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# CIVIL WAR IN YEMEN: IMMINENT AND AVOIDABLE

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## SUMMARY

Four years after the overthrow of long-time president Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen is on the brink of civil war. Under the surface of an internationally mediated transition, long-simmering political and societal fissures have deepened, culminating in the rebel takeover of the capital, Sanaa, and the flight of Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the president since 2012, to Aden, which has effectively left already impoverished Yemen split between two rival governments. Negotiations have sputtered and violent clashes continue, threatening to push the strategically located country, home to one of the world's most dangerous al-Qaeda franchises, to the point of collapse.

While complete fragmentation and full civil war is imminently possible, it is not inevitable. The rapid, but only partial, expansion of the Houthis shows that none of the factions can gain control of the entire country. Thus averting large-scale violence is in the interest of all parties and regional actors. Generally respected by most key actors, Europe could play a key positive role in resolving the crisis. Europeans must take great pains to avoid the appearance of either fully backing or completely rejecting the Houthis. And European actors must avoid repeating the mistakes of the 2011 transition and push the embattled factions towards building a settlement that includes all key stakeholders.

Over the course of the past six months, Yemen's once-celebrated post-Arab Awakening transition has come to a dramatic – if slow-burning – end. The takeover of the capital, Sanaa, by Houthi rebels in September 2014 spurred a multifaceted political crisis, which was temporarily glossed over by international mediation but, ultimately, continued to mount. It culminated in the mass resignation of Yemen's transitional president, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Prime Minister Khaled Bahah, and the cabinet on 22 January and a power grab by the rebels themselves on 6 February. The Houthis, a Zaydi Shi'a-led rebel group located in the north which had been the target of six brutal wars waged under Hadi's predecessor, Ali Abdullah Saleh, moved to enshrine their power by unilaterally dissolving the parliament and declaring the country under the supervision of their "Revolutionary Committee". Houthi representatives have tightened control over state institutions and continued to spread their writ south of Sanaa as they resist attempts to reach a new accord with other political parties. As a result, Yemen faces a multifaceted political crisis, which has led many nations – including members of the European Union – to close their embassies in Yemen.

Yemen, strategically located north of the Bab-el-Mandeb oil transit chokepoint and home to a dangerous al-Qaeda group, is on the brink of complete fracture. A resolution will only come in the form of a new political agreement and the return to some form of roadmap. A return to consensus government – and to a trajectory heading towards comparative normalcy – is in the interest of all the political factions. Unfortunately, their relations continue to be governed by mistrust, even

if all sides nominally agree that a new political deal is necessary, one that would pave the way for a constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections. Viewed positively by the bulk of Yemenis, the EU and its member states can play a key role in helping to push for such a deal. The EU will have to act decisively and together, and help broker a new transition path that does not repeat the mistakes of the initial one, by this time including the real power brokers and reaching out to protesters in Yemen's south. The West should also avoid being accused of rewarding aggression by simply accepting the Houthis as the new power in town, and instead push for a Houthi role in a consensus government.

### Uprisings and faltering transitions

In January and February 2011, scores of Yemeni political activists and previously disaffected youth inspired by events in Egypt and Tunisia took to the streets of Sanaa and Taiz to call for the fall of the regime of the country's long-time president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. By the end of February, both the Houthis and the Southern Movement, a fractious grassroots grouping calling for the return of autonomy to the formerly independent south, had declared their backing for the protests. They were then joined by the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of opposition parties including Yemen's key leftist factions and the Islamist Islah party, and a number of defectors from the regime itself, ranging from reformers in the president's party to key tribal figures to military leaders.<sup>1</sup> For many Yemenis, the domination of inter-elite squabbles over popular demands impinged on the revolution's legitimacy. But the elite presence just underscored that the Yemeni uprising united a number of different factions with fractious histories and starkly divergent end goals in revolt against the Saleh regime.

As the revolution split the military and institutional structures, the central government's control over the country quickly unravelled. Within two months, the Houthis had seized control of the bulk of the far-northern province of Saada.<sup>2</sup> The capital and the central city of Taiz saw clashes between pro- and anti-Saleh armed factions and deadly crackdowns on peaceful demonstrators, while many areas in the country's tribal north saw sustained fighting as well. In the south, secessionists managed to use the ensuing power vacuum to emerge from the shadows, while al-Qaeda-affiliated militants were able to seize control of most of the southern province of Abyan by the beginning of June.

