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UN-sponsored peace talks to end the conflict in Yemen collapsed on August 6, 2016 and fighting resumed between Saudi-led forces and the Houthis and forces loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president of Yemen, near the capital Sana'a.

There is little likelihood of a political breakthrough in the process given the terms of reference for the process created by UN Security Council Resolution 2216. The Hadi Abed Rabbo Mansour government is demanding the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2216 that calls for a restoration of the Hadi government to power in Sana'a, the withdrawal of the rebel militias from all cities they seized, to hand over their weapons to a military committee formed by Hadi and free prisoners of war. It also called to refrain from further unilateral actions that threaten the political transition.

The alliance of Zaydi Houthi Shiite rebels and the followers of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh rejected the proposal. They claimed that the plan did not meet their key demand for a unity government - a condition that amounts to an explicit call for President Hadi's removal and Saudi-led offensive to stop before committing to the resolution.¹

The collapse of the peace talks in Kuwait

The al Houthi political party, Ansar Allah, and the General People's Congress party, led by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, signed a power-sharing agreement on July 28, 2016. The agreement creates a supreme political council with ten representatives from each party and it dissolved the al Houthi Supreme Revolutionary Committee.

In addition to that, Yemeni rebels decided to assign a number of governors in some cities, including the capital Sana'a, and a number of Houthi leaders were granted senior posts. They also employed a great number of their loyal supporters in Police sector in addition to the telecommunications sector and the Ministry of Finance.²

Yemeni Houthi leader Abdul Malik Al-Houhi issued directives calling on senior commanders to implement a state of emergency in different parts of Yemen, including Sana'a and the group's northern stronghold of Sa'ada Province.³

The Houthis and Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) hold most of Yemen's northern half while forces loyal to Hadi share control of the rest of the country with local tribes. This effectively partitions Yemen between the Shiite-dominated north and east and the Sunni-dominated south and west.⁴

The move denounced by Yemen's internationally recognized government and the U.N. The UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, denounced the power-sharing agreement on July 28 for violating UN Security Council Resolution 2216, which forbids "unilateral actions."

On August 6, 2016, UN envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed announced the end of Yemen peace talks in Kuwait, but he left the door open to the talks' resumption and said that negotiation between the two Yemeni warring sides will resume in a month. He rejected that the talks in Kuwait have failed, and criticized any "unilateral" steps taken by any of the two sides.⁵

The response of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's Council of Ministers considered the "unilateral" steps taken by the Houthi rebels as an obstacle to reach a political agreement in Yemen and a violation of the resolutions of the Arab League, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the United Nations Security Council (Resolution 2216), as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council's initiative and its executive mechanism and the outcome of the comprehensive national dialogue.⁶

Saudi Arabia said that Iran-backed Houthi militias considered the ending of Yemeni peace talks in Kuwait as an "opportunity" to expand their operations and claimed that the Houthis started launching operations on the Saudi borders.

The Saudi Arabian coalition had suspended the military attacks in Yemen when U.N.-brokered peace talks were held in Kuwait.⁷ Since August 9, 2016, after UN-sponsored peace talks in Kuwait ended without an agreement, the Saudi Arabian coalition resumed its "Operation Restoring Hope" against the Houthis and their allies loyal to deposed Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh.⁸

Operation Restoring Hope began on April 21, 2015, was launched to bolster political and peace efforts but without ruling out the use of force. The operation followed the military Operation Decisive Storm.

Saudi Arabia at a crossroad

The Saudis backed Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi_ to replace Saleh after the "Arab Spring". Hadi eventually escaped in 2014 to Riyadh after being held under House arrest by the Iran-backed Houthis, and requested Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies intervene with military force in Yemen in order to counter the Houthi coup and restore him and the government to power. Since 2015 Saudi Arabia providing him with the funds and arms that keeps his weak government in power in Aden.

The war in Yemen represents multiple confrontations: an internal civil war in Yemen and a theater of the regional conflict between the Iranian led Shia'a coalition and the Saudi Arabian led Sunni coalition. Each coalition supports its local allies in Yemen.

The main goals of Saudi Arabia in the war in Yemen are:

- The first is to prevent the pro-Iranian Houthis and forces loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh, to take over Yemen.
- The second is to protect southern Saudi Arabia from becoming a hostile front.
- The third is to control the strategic Bab al Mandab straits and the port of Aden.

