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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

CASE ANALYSIS

# Civil War in Yemen: A Complex Conflict with Multiple Futures

Aleksandar Mitreski | Aug 2015

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Series: Case Analysis

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## Polarization in Yemen

Yemen's full-blown war was the result of a series of events that succeeded one after the other. Violence escalated during the second half of 2014, when citizens grew massively discontent with the political instability of Yemen's transitional government. Once violence became the norm, parties to the dispute quickly polarized, and as violence ramped up, polarization accelerated.

The triggers to this violence came when Yemen's already-weak transitional government led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi was further weakened as Houthi rebels captured Sanaa in September 2014. The president's Peace and National Partnership Agreement had emerged as a kernel of hope for an early resolution to the violence but it did not produce its promised results. Boasted by their early success in capturing Sanaa, the Houthis had their militias take control over key institutions in the city. They installed their own people within major institutions and media outlets, and in other cases 'puppeteered' members of the government whose members were ultimately put under house arrest. All hopes for the Peace and National Partnership Agreement were lost in January 2015, when Hadi resigned shortly after his escape from house arrest in Sanaa. Following a brief residence in the city of Aden, he took refuge in Saudi Arabia. Out of immediate danger, Hadi decided to revoke his resignation and continue his presidency from abroad. At the same time the Houthis decided to promote their own version of a national constitution and create their own government bodies. In the meantime, the Houthi insurgency continued, pushing all of Yemen into a civil war.

Yemen's current multipolar political landscape is nothing new. The country's population has never—after its 1944 civil war, or since unification in 1990—taken on a single national identity. During the 2011 Arab Spring, group differences were exacerbated, but at the outset of the revolutions relative balance of power in the country was able to

bring parties together, making possible negotiations at the National Dialogue Conference (NDC).<sup>1</sup> This is no longer the case, and three important developments explain the changes post NDC. First, Yemen's political scene became radicalized and at the same time was polarized. This made any links between the groups, whether based on historical ties or cultural similarities, impossible. Second, the changing balance of power and enduring resilience of the conflicted sides has inspired optimism within each groups that theirs will prevail and achieve dominance over others. This reduces prospects for negotiating a settlement. For example, as the Houthis consolidated their power on the eve of their complete capture of Sanaa, rejecting calls for negotiations seemed easy, and group officials seemed unfazed by the UN resolution urging them to withdraw and reverse their course. Third, the people in Yemen have no faith in a central government, and even less faith in any political process as a solution to their problems; largely due to disappointment over a long negotiating process and an ineffective transitional government. In addition, there is no leader who inspires hope, or can rally Yemenis under one flag, or for a common purpose. While President Hadi enjoys international support, at home he is unable to ensure unity amongst even his allies, let alone the whole country.

While Yemen faces an internal quagmire, regional actors, in particular the GCC states, have been increasingly engaged in the conflict. A Saudi-led military campaign, Operation Decisive Storm' began in March 2015, based on a coalition of forces originally supported—according to Saudis officials and public statements from countries in the wider MENA region—by more than ten countries. The UAE has been a strong supporter of the military action, contributing air support that has removed any ballistic threat for the region within the first 25 days of the operation. Other GCC states and MENA

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Barrett Holzapfel, "Yemen's Transition Process: Between Fragmentation and Transformation," United States Institute of Peace, *Peaceworks*, No. 95, 2014

countries have also positively responded to Saudi Arabia's move for military solutions.<sup>2</sup> Nations of the region have pledged military support and have become engaged in the second phase of the operation, titled 'Restoring Hope.' One of the strategic objectives of this operation is the disabling of the Houthi insurgency and the reinstatement of Hadi as the President of Yemen. For that purpose, large groups of pro-Hadi Yemeni fighters have been provided with weapons, equipment, and necessary military training. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have more recently delivered large quantities of heavy weapons (tanks), armored vehicles, and ammunition to the pro-Hadi fighters through the newly liberated areas in Aden. Troops from the Arab countries have been involved in training Hadi's army, which lacks expertise in operating for much of the weaponry and equipment being supplied. Some of the foreign troops, however, are reported to be involved in military operations themselves, and not simply working in a training capacity. Operation Restoring Hope also has a humanitarian component, and its first aid planes and ships have already arrived in Aden. The United States is also providing some assistance through intelligence, aerial refueling for fighter jets, and has indicated that it would provide possible assistance in rescuing of downed pilots. The thus empowered pro-Hadi army will be the much needed 'boots on the ground' to complement the Saudi air campaign. If the Southern Resistance answers Hadi's call for a united anti-Houthi front positively, and thus integrates with Hadi's army, a quicker advancement towards Sanaa may follow.

