

**INSIDE**

News

**Marib tribes demonstrate support for Hadi**

Page 2



Our Opinion

**What happens in Marib?**

Page 4

Feature

**Sana'a: A hybrid city**

Page 5



Report

**Journey to Yemen: A deadly year for migrants and refugees**

Page 6



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## President approves Houthi demands in attempt to prevent escalation

■ Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki

**SANA'A, Jan. 21**—President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi has agreed to implement demands made during Abdulmalik Al-Houthi's televised speech on Tuesday in order to prevent further escalations.

Hadi's approval came after meetings with his advisors, including Houthi representative Saleh Al-Sammad, which began on Tuesday evening and continued into the morning.

The Houthi leader made his demands during a televised speech on Tuesday evening, which was aired on the Houthi-affiliated channel Al-Masira. It came hours after renewed clashes between government and Houthi forces in which the Presidential Palace and President Hadi's personal home came under attack.

The president agreed to cooperate with Houthi popular committees and work to implement the four demands set out in Al-Houthi's speech. These included calls to re-

form the National Authority for the Implementation of NDC Outcomes, amend the draft constitution, implement the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), and to seek an immediate resolution to the security situation in Marib.

A failure to meet these demands would push the Houthis to "take new and strict measures that will prove very painful," said Al-Houthi.

During his speech, Al-Houthi accused the president of "stalling and wasting time" in implementing the PNPA and of "conspiring and aiding Al-Qaeda." He also warned against external intervention and, addressing the United Nations Security Council, said that "any measures aiming to subdue this country and conspire against it will be futile—we are ready to face any challenges."

The UN Security Council condemned attacks on the Presidential Palace and identified President Hadi as the country's only legitimate ruler. In a statement released from New York on Tuesday evening,

members of the Security Council demanded an immediate ceasefire and called on all political parties and blocs in Yemen to stand with the president and prevent government institutions from being undermined.

**President besieged**

President Hadi's personal residence on Al-Siteen Street remains occupied by armed Houthis. The building was taken after over two hours of fighting in which two of the president's guards were killed, according to Ali Al-Qanes, an officer with the Presidential Guard.

Accusations that Houthi intruders had ransacked the residence were denied by Mahmoud Al-Junaid, a member of the Houthi Political Office. He said the militants took control of the compound in order to protect it as well as President Hadi, who remains inside and is holding ongoing meetings with Houthi representatives there.

According to Al-Junaid, the Houthis have no intention of removing President Hadi from power, whom they acknowledge as the country's legitimate ruler. "We merely want to put the country on the right course," he said. "We will work with Hadi if he meets our demands, he is the president of Yemen."

Armed Houthis also besieged the Presidential Palace in Al-Sabaeen district on Tuesday afternoon, although similar levels of violence were not seen there as his security forces surrendered following negotiations with the Houthis.

Abdulrazak Al-Faqih, an officer stationed at the presidential residence, said his men managed to escape unharmed following orders from his superiors to withdraw from the premises.

Armed Houthis who had surrounded the residence allowed them to leave with their personal



Abdulmalik Al-Houthi spelled out his group's demands in a 90-minute speech he gave on the Houthi-affiliated Al-Masira channel on Tuesday evening.

firearms, although Al-Faqih said they were prevented from taking additional arms with them. "I personally tried taking three AK47 but they stopped me, so I ended up leaving with just one," he said.

UN Special Advisor on Yemen Jamal Benomar said in a meeting with the UN Security Council on Tuesday that Houthis were able to persuade the Presidential Guards not to resist, which allowed them to break into the Presidential Palace.

Mohammad Al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi Political Office in Sana'a, confirmed Houthis had contacted the Presidential Guards and persuaded them not to resist on Monday evening.

Houthis took over the Presidential Palace and his personal residence one day after violent clashes with the president's security forces which left 18 killed and 94 injured, the deputy emergency manager at the Ministry of Health, Ghazi Ismael, told the Yemen Times Wednesday.

Speaking with the Yemen Times, Minister of Information Nadia Al-

posed of four brigades and was formed by presidential decree in 2012.

There are unconfirmed reports that Houthis have seized weapons stored at the Presidential Palace, an allegation Al-Junaid has denied. "Our men have not taken any weapons, we have only prevented soldiers and officers from doing so," he told the Yemen Times.

Mohammad Mahmoud Ibrahim, who is a bodyguard for former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and who meets weekly with officers at the Presidential Palace, told the Yemen Times the following weapons were as of Wednesday being held at the palace: 300 tanks, 122 rocket launchers, almost 500 vehicles equipped with 12.7 caliber machine guns, 400 automatic assault rifles, 23 anti-aircraft artillery, 125 armored vehicles, 5,000 Glock, Perita, and Caracal handguns, and almost 10,000 sniper rifles. The Yemen Times was unable to independently verify these claims.



An empty guard post in front of President Hadi's personal residence, which was taken by armed Houthis following over two hours of fighting on Tuesday.

## Aden shuts all entry points over Sana'a "coup"

■ Bassam Al-Khameri

**SANA'A, Jan. 21**—All entrances to Aden governorate were closed Wednesday morning through a decree by the Supreme Security Committee of Aden. The move came in response to armed clashes in the capital between Houthis and security forces Tuesday afternoon.

"All entrances to Aden, including Aden International Airport, Aden Harbor and the land borders, will remain closed until further notice and will be opened once the situation in Sana'a becomes stable,"

Colonel Mohammed Mused of the Aden Security Department told the Yemen Times on Wednesday.

According to him, the entrances were closed at 7:00 a.m. Wednesday in response to what he described as a "coup" against President Hadi. As of 6:00 p.m. Wednesday all entrances remained closed.

Late Tuesday the Supreme Security Committee released a statement, aired via the state-run Aden TV channel, calling the clashes in Sana'a a "coup" with "serious repercussions for Hadi and the political process." The security commit-

tee announced all air, sea, and land entrances to Aden would be closed from Wednesday at 7:00 am until further notice.

The security committee is headed by Governor Abdulaziz Bin Habtoor and includes the Aden Security Chief and other security and military commanders. It is in charge of issuing decrees related to security issues in the governorate.

"The Supreme Security Committee of Aden has discussed the serious developments in the capital Sana'a and evaluated the military and security situation there due to the attacks against the symbol of national sovereignty and constitutional legitimacy, President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi," the statement read.

The committee said it holds the Houthis accountable for the safety and well being of President Hadi, Prime Minister Khaled Bahah, and Ahmed Awad Bin Mubarak, the director of the president's office.

Clashes broke out between the Houthis and security forces around 6:45 a.m. Monday and ended with a ceasefire in the late afternoon. Fighting renewed Tuesday afternoon near the personal residence of President Hadi and stopped hours later, before a speech by Houthi leader Abdulmalik Al-Houthi at 9:00 p.m.

In its statement, the Supreme Security Committee said it decided to close all entrances to Aden in order to prevent any armed groups from entering Aden and also to ensure the safety of people in Aden.

Mahmoud Al-Junaid, a member of the Houthi Political Office, said he was confused by the security committee's decision to issue the decree, calling it "careless."

"Hadi is still the president and no coup has taken place against him, these procedures taken by the security committee in Aden are to put pressure on Ansar Allah [the Houthis] and may have been under orders from President Hadi," he added.

A source in Aden International Airport, speaking to the Yemen Times on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to speak to the press, said the airport was closed at 7:00 a.m. sharp.

"No internal or international flights are arriving or taking off from the airport at all. We were given orders from the security committee of Aden to close the airport until further notice," he said.

Sami Khairan, an employee in Aden Harbor, told the Yemen Times that employees are not working and the harbor is completely shut down due to the orders of the committee.



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Under orders from Aden's Supreme Security Committee, the international airport, harbor, and all border crossings will remain closed until further notice.



# Marib tribes demonstrate support for Hadi

Story by **Nasser Al-Sakkaf**  
Photo by **Amal Al-Yarisi**

**SANA'A, Jan. 20**—Marib tribal leaders announced on Monday evening they would blow up electricity lines and oil pipelines if President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi was harmed.

According to Sadiq Bin Lanjaf, one of the sheikhs of Obaidah tribe in Marib governorate, "Dozens of tribal leaders met on Monday in Al-Suhail area to discuss developments in Sana'a." Sheikhs at the meeting decided to destroy Marib's electricity and oil infrastructure if Houthis would take any measure that would "harm" the president. "After the meeting we informed local media about our decision," said Lanjaf.

The meeting in Marib followed a day of intense fighting in Yemen's capital, where government troops exchanged heavy gun and artillery fire with the Houthis.

"President Hadi represents the entire country," Lanjaf declared. "He was lawfully chosen and if any party wants to remove him they should do so lawfully, too—not in form of a coup."

While many observers have portrayed Monday's events as an attempted coup d'état by the Houthis, leading Houthi members and activists denied these allegations.



Following discussions on Monday, several tribal leaders in Marib have threatened to attack vital infrastructure in their governorate if any "harm" comes to President Hadi.

"Houthis are in control of Sana'a and most of the north of Yemen. If [the Houthis] were after Hadi—who has offered to step down—[we] would just give him a phone call," Hussein Al-Bukhaiti, a leading Houthi activist, told the Yemen

Times on Monday.

Not all sheikhs in Marib support the threat made public on Monday. Mursel Al-Qabali, a sheikh in the Murad tribe, emphasized that the announcement made on Monday does not reflect the opinion of Mar-

ib tribes in general, saying "it was made by some individuals, therefore I do not think it will be implemented."

Although tribal leaders tend to agree on matters affecting Marib governorate, Al-Qabali said, they

hold differing opinions on political developments unfolding in the country.

