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Yemen After the Fall of Sanaa

Mohammed Jamih | Nov 2014

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background to Yemeni Divisions	1
Splits within the Military Establishment	2
The Struggle between the Houthis and the Islah Party	4
The Role of the Ex-President	5
The Dispute between Basindawa and Hadi	7
Control Over the Sea	9
Iranian Influence: Repeating the Hezbollah Experience in Yemen	10
The Gulf Position	11
The Al Qaeda Factor	13
Possible Future Scenarios	14

Introduction

Armed Houthi fighters under the name Ansar Allah seized Yemen's capital Sanaa on September 21, marking a critical juncture in Yemen's political path since the beginning of 2011. This paper explores the factors that led Sanaa to fall to the Houthis, by examining the nature of the divisions within Yemen; the roles played by the army, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and al-Qaeda; the struggle between the Houthis and the Islah Party; the disagreement between President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and Prime Minister Mohammed Salim Basindawa; the role of the Gulf states and Iran, and finally the true ambitions of the Houthis. It also attempts to predict possible outcomes on Yemen's future given continued Houthi efforts to exert control over much of the country.

Background to Yemeni Divisions

Yemen's revolution on February 11, 2011 drew a dividing line between two groups of political, tribal, military, and financial power in Yemen. The first represented the forces that coalesced under the umbrella of the ruling power, led by former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the second represented those forces outside the framework of power in its traditional sense in Yemen, although drawing a sharp divide between those in authority and those outside of it in Yemen is sometimes difficult.

A conflict between two forms of legitimacy thus emerged: the legitimacy of the ballot box, embodied and exploited by the ruling power, and that of a popular, revolutionary legitimacy that aspired for alternative rule, taking advantage of the winds of change blowing through the region sparked by the self-immolation of Tunisian Mohammed Buazizi. Contrary to popular narratives, the divide was neither then, nor now, sectarian. Ultimately, the divide in Yemen was, and remains, a highly political conflict for power.

This political division was also symbolically aligned across geographical lines. The opposition strongholds were located around Sanaa University, in Siteen Street in what became known as "Change Square", whilst the ruling camp mobilized in Sabeen Square, right near the president's office, and close to the monument to the September [1962] revolution. Symbolically, the inherent message was that those in Sabeen Square were following the aims of the 1962 revolution while those in Siteen Street—according to the reading of the authorities—had distanced themselves from those aims.

Events subsequently led to the Gulf initiative, which was signed on November 23, 2011 and ushered in a transitional period of national dialogue; but this constituted a temporary lid on the divisions that had by then encompassed many, even the military. By the time the national dialogue meetings came to an end, and an agreement was set on the framework that was to found a political and constitutional settlement, divisions were at boiling point. The situation erupted in Dammaj, and then Amran, which fell to the Houthis at the beginning of July 2014, and culminated in the fall of Sanaa at the end of September 2014.¹

While the Houthis are the most prominent name associated with the wave of opposition coming out of the extreme north to take control of Sanaa, there are many parties to the divides, or prospective divides in Yemen. There are the partisans of ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh, the tribal opponents of the al-Ahmar tribe who for decades made up the tribal leadership of the Hashid federation, the opponents of the Yemeni Islah Party, not to mention the geographical element to divisions in Yemen which should not be overlooked given recent events. This is clearly evident, for instance, in the nature of the alignments exposed by the unified position of the Houthis and former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in the rejection of Dr. Ahmed Awwad Bin Mubarak as prime minister, because of his southern affiliations.² Yemen's youth revolution tried to eradicate the division between Yemen's highlands and lowlands, or to challenge its excesses, but despite their efforts, divisions between the north and south prevail.

Splits within the Military Establishment

Following Yemeni unification on May 22, 1990 several attempts were made to integrate the northern and southern Yemeni armies. However, the lack of trust between military and political leaders, along with the differences in the makeup and combat styles of the two armies, prevented integration, prompting a war breaking out in the summer of 1994. Yemen's 1994 civil war led to the defeat of Southern Yemen which wanted to "break away" from the unified state and the incorporation of its combat units and brigades into the national army, which subsequently – after the exclusion of military

¹ "Chronology of events in Yemen since the start of the revolution," *Al-Jazeera Net*, October 2, 2014, <http://goo.gl/fKJOvm>.