Meanwhile, the UN is still at the forefront of the negotiations in Yemen. Negotiations are not a number one priority, however, since the UN's reputation was significantly damaged following months of less than effective diplomacy engagement in Yemen. That is not to say that UN's efforts are futile. UN resolutions are a significant legitimizer of

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<sup>2</sup> Except Oman, which is not part of the campaign and is instead offering a venue for negotiations.

the strong support for President Hadi. Time may prove that the UN's ongoing shuttle diplomacy is the best way to a ceasefire, followed by peace agreement.

When taking stock of the current Civil war in Yemen, it is imperative to have a holistic view of the complex conflict, and especially when seeking to find a way out of the turmoil. As things stand, a clear path towards quick conflict resolution seems impossible. The murkiness of the actual support by the Yemeni people for current leaders, ongoing shifting political dynamics, and the mixed results of military operations makes any conflict resolution strategy difficult to argue. This, in turn, renders many of the policy recommendations focusing on just one or another approach risky to follow.

## Understanding the Conflict's Dynamics

Yemen's conflict is saturated with different groups, and each have unique interests. Antagonism amongst the various Yemeni groups and the process of 'othering' between the Zaydis from the north and the Shagais from the central and southern parts of Yemen has been obliterating memories of coexistence and making any reconciliation unforeseeable. The current conflict has even blurred the actual differences between the Zaydis branch of Shia (Fivers) and those in Iran (Twelvers). This blurring is exacerbated when the Houthis' religion is equated with the one of the Persian belief structures and used as an argument to link the two. A March Briefing report by the International Crisis Group observed this in action, noting that the "previously absent Shiite-Sunni narrative is creeping into how Yemenis describe their fight," primarily through the labels used by

the Houthis and the Sunni Islamist party Islah.<sup>3</sup> In a way, increased use of sectarian rhetoric by the group has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While domestically the Houthis managed to maintain control over a large part of Yemen, including the capital, this has not translated into commensurate international recognition. The group is aware that UN resolutions are clear that Hadi's government is the only authority in Yemen. Attempts to make inroads in the international community have thus been carried out through economic ties, in particular those aimed at Russia (which remains unresponsive) and China, which has an interest in the Yemeni oil industry. While these efforts show some effort to reach out to the international community, on the whole, the Houthis have shown no state-building acumen and political alliances are made out of convenience.

With little regard for other political parties, the Zaydi Shia militias have forged an unholy alliance with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The deal was made without regard to the two groups' hostile history, which includes fighting in multiple wars against each other. For now, they seem to have been able to put most of their differences aside and unite against Hadi and his supporters. This alliance means the Houthis benefit from Saleh's powerful friends in the Yemeni army, something that has contributed greatly to the Houthis' early rise to power. The group may yet be aided by Saleh's diplomatic skills. For his part, Saleh is on a quest to regain his lost authority. The politically savvy former president of Yemen hopes to extend his influence through his political party, the General People's Congress (GPC).<sup>4</sup>

This can be read as a move against current President Hadi, who had been a member of GPC until November 2014, when he was kicked out. His ouster was the result of a travel

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<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group, "Yemen at War," Middle East Briefing No. 45, March 2015

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Saleh's party, the General People's Congress has rejected the Houthi constitutional announcement from January 2015. This is just one example of their uneasy relationship.

ban and asset freeze imposed by the UN Security Council on Saleh and a few other leaders from the Houthi side. Hadi's rivalry with Saleh and his break with the party only further speak to his inability to become a gravitational center in Yemeni politics. At best, Hadi was able to become a rival of Saleh, use decrees to make new appointments and reassignments to reduce Saleh's influence in the governing structures and military. Over time, these moves have been able to attract defectors from Saleh's faction, but without building a real base of his own. While having defectors on side is extremely useful when defections and declarations of support of Hadi from key GPC members provide a much-needed boost to the legitimacy of the current President, his overall legitimacy remains low. This is not least because of his moves to divide forces to steer against the Houthis. His allies, the Southern (Popular) Resistance, are a secessionist movement with strong support in the South and do not share Hadi's vision of a post-conflict Yemen.

