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# YEMEN'S FORGOTTEN WAR: HOW EUROPE CAN LAY THE FOUNDATIONS FOR PEACE

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## SUMMARY

- After years of conflict Yemen is on the verge of absolute collapse. Institutions across the country are falling apart, while a plethora of armed groups have taken advantage of the power vacuum to claim leadership over key territories, leading to even greater fragmentation of the country.
- The conflict, and the accompanying Saudi-led intervention, has brought about the Middle East's most severe humanitarian crisis, with 86 percent of the population in need of humanitarian assistance. Yemen is facing a lost generation as hundreds of thousands of Yemeni children grow up without an education or enough food to eat.
- The EU and its member states have a moral and strategic interest in ending the conflict. Failure to act could result in Yemen becoming a new hub for globally oriented terror groups, and could spur a new wave of refugees into Europe.
- The EU should make the most of its comparatively neutral position in Yemen to pave the way for post-conflict stabilisation and reach out to groups that have, to date, been marginalised in the ongoing peace process. The EU can complement UN efforts and may be faced with the responsibility of filling in for an increasingly isolationist United States.

Yemen is more impoverished and more anarchic than at any point in its history. The country has effectively fragmented. And swathes of territory are controlled by a wide array of different leaders with divergent, and often competing, agendas. Without any principled and decisive action to end or even mitigate the country's conflicts, Yemen risks sliding into a continued, accelerated decline. It is rapidly becoming fertile ground for extremist groups and could spur a new wave of refugees into Europe.

It is almost two years since Saudi Arabia launched its Operation Decisive Storm against the rebels in Yemen. The military offensive was unprecedented for Saudi Arabia, and was designed to restore a legitimate government to Yemen by pushing back against the Houthis – a rebel group made up from the country's Zaidi Shia minority, and facilitated by the resilient networks of Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Launched after the slow-moving takeover of the country by the Houthis, the military initiative was the first of its kind to be led and planned by Riyadh. It was undeniably ambitious.

As set out by then-Saudi ambassador to the United States – and soon to be Saudi foreign minister – Adel Jubair, the operation was not just about pushing back the putschists or securing the Saudi border, but about fighting the “Iranian threat” represented by the Houthis. It was also about restoring a ‘legitimate’ government to Yemen, including, but not limited to, rebuilding state institutions, disarming the rebels, and restoring the unpopular, but internationally recognised, president, Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi – who fled to Saudi Arabia shortly before the start of the offensive in March 2015.

The Saudi operation has pushed the Houthis out of numerous areas of Yemen and prevented them from taking over the southern port of Aden. It has forced them to retreat from most of Yemen's formerly independent south and many parts of the largely tribal provinces of al-Jawf and Marib in the north-west. Despite the relentless Saudi offensive, the Houthis and their allies continue to maintain their hold over Sanaa — Yemen's largest city —, the country's northern highlands, and the bulk of the country's Red Sea coast. The Houthis have also managed to maintain control of much of the central city of Taiz, which was a hotbed of anti-Houthi sentiment even before the battle for Taiz began, in April 2015.

However, having been stifled by continual air strikes and a complex series of initiatives that are best described as 'economic warfare', Houthi-controlled areas have slipped into borderline famine.<sup>1</sup> Massive unemployment rates have come amid rising prices for basic supplies, such as food and fuel, pushing many, ironically, to sign up as fighters. Today in Yemen, becoming a fighter in a militia group is one of the few paid jobs available. Despite utopian statements about the restoration of state sovereignty by pro-Hadi officials and spokespeople, as well as reported tranches of funding from the Gulf, areas liberated from the Houthis have remained plagued by chaos and disease. Compounding the issues Yemen faces are al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS)-linked fighters, who have taken advantage of the power vacuum and remain active in many areas where the Houthis have been pushed out.

The internationally recognised government remains largely in exile, unable to move, let alone govern. Even in 'liberated' areas of the country, government action is limited to symbolic visits under the heavy guard of foreign coalition forces. Yemen is in a political deadlock as the state continues to fall apart.

The country's deepening fragmentation points to the need for far wider political engagement, beyond the relatively narrow remit currently pursued by the UN. In a bid to strengthen that effort, European states should look to deepen engagement with all actors, including the Houthis, Yemen-based anti-Houthi resistance factions, and the population in the formerly independent south. In doing so, the EU can set an example, stressing the urgent need for a more inclusive political track that ensures all relevant groups have a seat at the table in peace talks.

European states also need to help ensure support for the humanitarian aid effort in Yemen, with 86 percent of the population in need of assistance. At the same time, it should be working to safeguard the country's barely functioning state institutions, before it is too late. Europe is consumed by myriad ongoing crises both within and on the edge of its borders. As such, Yemen may be perceived as a manageable far-off conflict. The refugee crisis has shown that 'far-off' conflicts can have large domestic impacts.

<sup>1</sup> These measures include attempts to cut areas under the control of the Sanaa government out of the international banking sector and to limit their capacity to receive imports. These efforts have been especially effective because Yemen imports 90 percent of its food.

With this in mind, the European Union has a moral and strategic interest in pledging greater political effort to the peace process in Yemen.

Europe's current approach is defined either by either acquiescence towards belligerent actors or relative non-action. At a moment when the United States is likely to pull back from any meaningful engagement in resolving the conflict, European states need to step up their role in resolving the conflict and prevent the country from becoming a failed state that could take decades to function again. Such a deterioration is on the near horizon, and would have troubling implications for both the region and Europe itself, particularly given the possibility of Yemen emerging as a hub for new globally orientated terrorism activities.