Since March 2015, the Saudi coalition has partial achievements: the Saudi coalition controls the strategic straits of Bab al Mandab and the port of Aden and about 50% of the territory of Yemen but the rebels still control significant parts of Yemen including the capital Sana'a and the northern provinces on the border with Saudi Arabia.

The political process to resolve the crisis between Yemen's warring parties has collapsed and Saudi Arabia is facing a critical decision point in its war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has three options:

- **Escalation of the war against the rebel alliance to achieve a total victory.** In order to achieve such ambitious goals Saudi Arabia will have to invest more forces and to ask significant help from its allies that are seemingly absent from the scene. With the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's main Arab ally in the war, strategically focused on parts of south Yemen and the limited forces loyal to Hadi, Saudi Arabia does not appear to be ready and capable to escalate the war.
- **Escalation of the war against the rebel alliance to achieve limited goals - to take capital Sana'a.** A large scale military offensive on Sana'a would be bloody and expensive. It will be a symbolic victory with the return of the Hadi government to the capital of Yemen but it will still leave the Houthis in control of their traditional stronghold in northern Yemen along the Saudi border and will not guaranty the end of the war.
- **Political solution which means de facto partition of the country.** This option can be a result of returning to the negotiation table with the rebels or a failure to achieve the military goals.

There are three main front lines between the Saudi Arabian coalition forces and the Houthis and forces loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh: the capital of Yemen – Sana'a, the city of Taiz and the border area between Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

The battle over Sana'a

Following the failure of Kuwait's peace talks and the continuous violations of rebels in respecting the cease fire, Yemeni Government Forces reinforced by the Saudi Coalition's jets, resumed on their military campaign to liberate the capital and other Houthi-controlled Yemeni provinces.

Forces loyal to President Hadi launched a major new offensive east of Sanaa to "liberate the district of Nehim", a key route to the capital, which has been under Houthi control since 2014.⁹

A Saudi-led military coalition conducted air strikes on the Yemeni capital Sana'a on August 9, 2016, for the first time in five months, after UN-backed peace talks to end the conflict broke down. The air strikes hit a presidential compound and military base in Sana'a as well as a rebel militia positions in a Republican Guard base in Arhab, a few kilometers from the international airport of Sana'a, and in Nehim.¹⁰

Earlier, Brig. Gen. Abdullah Al-Subaihi, commander of the Popular Resistance units which liberated the southern city of Aden from the Houthis, said the plan will concentrate on besieging the Houthis in Sana'a after blocking their access to allied forces loyal to ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh—who has backed the Houthi insurgency. The Popular Resistance, comprise volunteer fighters and military cadres loyal to Hadi.¹¹

General Mohamed Ali al-Makdashi, the chief of staff of Hadi's forces, said that the phase of firmness had started on all fronts, and mainly in the capital Sana'a. Al-Makdashi revealed the presence of a large number of military forces currently positioned in Ma'rab, ready to join forces fighting on all fronts. The general called on Sana'a residents to stay away from the sources of the enemy fire, adding his troops will reply to any attack.

Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Obaid Bin Dagher stressed that the Kingdom's honorable and continuing stand toward Yemen contributed to making the Yemeni army and the popular resistance on the outskirts of Sana'a. He hoped that the city will be liberated soon.¹²

The Houthi leadership in Sana'a declared a state of emergency in the capital, as forces loyal to Yemen's internationally recognized President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi closed in to around 125 kilometers of the capital.¹³

The battle over Taiz

Al Houthi-Saleh forces are attempting to secure control of the city of Taiz, Yemen's third largest city, where fighting has never halted despite the reduction in violence during the period of the Kuwait dialogue. Al Houthi leadership and Salafi militias are driving sectarianism in Taiz, which has a mixed population.¹⁴

The al Houthi-Saleh fighters are attempting to seize areas south of Taiz in order to isolate the city and solidify al Houthi-Saleh control over what used to be the North Yemen state. Al Houthi-Saleh fighters seized a forward operating base from Hadi-allied forces in Hayfan district, southern Taiz governorate on July 21, 2016, and seized villages in Hayfan district on July 28, 2016.¹⁵