Influence also comes from Yemen's immediate neighbors, who are generally strongly pro-Hadi. The political positions of regional actors and their interests in the different sides would indicate that regionalization of the Yemen conflict was inevitable. Saudi Arabia's actions, however, are also in response to wider regional trends. Intervention in Yemen has a great deal to do with curbing Iranian foreign policy on at least two big issues – the Iranian nuclear deal and their role in Iraq. With the nuclear deal recently concluded without any direct input from the Saudis, and Iraq set to be an even bigger challenge in near future, Saudi involvement in the Yemen sphere seemed inevitable. Where Teheran's involvement in Iraq is welcomed by the Western powers, and with the re-engagement of Iran in the international community their role could be strengthened, Saudi Arabia does not share the West's enthusiasm.

But the situation in Yemen is different. The level of support from Iran, as secretive as it may be, is not the same as Iran's support for the Shia militias in Iraq, the government of Syria's Assad, or Hezbollah in Lebanon. While hesitation to become further embroiled may be very much connected to a fear of possible overstretching in the region and the

fact that the Houthis are not under Iran's direct control, It may also be the case that Teheran has calculated the likelihood of a strong and determined response by Saudi Arabia if it were to step up involvement. Iran's public declarations call for ceasefire, though they know the balance of power on the ground in Yemen matters a lot since it will transfer to the make-up of any negotiations table. Iran leaves little up to luck. Iranian Revolutionary guards are on the ground in Yemen, Iranian money and aid has been shipped to the Houthis. It should not be a surprise if more money were to be poured in, especially given the funds that will be made available in the wake of the Iranian nuclear deal and an unfreezing of assets. Even though weapons may be much more needed than cash, the Houthis will still be more effective in maintaining control and popularity if they have no huge financial challenges.

For the leadership in Riyadh, Yemen continues to be a foreign policy priority. The Kingdom acted as patron to Yemen's government from the 1980s onwards, and it never accepted foreign influence in the country. In the 1960s Egypt's then president Gamal Abdel Nasser tried to expand his Pan-Arab revolution to Yemen, only to see his efforts neutralized by the Saudis. This time around, as Iran employs their 'revolution export' strategy,<sup>5</sup> similar determination exists in the House of Saud and its key allies to thwart it.

No accounting of the current conflict in Yemen would be complete, however, without accounting for terrorist groups. The best way to look at this issue is to understand the historical role of al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and its relatively recent branch of Daesh (The Arabic acronym for the group known as the Islamic State in Iraq

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<sup>5</sup> H.H. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs, discussing the regional behavior of Iran in context of the Yemeni crisis, stated that "there is systematic action that has been going for years on the idea of exporting the (Iranian) revolution", quoted in; Sami Aboudi, 'UAE says sees systematic Iranian meddling in Yemen, region', Reuters, April 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/08/us-yemen-crisis-uae-iran-idUSKBN0MZ1P520150408>

and Syria or ISIL). AQAP is considered the most powerful of al-Qaeda's branches after the death of Osama Bin Laden. It is, moreover, a terrorist group with a long legacy in Yemen. Many men who fought alongside Bin Laden in Afghanistan at the end of the last century came back to Yemen and to found AQAP. Indeed, since 1990, leaders of the largest Islamic military groups in this country have claimed ties to Bin Laden.<sup>6</sup> With the creation of AQAP, allegiance to Bin Laden's successor Ayman al Zawahiri was declared, and has been reasserted repeatedly since. The newly appointed leader of the AQAP Qasm al-Rimi, who assumed his position after the death of Nasir al-Wuhayshi in June 2015, made the same oath of allegiance when he took power. With such strong roots in Yemen, it would be difficult for ISIL to take over as a leader in the jihadist movement in the country.

Further dividing ISIL and the AQAP is the firm policy of the latter for the gradual establishment of a caliphate when the 'right conditions' are met. This is already underway in Yemen, and is not an ideology that is shared by the now rival terror group. As far back as 2009, the AQAP issued a recruitment call to aid in establishing an Islamic caliphate in Yemen.<sup>7</sup> The call anticipated the departure of Saleh from power, and the opportunity was taken at his departure to create new institutions in Yemen toward the goal of the caliphate. Further distinguishing the two groups, AQAP maintains that consultation with respectable scholars and influential leaders in the Ummah are a *sine qua non* for the establishment of a supranational entity. For AQAP, this serves as a source of unity and legitimacy. It is also cited in the attempts to challenge the authority

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, "A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen," The Combating Terrorism Center At West Point, September 2011, [www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CTC\\_False\\_Foundation3.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CTC_False_Foundation3.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Phillips, "What Comes Next in Yemen? Al-Qaeda, the Tribes, and State-Building," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2010.

of ISIL's leader and the illegitimacy of al-Baghdadi's declared caliphate, which neither has nor sought similar support.