## State collapse and fragmentation

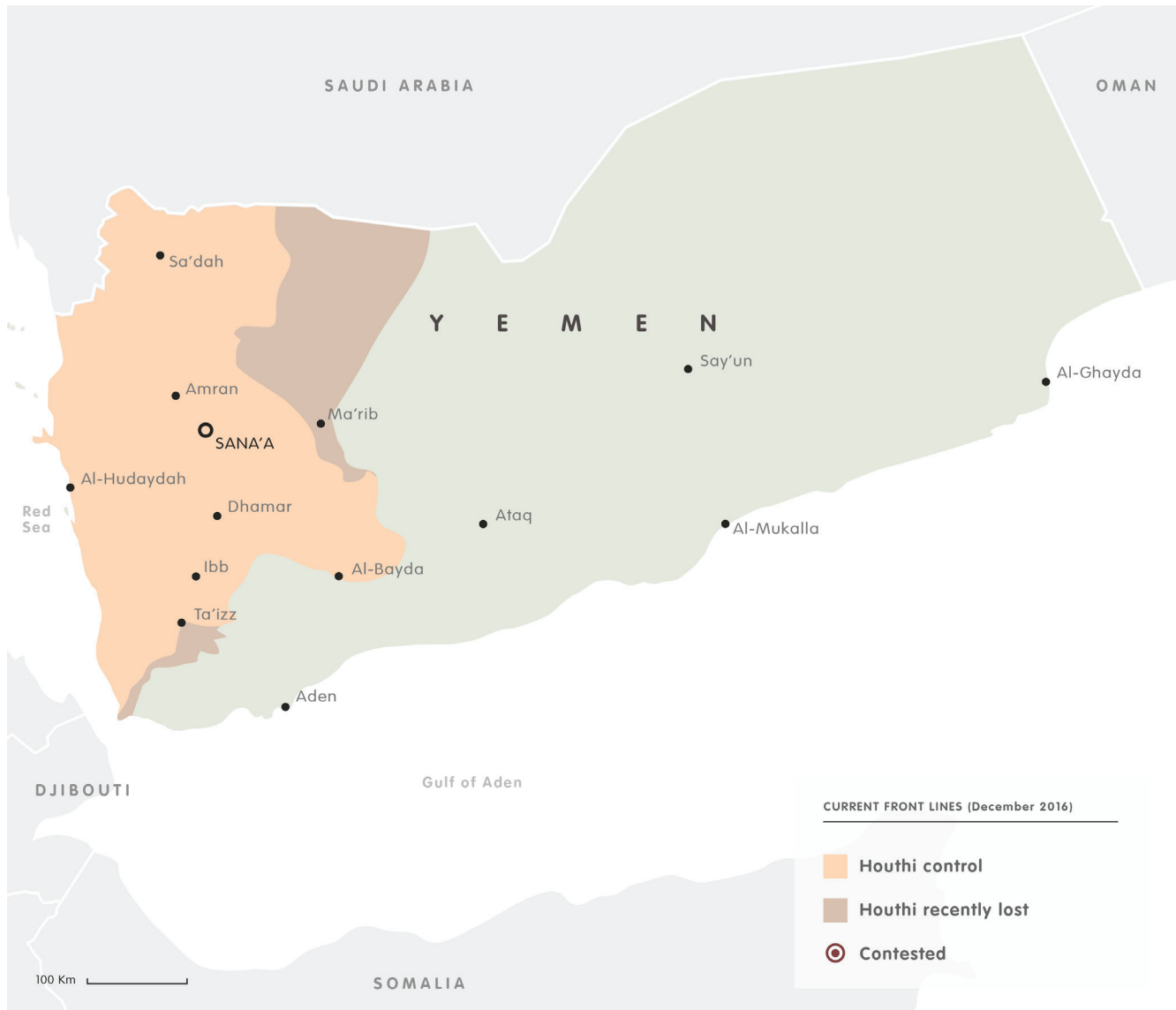
Yemen's fragmentation and descent into anarchy is no surprise, and the ongoing conflict has effectively forced many of Yemen's long underlying crises to the surface. The country finds itself riven by sectarian tension, with no single centre of control, and facing a widespread famine. All of this has left the nation on the verge of dissolution.

For those engaged in the long-running struggle to restore the autonomy of the formerly independent south, the conflict is simply another — albeit more destructive — phase in their ongoing fight for autonomy. For those in the central city of Taiz, the fighting largely marks an escalation and evolution of a conflict that was triggered by the country's 2011 uprising. For the core cadre of the Houthi movement, much like the southerners, this represents a more protracted round of fighting against adversaries they have been battling for more than a decade.

Viewed in context, many of the key events that kindled the conflict into a full conflagration are more akin to catalysts than driving factors. Similarly, much-discussed factors such as the ongoing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the increasing regional assertiveness of the new Saudi administration, only contribute to the list of long-festering tensions and power games that have helped to bring Yemen's conflict to the surface.

