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## **Yemen's Crumbling Factions: A Turning Point for Political Compromise, or War Escalation**

The Yemeni conflict is trapped in a painful stalemate: the absence of clear military winners weakens the role of diplomacy.

But emerging rivalries inside warring factions have been altering Yemen's balances among actors, leaving room for two opposite, but possible scenarios: negotiated political compromise or further military escalation.

The insurgent front (the Northern Shia Houthi movement, Ansarullah, plus former president Ali Abdullah Saleh's loyalists), supported by Iran, is increasingly shaken by mistrust, a war of words and, sometimes, violent outbursts.

The Houthis denounce Saleh's reported attempt to negotiate a compromise with Saudi Arabia, while the last one accuses the Sa'da movement to be only a corrupted militia able to monopolize the rebel's "parallel government", so marginalizing his party, the General People's Congress (GPC). On August 24, the 35th anniversary of the formation of the GPC, Saleh and the Houthis organised two different rallies in Sana'a. Later, violence broke out at a Houthi controlled check-point, where a prominent GPC politician and two Houthis were killed in a gun battle [Reuters, "Yemen ex-president seeks arrest of aide's killers", August 31, 2017].

Since the beginning, the alliance between the Northern movement and Saleh's loyalists has always been a tactical one, not a choice driven by ideology or sectarian affiliation. Common interests and the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen turned these ancient enemies into allies of convenience against the perceived Saudi aggression. Moreover, Ansarullah is increasingly divided between hardliners (mostly based in the Sa'da fiefdom) and mediators (predominantly in Sana'a), with regard also to the movement's stance vis-à-vis Saleh and his network.

Tensions are rapidly growing also in "liberated" Southern areas, as Aden, where in Summer 2015 the insurgent faction was rolled-back by Southern tribal militias and UAE's Special Forces.

On October 14, Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, former Aden's governor and now president of the self-proclaimed Southern Transitional Council (STC), announced the establishment of a "National Assembly". The new 303-members legislative body should convene, for the first time, in November and then organize a referendum for the independence of the South [Reuters, "Southern Yemen leader sees independence referendum, parliament body", October 14, 2017].

The STC refuses to integrate the army and to cooperate with internationally-recognized institutions (now based in Aden, as the Al-Zubaidi's "government"), first of all with Abdu Rabu Mansur Hadi's presidency, still sustained by Saudi Arabia. Instead, the United Arab Emirates back the STC, in spite of their formal support for Hadi, so emboldening Southerners' secessionist aspirations. In Aden, religious and political violence is on the rise: two Salafi imams have been recently killed.

Due to elite-infighting inside warring factions, the conflict in Yemen is at a turning point. Rivalries will likely trigger a reconfiguration of political and military alignments, so enabling political compromise or fuelling new layers of violence.

In case of further escalation, jihadists would have the chance to strengthen territorial presence and ideological outreach in many central and Southern provinces of Yemen, as al-Bayda, where the United States targeted, for the first time, the Yemeni wilaya of the so-called Islamic State on October 16 [Alex Horton, "In a first, U.S. launches deadly strikes on ISIS training camps in Yemen, The Washington Post, October 17, 2017]. However, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula remains the most powerful jihadi group in the country, and could easily exploit tribal and/or regional grievances and competing views on Yemeni future.

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