



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

## After Capturing Amran, Will the Houthis Aim for Sanaa?

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | July 2014

After Capturing Amran, Will the Houthis Aim for Sanaa?

Series: Assessment Report

Policy Analysis Unit – ACRPS | July 2014

Copyright © 2014 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

---

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

**Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies**

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

# Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Forces Battling in Amran	1
Reasons Behind the Fall of Amran	2
Will the Capital Fall after the Tribal Capital?	3
Conclusion	4



## Introduction

The Houthi militia Ansar Allah announced on July 8 its capture of the city of Amran, located just 60 kilometers north of the Yemeni capital Sanaa. Just before the announcement, the Houthi militia had succeeded in seizing the headquarters of two national security forces, the military police and the 310th Armored Brigade, as well as its positions around the city. The fighters looted weapons, ammunition, and military equipment and after taking control of Amran, blew up the residences of rival local tribal leaders, and destroyed the institutions held by the Yemeni Reform Party, al-Islah.

## Forces Battling in Amran

The Houthis state that al-Islah is the primary target of their offensive in Amran province. Having fought against forces loyal to the government and having seized government military installations and ammunitions, however, it is difficult to believe that the Houthis are not in conflict with the government. In a July 9 address, televised by the Houthi-aligned channel al-Masira, the leader of Ansar Allah, Abdel Malik al-Houthi, stated that the group's opponents were primarily al-Islah, al-Qaeda and some military leaders backing al-Islah, and not the government. Many however remain skeptical.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, al-Islah denies taking part in the fighting in Amran, which it described as a war between the Houthis and the army backed by tribesmen.<sup>2</sup> In fact, , most of these tribesmen belong to al-Islah and, alongside the 310<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade, they constitute the main force fighting against the Houthis and their allied tribes in Amran.

Several internal and external parties have stoked the conflict, and continue to do so. These include various regional powers waging a proxy war on Yemeni territory, and elements of the former ruling coalition who are settling scores through these confrontations. Still, unlike the previous six wars between the government and the Houthis, in which their main adversary was the army, the Amran conflict can best be described as a minor civil war, where tribal militias loyal to the Houthis and ones loyal to al-Islah are the main parties driving the conflict.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a summary of the speech, see the Ansaru Allah website: <http://www.ansaruallah.com/news/9279>.

<sup>2</sup> For the text of the statement, see the al-Islah website: <http://al-islam.net/new/view.aspx?id=6997>.

The UN Secretary-General's representative echoed this view when he described the Amran conflict as a war between armed groups. The July 11 UN Security Council press statement on the fighting in Yemen called upon the Houthis and all parties involved in the violence to withdraw from the city of Amran, and demanded that they return the weapons and ammunition pillaged from army and security bases to government authorities. The statement also called upon all parties to disarm.<sup>3</sup>

## Reasons Behind the Fall of Amran

Internal and external circumstances over the past few years have enabled Ansar Allah to strengthen its military capacity both qualitatively and quantitatively, allowing it to acquire the strength of a small regional state's army. This has enabled the military wing of the Houthis to capture Amran and pose a threat to the provinces of al-Jawf, Hajjah, Dhamar, and perhaps Marib. In reality, the Houthis' success in taking Amran is not only down to the military power of their militias, but also due to their opponents' weakness. The February 11, 2011 revolution led to the fracture of the ruling alliance, which – despite the rivalry and hidden conflicts amidst its members – had maintained a reasonable level of mutual support on the basis of “one's enemy's enemy is one's friend”. After the revolution, the military leadership backing the war against the Houthis eventually lost influence over central political decision-making. Consequently, the 310<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade has participated in the fighting alone, without support from other army units except for the provision of limited air support due to the personal ties between brigade commander Major Hameed al-Qushaibi and General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, presidential advisor on defense and security. This in itself reveals the degree of fragmentation that has occurred within the ruling coalition. The lack of support has affected the morale of the officers and men of the 310<sup>th</sup> Brigade, who have felt isolated and unsupported when taking on the Houthis in Amran. This sentiment is corroborated by media accusations concerning “betrayals” by certain military units which allegedly helped the Houthis take Amran with relative ease. At the same time, ties between the clan sheikhs of the four tribes of the Hashid tribal confederation have clearly weakened in recent years, particularly after the death of Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar in 2007, who acted as a tribal symbol uniting the sheikhs of the Hashid confederation. Disputes between the tribes were exacerbated after Yemen's February 2011 revolution

---

<sup>3</sup> For the full text of the Security Council press statement CS/11470 concerning fighting in Yemen issued on July 11, 2014, see <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2014/sc11470.doc.htm>.

and have now erupted into open rivalry over both political and social differences between the sheikhs of Hashid.

