



The Arab Gulf States
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the War but Might Lose What Comes Next

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About the Author

Gregory D. Johnsen is a non-resident fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. He has been a Peace Corps volunteer in Jordan, a Fulbright Fellow in Yemen, and a Fulbright-Hays Fellow in Egypt. In 2013-14 he was selected as BuzzFeed's inaugural Michael Hastings National Security Reporting Fellow where he won a Dirksen Award from the National Press Foundation and, in collaboration with Radiolab, a Peabody Award. He has a PhD from Princeton University and master's degrees from Princeton and the University of Arizona. Johnsen is the author of *The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (W.W. Norton), which has been translated into multiple languages. From 2016-18 he served on the Yemen Panel of Experts for the United Nations Security Council. In 2019, he served as the lead writer for the United States Institute of Peace's Syria Study Group. His writing on Yemen and terrorism has appeared in, among others, The New York Times, The Atlantic, and Foreign Policy.

Executive Summary

After more than eight years of a devastating war in Yemen, one thing is clear: The Houthis remain in control of Sanaa. Saudi and Emirati airstrikes have not chased them back to the mountains, and international pressure has not forced them to capitulate at the bargaining table. In that sense, the Houthis have won the war. At this late date, the group is unlikely to be militarily or diplomatically forced out of Sanaa.

There are three major reasons for the Houthis' victory. First, the group has been more flexible and agile than its opponents, and it has done a better job of turning enemies into allies, as opposed to the Saudi-led coalition, which has often turned allies into enemies. Second, the Houthis benefitted from a string of poor policy decisions and battlefield blunders by their opponents in the United Nations-recognized government of Yemen as well as by the Saudi-led coalition.

Finally, the Houthis took advantage of the fragmentation among their opponents. This was the case both domestically as well as regionally. On the domestic front, the various armed groups affiliated with the U.N.-recognized government, such as the Southern Transitional Council and Islah Party, had different objectives and, at times, came into conflict with one another. Regionally, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pursued different end states and fought different wars. All of this allowed the Houthis to remain in control in Sanaa, holding territory, and, ultimately, achieving victory.

However, the Houthis have created significant challenges for themselves that will be difficult to overcome in a postconflict scenario. The three most pressing pertain to governance, the economy, and domestic allies. The Houthis have not governed effectively or transparently, they lack the economic base to support an independent state, and they have alienated power centers, particularly many of Yemen's tribes, whose support they may soon need. In short, the Houthis will be more vulnerable after the full withdrawal of Saudi and Emirati forces than they have been at any time during the war.

Introduction

In the late spring and early summer of 2014, Houthi fighters began advancing south out of Saada governorate and into neighboring Amran governorate. At the time, the Houthis, a Zaydi-Shia revivalist group that had fought six successive wars against Yemen's central government between 2004 and 2010, claimed the offensive was a private affair. The group wasn't interested in fighting the government, it said, only tribesmen and militias that had participated in the six Houthi wars.¹

In many ways, this was the same strategy the Houthis had implemented a year earlier in Saada: eliminate local rivals, consolidate control, and expand their reach. In late 2013, while the rest of Yemen was focused on the conclusion of the National Dialogue Conference that followed the upheaval of the Arab Spring and the resignation of Yemen's long-serving president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Houthis were battling their local Salafi rivals in Dammaj. Weeks of fighting

¹ Ruwanthika Gunaratne and Gregory D. Johnsen, "When Did the War in Yemen Begin?," *Lawfare*, June 28, 2018.

culminated in January 2014, when the two sides signed a peace agreement overseen by President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who had just extended his two-year transitional term for another year. The agreement called for the Salafis to be evacuated from Saada, which left the Houthis the *de facto* power on the ground.

The Houthis spent the first half of 2014 consolidating control over their home governorate of Saada and mopping up small pockets of Salafi fighters. Then, in June, the group began moving south. It is unclear, even now, what the Houthis' strategic goals were at the time. Were they only looking for some revenge and score settling after six brutal rounds of fighting from 2004-10, or was the group, from the very beginning, looking toward Sanaa and reversing the 1962 revolution, which overthrew Yemen's last Zaydi imam and established a republic in North Yemen?

Weeks of fighting culminated in January 2014, when the two sides signed a peace agreement overseen by President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who had just extended his two-year transitional term for another year.