At the heart of the country's deepening fragmentation is the division of Yemen's governing institutions into two halves. They have been divided by their loyalty — or, in many cases, simply their acquiescence — to the Supreme Political Council of the Houthi-Saleh de facto government in Sanaa, or the internationally recognised government, which remains largely in exile in Saudi Arabia. State fragmentation means that there are now two claimants for most ministerial, official, or governor positions — one representing each side. The Yemeni civil service has effectively been weaponised by warring factions. A key example of such weaponisation was the internationally recognised government's decision to move the Yemeni Central Bank to Aden, away from the Houthis — a move that has back-fired because its decision to

# Houthi control in Yemen (December 2016)



sack widely respected governor Mohamed bin Hamam has compromised one of Yemen's few remaining institutions.<sup>2</sup> Even if the ranks of the bureaucracy have largely remained the same, what is left of the state is now being managed by competing forces, accelerating a hollowing-out of the central state apparatus that has been under way since the conflict began. Beyond being split between different masters with different visions, state institutions have been weakened as funds have been diverted, and officials and bureaucrats crucial to their functioning have left the country.

Competing power structures within the state have, unsurprisingly, exacerbated Yemen's pre-existing budget crisis, leaving officials on both sides unable to pay wages

and unable to fund projects.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, efforts by the internationally recognised government to combat the Houthis' control of institutions based in Sanaa have only ended up weakening them. The clearest example of this is the hasty relocation of the Central Bank from Sanaa to Aden.<sup>4</sup> Many institutions have been destroyed by Saudi airstrikes that have targeted Houthi power-bases. Scores of other government buildings have been damaged in street level clashes or by the Houthis' own shelling operations.

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth look at Yemen's continuing central bank crisis, see Mansour Rajeh, Amal Nasser and Farea al-Muslimi, "Yemen without a functional Central Bank", Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, 2 November 2016, available at <http://www.sanaacenter.org/publications/item/55-yemen-without-a-functioning-central-bank.html>. (hereafter, Rajeh et al, "Yemen without a functional Central Bank").

<sup>3</sup> Rajeh et al, "Yemen without a functional Central Bank".

<sup>4</sup> Rajeh et al, "Yemen without a functional Central Bank".

## *An unlikely Houthi-Saleh alliance*

Against the odds, the Houthi-Saleh alliance has managed to maintain some degree of cohesion, despite, or perhaps because of, the war being waged against them. Their dogged will to maintain a hold over Sanaa, the locus of the country's institutions, has been the key to their ability to maintain control of the city.

The Houthis' rise to power in Sanaa is underpinned by a number of developments. Firstly, the Houthis were able to benefit from the wavering support for former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his network, key elements of which had balked at the loss of long-held hegemony in Yemen's post-2011 order. Secondly, they were largely able to graft themselves on top of pre-existing government bureaucratic and institutional networks, taking oversight roles and conducting selective purges even as they left much of the original structure and personnel of those institutions intact. Thirdly, in many cases, they were often able to gain the grudging acquiescence of social figures who were keen to avoid conflict at all costs, even if they resented their new overlords.

Ties between the Saleh network and the Houthis have only deepened over the course of the conflict. Both factions – despite their tense history – have found themselves fighting alongside each other in the same trenches, literally and metaphorically. As pro-Saleh troops and Houthi fighters began to work together on the battlefield, they also started to work alongside each other in diplomatic functions, constituting a single united front in the ongoing United Nations-mediated talks to end the conflict. There have also been ongoing efforts to formalise the partnership on the ground; efforts that have led to an increasingly open role being carved out for Saleh and his backers.

The most obvious effort to formalise the relationship between the Houthis and the Saleh faction was the formation of a Supreme Political Council in July 2016, which ostensibly superseded the Houthi-affiliated Higher Revolution Council that previously ruled the country. The SPC is based in Sanaa and made up of an even number of Houthi movement and Saleh backers. The council eventually tapped former Aden governor Abdulaziz bin Habtor to serve as prime minister, in addition to gaining the endorsement of Yemen's parliament, which reconvened on 13 August 2016 in Sanaa, in defiance of exiled leader, Hadi.

Despite the strides towards cohesion made by the Houthi-Saleh alliance, areas under their control have become highly unstable because of Saudi bombing operations. At the same time, numerous institutions have become personalised and factionalised owing to the heavy hand of the Houthis, who have continued to operate a parallel state despite their effective takeover of the country. Still, the same heavy hand that has seen the Houthis and their allies imprison and, in some cases, reportedly kill and torture scores of their

adversaries, has also brought uncertainty to those living in areas under Houthi control.<sup>5</sup>

The ability of people to live in Houthi-held areas has come under growing strain, owing to both the indirect and direct effects of the war. Salaries of government employees have been slashed, provision of basic services has become rare, and a general, low-level state of disorder and dissatisfaction – caused by the Houthis' general lack of experience with governance – has spread.<sup>6</sup>

## *Centrifugal forces in the north and south*

The rest of the country, constituting a majority of Yemen's territory, but a minority of its population, is under the nominal control of the internationally recognised Hadi government. But compared to the Houthi-controlled areas, it has witnessed a much more diffuse set of fissures. There is even tension and infighting between leaders who have declared their loyalty to Hadi. Indeed, the so-called 'liberated areas' can be divided into a number of de facto sub-areas, led by de facto leaders with vastly different ideologies and long-term aims to those of the exiled Hadi government.

