



Rethinking Yemen's Security

Why Stabilizing Yemen Must Start in Aden

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SUMMARY

- Even as a resolution to Yemen's civil war remains elusive, the international community and Yemenis should focus on stabilizing territory wherever possible and on empowering local actors to build security and better governance from the bottom up. The southern city of Aden is a crucial place to begin such an approach.
- Aden is the only major city to have been retaken from the Houthi rebels by the Yemeni and Arab coalition forces. Although Yemen's government promised Aden's residents the swift return of governance, security, and reconstruction, the police are not functioning, local leaders have been marginalized, and conditions in the city and nearby regions are deteriorating.
- Aden, currently flooded with troops from coalition countries, does not need more foreign boots on the ground. Aden needs local resistance fighters to be integrated into police and security forces, as well as the creation of functioning local government institutions and political space for southerners to help achieve stability.
- If security is not restored with a focus on empowering Aden's residents to rebuild their own city, Al-Qaeda could take over additional territory within southern Yemen and fighting could break out among heavily armed southern factions.

As the international community stands by, Yemen's devastating civil war rages on with no resolution in sight. The year-long war has killed more than 2,000 civilians, injured some 5,000, and caused a humanitarian emergency in what was already the Middle East's poorest country.¹ The conflict has enabled Al-Qaeda to expand its presence in southern Yemen and has further weakened Yemen's fractured political system. United Nations-led peace talks between the two warring sides—(1) the Houthi rebels, backed by Iran and allied with forces affiliated with former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh; and (2) the Yemeni government, backed by an Arab military coalition led by Saudi Arabia with support from the

United States—so far have gone nowhere.² The protagonists seem to believe they can prevail militarily, and there is insufficient international pressure to end the fighting. The coalition's air forces continue waging an intense and indiscriminate bombing campaign in Houthi-controlled regions in the North. Houthi fighters and Saleh's forces have escalated their offensive in recent weeks, especially in the key southwestern city of Taiz, where they have imposed a months-long siege and are bombing the city extensively.

Even as a top-down solution to end the war and to rebuild the shattered country

² Other Arab countries participating in the coalition are Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates, which is playing a central role. The United States and the United Kingdom have provided logistical support, intelligence, and expedited arms supplies to the coalition.

¹ "Statement of the Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, Johannes Van Der Klaauw, on the Dire Situation in Taizz City," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Oct. 25, 2015.

appears distant, the Arab coalition, the international community, and—most of all—Yemenis themselves need to focus on securing and stabilizing territory wherever possible. In Yemen, where regional powers are deeply enmeshed in the crisis, national agendas are fiercely contested, the military remains splintered, and the central government has little control or legitimacy, solutions need to start small and empower local actors to build peace from the bottom up.

The major southern port city of Aden, which serves as the *de facto* capital for the Yemeni government while the Houthis remain in control of the capital city of Sanaa, is a crucial place to begin such an approach. In late July, after four months of clashes, southern resistance and pro-government Yemeni army forces, backed by Arab coalition forces with heavy weapons, aerial bombing, and other battlefield assistance, pushed out Houthi and Saleh's forces from Aden and from key southern governorates. In July, Yemeni Vice President and Prime Minister Khaled Bahah promised Aden's residents the swift return of governance, security, and reconstruction. But instead, local leaders have been marginalized, formal security institutions are not functioning, and the situation is deteriorating dangerously.

A WAR WITH COMPLEX ROOTS

Even in a region full of complicated conflicts, the Yemeni war is unusually labyrinth, with multiple players, multiple layers, and opportunistic alliances between former enemies. The war is a central battleground in the regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, who are exploiting Yemen's home-grown dysfunction for their own agendas. The conflict follows the failure of Yemen's political transition, which attempted to forge a new ruling arrangement after mass anti-government demonstrations during the Arab Uprisings led to the departure of autocratic leader Ali Abdullah Saleh in early 2012. The war's deeper roots lie in Yemen's chronic underdevelopment, weak state institutions, endemic corruption, political exclusion, and monopoly over power and resources by the northern elite. It is also an extreme violent manifestation of long-term power struggles between the traditional

northern Yemeni political elite, dominated by Saleh and Hashid tribal leaders following the Sunni Shafe'i branch of Islam, and the political Hashemites, a clan that follows Zaydi Shi'ism and ruled the area that is now northern Yemen for 1,000 years until 1962. In today's Yemen, the political Hashemites are represented by the Houthis, an armed rebel movement of the same sect originating in the northern province of Saada. For local actors in the South and other areas of Yemen, however, the fight is driven by resentment over decades of marginalization and a deep desire to end northern hegemony in their regions.