Regardless of their intent, the Houthis quickly came into conflict with government forces, particularly those supported by Islah, a Yemeni political party with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

By early June, the Houthis were fighting the 310th Brigade, a government unit led by General Hamid al-Qushaybi. The general had participated in the six Houthi wars and was a close ally of Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who had overseen the wars.² Worried about the possibility of Houthi gains, Hadi ordered the air force to carry out strikes on the group and dispatched reinforcements to Amran.³ Notably, however, while four battalions were dispatched from Sanaa to Amran, none of the four reached the front lines, and all refused orders to participate in the fighting. The United Nations Panel of Experts later claimed, based on anonymous sourcing, that the Republican Guards – which had once been commanded by Saleh's eldest son and were still loyal to Saleh – ordered “other army units not to fight with the Islah party against the Houthis in Amran.”⁴

Without reinforcements, the government forces were soon overwhelmed. On July 8, the Houthis killed Qushaybi and took control of Amran city, the capital of the governorate. The U.N. Security Council issued a statement, demanding that the Houthis “withdraw and relinquish control of Amran and hand over weapons and ammunition pillaged in Amran to the national authorities loyal to the Government.”⁵ But it was too late. The Houthis had taken Amran, and, once again, the group was looking to expand. South of Amran the road to Sanaa lay open.

² “Yemen: Amran Conflict, Situation Report No. 5,” *Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Yemen*, July 9, 2014.

³ “Yemeni Airstrikes End Ceasefire in Flare-Up of Houthi Rebellion,” *Reuters*, June 3, 2014.

⁴ “Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen (2014),” *U.N. Security Council*, February 20, 2015, 29. Note: While the author of this paper served on the Yemen Panel of Experts from 2016-18, he was not a member of the panel when this report was written.

⁵ “Security Council Press Statement on the Fighting in Yemen,” *U.N. Security Council*, July 11, 2014.

This paper examines what happened after the Houthis marched into Sanaa in September 2014. It argues that the Houthis have all but won the war in Yemen – they are unlikely to be militarily or diplomatically uprooted from Sanaa – but in doing so they may have set themselves up to lose in a postconflict scenario.

How the Houthis, a ragtag group that in 2004 looked to be on the verge of extinction, won what has been, up to this point, an eight-year, multifaceted conflict is one of the more intriguing questions to emerge from the war in Yemen. This paper argues that there are three primary reasons for the Houthis' victory. First, the group has benefited from its flexibility, particularly in turning enemies into allies. Second, the Houthis benefitted from the poor decision making and a series of unforced errors by opponents. Finally, the Houthis were able to take advantage of the fragmented and fractured nature of their enemies. The anti-Houthi coalition, even under the recently formed Presidential Leadership Council, is a deeply divided alliance whose members, at times, appear more eager to fight one another than they are to combat the Houthis.⁶

In winning the war, however, the Houthis have created a number of conditions that will make it difficult for the group to maintain its current degree of dominance in the northern highlands. For instance, the Houthis have consistently portrayed the conflict as a war of aggression on Yemen waged by outside countries, creating a “rally around the flag” effect. But when Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates fully withdraw from Yemen, the Houthis will be required to effectively govern. And if, as appears likely, they are unable to do so, they will face significant domestic unrest. Further complicating any future plans of governance, the Houthis have alienated several groups in northern Yemen that they may need in the future. Perhaps the most powerful of these are the tribal sheikhs.

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For centuries, there has been a back-and-forth battle for dominance in Yemen's Zaydi highlands, which is best described as sayyids versus sheikhs. For much of Yemen's history, the sayyids – descendants of the Prophet Muhammad – had the upper hand, as sayyids ruled the state as Zaydi imams. The 1962 revolution in Yemen, which overthrew the Zaydi imamate and established a republic, reversed that trend. Tribal sheikhs, who were culturally Zaydi, such as Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the head of the Hashid tribal confederation and Islah as well as the speaker of parliament, who died in 2007, became powerful, while Zaydi sayyids were discriminated against by the state. Over the last eight years the balance of power has shifted once more, and sayyids are once again the dominant class in northern Yemen.

As the Houthis increasingly struggle to govern – and already Abdul Malik al-Houthi has described calls to pay the salaries of civil servants as code for “sowing unrest and chaos”⁷ – the group will need to broaden its coalition of domestic allies in the north.