This seeking of wider legitimacy speaks to the priority of alliances for AQAP, which has indeed demonstrated success in gathering more allies amongst tribal leaders in Yemen than ISIL. These alliances are largely based on a common interest to deter any advancement of the Houthis, rather than any shared ideals for the future political reorganization of Yemen. It is therefore difficult to assess how long these alliances may endure, but, without a better alternative, it is likely the tribes' current cooperation with AQAP will remain in place as long as the Houthi movement provides a need for it.

This means AQAP is well positioned to expand its governing territory, at least for the duration of the Yemeni crisis. ISIL may also expand their influence in Yemen, but they are unlikely to be a major player in the crisis. While the group loyal to al-Baghdadi is increasingly popular in the media, it has had limited success in Yemen. The group will need to be accounted for, however, in the aftermath of the war and during a possible peacemaking process. Both AQAP and ISIL have declared that the Houthis deserve to be killed, however, ISIL has far more extreme methods and are prone to terrorist acts, which deepen the sectarian rift.

Each of these parties is operating, moreover, in a country with limited economic prospects. In addition to high unemployment, water and food shortages, oil exports are failing to produce enough revenue for the government, due to the fall in oil prices and declining oil production as a consequence of the conflict. This means that the nation is not, and will not be economically self-sufficient in the near future.

The crisis in Yemen has all of the necessary conditions of a conflict that will continue for many years to come. Pro-Hadi forces have had a few recent successes securing territory in the south, which has further boosted their capabilities, allowing an increase of weapons shipments, as well as military and humanitarian aid in the south.

Meanwhile, the Houthis continue to endure the military campaign being waged against them. There is such enthusiasm for the conflict that Houthi fighters may even prefer to battle foreign ground troops so as to gain the opportunity to inflict direct damage on the Saudi-led coalition. At the same time, the international coalition will not abandon their policy of balancing powers in the Yemeni arena, in the hope that some balance would stabilize the country.<sup>8</sup> Internationally lead negotiations have been in contact with almost every relevant actor, but getting these actors to conclude the peace talks remains a work in progress. Even successful peace talks and an end to direct violence, however, do not imply a unified nation-state, in particular given the continued strength of secessionist movements.

## Conflict's Unclear Future

The mercurial dynamics of the Yemeni conflict and the multiple possible pathways upon which it might develop make planning unclear. Various scenarios explore multiple probable trajectories, and the many stakeholders – both domestic and regional - prefer diverse and conflicting outcomes. What does seem unlikely is that an outcome will be left to the will and capabilities of any one party to determine the outcome alone.

The four scenarios below [Figure 1] represent the four poles of possible outcomes that current stakeholders may have to accommodate in any possible solution. The scenarios are fluid, and represent a spectrum of possible outcomes. The X-axis represents the

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<sup>8</sup> Robi Barrett from the Middle East Institute in Washington D.C. explains that traditionally Saudi Arabia (together with other Gulf partners) has been balancing between the country's multiple centers of power and that the coalition's view is that repetition of "another 1994-like conquest of Sunni areas by Zaydi-led elements must be resisted." Robi Barrett, "Saudi Arabia's Return to Traditional Yemen Policy," Middle East Institute, Washington D.C, May 2015

stability of Yemen, with outcomes ranging between its two extremes: war and peace. The war extreme examines the possibility of protracted conflict, where the war in Yemen continues at its current level, or even worse, at a heightened level of violence. At the other end of the spectrum is a peaceful solution, which assumes a peaceful resolution to the crisis. While obviously the peaceful solution is desirable, it is important to note that a resolution does not assume positive peace or an imminent reconciliation. On the contrary, considering that this is a near-term analysis, certain ungoverned territories or sporadic violence should be expected even in the most optimistic future.