² "The Houthis reject the appointment of bin Mabarak as prime minster," *Al-Jazeera Net*, October 8, 2014, <http://goo.gl/D0s8dw>.

commanders from the south – became the regime’s army.³ Additionally, there was a clear split between the dissolved presidential guard, headed by the son of the ex-president, Major-General Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh and the rest of the military sectors, foremost among them the dissolved 1st Armored Division and its commander Brigadier-General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar who was the mastermind behind the Yemeni state’s war against the Houthi rebels. General Muhsin and the 1st Armored Division were in fact the Houthis’ first target upon them entering Sanaa, virtually unopposed by the army.

The enmity between defense minister Mohammed Nasir Ahmed and Brigadier-General al-Ahmar is said to have deeply affected the performance of the army in confronting the Houthis in Amran and Sanaa. Yemen’s Defense Ministry went as far as declaring on several occasions that the army was neutral in the current conflict, which it depicted as a struggle between the Houthis and the Islah Party.⁴

Splits within the army—despite its restructuring following the revolution—paved the way for Houthi penetration. In fact, this penetration had been present for years, prior to the Houthi assault on Sanaa, due to elements within the army allegedly linked to the Houthis through religious, family or other ties. The head of the National Security Agency, Ali al-Ahmadi, clearly indicated this when stating that “The collapse of some units of the army and security forces before the Houthis was a result of treason and the infiltration of these units.”⁵ The corruption that had taken root in state institutions, including the military, where large sums were spent on fictitious soldiers not actually in the field or who followed and were loyal to prominent social, political, or party personalities, also served to weaken the army in the confrontation with the Houthis.

³ Yaseen Qaid al-Shurjabi, “The regime was able to incorporate the military, and then to control it and transform it into a tribal and family enterprise with a vested interest in the continuation of the regime.” *Al-Gomhoriah* (Yemen), July 4, 2012, <http://www.algomhoriah.net/articles.php?lng=arabic&aid=32093>.

⁴ “Yemeni defence minister confirms the neutrality of the army,” *Al-Jazeera Net*, April 13, 2014, <http://goo.gl/nFTIU8>.

⁵ “Al-Ahmadi to *Al-Seyassah*: The fall of Sanaa is a coup against the state and were it not for treason and Iranian support, the army would not have collapsed,” *Al-Seyassah* (Kuwait), September 27, 2014, <http://goo.gl/oFxX6h>.

The Struggle between the Houthis and the Islah Party

During the six wars between the former regime and the Houthis, the Yemeni Islah Party was seen as a tacit sympathizer with the Houthis, irritating the regime of ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Islah Party – a party linked to the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood – was thus pigeonholed, along with other parties within the Joint Meeting Party alliance, as supporters of the Houthis. Later, the Islah Party and the Houthis would enter into an alliance to oust the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, unified in their slogans in Change Square in the capital Sanaa.⁶

The turn of events, however, would eventually see clashes between tribes loyal to the Islah Party and the Houthis, with the Houthis later claiming that their war was primarily targeting “takfiris, supporters of ISIL, and the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Overall, the Houthis have largely succeeded in disguising their conflict against the Yemeni state as a struggle between them and the Islah Party. This served to ensure the neutrality of the various state agencies in this conflict, which were in fact targeting the Yemeni state, aspiring beyond challenging the Islah Party to take control of the military, security, and economic institutions of the state, goals that became clear with the fall of the capital to the Houthis.

No doubt, the Houthis have demonstrated astute and clever policy in their run up to the capture of the capital, and the numerous wars waged in the meantime against various groups and sectors in Yemen. When they besieged Dammaj, they did so under the pretense that they were targeting the “foreign takfiris” studying at the Ahl al-Hadith Center in Dammaj, and not against the Muslim Brotherhood. Once they succeeded in forcing the people of Dammaj out of their villages, Houthi fighters headed straight for the administrative centers of Amran and took on a more strident tone towards the tribal sheikhs of Hashid, among them the businessman and leader of the Islah Party, Hamid al-Ahmar. Clashes intensified and ended at the beginning of February 2014 when Houthi fighters took control of the al-Hamri region and blew up the house of the late Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar who headed the supreme council of the Yemeni Islah Party. Subsequently there were armed clashes with the 310th Brigade stationed in Amran

⁶ “The Houthi-Islahi conflict and its danger for the future of Yemen,” *Wefaq Press*, September 8, 2014, http://wefaqpress.net/news_details.php?sid=19125.

under the command of Hamid al-Qushabi, who was associated with Brigadier-General al-Ahmar, in his turn associated with the Islah Party.