The war erupted in September 2014, when Houthi fighters capitalized on popular discontent over the ineffective rule of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, Saleh's former vice president and his Saudi- and Western-backed successor, and swept through Sanaa, put Hadi under house arrest, and took over the government. The Houthis allied with Yemeni military forces loyal to former President Saleh, who was himself formerly a Saudi client, close U.S. counterterrorism ally, and staunch Houthi enemy who has retained deep influence inside Yemen even after his ouster. The Houthi-Saleh forces then moved south, in March reaching Aden, where Hadi and some ministers had managed to flee from Sanaa. When Houthi fighters and Saleh's forces entered Aden, Hadi and his aides escaped to exile in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Later in March, the Arab coalition launched a bombing campaign with the stated objectives of restoring the Hadi government to power in Sanaa and preventing Iran from gaining a foothold on Saudi Arabia's border. The war has caused further chaos in the South amid a continued lack of central government influence. Not only has Al-Qaeda strengthened its presence—aided by the fact that coalition forces are not targeting the terrorist group while they fight the Houthis—but southern groups have also grown more assertive in their demands for autonomy while continuing to be factionalized.

LONG-STANDING GRIEVANCES IN THE SOUTH

Aden, Yemen's most important city after Sanaa, was the capital of the former People's Democratic

Republic of Yemen, also known as South Yemen, until unification with North Yemen in 1990. In 1994, southern leaders, unhappy with the North's post-unity domination of the political system, and with aid from Saudi Arabia, attempted to secede, but Saleh's army retook the South after a brief war. In the fragile peace that followed, Yemen's leaders and the international community papered over the underlying grievances, and Saleh's regime maintained its tight grip on power and revenues.

In 2007, the southern "Hirak" movement emerged, organizing strikes and demonstrations in Aden and across the South to protest corruption and repression. The movement was spearheaded by former southern military officers whom the Saleh regime forced into retirement following the 1994 civil war. Saleh responded to Hirak's peaceful protests with excessive force. Continued repression and lack of political reforms led the movement to escalate its demands and, by the end of 2008, Hirak was calling for southern independence.

These tensions burst to the surface again during the post-2011 transition process, when President Hadi and the transitional government did very little to build confidence with the southern population. In 2013, the National Dialogue Conference, an internationally supported process that aimed to lay the foundation for a new social contract, endorsed a long list of points for the government to implement as trust-building measures for southern political forces. These points included the restitution of property seized by the northern elite and their southern patrons, the release of political prisoners, and the reinstatement of southern army officers. Yet the government implemented only one of the recommended measures: issuing a formal apology for the 1994 civil war. The Yemeni government's continuing incompetence and the political vacuum in the country since the outbreak of war in September 2014 have deepened the geographic divide.

THE CURRENT SECURITY SITUATION IN ADEN

The recent battle for Aden witnessed some of the worst fighting and destruction of the current war and compounded an already tenuous

security situation there. Prior to 2011, Aden had been known within Yemen for its reliance on formal security institutions, such as the police and court system, and for its relatively arms-free environment. But in the wake of national unrest following the 2011 anti-Saleh demonstrations, police, justice, and municipal services were severely disrupted, security forces withdrew from Aden and nearby regions, and Aden was flooded with weapons. In 2011, several military bases in the South were raided by Al-Qaeda affiliates, armed groups, tribesmen, and even ordinary residents. Then for at least a year before the 2014 war broke out, the Houthis and Hadi's government each armed their local supporters in anticipation of fighting. Adding to this influx of weaponry, the Arab coalition airdropped and supplied large amounts of arms to resistance fighters during the battle for Aden.

Since pushing their opponents out from Aden, the Hadi government and its Arab backers have failed to take the necessary measures to re-establish governance and security. It took Vice President Bahah and other cabinet members more than six weeks to return to the city from Riyadh. While some aspects of normal life have resumed since July, basic municipal services including electricity, water, health care, and garbage collection have deteriorated tremendously. During the fighting, some police stations were destroyed and others shut down; they have yet to be reopened. Lawlessness is spreading: homicide, assassinations, kidnapping, and armed robbery are on the rise, and reports indicate a growing presence of Al-Qaeda and other radical elements inside Aden. On October 5, a group allegedly affiliated with the Islamic State claimed responsibility for suicide bombs that killed eleven Yemeni and four coalition soldiers. Unable to withstand this first major security challenge after their return to the city, after the bombing government ministers rushed back to the comfort of Riyadh, amid reports of growing political differences between Hadi and Bahah. During October, masked armed men have raided Aden College several times to force segregation between men and women.