Mohammad Al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi Political Office in Sana'a, explained that the Houthis were solely focused on completing

"the people's revolution" that started on Sept. 21, 2014, and would not pay attention to threats made by leading tribal figures in governorates like Marib and Shabwa.

On Sunday tribesmen in Shabwa called on petroleum companies operating in the governorate to cease production in protest of the Houthis' kidnapping of Ahmad Bin Mubarak—the director of the president's office—on Saturday.

Salem Al-Sael, a local journalist based in Shabwa, told the Yemen Times that as of Wednesday afternoon the four major oil companies in the governorate remained closed.

Al-Bukhaiti said that Houthis will not harm political figures like Bin Mubarak and described the kidnapping as a "further step in the completion of the people's revolution." The end-goal of "the people's revolution," Al-Bukhaiti said, is the eradication of corruption.

Nabil Al-Sharjabi, professor of international relations and crisis management at Hodeida University, does not believe the threat made by tribesmen in Marib is to be taken seriously. "Tribes in Marib and other oil-rich governorates usually threaten to destroy vital infrastructure but they have not followed through on their threats yet, and they will not in the future, because they know the entire country will turn against them."

# Houthis killed in Rada'a explosion

Story by **Ali Aboluhom**  
Photo by **Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki**

**SANA'A, Jan. 21**—Five Houthi militants were reportedly killed in an explosion on Tuesday night in Rada'a district, in the west of Al-Baida governorate.

According to Ali Maqsham, the security manager of Rada'a city, an improvised explosive device (IED) went off near a Houthi checkpoint in Dar Aziz area, two kilometers outside Rada'a city, claiming the lives of five Houthis.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed responsibility for Tuesday's explosion on its Twitter handle, stating that five Houthis were killed in the explosion.

Waleed Al-Dailami, the leader of Houthi popular committees in Rada'a district, denied any Houthi casualties caused by Tuesday's events. On the contrary, he argued

that the IED failed to go off, and that Houthis detected and killed the AQAP member who planted it.

The attack follows renewed clashes between Houthis and members of AQAP, according to Maqsham. On Monday, fighting took place in Al-Khubza, Al-Sharia, and Adel Al-Shawarea villages of Rada'a district.

"The casualties of recent clashes remain unknown," Maqsham told the Yemen Times on Wednesday.

Mohammad Al-Maweri, a local journalist from Rada'a city, confirmed that fighting renewed Monday, saying a "roar" of artillery could be heard until Tuesday afternoon in areas surrounding Rada'a city, including Qaifa. Al-Maweri told the Yemen Times on Wednesday evening that fighting had not broken out again.

"Although Houthis took over Rada'a city and areas surrounding it, Al-Qaeda members, every now and then, launch offensives or

ambushes against Houthis in the broader Rada'a region," Al-Maweri said.

Houthis took control over parts of Rada'a district on Oct. 29, 2014. However, sporadic clashes between the group's popular committees and local tribes—often affiliated with AQAP—continue unabated.

Tensions between Houthis and AQAP increased in Rada'a after Houthis took over Sana'a on Sept. 21, 2014, and expanded their presence into other governorates, including Al-Baida, arguing they were aiming to improve security by fighting AQAP.

According to a study released by the Abaad Studies and Research Center in late Dec. 2014, the number of Houthis killed in Rada'a between September and December 2014 reached 1,000, while the number of AQAP casualties was between 300-400 for the same period.



Members of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed responsibility for the attack on a Houthi checkpoint, which reportedly left five dead. Local Houthi representatives denied suffering any losses.

# Director of Yemen TV resigns

■ **Khalid Al-Karimi**

**SANA'A, Jan. 20**—The general news director of the state-run Yemen TV channel resigned from his post on Tuesday in response to Houthi interference with the channel's editorial policy and alleged censorship.

"Before Monday, we tried our best to be neutral and to reconcile government and Houthi viewpoints. After Monday, the Houthis began supervising my work, telling me what to broadcast. I preferred to resign from my position," said Tawfik Al-Sharabi, the general news director of Yemen TV.

The Houthis, otherwise known as Ansar Allah, have tightened their grip on state-run media institutions in the capital Sana'a, including both TV channels and newspapers. Following their takeover of the capital on Sept. 21 last year, the group took control of Yemen TV, Saba News Agency, and Al-Iman TV—all state-run broadcasters located in a single

compound in the city's Al-Thawra district.

"The channel no longer broadcasts neutral news. Its coverage now represents only one side—that of the Houthis," said Al-Sharabi.

Waheeb Aqlan, a broadcaster with Yemen TV who was in the office during the takeover, confirmed Al-Sharabi's allegations. "The Houthis appointed a supervisor for the general director, so they undermined his authority and as a result, he resigned," he told the Yemen Times.

However, according to Khaleel Al-Qaheri, another broadcaster working for Yemen TV, news coverage on the channel has always been compromised by political oversight from either side, particularly since Sept. 21.

"This TV channel has always been run to serve the interests of those controlling it," said Al-Qaheri. "Since Monday's developments, Houthis have placed their own supervisors in the office to monitor our editorial policy. They want to



The general news director of the Yemen TV channel, Tawfik Al-Sharabi, resigned on Tuesday in response to Houthi interference with the channel's editorial policy.

publish their side of events, and to counter what is said against them based on developments in the capital."

On Monday, Houthi popular committees and forces under President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi engaged in fierce fighting in the capital city, ushering in a new turning point in Yemeni politics.

According to Al-Sharabi, some of the staff are not willing to lose their jobs and others are pro-Houthi. "Some say we are merely news anchors—we come to read the news, and we go home," he said.

Mukhtar Al-Sharifi, a broadcaster for Yemen TV who Aqlan charges is pro-Houthi, said Al-Sharabi's resignation was a "reckless decision."

"No one attempted to interfere with his work—we [the Houthis] wanted to provide a helping hand at this critical time," said Al-Sharabi. "Everyone [at Yemen TV] should cooperate to serve the citizenry and help re-establish stability. It would be better if he reconsidered his deci-

sion [to resign]."

Houthi representatives claim they are interfering with news outlets to ensure media neutrality. Hussein Al-Bukhaiti, a prominent Houthi figure and spokesman for the group, said Houthi popular committees are not trying to silence opposing views. "The Yemen TV broadcasts the facts, it no longer publishes distorted representations of the popular committees. Ensuring revolutionary legitimacy takes priority, the channel's staff needs to realize that the situation changed after Sept. 21," he said.

On Monday, Minister of Information Nadia Al-Sakkaf tweeted that the Aden TV channel and her own Twitter account remained the only trustworthy official sources. "Anyone wanting to be updated with news and information related to the state and what is taking place can follow the Aden TV channel, not Yemen TV. I will also continue publishing news on my twitter account," she wrote.

# Fighting disrupts everyday life in Sana'a

Residents report war-like scenarios during two days of turmoil in Yemen's capital

Story by **Nasser Al-Sakkaf**  
Photos by **Sara Alzawqari**

**“W**hen the shell destroyed the entire second floor, we were hiding on the first floor,” Mansur Al-Houthi recalls. On Monday morning at around 8:30 a.m. his house was hit by a stray shell. Living in Hadda neighborhood, south-western Sana'a, with his nine family members, Al-Houthi said he felt trapped and exposed. While it was not safe staying, he felt that leaving would put his family at even greater risk.

Though the fighting came to a halt, residents' fears have hardly subsided. “We did not feel safe until the night, when the clashes stopped. But even now, we remain scared and are thinking of moving to an area that is safe.”

Intense fighting broke out in Yemen's capital on Monday morning around 6:45 a.m. Heavy artillery and gunfire could be heard until the afternoon, with intense fire being exchanged between government security forces and the Houthis. Clashes in Sana'a's residential neighborhoods inevitably affected civilians, destroying houses and causing a high number of casualties.

The deputy emergency manager at the Ministry of Health, Ghazi Ismael, told the Yemen Times on Wednesday afternoon that 18 were killed and 94 injured in Monday's clashes.

A source in the Records Department at the Police Hospital said that two injured people reached the Hospital on Monday, and that other casualties were delivered to Al-Thawra Hospital, Al-Jumhuriyya Hospital, and other private hospitals in the city. Inas Al-Sharqi, an employee of the Emergency Department of Al-Thawra hospital, said that three deceased and 15 injured Yemenis were delivered on Monday.

Sara Alzawqari, manager of the Yemen Times radio station in Sana'a, lives in Al-Maqaleh Market close to the Presidential Palace where fighting took place. “Our house was shaken by the shells, but we could not leave. Instead, we tried to move from one room to another to try to protect ourselves from the shelling.”

“By 3:00 p.m., a shell hit the house next to us and pieces of cement fell in our yard, which only made us more scared, especially because the sound of shooting came closer,” Alzawqari recalls.

Abeer Al-Sofi, a resident living on Socotra Street near to the Culture Roundabout in Socotra neighborhood, shared the same experience as Alzawqari and Al-Houthi. “From Monday morning until 4 p.m. we heard bullets hitting our house,” he said. “We gathered on the first floor, but we could not leave the house due to the ongoing fighting.”

At around 1 p.m., a shell hit the house of Al-Sofi's neighbor, making the severity of the situation even more apparent and panicking Al-Sofi and his family.

Al-Khalil Ibrahim Mosque, which is also near to Al-Sofi's house, was hit by a stray shell too (see map).

A Houthi fighter stationed at Misbahi roundabout in Sana'a's Hadda neighborhood—which endured over seven hours of fierce fighting—seemed unimpressed by these personal tragedies. Calling himself “Abu Ali,” he bluntly declared, “Civilian casualties are part of any war.”

“I fight because my leaders are going to eradicate the corruption in this country and spread justice,” he said. Given the Houthis' internal organizational structure, he added, it is not up to him to question his leaders' order to fight—even if it is in a residential neighborhood. “I am a fighter and it is a national duty to fight in order to regain justice,” he made clear. “We want equality between people from different classes.”

