

NEWS COMMENT

YEMEN CRISIS RAISES REGIONAL POLITICAL, ECONOMIC STAKES

WITH LOW-LEVEL TENSIONS ERUPTING INTO NATIONAL UPHEAVAL, RECENT EVENTS IN YEMEN HAVE PUT THE COUNTRY AT THE CENTER OF ATTENTION AS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STAKES IN THE REGION ARE RAISED.

by Chloé Benoist



While the increasingly desperate situation in Yemen has consistently failed to make international headlines, the recent overthrow of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi by the Ansarullah militia has upset the precarious balance of power and caused growing concern, as regional and global actors have scrambled to intervene and

safeguard their interests.

Following a 2011 uprising which overthrew veteran strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh, Hadi officially became president in February 2012 after elections in which he was the only candidate. While his was a new face at the top, as a former vice-president under Saleh, Hadi was seen by many as a continuation of the regime approved by the Gulf Cooperation Council. When Ansarullah, a group also known as the

Houthis after its leading family, took over the capital Sanaa in September 2014, the event cast a light on the divisions opened up within Yemen since 2011.

Four months after taking the capital, Houthis, who are members of the Zaydi offshoot of Shiism, surrounded the presidential palace in Sanaa on January 25, leading to the resignation of Hadi and his prime minister, Khaled Bahah. After a month under house arrest, Hadi staged

WHO'S WHO?

SOME OF THE MAIN YEMENI POLITICAL ACTORS WHO COULD CHANGE THE COURSE OF EVENTS



ANSARULLAH LEADER
Abdu Al Malik Al Houthi



TITULAR PRESIDENT OF YEMEN
Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi



FORMER PRESIDENT OF YEMEN
Ali Abdullah Saleh



LEADER OF AL QAEDA IN YEMEN
Naser Al Wahishi

a dramatic escape to his hometown of Aden, the country's main southern city. From there, he rescinded his resignation, claiming it had been made under duress. Southern separatists, who oppose the 1990 unification of Yemen, have come out in support of Hadi even though they boycotted the 2012 elections. While Hadi's shaky position has been boosted by their backing, it remains unclear whether he will speak out in favor of southern secession.

The situation has since worsened. The Houthis turned south to Aden in late March of this year after the group called for general mobilization against Hadi and his supporters, making an all-out armed confrontation increasingly inevitable with each passing day. The situation was particularly unstable as BOLD went to press, but it seems that Hadi's grip on power has slipped, as it was confirmed that he had fled again, this time to Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, Sunni Islamist militants have taken advantage of the chaos to move against Yemen's Shiites, who make up roughly half the population. On March 20, suicide attacks killed at least 142 and wounded 345 in two mosques mainly frequented by Shiites in Sanaa. The attacks were claimed by a group calling itself the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State, which views Shiites as heretics.

The United Nations has begun efforts to broker peace talks between the political opponents. Gulf Arab powers have come out publicly in support of Hadi, with the Arab League calling the Houthi takeover a "coup."

Although Saudi Arabia initially claimed it had amassed troops along its border

with Yemen for purely defensive purposes, on March 25 it began an air-strike campaign in the country, leading an international military coalition of mostly Arab countries, backed by the United States.

Oil prices have ticked up since the campaign began, due to fears that the conflict would impact the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, through which an estimated 3.8 million



RECENT EVENTS CAST A LIGHT ON THE DIVISIONS OPENED UP WITHIN YEMEN SINCE 2011.



barrels of crude and oil products transit every day. An employee of insurance provider Clements Worldwide, Smita Malik, told Reuters: "Because of recent events, Yemen is now really in a category where no one is binding new business. Instead they are working on evacuation and business interruption for existing clients who are abandoning assets."

As president, Hadi has been a reliable ally to Western powers. He allowed the United States to conduct its controversial drone war in the country targeting suspected Al-Qaeda militants, which has led to the death of numerous Yemeni ci-

vilians. Even though the US has closed its embassy in the country since the Houthi takeover, it hasn't suspended raids.

However, a Washington Post report in mid-March revealed that more than \$500 million in US military aid to the Yemeni government could not be accounted for by the Pentagon, raising the possibility that these weapons might fall into the hands of Houthis or Islamist militants.

Former president Saleh, on the other hand, is thought to be backing the Houthis in a possible bid to reclaim power for himself. Gulf powers have accused Iran, Saudi Arabia's regional arch-foe, of providing support to the Houthis, even though the Islamic republic has officially denied doing so.

Ibrahim Sharqieh, deputy director of the Brookings Doha Center, told The New York Times on March 25 that he foresaw Aden falling under Houthi control in the very near future. "But that will just set the stage for a prolonged conflict or civil war, because the Houthis have not been able to maintain order even in the areas they have controlled since last year," Sharqieh said.

Hadi and the southern separatist-backed National Salvation Alliance, Houthis and Islamist militant groups are the main local actors likely to influence the course of events in the country, with foreign powers likely backing one or the other based on their interests.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Yemeni population is likely to suffer the consequences of the deteriorating political and security situation on top of their already difficult living conditions. According to the World Bank, at least 54.5% of Yemenis lived in poverty in 2012. **B**