorates of Aden, Lahj, Al-Dhalea, and Marib. These two sides are far from homogeneous, but rather are constituted by myriad local actors with various competing and complementary interests.

### **The local actors**

**The Houthi Movement** - also known as Ansar Allah, or the ‘Partisans of God’ - finds its constituency in Yemen’s Zaydi Shiite sect, who make up roughly a third of Yemen’s population. The Houthi side in the current military conflict is comprised of various allies of convenience, including Zaydi ideologues, popular committees loyal to Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, and forces loyal to former President Saleh - including the republican guards and parts of the central security forces - as well as smaller parties traditionally affiliated with these larger groups.

This coalition of forces is largely drawn from northern Yemen, which fuels the perception in South Yemen - where there has long been an active secessionist movement - that they are a ‘northern occupier.’ This, in addition to the Houthis’ Shiite affiliation, has opened the floodgates to various, once dormant, streams of sectarian and geographical animosities across the country.

**The Popular Resistance**, on the other hand, is made up of a diverse array of groups who, in absence of a central government in San’aa and the com-

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plete collapse of state institutions, facing an invading force from the north and with the generous financial and military support of the Saudi-led coalition, have tentatively amalgamated. Despite the common enemy, each member has their particular motivation for joining the fight and deep divisions in ideology and objectives remain. In fact, other than opposition to the Houthis, one of the few commonalities members of the Popular Resistance seem to share is that none regard Hadi's return to the presidency as a priority.

In practical terms, the Popular Resistance will most likely be able to thwart the Houthi-Saleh coalition's military ambitions, but at the same time they represent the ascent of decentralized militia power across Yemen and as such pose a threat to any potential political settlement, including the restitution of Hadi government they are supposedly fighting for.

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Popular Resistance groups can be classified into three main categories, the first of which is defined by its sectarian and/or religious motivations. This includes a number of Sunni Islamist groups, which are mostly Salafist in nature and who are in conflict with the Houthis largely for ideological reasons. Included in this category is the nascent Al Rashad party, as well as more radical fighters affiliated with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (IS) group's Yemen branch, whose primary motivation is fighting jihad for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate.

The second type - and the most dominant force in across most of South Yemen - is the HIRAK Movement, also known as the Southern Separatist Movement. This group is composed of several secessionist groups fighting to reestablish South Yemen as a separate country. (North and south Yemen officially united in 1990.) With the launch and success of Operation Golden Arrow - leading to the expulsion of Houthi-allied forces from the city of Aden and the nearby Anad Airbase - the HIRAK Movement has taken a major step towards achieving its goal of reestablishing Aden as the capital of South Yemen. Given its ambitions, it is very foreseeable that the secessionist and religiously motivated segments of the "Popular Resistance" will clash over interests in the south in the wake of the Houthi retreat.

The third category of groups in the Popular Resistance is the political parties with affiliated tribal militias in the governorates of Ta'izz, Ibb, Al-Baidha, Marib and al-Jawf. They reject Houthi domination and are fighting for greater self-governance. This category, which includes a large number

of Islah, Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood, party loyalists, frames the fight as one for a federal Yemen.

The outside actors have been involved, in various manners and degrees, in arming all types of groups in all sides of the conflicts. Among the raft of concerns this strategy elicits is it will radically complicate future prospects for peace, and is shortsighted even relative to the coalition's own stated goal of reinstating Hadi to power, as the groups they are empowering are inherently at odds with there being a strong central government in Sana'a.

### **What can be done locally to increase peace potentials?**

Political spokespeople and media pundits alike have suggested that a Houthi military defeat will result in the restoration of the pre-Houthi expansion era. However, with Yemen's government abroad and state institutions all but evaporated, non-state actors are now competing for domestic legitimacy in the power vacuum. In the span of five months, armed non-state actors affiliated with the "Popular Resistance" have managed to claim momentous authority in their local territories and para-state entities have been fortified, notably the Hirak Movement, AQAP and the Islamic State. Even if the Houthis are defeated, the central government will have to reckon with-or accommodate-various non-state actors to attain and maintain its power.