“We started fighting when we realized that the government doesn't care for the population. They cut fuel subsidies, which affect ordinary citizens, while there are others who steal millions and no one punishes them,” Abu Ali explains.

Mohammad Al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi Political Office in Sana'a, portrayed the fighting by Houthis as an act of self-defense, regretting the number of casualties caused. “We do not prefer to fight anyone, whether inside or outside the capital city.”

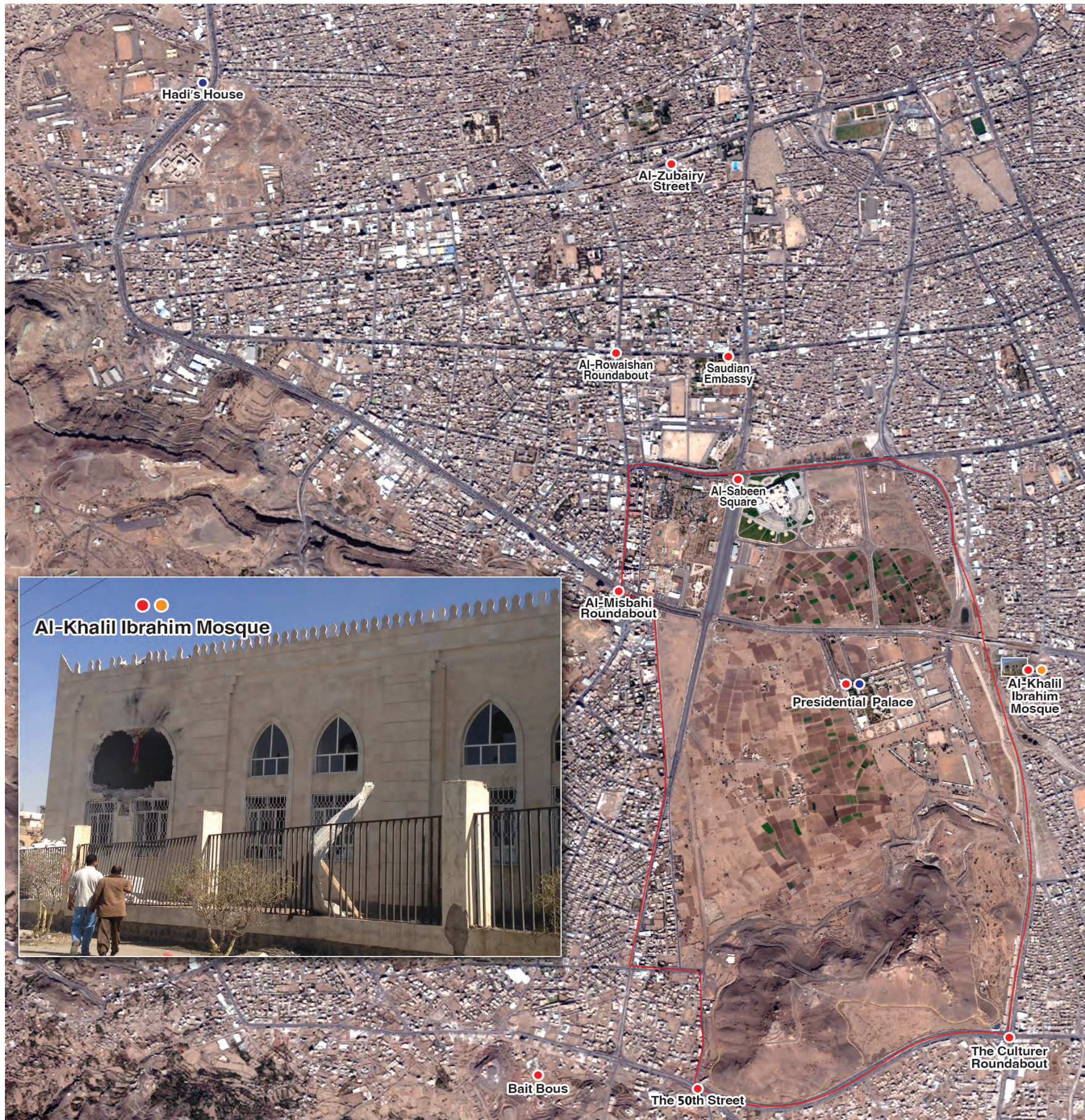
Mohammad Hizam, the deputy relations manager in the Interior Ministry, said he could not speak about Monday's events and that he did not have any details. While Houthis seem to be stationed everywhere throughout the capital city, soldiers are rarely seen.

The impact of Monday's clashes goes beyond destruction and casualties, causing prolonged disruptions to everyday life in Yemen's capital. Al-Dailami School in Hadda neighborhood closed down on Monday and will remain closed until Feb. 8. A sign on its locked-down gates reads, “Examinations of Al-Dailami School are postponed until 8.2.2015 due to the security situation in the capital city.”

Al-Dailami School is not alone. The Educational Office in the capital city announced on Monday that until Feb. 8—the beginning of the next semester—schools will be closed in Sana'a's Al-Sabaen district, including Sabaen, Hadda, Al-Safia and other neighborhoods.

The spokesperson of the Ministry of Education, Ismael Zaidan, told the Yemen Times on Wednesday the ministry took this step as precautionary measure.

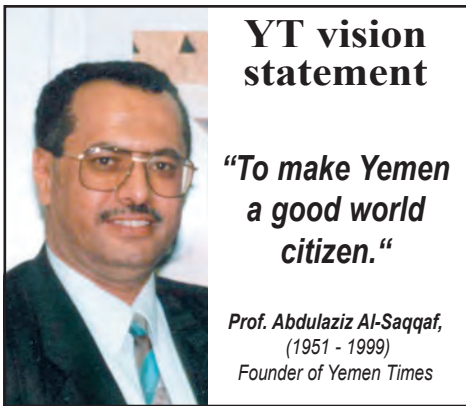
Zaidan explained that the lack of classes is actually limited since holidays began on Jan. 21 and will last until Feb. 8.



Areas marked in red denote clashes that took place on Monday, while blue denotes fighting that took place Tuesday.



Fighting between Houthis and government troops on Monday and Tuesday left residents in fear and a number of buildings destroyed.

**YT vision statement****"To make Yemen a good world citizen."**Prof. Abdulaziz Al-Saqqaf,  
(1951 - 1999)  
Founder of Yemen Times**OUR OPINION****What happens in Marib?**

In his speech Tuesday evening, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi informed the country he was not removing Hadi from power—for now. The clashes, he said, were a warning. Al-Houthi then laid out four demands. If Hadi does not move forward with these demands, Al-Houthi has warned that all options are on the table.

One of his demands is that Hadi secure Marib, which harbors Al-Qaeda. One thing this week's activities have demonstrated is that Hadi has little control over the military and that his forces have been unable to fend off fighters from even the presidential residence and the Presidential Palace. How can Hadi clear Marib of Al-Qaeda and get a grip on the pipeline and electricity sabotages if he can not secure his own residence? He can not. This was less a demand on Al-Houthi's part than it was an acknowledgment that the Houthis will likely enter Marib. The consequences of such an action should frighten us all.

The Houthis entered Rada'a in the fall in an effort to clear the district of Al-Qaeda, and declared it Al-Qaeda free—taking journalists to the area to show-off their victory. A recent car bomb left 16 school girls dead. Blow-back reached the capital, where an increasing number of IEDs, car bombs, and suicide bombings have left dozens dead. The targeting of Islahi institutions and individuals, as well as the recent displays of power masquerading as religious expression, have been a recruiting tool for Al-Qaeda.

Expect far more blow-back should the Houthis enter Marib. Does Marib have any options in front of it, or is it resigned to sit-back until the fighting comes to the governorate? Are there terms for peace that can be realistically achieved?

The authorities in Marib can wait for what seems to be the inevitable and begin negotiations once the Houthis enter the governorate and fighting starts, or they can send an envoy to Sana'a to lead negotiations with our de-facto president, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi.

**Ahlam Mohsen****A thousand lashes for Raif Badawi, while the West stays silent on Saudi human rights****Madawi Al-Rasheed**  
LSE Middle East Center Blog  
First published Jan. 16

**R**aif Badawi, a Saudi blogger and the founder of an online liberal debating forum, has become the most recent victim of the unjust Saudi justice system and the contradictions, one might say hypocrisy, of the Saudi monarchy.

In May 2014 Badawi was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes to be administered 50 at a time. The first 50 were administered on Jan. 9. Just 24 hours later a Saudi delegation joined the march in the Place de la Republique in Paris in support of freedom of speech following the Charlie Hebdo massacre.

Badawi was sentenced for allegedly insulting religion on his censored liberal forum, which Saudi commentators, both anonymous and identified, used as a forum for discussion, short commentaries—and mostly rants—about the strict religious controls over their personal freedoms, the assault on their human rights and restrictions on freedom of speech in Saudi Arabia.

Badawi's blog hosted campaigns to support introducing a legal age for marriage (especially for girls) and campaigns in favor of allowing women to drive, while there was also much discussion of sexual harassment cases and abuse in public spaces were often discussed. It was anything but one-sided: Both advocates and opponents of Islam and Islamic law frequently voiced opposing opinions.

On more than one occasion, the blog has been used as a satirical platform to ridicule strange fatwas and religious opinions from famous Saudi scholars—for example the opinion that driving is detrimental to women's ovaries.

**Religious police**

One of the main concern of the site's users has been the so-called "religious police"—the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. These government-appointed moral vigilantes parade the streets in luxurious white four-wheel drives in search of immorality, enforcing gender separation laws, making sure that all shops are closed during prayer times and that men and women dress modestly at all times (not to mention tracking down illicit brewing or consumption of alcohol and, of course, prostitution).

