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SANA'A, March 25—Tens of thousands gathered in Al-Sabaeen Square in the capital Sana'a on Wednesday to attend a funeral procession for those killed in the March 20 attacks on the Badr and Al-Hashoush mosques. The suicide bombings left at least 137 dead and hundreds wounded. Hashem Sharaf Al-Deen, one of the procession organizers, said there were around 80 coffins in the procession and the rest of the deceased were already buried individually by their families. **Inset:** Among many notable attendees were Yahya Al-Houthi, the elder brother of leader Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, Mohammad Ali Al-Houthi, the head of the Revolutionary Committee, and Jalal Al-Rowaisan, acting minister of interior. **Read more on page 6**
Photos by Ali Aboluhom

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Al-Subaihi captured and Lahj falls as Houthis move on Aden

■ **Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki**

SANA'A, March 25—In coordination with armed forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Houthi militants took control of Lahj governorate and captured a number of key opponents on Wednesday morning.

The group captured Brigadier Mahmoud Al-Subaihi, the former minister of defense who was leading troops loyal to Hadi in the south, and Faisal Rajab, commander of the pro-Hadi 119th Armored Brigade in Lahj's capital Al-Hawta.

The captures happened at 11 a.m. as the Houthis and their allies were combing Al-Hawta city, which they took control of shortly after the fall of Al-Anad Airbase that morning, said Naji Al-Arashi, chief-of-staff of the 201st Armored Brigade stationed in Al-Anad.

"By cooperating with the Houthis we have taken control over Al-Hawta city, Al-Anad base, and remaining districts in the governorate," he said, adding that the Houthis, aided by the army, intend to take over the remaining southern governorates as well.

Al-Subaihi was leading the counter-offensive against the Houthis in Lahj governorate. Following the Cabinet's resignation on Jan. 22, the Houthis appointed Al-Subaihi as acting minister of defense on Feb. 6. However, he fled Sana'a for Lahj on March 8, and headed towards Aden where he became President Hadi's de facto minister of defense.

A senior source within the brigade, speaking to the Yemen Times on condition of anonymity, said Special Security Forces (SSF) and other units arrived on the outskirts of Al-Anad base in the middle of the

night before advancing without resistance later in the morning.

According to Colonel Ali Qasim Muthana, deputy commander of Al-Anad airbase, "We contacted air force leadership in Sana'a and there was mediation between us and the Houthis, we agreed to hand over the entire base on condition that no one gets harmed."

"I allowed them to enter and deploy their men, and indeed that happened without any confrontation. If we had resisted, our soldiers and citizens would have been the victims," he said.

Forces from the 33rd Armored Brigade took control of the cities of Al-Habilain and Al-Malah and were joined by reinforcements, according to a source from the Operations Department for the two cities, which border Al-Dhale governorate to the north. According to Houthi Political

Office member Mohammad Al-Bukhaiti, all of Lahj governorate is under the Houthis' control. He confirmed that Al-Subaihi and Rajab are in Houthi custody.

The Houthis announced a YR20 million (\$93,000) award for the capture of Hadi on the official state TV channel Al-Yemen, whose whereabouts remain unknown as of Wednesday evening.

Responding to claims that Hadi had fled the country, the head of national security, Major-General Ali Al-Ahmadi, claimed to Reuters Wednesday afternoon that he was with Hadi in the Presidential Palace. The Yemen Times was unable to verify the authenticity of this claim.

Abdurahman Anis, an Aden-based journalist, said that as of 5 p.m. Wednesday Aden was calm but the Houthis were stationed in Lahj about 30 kilometers away.

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Protests continue in Taiz, governor resigns

Story by **Fareed Al-Homaid**
Photo by **Ahlam Mohsen**

SANA'A, March 25—Tens of thousands of protesters gathered in Taiz city Wednesday, a day after ten protesters were reported killed in the governorate and another 83 injured.

The Ibn Sina Hospital, located near the SSF camp in Taiz city, made appeals for urgent blood donations as medics struggled to cope with growing numbers of injured protesters.

According to local journalist Ahmed Al-Wafi, ten protesters were killed in the governorate on Tuesday. These figures were confirmed by Dr. Mubarak Al-Habashi of Ibn Sina Hospital on Wednesday, who said six of those killed were in Taiz city while the other four were brought to hospitals in Al-Turba city, 60 km south of the capital.

Akram Al-Jubaihi, a local journalist and eyewitness to the protests, said the victims were killed by armed Houthis wearing uniforms belonging to the Special Security Forces (SSF). "We know the real SSF soldiers, those confronting the protesters today are Houthis," he said.