The Y-axis tackles the issue of integrity. It assumes a possible return to the process of solidifying a unified Yemen, on the one hand, or dividing the territory into two separate entities on the other. 'Integration' marks the preservation of the country's existing borders, regardless of its level(s) of decentralization (e.g. federation), where the opposite extreme reflects the endemic lack of national cohesion and thus represents the possibility of dividing the country in two separate states/territories. Such a scenario includes the possibility of reverting back to the pre-1990 borders, or even an alternative re-drawing of the map.

Stability and integration are key factors for the future of the country. Stability as a criterion is an overarching theme, vital for enabling further discussion on political, economic, and social issues. In other words, depending on the stability of the country and whether there is war or peace in Yemen, different policies should be applied. Integration on the other hand, provides a lens through which to examine key political developments that are equally unpredictable. Ultimately, having one or two countries on Yemen's current territory would completely change the political landscape, and consequently the strategies employed to reach a peaceful resolution. Understanding how these two factors combine helps complete the possible pictures of Yemen over the next few years.

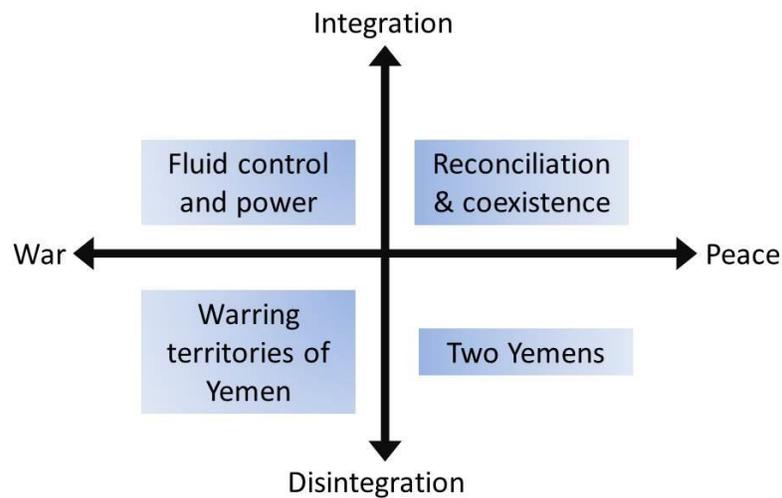


Figure 1

### Fluid Control and Power

A first scenario, based on Yemen's current dynamics, plots a possible future for the country along the 'development' of the *status quo*. In this scenario, the country remains undivided as a political unit, but the war is unceasing and offensive operations are continuously being launched. Consequently, different parties gain or lose control of territory based on successful military/insurgent advances.

This makes a map of territorial control one that constantly morphs, even within short time intervals. Such a future remains very much like today's Yemen, where ongoing clashes between the Houthis and pro-Hadi insurgents in large cities like Aden and Taiz have given mixed results for each side. Earlier in the year the Houthis had managed to quickly gain a large territory in their quest to capture Aden, and it was then that they

also overtook the al-Anad Air Base in Lahij. With the recent success of the popular resistance troops and Hadi's supporters in retaking much of that same area, it is also possible that a further Houthi retreat may follow. A similar situation is seen in the battle for Taiz, the battle over which could go on for any length of time.

### Warring Territories of Yemen

A second scenario posits that a certain level of war fatigue on the ground will result in a divided Yemeni territory, to be controlled by different groups. War-weariness may not be enough for the warring parties to conclude a peace process, and may instead only serve to limit the conflict to the frontlines. A war-weary end to hostilities would simply entrench parties in their positions and focus each on defending areas under their control. The Houthis would then likely control the northern part of current-day Yemen, while the forces loyal to the regime in exile (which would likely return to Yemen under these conditions) could successfully defend the southern and central areas of the country. Although still divided on how the future political map of Yemen should look, Hadi loyalists and the Southern Resistance (*Hirak*) are likely to keep a fragile and to a degree united front in the fight against their common enemy. Small areas of ungoverned territory may also exist in the current al-Qaeda controlled areas, with neither party willing or able to conquer the other territories.

Under this outcome, the conflict would be expected to manifest through clashes along the frontlines, but sporadic terrorist attacks beyond these areas could not be ruled out. Military operations from regional state actors would also likely continue. However, without the ground support of Hadi's loyalists, the air campaign would likely produce limited results.

So far, success in regaining control of territory from the Houthis has been in areas in the south where the Houthi movement does not have massive support. It will be

increasingly difficult to repeat these territorial gains in the north, which are areas of Houthi strongholds. This is why the battle may be limited to the frontlines and over time a *de facto* disintegrated country could be created, as no institution has authority over the full territory.