There seems to be no end to the number of ways one can fall foul of the religious police—the number and range of offences is constantly expanding, and now includes tweeting "subversive" and politically challenging statements, communicating with foreign media and making unauthorized visits to embassies in Riyadh among many other "offences."

**Personal freedoms**

Although Badawi's blog carries the name "liberal," one must not jump to conclusions. This is not liberalism as it is historically understood in the West—you won't find any calls for revolutionary political change in favor of representative government or elections. He has been mainly concerned with the denial of personal freedoms and the excess of religious interventions by government and Saudi Arabia's over-privileged clergy.

For example Badawi once praised a member of the royal family—who was governor of Mecca at the time—as enlightened because of his calls for restricting the power of the religious police and in favor of allowing women to drive. Of course, it didn't stop his arrest and imprisonment.

In the eyes of the Saudi judiciary, Badawi's main crime is to call for the separation of religion and state, a kind of secularism that he admires in other countries and believes to be the only solution to pro-

tect freedoms in Saudi Arabia.

But Badawi's quest for secularism got him in trouble with the Wahhabi conservative constituency in Saudi Arabia, which controls the judiciary. As preachers and judges, they have a monopoly over interpreting Islam and passing arbitrary sentences. The sharia (Islamic law) has yet to be codified in Saudi Arabia and its application is subject to the opinion of judges who do not accept the pluralism of Islamic jurisprudence or a diversity of legal interpretations.

**A worrying precedent**

It must be said that the 1,000 lashes included with Badawi's ten-year jail sentence are so unusual and have no precedence in the Islamic tradition—previously the number of lashes has never exceeded 100. So it must be a vindictive judge who settled on this excessive number.

Given that Saudi judges are appointed by the Ministry of Interior—which is also responsible for security and anti-terrorism efforts, they have become the arm of this ministry that wants to silence dissent, stifle human right activists and criminalize any activity that challenges the absolute monarchy.

The regime appeases those important judges by allowing them a free hand when dealing with cases of religious dissent. They surely do not want to see Badawi's dream of secularism come true—this would mean they would lose their privileges and control over society.

Unfortunately, Badawi's case may have set a precedent for the handing down of harsh sentences for prisoners of conscience. The Saudi regime remains immune from international pressure, as its allies—mainly Western governments—are afraid to rock the boat with their loyal friends in Riyadh.

This is, of course, simply realpolitik on the part of the West; Saudi Arabia still controls huge quantities of oil and is a good

business partner. There is never any concern about unpleasantness or corruption scandals erupting. In the past, investigations of corruption, for example the infamous Al-Yamama arms deal between Saudi Arabia and BAE, were halted by Tony Blair when the UK's Serious Fraud Office was about to expose dodgy bribes paid to Saudi princes to secure the deal.

Human rights in Saudi Arabia are truly not on the foreign policy agenda of most Western governments.

**Divine law?**

Raif's ordeal can only be stopped by royal decree. But with the ageing king still in hospital recovering from pneumonia, the Saudi royal family busily trying to sort out, in secret, the vexed issue of the succession—and terrorism raging to the north and south of the country in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the blogger is unfortunately left without support or hope.

There are thousands of prisoners of conscience in a country like Saudi Arabia who may linger in prison for decades, suffering torture such as lashing and flogging. Their cases are kept alive by international human rights organizations but are greeted with a deafening silence by the rest of the world.

The Saudis can no longer hide behind their claim that they are simply abiding by divine law and applying sharia on earth. They must be told that their interpretations of the law fall short of the aspirations of many Muslims. Someone must point out to them that religious texts may be revered and considered sacred, but religious scholars who claim to act on behalf of god are not.

Badawi is innocent as he has not committed a crime even within a narrow interpretation of Islamic law. This punishment is an abomination and the international community must do all it can to bring pressure on its Saudi ally to stop it. But don't hold your breath.

**Energy company drills through human rights in the Western Sahara****Craig Browne**  
Muftah.org  
First published Jan. 15

**O**n the evening of December 13, 2014, a 240 meter-long drillship drifted through the night and into Western Saharan waters. Despite its size and long-awaited arrival, the hulking vessel went relatively unnoticed. With the ability to burrow through the sea floor at a depth of over 12 kilometers, it took up residence approximately 70 kilometers from the shore of Western Sahara. Known as Africa's last colony, the territory of Western Sahara is claimed by Morocco while the indigenous Sahrawi population and the United Nations recognize the area as independent.

The vessel—the Atwood Achiever—is a \$600 million drillship operated by Kosmos Energy, a Texas-based oil and gas exploration and production company. With this move, Kosmos hoped to attract billions of dollars in foreign investment and jobs to Morocco. Kosmos states on its website that it has been "working with the Kingdom of Morocco with the objective being to ensure that if commercial deposits were to be discovered in offshore Western Sahara, they could be developed in a manner that both reflects international best practices on re-

source management and transparency as well as complies with international law (including the 2002 UN opinion)."

Three questions stand out here. Why is Kosmos dealing with the Moroccan government if it is drilling in Western Saharan water, given the territory's disputed nature? Why is Kosmos so concerned about international law? And what is the 2002 UN opinion exactly?

**Big Business and Human Rights**

In 2002, the UN's top legal officer, Hans Corell, determined that if "further exploration and exploitation activities were to proceed without respect to the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara, the contracts would be in violation of the international legal principles dealing with non-self-governing territories." Corell was responding to seismic testing carried out by oil companies Kerr-McGee and Total-FinaElf, in their ultimately aborted search for hydrocarbons in the area. This is the 2002 UN opinion that Kosmos was referencing.

When news that the Atwood Achiever was heading to Western Saharan waters first came to light, several leading Sahrawi activists penned a letter to the CEO of Kosmos, Andrew Inglis. In it, they asked Kosmos to withdraw its plans for drilling. These activ-

ists believed these efforts would only benefit "the people that are undermining our rights; the king of Morocco, the Moroccan government in Rabat and the Moroccan settlers in our homeland." These concerns echo the official position of the government of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the Sahrawi authority currently in control of approximately one quarter of the territory of Western Sahara.

Activists and others have claimed that protests against Kosmos's actions in Western Saharan waters have been met with violence from Moroccan authorities. Since Kosmos has declared its interest in promoting human rights, it would seem logical to conclude that the company would abhor people being beaten for expressing displeasure with its operations. Indeed, the Moroccan government regularly responds with disproportionate force and violence against peaceful demonstrations in the Western Sahara.

**The Voiceless Sahrawis**

On Nov. 12, 2014, Reg Manhas, Kosmos' Senior Vice President for External Affairs, replied to the activists' letter. Manhas said that Kosmos had met with elected officials, business leaders, tribal leaders, and representatives from civil society organizations, the tourism industry, and the fishing

community in order to present Kosmos' exploration project. He added that these meetings were attended mostly by Sahrawis. Manhas therefore implies that most Sahrawis are supportive of this project. Yet Manhas's statement neglected the complicated reality of the Western Sahara conflict.

Since the Green March took place in 1975, the Moroccan King and government have encouraged an increasing number of Moroccans to move into Western Sahara. Through incentives, such as tax breaks and appeals to nationalist sentiments, Moroccan authorities have engineered a new reality on the ground: Moroccan settlers outnumber indigenous Sahrawis by a ratio of at least 2:1. This is settler colonialism at its finest.

In order to provide a lasting, equitable solution to the issue, a referendum has been touted to take place at various times during the past 40 years. This could either recognize Sahrawi self-rule or Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. However, the overwhelming presence of settlers makes the possibility of a fair referendum on independence essentially impossible, whichever way Sahrawis vote. They also raise serious questions about who Kosmos has been meeting with.

*Continued on the back page***YEMEN TIMES**

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# Sana'a: A hybrid city

■ Roman Stadnicki

Mostly known for its old city—which has been listed as a UNESCO world heritage site since 1986—Yemen's capital has witnessed unprecedented urbanization trends over recent decades that have restructured the city along territorial and social lines.

Little is known about the organization of Yemen's capital, apart from its old city center, its history, souqs, traditional tower-shaped houses, and ancient buildings like its Grande Mosque—built, it is said, during the life of the Prophet.

## 1970-2000: Three decades of urban explosion

Even though Sana'a constitutes one of the very first urban centers in the Arabian Peninsula, the city remained a small town until the end of the 20th century.

During Yemen's Imamate (898-1962) the development and diversification of Sana'a's economic and cultural functions progressed slowly. At the time, the pattern of Sana'a's growth followed that of other Arab-Islamic cities: An expanding of the souq, a re-centering of the city around its main mosque, and the emergence of culturally segregated neighborhoods. Sana'a's Turkish neighborhood, Bir Al-Azab, emerged during the first Ottoman occupation in the 16th century, and was long preserved as a place of leisure for the imams, while the city's Jewish neighborhood, Qa Al-Yahud, emerged in the 18th century.

Today Sana'a's development is being shaped by growing demographic pressure, a rapid spread of new buildings, and the resulting intensity of traffic flows. Its urban layout is the product of the 1962 revolution, a phase of economic prosperity and sustained commercial activity that followed, and increasing rural-urban migration.

Prior to the 1962 revolution, tribal law forbade farmers with land extending to the old city walls from selling any land to urban dwellers. This explains why Sana'a could not spread beyond its traditional borders until 1962. It also explains the intensity of the "urban explosion" that followed the revolution.

