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Yemen and the death of Saleh

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Summary

Former president of Yemen, Ali Ahmed Saleh, was killed in the Yemeni capital Sanaa at the beginning of December. There had been growing discord in his alliance of convenience with the Houthi rebels in the conflict, which has been raging since early 2015.

The Saleh family had been negotiating with Gulf supporters of the officially-recognised Government and had indicated that he might consider changing sides. The move looked unprepared, however, as Houthi military forces routed his troops in the Yemeni Capital Sanaa, and he was killed.

His death has brought some opponents of the Houthi rebels together and the Saudi-led coalition supporting the officially-recognised Government [made some progress](#) in December. The main result, however, appears to have been an intensification of bombing by the Saudi air force, the effectiveness of which analysts have questioned.

Analysts also fear that it will be [even more difficult](#) to negotiate a solution to the bloody conflict without the skills of Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Meanwhile, the suffering of the Yemeni people continues to grow. Agencies warn that Yemen is the biggest humanitarian crisis in years, and that the country is on the brink of famine – 400,000 children are in danger of starving to death [according to Unicef](#).

The future of the country has increasingly been called into question, as reports suggest that the UAE may be backing secession for the south; a referendum has been mooted. That would spell a divergence between Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

For further background see the Commons Briefing Paper [Yemen at War](#), April 2017, also [Yemen update June 2017](#).

The Commons Briefing paper [The legal and regulatory framework for UK arms exports](#), September 2017, is also relevant.

1. Shoot-out in Sanaa

On 4 December the radio station of the Houthi-controlled Yemeni Ministry of the Interior announced that Ali Abdullah Saleh was dead. His car had been attacked as he tried to leave the Yemeni capital Sanaa, according to early reports. He may, in fact, have been executed in his residence.¹ His military forces, who had at first taken much of northern Sanaa, were beaten back and within a couple of days were routed by Houthi militias.

On 2 December, Saleh had called for a “new page” to be turned in Yemeni relations with Saudi Arabia. This was the culmination of four months of growing tensions in the alliance between the Houthi group, representing the north of the country, and former president Saleh. It was in any case something of an opportunist alliance; when Saleh was president he had clashed several times with Houthi rebels in the north and collaborated with Saudi airstrikes on their military bases. After being ousted in 2011, siding with the Houthis against his successor looked like the best way to get either himself or his son back into power.

Growing tensions

The “new page” was a sign that Saleh intended to switch sides again, to align himself with the internationally-recognised government of Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi backed by Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia had hoped that luring Saleh over to their side would help bring an end to the Yemen conflict, where the Saudis made almost no progress in 2017. Some sort of deal involving a return to power for his family was on the table. The loss of Saleh and his General People’s Congress (GPC) party might have been enough to turn the tide against the Houthis.

The switch, however, looked ill-prepared, and Saleh was left at the mercy of powerful Houthi militias who have been in control of Sanaa for some time. The Houthis, on the other hand, were ready for the switch.

Ill-prepared

Saudi Arabia is now pinning its hopes on Ahmed Ali Saleh, the former president’s son. Ahmed met the *de facto* leader of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed bin Zayed, shortly after the events. The UAE is the Saudis’ main ally in their coalition to drive back the Iran-backed Zaidi Shia Houthis.

¹ [‘The last hours of Yemen’s Saleh’](#), *Reuters*, 8 December 2017

2. What difference will it make?

Saleh and the GPC had grown less and less important in the conflict, however, as the Houthis had become more confident, waging the battle against the recognised government and the Saudi-led coalition largely without the former president's forces.

Ahmed, the former president's son, had vowed to seek revenge for the death of his father, but the fact that he has been living in the UAE for some time counts against him.

The death of Saleh and the failure of his forces in Sanaa were a big blow to the GPC; it may now fragment further, with many supporters shifting their allegiance to the Houthis. While the Houthis are not particularly popular, Saudis are even less so.²

While it may scare potential rivals, the fact that the Houthis killed Saleh may also be attracting some Yemeni actors to the coalition side. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Vice President and long a significant military leader in Yemen, sent his troops into battle again against the Houthis after the killing. And Islah, a political party related to the Muslim Brotherhood that has had contacts with both sides, also moved closer to the pro-Hadi coalition,³ as it has distanced itself from the Muslim Brotherhood. Islah could displace the GPC as a mainstream political party in Yemen.⁴

Saleh's demise has led the Saudi-led coalition to intensify its bombing campaign on the capital and elsewhere. One source suggested that Saudi sorties had increased by 67% in the aftermath Saleh's death.⁵ This will not drive the Houthis from the city, according to many analysts, but is likely to increase resentment against the Saudis.

Many observers think that Saleh's death will make the Yemen conflict more difficult to resolve. Writing for Chatham House, one analyst says that Saleh's negotiating skills will be missed in trying to find a settlement. Saleh famously compared running the country to dancing on the heads of snakes, a feat of footwork he sustained for over 30 years:

Saleh will be remembered as the man who shaped modern Yemen in his own image, but who was more willing to burn the country to the ground than relinquish power. Yet without his deal-making skills, the civil war he helped to spark and the devastating humanitarian crisis it caused are only likely to get worse.⁶

Conflict now even more difficult to resolve?