The sooner this war is stopped, the less entrenched these localized centers of military and political power will be, and the greater the chance the central government will be able to reconstitute itself, gradually reassert its authority across the country and stabilize Yemen. Though admittedly prospects for peace are dim in the current geopolitical climate, the status quo will lead Yemen to become a fully-fledged failed state, a humanitarian disaster on near unprecedented levels, and a global security threat. Thus, it is incumbent upon responsible policy and decision makers to begin to formulate an alternative and get a handle on what a possible path to peace might look like.

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- All major parties involved in the war must immediately agree on a pact of peace and concord. While the peace agreement must be inherently Yemeni, any settlement cannot materialize without regional consent. If key regional actors such as Iran and KSA desire to continue the conflict, they will undeniably continue. It is essential to stop the bloodshed and opt for a political agreement to save Yemen from fragmentation and years of infighting. The central incentive for conflict resolution must come from the government represented by President Hadi and Vice President Bahah, Saudi Arabia and its allies, the Houthi militia, and Saleh's allies. To assist this settlement, regional actors must stop all military support for various sides of the conflict. Those who are aiming to work towards a resolution must coordinate together. As time goes on, Yemen's ability to ever make it to peace might get lost in the middle of regional rivalries.
- The government must return promptly to Yemen and new consensus must be reached. All parties can reach a settlement adhering to the principles of UNSCR 2216 without clinging to its outdated specificities. Timely rush objectives, like federalism, need to be more realistic in terms of their capacity to end the conflict. The highly divisive issue of separatism will require the direct attention of the president and his government. The longer the legitimate government remains abroad, the more legitimate non-state actors will become and the harder it will be to regain the trust of the population.
- The agreement must consider the historical specificities of the social formations and amalgamations that make up the social structure of present day Yemen. Any peace agreement needs to go beyond the ubiquitous concept of "federalism," championed by the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). It must consider the fractured reality on the ground, the rise of sectarianism and regionalism, and the possibility of social, political and economic fragmentation. It must be sensitive and in tune with the diverse realities on the ground. Therefore, the treaty should include several addendums featuring local peace-agreements amongst prominent local non-state actors. If efforts within the framework of Yemen's continued unity are unsuccessful, the government will not be able to continue turning a blind eye on the southern factions to self-determination. It is vital to absorb active local non-state actors into formalized state institutions. Last June, President Hadi announced the integration of the Popular Resistance into Yemen's fragmented military. While this is promising, reintegration must be inclusive of all factions. Failure to include some could prove detrimental in defiance of long-term peace.

Those who are excluded could potentially spoil peace processes. Moving forward, reintegration can begin at the national level by appointing prominent local representatives as advisors for the government. Influential local actors, especially in the south, should also have representation at the local level, as this will put them under the pressure to deliver to their local populace. They can also cooperate with the government to provide security and administer law and order.

- The international community and Hadi's government need to acknowledge and strongly condemn terrorist activities of armed radical groups in Yemen, like ISIS and AQAP. These groups use the local population's grievances to garner support from local communities. Hence, they must be denounced to discredit them. Moreover, organizations and individuals funding these groups need to be prosecuted and their funds need to be cut off. Radicalized groups have deep roots in Yemen's government, even more so than formalized civil society, and they have successfully created systems of patronage. In the governorate of Hadramout, AQAP is currently modeling itself after the Houthi movement. They have created parallel non-state structures that are expanding to the rest of south Yemen, which will constitute a great threat to any future state-building agendas. The Houthis also must be clearly told that keeping their political identity is conditional to them stopping their use of violence.
- Given the sectarian magnitude of this war, religious leaders, especially those who have professionalized their work, can reduce sectarian tension by promoting tolerance and forgiveness. Religious actors play a central role in mitigating Yemen's conflict, given the fight between the Houthis and the rest of Yemen, as well as Saudi Arabia, is framed as part of a larger Sunni vs. Shiite war. On both sides, the battle is religiously polarized between "good" and "evil," and faith-based narratives continue to persuade the public.
- Immediately after reaching a political settlement, political and tribal militias are required to hand over heavy and medium weapons to the state. Then the government must regulate and enforce laws about the possession of arms and their personal use. Cities like Aden and Sana'a must be designated as arms-free territory. Almost all armed groups in Yemen have the capacity and will to use violence as means to reach their respective goals, making disarmament a priority for stability.