Early urbanization was marked by attempts to modernize the city's infrastructure. A Chinese company funded the building of the Hodeida-Sana'a road, completed in 1961, which remains a major highway today, connecting Sana'a with Hodeida city. The road's construction symbolized the beginning of the country's automobile era and constitutes the starting point of the city's extension towards the west (Al-Zubayri Street). The end of the 1960s also witnessed the creation of Tahrir Square (Freedom Square), regarded as the first planned development project in Yemen.

Tahrir Square was thought by many to symbolize the control of the republican government over the city. The large square also reflects Egyptian influence on the Yemeni development process: The construction plans of Tahrir Square were designed by engineers and architects from Cairo, who aimed to provide Sana'a with a central business district.

Following its construction, a great number of ministerial and financial institutions, as well as shops, were eager to settle close to Sana'a's new city center, which in their eyes symbolized modernity and Yemen's turn toward Egypt, a leading economic power in the Arabic world at the time. As a result, Al-Mughni and Jamil Street, which surround the square, were densely populated with administrative and commercial institutions, and Tahrir Square quickly took on the role of a versatile economic center—a role that older areas were no longer able to fulfill.



Extensive rural-urban migration in the 1990s resulted in informal settlements on Sana'a's outskirts that today constitute new "urban centralities" in Yemen's capital.

With the ending of civil war in 1969, the city began developing at a higher rate. At the time, the new republican regime was supporting and facilitating the emigration of Yemeni workers to economically booming Gulf countries. Having been employed as workers at large Saudi, Emirati, and Kuwaiti construction sites, many Yemenis started up a number of businesses upon their return to Yemen. The country was then enjoying an era of relative economic prosperity, which was to last over ten years. In Sana'a, most of the capital provided by returnees flowed into the construction sector, triggering an unprecedented boom in the city's urban economy. Construction materials, carpenters, locksmiths, electricity, imported machinery, and other industries and products were required to sustain the city's development.

The urban growth of the 1980s was stimulated by waves of newly returning Yemenis, a government that was keen to affirm its role as a modernizing force, and the diversification of commercial activities, including the expansion and multiplication of souqs, the development of retail businesses, and the emergence of small and large supermarkets. After building Dayiri Street in the 1970s, the municipal authorities created a new ring road towards the end of the 1980s, Al-Siteen Street, which added a concentric structure to Sana'a. The road quickly improved the situation of new peripheral neighborhoods, while encouraging the creation of others. In addition to the west, urbanization—which is blocked on the east by the Nuqum Mountain—spread southward, mainly along Taiz Road, and northward.

During the 1990s, Sana'a's urban explosion, which experienced a jump from 140,000 inhabitants in 1975 to almost one million in 1994, was amplified by increasing rural-urban migration trends. Initially, a high number of Yemeni emigrants—between 500,000 and one million according to estimates at the time—were expelled from Saudi Arabia during the Gulf war. The eviction was politically motivated, with the Saudi kingdom opposing former President Saleh's pro-Iraqi position. After a quick return to their villages, Yemeni returnees joined the rural exodus which had set in a few years prior to their homecoming, and moved to nearby cities. Domestic migrants mostly settled down in informal settlements on Sana'a's outskirts. Moreover, the reunification of North and South Yemen in 1990 added new importance to Sana'a as a political and administrative center. The unique capital soon attracted people from the former South, mainly from Aden. Better-off than the people who had migrated to the city earlier, southerners settled down in wealthier suburban neighborhoods located around Hadda Street.

## Moving centralities

Nowadays, Sana'a's population is very likely to exceed official figures

put forth by the Yemeni government, which estimates the number of the capital's inhabitants at two million. While not included in government estimates, some of the neighborhoods that had emerged in the course of the city's urbanization process seem to have real economic potential, while also constituting key spaces for social life. The formation of these new "centralities" suggests a rethinking of center-periphery relations in Sana'a.

Sana'a's old city is being abandoned by its old elites, who are increasingly attracted to new residential areas located in the city's periphery. At the same time, the city's central souq, Souq al-Milh, is losing its place in Yemen's modern market economy—its roads are too narrow, its buildings dilapidated, and its caravanserais have long been abandoned.

Tahrir Square, while remaining the core of intra-urban connections, has lost much of its economic importance, with many specialized shops, businesses, and services having moved elsewhere. Despite efforts to promote its symbolic centrality, including the development of a small park, public authorities have not managed to slow the decreasing importance of this "old modern center."

Today, Hasaba in the north, Shumaila in the South, and Hayil in the west constitute Sana'a's three new urban centers. They all enjoy intense trade activities, dynamic souqs, and reliable public transportation, and play a double role in the construction of greater Sana'a: They serve as a bridge between the city center and the wider Sana'a basin and are developing links of interdependence with the new peripheral neighborhoods.

## Preserving without planning: The limits of public authorities

The emergence of Sana'a's polycentric structure was never planned by public authorities, who are more concerned with the preservation of the old city center. Prior to 2011, the protection of historical sites as a "showcase," and the preservation of the old city's small economic impact in the areas of tourism and craft, seemed reason enough to emphasize the old city over challenges that lie in the social and political regulation of extra-mural peripheral areas.

To this day, urban and commercial regulations are barely in existence. Public authorities seem to engage in "catching up" strategies—including the posterior legalization of informal settlements and the slow expansion of public services—and branding strategies, such as the building of the Saleh Mosque in Hadda.

## Identity hybridizations

The exceptional growth of Sana'a has unsettled its former social order, which used to be shaped by the city's urban elite and its general understanding of being "different from" the tribal world. Among these



Old elites are abandoning the old city and are moving to newer residential areas of Sana'a like Hasaba, Hayil, and Shumaila.

changes is the constant influx of tribal populations, many of whom come to the capital in hopes of making a fortune through the qat trade. The urbanization process itself has also involved an increasing number of merchants and craftsmen of a "lower social status" coming from the countryside to Sana'a.

At the same time, a business-oriented, educated, and increasingly "decentralized" urban bourgeoisie has emerged in wealthy neighborhoods bordering Hadda Street,

which reflects increasing globalization trends in the city.

If, as everywhere else, social inequalities are increasing in Sana'a, plural identities are likely to appear. They would be the result of a spontaneous accumulation and juxtaposition of traditional urban spaces and localities that are impacted by a global urban modernity.

The peripheral spaces of Sana'a are creating an entirely novel identity mosaic, which is mostly the result of private initiatives and inhab-

itants' own life-style choices. These spaces are announcing deep social changes, hastened by the revolution of 2011, which are likely to move beyond the Yemeni capital and spread elsewhere in the country.

*Dr. Roman Stadnicki is the head of the Urban Studies Department at the French sponsored research institute CEDEJ in Cairo. He earned a PhD in contemporary urbanization of Sana'a in 2009 from the University of Tours (France).*

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# Journey to Yemen: A deadly year for migrants and refugees

This is a three-part series about the migrants and refugees who come to Yemen. Part one, published last week, focused on the conditions in countries of origin that lead people to flee their homes. Part two, below, focuses on the risky journey at sea migrants and refugees make. Part three is about the obstacles migrants and refugees face once reaching Yemen and proposed long-term solutions.

■ Story by **Ahlam Mohsen**

**F**ifteen-year-old Iftu\* left Ethiopia after his father was killed because he feared for his life. Hoping for a future without persecution, he headed to Yemen by boat.

2014 was the deadliest year on record for migrants and refugees making the journey to Yemen by sea. With 246 recorded deaths, this year saw more casualties than the previous four years combined, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

The vast majority of those making the crossing are from Somalia and Ethiopia. The Yemeni government—the only signatory in the Arabian Peninsula to the 1951 Refugee Convention—grants automatic

refugee status to Somalis, in recognition of the more than two decades Somalia was at war.

“The government of Yemen has displayed an extraordinary generosity towards Somalis, granting all of them prima facie refugee status because of the conflict raging in their country. But for Ethiopians the opposite is true,” according to a report produced by Human Rights Watch (HRW) on migrants and refugees who reach Yemen’s shores.

Those attempting to make the journey often walk for days to reach ports in Somalia and Djibouti, according to Nick Stanton, a public information officer with UNHCR.



Migrants arriving in Yemen by boat often report abuse, including rape and torture. The boats are usually packed way beyond normal capacity, and passengers are routinely beaten if they do not stay still.

“They pay around \$300 to board a smuggler’s boat and cross the Gulf of Aden or Red Sea,” Stanton said. Those making the crossing frequently report mistreatment, abuse, rape and torture. According to Stanton, “the increasingly cruel measures being adopted by smuggling rings seem to account for the increase in deaths at sea.”

According to HRW, many of these boats are crewed by “notoriously brutal smugglers who beat, rob, rape, and even murder their passengers.”

The boats are often overcrowded, and to prevent capsizing, passengers are ordered to sit still.

“On almost every boat the story is the same—as the journey stretches on passengers are compelled to stretch, stand up, or otherwise try to relieve the pain building up in their joints and limbs.

The smugglers respond by beating those who move using rubber whips, sticks, or their own fists and feet. In some cases disruptive passengers are bound hand and foot or forced into the dank and airless cargo holds below deck,” according to the HRW report, *Hostile Shores*.

“My nightmare began when I arrived in Obock, Djibouti. I met with the smuggler, who was to take me to Yemen. He took me to a place where I met others like me, traveling to Yemen. In total we were 57,” Iftu told UNHCR. “Among us were one woman and two children. Naively, I thought that the boat would be big enough to fit us all. I was wrong.”

When the smuggler arrived with the boat, Iftu observed that it would only fit 20 to 30 people.

“The smuggler told us that we had to sit in a specific position to save space. We sat with our legs together towards our chest, and put all our weight on the tips of our feet. Some people found it hard, and the smuggler forced them to sit in that position.”

“It was a nightmare that you can not wake up from, and it will never leave me,” he added.

Passengers often face the greatest danger when they are close to Yemen’s shores.

