

Yemen (2016-August-25th)

A limited time window snapshot of the ongoing situation in Yemen, as of 2016-August-25th.

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1. Analysis and Summary of Events

While **al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)** have suffered certain tactical defeats and setbacks in recent weeks, this is not believed to have noticeably weakened the organization's reach or strength. On the ground in Yemen, judging by reports available, the group continues to experience wide ranging popular support. AQAP continues to exhibit the ability to not only persevere -- but prevail -- despite losing previously held territories in the South of Yemen in battle against both competing militant groups and government forces. If placed in a recent historical perspective, we saw similar events transpire after the group lost strongholds and alliances in 2012.

For example; The militant wing of AQAP, Ansar al Sharia, carried out an attack targeting al Houthi officials in Sana'a on the 19th of August. The attack resulted in the death of 12-14 (official reports vary) al Houthi members. On the 21st of August, the group released a video which they stated showed their training facility, referred to as the "**Osama Bin Laden Compound**", and an attack on an al Houthi group outside of the Rada'a area of Yemen's al-Bayda governorate. On August 15, the group killed 5 Hadi-allied soldiers utilizing a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) in Shaqra. On the 18th of August, an AQAP fighter detonated a SVBIED, which killed 3 Hadi-affiliated soldiers.

These recent attacks demonstrate without a doubt that the group has preserved its capabilities to conduct asymmetrical attacks, despite the Hadi-affiliated offensive on its territories and infrastructure.

The Hadi-affiliated troop offensive on AQAP territory has included such activities as entering Shaqra, Zinjibar, and Ja'ar, to conduct clearing operations with the explicit purpose of disrupting AQAP-related activities in the areas. In addition to these activities, Hadi allied forces also entered the city of Lawder, in the Abyan Governorate, on the 17th of August with the intent of clearing it of AQAP resources.

The actions of AQAP are proving to be effective in preventing Hadi-allied forces from being able to effectively secure the disputed governorates. And with the effective insurgency tactic of not seeking to contest control of the cities directly continuing to render victories for the Jihadists militants, few indicators show that the bloodletting of Hadi-affiliated forces will stop or slow down. With its tactics being successful, AQAP has expanded its area of operations through pragmatic support for local militias fighting al Houthi-Saleh forces. It draws strength from its relations with local populations and benefits from the conditions created by Yemen's civil war.

The **international involvement** continues to expand in Yemen as well, with **U.S.** airstrikes in Shabwah and Ma'rib governorates resulting in the death of 11 AQAP militants on the 24th of August and **Russian** officials reaffirmed their association with the two warring main parties (Hadi and al Houthi-Saleh) in the country.

Russian involvement in the country continues to expand as they are engaging both the al Houthi-Saleh alliances and the Hadi-led government in order to expand on their influence in the Arabian Peninsula and to establish a firmer power base in the Gulf states overall. And while the Russians are holding off on creating more formal associations with the al Houthi-Saleh alliance, they are not taking it off the table. For instance, Russia rejected a UN Security Council pronouncement that was “in support of the political process” on August 3, citing language overtly critical of the al Houthi movement.

The Russian Foreign Ministry did urge parties, on 11th of August, to find common ground in order to establish a ceasefire and return to UN-led peace talks. Oleg Dremov, acting Russian Charge d’Affaires for Yemen, attended the 15th of August ceremony in Sana’a that formalized the Supreme Political Committee (SPC) by the Houthi-Saleh alliance. Mr. Dremov referred to the SPC as a “realistic authority” that “widens the base of popular legitimacy.”

And with the alliance continuing its path towards attempting to establish themselves as an internationally recognized and supported state entity, the Former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh offered the Russian government access to Yemen’s bases, airports, and ports on the 21st of August, citing shared interests in “combating terrorism.”

The **rocket attacks on Saudi Arabia** by al Houthi affiliated forces continue, utilizing “locally built rockets.” On the 15th of August, an article by the Saudi affiliated news outlet al Arabiya stated that **Iran** had, through its Islamic Republic News Agency (**IRNA**), admitted to supplying the al Houthi movement with Iranian-made **Zelzal-3** rockets and equipment. This statement was later denied by the IRNA. al Houthi and Iranian news outlets specify that the rockets being used by the al Houthi movement are “shorter, lighter, and less aerodynamic” than the Iranian-made conventional Zelzal-3 missile. And that these are, based on the al Houthi and IRNA official statements, made inside Yemen.

The Zelzal-3 rocket is otherwise used by other Iranian backed or affiliated groups throughout the Middle Eastern region, including **Hezbollah** in **Lebanon**, and **Syrian groups**.

al Houthi-Saleh fighters fired a supposedly locally-made Zelzal-3 rocket at areas in Najran city, Saudi Arabia on the 23rd of August, demonstrating their intent and continued ability to strike Saudi positions from their positions along the Yemeni border. It is not clear whether Iran or Iranian proxies like Hezbollah supported the construction of Zelzal-3 missiles inside Yemen. Iran has provided al Houthi forces with materiel support in the past. Certain international groups are investigating these matters, and a report on the matter is expected to be forthcoming in the months to come.