Following the fall of Amran, the Houthis laid siege to Sanaa on the pretext of overturning the price increases resulting from the lifting of subsidies on petroleum products, bringing down the government, and bringing the outcomes of the national dialogue into effect. Their first target in Sanaa was the headquarters of the disbanded 1st Armored Division, no longer the force it had been prior to the restructuring of the Yemeni army. The Houthis looted most institutions belonging, or attributed, to the Islah Party, such as Al-Iman University, the Science and Technology University, the party headquarters in the capital including the general secretariat, Islah Party charities, and the homes of party leaders in the capital, foremost among them the homes of Hamid al-Ahmar, the party leader and businessman, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkul Karman.

Throughout, the Islah Party chose not to retaliate in the capital Sanaa, on the grounds that it wished to avoid the bloodbath that would result if it called upon its supporters to confront the Houthi advance on Sanaa. This was a clever tactic that spared the Party further losses and perhaps saved it from becoming plunged into a long war of attrition that some domestic and foreign forces were hoping for.

The Role of the Ex-President

Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh was at war with the Houthis on no less than six separate occasions from 2004 to 2010. In spite of this, he was able to strategically form a tacit alliance with the rising force of the Houthis. It is said that Saleh succeeded in creating this alliance by means of the tribal sheikhs loyal to him from the Hashid confederation and others. Saleh allegedly gave them the green light to coordinate with the Houthi group without his being prominent in the picture, which until now portrayed him and the Houthis as bitter enemies. Many reports have talked about cooperation between Saleh and the Houthis and how the ex-president's allies enabled them to enter Sanaa. This was implicitly confirmed by the Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdel Salaam.⁷

⁷ "The Houthis: We entered Sanaa in coordination with officials, army officers, and embassies," *Al-Jazeera Net*, October 10, 2014, <http://goo.gl/WDZHbU>.

Ali Abdullah Saleh had on numerous occasions been warned against trying to derail the process of political transformation. The UN Security Council statement of February 15, 2014 singled him out, along with former vice-president Ali Salim al-Beidh, as obstacles to the initiative. Also, in a televised interview, UN representative to Yemen, Jamal Benomar indicated that some quarters had facilitated the entry of the Houthis into Sanaa, further claiming that some quarters working in secret had helped the Houthis and paved the way for their occupation of Sanaa.⁸

In addition, not gone unnoticed was the fact that the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference meetings, completed in January 2014, saw clear coordination between the wings of the General People's Congress loyal to Saleh and the Houthi team at the Conference. Coordination between the two parties intensified after the end of the National Dialogue against a common enemy: Islah. Reports stated that one of the main tribal sheikhs in Amran, a leader in the General People's Congress, participated in the Houthi assault on Sanaa. Before that, allies of Saleh had a prominent role in the battle for Amran and in the defeat of the 310th Brigade stationed there and the killing of its commander Hamid al-Qusheibi, who was an enemy of Saleh and clashed with the republican guard during the youth revolution.⁹ Add to this the participation of supporters of the ex-president at demonstrations organized by the Houthis which raised three demands: overturning the price increases resulting from the lifting of subsidies in petroleum products, removal of the national unity government, and the implementation of the outcomes of the National Dialogue.

Based on various sources of evidence, observers infer that Ali Abdullah Saleh was implicated in the fall of Sanaa. Perhaps not coincidental was the fact that upon entering Sanaa, Houthi fighters first identified the homes and property of their political, tribal,

⁸ "Fears of a new spiral of violence ... UN envoy to Yemen Jamal Benomar to Ukaz: "Parties working in secret paved the way for the Houthis to occupy Sanaa," *Ukaz*, September 28, 2014, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/mobile/20140928/Con20140928725903.htm>. Yemeni writer and researcher Nasir Yahya mentions Saleh and the Houthis: "It is difficult to ignore the fact that the two sides at least one year ago became closer on many issues." See: Nasir Yahya, "The confusing alliance in Yemen," *Al-Jazeera Net*, January 26, 2013, <http://goo.gl/D5V7yU>.