Fears of Yemen's impending dissolution spurred a series of Western-backed talks mediated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and sponsored by the Group of 10 (G10), a diplomatic group made up of the GCC states, the UNSC permanent members, and the EU delegation to Yemen. The United Nations Special Adviser on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, who was initially appointed in April 2011, facilitated the talks aimed at brokering a deal between Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) and the JMP,

<sup>1</sup> Most notably, Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a former regime strongman who controlled the First Armored Division, a key branch of the Yemeni military.

<sup>2</sup> Garrett Therolf, "Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh loses grip on several provinces", the Los Angeles Times, 30 March 2011, available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/mar/30/world/la-fg-yemen-divisions-20110330>.

sidelining other opposition groups, including the Houthis and the Southern Movement. This was the original sin of Yemen's internationally mediated transition: these talks effectively cast the uprising as a political crisis between elites, deepening tensions between various anti-Saleh groups as the JMP gained what many considered to be undue influence as the representative of "the opposition".<sup>3</sup>

Such efforts eventually bore fruit in November with the signing of the so-called GCC deal. Inked by representatives of the GPC and JMP in Riyadh, the agreement saw Saleh leave power in exchange for immunity from prosecution, simultaneously setting the country on a path that would lead to the formation of a unity government split between the GPC and JMP and the referendum-like election to a two-year term of the consensus candidate, Hadi, who had served as Saleh's vice president for 17 years.

While the agreement called for a national dialogue, it institutionalised the sidelining of non-establishment factions, fuelling deepening uncertainty even among the tentative optimism that surrounded Hadi's inauguration.<sup>4</sup> But by the time the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) got underway 13 months later, the cleavages in the Yemeni body politic had already grown visible. The participation of the Houthis and some factions of the Southern Movement in the NDC process led to a façade of inclusivity, but at the same time there was increasing radicalisation of the southern street and rising tensions between the Houthis and their tribal adversaries – largely aligned with the Islah party – north of Sanaa. Outside the elite circles in the capital, the NDC summit was largely dismissed as little more than political theatre: the bulk of southern delegates had little legitimacy on the ground, and the Houthi movement's delegates were overwhelmingly political figures rather than actual power brokers.<sup>5</sup> The talks were extended into the following year, reaching some form of a conclusion in January 2014, despite the resignation of the bulk of Southern Movement delegates and deep controversy over the decision of a six-region federal division of the country, which many factions accused Hadi and his international backers of unilaterally pushing.

The wake of the conclusion of the NDC saw the acceleration of long-building challenges facing Yemen's transition. Hadi grew increasingly autocratic, missing opportunities to broaden support and unnecessarily stoking opposition from previously (tenuously) supportive factions by filling new positions with his close allies and their followers and failing to fulfil expectations of announcing a new, more inclusive cabinet at the end of the NDC. Simultaneously, his apparent reliance on international support only heightened criticism of his lack of attention to Yemenis' concerns. The central government continued to fail in outreach efforts with the southern street. Saleh's backers continued to agitate from their new role as a self-proclaimed opposition party, lodging sharp – if not wholly undeserved – criticism of

<sup>3</sup> Ginny Hill, "Yemen unrest: Saleh's rivals enter elite power struggle", BBC News, 27 May 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13560514>.

<sup>4</sup> For their part, Benomar and his backers have repeatedly argued that the GCC deal's Implementation Mechanism provided a subtle means for providing comparative inclusion for previously marginalised groups.

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth look at the state of play on the eve of the NDC, see Adam Baron, "Yemen's Rocky Roadmap", *Foreign Policy*, 11 December 2012, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/10/yemens-rocky-roadmap/>.

the government's performance while being widely accused of undermining efforts to get things on track. Meanwhile, the Houthis continued to expand in Yemen's tribal north. Politically, the Houthis took advantage of their lack of representation in the cabinet to fault its performance, joining an alliance of convenience with the backers of the former president as both factions cast themselves as the only true opposition remaining in the country. The international community, by and large, appeared indifferent to mounting discontent, casting Yemen as a model and continuing to back the government unconditionally.

Underlying all developments was the continued inability to revive Yemen's moribund economy. Although Yemen's Central Bank has managed to keep the country's currency rather stable, already high rates of unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity have climbed despite significant economic and development support from EU states and others.