## **Two Yemens**

If violence is halted, the future of Yemen will be decided by the largest and most relevant parties in the country, in conjunction with help from the international community. One possible outcome in this direction would be for the negotiators to acknowledge that a Westphalian nation-state is impossible on this territory, and instead conclude an agreement to divide Yemen. This will not be a quick or easy process, but it has significant support in the county, especially in the south. The Popular Committees in the south and Hadi's army fighting against the Zaidi Shia Islamist group there neither belong to a single tribe nor share a common strategic objective – just a common enemy. Clashes in mid-July - when control over Aden was claimed back from the Houthis – represented for some fighters the liberation of the nation's second largest city. For the members of the region's separatist movement, it was a liberation of their old (and possibly future) capital. For Saudi Arabia, this means having in what would become Northern Yemen, a neighbor that is no friend of theirs, and another, Southern Yemen, which will inherit the AQAP problem.

## **Reconciliation and Coexistence**

While currently ineffective, peace negotiations may eventually lead toward a permanent cease-fire and a deal that will preserve the unity of Yemen. This could come to pass in one of two ways. First, as the result of an effective and creative diplomacy, or second, because of the success of Operation Restoring Hope, which seeks to put President Hadi

in charge of Yemen and the surrender of the Houthi movement and Saleh's forces. Whatever means peace talks may emerge, however, the years to follow are sure to be difficult.

One way the road to stability could be eased, is through a possible rebirth of the Peace and National Partnership Agreement, or PNPA 2.0. This agreement, or a new form following similar lines, could revive internal political dialogue in the country. A successful agreement would mean that post conflict institutions would have to be agreed upon, and integration of different demographic groups would be expected to take place at various levels in the government. While a clear step forward, a PNPA 2.0 would merely begin the process of reconciliation and give hope for a prolonged stability. An international peacekeeping mission might also be necessary to keep the terms of any agreement in its initial phases, as a united and relatively stable Yemen could slowly rebuild as a federal system.

However, since the terrorist organizations operating in the country will certainly not be part of the negotiations process, and not seen as a possible actor that could be integrated into the reconstructed national institutions, they will likely remain a problem for the next government of Yemen as well as the international sponsors of the peace process.

## Key Recommendations

The following recommendations take into account each of the developed scenarios. They are aimed at improving the Saudi-led coalition's conflict resolution efforts in Yemen, and securing a smooth road to stability in the years to come. Since the conflict has moved swiftly, some aspects of the recommendations may already have been

undertaken by parties involved when this goes to press. This should serve as part of the justification for the recommendations, and more reason to continue forward with them. The overall aim is to suggest improvements to current strategy that might ensure a long term and comprehensive approach for Yemen. Therefore, predictions on some of the scenarios are not worked through, since policies for a military campaign, for example, are not applicable in case of peace and reconciliation.<sup>9</sup>

*A strategy for dealing with the Houthis has to have an engagement component. Since the Houthis will either remain a party to the conflict or become a part of the solution, integration of the group should be one of the first priorities of reconciliation efforts. No military campaign will wipe out all of the Houthi militias, and a leadership decapitation will not eradicate the movement either. The former president learned this lesson following the murder of the founder of the Houthis - Hussein Badr al-Deen al-Houthi – which only galvanized the group under the leadership of the slain leader’s brother.<sup>10</sup> Even if the Houthis surrender after a successful operation lead by pro-Hadi forces and the coalition, political and security instability will certainly continue if the group is excluded or marginalized from any peace process.*

While an engagement with the militarized Zaydi group is also necessary, it will require both crafty diplomacy and muscle. The Houthis have proven keen on bending the rules when convenient. Ideally, Saudi Arabia will be able to facilitate a process of transformation of the movement and secure at least an abandonment of its radical

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<sup>9</sup> There are some additional limitations to this analysis. Although it has charted the diversity of future paths, the possible outcomes of the Yemeni crisis are not all exhausted by the model developed. A more thorough investigation of the alternative paths for many other sectors could add depth to analysis, and additional sections examining the economic and social aspects of Yemen would be invaluable.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Salisbury, "Yemen and the Saudi–Iranian 'Cold War,'" The Royal Institute of International Affairs Chatham House, Middle East and North Africa Programme, February 2015

military strategy and adoption of purely political means. This will make a credible negotiating partner, or even a neighbor. Since Saudi Arabia would share a border with a Houthi territory of Yemen were to split, they are doubly suitable as a leader for Houthi engagement.