⁹ "The fall of Amran deprives the Brotherhood of its stronghold and puts the Houthis at the gates of Sanaa," *Al-Hayat*, July 20, 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Articles/3683172>.

and military rivals, ransacked them along with many state institutions, yet the homes of Saleh and his family remained untouched. In fact armed Houthis cordoned off the house of the ex-president in Sanaa to keep it safe.¹⁰

Coordination was also evident in the media. Pro-Saleh newspapers opened their pages to Houthi writers, and Houthis singled out these newspapers for their statements in a media harmonization that reflected clear political and practical coordination.

Such coordination is not entirely unexpected given the historical Yemeni equation between the north and south of Yemen. For when the highlands felt that its authority was beginning to slip away towards the lowlands, it began fervent efforts to reproduce its authority by means of the counterrevolution which culminated in the fall of Sanaa to the Houthis. Such was the event described by Jamal Benomar in his interview with Sky News Arabic on September 27, 2014 as the occupation “of the capital Sanaa by an armed group [who] looted heavy weapons from the arsenals and headed for northern regions.”¹¹

The Dispute between Basindawa and Hadi

Yemeni Prime Minister Mohammed Salim Basindawa tendered his resignation the day Houthi fighters entered Sanaa. Notably, Basindawa offered his resignation to the Yemeni people, not the president of the republic as constitutionally mandated. In his resignation speech he said, “In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate. Great people of Yemen, peace and the mercy of God upon you, I have decided to offer my resignation as prime minister of the national unity government to you.” Basindawa allegedly resigned on the grounds that he wished to make it easier for an agreement to be reached between President Hadi and the Houthis. He accused the president of monopolizing power and not allowing the government to participate in military and security matters, thus going against the Gulf initiative.

¹⁰ Khalid al-Hamadi, “Yemen: Houthis surround the house of Saleh to protect it and Hadi admits to the existence of ‘treason’ and great fears for the future of the country,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, September 23, 2014, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=225530>.

¹¹ “Benomar: The Houthis are breaching the peace agreement,” *Sky News Arabia*, September 27, 2014, <http://goo.gl/gTuZcR>.

Basindawa's resignation and the manner in which it was executed caused a great deal of embarrassment to the presidency, prompting it to deny his resignation despite the text of his resignation having already been published. Yemen's leading state news agency issued a statement from a source it described as official saying, "There is no truth to these false reports being carried by some media outlets, which, by promoting them, are trying to sow confusion."¹²

In fact, the disagreement between Hadi and Basindawa, which was alluded to in the latter's resignation speech, dated back to the start of the national unity government following the signing of the Gulf initiative in November 2011. The former prime minister claimed that problems first arose when the Gulf initiative and its implementation mechanisms failed to clearly define the authorities of the president and the prime minister during the transitional period. Basindawa, it seems, felt unable to take decisions and was kept out of the loop regarding sensitive military and security issues.

On numerous occasions during his premiership, Basindawa referred to what he termed his marginalization by Hadi, and claimed that he was not being given sight of sensitive security reports to the extent that whenever he was asked a question about any military or security issue, he would reply that he had no knowledge of the matter because the defense and interior ministers did not show him such material. It is probable that Hadi intended to prevent sensitive security reports from being seen by Basindawa to prevent him from leaking them to elements in the Joint Meeting Party or others.¹³

Yet it was not marginalization that led Basindawa to resign. He had been complaining of marginalization from the outset, but remained in his post until Sanaa fell to armed Houthis – the real reason behind his resignation. With the advent of the Houthis entering Sanaa, consultations were already under way regarding the formation of a new government after an agreement had been reached among the political parties and between them and the Houthis prior to Basindawa's resignation.

In the end, despite several attempts to effectuate some degree of harmony among its members, the national unity government stood paralyzed in the face of the differences

¹² "Official source denies the prime minister has tendered his resignation (to the press)," *Saba News*, September 3, 2014, <http://www.sabanews.net/ar/news366723.htm>.