⁶ For more on the formation of the Presidential Leadership Council, see: Ben Hubbard, “[Yemeni Leader Hands Power to New Body as His Saudi Backers Seek to End War](#),” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2022; For more on the infighting within the Presidential Leadership Council, see: Gregory D. Johnsen, “[Shabwa and the Cracks in the Foundation of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council](#),” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, August 19, 2022.

⁷ Baraa Shiban, [Twitter post](#), August 24, 2022, 11:31 a.m.

Unfortunately for the Houthis, in their rush to seize, hold, and remake government in northern Yemen, they have attacked or alienated many of the groups and individuals whose support they will soon need. If they fail to build and consolidate additional support, the Houthis will likely become more repressive, which may become counterproductive, uniting their domestic enemies against a common cause. In such a future, the Houthis would be vulnerable in a way they haven't been over the past eight years of war.

Part I: Transforming Enemies Into Allies

Late 20th century politics in Yemen was characterized by rapid and dramatic shifts in alliances: Former rivals became allies, while onetime friends found themselves on opposing sides. President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled North Yemen from 1978-90 and a unified Yemen from 1990-2012, institutionalized this process, which he described as “dancing on the heads of snakes.”⁸ In Saleh's view, the state was not strong enough to impose its will on all of Yemen's various groups and parties, so the state had to align itself with and empower weaker groups to undermine the rise of powerful rivals.⁹ For Saleh, this meant a constant calibrating of power to determine which groups needed to be checked and which of his rivals could be safely supported.

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In early 2014, Saleh was no longer president, having been replaced by his longtime deputy, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, in February 2012 in the wake of the Arab Spring protests. But unlike other so-called “presidents for life,” such as Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, Saleh didn't go into exile, prison, or the grave. Instead, as part of a compromise deal, Saleh agreed to step down in exchange for immunity. The idea, which the United States, the U.N., and Saudi Arabia supported, was that Saleh's resignation would prevent bloodshed and a civil war.¹⁰ In practice, however, the agreement only delayed the war.

Saleh went home a “private citizen” in the words of one U.S. official, but while he was no longer president, Saleh was still the head of a powerful political network and eager for revenge.¹¹ As the National Dialogue Conference limped to a finish in 2013 and the Houthis returned to Saada, Sanaa dissolved into a four-sided standoff. On one side was Hadi, the newly named president, and the Yemeni government; on another was Saleh, the former president, and his network and loyalists within the military; the third side was Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a general

⁸ “Newsmaker: Yemen's Saleh, ‘Dancing on the Heads of Snakes,’” *Reuters*, September 23, 2011.

⁹ For more on this, including Saleh's backing of the Houthi's first leader, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, during the mid-1990s, see: Gregory D. Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

¹⁰ “United States Defends Immunity Law for Yemeni President Saleh,” *Associated Press*, January 10, 2012.

¹¹ Christopher Dickey, “America Welcomes Yemen Elections, Remains Wary of al Qaeda's Influence,” *The Daily Beast*, February 21, 2012.

who broke with Saleh during the Arab Spring protests;¹² the fourth side was represented by the al-Ahmar tribal family (no relation to Ali Mohsen), which fought against Saleh during the Arab Spring.¹³

The Houthi offensive into Amran in early 2014 presented Saleh and the Houthis with an opportunity to collaborate and cooperate against common enemies. At the top of both their lists was Ali Mohsen, the general who broke with Saleh in 2011 and was responsible for much of the fighting and destruction in Saada during the Houthi wars. Next came the al-Ahmar tribal family, which fought against Saleh in 2011 and had supplied many of the tribal militias that fought the Houthis between 2006 and 2010. Finally, there was Hadi, who had replaced Saleh, removed his relatives from power, and ordered the airstrikes against Houthi forces in Amran.

Both sides needed the other. Saleh needed the Houthis and their fighters to tip the balance of power against Ali Mohsen and the al-Ahmar family, while the Houthis needed Saleh and his military allies to gain access to Sanaa to go after Ali Mohsen and the al-Ahmar family. Conveniently, both Saleh and the Houthis were able to overlook years of conflict that included Saleh's ordering of the arrest of Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi in 2004 and his subsequent refusal to turn Hussein's body over to his family for burial.¹⁴ Instead, both acknowledged that times had changed and that, just as in the mid-1990s, Saleh and the Houthi family could be allies again.

