

# Coup in Yemen: Saudi Arabia's Nightmare

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## The apparent collapse of the Yemeni government is a headache for Riyadh and bodes ill for U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

**C**onfusion reigns in Sana today after Houthi rebels seized the presidential palace and laid siege to the residences of President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and Prime Minister Khaled Bahah. A U.S. embassy vehicle was also shot at, and CNN reported that two U.S. Navy ships had taken position in the Red Sea to evacuate Americans from the embassy if needed. All this happened just a few hours before President Obama's State of the Union address, less than two weeks after Yemen-linked terrorist attacks in Paris, and four months after the president credited Yemen as a successful example of U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

But the regional consequences are arguably greater than any embarrassment to Washington. For decades, neighboring Saudi Arabia has been almost neurotic about its impoverished neighbor. For example, many observers believe that Saudi population statistics are often skewed to show that the kingdom is more populous than Yemen, thereby denting any Yemeni revanchism for historically lost territory. (The CIA World Factbook gives a figure of 27.3 million for Saudi Arabia, including several million expatriates, and 26 million for Yemen.) Moreover, the kingdom's founder -- Abdulaziz, also known as Ibn Saud -- reputedly warned on his deathbed against allowing Yemen, then divided into two states, to unite. But unification did eventually occur in 1990, prompting Riyadh to back a southern breakaway movement in 1994. The forces of President Ali Abdullah Saleh soundly defeated that movement, but the episode only intensified bilateral distrust. Saleh was eventually pushed out in 2012 after Yemen's own version of the "Arab Spring."

Saudi official reaction to the violence of the past few days has been muted, though newspapers in the kingdom have headlined the increasing chaos. Today, the Arab League called on all parties in Yemen to reject violence -- almost certainly a forlorn hope in a country where adult males are traditionally armed.

Saudi decisionmaking on the crisis is likely slowed by King Abdullah's current indisposition. The Yemen portfolio is

said to be divided between Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, who handles counterterrorism issues, and the Defense Ministry under the ailing Crown Prince Salman, which oversees payments to border tribes.

It is not clear whether Yemen faces anarchy or merely a power vacuum. The Houthi tribesmen from the Zaidi sect, linked to Shiite Islam, were motivated by grievances at first but now may want control. President Mansour Hadi did not block their initial advance on the capital last September, apparently out of fear that he would be accused of human rights violations; whether he will lessen his customary caution is unclear. The United Nations envoy, a Moroccan diplomat, has had little impact. Adding to Saudi fears is the sense that the success of the Houthis, who have previously received support from Iran, will be perceived as a strategic advance for Tehran.

Even if a ceasefire can be arranged and President Mansour Hadi can hold on, further destabilization appears inevitable. From the U.S. perspective, this is a setback for efforts to rally action against al-Qaeda groups who have found sanctuary in Yemen. If southern Yemen were to secede, it could make the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait connecting the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean more lawless. For Saudi Arabia, the events in Sana mean Riyadh must increasingly cope with two fronts: Sunni ISIS forces to the north, and Shiite Houthi forces -- in Saudi terms, Iranian proxies -- to the south.

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