In the south, power lies with figures who have long been tied to hardline factions in the Southern Movement – a grouping calling for the formerly independent south to have autonomy once again. This is particularly true in Aden, where key Southern Movement figures such as Aidarus al-Zubaidi and Shalal Ali Shaye have been appointed governor and head of security, respectively. Although they are nominally incorporated into the governing structure, they remain largely autonomous actors. In many cases they bypass Hadi to directly coordinate with foreign actors, such as the United Arab Emirates. At the same time, they have frequently demonstrated their reluctance to cooperate with members of the Hadi government, who are of northern origin, and whom many southerners continue to regard as occupiers.

To the north, gains by anti-Houthi forces have largely been in the city of Taiz, the province of Marib, and small enclaves along the Saudi border. In both areas, much of the new political leadership, in addition to the mainstream anti-Houthi fighting factions, has ties to either the Islah party, a Sunni Islamist-led opposition faction aligned with the Hadi government, or the network of Saleh's ally turned adversary, Ali Mohsen. The turbulent situation in the besieged city of Taiz – both with regards to the factionalisation of anti-Houthi forces and the rise of extremists within their ranks – has prevented any significant progress being made by the Hadi government in the city. Much of the comparative stability in Marib and neighbouring areas owes far more to local informal tribal governance networks than any actions

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth report on abusive detentions carried out by the Houthis and their allies, see "Yemen: Abusive Detention Rife under Houthis", Human Rights Watch, 18 November 2016, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/17/yemen-abusive-detention-rife-under-houthis>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Ben Hubbard, "Plight of Houthi Rebels is Clear in Visit to Yemen's Capital", *The New York Times*, 26 November 2016, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/world/middleeast/houthi-rebels-yemen.html>.

by representatives of the Hadi government.<sup>7</sup> Despite their ostensible loyalty to the central government, local authorities in these neighbouring areas have often appeared to operate autonomously in the absence of a centralised state authority. To this end, the Marib governorate has directed oil and gas revenues to its local central bank branch rather than to the centralised institution.

### *The exiled Hadi government*

With breakaway forces mobilising in the south, a Houthi-Saleh alliance running the centre, and autonomous-leaning forces in the north, the Hadi government, exiled in Saudi Arabia, seems increasingly distant, both literally and figuratively.

Today, the government is an ideologically incoherent mixture of figures and factions united by little more than their opposition to the Houthis, opportunism, historical ties to the Saudi government, or a mix of all three. Hadi's government has failed to provide a true united front for the country to rally around, let alone any vision for the future beyond defeating the Houthis. Many political factions with strong power-bases on the ground remain marginalised or unrepresented within the ranks of the government. All the while, owing to its long periods of absence from Yemen, the lives of comparative luxury that government officials enjoy outside of the country, and their ever-increasing rotundity (something that does not go unnoticed by the 14 million Yemenis that now experience food insecurity on a daily basis), the government has found itself more frequently the punch line of jokes than the subject of respect, even among many Yemenis that are staunchly opposed to the Houthis.

And yet, the Hadi government retains a stranglehold on the representation of any anti-Houthi forces in the political process. This is something that, paradoxically, has worked against its own interests and marginalised many of the most powerful anti-Houthi fighting forces who share at least one goal with the Hadi government – eliminating Houthi control. Many anti-Houthi fighting forces are dependent on figures based in exile for funds and arms. Most of these funds and arms are provided by backers in the Gulf, particularly the government of Saudi Arabia. This has helped those in exile to maintain a connection with those on the ground. But it has also deepened tensions on the ground, as figures and factions that are ostensibly on the same side compete for the kingdom's favour.

### *Risks of further discord?: Saudi Arabia and the UAE*

The two main international partners backing the anti-Houthi coalition – the UAE and Saudi Arabia – share the same goal, but their actions on the ground in Yemen have shaped up quite differently since the beginning of Operation Decisive Storm in 2015. Saudi Arabia has largely remained focused on the north, particularly in Marib and areas along

<sup>7</sup> In some cases, most notably that of Marib governor Sultan al-Arada, the two have intersected, allowing the government to benefit from the popularity of local leaders in key positions.

its border, while the UAE has focused on the formerly independent south, with Emirati troops working to bolster security forces, both in terms of maintaining a presence on the ground and, more significantly, training locals. While there is certainly some overlap, the two nations have also supported different partners, owing in part to the UAE's longstanding disdain for the Muslim Brotherhood, which King Salman of Saudi Arabia appears to view as far less of a threat than his predecessor, Abdullah. This has resulted in frequent tensions between the Yemeni Islah party, which incorporates the bulk of the Saudi-backed Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood and some of the UAE's partners, many of which are staunch opponents of the Islah party.<sup>8</sup>

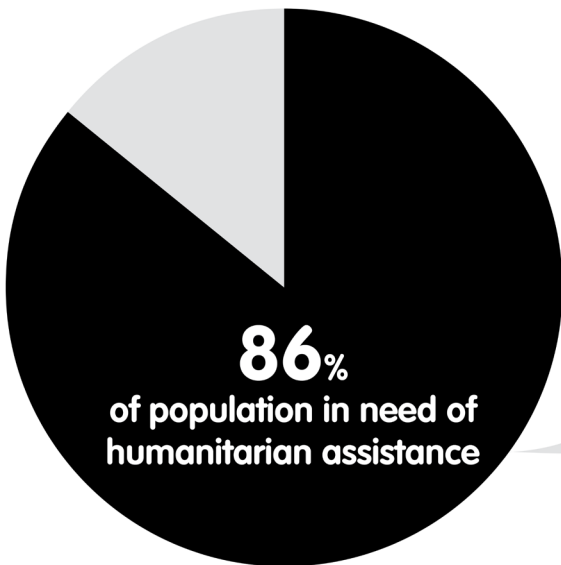
Put together, these competing internal and regional dynamics have fuelled a wider political implosion and institutional collapse in areas across the country. Yemen's security situation had been steadily deteriorating long before the start of Operation Decisive Storm, as power was taken up by an increasing number of armed groups, most notably the Houthis themselves, with unclear long-term goals regarding their participation in the Yemeni state.