### Failed transitions and full political crisis

Things first came to a head as the summer of 2014 drew to an end. A theoretically sound but hastily implemented plan to remove fuel subsidies drew massive opposition, stoking pre-existing resentment of the government, which was widely considered to be corrupt and ineffective. This provided the Houthis with a "golden opportunity on a silver platter", as one Yemeni official called it, to call for mass demonstrations demanding the sacking of the government and the return of the subsidies.<sup>6</sup> The unrest spurred by the protests provided the Houthis with a casus belli, as they entered Sanaa and

6 Personal interview with a Yemeni official. All interviews were conducted between January 2014 and February 2015.

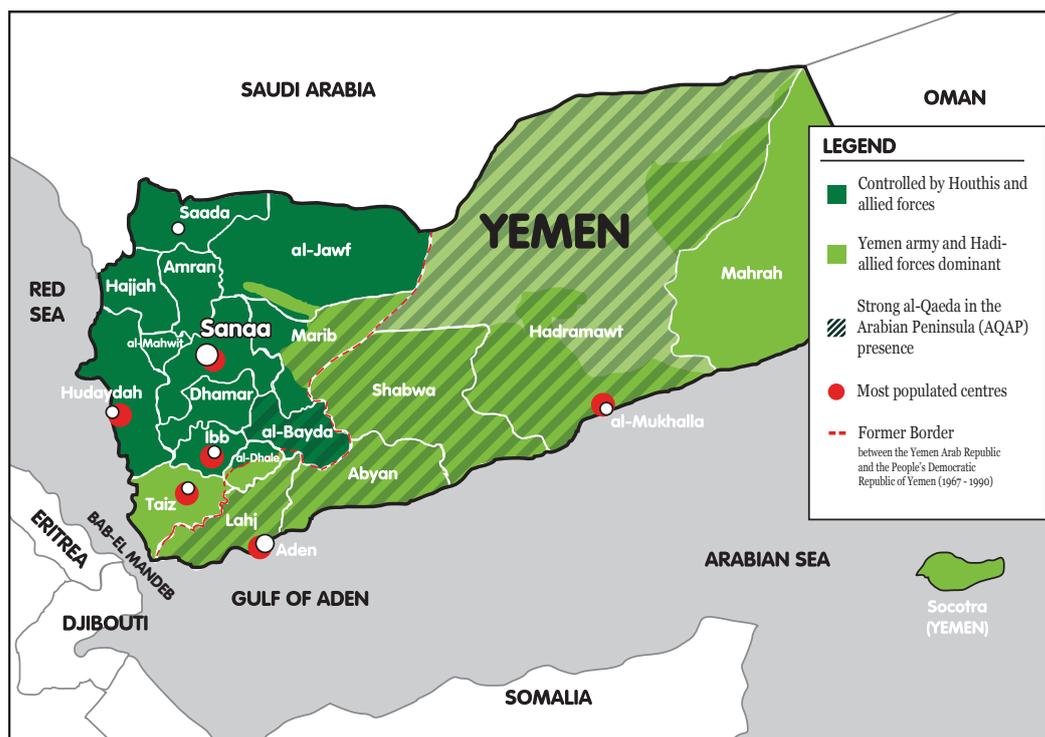
took control with minimum resistance; their adversaries in the Islamist Islah party withdrew after a series of clashes, while supporters of Saleh – who had cemented an alliance of convenience with the Houthis over the course of the NDC – stood by.<sup>7</sup> A Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA) was agreed, and the second new government in the space of roughly three years was formed in early November, largely staffed by technocrats and headed by the widely respected former prime minister Khaled Bahah, a political independent. The formation of the unity cabinet, made up largely of technocrats rather than partisan figures, was widely celebrated and ostensibly backed by the Houthis. But it also set a dangerous precedent. It was not peaceful protests nor negotiations that led to change, but the actions of an armed group; ultimately, in making such a move at such a time, it sent the message that violence and unilateral action pay. The Houthis have appeared to take this to heart, expanding their power with force more through broader swaths of the country, pushing for the appointment of their supporters in key positions and demonstrating an increasingly adversarial position with regard to the central government. Taking note of this, the UN levelled sanctions – which were adopted by the EU in December – against Saleh and two Houthi leaders.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in mid-January 2015, amid preparations to announce the completion of the drafting of the new constitution, Houthi rebels kidnapped Ahmed Awadh bin Mubarak, the president's chief of staff, and soon after descended on the presidential palace compound and the

7 Saleh and his backers largely cast their decision as a matter of remaining neutral in a conflict which they did not feel they were a party to.

8 See pages 365/60-69 of the Official Journal of the European Union, available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014R1352&from=EN>.