Ali Al-Qahoom, a member of the Houthi Political Office in Sana'a, told the Yemen Times that security



A child protests in Taiz city on Wednesday as soldiers watch on.

forces reacted when protests turned violent, and he questioned reports that protesters were killed on Tuesday.

"What is happening in Taiz is chaos instigated by the Islah Party. Armed Islah supporters attacked the SSF camp and its soldiers fought back in self-defense," he said. "Islah is trying to provoke people in Taiz to go out to the streets and to attack security forces. They are lying about protesters being killed."

Mass protests have been taking place in Taiz since Sunday, when Houthi militants said to be clothed

in SSF uniforms entered the governorate. Protesters are demanding the militants remove their checkpoints and vacate the governorate.

Al-Jubaihi said Houthis remain in control of the SSF camp on Al-Hoban Street in the center of the capital, in addition to Taiz International Airport at the northern entrance of the city.

Al-Turba has witnessed large-scale protests against new checkpoints in the city, with protesters forcing the closure of a checkpoint and reportedly storming the security building there.

Taiz governor Shawqi Ahmed Hail resigned from his position on Tuesday. His press secretary, Sultan Mughalles, said on Wednesday the governor has no intention of returning. According to Mughalles,

the governor resigned following a meeting with members of the security committee and other political leaders in Taiz.

"As the head of the governorate's security committee [Hail] ordered

SSF commander Ali Al-Harithi to remove newly established SSF checkpoints in Al-Turba and Al-Rahida cities," he said. "When the commander refused Hail's orders, the governor submitted his resignation.

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Houthis warn against foreign military intervention

■ **Khalid Al-Karimi**

SANA'A, March 24—Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, considered the country's legitimate president by the international community, dispatched a letter on Tuesday to the UN Security Council asking for military intervention against the Houthis.

"A Security Council resolution should invite willing countries to immediately support Yemen's legitimate government by all means and measures, to protect Yemen and deter the Houthis' potential aggression at any time against Aden city," the letter reads.

The day prior, Hadi requested military intervention by the Peninsula Shield Force, the joint military force of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), according to Riyadh Yasin, the foreign affairs minister.

The Houthis have warned against military intervention in Yemen. Mohammad Al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi Political Office, told the Yemen Times that Hadi's call for foreign military intervention tells of his intention to drive the country into civil war.

"If he was a real president, he would not seek the support of foreign military forces to crush his

people. His call for foreign military intervention is a conspiracy against Yemen and proves Hadi is a traitor," said Al-Bukhaiti.

Mohammad Abdulsalam, the official spokesperson for the Houthi group, said in a phone interview Monday with the Beirut-based, Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Manar TV channel that military intervention by Saudi Arabia in Yemen's affairs would amount to repeating the Libyan scenario through supporting terrorist groups in the south.

"If Saudi Arabia wages a war on Yemen, it will open a door to war that it can not control. Just leave us alone and we will solve our problems ourselves," Abdulsalam said.

On Monday, in response to Hadi's call for military assistance, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, said in a press conference that his country would "take necessary measures if needed" to protect Yemen's sovereignty.

Hadi's call for foreign military intervention came following the Houthis' control over Taiz Sunday, March 22, and subsequent expansion south toward Aden.

According to Al-Bukhaiti, Houthi fighters have been fighting Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Al-Baida, a northern

governorate, and did not previously plan to move south. AQAP's presence and the latest violence made it imperative for them to expand, he claimed, adding that "any Saudi military intervention in Yemen will not be for the good of Saudi Arabia."

Iran has been repeatedly accused of backing the Houthis, but the degree of cooperation between the two parties remains unclear. When asked if military intervention by Saudi Arabia would lead the Houthis to seek Iran's military support, Al-Bukhaiti said, "The Yemeni people are able to confront the challenges and defend themselves without the support of any country."

Abdulmalik Al-Fuhaidi, the editor-in-chief of Al-Motamar Net, the mouthpiece of the General People's Congress (GPC), criticized Hadi's call for foreign military intervention.

"It is shameful that Hadi begs for support from foreign powers. Regardless of their different affiliations, Yemenis will reject any interference because it will bring more problems than solutions," said Al-Fuhaidi. The head of the GPC, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, is widely viewed as being allied with the Houthis.

Unlike Al-Fuhaidi, Nasser Al-Khubaji, a Southern Movement leader, said military intervention by the Peninsula Shield Force is acceptable as long as it is to defend the south. "Though we may have differences with President Hadi, we think it is not wrong to request military support to protect our land," he said.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) emphasized Hadi's legitimacy on March 22, calling on all parties and member states to "refrain from external interference which seeks to foment conflict and instability and instead to support the political transition." As of Wednesday evening, the UNSC had yet to comment on Hadi's letter.