According to HRW, in order to avoid capture by landing on beaches, smugglers often force passengers to jump into water far from shore.

“But many cannot swim, or are simply too exhausted from their ordeal to stay above water,” according to the rights group.

For Iftu, the engine of the boat he was on had failed in the middle of the sea, and he returned to Djibouti’s shore for two days, where he stayed on

a beach with no food or water.

“The next day the smuggler came back with the same boat. He changed the engine, which had broken down in the middle of the sea. He shouted ‘come in if you want to go to Yemen,’ so I boarded and sat the same way as before. I was afraid that it would take us a long time to reach Yemen because my legs would not bear the pain of sitting this way for a long time.”

Luckily for Iftu, the trip only took two hours.

When they finally reached shore, the smuggler shouted “you have to get out now!”

“I jumped into the sea. Some people did not understand him and stayed on the boat. I saw the smuggler pushing people off his boat, which caused one of the kids to almost drown in front of me. I freaked out. I did not know what to do. I simply froze. Thankfully, an elderly man went to help and carried the child to the shore. When I reached the shore I was very exhausted, but I was glad that I reached Yemen safely.

In 2014, 91,592 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers made it to Yemen’s shores. Of the 71,907 Ethiopians who departed for Yemen, 151 died making the journey. Of the 19,640 Somalis who departed, 93 died. Two people of other nationalities died making the trip in 2014.

This compares to five people in total who died making the trip in 2013 and 40 people in 2012.

The most deadly point of departure this year was in Putland, Somalia, with 64 deaths, followed by 63 in Elayo, Somalia. Obock, Djibouti, was the third most deadly point of departure with 41 dead, according to UNHCR.

The deadliest location in Yemen for deaths at sea was Bab Al-Mandeb off of Taiz, with 83 deaths, followed by the Gulf of Aden, with 64 deaths.

The most common entry point was Lahj, with 37,209 people in 2014, followed by Hadramout, with 26,347.

\*Not his real name

The next piece in the series will look at the obstacles migrants and refugees face once they reach Yemen’s shores and proposed long-term solutions to mixed migration.

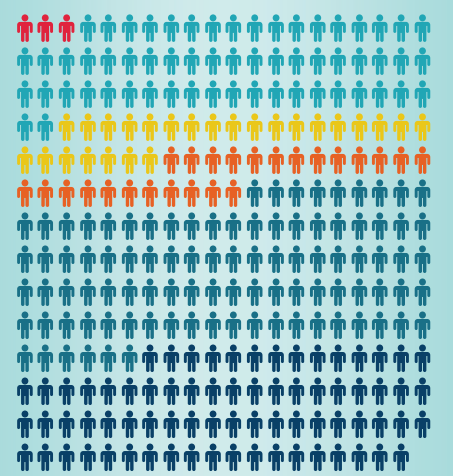
Photos courtesy of UNHCR

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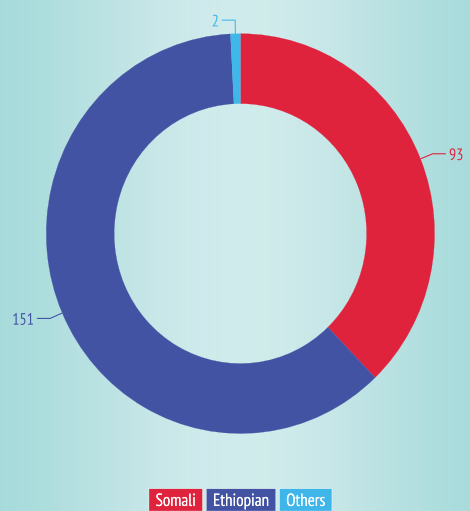
Number of people who died at sea making the journey to Yemen in 2014

Bab Al-Mandeb was the deadliest location in Yemen of deaths at sea

Reported by locations in Yemen of deaths at sea



Lahji Shabwah Hadramout Al Mokha, Taiz Bab-Al-Mandeb, Taiz Gulf of Aden



Somali Ethiopian Others

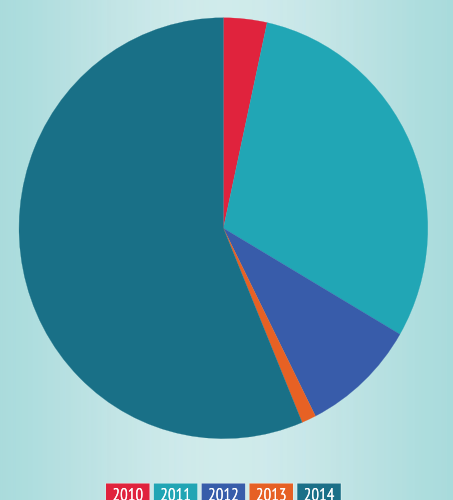
“The increasingly cruel measures being adopted by smuggling rings seem to account for the increase in deaths at sea.”

Nick Stanton, UNHCR

“I jumped into the sea. Some people did not understand [the smuggler] and stayed on the boat. I saw [him] pushing people off his boat, which caused one of the kids to almost drown in front of me.”

Iftu, 15 years old

Deaths at sea from 2010 to 2014



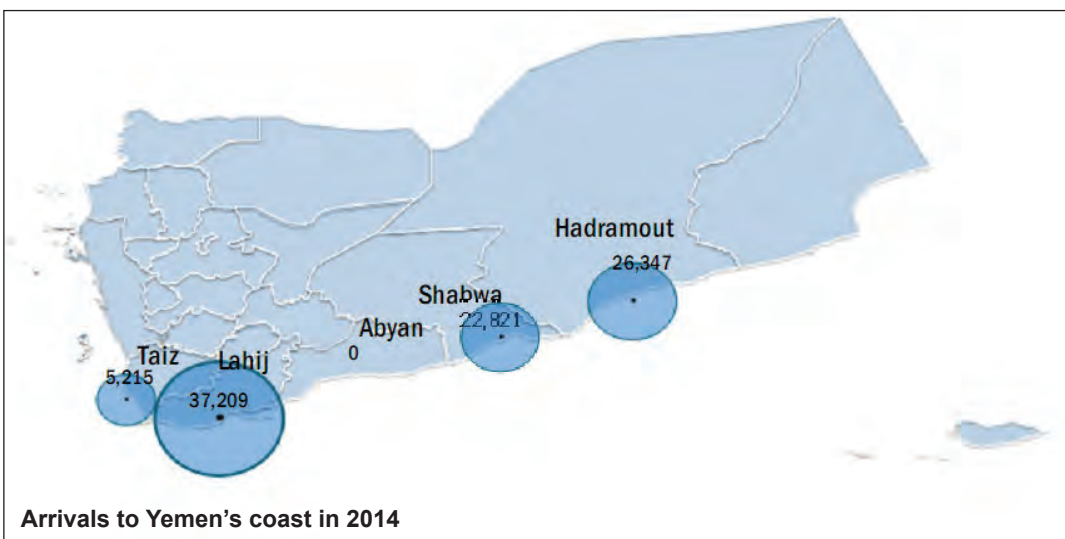
2010 2011 2012 2013 2014

Data courtesy of UNHCR, visualized by the Yemen Times

Created with Infogram



In order to avoid being caught, smugglers often force the passengers overboard far from shore. Exhausted from the journey or unable to swim, some never make it to land.



Arrivals to Yemen’s coast in 2014





# Yemenis living “hour to hour” amid power struggle

**IRIN**

First published Jan. 20

**M**uneer Asharby nearly didn't go to work today. It wasn't until after noon that he finally braved the walk. Even so, he kept half of his hardware shop closed in case he needed to make a fast exit.

The day before a mortar shell landed just in front of his shop, in the southern part of the Yemeni capital Sana'a.

Asharby's Bait Al-Abatan neighborhood sits in the shadows of a hill now under control of the Houthi rebel group from northern Yemen. They had been battling with government forces for two days, with both sides showing little concern for the civilian population.

“They [are] fighting for the chair,” he said, referring to the president's seat.

Mid-afternoon, the gunshots again rang out across the city, but this time the outcome was more decisive. After brief clashes, Houthi fighters had stormed the presidential palace with relatively little bloodshed. Shortly after, the house of President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi came under attack. Had the “chair” been toppled?

It is not immediately clear if Hadi remains in power, but the Arab world's poorest country has undoubtedly been again thrown into chaos.

Since late summer, the Houthis—made up of predominately Zaidi Shia Muslims—have gradually increased their influence and reach, with the support of others—including, allegedly, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was deposed in 2011 after popular protests. In September, they claimed control of much of the capital, initially stressing they were not seeking to depose Hadi.

Yet in recent days they have made another power play, with government forces pegged back by the well-armed militia.

“The Houthi strategy is to take over Yemen slowly—shock and then



Experts worry AQAP may capitalize on the situation and provoke more violence.

stop, shock and then stop,” said Farea Al-Muslimi, visiting scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center.

The Houthi takeover came after a ten-month National Dialogue Conference (NDC) failed to produce a clear consensus on the future of the country. The NDC—a product of the 2011 revolution—aimed to prevent the state from fracturing further. But Yemen has instead been increasingly embroiled in regional and sectarian polarization.

Al-Muslimi expects the Houthi takeover of the presidential palace to lead to more violence. In recent months, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—the militant group's Yemeni faction—has carried out a series of suicide bombings in Sana'a, attacking Houthi targets.

“It is worse than a [military] coup because it will increase the state of chaos,” Al-Muslimi said.

Asked whether he thought Hadi could remain in power, he said, “He has not [been] in power, the Houthis are in power. They have just ended his symbolic political legitimacy.”