The rising power of militias in Yemen has been most obvious in the cities of Aden and Taiz, which, arguably, were once more orderly than the capital. Despite tenuous progress being made under the leadership of Aden's governor, Aidarus al-Zubaidi, the city is still dominated by militant factions, many of which have frequently changing relationships with each other, coalition partners, and the central government. On visits to the city, government officials are largely unable to leave the heavily fortified Al-Maashiq presidential compound, rendering them incapable of having anything more than a symbolic presence in the city. Things have been even worse in Taiz, where the Houthis and their allies have placed the city under siege.

### *Salafis and secessionists*

Amid the general disorder in Yemen, two groups have managed to establish themselves with a groundswell of grassroots support, and appear likely to grow in strength. The first are Yemen's southern secessionists. Having largely aligned themselves with the anti-Houthi coalition, southern fighters have been relatively successful in their attempts to gain control of most of the formerly independent south. Notably, the flag of united Yemen is almost completely absent in areas formerly ruled by the so-called People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Even government officials have been faced with the sight of southern secessionist flags in the temporary administrative capital of Aden. While the many wings of the Southern Movement have increasingly – if informally – coalesced under the leadership of al-Zubaidi, the Southern Movement itself lacks a coherent ideology beyond broadly supporting autonomy for southern Yemen. With its many branches, the movement is a rag-tag bunch

<sup>8</sup> In the south, the Islah party is widely seen as a 'northern' institution, viewed by many as an equal partner to Saleh owing to the party's alliance with the former president through much of the 1990s.



**That's almost 9 in every 10 people**

An icon showing ten stylized human figures holding hands in a line. Nine of the figures are solid black, and the tenth figure on the right is white with a black outline.

Source: UNOCHA

of different factions holding widely divergent views about cooperation with the central government, and different levels of actual power on the ground.

The second group is made up of a variety of Salafi factions that have managed to secure considerable power on the ground. In many regards this is not a new development. Yemeni Salafis have been a powerful social force for decades, while armed Salafi militias played key roles in battling the Houthis during the six wars waged against them by former president Saleh. In the aftermath of Yemen's 2011 uprising, Yemeni Salafis even created formal political structures, most notably, the Rashad party, which participated in Yemen's National Dialogue Conference in 2013-14.

The conditions fostered by the conflict have created a dramatic shift in the Salafis' role in Yemen. They have now taken an active governance role in many areas of the country, working with southern secessionists and joining with UAE-backed security forces in many parts of the south – most notably in Aden. They have also used the ongoing chaos to carve out areas under their control, specifically in Taiz. Far from being monolithic, Yemen's Salafis have historically been – and remain – deeply fractious. Like the Southern Movement, they are ideologically, organisationally and hierarchically divided.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the incorporation of key Salafi networks into some sort of functional post-conflict governance structure will remain a key task in any peace efforts.

### *Al-Qaeda in Yemen*

Managing the resurgent power of Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) will also pose a huge challenge. AQAP has fought alongside more mainstream anti-Houthi forces on numerous fronts appears to have rebounded since the loss of Mukalla on the southern coast, launching a series of attacks against Houthi targets in the north and UAE-backed troops in the south.

There are, of course, some exceptions to the collapse of order in Yemen. In Marib, for instance, local leaders allied with the Hadi government have been able to achieve a degree of stability. Ironically, this stability has been born out of the same informal tribal systems of governance that, in the past, have led to the province being labelled as 'backwards' by Yemeni urbanites.<sup>10</sup> Emirati-backed forces have helped to restore a modicum of stability to areas of Hadramawt Governorate – including in the port city of Mukalla – since al-Qaeda fighters abandoned the city earlier this year. Despite continuing attacks by al-Qaeda and its Yemeni front group, Ansar al-Sharia, the city remains one of the most secure in the south, something underlined by the continuing stream of internally displaced people relocating to the city.<sup>11</sup>

### *Yemen's lost generation*

Amid the incoherence and instability in Yemen over the past two years, one thing has remained constant – the suffering of the Yemeni people. The numbers speak for themselves. Over 21 million people, making up an estimated 86 percent of the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>12</sup> Over 14 million people are food-insecure, with half that number severely food-insecure.<sup>13</sup> Nineteen million people lack access

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Yemeni government official.

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview, Southern Resistance leader.

<sup>12</sup> "Yemen: Crisis Overview", United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, available at <http://www.unocha.org/yemen/crisis-overview>. (Hereafter, "Yemen: Crisis Overview", UNOCHA.)

<sup>13</sup> "Yemen: Crisis Overview", UNOCHA.

<sup>9</sup> Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen*, (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2011).