*Establish a long-term strategy to deal with al-Qaeda and enforce it immediately.* The growing power of AQAP must not be seen as a problem that is secondary to the Houthi issue. To take such a stance would be to risk not only international blame on Saudi Arabia for enabling a strong AQAP, but would ensure the region were set up for a long conflict with an increasingly formidable terrorist organization. While discussions with Houthi groups might see the rest of the country is stabilized, AQAP and its smaller rival ISIL are sure to keep an ungoverned territory and use it as a launching pad for domestic or international attacks.

A continuous fight as part of a long-term strategy to combat terrorist groups is not only important for the stability of Yemen, but for the region as well. The coalition must be aware of the risks an empowered AQAP would bring for the GCC countries; elevating the danger of terrorist attacks for the Gulf States and even creating the possibility of spillover effects under certain circumstances, as in the case of Oman. The spill-over could either be in a form of an insurgency or terror activities. As it stands, both of these risks remain in place, as al-Qaeda continues to cause instability, and its actions in Yemen demonstrate potential for a full-blown insurgency.

*Develop a principled humanitarian strategy for the entire country.* Saudi has Arabia pledged more funds than all of the other members of the Friends of Yemen group since the crisis broke out. When the UN launched an appeal for \$274 million in emergency assistance for the country in April 2015, Saudi Arabia pledged to foot the entire bill

(although the UN has not yet confirmed receiving the pledged funds). The Yemenis are yet to feel the benefit of any significant international assistance, however, due to the coalition's restriction on what enters Yemen and where. Currently, most of the international aid gets to Aden.

Understandably, Riyadh cut much of its funding after the Houthis took over control over Sanaa, and much of the worry today is still about how much of the aid, should it get distributed in all areas of Yemen, would go to strengthening the Houthis. This is not a sustainable strategy. Statements such as those from President of Médecins Sans Frontières Dr Mégo Terzian, who has teams on the ground in Yemen, describe the horrors of civilian everyday life, accentuating the need for pressure by the international community to all warring parties to stop the violence. Calls like those of Dr Terzian will inevitably become more frequent as conditions deteriorate. The coalition's strategy to restrict the shipments may be labelled as 'collective punishment' of the Yemeni people, so alternative strategies are urgently necessary.

A principled strategy could still prevent ships carrying weapons getting anywhere near the shores of Yemen, or supplies that have a purely military use. However, food, medicine, and other critical aid will have to be massively and immediately imported.

Additionally, aid does not have to be channeled entirely through the UN. The coalition can prevent a rapidly developing humanitarian catastrophe and prevent damage to its strategic goals by using various additional INGOs that can comply with the rules of the strategy. Fast recovery of the thousands of injured and sick people will also be needed in a case of a hoped-for peace solution.

*Create a feasible alternative and demonstrate capacity to follow through on promises.*

The population of Yemen is all too aware of what their prospects are for an end to violence or long-term stability under another transitional government. As early as 2012

the World Bank reported that Yemen has less than 12 years left to benefit from financing,<sup>11</sup> meaning post-conflict reconstruction will have to coincide with a period of economic diversification and significant restrictions on government finances. This is sure to make any new leadership unpopular. When fuel subsidies were cut by the Hadi's already unpopular government, anger swelled amongst the Yemenis just months before Sanaa's takeover by the Houthis. Since relatively quick stabilization is becoming less achievable by the day, with rapidly climbing numbers of refugees and IDPs disrupting existing businesses or educational opportunities, diversification of the economy will be especially difficult. Without post-conflict programs to generate jobs and educational opportunities, Yemen's large population of youths threatens to become a 'lost generation.' A feasible alternative to war thus requires functional central institutions and resources.

While military-related trainings are a top priority for a reconciliation strategy, the recommended policy goes well beyond what is needed to end hostilities. The policy assumes an entire set of activities: conferences for defining national strategies (such as "Saving Yemen and Building a Federal State" held in May 2015) with clear goals, the development of capacity building programs, early application of some of the programs on the ground in stable pockets of the country, and a great deal of official rhetoric on the subject in order to secure the necessary buy-in. The programs must build consensus and capabilities on the ground. Only thus can they provide the future government(s) of Yemen with the minimum ability to effectively begin carrying out basic functions and guarantee a minimum level of stability.