### Control over Yemen as of March 2015



Source: Author's information compiled from various interviews and other sources.

homes of a number of key officials. After being presented with a list of demands from the Houthis, the cabinet and the president resigned a week later, taking the Houthis by surprise – to say nothing of the rest of the country – and spurring an even larger political crisis.

As political negotiations sputtered, the Houthis unilaterally issued a “constitutional declaration” on 6 February, dissolving the parliament, forming a new transitional council that would form a presidential council that would rule Yemen for two years, and reshaping the higher security committee to include key Houthi figures. The Houthi decree has effectively left power in the hands of their Revolutionary Committee, headed by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, a former political prisoner who headed a committee that organised aid distribution by international NGOs in the province of Saada.

This has heightened many local and regional powers’ anxiety over the new status quo. Western embassies – citing “security concerns” – have closed in protest, saying they will not reopen until a power transfer deal is reached.<sup>9</sup>

The situation only grew more complicated on 21 February, as Hadi escaped house arrest in the capital and made it to Aden, retracting his resignation and declaring Sanaa “occupied”. He has since continued to conduct meetings and issue decrees as president, welcoming the reopening of the GCC states’ embassies in the southern port and meeting with the US and British ambassadors at the presidential palace. All the while, the Houthis have rejected his retraction, stressing that their constitutional declaration is irrevocable. Distrust and anxiety on all parts have deepened since, particularly in light of a series of deadly bombings against Zaidi Shi’a mosques on 20 March and clashes between pro- and anti-Hadi forces in Aden that same week. Notably, the Houthis have also taken clear steps to take the central city of Taiz which, until late March, was a hotbed of resistance to the group.

Thus, as it stands now, relations between political actors remain in flux and governed by a deep distrust. But a political deal remains in all parties’ interest: no faction can rule Yemen alone, and any attempts to do so are destined to plunge the country into a prolonged violent conflict. While the Houthis continue to send signals of being willing to reach a compromise, they have also maintained their refusal to go back on the constitutional declaration, continuing to consolidate their power as they engage in UN-brokered negotiations. Their unilateral actions have frustrated other political factions. Saleh’s GPC has loudly rejected the constitutional declaration, casting the dissolution of parliament as illegitimate.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the parties of the JMP have been caught between attempting to secure their place in the new order by compromising with the Houthis and avoiding angering their grassroots, who increasingly reject negotiations with the group.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Hadi has set up a rival capital in Aden.

9 Jane Marriott, “Yemen: the ball is in the Houthis’ court”, Global conversations (the Foreign & Commonwealth Office blog), 16 February 2015, available at <http://blogs.fco.gov.uk/janemarriott/2015/02/16/yemen-the-ball-is-in-the-houthis-court/>.

10 Personal interview with a GPC official.

11 Personal interview with a Yemeni activist with close ties to JMP officials.

Regardless of increasing tensions, the Houthis appear to be set to remain the dominant power in the rugged Yemeni provinces of Saada and Amran – and in the bulk of Hajjah and al-Jawf – for the foreseeable future. The Houthis have succeeded in cementing the loyalty of many key tribal leaders, simultaneously forcing the flight of their most powerful opponents – an achievement that has been bluntly demonstrated by their policy of destroying the homes of those they have defeated on the battlefield.<sup>12</sup>

But, as one heads south, the strength of the Houthis’ hold on power is increasingly fragile. They have failed to consolidate power in the central provinces of Dhamar or Ibb, let alone Taiz, Yemen’s most populous province, where street protests against the Houthis and the “coup” against Hadi continue on an almost daily basis. Notably, in the coastal province of Hudaydah, Houthi fighters have largely avoided the countryside, focusing on the key port and provincial capital, Hudaydah city. Simultaneously, the Houthis’ claims of an imminent defeat for al-Qaeda-allied tribal fighters in the province of al-Bayda have yet to come to fruition: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants continue to launch a seemingly never-ending stream of attacks on Houthi positions in the province, with limited success. In the central province of Marib, home to the bulk of the former North Yemen’s oil and gas resources, there is a standoff between the Houthis and well-armed tribes from an array of political backgrounds.<sup>13</sup>