**19 million**  
without safe drinking water



**14.1 million**  
without food security



**3.27 million**  
internally displaced

**5x**

increase in  
child soldiers  
since 2014

**6x**

increase in child  
deaths or  
maimings since  
2014

Source: UNOCHA

to safe water – something that has even graver consequences, including the outbreak of contagious diseases.<sup>14</sup> Over 7,000 people have been killed as a direct result of the conflict, and many more have been killed due to its indirect effects. UN officials estimate that 10,000 children alone have died due to preventable diseases since March 2015.<sup>15</sup>

Damage to the port of Hudayda, which was bombed by the Saudi-led coalition in 2015, has made it extremely difficult to offload desperately needed supplies. This has had deadly consequences for a country that imports 90 percent of its food.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneously, much of the nation's infrastructure has been bombed, while scores of factories have been hit as well, decimating the country's industrial capacity and increasing already sky-high rates of unemployment.<sup>17</sup>

In some areas, the conditions have been worse than in others. In Aden – and in other particularly hot cities in southern and coastal areas – standing water combined with the collapse of government sewage and garbage services has led to the spread of diseases like cholera and dengue fever that have ravaged the population. Air strikes from the Saudi-led coalition have also destroyed many homes, most notably in Saada governorate, as have street clashes and shelling from the Houthis and their allies, which have left swaths of the cities of Taiz and Aden in ruins. The latest figures indicate that there are some 3.27 million internally displaced people in the country.<sup>18</sup>

14 "Mercy Corps: 72-hour cease-fire in Yemen is not enough", Mercy Corps, 20 October 2016, available at <https://www.mercycorps.org/press-room/releases/mercy-corps-72-hour-cease-fire-yemen-not-enough>.

15 "Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien Statement to the Security Council on Yemen, 31 October 2016", Reliefweb, 31 October 2016, available at <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-10>.

16 Noah Browning and Jonathan Saul, "Yemen critically short of food, fuel imports as war cuts supply lines", *Reuters*, 6 July 2016, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-shipping-idUSKCN0P1IQD20150708>.

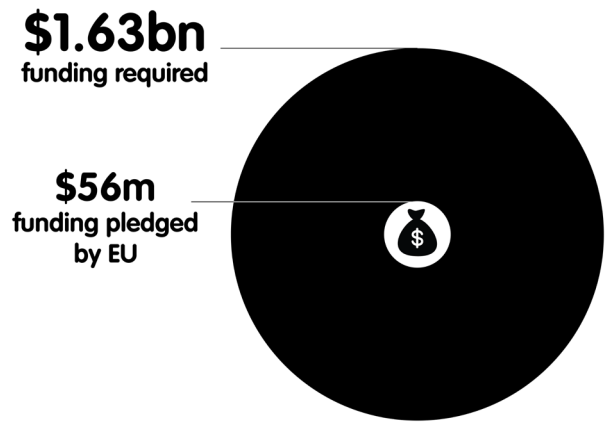
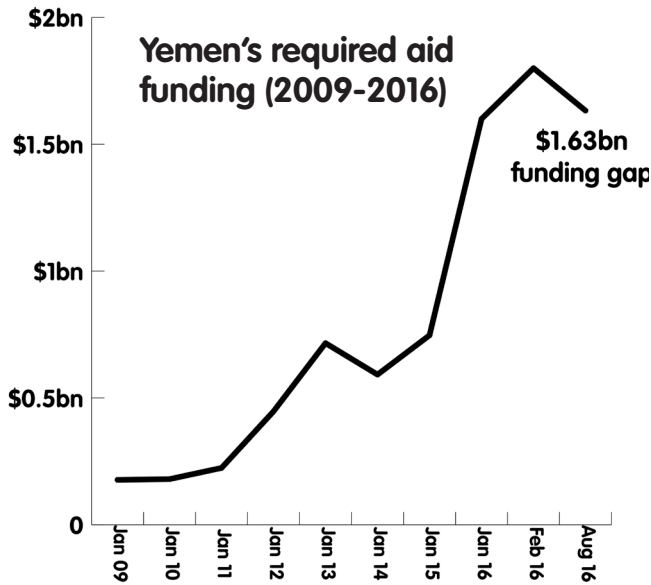
17 Ben Hubbard, "US fingerprints on Attacks Obliterating Yemen's Economy", *The New York Times*, November 13, 2016, <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/11/14/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-bombing-houthis-hunger.html>.

18 "Yemen: Crisis Overview", UNOCHA.

These are issues that will outlive the duration of the war. The spillover and generational effects of disease, malnutrition and displacement will last for decades. Yemen is faced with a lost generation. Parents across the country have been forced to make the decision between feeding their children and putting them through school, leading to a situation where thousands of children are hungry and uneducated, and in which the country's already-alarming child labour rates have increased yet further.

This is not to mention the wholesale unravelling of much of Yemen's social fabric. Military conflict and the splitting of state authority into various factions has further embedded the nation's social divides. Yemen has witnessed an unprecedented spread of sectarianism since the beginning of the conflict that risks taking root and shaping societal dimensions in the country for decades, even in a post-conflict environment. In that regard, it is not just Yemen's buildings and infrastructure that will need repairing, but the rifts in Yemen's social fabric, too.

