

Yemen: at a political crossroads

The instability in Yemen may seem to be just another sectarian conflict; however, the reality is much more complex. Yemen's pluralistic political environment is shaped by an explosive mixture of tribal, sectarian and national ambitions, which underpin the implementation of the national dialogue that concluded in January 2015.

What is at stake?

Looking at the ongoing conflict through the lens of [sectarian division](#) alone, in a country that has no history of such conflict, may serve only to further obscure the picture. As a matter of fact, it would mean 'playing the game' of [terrorist groups](#) such as AQAP and ISIL/Da'esh, for whom inflaming the narrative of religious conflict is yet another way to attract [new recruits](#), and ensure their legitimacy. Conversely, it is important to understand that the conflict is deeply rooted in sentiments of neglect, inequality and poverty, which have worsened the deep tribal and regional fractures that divide Yemeni society. Only a mutually acceptable [political solution](#) can overcome this stalemate. [The Peace and National Partnership Agreement](#), facilitated by the United Nations and signed on 21 September 2014, has failed to stabilise the country, but remains the only viable option for avoiding civil war. Therefore, the same goal motivates all actors involved in the conflict: to ensure the best starting position at the negotiating table for their constituents, when the time comes. At the same time, the international community's concerns about the situation in Yemen focus on two main points. First, Yemen is a stronghold for Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP), and increasingly for ISIL/Da'esh. Second, Bab el-Mandeb strait is a [chokepoint](#), connecting the world's most important shipping routes, including for the transport of an estimated 4% of the global [oil supply](#).

The al-Hadi government

President [Abd Rabbuh Mansour al-Hadi](#) came to power following the massive 2011 [demonstrations](#) against then-President [Ali Abdullah Saleh](#), whose government was criticised for rampant [corruption](#). In line with the [transition plan](#) brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and supported by UN Security Council [Resolution 2140](#) (2013), presidential elections took place in February 2012, with al-Hadi as a consensus candidate for an initial term of two years. On leaving office, Saleh was allowed to stay as a leader of the [General People's Congress](#) – the platform he later used to undermine al-Hadi's government – and together with his family was granted immunity from prosecution. As part of the transition process, the [National Dialogue Conference](#) (NDC) convened in March 2013, in an attempt to bring together different interest groups and put together the foundations for reform of Yemen's political system, including drafting the constitution – subject to a referendum – followed by presidential and parliamentary elections. In the absence of broader political support for the NDC's final document, and faced with a worsening economic situation, (resulting from cuts in fuel subsidies amongst other reasons) the Houthis – an insurgent movement from the north – used that political momentum to seize control of parts of Yemen, including the capital San'a, forcing al-Hadi to resign on 22 January 2015.

The Houthi movement

The Houthi movement is a Zaydi [religious clan](#) (also known as Ansar Allah, 'Partisans of God'), which mostly occupies the northern governorate of Sa'da, and has a long history of [insurgence](#) against Yemeni central governments. The Houthi family and its supporters believe that [Zaydi Shiism](#) – a branch of Shia Islam with legal traditions and religious practices [close](#) to Sunni Islam – has been marginalised in Yemeni society, and abandoned in their fight against increasing Salafi proselytising. As a minority within Yemeni society, the Houthis do not have enough leverage to effectively run the country alone. In this sense, their expansionist ambitions, under the leadership of [Abdul Malik al-Houthi](#), can be interpreted as an attempt to maximise

their leverage in advance of the next round of negotiations on the country's future. On 7 January 2015, the Houthis opposed the draft constitution presented by al-Hadi. Their primary interest is in redrawing Yemeni federal regions, to obtain a share in the country's oil production infrastructure, as well as, ideally, gaining access to the Red Sea and representation in new Yemeni governance structures. Following al-Hadi's resignation, and after weeks of failed negotiations to appoint a new government, on 6 February 2015, the Houthis proclaimed a [new governance plan](#), including the formation of a National Transitional Council and a five-member presidential council.

Southern independence

The national talks on Yemen's political transition – conducted under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy [Jamal Benomar](#) – collapsed on 9 February 2015, after the Muslim Brotherhood backed the Sunni Islamist [Al-Islah Party](#) and the [Nasserist Unionist People's Organisation](#) from Taiz left the negotiating table. Territorial advances made by [the Houthis](#) since have strengthened [secessionist](#) sentiment in oil-rich southern parts of the country. Fragile power-sharing arrangements between north and south, put in place by the 1990 unification plan, remained unsatisfactory, and led to the civil war in 1994 and further alienation in following years. The Southern Movement emerged from the 2007 wave of civil unrest against the Saleh government. It calls for more decentralisation and a greater share in revenues from oil extraction in the south. The ability of the Southern Movement to represent a united south is [constrained](#) by the lack of consensus between southern tribes, some of which carried out military [attacks](#) on government checkpoints before 2011. [Ali Salim al-Beidh](#) – one of the leaders of the 1994 revolt, and currently in exile in Lebanon – faces rival claims from tribal leaders in the southern and eastern governorates, in particular from the [Hadramout Tribes Confederacy](#) (HTC), who aim for more autonomy. Both parties, however, stand united against the central government in San'a, whom they view as occupiers.

Roads to stability

Although generally [criticised](#) for its lack of broader legitimacy, a compromise along the lines of the GCC-brokered plan remains the only viable, albeit [fragile](#), alternative on the table to avoid state failure and [civil war](#). With serious erosion of state authority, and deepening distrust on all sides, the primary challenge will be to draft a new constitution and reach a compromise over the country's federal division, in particular on a proposed partition into [six regions](#). Even though the international community recognises al-Hadi as the legitimate president of Yemen and may not feel comfortable with the Houthi rebels as a partner – especially in light of their suspected [connection to Iran](#) – they are bound to work together. The Houthis not only have the single [largest force](#) in the country, but they also occupy an area of Yemeni territory that serves as a 'buffer zone' between Saudi Arabia and terrorist organisations operating in Yemen. The southern tribes' position is less certain. The backing of regional powerhouses may prove crucial. Saudi Arabia is trying to influence the future balance of power, both in the country and the region, by leading the international military operation against the Houthis, which Iran opposes. In March 2015, the [Arab League Summit](#) endorsed the [Saudi-led military operation](#), and urged the Houthis to withdraw immediately from San'a, from government institutions, and to surrender their weapons to the legitimate authorities. Whilst finding the right channel for political negotiations is an important step, any future deal will need to build the institutions capable of addressing Yemen's dire security and economic situation, including corruption, its over-reliance on oil, and food and water shortages.

This is one of a trio of publications on Yemen; the others cover the [socio-economic situation](#) and the [security vacuum](#).

Figure 1: Yemen's political landscape – friends and foes