The situation is even more complicated in the formerly independent south, where calls for a return to autonomy have grown all the more complicated in the wake of Hadi’s retraction of his resignation. The Southern Movement’s leadership appears to have been caught off guard; until now they have remained cautious, taking a wait-and-see attitude while continuing to raise demands for secession; this in part is due to the divided nature of the movement’s leadership, which includes figures from the struggle against the British and the south’s three-decade-long period of socialist rule. It is worth noting that even as the evaporation of the Yemeni state has provided them with a ready vacuum to fill, they have yet to take advantage, in part because they are still ridden by political, regional, and historical divisions.<sup>14</sup>

While discord and dysfunction in the south are not new, the past months have left areas south of Sanaa in relatively uncharted territory. Many in the populous provinces of Ibb and Taiz have expressed fears that they will be marginalised in any further political settlements, caught between more powerful forces in the far north and the south. And while Houthi expansion has stalled, further violence is likely. In large part, the powder keg of tensions that characterised areas north of Sanaa for most of 2013 and 2014 has simply been moved to the capital’s south.<sup>15</sup>

In short, Houthis hold the north but hegemony has yet to set in in the bulk of the country. The centre is contested between the rebels and forces deeply opposed to their

12 Personal interview with a Houthi-aligned tribal figure.

13 Personal interview with a Marib-based activist.

14 Peter Salisbury, “Tensions soar at southern Yemen protest camp”, *Al Jazeera English*, 29 November 2014, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/11/tensions-soar-at-southern-yemen-protest-camp-20141129142436169878.html>.

15 Personal interview with a Sanaa-based political analyst.

control, and the south provides a theatre for the various tensions between Houthi expansion, general popular unrest, and Hadi's attempt to reassert his legitimacy. And even areas to the south of Sanaa where the Houthis have worked to consolidate their power remain far from calm, as resentment and anxiety builds in many parts of the country.

### Influential neighbours

Yemen's politics have long been strongly influenced by its northern neighbour. The Saudis have played a key role in shaping Yemeni politics, backing former president Saleh, funding a number of Sunni Islamist factions, delivering salaries to swaths of Yemeni tribal leaders, and, eventually, playing a key role in backing the power transfer deal that paved the way for former president Hadi's accession to power.

Despite offering a great degree of political and financial support to Yemen under Hadi – indeed, effectively bailing out the central bank on multiple occasions – Saudi Arabia has gotten very little out of the investment, considering the collapse of the government and the dramatic rise of the Houthis, a group that the Saudis designated a terror organisation in March 2014.<sup>16</sup>

Still, the détente on the Saudi border with Houthi-controlled Saada suggests that the Saudis are willing to tolerate the group's presence – so long as they manage to keep the peace. Nonetheless, the Saudis have reportedly cut off all direct financial support to Sanaa in the wake of the Houthi takeover and have been strongly backing Hadi since his escape to Aden. While there are reportedly divisions in the Saudi royal family, the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs largely view the Houthis as spectres of Iranian encirclement, casting them as a key potential threat to their sovereignty and security.<sup>17</sup> This framework of the conflict in Yemen as a front in a regional battle between Sunni Arab states and Shi'a Iran, while an oversimplification, is increasingly adopted by the Gulf states' partners within the Sunni-majority country.

The lack of direct Saudi support has left the Yemeni government on the brink of insolvency. But regardless of whether the Saudis do, eventually, bail the Yemeni government out, Saudi Arabia is likely to continue efforts to ensure it retains a strong foothold in its southern neighbour. Notably, Saudi Arabia has been suspected of funding tribesmen in Marib, where opposition to the Houthis has led to a building military standoff, and other tribal areas of the country.<sup>18</sup>

Saudi Arabia is not alone in this – Kuwait has long held convivial relations with southern secessionist factions, while key secessionist leaders like Haidar Abu Bakr al-Attas have placed themselves between the kingdom and the United Arab Emirates. But with the return of key secessionist exiles close to Saudi Arabia, it appears that the Gulf states are treating the secession of the south as a back-up plan, using

longstanding relationships to groom a potential leadership. If Yemen continues to fracture along regional lines, full-on GCC support for a bid for independence in the south is well within the realm of possibilities.