On August 17, 2016, Houthi militias and forces loyal to ousted former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh have cut the last supply routes between major cities Aden and Taiz.¹⁶

Al Houthi leader Abu Ali al Hakim proclaimed that "if we lose the battle for Taiz, then we permit the events of Karbala to occur a second time in Sa'ada," drawing a connection between historic al Houthi territory and the 680 CE battle that deepened the schism between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.¹⁷

Brig. Gen. Abdullah Al-Subaihi, commander of the Popular Resistance (a militia allied with Hadi's forces), said that two separate units from the Popular Resistance, totaling around 2,000 ground forces and supported by coalition warplanes, plan to liberate the cities of Taiz and Ma'rib—which lie some 200 kilometers to the south and east of Sana'a respectively—before heading to the capital.¹⁸

Meanwhile, at least 80 Houthis were killed in violent clashes with the Popular Resistance forces in Taiz.¹⁹

The Yemen – Saudi Arabia border front line

The al Houthi-Saleh alliance increased attacks on southern Saudi Arabia in July – August 2016, causing Saudi Arabia to warn that violation of Saudi Arabia's borders is a "red line." Around 100 members of the Saudi forces and civilians have been killed in skirmishes, by artillery fire or landmines inside Saudi Arabia's borders since the coalition launched its campaign in March 2015.²⁰

Yemeni Houthi leader Abdul Malik Al-Houhi issued directives on August 8, 2016, calling to implement a state of emergency in the provinces of Sa'ada and Hajjah on the border with Saudi Arabia.²¹

On August 9, 2016, Saudi Arabia said its air force has intercepted two ballistic Scud missiles fired from Yemen into the kingdom. A Saudi military statement said the missiles were fired toward the cities of Abha and Khamis Mushait, both of which are close to the kingdom's southern border with Yemen. It said the missiles caused no damage. The Houthis are known to have a supply of Soviet-era Scud missiles, seized from the country's military stockpiles.²²

Hadi's vice president, Lieutenant General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar arrived at the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia to supervise the military operations at all battlefronts from inside Yemen.²³

On August 10, 2016, Saudi forces backed by aerial support from the Arab Coalition have killed Saleh al-Houthi Mouawad Kibsi, a Houthi leader and 40 other militias near the kingdom's southwestern borders with Yemen.²⁴

Saleh al-Houthi Mouawad Kibsi, was in charge of the Houthi militia's military operation in the Yemeni region that borders the Saudi southwestern city of Najran. It was reported that Kibsi was killed along with his brother and two of his companions.²⁵

On August 13, 2016, joint Saudi forces foiled an infiltration attempt carried out by the Houthi militias near the Najran district in the kingdom. Saudi forces managed to kill dozens of Houthi and deposed Ali Abdulla Salah militia elements, as well as destroying five of their military vehicles.²⁶

The Saudi Arabia – Egypt – Yemen connection

On August 13, 2016, Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Obeid Bin Daghr has arrived in Cairo to discuss recent developments in Yemen and bilateral relations between the two countries with top officials, including President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi.

Egypt has been participating with naval and air forces in the Saudi-led military coalition against the Iranian-backed Houthi fighters in Yemen since the coalition was launched in March 2015 and the Egyptian navy is currently securing the Bab El-Mandeb strait.²⁷

Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi said that Egypt was keen on providing the needed support for Yemen so they can overcome the current conflicts and focus on development and restoration in a way that accomplishes Yemeni people's aspirations to restore peace and stability. El-Sisi stressed to Yemen's Prime Minister the importance of avoiding a long-term armed conflict in Yemen.²⁸

Summary

The United Nations says more than 6,400 people, mostly civilians, have been killed in Yemen since the coalition air campaign began in March 2015. The fighting has created a humanitarian crisis in Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the Middle East. The fighting has driven 2.8 million people from their homes and left more than 80 percent of the population needing humanitarian aid.²⁹

Operation "Decisive Storm" was the only option to prevent Houthi-Saleh alliance backed by Iran from occupying Yemen and turning it into a large regional war front between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia achieved this goal but the war is not over.