The Hadi-affiliated forces are unlikely to be able to retain their recent gains in the Tai'z areas, and reports indicate that they have become bogged down in the central areas of the country, with few gains having been made in recent weeks. While the forces attempt to advance alongside the Tai'z fronts, their advances appear to not result in any new terrain being held for long. And on the 22nd of August al Houthi-Saleh fighters launched counterattacks in Hidhran and al Rubayi areas, western Taiz city. The local support for al Houthi-Saleh is reportedly strong in the overtly Hadi Tai'z area, and the street fighting is reportedly fierce. Hadi-affiliated forces have also failed to advance along the frontlines in al Dhaleh, al Bayda, and Ma'rib governorates, despite fierce skirmishes with al Houthi-Saleh fighters in those areas.

The ongoing Hadi forces **preparations** for an **offensive** on the Northeastern part of **Sana'a** city, which is currently under control by the al Houthi-Saleh base, continues. Hadi forces managed to seize control of the mountain positions al Kuhl and al Qutb in the Nihm district on the 20th of August. The al Houthi militia has done several counterattacks to retake these positions, as they represent key strategic positions that can be used as artillery or mortar base positions against Sana'a. The Hadi Government's vice president, and former Lieutenant General, Mr. Ali **Mohsen** al Ahmar, visited the positions on the 15th of August and then indicated that a grander offensive against Sana'a is in the making. On the 11th of August Hadi-affiliated planes destroyed a main supply route bridge to Sana'a.

Further on, al Houthi-Saleh forces engaged with Hadi-allied forces in al Maslub district, al Jawf governorate, on the 19th of August. The district is located on the main road between Sana'a and the Saudi Arabian border, and is the natural location from which Hadi-allied reinforcements would arrive in preparation for an assault on Sana'a. On the 20th of August, an estimated 100,000 demonstrators attended a pro-al Houthi-Saleh rally in Sana'a.

2. A brief introduction to Yemen

Yemen, or اليَمَن / al-Yaman, is officially known as the Republic of Yemen (الجمهورية اليمنية / al-Jumhūrīyah al-Yamanīyah), and has, throughout its turbulent history, been at odds with the outside world, as well as internally for most of its existence. If outside forces have not sought to control the country, then inside forces have struggled to control it. Civil war could be construed as the default state of affairs in the country.

“Ruling Yemen is like dancing on the heads of snakes,”
(Ali Abdullah Saleh, Former President of Yemen, 28th March 2009)

The Civil War of Yemen began in 2015, and has raged fiercely since. The Yemeni Revolution, which began in mid-January 2011, was a direct response to the regional movement known in the West as “The Arab Spring”, which, in turn, spurred on an internal instability that enabled the al Houthi clans’ long-standing insurgency to gain a strategic advantage in the country. This strategic advantage peaked in the al Houthi movement’s capture of the capital, Sana’a, in the fall of 2014. In recent years, the involvement of strategic partners have turned the conflict from a local one to a global one. In early 2015, the creation of a coalition was spearheaded by Saudi Arabia to counter the perceived threat of the Shia interests that the Iranian backed and supported al Houthi tribe and clan represented.

Yemen was once famed for its strategical value as a sea and trading port for the European empires, in particular the British Empire, and its lucrative coffee trade. As it is making headlines today for what is often considered a mere proxy war between regional power players, and their unlucky allies, along with its links with radical Islam, it is important to remember that the nation has a long history of conflict.

Divided in the nineteenth century between Ottoman and British spheres of influence and by local connections which reached as far afield as Java, Yemen had a long tradition of imagined unity which reached political fruition in the form of a single state only in 1990. North Yemen, under Zaydi Imamate, was the one fully independent Arab government after World War 1. South Yemen was a British protectorate, just like Palestine at the time. Both Yemens were at the centre of Arab politics in the 1960s, and the South then became the Arab world’s only Marxist state; the North was the site of intense Saudi interest.

Yemen’s belated union in May 1990, as the Yemen Republic, was shaken by the Gulf crisis and by civil war in 1994.

Yemen is often referred to as the forgotten Gulf State; with a uniquely rich history and culture, it is well-deserved to be better understood by the world. Often forgotten, and only remembered for its conflicts, the West has been neglecting Yemen at its own peril. For centuries, a thorn in the side of any foreign power seeking to exploit its valuable location, the most beautiful but also the poorest state in the Arab world is dominated by its tribal makeup, increasingly fractious and an ideal haven for radicals.

Background of Author

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