When the Houthis marched into Sanaa in September 2014, it was Saleh who paved the way, ordering his soldiers to stand down and allow the Houthis inside.¹⁵ This alliance of convenience between Saleh and the Houthis remained an open secret for nearly two years, before it was formalized in July 2016 with the formation of the Supreme Political Council, which included five members nominated by Saleh and five by the Houthis.¹⁶

Perhaps not surprisingly, the alliance eventually collapsed in spectacular fashion during a bloody four-day street battle in Sanaa in December 2017, which ended with the Houthis' execution of Saleh.¹⁷ By that point, of course, the Houthis were well entrenched in Sanaa and no longer needed Saleh. Indeed, by then, Saleh had become more of a threat than an asset.

Part II: Unforced Errors

Throughout the war in Yemen, Hadi, the Saudi-led coalition, and, more recently, the Presidential Leadership Council have all made a series of unforced errors and policy mistakes that gave the Houthis an advantage and, ultimately, will allow them to win the war. These mistakes range from minor ones, such as Hadi's unwillingness to remain in Yemen, to major ones like

¹² Hakim Almasmari and William Branigin, "Saleh Suffers String of Major Defections After Protesters Gunned Down in Yemen," *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2011.

¹³ Peter Finn, "Elite Yemeni Families at Center of Clashes," *The Washington Post*, June 2, 2011.

¹⁴ Gregory D. Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012); and Adel al-Khader, "Yemenis Bury Remains of Founder of Houthi Rebel Group," *Reuters*, June 5, 2013.

¹⁵ Iona Craig, "What the Houthi Takeover of Sanaa Reveals About Yemen's Politics," *Al Jazeera America*, September 25, 2014.

¹⁶ "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen (2016)," *U.N. Security Council*, January 31, 2017, 11-12.

¹⁷ "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen (2017)," *U.N. Security Council*, January 26, 2018, 11.

Hadi's firing of his vice president, Khaled Bahah, in 2016 and the Saudi-led coalition's seeming disregard for civilian casualties in Yemen. But three of these errors stand out as particularly significant, coming at key moments in the conflict, and each has had a significant impact on the war's trajectory and outcome. The first of these errors facilitated the Houthis' entrance into Sanaa. The second allowed the Houthis the time and space to cement their rule in Sanaa. The third created a de facto partition of the country, effectively dividing it into Houthi-controlled areas and non-Houthi areas, in ways that decisively benefitted the Houthis and helped ensure their military victory.

In late July 2014, following the Houthi takeover of Amran, Hadi drastically reduced fuel subsidies in hopes of balancing the budget. At the time, Yemen was spending roughly \$3 billion a year, or a third of its revenue, on subsidies.¹⁸ Hadi, aware that the lifting of subsidies in Yemen was generally met with protests, decided not to announce the decision beforehand.

Instead, on the evening of July 29, the price of a liter of fuel went up by 60%, while a liter of diesel increased by 90%.¹⁹

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Not surprisingly, the unexpected price hike sparked widespread protests in Yemen. Perhaps just as predictably, the Houthis manipulated and stoked public anger, much as they did during the Arab Spring protests in 2011, calling for mass protests and public sit-ins.²⁰ In late August, Abdul Malik al-Houthi called for "civil disobedience" and an expansion of the protests, calling Hadi's government "corrupt."²¹

At the same time, under the cover of these protests, Houthi fighters infiltrated the tent encampments established around Sanaa to protest the lifting of the subsidies. By September 21 all the pieces were in place: Hadi's government was deeply unpopular, Houthi fighters were at the gates of Sanaa, and Saleh loyalists within the military stepped aside. As Iona Craig, a British journalist who was in Sanaa at the time, recalled, "Houthi gunmen walked up to government institutions across the city and asserted their control without a shot being fired."²² Eight years on, the Houthis have yet to relinquish control of Sanaa.

In March 2015, six months after the Houthi takeover of Sanaa, while Houthi and Saleh forces were pushing south toward Aden, Saudi Arabia declared that it had formed a coalition of countries to intervene in Yemen, repel the Houthi advances, and restore Hadi to power.

Almost immediately, Saudi Arabia and its primary partner, the UAE, were on different pages. Despite a joint command center in Saudi Arabia, the two were never able to settle on a common strategic approach to the war in Yemen.²³ Partly this was the result of differing realities in

¹⁸ Mohammed Ghobari, "Tens of Thousands of Yemeni Houthis Protest Against Fuel Reform, Government," *Reuters*, August 18, 2014.

¹⁹ Peter Salisbury, "Yemen Rage Boils Over 'Unliveable' Price Hike," *Al Jazeera*, August 1, 2014.