The Houthi group has exploited these disputes and succeeded in creating a new network of tribal alliances. Furthermore, it has obtained the allegiance of most of the tribal sheikhs of Uzer, and the neutrality of most of those of Bani Suraym and Kharif. In fact, Sheikh Sadiq, son of Abdullah al-Ahmar, along with his brothers was only able to mobilize men from his own Usaymat tribe, revealing the weakness of al-Islah, whose organizational structure is mainly composed of tribal sheikhs of Hashid (and other Yemeni tribes).

### Will the Political Capital Fall after the Tribal Capital?

The city of Amran can be considered the tribal capital of Yemen, since the country's most influential tribal sheikhs –most significantly the al-Ahmar clan – whose influence on state and politics in Yemen have dominated the last 50 years, come from the province of Amran. The influence of these and other tribal sheikhs from the Hashid confederation developed in the wake of their support for the September 1962 Yemeni revolution that overthrew the imamate, an influence that grew because they backed the republic and participated in the wars to defend it. These facts help explain the effort of al-Islah and its supporters to portray the war in Amran as a war against the republic. They claim that the Houthi group is trying to restore the imamate in Yemen, and that its war in Amran and other regions is one stage in an all-out conflict whose ultimate goal is to take the capital Sanaa. Some justification for these claims may be found in the actions, speeches, and documents of the Houthi group. For instance, the introduction to the intellectual and cultural manifesto of the Zaydis published in February 2012 speaks of the theory of election<sup>4</sup> and the idea that only descendants of

---

<sup>4</sup> The document states: "Concerning election, we believe that God Almighty elects whom He wishes from among His worshippers as groups and individuals, since God states in the Quran, "God elected Adam and Noah and the House of Abraham and the House of Imran above the worldlings," (Al Imran 33) and as the Prophet states, "God elected Ismail from the children of Abraham, and Bani Kanana from the children of Ismail, and Quraysh from Bani Kanana, and Bani Hashim from Quraysh, and from Bani Hashim He elected me." We believe that God Almighty elected the household of the Prophet and made them guides to the Umma and inheritors of the holy book after the Messenger of God until the day of judgement, and that in every age, He prepares one to be a guiding light for His worshippers, one able to lead and champion the Umma in all its needs." See the full text at [http://yemenndc.blogspot.com/2013/06/blog-post\\_4.html](http://yemenndc.blogspot.com/2013/06/blog-post_4.html).

the Prophet's household have the right to be imam of the Umma; in addition, in the organizational structure of Ansar Allah, Hashimis are disproportionately represented in leadership positions. Nevertheless, Ansar Allah leaders have on many occasions denied that they are trying to overthrow the state or the republican system. Abdel Malik al-Houthi confirmed that Ansar Allah has no intention of becoming an alternative to the state, and that after what he termed the "cleansing" of the city of Amran, official institutions were informed that although it had taken possession of government buildings and facilities, work should continue as usual.

Whether or not the Houthis wish to capture Sanaa and replace the republic with an imamate or a monarchy, the question is whether they are able to do so. All signs suggest that they are not. In contrast to the war in Amran province, which features a struggle of power and influence among the tribal sheikhs and the Hashimi elite, an attempt to overthrow the republican regime and conquer the capital Sanaa would be tantamount to declaring a full-blown war. The Houthi militia would find itself waging war against the state with all its military and material capabilities, most of which are centered within and around Sanaa. The government is backed not only by those forces that the Houthis call "takfiris and supporters of ISIS," but by the various political and social forces that remained neutral during the previous wars. If the Houthi group were to embark on such a war, it would lose the support of many of the tribal figures and sheikhs who backed it in Amran. Much of this support was given for political and other reasons connected to tribal hostilities and vendettas, and not sectarian reasons. Many of these figures would likely withdraw their support if a conflict to overthrow the republic breaks out, especially if the state is generous in offering them financial aid. The map of tribal allegiances in Yemen shifts rapidly, and financial incentives are a determining factor in military alliances.

## Conclusion

The Houthi group has reached the high point of its military power and has achieved major victories in its battles in Saada, Amran, al-Jawf, and Hajjah provinces. It could potentially score other successes in battles outside these provinces, but if it embarks on a full-scale campaign against Sanaa aiming to forcefully seize power and overthrow the republican regime, replacing it with an imamate or monarchy, this would lead to military and political suicide. The movement would lose elements that have strengthened it and that it has fostered over the last ten years. The only way to maintain its strength is to transform itself into a political group that takes advantage of its previous military



victories to assert its presence on the political scene. This can be achieved through helping the program of the National Dialogue Conference succeed, which would enable it to exploit many of the gains it has made over more than a decade of confrontation with both the state and rival tribes.