Even if the crisis does not take a peaceful turn, meaning that the policy could not be completely followed through, it will be important to show an alternative in a protracted

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<sup>11</sup> World Bank, "Facing the Hard Facts in Yemen," September 26, 2012, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2012/09/26/yemen-talking-points>

war. If no efforts are made, the bellicose groups will have increased opportunities for support and recruitment. The Houthis have already tried to reach out to the disengaged communities in Yemen (the *muhamasheen*), trying to capitalize on their hopelessness.

*Work with the tribes directly.* Any successful strategy depends on local support. Tribal society in Yemen has undergone significant transformation in the last few decades, particularly due to the oil benefits distributed by the central government. This has reduced the influence of local tribal sheikhs and could once have be hailed as a step forward in Yemen's nation building efforts.<sup>12</sup> However, in recent years the process has taken a reverse course. Aside from polarization of the multiple centers of political authority, none of parties in Yemen has the power to provide patronage for most or all of the tribes. This, once again, promotes the tribal leaders' role, since they are positioned to pledge alliances in return for financial benefits, security, etc. While this situation creates more volatile and fragmented environment on the ground, it also provides a valuable insight on how to gain tribal loyalty or ways to consolidate power in a post- conflict society.

Given the multiple layers and multi-polar nature of the conflict, the solution must be equally multidimensional, and employ different methods depending on the future path of the crisis. In the current conditions, any humanitarian assistance and protection may secure friends, or, in the case of a peacemaking process, political inclusion and economic rewards could be a 'carrot' for gaining loyalties that would allow a peace making plan to go forward.

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<sup>12</sup> Sarah Phillips, "What Comes Next in Yemen? Al-Qaeda, the Tribes, and State-Building," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Program, March 2010

*Consider employing tactics similar to the American 'Money as a Weapon System' (MAAWS).* A strategy for the allocation of finances is needed in order to ensure the delivery of relatively small financial reparations for many families who have suffered as victims of collateral damage to the war. MAAWS is more than an apology or a mere financial compensation for the death of the innocent in Yemen in the air raids. Rather, it represents the formal recognition of a mistake and can be a powerful tool to complement efforts toward the strategic objectives of the coalition.

Internationally, the Saudi-led campaign has mostly met support or neutrality, while the opposition is backed mainly by Iran. All eyes, however, are on the conflict, which has caused an increasingly large death toll, of which the UN has been maintaining a count. What really hurts the success of the current strategy are the increasing number of civilian casualties. Videos from Yemen are regularly published online accompanied by claims that they show the massacre of civilians by coalition bombings. Regardless of the authenticity of all of the videos, little doubt exists that innocent lives have been lost due to the air raids.

MAAWS would present a multifold benefit for the coalition. To begin with, international recognition it is likely to follow and reduce pressure on the coalition, in particular from humanitarian organizations and the UN. That does not mean anyone would simply accept civilian casualties, but any effort toward making amends in such setting would deserve a nod of approval. Another, and more important factor is that MAAWS could help the confidence building process and ultimately help with reconciliation should a peace process occur in the near future. In the case of an ongoing conflict, a window of opportunity should be kept open for Saudi-Houthi contact, even via smaller groups currently loyal to the Houthi committees. With so many casualties, this opportunity is reduced to a minimum. Finally, a carefully developed media and online campaign should assist in creating buy-in for the plan.

*Preserve leadership in international involvement in Yemen.* Regardless of developments in Yemen's war, GCC leadership of the coalition should be maintained. Having the UN as a patron for this conflict could be ineffective, since the world body is unable to exert real pressure when it is needed, and its reputation in the area remains at a low. The Americans are not an option either. The US should not 'Americanize' the conflict, nor in the current state is it willing to. Any increased involvement by the US would add fuel to the fire. Anti-American positions are not exclusive to the Houthis, who have adopted the "Death to America" chants of the Iranian Revolution. Across Yemen—in many population pockets as well as with the clergy—there is a strong discontent around potential American involvement.<sup>13</sup> Even in the case of a permanent ceasefire and the ensuing need to rebuild the country, the US cannot offer an impressive record of post-war nation-building, at least not more than any other country. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has had a traditional role in Yemen, has a strong interest in maintaining stability in the country. Moreover, it has the capacity to push this strategy to its completion in the years to come.

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<sup>13</sup> W. Andrew Terrill, "The Conflicts In Yemen and U.S. National Security" Strategic Studies Institute, January 2011