²⁰ "Yemen President Dismisses Government to End Stand-Off," *BBC*, September 2, 2014.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Iona Craig, "How Yemen's Capital Sanaa was Seized by Houthi Rebels," *BBC*, September 27, 2014.

²³ "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen (2016)," January 31, 2017, 14.

different parts of the country; and partly this was driven by the ways the two armies were structured and built. The UAE's military, which General James Mattis once referred to as "Little Sparta," was relatively small but had significant on-the-ground experience in Afghanistan and throughout the broader region, where it frequently trained and conducted joint raids with U.S. forces.²⁴ The Saudi military, on the other hand, was big, bloated, and enamored of high-tech weapons. This shaped how each country saw and fought the war.

By the time Saudi Arabia announced its coalition and the beginning of combat operations in Yemen, Houthi and Saleh forces had overrun al-Anad air base just north of Aden, where U.S. troops had been stationed to fight al-Qaeda, and were beginning to filter into the southern port city. The UAE, which took responsibility for much of Yemen's southern and western coasts, inserted troops into the city, while Saudi Arabia carried out airstrikes in the north.²⁵

Both eventually achieved their initial aims. By July, the UAE, aided by local resistance forces, had pushed the Houthi and Saleh elements just north of Taiz, where the battlelines would remain largely static for the next eight

years. Similarly, Saudi Arabia quickly *In Yemen, no side has clean hands.*

established air dominance over Yemen, grounding or destroying the few planes in Yemen's air force and shutting Sanaa International Airport (which had both a civilian and military side), and was unopposed in bombing runs over the country. Within the first few months of the war, Saudi Arabia succeeded in destroying most of the known military targets in Houthi-held areas.

The Houthis – who were at heart a guerilla organization – adjusted; Saudi Arabia did not. The Houthis and Saleh moved arms manufacturing and military training underground and hid weapons caches in civilian areas. Saudi Arabia, along with the UAE, continued to carry out airstrikes. But instead of hitting military targets as they did during the opening weeks of the war, Saudi-led coalition pilots began increasingly striking civilian targets, which drew significant international attention and outrage.²⁶ The Houthis, as the U.N. and other international organizations documented, were also guilty of human rights violations, including torture, forced disappearance, and sexual assault. But as a guerilla movement and not a nation-state these violations attracted much less media attention. In Yemen, no side has clean hands.

Eventually, Saudi Arabia was faced with a choice about how to conduct the war in Yemen. It had, essentially, three options. First, it could give up, withdraw, and let the Houthis legitimize the coup. Second, it could insert ground troops into northern Yemen for what would likely be a long and bloody war with no guarantee of success. Third, it could continue to carry out airstrikes and hope that they would eventually overwhelm and uproot the Houthis.

²⁴ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "In the UAE, the United States has a Quiet, Potent Ally Nicknamed 'Little Sparta,'" *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2014.

²⁵ Thomas Juneau, "The UAE in Yemen: From Surge to Recalibration," *Lawfare*, October 11, 2020.

²⁶ Ewen MacAskill and Paul Torpey, "One in Three Saudi Air Raids on Yemen Hit Civilian Sites, Data Shows," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2016; see also, Edward Wong, "U.S. Fails to Assess Civilian Deaths in Yemen, Internal Report Says," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2022.

Saudi Arabia, of course, decided on option three: airstrikes. But as the civilian casualties mounted throughout 2016 and 2017, this approach cost Saudi Arabia the public relations war, alienated large parts of Congress, and prompted the suspension or cancelation of large weapons sales,²⁷ while having negligible impact in altering the military balance of forces.

Within Yemen, this heavy reliance on airstrikes did two other things, both of which allowed the Houthis to consolidate and deepen their hold over the northern highlands. First, the extraordinarily high number of civilian casualties increased local anger against Saudi Arabia and muted local resistance and anger against the Houthis. Second, absent the threat of a significant ground invasion, the Houthis were able to concentrate on consolidating their rule in Sanaa.

From September 2016 until late 2017, Yemen operated without a functioning central bank.

If the first error aided the Houthis' entrance into Sanaa, and the second error helped the group strengthen its hold on Sanaa, the third error institutionalized that control through a de facto partition of the country.

In September 2016, against strong international advice, Hadi moved Yemen's central bank from Sanaa, where it was under Houthi control, to Aden, where it would come back under government control.²⁸ Hadi's theory was that this would limit funding for the Houthis' war efforts while strengthening the government hand. Instead, the move, more than anything that happened on the battlefield, split Yemen into two countries.