## Turning on each other

This is the latest chapter in the ongoing story of Yemen's unraveling: The government and aligned tribes have been battling the Houthis in the north on-and-off for more than a decade; AQAP is active in Yemen's south, provoking regular US drone strikes; a southern secessionist movement has been gaining strength; and after street clashes and political manipulation, Yemen's

version of the Arab Spring led to an unstable political transition—never completed—that has now been thrown into question.

According to the UN Office for

the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), close to 16 million people in Yemen—more than half the population—will need humanitarian aid in 2015, of whom eight million are children.

More than 330,000 Yemenis are already displaced within the country due to pockets of conflict in both the north and south.

Around the Nahdayn hills that oversee the presidential palace, evidence of the more recent battles is clear: Buildings hit with heavy artillery, others pockmarked by bullet holes. One resident pointed to a gaping hole in his gate caused by the crossfire.

“Everyone is armed. You see weapons everywhere. How can you feel safe?” said an employee at a construction company who did not want to share his name. Speaking in whispers, he said the violence has made old friends lose trust in one another.

“Everyone is lying. You don't know whom to believe,” said 26-year-old civil servant Ali Abdulla.

“It should be the government that is protecting us,” he added, disparaging the lack of government presence nearby to provide a sense of safety.

Trond Jensen, head of the UNOCHA in Yemen, said that the humanitarian impact had so far been relatively limited, but added, “We are concerned about the protection of civilians and ensuring civilian infrastructure is not damaged.” In particular, he highlighted the threat of hospitals and schools being hit during battles, with re-

ports of one hospital having been damaged.

Up to a few hundred families have been displaced by the fighting, predominantly in the more affluent southern part of the city, Jensen said, stressing the numbers were not yet clear.

Yemen suffers from chronic poverty, with among the highest rates of malnutrition and stunting in the world. The political turmoil over the last few years had already made it harder for aid organizations to support those in need; this latest development will only make aid delivery even more difficult.

Adam Baron, a Yemen expert and visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), said he feared the worst. “It's difficult to say how further conflict could be avoided. The real question is if wiser heads will prevail. Until now, it seems as if things truly are at risk of spiraling out of control.”

Until unification in 1990, the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) were two separate countries. Some have now raised concerns of a new split.

Al-Muslimi said he thought a clean break was impossible. “That is the best possible scenario. I think it will be a lot more chaotic than that. We are in a moment of change, but for now we are just going from hour to hour.”

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## Egypt's need for low-income housing

**Maria Golia**

Middle East Institute

First published Jan. 15

**I**n March 2014, before resigning as Egypt's minister of defense and pursuing his campaign for the presidency, General Abdulfattah Al-Sisi announced an agreement with the UAE construction firm Arabtec to build a million affordable homes for “Egyptian youth.” The Egyptian Army facilitated the deal by pledging to donate 160 million square meters of land in 18 locations nationwide. Although Arabtec had never handled a project of this scale or value (\$40 billion), one of its largest stakeholders (22 percent) is the Abu Dhabi state fund Aabar. The firm's letter of understanding noted that the UAE was “very keen to mobilize all efforts to boost support for our brothers in Egypt.” The project made headlines, Sisi was elected president, and Arabtec then fell off the media's radar.

As a growing source of social discontent, Egypt's multifaceted housing crisis is an urgent political concern. On the one hand, there

is a glut of high-end housing, with over six million units standing empty. On the other hand, there is a shortage of affordable units for those who need them most. With 18 percent of Egypt's families living in single-room dwellings, the million-unit project was welcome news. The promise that it would produce a million jobs was very welcome news as well. The Army, led by General Sisi, appeared to be responding on a grand scale to the public's need for affordable housing, with deep-pocketed Gulf allies (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait) on board.

The Gulf states have become increasingly involved in Egypt's economy since the ousting of Islamist President Mohamed Morsi. Their support—in the form of interest-free deposits to Egypt's Central Bank, petroleum products, long-term loans, and grants amounting to a reported \$11.02 billion (18 percent of the total foreign direct investment in Egypt between July 2013 and June 2014)—has helped keep Egypt's economy on its feet.

Gulf monarchies that see political Islam as a threat to their legitimacy were relieved by Sisi's election. At

Abu Dhabi's “Invest in Egypt” conference in November 2014, Sultan Ahmed Al-Jaber, the UAE minister of state, affirmed that “Egypt's economic stability is a must.” As a sign of Gulf involvement in the economy, the Arabtec deal inspired confidence in local markets. “We'll see similar deals in the coming period, in energy, oil and gas, or roads,” said Karim Awad, co-chief executive of EFG-Hermes, Egypt's largest investment bank. With the recent dramatic downturn in oil prices, some in Egypt are wondering if this Gulf enthusiasm might decline.

Egypt's low-income housing shortage has historically generated more rhetoric than action. In the run-up to the 2005 presidential elections, former President Hosni Mubarak announced a 500,000-unit low-income housing project that as of February 2014 had delivered 360,000 units. Around 50,000 of these remain unconnected to utilities grids and are not useable, according to Yahya Shawkat, architect and housing expert for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR).

Continued on the back page



## Vacancy

A hotel company announces a vacancy in the post of Master Chef in one of its properties in Sana'a. At least 10 years of experience in 5-stars hotels is essential. All qualified applicants should send their CVs (incl. all necessary references) to the e-mail shown below:  
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# Neighborhood Internet hotspots

*New business idea offers Yemenis cheap access to internet at home*

Story and photos by  
**Bassam Al-Khameri**

Yemen has one of the least developed telecommunications networks in the Middle East. By 2008, according to a study by the Jordan-based Arab Advisors Group, only 0.5 percent of Yemenis had access to fixed line broadband. Costly subscriptions and Internet cafes have been the only options available, but some enterprising businesses and individuals are trying to change that by providing their own open-access hotspots.

The country's two internet service providers, YemenNet, which is part of the government's Public Telecommunication Corporation (PTC), and TeleYemen's Y.Net, which is under the management of FranceTelecom but also belongs to PTC, were established in 1996. In March 2014, the PTC reported the number of Internet users in Yemen had reached 2,424,890.

YemenNet provides Internet services in varying bundles: 256 kb/s, 512 kb/s, 1 Mb/s, 2 Mb/s and 4 Mb/s. The monthly fees range from YR2,250 (\$10) to YR11,250 (\$52), and customers need to purchase their own router for about YR4,500 (\$21). The majority of Yemenis are unwilling or unable to pay these rates, or to buy their own computers, and most therefore visit Internet cafes instead of accessing the web from home.

This is beginning to change, however, as a growing number of shop owners, mobile maintenance centers, hotels, and enterprising individuals are establishing their own Internet hotspots and providing pay-as-you-go access to customers in their area. These new networks enable people to access the Internet at home and in the street without the need for costly subscriptions.

Abdulrahman Saif, who owns a hotel and Internet hotspot in the capital's Al-Dairi Street, says wireless networks have so much potential because they can be established anywhere and by anybody. "No license is needed to install [personal] networks. You just need the money to get it started, and you can provide a network from anywhere, even your home."

Saif subscribes to YemenNet's highest grade package to ensure

as many customers as you can use it without compromising the connection. "The speed of the golden line is four gigabytes and the monthly fee is YR29,400 [\$130]. It's necessary if you want to provide high speed connections for your customers, but there are cheaper and slower options too."

Using Saif's hotspot, neighbors and others in his area can access the Internet whenever they need to. Customers just need to be close enough to the router, most of which have a range of about 32 meters, and to buy a temporary subscription card.

"My subscription cards are sold for 100, 200, and 300 riyals [\$0.47 to 1.40]. The first can be used for three hours, the second for six hours and the last for ten hours. People can even have monthly subscriptions and get 24 hour access for YR3,500 [\$16]," according to Saif.

## An easy alternative?

The initiative has been welcomed by many who prefer surfing the web from home instead of going to Internet cafes, for reasons ranging from convenience to security concerns.

Mohammad Aziz, the owner of a grocery store on Al-Qiadah Street in Sana'a, said he finds the service useful because he rarely has the time to visit cafes. "I was only able to visit Internet cafes on Fridays because I can't leave my grocery store during the day since I manage the shop on my own. Now I can use Internet from my shop and work at the same time."

For Salah Al-Deen Mahiub Al-Badani, a sociology student at the University of Sana'a, pay-as-you-go access allows him to study from home without paying for expensive subscriptions he doesn't need or letting it interfere with family life.

"I need to carry out online research for my classes but I don't have an Internet connection at home. I wanted to subscribe to YemenNet but the costs are high and my father is against the idea because he's afraid my younger siblings will spend their time on Facebook and chatting instead of studying," Al-Banadi explained.

The new alternative is cheap and simple. "Whenever I have an assignment and need to surf the web to get information, I go to the privately-owned telecommunica-



With high-speed Internet and long-range antennas, neighborhood hotspots are able to reach a greater number of users.

tion center in my neighborhood and get a card for YR100 or more based on the time I need to use it for," he said.

Riyadh Al-Sururi, a recent high-school graduate, finds the service convenient because he likes to stay up late on his computer, and going out to the Internet cafe at night worries his family.

"I used to argue with my father about staying out late at the Internet cafe each night to chat with my friends, which he was against because of the unstable and unpre-

dictable situation in the country." Now, after his neighbor created a local hotspot, Al-Sururi says he can stay up into the early morning without worrying his family.

Not everyone is sold on the idea, however. Ali Al-Shamiri, a student at the University of Sana'a, says he liked the idea of neighborhood hotspots but found they do not work in practice. "The connection is very slow, particularly at night, when several people are using the same network at the same time, and my house isn't close enough to the router," he said.

Saif Al-Ahdal, the owner of an Internet cafe in the capital's Al-Safia neighborhood, thinks most people will prefer accessing the Internet in a cafe or at home with their own subscription because the speed of the connection is a priority. Nonetheless, he thinks neighborhood hotspots are a good idea and can prove more profitable than Internet cafes.