¹³ "Minister reveals... Hadi does not trust Basindawa," *Yemen Press*, March 22, 2014, <http://yemen-press.com/news28761.html>.

among its component parts and their varied interests, causing its function to stall and making it appear weak and unable to deal with the challenges of the transitional period.

Control Over the Sea

Several media reports have reported on Houthis using the ports of Midi and al-Salif for smuggling, weapons in particular, which were shipped in and stored temporarily on uninhabited islands in the Red Sea—some of them under Eritrean control—before being transported in small fishing boats to Yemen and their final destination of Saada in the north.¹⁴ The Houthis have asked for the province of Hajjah to be included in the Azal region which comprises the provinces of Saada, Amran, Sanaa, and Dhamar. Seeing that creating a region without an outlet to the sea is not in their interests, the addition of Hajjah would guarantee a passage toward the Red sea.

The presence of a sea port in Azal is crucial for the Houthis who are seeking to do more than import weapons via the Red Sea coast, which has been uninterrupted for years and whose pace quickened during the period post the youth revolution from early 2011. A few days before the Houthis entered Sanaa, Faris al-Saqqaf, an aide to the Yemeni president, stated that one of the Houthis' demands aimed to review the borders of the federal regions so as to obtain a sea port under their control by incorporating Hajjah province.¹⁵ Houthi ambitions were not limited to Hajjah. They put their control and upper hand and the collapse of the military and security institutions of the state to good use, and on October 15, 2014, in a strategic step towards control of the strategic Bab al-Mandab straits, they took the city of al-Hudaydah, one of the main Red Sea ports.¹⁶

Beyond this, the Houthis asked for the incorporation of al-Jawf province in the Azal region, given the presence of oil and gas reserves, demonstrating their determination to

¹⁴ Mohammed Jamih, "Discovery of 3 secret bases for the training of the Houthis under the supervision of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard on Eritrean territory," *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, February 24, 2014, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=137121>.

¹⁵ "Hadi's advisor to *Al-Seyassah*: The Houthis want an outlet to the sea," *Al-Seyassah* (Kuwait), September 13, 2014, <http://goo.gl/8cl4xD>.

¹⁶ "The Houthis take control of al-Hudaydah by arrangement with the government," *Al-Jazeera Net*, October 15, 2014, <http://goo.gl/kW2aFH>.

take control of the province despite the serious losses incurred during four bloody confrontations between the army and the tribal supporters of the Houthis in al-Jawf.

Iranian Influence: Repeating the Hezbollah Experience in Yemen

In the early 1990s, the Iranian embassy in Sanaa was active in the Zaydi revival, a time when the embassy organized visits by officials to Saada province to oversee the organization of some Yemeni elements and provide them with organizational training.¹⁷

The role of Yemeni religious leader Badreddin al-Houthi in forging links with Iran was key. Following his return from Iran where he had taken asylum after the 1994 war, Badreddin al-Houthi tried to empower his son Hussein to take over the leadership of the group he had founded before their return to Yemen. In those days, the group was known as the Organization of Young Believers. Hussein eventually succeeded in ousting Mohammed Yahya Azzan, general-secretary of the organization, and became its leading official and thereafter took the group down a path closer to Khomeinism than traditional Zaydism. Iran played a major role supporting the Organization of Young Believers materially and politically. The Iranian embassy also played a big role in providing organizational frameworks and intellectual and cultural content. In fact, the slogan of the group was and remains "Death to America. Death to Israel." Communications from Badreddin al-Houthi to some figures in the Iranian religious hawza academies sheds light on the nature of the relationship between the Houthis and Iran.¹⁸

On another level, the close ties between the Houthis and Lebanese Hezbollah indicate that they share almost identical origins and aims. Not only are their similarities reflected in their wish to control the state, but also in their quest to create a state within the state, thus reaping the benefits of power without having to bear the responsibilities. This bears the hallmarks of the Iranian strategy that is cognizant of the fact that the groups working for Iran in the Arab countries are minorities. Care is therefore taken for these groups not to provoke the host majority while ensuring that these groups are

¹⁷ Ali Mohammed al-Saraji, "The Iranian role in the Saada war," *Nashwan News website*, September 5, 2014, <http://nashwannews.com/news.php?action=view&id=7303>.