This is in large part due to paranoia over the Houthis' ties to Iran. While largely overhyped – the Houthis are, ultimately, an indigenous Yemeni group with an autonomous leadership motivated almost wholly by local Yemeni issues – the Houthis' ties with Iran have, unsurprisingly, been the cause for widespread anxieties among the Gulf states. Oman has proved the exception, reportedly using its non-aligned position to increase its role as a mediator in negotiations between differing Yemeni political factions.<sup>19</sup> But while the Gulf states' focus on the Houthis' ties with Iran may be somewhat misplaced, there is little question that a Houthi-ruled or Houthi-influenced Yemen will see the centre of gravity shift towards Iran at the expense of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

This is likely to continue regardless of whether the Houthis formally take control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Iran has also built ties with some members of the GPC and leftist figures from the south of the country. These relationships have been strengthened as Iran has upped its economic and political cooperation with Sanaa, welcoming a delegation of government officials to Iran. The Islamic Republic's ultimate Yemen strategy appears unclear – although it appears that Iran aims to have a friendly government in Sanaa, albeit not one that is necessarily hostile to Saudi Arabia. And while hardliners within the Iranian government have heaped praise upon the Houthis' takeover of Sanaa, many have argued that Tehran has ultimately been pleasantly surprised by the extent and speed of the group's gains.<sup>20</sup>

Russia and China have also entered the picture, with their diplomatic staff holding numerous high-profile meetings with key Houthi political leaders. The Houthis' public moves towards Russia and China would appear to underline the shift away from the United States. Former president Hadi's closest ally, perhaps, was Washington, which saw the government as a key partner in the battle against the Yemen-based AQAP. Even if they have sent signals of a willingness to cooperate on some grounds, the acerbically anti-American Houthis' domination of the capital – and the institutions of the Yemeni armed forces – has nonetheless forced the US to dramatically scale back its involvement in Yemen, particularly since the closure of its embassy. Nonetheless, a number of drone strikes have occurred since the resignation of Hadi, indicating that the US will continue its controversial drone strikes against suspected AQAP targets.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, fears over the potential blockage of the strategic Babel-Mandeb strait, an oil transit chokepoint where the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean meet, have led to increasingly bellicose rhetoric from Egypt. Many have expressed worries that the Houthi rebels could directly seize control of the Yemeni side

16 Bruce Riedel, "Houthi victories in Yemen make Saudi Arabia nervous", *Al-Monitor*, 15 October 2014, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/houthi-yemen-victory-saudi-arabia-nightmare-iran.html>.

17 See David Hearst, "Blowback in Yemen: Houthi Advance is a Saudi Nightmare", the *Huffington Post*, 20 October 2014, available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-hearst/blowback-in-yemen--houthi\\_b\\_6015990.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-hearst/blowback-in-yemen--houthi_b_6015990.html).

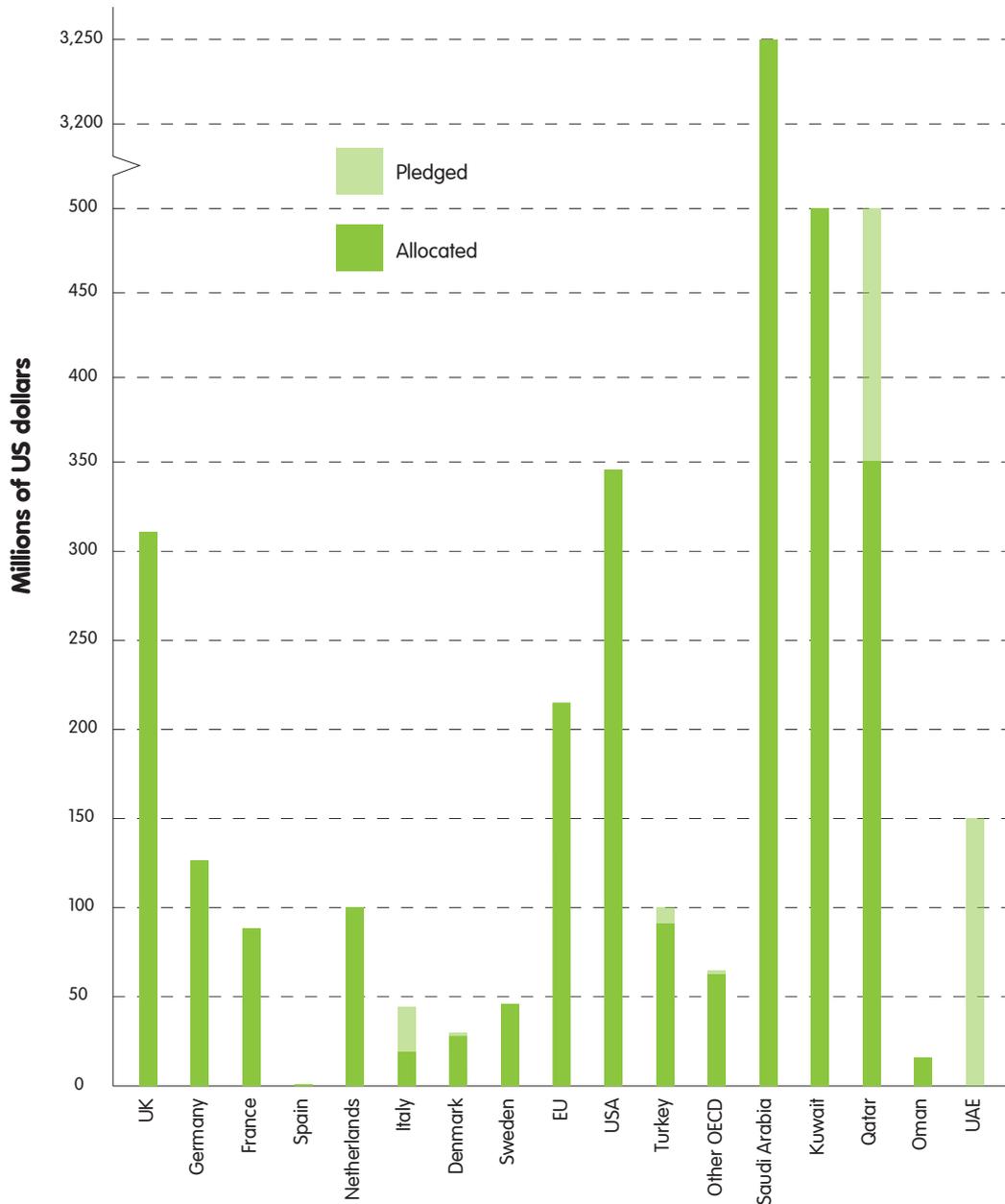
18 Personal interview with a Sanaa-based political analyst.