Yemen faces decades of fallout. Millions of children are growing up without an education, malnourished, and in an environment where the few available jobs involve wielding weapons against others. With each day that passes, Yemen's conflict grows worse, while the challenge of rebuilding and returning to normal becomes exponentially more difficult. Fragmentation, deepening anarchy, and the accelerating collapse of still-existing state institutions point to a potentially irreversible situation with many long-term costs, including the possible break-up of the entire country. In a nation with a deep history of armed insurgency, and an active al-Qaeda affiliate that has targeted the West, the dangerous power vacuum in Yemen comes with very troubling implications. And not just for Yemen, but for the broader region and Europe too.



Source: European Commission, UNOCHA

## What can Europe do?

Europe cannot afford to ignore Yemen. But what can and should it do? Ultimately, it is only the belligerents – including their regional backers – that can de-escalate the conflict. That being said, there are a number of steps that the EU and member states can take in order to help facilitate a peace process in Yemen. The EU may be able to take advantage of its position as an external party to encourage key actors to move away from the battlefield and towards the negotiating table.

For all its flaws, the UN-led peace process remains the best hope for progress at the moment, being one of the few forums that both local and regional actors participate in. However, it is clear that any deal made in this forum will face implementation issues because of the growing ideological distance between the country's formal political leadership and those holding de facto control on the ground. And that is not to mention the various other factions that have divergent aims and competing goals. This is where European states can make a difference. The EU and its member states can support the ongoing UN-led process while engaging in separate actions to help pave the way for a more stable Yemen, including by engaging with key actors on the ground that have hitherto been excluded from the peace process.

While the EU and its member states have the opportunity to act, they should not take their position for granted. EU member states will not automatically be granted a seat at the negotiating table. Instead they must work hard to make themselves relevant if they want to be involved in assisting the peace process.

## Fill the gap left by the US

When Donald Trump becomes US president in 2017, coordinated European action will become even more important. Not only is Trump likely to forget about Yemen, his singular focus is likely to be on issues facing the US mainland, such as counter-terrorism. This change in US political worldview might lead it to abandon the tentative progress achieved by the quartet – a format involving the UK, US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – and by Secretary of State John Kerry, in addressing the core political drivers feeding the conflict. The anticipated retreat of the US provides an opportunity – and, indeed, bestows a responsibility on Europe to step up and provide leadership for international efforts to work towards peace in Yemen. The success of such efforts, however, will depend on Europe's ability to coordinate effectively among themselves. Lacking any coherent EU position or effort, attempts to fill the gap left by the US will likely come to naught.

## Coordinate at EU level

It is crucial to stress the need for far greater coordination between the EU and member states on Yemen – specifically with the UK, France, the Netherlands and Germany, which have played an active role there. This task has become even more difficult since the withdrawal of western diplomatic delegations from the country at the end of 2015. Many western delegations are now based across Europe instead of in the region surrounding Yemen, with the exception of a few. The decision taken by the EU and Dutch delegations to join the Germans and set up camp in the Jordanian capital of Amman represents a step in the right direction. This will at least allow for greater opportunities for cooperation on the Yemen issue, born out of regional proximity.<sup>19</sup> But greater coordination between delegations is needed. The lack of coordination to date has served to impede both peace efforts

<sup>19</sup> Interview with EU official, September 2016.



and weaken the potential influence of Europe, constituting a significant missed opportunity.

While meetings at ambassador-level remain frequent, coordination of efforts at lower levels is severely lacking, whether with regards to mundane issues such as information sharing or more significant ones like tailored messaging or actions. In this regard, the current ministerial quartet format – involving the UK, the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – represents a valid model, and one that could be emulated on a ministerial or ambassadorial level to coordinate European policy on Yemen. But such a development is not only necessary for European cooperation, it will also be crucial with regards to cooperation with the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. There is a crucial need for coordination with the UK too, because of the British government's strong ties with the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Increased coordination on an EU level would not only lead to more targeted European efforts, but an easing of international dialogue with the UK and GCC states.

### *Instrumentalise EU 'neutrality'*

In contrast to the UK, which is widely viewed as a belligerent in the conflict, the EU and key member states, such as Germany and the Netherlands, are viewed as comparatively neutral actors by key factions in Yemen. The EU and member states should make the most of this 'neutral' status to facilitate the peace process. Because of the number of different factions in Yemen, the peace process needs to be broadened. The EU is in a unique position to help to make the process more inclusive because it is as an actor that factions may be more inclined to trust. That being said, European states must be key to avoid the appearance of bias, taking particular care to maintain open channels with all parties, including the internationally recognised government.

### *Engage with marginalised actors*

More channels of communication must be opened with newly emergent actors and those traditionally marginalised by Yemen's political establishment. Indeed, as much effort must be devoted to building an understanding of grassroots dynamics as has been devoted to maintaining contact with the Yemeni government's formal political leaders, most of whom remain in exile. In particular, the diversity of anti-Houthi groups must be taken into account. There have already been steps towards this, most notably with regards to increasing albeit tentative efforts by European diplomats to reach out to key figures in the Southern Movement. Europe's comparatively cordial relations with the Houthis mean that key European diplomatic powers already have an important channel. However, it is crucial that any process of engagement takes place in such a manner that it supports ongoing UN talks, and does not inhibit continued coordination with the special envoy and his team.