Hadi's decision cut off the central bank in Sanaa from the international banking system, but due to insufficient preparatory work, the branch in Aden was not in position to seamlessly integrate the vastly expanded mandate it was given. From September 2016 until late 2017, Yemen operated without a functioning central bank. Over time, the problem has only grown worse.

In early 2020, Hadi's government began printing new banknotes in an effort to "cover the government's deficit and pay public sector wages."²⁹ The Houthis responded by banning the new banknotes in territory they controlled, which, along with the depreciation of the Yemeni rial and inflation, helped split Yemen's economy into a Houthi-controlled one and a government one.³⁰ Today, the rial trades at vastly different rates in Sanaa than in Aden. As of August 2022, the rial was trading at 550-1 against the U.S. dollar in Sanaa, while in Aden it was trading at 1,050-1.³¹ As Afrah Nasser pointed out in a recent paper, today the two regions

²⁷ Helene Cooper, "U.S. Blocks Arms Sale to Saudi Arabia Amid Concerns Over Yemen War," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2016; see also: Merrit Kennedy, "Trump Vetoes Bills Intended to Block Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia," *NPR*, July 25, 2019.

²⁸ "Yemen President Names New Central Bank Governor, Moves HQ to Aden," *Reuters*, September 18, 2016.

²⁹ Reyam Mukhashaf and Abdulrahman Al-Ansi, "Prices Soar as Yemen's Rival Central Banks Tussle Away From the Battlefield," *Reuters*, July 14, 2021.

³⁰ "Yemen's Rival Powers Battle Over Banknotes," *Reuters*, January 17, 2020.

³¹ "Yemen Quarterly Food Security Report," *Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations*, August 12, 2022.

are “governed by different customs regulations, revenue authorities, financial intelligence units, and telecommunications authorities, and by distinct laws and policies related to trade, banking, and taxes.”³²

Hadi’s decision in 2016 effectively split the country, placing Houthi-controlled territories and Hadi government-held areas on different trajectories, giving otherwise subsidiary administrative arrangements regarding location of the central bank the power to deconstruct much of what remained of the Yemeni state. Unwinding those changes and reintegrating Yemen’s economy at this late date is all but impossible. No matter what is decided at the negotiating table, Yemen is likely to remain divided for the foreseeable future.

Part III: A Fragmented Opposition

The third major factor for the Houthis’ victory in Yemen – next to their flexibility in turning enemies into allies and the errors of their opponents – is the fragmented nature of their enemies. Despite the rivalries and factionalism within the Houthi movement, the organization itself is largely unified; the anti-Houthi coalition is not. Members of the anti-Houthi coalition have, on multiple occasions, clashed with one another, and the various armed groups fighting the Houthis have vastly different visions of what an end state in Yemen should look like. This lack of unity has allowed the Houthis to prevail despite fewer resources, munitions, and men.

Although the war began as a simple bifurcated conflict between the Houthis and the U.N.-recognized government of Yemen, which was backed by the Saudi-led coalition, it quickly fractured into a multisided war. The first crack appeared in April 2016 when Hadi, in an attempt at self-preservation, fired his vice president, Khaled Bahah, replacing him with Ali Mohsen, the general who had overseen the wars against the Houthis in the north and was close to Islah.³³ At the time, Hadi was worried that he might be replaced as part of the upcoming peace talks in Kuwait. Naming Ali Mohsen, who had ties to extremist groups, as his vice president was his insurance policy. But Hadi’s decision, in many ways as shortsighted as the one to split the central bank, had long-lasting ramifications.

Worried about Islah’s growing influence in the presidential office and angered with Bahah’s dismissal, the UAE began forming proxy militia groups that operated outside of the Hadi government’s command and control.³⁴ These groups – which initially included the Security Belt Forces, Hadrami Elite Forces, Shabwani Elite Forces, and Giants Brigades – were trained, armed, and paid by the UAE. Not surprisingly, they also took orders from the UAE, which was increasingly at odds with Hadi’s government.

A year after he fired Bahah, Hadi compounded his mistake by dismissing two more key UAE allies in Yemen. This time, Hadi fired Aidarous al-Zubaidi, the governor of Aden, and Hani bin Breik, a minister without a portfolio.³⁵ The two men, with support from the UAE, would go on

³² Afrah Nasser, “Yemen’s Prospects for Unity are Uncertain After Many Years of War,” *Arab Center Washington DC*, July 28, 2022.