¹⁸ Adil al-Ahmadi, *Dice and Stone: Shiite Rebellion in Yemen*, Two vols (Sanaa: Nashwan al-Himyari Center for Studies and Publishing, 2009), pp. 353-5.

highly capable to compensate for their numerical disadvantage. The speeches of Abdel Malik al-Houthi, for instance, show him imitating the style of Hezbollah general-secretary Hassan Nasrallah in delivery, movement, appearance, and by wearing the Palestinian scarf—a borrowing from Iranian revolutionary leader Ali Khamenei which has garnered support for Iran from a not insignificant portion of the Arabs.

The extent of Iranian involvement is no secret. In the past, six Iranian spy cells have been caught. There is also evidence that Iran has been shipping arms to the Houthis in past years. Of course this fits with efforts to expand Iranian influence in the region. This has become more problematic with the fall of Sana'a to the Houthis, which Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called a “great victory” and the MP for Tehran, Alireza Zakani, referred to the fall of the fourth Arab capital to Iran.¹⁹

The Gulf Position

Sana'a fell to armed Houthi militias on September 21. The evening of that same day, the political parties met in Sana'a in the presence of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and UN envoy Jamal Benomar and signed the Agreement for Peace and National Partnership. The agreement was agreed upon under intense pressure and intimidation being applied to all components of the political process, but was ceremoniously signed the day Sana'a fell to give the impression and send a message domestically and abroad that what had happened in Sana'a was what everybody wanted and that the Yemenis had emerged from the crisis by means of a political agreement. The agreement acted as political cover for the Houthis with the international community to wreck the political process based on the Gulf initiative by imposing the new realpolitik arising from the occupation of Sana'a.

The blessing of the Gulf Cooperation Council for the agreement suggests either submission or a recognition of the reality manifest in Houthi control over the levers of the Yemeni state, and the death of the Gulf initiative. However some GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia who is more closely threatened by the domestic impact of Houthi control in Yemen, were quick to express their rejection of the agreement and the implicit political change brought about by events on the ground.

¹⁹ Mohammed al-Madhhaji, “Tehran congratulates the Houthis on victory and an Iranian official threatens Saudi Arabia,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, September 25, 2014, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=226401>.

The statements of the Saudi foreign minister were clear in their rejection of what the Houthis had done in Sanaa. These were followed by a statement from the GCC [interior] ministers following their meeting in Jeddah in which they clearly rejected what was happening and emphasized that the GCC states would not stand idly by, because the security of Yemen was an inseparable part of Gulf security.²⁰

It is no secret that Saudi Arabia is the Gulf state most concerned about events in Yemen. This is not just because of its long border with Yemen, but also because of the significant entanglement between the two countries. Saudi Arabia will be the party most damaged by a security collapse or the presence of armed militias in the capital Sanaa, particularly as these militias have taken control of a large part of the Yemeni border with Saudi Arabia and are loyal to the Kingdom's opponent in the region, the theocracy in Iran.

Saudi Arabia's alarm bells were triggered when Amran fell to the Houthis, after which they tried to take measures to limit the role of the Houthis by exerting pressure for a reconciliation between President Hadi and ex-President Saleh and for a rapprochement between Brigadier-General al-Ahmar and the ex-president. The efforts however came too late as divisions between the parties increased while the Houthis drew closer to Sanaa.²¹

The Gulf states appear to have more political and economic options in Yemen than any other party. These options may have an effect if they are used as part of an integrated program to support the process of political transformation in Yemen based on the Gulf initiative, which will permit "a unified voice for the different Yemeni forces, including from the South, to join together against the Houthis and al-Qaeda and adopt a political project to exclude the rebels and punish them economically."²² This also includes

²⁰ "Emergency meeting of Gulf state interior ministers to discuss the situation in Yemen," *Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni*, October 1, 2014, <http://almashhad-alyemeni.com/news42002.html>.

²¹ Abdel Hakim Hilal sees that "After the Houthis crossed the borders [...] and took complete control of Amran, anxiety has started to affect the Kingdom [...] it has tried to communicate with President Hadi to bring about a reconciliation with Saleh and create a broad national alignment to take on the Houthis amid promises for generous assistance to overcome the country's economic crises." See: Abdel Hakim Hilal, "Who governs the conflict in Yemen," *Al-Jazeera Net*, September 7, 2014, <http://goo.gl/KiHM8l>.

