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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Houthis Seize Sanaa: Implications

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Sep 2014

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

The Yemeni capital woke up to a new political and military reality on September 21. Following fierce battles between Yemeni government troops and Houthi fighters, the Houthis succeeded in taking control of key facilities in Sanaa including the parliament, the central bank, the cabinet office, and the general command of the armed forces – an ambush conducted with relative ease. The Houthis then stormed the headquarters of the first armored division led by Major-General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the chief opponent of the Houthis and one of Yemen's most influential figures. From there they amassed tanks, artillery, armored vehicles, and light weapons that they dispatched to their strongholds in the North. They then proceeded to attack, and in some instances demolish, a number of homes belonging to the sons of the late Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the representatives of the Yemeni Islah Party – a symbolic action in Yemen marking the subjugation of the enemy.

A Takeover of the Capital or Better Terms for an Agreement?

The irony of the fall of Sanaa to the Houthis coinciding with the 52nd anniversary of Yemen's 1962 revolution – which toppled the Imamate and paved the way for the Yemeni republic – did not go unnoticed. The popular narrative is that the Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah, are trying to monopolize representation of the followers of the Zaydi sect in Yemen, and reinstate a theocracy similar to the Zaydi imamate. Following this recent unprecedented Houthi victory, the followers of leader Abdel Malik al Houthi called on their supporters to celebrate their successful advance in Sanaa with fireworks and gatherings, prior to his appearance on television on September 23 to give his historic speech.

Some critics maintain that the aim of the Houthis from the very start was to seize Sanaa, given its political symbolism as the country's capital, as vengeance toward the state that replaced the Zaydi Imamate. In their view, the talks brokered by the UN assistant director-general and special envoy to Yemen, and the signing of the Peace National Agreement between the Houthi rebels and Yemeni president Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi, represented little more than a cover for their advancement on the ground and their capturing of the capital; hence the Houthi's refusal to leave Sanaa once they had crushed the Al-Ahmars and the Islah Party, and their refusal to sign the security annex

to the Peace and National Partnership Agreement which contained procedural steps to ensure the withdrawal of the Houthis from Sanaa and Amran, as well as the confiscation of their weapons.

Others however believe that by taking control of Sanaa the Houthis primarily aimed to strengthen their hand to obtain a more favorable agreement and a greater share of power than had been offered by the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that was signed earlier this year. The Peace and National Partnership Agreement contains articles for the formation of a competency-based government within one month and the appointment of Houthi and Southern [Peaceful] Movement political advisers to President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, whom the President is now obliged to consult over the choice of the members of the new government. The president, however, still retains the final choice over the sovereign portfolios (defense, interior, foreign, and finance ministers). The agreement also stipulates further lowering of the price of fuel, economic reforms to be carried out by the new government, and a re-examination of the make-up of the national committee to oversee the outcomes of the national dialogue. All of these articles are gains made by the Houthis as a result of negotiating while shelling.

How and Why did Sanaa Fall?

Irrespective of what the Houthis were trying to do, the rapid fall of Sanaa came as a shock to many. With the Yemeni army remaining neutral, after only four days of fighting, Houthi fighters defeated the forces commanded by Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and supported by armed elements from the Islah party. The Houthis were able to invade northwestern and northern neighborhoods of the capital and take control of the television center and airport, before heading south to capture the headquarters of the first armored division and the general command of the armed forces, ensuring a decisive victory.

No doubt, the rapid fall of the capital indicates the complicity of some of the military top brass, who are still accused of being loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. For how could militias armed with light and medium weapons take on army units equipped with heavy weapons and charged with the security and protection of state institutions?

Still, there are other reasons and factors that contributed to the Houthis' rapid victory in Sanaa, the most important of which are: the weakness and lack of cohesion of the government of Mohammed Salim Basindawa and the dual-loyalties of its members;

lack of economic or military assistance from the Gulf; the weakness of President Hadi in the face of political factions and his inability to rely on a loyal military force to carry out his decisions; the lack of cohesion and multiple loyalties within the Yemeni armed forces, some of whose commanders favor the Houthi group, not for sectarian reasons but due to the resentment they still hold for the restructuring of the armed forces and former Republican Guard following the ousting of Ali Abdullah Saleh; and last but not least the increased unemployment and poverty rates in Yemen. In this regard the Houthis were astute in using economic demands as a cover for their move against the state. All of these factors coalesced into creating a state of political and security flux that presented the Houthis with a good opportunity to take control of the capital and then impose their conditions.

The Seeds of the Agreement's Failure are Inherent in It

Needless to say, the recent agreement falls short of offering a comprehensive and radical solution to the Yemeni crisis, particularly in view of the fact that the Houthis refused to sign the security annex that requires them to withdraw from Sanaa and its suburbs, and hand their weapons over to the state. If anything, the Houthis have been stockpiling more weapons after having looted the Yemeni army camps that fell into their hands. As a result, the Houthis will always be inclined to use force as long as they feel that there is an appropriate opportunity to achieve further demands. Therefore, the elements triggering the collapse of the recent agreement are latent within it. The heightening political and social tensions resulting from the Houthis having occupied Sanaa and made examples of figures from its main tribe (Hashid, to which the al-Ahmar clan belong) make it difficult for this agreement to be a formula for stability, particularly with increasing sectarian polarization and its intersection with existing tribal divisions.

As the alleged link between the Houthi movement and Iran becomes stronger, there is an increasing awareness among the Yemeni forces that the development represents a threat to Yemeni national security. President Hadi expressed these fears frankly in recent days when he said that Tehran wanted to bargain Sanaa for Damascus. At the same time, Iranian MP Alireza Zakani stated that the Yemeni capital Sanaa had become the fourth Arab capital, after Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad, to fall to Iran, in a reference to the Houthi seizure. This was a provocation to many, both inside and outside Yemen.

In this pressing regional context, and with the growing structural damage to state institutions (civilian, military, and security), the Yemeni state has increasingly come out as the weakest party and is being forced to offer further concessions. This risks raising the ceiling until the state and its apparatus becomes a mere tool in the hands of the Houthi group, in a repeat of the Hezbollah experience in Lebanon. The recent agreement ensured that the Houthis will have advisers with broad powers to influence the Yemeni president, who is required to take their opinion when appointing government ministers, with the exception of the sovereign political portfolios.

It remains to be said that the party which participated covertly in the crisis, i.e. former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, did so on the basis of immediate tactical factors and the wish to take revenge against those forces that helped to oust him in 2011. The same applies to his Gulf allies who have adopted a short-sighted policy which lacks a strategic orientation, driven by their desire to get rid of the Yemeni Islah Party. They were complicit in, or at least remained silent about, the Houthi mobilization against Sanaa, in the belief that it was a confrontation with their enemies. Given that the experience of the Joint Meeting Party went further than Islah and represented an exceptional Yemeni experience of cooperation between various ideological trends and different tribes, these people will soon discover that they have created, or helped to create, a more serious threat than those they imagined they had gotten rid of. At that point, it may be too late.