Southern resistance forces played a crucial role in defeating Houthi and pro-Saleh fighters, but they have since been sidelined. These forces were composed mostly of civilians from

across Aden's social and political spectrum—including Hirak members, students, workers, former soldiers, doctors, teachers, and Salafis—who came together in self-organized groups under the command of local leaders. When the fighting ended, they formed the Higher Resistance Council to unify their efforts.³ The resistance still has a presence in every district of the city but has not been formalized. "We are trying to establish order, but at the end of the day we are not a state. We don't have sufficient capacity or resources," explained resistance leader Abdulkareem Qassim. "Right now, there is no government in Aden. There is no one I can pick up the phone and reach out to if I need help."⁴

Currently, foreign soldiers, mainly from the United Arab Emirates, guard public facilities in Aden, while resistance forces man checkpoints; there is no functioning police. There is growing frustration among resistance leaders and Aden residents more broadly over the delay in integrating local resistance forces into the national security and armed forces.⁵ On July 28, President Hadi issued a decree requiring the integration of southern resistance fighters into army and security units, but it has yet to be implemented. A joint committee of officials and resistance leaders was formed in early September to help the government carry out the decree, but there has been little follow-through.

Instead, the Yemeni government and coalition have continued to stock the city with thousands of foreign troops. The UAE, which already has some 4,000 soldiers on the ground, is reported to have recently deployed hundreds of additional troops to Aden from their counterterrorism forces.⁶ On October 17, hundreds of Sudanese forces arrived as part of a coalition plan to send some 10,000 foreign reinforcements to secure the city.⁷

³ Author's interview with Abdulkareem Qassim, Oct. 5, 2015.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Author's interviews with Abdulkareem Qassim, Oct. 4, 2015, and with Ahmed Addamani, Adeni journalist, Oct 8, 2015.

⁶ Mohammed Al-Qalisi, "Coalition sends anti-terror squad to Aden after suicide attack," *The National*, Oct. 14, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/coalition-sends-anti-terror-squad-to-aden-after-suicide-attacks>

⁷ Mohammed Alhaj, "Hundreds of Sudanese Troops Arrive in Aden," *Washington Post*, Oct. 17, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/emirati-officer-killed-in-drive-by-shooting-in-yemens-aden/2015/10/17/15e27dfe-74e4-11e5-ba14-318f8e87a2fc_story.html

Some Yemenis believe that the delay in normalizing security based on a more central role for the residents of Aden is the result of political calculations by Yemeni government leaders concerning the future of the South.⁸ They may fear that empowering local residents to provide their own security will bolster their demands for independence. While most southern factions demand secession from the North, President Hadi has not recognized this demand, and some Yemeni officials harshly reject it. Moreover, the Saudi-led coalition wants to maintain Yemen as a unified state because they fear that secession would lead to internal conflicts and chaos in the South and could encourage secession demands in other parts of Yemen.

The impasse in Aden appears to be that while Hadi has financial resources from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, he lacks support from the people of Aden and, most important, from the various strands of the resistance forces who have local legitimacy. The resistance lacks financial resources, but it has the support of most Adenis and possesses the manpower and know-how to play a pivotal role in rebuilding and securing the city. Until there is a compromise between Hadi and Saudi Arabia on one side and Adenis on the other, it appears that Hadi's government is happy to let the situation in Aden slide out of control, raising serious questions about the government's and the coalition's strategy in the war.

The present situation, in which security is provided mainly by foreign troops, also may indicate a shrinking role for Yemen's exiled government in the face of foreign power-brokers, which is deeply disconcerting for Yemen's political future. Resistance forces are trying to work out an arrangement with the UAE in which the coalition would enlist 6,000 resistance members into the security forces.⁹ But this is not the solution either, because it allows for foreign powers to work directly with local actors without Yemeni government leadership.

⁸ "In This Case Tehran Cannot Replicate the Syrian Scenario in the South," [Arabic] *Aden Al-Ghad*, Oct. 7, 2015, <http://adenghad.net/news/176746/>, and author's interview with Abdulkareem Qassim, Oct 5, 2015.

⁹ "Exclusive: Saleh ben Fareed: 6,000 soldiers were enlisted in Aden's security," [Arabic] *Aden Al-Ghad*, Oct. 21, 2015, <http://adenghad.net/news/178180/>

Despite the end of fighting in the city, the government and coalition still operate in a political vacuum. After Aden's governor was removed in early September, this important post remained vacant for more than a month. Little effort has been made to initiate a political process to bring southern factions together to resolve differences and to reassure southerners that their grievances will be addressed. Such a step is necessary to build the momentum that is required to strengthen local government and to facilitate arrangements to establish security and local police forces.