²² See Abdel Rahman Al-Rashid, "Gulf hands tied in Yemen," *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, October 3, 2014, <http://www.aawsat.com/home/article/193571>.

support for the army by restructuring and rearming it, so enabling it to restore control over the main cities and impose the power and sovereignty of the state over all the national territory.

As expected, the fall of Sanaa evoked a response from al-Qaeda and its affiliates against the Houthis. The Ansar al-Sharia group, a branch of al-Qaeda, carried out the threats it made against the Houthis the day after they entered Sanaa by means of suicide attacks that targeted a Houthi rally in Marib on September 28 and in Sanaa on October 9 which led to tens of fatalities. Clashes also broke out between the two sides in the Ibb and al-Baydah provinces.

The Al Qaeda Factor

There is unanimity that al-Qaeda will exploit the state of tension and popular anger towards recent Houthi behavior in Sanaa, and may find a popular support base in Shafi'ite Sunni areas. This could be a repeat of the Iraqi experience where ISIL found a popular support base in Sunni Arab areas once the Sunni Iraqis felt they were being marginalized and oppressed.

The situation is made more complicated by the fact that the Houthis are trying to present themselves as partners in the war on terror, by means of indirect overtures to the United States, which is leading the international coalition against terrorism in the region. The Houthis justify their previous wars since Dammaj as being against "takfiris, Wahhabis, al-Qaeda, ISIL, and the Muslim Brotherhood." On this same basis, the Houthis launched their wars in Amran, al-Jawf, and Hajjah, right up to their entry into Sanaa, where they played down their sectarian pride in the recovery of what they consider to be the political capital of the state of the Zaydi imams, having already reasserted control over the spiritual capital of these imams in Saada where the tomb and mosque of Imam al-Hadi Yahya ibn al-Hussein, founder of the Hadawiah Zaydiah, and first Zaydi imam of Yemen, are located.²³ Despite the fact that Zaydis are sometimes described as "the Sunna of the Shiites, and the Shia of the Sunnites," in its Houthi form Zaydism is much closer to Twelver Shiite thought in the version of Khomeini, particularly in how it views the first generation of the companions of the

²³ "Al-Qaeda threatens the Houthis," *Al-Jazeera Net*, September 25, 2014, <http://goo.gl/HSAest>.

Prophet and in its position on the political struggle at the end of the period of the rightly guided caliphs.²⁴

With the increasingly belligerent tones of the two organizations that claim to be the sole representatives of their religious communities, despite the fact that no major religious scholar from either community in Yemen has backed their views, centuries of co-existence are in jeopardy. In addition, the focus of the leader of the Houthi group on takfiri groups has sectarian origins and is helping to increase polarization and represents fertile ground for jihadi groups and al-Qaeda to exploit.

Possible Future Scenarios

Given all the above, Yemen is facing one of the following possibilities:

First, the continuation of a fragile political process which the Houthis have the upper hand in formulating, alongside the formal presence of a president and prime minister. Such a scenario would be reliant on Iranian support, but in all likelihood will not materialize since the GCC is unlikely to back that kind of political process.

Second scenario would entail the Somali model whereby the divisions on the ground could lead to a civil war. In the Yemeni context, this is not expected to be all out, given the tribal makeup of Yemen which to some extent overrides the sectarian dimension of its society. Alignments would thus more likely take on a tribal and regional form rather than a sectarian and doctrinal one, with the exception of the possible clash between Ansar al-Sharia and Ansar Allah.

Third, the bringing to bear of a form of international pressure—political and economic—on all political and social components to once again stick to a process of peaceful political transformation in Yemen.

Needless to say, the chances of any of these possibilities occurring depend on a host of domestic, regional, and international factors, by virtue of the fact that Yemen has now become an arena for conflict where the interests of different parties are all in interplay.

²⁴ For more information, see: Ahmed al-Daghashi, *The Houthis, The Houthi Phenomenon*, vol 1 (Sanaa: Khalid bin Walid, 2010)