### *Commit long-term resources*

It is crucial to recognise that ending the war and ending the violence in Yemen are two essentially separate – if interconnected – goals. While stopping the killing may provide space to resolve Yemen's conflict(s), one is not the inevitable precursor to the other. This is, perhaps, the greatest lesson of the GCC-mediated deal in 2011, which paved the way for Yemen's post-Arab uprising transition. The deal served, at best, as an intermission in the country's conflict rather than any sort of forum that helped to guarantee its end. Diplomatic efforts and outreach towards facilitating the resolution of Yemen's varied and deep-rooted conflicts will therefore need to continue even after any deal is reached. The EU will need to commit long-term resources to this end, because the greatest work towards building sustainable peace will take place on the ground after a deal is signed. In this regard, Europe can play a crucial role in stabilisation efforts, complementing the top-level process being undertaken by the UN envoy's team.

### *Support multi-track peace processes*

The path to peace in Yemen will be fraught, requiring compromise, the rebuilding of trust, the re-hashing of many painful moments in history. It will also require new leadership. Peace will not be achieved through a single isolated process, but only through a series of continuing processes – both informal and formal – on a national, regional, and local level. 'One size fits all' attempts to resolve Yemen's myriad conflicts, particularly peace processes that only involve elites and are Sanaa-centric, are doomed to fail. The immediate goal must be to forge an agreement that provides space for a multi-track process to thrive. For this to happen, key international actors will need to stop backing continued conflict and instead focus their efforts on de-escalation and rebuilding. In this regard, Europe's perceived neutrality may allow it to play a key role in helping to mediate on a grassroots level, both in terms of aiding internal efforts and, perhaps even more importantly, helping to bring the concerns of groups and factions on the ground to an international level, ultimately complementing the UN's ongoing peace efforts. In numerous cases, this would benefit from closer coordination with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

### *Support efforts to fix infrastructure problems*

Beyond working to bolster the long-term political process, European efforts should also focus on short-term solutions that can help Yemen to get back on its feet. One priority will be to push key actors to facilitate the reopening of Sanaa Airport to civilian air travel and to ease traffic into the port of Hudayda. These efforts should include, if necessary, exerting stronger pressure on the coalition. This would serve to fundamentally improve the humanitarian situation. Rebuilding other destroyed industrial, transport and agricultural infrastructure will also be crucial. A Yemen

dependent on foreign aid will never be stable or sustainable.

### *Support efforts to preserve state institutions*

There should also be a focus on preserving what remains of state institutions. There are still opportunities to encourage coordination between bureaucrats and government officials from different sides of the political spectrum, in addition to bolstering local governance institutions. In some ways, this can be tied to the distribution of aid and other services. Productive coordination with institutions on the ground helps to bolster both their operational capacity and their legitimacy with their constituents.<sup>20</sup> In an ideal situation, the delivery of aid could fulfill two purposes: providing assistance to Yemenis in dire need, while helping to prevent the collapse of essential local governance institutions. As long as the conflict continues, aid needs to be distributed immediately to ameliorate the ongoing humanitarian crisis. There is no excuse for European states to shy away from offering the strongest support for aid initiatives.

### *Deepen coordination with the Gulf states*

In all of the above factors, coordination with the Gulf States – particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia – will be vital. Any peace process is reliant on the Saudis and the Emiratis, particularly owing to their historical and continuing ties with key players on the ground. Saudi and Emirati aid and support will also be crucial in post-conflict Yemen. In that regard, it is crucial that Europe maintain a constructive relationship with the Gulf states and avoids alienating powerful actors that also have an interest in Yemen's long-term stability. Europe should also continue to make use of existing channels with Iran when appropriate, while continuing to back efforts to reduce regional tensions through track-two diplomatic efforts with Iranian and Gulf actors. This must all come in addition to continued coordination with Oman and support for the Sultanate's mediation efforts, which it has been able to carry out by virtue of its unique place in regional politics. Maintaining cordial relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, Oman has used its position to mediate between Yemen's warring factions, hosting meetings between Houthi and pro-Saleh figures and Saudi and western officials throughout the conflict.

### *Support an international war crimes commission*

Finally, the EU and member states should back an independent, international commission into allegations of international humanitarian law violations.<sup>21</sup> In the atmosphere of impunity it is absolutely crucial that a precedent is set. The continuing lack of accountability has only emboldened both sides, helping to pave the path for

greater disregard for the protection of civilians because armed groups have confidence that they will never be held accountable for their actions.

## Conclusion

Yemen's tragedy extends beyond a simple war. The country and its institutions are falling apart. At the same time, a far-reaching humanitarian crisis now rivals, perhaps even outpaces, Syria in its severity. But despite Yemen's distance – both geographical and metaphorical – from Europe, the strategic and moral necessity of a robust European effort to understand and help in the resolution of the country's conflicts should not be ignored. Unfortunately, Yemen is likely to be mired in varying levels of conflict for years to come. A coherent European policy on Yemen could at least play a strong role in improving the humanitarian situation in the country, while laying the foundations of a meaningful and sustainable peace.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Baron, Andrew Cummings, Tristan Salman, and Maged Al-Madhaji, "The Essential Role of Local Governance", Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, 10 September 2016, available at <http://www.sanaacenter.org/publications/item/50-the-essential-role-of-local-governance-in-yemen.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Previous Dutch-led efforts to set up such an inquiry have been stifled or significantly watered down. See Patrick Wintour, "Renewed calls for inquiry into alleged human rights violations in Yemen", *The Guardian*, 19 September 2016, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/19/renewed-inquiry-alleged-human-rights-violations-yemen-houthi>.

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