³³ Lou Lorscheider, “Yemen President Fires PM Ahead of Peace Talks With Rebels,” *VOA*, April 3, 2016.

³⁴ Nadwa al-Dawsari, “Fantasies of State Power Cannot Solve Yemen’s War,” *The Century Foundation*, July 13, 2021.

³⁵ Ahmed al-Haj, “Yemen’s President Fires Minister, Aden Governor,” *Associated Press*, April 28, 2017.

to establish and head the Southern Transitional Council, which advocated for an independent Southern state. Many – although not all – of the proxy militias groups that the UAE had established a year earlier became the STC's de facto armed wing.

By 2019, the simmering tensions between Hadi's government and the STC erupted into open warfare. In August, troops loyal to the STC pushed Hadi's soldiers out of Aden and began moving east through Abyan toward Hadramout, which was likely the group's ultimate goal where much of Yemen's oil and gas reserves are located. But the STC offensive bogged down in Shabwa, amid defections from the Shabwani Elite Forces. Hadi's troops began pushing STC-affiliated forces back toward Aden and may have been able to retake the city if the UAE hadn't intervened with airstrikes against Hadi's forces.³⁶

In April 2022, Saudi Arabia and the UAE attempted to paper over the cracks in the anti-Houthi coalition by forcing Hadi out and establishing an eight-man Presidential Leadership Council.³⁷ The council was equally split with four members from the North and four from the South, four of whom were close to Saudi Arabia and four who were allied with the UAE.³⁸

Saudi Arabia hoped that the Presidential Leadership Council would present a unified front to the Houthis either on the battlefield or, if that failed, at the negotiating table. But in July and August old tensions resurfaced as Islah and the STC, both of which were represented on the council, fought one another for control of Shabwa.³⁹

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Part IV: From Rebels to Rulers

On September 21, 2022, the Houthis celebrated what the group described as its "revolution," marking eight years since the group took control of Sanaa. On September 26, the Houthis broke up a celebration in Sanaa's central Midan Tahrir, marking the 60th anniversary of the revolution that overthrew the Zaydi imamate and established a republic in North Yemen.⁴⁰ The Houthi action against the celebration was unsurprising given that the Houthis believe they are righting what they see as the historical wrongs of the 1962 revolution.

In many ways the Houthis see the revolution that began September 21, 2014 as a corrective to the September 26, 1962 revolution – the Zaydi elite are back in charge and Northern Yemen is, once again, separate from Southern Yemen. The country, despite the best efforts from the U.N. and U.S. special envoys, will not be reunited as a single state, and, in fact, the very

³⁶ Declan Walsh and Saeed al-Batati, "Ally Attacks Ally in Yemen's War Within a War," *The New York Times*, August 29, 2019.

³⁷ Summer Said and Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Arabia Pushed Yemen's Elected President to Step Aside, Saudi and Yemeni Officials Say," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 17, 2022.

³⁸ For more analysis, see Gregory D. Johnsen "Old Wine in New Skins: The Yemen Presidential Council," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, April 7, 2022.

³⁹ "Infighting in Southern Yemen Exposes Fragility of Leadership Council," *Al-Monitor*, August 14, 2022.

⁴⁰ @Alhadath_YMN, *Twitter post*, September 26, 2022, 4:16 p.m.

foundations of that state have been turned on their head, as a Zaydi counterrevolution of sorts cements its hold. The Houthis have won the war. The last eight years of fighting has made that clear. What is less clear is whether the Houthis can maintain their grip on power in the absence of war.

To win the peace and create a functioning and independent state in the North, the Houthis will need to overcome severe challenges in three areas: governance, the economy, and the creation of domestic allies. Throughout the war, the Houthis have struggled in each of these areas. That none of these proved fatal to the Houthis' war efforts is largely a result of their opponents' political and tactical errors. In other words, the war has been good to the Houthis. It allowed them to strengthen and extend their hold on power, putting down roots the group hopes will hold once Saudi Arabia and the UAE fully withdraw from the country.

The first challenge the Houthis will need to overcome is their seeming inability to effectively govern. Since entering Sanaa in 2014, the Houthis have restructured government in the North, effectively creating two streams of governance – formal and informal – both of which lead back to Abdul Malik al-Houthi.