An International Crisis Group analyst agreed that the death was likely to worsen the crisis:

² 'The Killing of Former President Saleh Could Worsen Yemen's War', *International Crisis Group*, 6 December 2017

³ Critical Threats, [Yemen situation report 21 December 2017](#)

⁴ 'Violence flares in political void left after Saleh's death', *Gulf States News*, 11 January 2018

⁵ Yemen Data Project, [Data](#)

⁶ Peter Salisbury, ['Yemen's Future Looks Grim After Saleh Killing'](#), Chatham House, 11 December 2017

6 Death of Saleh

The Houthis, while an important military force, are not particularly adept at politics or governance. Their reach...in the population is limited, and over time that will play into their opponents' hands. But that won't happen any time soon, so it looks like the conflict will worsen.⁷

Writing for Brookings, another seasoned observer's conclusion was withering:

The bankruptcy of Saudi planning is breathtaking. Now the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) is intensifying its bombing of Sanaa and the carnage is getting worse. The poorest country in the Arab world is being systematically destroyed by the richest.⁸

⁷ [The last hours of Yemen's Saleh](#), *Reuters*, 8 December 2017

⁸ ['In Yemen, Iran outsmarts Saudi Arabia again'](#), Brookings Institution, 6 December 2017

3. Impending famine?

In November 2017 a rocket was launched from Houthi-controlled Yemen and exploded in the sky near the Saudi capital Riyadh. It was a sign that Iranian help to the Houthi rebellion was getting more significant. It also provoked Saudi Arabia to tighten its blockade of Yemen, particularly of the port of al-Hodeida.

The UK Government expressed its concern at the blockade and the suffering of Yemenis in December 2017:

[...] The Prime Minister met with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia during her visit to Riyadh on 29 November and was clear on the importance of a resolution to the conflict and humanitarian and commercial access to all of Yemen. The Foreign Secretary raised the urgency of the humanitarian situation with the Crown Prince on 23 November and has also spoken with the Secretary-General of the UN.⁹

The Saudi-led coalition announced on 22 November that they would allow some humanitarian deliveries to resume.¹⁰ UN flights were allowed to land at Sanaa airport and aid ships to dock at Hodeida.

Aid agencies reported that improvements in access were slow to be implemented, but the situation improved and, after the second missile attack on Saudi Arabia, Riyadh announced that it would leave the ports open.¹¹

Nevertheless, the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Sir Mark Lowcock, said in a closed session in December that the blockade of Hodeida and other Yemeni ports had slowed or stopped deliveries of food and medicines to Yemenis. He said that 8.5 million Yemenis were at risk of starvation; this had jumped from 7 million in November.¹² A UN spokesperson said that Yemen is "now on the cusp of the largest famine in modern times".

About three million Yemenis are internally displaced and there are about a million cases of cholera. Malnutrition, particularly of children, is already widespread. Unicef says that 400,000 children are at risk of dying of starvation.¹³

400,000 children at risk of dying of starvation – Unicef

In December, the UK Government was asked about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen:

Chris Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what recent representations he has made to his Saudi Arabian counterpart on the humanitarian situation in Yemen.

⁹ [Written question - HL3497, 7 December 2017](#)

¹⁰ 'Saudi Arabia agrees to ease Yemen blockade after warnings that thousands will starve', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 November 2017

¹¹ ['Yemen's Houthis 'kidnap' daughter of Saleh's personal guard'](#), *The National*, 20 December 2017

¹² ['Son of Slain Yemen Leader Is Said to Vow Revenge'](#), *New York Times*, 5 December 2017

¹³ [Yemen conflict: A devastating toll for children](#), updated 20 December 2017

Alistair Burt: The British Government is closely engaged on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The Foreign Secretary has discussed the situation with the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman several times in recent weeks, most recently with the Crown Prince on 19 December. We welcome the Coalition's announcement on 20 December that Hodeidah port will reopen for both humanitarian and commercial supplies, including fuel and food. On 20 December, the Prime Minister discussed this announcement with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman. In 2017/18, the British Government is committing £205 million in humanitarian aid to Yemen.¹⁴

¹⁴ [HC Written question – 120109, 28 December 2017](#). For more information on how UK aid has been spent in Yemen, see the [DFID Yemen country profile](#) and the [Yemen Development Tracker](#)

4. Military campaign

In December, the Saudi-led coalition advanced northward along the western coast, breaking a stalemate of almost a year. There was also some progress for the forces of the Hadi government in the centre of the country and in the far north. UAE troops were particularly significant in the west.¹⁵

The defection then killing of ex-president Saleh brought some military forces formerly controlled by Saleh into the coalition in opposition to the Houthis, bolstering this military progress. The UAE also dropped its opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood-associated Islah party, which joined forces with the coalition.

Most of the country's populated areas remain in the hands of the Houthis, however.