"The current situation [for business owners] in Yemen is very difficult. Owners of cafes have to buy oil or diesel to operate generators due to the constant power outages. People who operate WiFi networks don't have the same problem because they only need to power one router and computer, instead of several," he said.

Issues of legality pose more serious questions, however, as creating hotspots for commercial use requires a license from Internet providers and the Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology.

According to Sami Shubail, who heads the Post and Telecommunication Union—a non-governmental organization which represents employees of the state-run post, telecommunications, and information technology sectors—people creating neighborhood hotspots are breaking the law. "They purchase Internet services from us for

personal use without informing us that they are using it for business, and so they don't apply for the license."

As stated on TeleYemen's website, any attempt to "trade on, resell, hire, assign, transfer access, or in any other way dispose of the Y.net service without prior approval from TeleYemen" is a violation of the service's terms and conditions.

Shubail claims TeleYemen, YemenNet and the Ministry of Telecommunication are aware the practice is becoming more common, but says the law is not being enforced because of a lack of resources and more pressing priorities in the country.

## Legal questions raised

The practice also raises questions concerning accountability and media regulation. Yemen's Press and Publications Law, which was passed in 1990, subjects all forms of media, including the Internet, to a broad set of prohibitions.

According to the law, any publication must operate "within the context of Islamic creed, within the basic principles of the constitution, goals of the Yemeni revolution, and the aim of solidifying national unity." The law has been used to create a number of technical and legal restrictions on Internet use, including extensive censorship.

According to OpenNet Initiative, a non-governmental organization that works to expose Internet filtering and surveillance practices around the world, Yemeni authorities enforce physical restrictions in Internet cafes. This includes the removal of partitions placed between workstations, to make computer screens visible to cafe operators and law enforcement so that the Internet activities of customers can be monitored.

Some Internet cafe owners also use computer monitoring software to track the online activities of

their customers, according OpenNet, who quoted one cafe operator in its 2009 report on Internet use in Yemen: "Through a program I can closely monitor what my customers are browsing. When I find that a customer is navigating a pornography website, I shut the customer's system automatically from my disk and I ask him to leave immediately."

Mohammad Jahlan, who established a public hotspot in the Al-Safia neighborhood of Sana'a, told the Yemen Times he doesn't allow his customers to access restricted sites.

"When I established this network about two months ago, the programmer who prepared my Internet system entered several codes that prevent people from downloading porn or suspicious videos. When a subscriber tries to download such videos, he receives a message that the site he requested is blocked," he said.

Direct monitoring by government authorities and Internet providers is necessary because web censorship is easily bypassed using so-called virtual private network (VPN) services that allow users to access blocked websites by redirecting requests through computers and Internet connections of other users in non-blocked areas outside of Yemen.

If several people are using a single connection, as in the case of neighborhood hotspots, how are these censorship laws to be enforced? Is the hotspot provider accountable for what his or her customers are browsing on the Internet, be it pornographic or terrorist material?

While neighborhood hotspots create obstacles for government and Internet providers in their efforts to censor material deemed subversive, it offers Yemenis new opportunities for more open access on the web.



Yemenis with Internet access began to sell Internet services to neighbors and others living nearby.

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## Energy company drills through human rights in the Western Sahara

It is extremely hard to believe Kosmos could have been speaking mostly with Sahrawis (at least with those who had come of their own free will, independent of coercion from the Moroccan government) and come to the conclusion that its work would have positive rewards for the indigenous population.

It is indeed likely that the discovery of hydrocarbons could benefit locals greatly, but considering political realities, it is more than probable that local Moroccans, and the central government based in Rabat, would benefit the most.

In his letter, Manhas noted that a commercial discovery would "provide a foundation upon which the people can build whatever political solution results from the UN-led

process." But a lucrative oil field would only further complicate the political stalemate and increase Morocco's de-facto control of the territory and its resources. Indeed, as quoted in the Financial Times, Hans Corell recently stated that "the more resources are found in Western Sahara and its maritime zone, the less will be the incentive for Morocco to fulfill the UN resolutions and international law."

If abundant natural resources were found and developed, independence for the Western Sahara (which is not supported by the Polisario, the Western Sahara independence movement, or by many Sahrawi activists) would become less favorable to the Moroccans. Control over an area boasting sub-

stantial resource wealth would be a boon to the Moroccan authorities—it would further dissuade them from granting independence to Western Sahara.

### Corporate Hedging

When Manhas says that Kosmos does not have a role to play in the political process, he is, therefore, being woefully naïve and ignoring the asymmetry in power that structures the conflict.

If Kosmos was actually speaking to Sahrawi activists and representatives of the Western Sahara government (SADR), it would find that most of the indigenous population does not support drilling in Western Sahara waters because it violates international law and gives

more power to Morocco, as the occupying force in the territory.

This means that either Kosmos is being played by a highly skilled Moroccan regime, fluent in the language of deceit, or the company is fully aware of the realities on the ground, and has chosen to ignore them. In either case, Kosmos should more carefully consider the skewed power dynamics in the conflict, the importance of international law, and the position of the Sahrawi people, before disregarding human rights for the sake of profits.

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## Egypt's need for low-income housing

Meanwhile, 40,000 Egyptians who applied for units and made a EGP5,000 (\$700) down payment have yet to receive their houses. "That's 200 million EGP [\$28 million] from Egypt's poorest families that the government basically sat on for eight years collecting interest," Shawkat said. The people protested and were told to apply for the more recent Social Housing Project, but the criteria are different and many may not qualify.

The Social Housing Project (SHP), initiated in 2011 by then Minister of Housing Mohamed Fathy Al-Baradei, promised a million units for low income households, that is, those earning between EGP1,400 and 2,500 per month (between \$200 and \$350). Successful applicants for the 70-square-meter units, priced at EGP135,000 (\$19,000), would receive a cash subsidy of EGP25,000 (\$3,500) and be given a 20-year mortgage at seven percent interest. These terms, however reasonable, place the homes out of reach for the 20 percent of Egyptians who make less than EGP1,400 per month. "Low income" does not include the poor," says Shawkat. Moreover, 60 percent of Egypt's work force is employed in the informal sector and consequently ineligible for SHP units, since they cannot prove their salaries. Further, to meet its target, the SHP would need to build 200,000 units per year but has produced only 50,000 and delivered around a thousand so far.

In October 2014, six months after Sisi's original agreement, a revised version of the Arabtec project was back in the news, with phase one involving the production of just 120,000 units. Instead of the Army donating the land, the New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA), under the auspices of the Ministry of Housing, would allocate land in exchange for a percentage of the units Arabtec builds. Aside from having to compensate NUCA for the land, Arabtec is responsible for financing the project through foreign banks and will have to generate feasibility studies. In order to

obtain financing, the project must be profitable. Estimates suggest that given the added cost of land, the units' price will again be out of reach for Egypt's poor.

Yet another recently announced state housing project, Dar Masr, consisting of 160,000 middle-income homes, will directly compete with Arabtec. Since only 300,000-500,000 units in this category are sold each year, the notion that one developer, whether Arabtec or Dar Masr, can profitably produce 200,000 annually is unfeasible. At this writing, the Arabtec project details, from design to financing, remain far from concrete.

In whatever form it eventually materializes, the "million-unit" Arabtec project demonstrates that while the state has taken steps to provide more housing for middle-income Egyptians, low-income housing solutions are still needed. No one has succeeded in tackling this problem more directly than the Egyptian people themselves. While the SHP produced 50,000 units between 2012 and 2014, informal (unlicensed) housing in Egypt's ashwaiyyat (unplanned areas) increased by at least two million flats in that same period. Especially since 2011, in the absence of state supervision, construction of informal housing has increased to such an extent that licensed developers have encountered shortages of building materials for their projects.

Living conditions in the ashwaiyyat are far from ideal. Construction costs for these no-frills brick dwellings are around EGP200-300 (\$28-\$42) per square meter, a budget that excludes design or finishing. Built on unplanned land, the individual units are randomly integrated into larger neighborhoods lacking adequate utilities and serviceable streets. Most importantly, they have consumed vast tracts of arable land, diminishing Egypt's already short supply.

In the absence of viable alternatives, informal quarters will continue to multiply, a reality the state

is beginning to acknowledge. In October 2014, the Egyptian cabinet approved an initiative to issue long-term, low-interest loans of EGP30,000 (\$4,200) for finishing informal buildings. According to Minister of Housing Mostafa Madbouly, obtaining the loans would not require proof of building ownership, a logical reprieve since Egyptians living in informal housing, by definition, lack such documentation. The terms described in the Arabic press, however, based on a Ministry of Housing statement, call for proof of both the applicant's ownership of the property and monthly income. It is thus unclear when or how these loans, which would effectively endorse informal building on agricultural land, will be made available.

Most Egyptians, whether in planned or unplanned areas, do not hold titles to their properties. This prevents them from applying for mortgages and severely restricts the mortgage market growth, currently equivalent to less than one percent of GDP. Experts agree that the only way to end the housing crisis is to deal with the issues of mortgage finance, a project that has made some headway in the last decade with the help of the World Bank. But suitable land on which to build remains at a premium. For now the largest tracts of infrastructure-equipped land are in the so-called new cities in Cairo's desert environs—remote and unaffordable options for low-income families.

Egyptians are accustomed to fending for themselves when it comes to putting a roof over their heads, and with population growth and urbanization proceeding at a rapid pace, a continued lack of affordable housing will not slow them down. But unless the state's approach shifts to more carefully considered ventures involving infrastructure-equipped land and accessible mortgage finance, its current efforts at housing production are likely to exacerbate rather than alleviate Egypt's growing housing crisis.

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