On the formal side, the Houthis have appointed allies and revamped existing government ministries to ensure adherence to their policies. This is an ongoing project for the Houthis, as they reshape what were once republican ministries more in the group's own image. Not surprisingly, the Houthis started with the intelligence agencies. In 2020, the Houthis merged Yemen's two intelligence agencies into a single organization.⁴¹ Similar changes are also underway in the Ministry of Education, particularly when it comes to curriculum.

Perhaps the biggest change the Houthis have implemented is in the supervisor system. These supervisors, known as *musharifin*, are attached to every ministry, agency, and institution. The *musharifin* act as overseers and a check on the state bureaucracy, reporting directly to Abdul Malik's inner circle.⁴² This bifurcated system has created competing channels of institutional power, which allows Abdul Malik to play his own game of "dancing on the heads of snakes," maintaining control over state institutions while playing rivals off against one another so they can't challenge him. But while this style of government may be effective in reducing internal threats, it does little to establish the rule of law or transparent governance, both of which the Houthis will need to demonstrate if they hope to effectively govern in a postwar scenario.

Tied to the issue of governance is that of the economy. In some ways, such as those detailed above, the Houthis have benefitted from Yemen's bifurcated economy. The rial is trading at a higher rate against the U.S. dollar in Sanaa than it is in Aden. But as Rafat al-Akhali pointed out, this is likely inflated. "The exchange rate is maintained through suppressing demand and completely controlling supply."⁴³

⁴¹ "The Houthi Supervisory System," ACAPS, June 17, 2020.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Reyam Mukhashaf and Abdulrahman Al-Ansi, "Prices Soar as Yemen's Rival Central Banks Tussle Away From the Battlefield," *Reuters*, July 14, 2021.

A more serious problem for the Houthis is how to pay the salaries of civil servants, which they have not been able to do consistently since taking control of the government in 2014. Indeed, one of the Houthis' key demands to extend the truce, which expired October 2, 2022, is for the Yemeni government to pay the salaries of civil servants in Houthi-controlled areas.⁴⁴ The Houthis do not have an economic base that would support an independent state. This is one of the reasons the group has been so determined to take Marib and its gas and oil fields. If the group is unable to take Marib before the borders are demarcated, it will struggle to support itself. If the Houthis can't govern and can't pay public sector employees, the Houthis won't survive in Northern Yemen for long.

What could accelerate their collapse is the lack of domestic allies. The Houthis have alienated several groups in Northern Yemen as they have consolidated power. The most notable of these is the traditional tribal leadership. Like they did with the bureaucracy, the Houthis instituted "supervisors" for the tribes.⁴⁵

These supervisors tend to be sayyids, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and traditional rivals of the tribal sheikhs. Following the 1962 coup and subsequent civil war, which overthrew the last Zaydi imam of North Yemen, sheikhs took on a more powerful role in the tribes as the sayyid class was largely overthrown and stripped of its power. In the 1980s and 1990s, Saleh drew many of these sheikhs into his network, creating a phenomenon known as "city-sheikhs," tribal leaders who increasingly spent more time in Sanaa and less time with their tribes.

The Houthis are attempting a similar co-option or, if that fails, a weakening of the tribes' traditional power. In 2014, the Houthis fought and largely defeated the al-Ahmar tribal family, which had been the sheikh *mashaykh*, or head sheikh, of the Hashid tribal confederation. In the years since, the Houthis have bought off the sheikhs they could, threatened or imprisoned the ones they couldn't, and come into open conflict with those who rebelled.⁴⁶ This has created a number of enemies for the Houthis, individuals and families with long memories and scores to settle.

In April 2021, Timothy Lenderking, the U.S. special envoy for Yemen, testified: "There is an acceptance that the Houthis will have a significant role in a post-conflict government, if they meaningfully participate in a peaceful political process like any other political group or movement."⁴⁷ But this was a misreading of the Houthis' political goals. They did not want a "significant role" in government; they wanted to be the government.

More than eight years after the Houthis entered Sanaa, the group is the government in the North. The Houthis won the war. The only question that remains is: Can the Houthis survive the peace?

⁴⁴ "Houthis: 3 Demands to Achieve Stability in Yemen," *Middle East Monitor*, September 26, 2022.

⁴⁵ Adel Dashela, "Coercing Compliance: The Houthis and the Tribes of Northern Yemen," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 6, 2020.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Testimony of the Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking," Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, April 21, 2021.