19 A number of Yemeni observers have gone as far as to suggest that Oman openly take a leading role in mediating between various political factions.

20 Personal interview with a European diplomat.

21 Spencer Ackerman, "White House says drone strikes in Yemen continue despite Houthi coup", *the Guardian*, 24 January 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/24/white-house-drone-strikes-yemen-houthi-coup>.

### Development aid to Yemen



Source: *The Executive Bureau for the Acceleration of Aid Absorption & Support for Policy Reforms*

of the strait, and Egyptian officials, most notably the head of the Suez Canal Authority, have explicitly threatened to intervene militarily in Yemen if the strait is blocked.<sup>22</sup>

#### The way forward

Hadi’s escape to Aden and retraction of his resignation – in addition to the Houthis’ reactions to said events – have pushed the country all the closer to the brink of sustained armed conflict. Yemen is undeniably at a crossroads: a failure of negotiations towards a power-sharing deal risks ushering in full-on civil war. Owing to the increasingly intractable nature of the political crisis, Europe must

prepare for the option of Yemen’s continued fragmentation – but it must also exert itself to help prevent it by supporting negotiations towards a power-sharing deal.

A power-sharing deal remains in all parties’ interest: the options facing Yemeni political factions are brokering a deal or plunging the nation into a prolonged civil war that is likely to devastate the already acutely impoverished country. But talks continue to be governed by a not wholly unreasonable spirit of mistrust, as all parties push forward as if working towards a zero-sum scenario based on the belief that their rivals are working in the same fashion. This has only been exacerbated in the aftermath of Hadi’s escape to Aden, as Houthi-affiliated governing bodies in Sanaa have dismissed Hadi and his allies as fugitives, while Hadi has accused the rebels – whom he cooperated with for months – of carrying

<sup>22</sup> “Egypt will intervene militarily if Yemen’s Bab al-Mandab strait is blocked: Suez Canal head”, *Ahram Online*, 4 February 2015, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/122219.aspx>.

out a coup. Yet no one will win from a bloody conflict. As the deepening regional fissures in the country suggest, no one faction is capable of dominating the whole of Yemen.

The shape of a new agreement has long been clear and, thankfully, the NDC outcomes present a valid framework for moving forward. The original sin of the GCC deal – that is, its privileging of traditional elites over all other parties – must be rectified by including groups such as the Houthis and previously marginalised southern factions as stakeholders along with mainstream political factions. The concerns the Houthis and other parties have with the new constitution – specifically, the six-region federal division of the country – must be addressed rather than swept under the carpet; this will likely require rewriting the federal map. The end of dialogue has raised expectations and the previously disenfranchised parties will want to see more accountable governance structures and a more balanced power-sharing formula in a revised constitution. A strict roadmap setting out the schedule for a constitutional referendum and presidential and parliamentary elections must be agreed to and adhered to. Any elections – and indeed even a referendum – will undoubtedly be messy. Yet elections should not be delayed indefinitely as conflicts will only be heightened as time goes on.