The political process to resolve the crisis between Yemen's warring parties has collapsed August 2016 and Saudi Arabia is facing a critical decision point in its war in Yemen. Yemeni Prime Minister Dr. Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr completely rejected the emergence of a Hezbollah-inspired Houthi version which threatens the stability and security of Yemen. Daghr accused Iran of backing both Houthis and the insurgency, and that it stands to be the reason behind any regional conflict.³⁰

The al Houthi-Saleh alliance backed by Iran has little incentive to reach a diplomatic compromise at peace talks as long as it controls significant areas of Yemen, including the capital Sana'a. The power-sharing agreement between Ansar Allah, and the General People's Congress party, in Sana'a, may be the first step in formalizing the recreation of a North Yemen state.

The al Houthi-Saleh alliance increased attacks on southern Saudi Arabia in what may be an effort to induce Saudi Arabia to negotiate a ceasefire outside of the UN framework.

Saudi Arabia's strategic interest is to maintain its control over Yemen and to prevent the victory of the Iranian allies in the country. In order to achieve this goals Saudi Arabia needs a significant military success such as the liberation of Sana'a and the return of Hadi's regime to the capital. After such victory Saudi Arabia and its allies will be able to return to the negotiation table with better chance to achieve a peace agreement in Yemen.

Notes

¹ Bruce Riedel, Saudi Arabia's moment of truth in Yemen, Al Monitor, August 2, 2016.

² Sa'ed Al Abydah, Houthis in Race against Time to Legitimize Coup, Asharq Al – Awsat, August 11, 2016.

³ Arafat Madbish, Yemen: Houthis declare state of emergency in northern stronghold, Asharq Al – Awsat, August 18, 2016.

⁴ Bruce Riedel, Saudi Arabia's moment of truth in Yemen, Al Monitor, August 2, 2016.

⁵ Arab coalition to revive Yemen operations, Al Arabiya, August 7, 2016.

⁶ Saudi Arabia slams move to form political council in Yemen, Saudi Gazette, August 2, 2016.

⁷ Yemen peace talks in Kuwait end amid fighting, Al Jazeera, August 7, 2016.

⁸ Houthi leader, 40 militias killed near Saudi border, Al Arabia, August 11, 2016.

⁹ Arafat Madabish and Abdul Hadi Habtoor, Yemeni Government Resumes Military Operations, Ahmar Leads Campaign from Ma'reb, Asharq Alawsat, August 8, 2016.

¹⁰ Saudi-led Yemen capital resume air strikes on, Al Arabia, August 9, 2016.

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- ¹¹ Yemen: Plan in place to retake Sana'a from Houthis within 15 days, says senior pro-Hadi commander, Asharq Al – Awsat, August 1, 2016.
- ¹² Yemeni premier hails Saudi support to his government, Saudi Gazette, August 12, 2016.
- ¹³ Mohamed Ali Mohsen, Yemen: Houthis declare state of emergency in Sana'a as government loyalists close in on capital, Asharq Al – Awsat, August 10, 2016.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Nicholas Jonsson, 2016 Yemen Crisis Situation Report: August 4, Critical Theaters, August 4, 2016.
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- ¹⁷ Nicholas Jonsson, 2016 Yemen Crisis Situation Report: August 4, Critical Theaters, August 4, 2016.
- ¹⁸ Yemen: Plan in place to retake Sana'a from Houthis within 15 days, says senior pro-Hadi commander, Asharq Al – Awsat, August 1, 2016.
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- ²⁰ Saudi-led jets pound Yemen rebels for third day, Ahram Online, August 11, 2016.
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- ²³ Arafat Madabish and Abdul Hadi Habtoor, Yemeni Government Resumes Military Operations, Ahmar Leads Campaign from Ma'reb, Asharq Alawsat, August 8, 2016.
- ²⁴ Houthi leader, 40 militias killed near Saudi border, Al Arabia, August 11, 2016.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Saudi army foils massive Houthis infiltration, Al Arabia, August 13, 2016.
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- ²⁸ Long-term armed conflict in Yemen should be avoided, says Egypt's Sisi, Ahram Online, August 15, 2016.
- ²⁹ Saudi-led jets pound Yemen rebels for third day, Ahram Online, August 11, 2016.
- ³⁰ Mohamed Alimohsen, Bin Daghr: Iran Stands behind Regional Conflicts...Yemeni Hezbollah-Inspired Entity Will Not Be Permitted, Asharq Alawsat, July 4, 2016.