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- Traditional figures, like tribal leaders, need to be included, however very carefully and cautiously, in the future balance of power sharing. Post revolution, Yemeni tribesmen were excluded from the transitional process 2012-2014, which drove the tribes into the arms of radical groups. Not to mention, their cooperation is necessary for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and for local adjudication.
- Some political parties can potentially initiate domestic peace efforts. Zaydi-dominated parties within the traditional opposition, specifically Al-Haq party and Union of Public Forces, threw in their lot with the Houthis, as did the Yemeni branch of the Syrian Baath party. The Sunni Islamist Islah party, which incorporates the bulk of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, and a number of Southern coalitions, joined Hadi's camp, as did some members of Saleh's party, the General People's Congress (GPC). Parties like the Nasserites and Socialist parties maintained a degree of ambiguity, taking no clear positions even as prominent figures within the parties took personal ones. The official neutrality espoused by the Socialists and Nasserites may be used as means for them to regroup and support locally rooted efforts for peace in Yemen. Those who want peace from all sides are slowly emerging. They can find a common ground and start an informal conversation with each other- even if their leadership is opposed to it.
- The private sector, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), syndicates and unions can foster social cohesion through advocacy, education, protection, peace and war reporting, and humanitarian service delivery. Foreign and local investment needs to be encouraged to promote economic recovery and create employment for Yemeni youth. Tackling Yemen's unemployment crisis will serve as a means to stymie militia recruitments. Moreover, Yemen's experience with CSOs dates more than 35 years. Established CSOs could be effective peace-implementing partners. While they cannot serve as a substitute to state building and have limited leverage, they are an alternative to the militia-fication of Yemen. The international community must create incentives and conditions for Yemen's government to collaborate with CSOs and to lure business opportunities into the country including restarting funding for governance and peace-building programs as soon as conditions allows .



- The government must start a comprehensive national reconciliation and transitional justice plan by forming a specialized legal body. The creation of this body needs to be treated as a high priority and the government must refrain from elaborate processes that have proved futile in the past. Moving forward, the legal body needs to consider all previous conflicts fairly. All victims, regardless of their geographical location or political affiliations, must be treated with empathy with the intention of restoring their rights. Upon reaching a settlement, participating parties need to make amends, and the government should consider incentives for groups that vow to refrain from violence. Traditional forms of conflict resolution, like tribal arbitration, should also be considered.

Five months into the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, the humanitarian catastrophe continues to escalate - some 20 million Yemenis are on the verge of famine and in June the United Nations elevated Yemen's crisis status to Category 3, on par with Syria. Any upcoming resolution that fails to take into consideration the position of local stakeholders will not succeed, while at the same time finding such a resolution has grown even more difficult, owing specifically to the new power many stakeholders have attained since the Saudi-led military operation began. It is incumbent that the international community begins to understand how its policies and actions play out in the complex and dynamic relations between these local actors to refrain from further inflaming the situation in Yemen, and rather, begin to tamp the flames.

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## ABOUT "YEMEN IN CRISIS" PROJECT

The "Yemen in Crisis" Project is one of Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies programs. It aims at exploring peace opportunities in Yemen and providing local, regional and international decision-makers with the needed knowledge to contribute towards more sustainable peace in Yemen. The center specialized researchers and analysts issue a monthly policy briefs that address Yemen various issues as part of the center message to provide new approaches for issues related to Yemen and the region.

## ABOUT RESEARCHERS:

**Sama'a Al-Hamdani** is a visiting fellow with Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. She is an independent writer, researcher & analyst based in Washington DC focusing on Yemeni politics and woman affairs.

**Adam Baron** is the director of research and analysis at Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. He is currently a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations in London.

**Maged Al-Madhaji** is a co-founder and executive director of Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.

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**Note:** The information and views set out in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views and positions of Sana'a Center, Friedrich-Ebert or Saferworld

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Yemen, Sana'a, Hadda St  
Tel: +967 1 444 375  
Fax: +967 1 444 316  
Email: [info@sanaacenter.org](mailto:info@sanaacenter.org)  
[WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG)  
 [sanaacenter](https://www.facebook.com/sanaacenter)

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The Center also provides consultation and technical and analytical advice in the fields of political, civil and social development, in addition to researching and analyzing key issues of great interest to local, regional and international stakeholders.

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Saferworld works to prevent and reduce violent conflict and promote co-operative approaches to security. We work with governments, international organizations and civil society to encourage and support effective policies and practices through advocacy, research and policy development and through supporting the actions of others.