The US and Saudi Arabia claimed that the missiles fired at Saudi Arabia from Houthi-controlled territory in November and December were supplied by Iran. The US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, presented evidence in December, claiming that it proved the Iran connection.¹⁶

A UN internal report shortly afterwards did not fully support that conclusion, finding that the missile did contain Iranian components but also an American component, and that it was not clear who the weapons broker had been, according to reports.¹⁷

Most of the population lives in Houthi-controlled areas

UK involvement

Arms sales and military observers

The UK continues to provide support to the Saudi-led coalition by selling arms to the Saudis and the UAE. There are also UK military personnel in the Saudi-led coalition headquarters. Their role was discussed in the House of Commons in November, when Andrew Mitchell said that they were involved in selecting targets for the coalition:

...Britain's policy is riddled with internal inconsistencies. While one limb of the British Government is desperately trying to secure entry into the port of Hodeidah for vital food, medicine and fuel, another limb is assisting with the blockade and, indeed, the targeting of attacks.

Alistair Burt, the Minister for the Middle East, retorted:

British personnel are there to observe what is happening in relation to international humanitarian law, so that they can be part of the process of ensuring that it is adhered to. They are not part of the operational process. They are not under command to do that or anything else. They are not taking part in the targeting or anything like it, and have not been so.¹⁸

¹⁵ Critical Threats, [Yemen situation report 21 December 2017](#)

¹⁶ 'Press Conference Highlights Iran's UN Violations', US Department of Defense press release, 14 December 2017

¹⁷ 'Haley's 'Smoking Gun' on Iran Met With Skepticism at U.N.', *Foreign Policy*, 14 December 2017

¹⁸ [HC Deb 29 November 2017, c517](#)

UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia remain highly controversial,¹⁹ but the Government's argument is that the UK's export licensing process comprises robust safeguards to ensure that UK-supplied equipment is not used in violation of international humanitarian law. Mr Burt said in the November debate:

The question of arms control has been raised. We have a rigorous legal and parliamentary process, and ensuring that international humanitarian law is not breached is clearly a vital part of that. The information supplied by those liaison officers is crucial to ensuring that our international obligations are observed. That is why they are there.²⁰

In July 2017 the High Court in London rejected an action by the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) to force the Government to reconsider its decision not to suspend the trade, on the grounds of possible violations of international humanitarian law. The High Court found that the sales were not unlawful.

CAAT released figures in November indicating a 170% increase in UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia since the air campaign began, and launched a crowdfunding campaign to pay for an appeal against the July decision.²¹

On 3 January, Norway suspended its sales of arms and munitions to the UAE as a precautionary measure. The Norwegian foreign minister said that Norway had no information that Norwegian weapons had been used in the Yemen conflict.²²

Norway suspends arms sales to UAE

Political negotiations

In 2016 the Government indicated that the UK would present a draft resolution to the UN Security Council demanding a ceasefire. So far, that draft has not been presented'. Alistair Burt, Middle East Minister, cast some doubt on expectations of progress at the UN:

The best lever to pull is in the negotiations process that we have discussed. We do not think this can be done through the UN. It is much better to deal with the parties, on both sides, who have the opportunity and the responsibility to get something done around the table.²³

On 28 November 2017, the UK had hosted talks in London,²⁴ attended by foreign ministers of the UK, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman, the US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Thomas Shannon, and UN Special Envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed.

¹⁹ For information about the licensing process and the arguments over sales to Saudi Arabia in the context of the Yemen conflict, see the Commons Briefing Paper [The legal and regulatory framework for UK arms exports](#), September 2017

²⁰ HC Deb 29 November 2017, c524

²¹ [‘Huge increase in value of bombs and missiles licensed to Saudi Arabia by UK since war in Yemen began’](#), CAAT press release, 8 November 2017

²² [‘Norway suspends arms sales to UAE over Yemen war’](#), *Reuters*, 3 January 2018

²³ HC Deb 29 November 2017, c528

²⁴ [‘Foreign Secretary hosted meeting on Yemen’](#), Foreign and Commonwealth Office press release, 28 November 2017

5. Partition?

30 November 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of the final withdrawal of British troops from Aden and the creation of the state of southern Yemen. The two halves of Yemen have only been united since 1990.

The UAE is backing a Transitional Political Council of the South, led by Aydarous al-Zubaidi former Governor of the southern city of Aden, whose policy is to hold a referendum on secession from Yemen. The Hadi government is vehemently opposed to partition, but the idea has significant support among the southern population and the Transitional Political Council intends to hold a referendum.

Given the near-stalemate between the Houthis and the supporters of the Hadi government, and the fact that the front lines are quite close to the old border between north and south, the idea of secession is increasingly believable. Whether Saudi Arabia, which has spent so much money and political capital to reinstall Hadi in Sanaa, would support the idea is another matter. Yemen is a highly tribal society, and the allegiance of the tribes is also in flux. This fragmentation suggests that instability will persist in Yemen.

Independence
referendum for the
south?

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