The closure of the EU Delegation and the embassies of Italy, Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom undeniably marks a setback. But Europe must not cease efforts to facilitate a political deal and, further, must not be seen as abandoning Yemen. Notably, humanitarian aid operations have by and large continued. The EU and its member states benefit from being viewed comparatively positively by most political factions, particularly in comparison to the UN's increasingly unpopular Yemen envoy. This allows Europe to continue to play a key – and positive – role in helping Yemen's political factions broker some deal to move forward.<sup>23</sup>

Looking ahead the key initial goal of foreign actors should be to aid in brokering some resolution to the current crisis. Much of the discourse on this has been problematic, focusing on the question of whether or not Europe or other actors should embrace the Houthis or return to backing Hadi. Such a question is deeply misplaced. In this crucial time, international actors – particularly Europe – must push for partnership and inclusive governance and take pains to maintain the appearance of neutrality. There is no either/or scenario: in order for Yemen to move forward, the Houthis, the Islah party, the GPC, Hadi, and other factions must come to a compromise agreement and must agree to some roadmap for the future. While clearly a solution cannot be imposed from outside, the mistrustful stakeholders in Yemen will need support (pressure and reassurance) to come to a resolution on the ultimate structure of a new governing agreement – whether that means a presidential council, Hadi's formal return with the addition of two or more vice presidents, or some other formula.

It is not just political coordination – as demonstrated by the embassy closures – that is key in this regard, but donor coordination as well. Contradictory moves with regard to humanitarian and political aid – whether in terms of carrots or sticks – risk undermining collective European policy on Yemen. But divisions within Europe regarding how to respond to rapidly shifting events risk damaging joint European interests in working towards Yemen's stability. While ostensibly on the same page, European policy in Yemen has often been stifled by key players' mixed priorities: Germany has maintained a focus on economic development, France has been perceived as focusing on its economic interests in the country, while the UK has focused on political matters and a security agenda that dovetails closer to that of the US than any other partner. Still, despite the challenges represented by these divisions, collective action can allow European nations to potentially shape Yemen's political path for the better.

It is worth noting that, among EU states, Germany's ties with the Houthis do present a unique opportunity for reaching out to the group; Abdulmalek al-Houthi's brother, Yahya, was granted asylum in Germany and lived there until returning from exile in 2013. Simultaneously, the UK continues to be looked upon positively by most key southern factions, maintaining many relationships dating back to its presence in Aden. London has assumed a leadership role through chairing the "Friends of Yemen", a grouping of international donors.

Regardless of anxieties regarding Iran's increased role in Yemen, simply condemning its influence is far from likely to spur constructive engagement from Tehran while appearing to confirm perceptions that the West is irredeemably biased towards the Gulf states. The EU is in a position to constructively engage with Tehran and try to persuade the Iranian government to help push the Houthis towards meaningful talks and a power-sharing agreement.

On the larger level, regardless of the deep flaws of the GCC deal, it is crucial that Europe continue to work with the Gulf states on Yemen, including in making the case for an inclusive settlement in Yemen that takes into account the concerns of traditional Gulf partners but gives the Houthis their place at the table. The Gulf states represent key potential partners in pressuring various factions to avoid potentially destructive acts. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE are increasingly expressing their opposition to a Yemen that has any strong Houthi role, yet they are also deeply concerned by the growing tumult in Yemen and have considerable financial investments at risk. Thus, European powers must stand firm on the necessity of an inclusive government for Yemen and press (and reassure) their Gulf allies on the point. If war and fragmentation can be avoided, then Europe will also quickly and meaningfully have to invest in securing the peace by helping Yemen address the root of the country's problems and its next greatest challenge: its moribund economy.

<sup>23</sup> For its part, the European Council has wisely stressed the importance of an inclusive government and a deal governed by consensus in its statements on Yemen, see Council Conclusions on Yemen, 09 February 2015, available at [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/yemen/press\\_corner/all\\_news/news/2015/20150209\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/yemen/press_corner/all_news/news/2015/20150209_en.htm).

## About the author

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