



Crash Course: Conflict in Yemen

As fragility and extremism continue to wrack the gulf country of Yemen, BPC has compiled a quick overview on recent events, Yemen's troubled history and the main actors in the current conflict.

Yemen's divided history

Historically divided between north and south, the unified country of Yemen has only existed since 1990. With their different histories, sectarian identities, levels of economic development and legacy of internal conflict, Yemen's troubled past is reflected in the country's uncertain and fragile present: ineffective central government, strong tribalism, an insurgency in the country's north, secessionism in the south and the growth of al-Qaeda.



In the most recent escalation of violence in Yemen, Houthi rebels, based in the northern Governorate of Sa'dah, seized the Yemeni capital of Sanaa in September 2014, ultimately forcing the Yemeni government to resign in January 2015. Since then, fighting has crept southward. On March 19, fighting moved to the southern port city of Aden, where Houthi fighters fired missiles at a palace hosting ousted President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Additionally, forces loyal to former President Saleh and allied with the Houthis clashed with Hadi's forces for control of Aden's airport. The Islamic State has also become active in Yemen. A previously unknown ISIS affiliate calling itself Sanaa Province took credit for suicide bombings at two Houthi mosques in Sanaa that left over 100 dead, calling the attacks "a tip of an iceberg." On March 22, Houthi fighters seized control of Taiz, Yemen's third-largest city, including the international airport there.

Who are the main actors in the conflict?

- **Houthis (also known as Ansar Allah):** Yemeni rebel fighters named for Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, based in the Shia Zaydi-majority northern Sa'dah governorate. Houthis seized control of the capital of Sanaa in September 2014.
- **Ali Abdullah Saleh:** President of Yemen from 1978 (when he served as president of North Yemen until reunification in 1990) until stepping down in 2011 as part of an agreement brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in response to widespread protests against his rule. Saleh retains control over some of the country's security forces, who are loyal to him and not his successor President Hadi. Saleh has allied with the Houthis against President Hadi. Although he is a Zaydi, the predominant Shia sect in Yemen, he led a Sunni-majority government and is supported among Yemen's Sunnis.
- **Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi:** Formerly Saleh's vice president, became president in 2012, and was forced out by Houthi rebels in January 2015. After escaping from house arrest, he fled to the southern city of Aden, where he is mobilizing his Sunni supporters.
- **Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP):** Militant Islamist organization, primarily active in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, formed by a merger of al-Qaeda's Yemeni and Saudi branches in January 2009, with strongholds primarily in Yemen's south.
- **Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL):** Sunni Islamist terrorist group active in Syria and Iraq, ISIS has expanded to Yemen under the name Sanaa Province, carrying out two suicide attacks against Houthi mosques in Sanaa in March 2015. Once an offshoot of al-Qaeda, ISIS broke off from the al-Qaeda umbrella in February 2014 and declared itself the leader of an Islamic Caliphate.

What is the relationship between them?

Saleh and the Houthis: Strange Bedfellows

- Though bitter enemies over the course of his decades-long rule, Saleh has allied himself with the Houthis in a bid to regain power.

Saleh and Hadi: New Rivals

- As part of the agreement with the GCC, Saleh received immunity when he stepped down as president and was not banned from political involvement. Saleh remained the leader of the General People's Congress, Yemen's largest political party.

- Even before the outbreak of armed hostilities, Hadi had accused Saleh of attempting to undermine his transitional government.
- Hadi has attempted to reduce Saleh's influence in government, dissolving the Republican Guard, an elite U.S.-trained military force led by Saleh's eldest son.

Houthis, AQAP, and ISIS: Sectarian Struggle

- AQAP and ISIS, Sunni jihadist groups, are fighting against the Shia Houthis.
- However, ISIS' advance into Yemen is placing it in direct competition with AQAP, as both groups compete for the mantle of most effective Sunni terrorist group in order to continue attracting recruits, funding, and weapons.

Where do other countries fit in?

The continued conflict in Yemen has all the makings of a regional proxy war, with Iran backing the Houthi rebels and Saudi Arabia and other regional Sunni monarchies potentially entering the fight, as they have before, to back Hadi.

Iran

- Statements by Iranian officials place Yemen's Houthis in its "axis of resistance," which includes Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militants.
- "The Islamic republic directly supports the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the popular forces in Syria and Iraq," [said](#) a representative of the Supreme Leader.
- Iran, through the Quds Force, an elite unit with its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has been [smuggling](#) weapons and supplies to Houthi forces. In 2013, Yemeni authorities seized the ship "Jihan 1," believed to be smuggling weapons from Iran to local insurgents. Iran, however, denied any connection to the arms shipment.

Saudi Arabia

- In 2009, Saudi Arabia [joined](#) Saleh's campaign against the Houthis, engaging in cross border bombing operations against Houthi positions.
- After evacuating its Sanaa Embassy, the Saudi Arabian Ambassador relocated to Hadi's stronghold of Aden, along with other Gulf embassies.
- Saudi Arabia has poured nearly \$4 billion into Yemen since 2012. However, after the Houthi takeover, the Saudi government [halted](#) aid to Yemen, including hundreds of millions promised in military aid, wary that it could potentially benefit the Houthis.
- Saudi Arabia has previously intervened against perceived Iranian threat in neighboring states: in 2011, Saudi Arabia sent troops to the kingdom of Bahrain to quash Shia protests against the Sunni monarchy.

What about the United States?

On March 21, the United States, a supporter of Hadi's government, announced that it would evacuate its remaining special forces from Yemen, which had been stationed in Yemen's southern al-Annad air base, after AQAP launched an offensive against the nearby city of al-Houta.