LOOMING RISKS

As long as they are not integrated into police and security forces, local resistance forces remain vulnerable to politicization and internal conflicts, especially in the presence of southern factions with competing agendas and divergent allegiances. What had united these various factions over the past several months was the goal of pushing Houthi fighters and Saleh's forces out of the South. As this objective has become less relevant—but without overarching grievances addressed—old and new disagreements are likely to surface and could turn violent. “If the resistance is not integrated into formal security forces, the city will be lost to different armed groups,” said Lina Al-Hasani, a local civil society leader. “The problem is that these groups will have heavy arms, including tanks and armored vehicles. It will be a mess.”¹⁰

The fragile situation in the areas surrounding Aden also poses an immense and urgent challenge. The governorates of Lahij, Dhalee, and Abyan suffer from serious security problems and political tensions. The tribal governorate of Shabwa has been ignored by the Yemeni government and coalition forces. In a recent interview, the governor of Shabwa warned that Al-Qaeda is planning to take over Abyan and Shabwa, noting that there is no military or security capacity on the ground to prevent this from happening.¹¹ Al-Qaeda already controls Mukalla, the capital of the expansive governorate of Hadramout.

¹⁰ Interview with Lina Al-Hasani, local civil society leader, Oct. 5, 2015.

¹¹ “Interview with Shabwa Governor,” [Arabic] *Aden Al-Ghad*, Oct. 18, 2015, <http://adenghad.net/news/177802>.

RESTORING ADEN'S SECURITY AND STABILITY

The Yemeni government and its foreign supporters must start immediately to establish local security in Aden. If the city continues to lack effective security and governance—of which local empowerment is an essential component—a scenario in which Al-Qaeda sweeps through the entire South is not outside the realm of possibility. It is equally urgent that the Yemeni government, with the help of the United Nations, start a parallel political process to engage southern factions in a dialogue to resolve differences and to determine key governance and security issues in Aden and the South in general. Otherwise, internal divisions and a history of conflict and distrust among these local factions, coupled with the abundance of weapons, will create a perfect storm for prolonged conflict and fragmentation. Aden does not need more foreign boots on the ground; the city needs local police, functioning local government institutions, and political space for southerners to achieve these goals.

While Aden and the wider South have the potential to become a major security crisis, they also represent a significant opportunity for the Yemeni government. By restoring basic services and sustainable security—provided by Yemenis who have the biggest stake in building a capable and effective police force—and by opening a political dialogue with local leaders, the government can prove that it is capable of rebuilding Yemen.

The Yemeni government and the coalition need to launch two simultaneous processes, one that brings local political and civil society leaders from Aden together to discuss their grievances, needs, and future aspirations, and another in which government security officials engage resistance forces. The first track would involve an open conversation on governance and accountability measures to monitor aid (amid concerns that widespread corruption inside Yemen is siphoning off urgently needed humanitarian aid from the Gulf states and other donors) and service allocation and delivery. The second track would focus on integrating local resistance into the armed forces, which must be similarly a transparent and accountable

process. This process should be part of a reform and restructuring effort of security institutions that involves enlistment, capacity-building, and training. As an immediate measure, until they are formally enlisted, the resistance forces could wear a special uniform that distinguishes them from other armed groups.

LESSONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The prevailing assumption of the United States and other members of the international community concerned with Yemen is that the central government is the key to stability in the country. But the escalation of violence since 2011, the Hadi government's inability to establish security and legitimacy, and the government's swift toppling by the Houthis should call this assumption into serious question. In many respects, Yemen's problems have stemmed from the fact that governance is too centralized with too little accountability and too little attention to regional and local needs and grievances.

The Arab coalition-led marginalization of Aden's residents from playing a central role in their own city is another example of this dangerous pattern. The international community and donors need to shift their approach from focusing mostly on President Hadi's role to promoting local ownership of political and security reforms. Local actors are more likely than distant national leaders to commit to serious reform, as they have the greatest incentive to improve security and services in their areas and to be accountable to their own communities.

Empowering local actors will be time-consuming and hard, but doing so is more likely to produce positive results than outsourcing security to non-locals and foreigners. In a situation where the international community's approach of supporting national leaders who lack legitimacy and who have used security and armed forces to strengthen personal and factional loyalties has proved unsustainable and counterproductive, empowering local actors remains the only viable alternative.



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