Abdulsalam Mohammad, head of the Sana'a-based think tank Abad Center for Strategic Studies, said the potential military intervention by the UNSC and the GCC would be limited to imposing no-fly zone areas and logistical support.

"Direct military intervention would be costly and I do not expect it to happen. Stopping the influx of weapons to Yemen and freezing former President Saleh's assets would be better than direct military intervention," said Mohammad.

Houthis request public donations for war effort

■ **Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki**

SANA'A, March 24—The Houthi Revolutionary Committee announced Monday it was taking donations via an account opened with the Credit Cooperative & Agricultural Bank (CAC) in Yemen.

The call for donations comes as part of the group's general mobilization for war, announced earlier on Saturday.

Revolutionary Committee member Muhammad Al-Maqaleh said it is "a duty of all Yemenis inside and outside the country to stand

by the Revolutionary Committee and the army in their struggle against Al-Qaeda and other enemies."

Mohammad Al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi Political Office in Sana'a, said citizens should be expected to contribute "either in money or manpower" whenever the state is faced with internal and external threats.

He said the account is open to

donations from individual Yemeni citizens, but that "donations from other governments are a private matter and have nothing to do with the CAC bank account."

Al-Bukhaiti added that personal donations are but one means to raising funds, and that state revenues from taxation, natural resources and the public treasury will all be pooled in the effort. "The

Revolutionary Committee has the right to use any of these funds in support of the general mobilization," he said.

Mubarak Al-Obadi, a member of the Islah Party's Media Department, said the opening of the account indicates that Houthis are expecting a protracted war.

"It will be a disaster," he said. "Citizens won't be able to contribute under our current economic difficulties, so the Houthis will have to support their mobilization campaign through a public treasury that is already half-empty."



Houthis reject Doha peace talks

■ **Ali Ibrahim Al-Moshki**

SANA'A, March 24—Calls for national peace talks to resume in the Qatari capital Doha were rejected by Houthi representatives on Tuesday, while militias and military units loyal to the group continue their push south towards Aden.

Muhammad Al-Bukhaiti, a spokesperson for the Houthi Political Office, said Qatar represents one of the group's "worst enemies" and that the location for continued dialogue can only be decided by those participating in it.

"[UN Special Envoy] Jamal Benomar and the UN are in no position to decide where talks are held, only those engaged in discussions are entitled to do so," he said, adding that Benomar should have made sugges-

tions to relocate the talks when they were still being held in the capital Sana'a.

The Houthis are adamant that any dialogue will resume in Sana'a and that regional powers should "stay out of Yemen's internal affairs," said Al-Bukhaiti.

"The problem is not primarily where the dialogue takes place, it is a matter of its participants and other foreign powers trying to derail the talks and create conflict in Yemen for as long as possible," he added.

Benomar's office confirmed the special envoy's desire for talks to be held in Doha and that any agreement reached is to be signed in the Saudi capital Riyadh. His proposal has been submitted to UN Security Council members, who have endorsed the plan.

On March 5 the Saudi government accepted an earlier proposal for talks to be held in their capital, a plan that fell through following opposition from Houthis and members of the General People's Congress (GPC).

Peace talks struggled to resume following the Houthis' constitutional declaration on Feb. 6, which dissolved government and effectively formalized the group's takeover. Talks were marred by disagreement and saw Nasserist and Islah delegates withdrawing, until Benomar agreed to relocate the dialogue.

Adnana Al-Audaini, deputy head of the Islah Party's Media Department, said his party would continue the dialogue outside of Yemen. "The situation here is very dangerous and war will break out unless we return to talks and contain the crisis," he

said.

Mohammad Al-Sabri, a Nasserist Party member who participated in previous rounds of talks, told the Yemen Times Tuesday that his party is not interested in where talks are held so long as they resume outside

of the capital Sana'a. "Any dialogue in Sana'a [which came under Houthi control on Sept. 21, 2014] will happen under coercion and fear of the Houthis," he said.

"Benomar is not coordinating his efforts, he is merely making phone

calls and announcements to waste time," he added. "He is allowing the Houthis to bring Yemen under their control and destroy whatever state authority still remains, at which point there will no longer be a state to have any dialogue for."

Ceasefire in Marib ends clashes between tribesmen and Houthis

■ **Bassam Al-Khameri**

SANA'A, March 25—Fighting between Marib tribesmen and Houthi militias backed by security forces in the Qania area of Marib governorate came to an end on Tuesday after the parties reached a ceasefire agreement.

Sheikh Mohammed Bohaibeh, a prominent member of the Murad tribe in Marib, said the agreement was reached following discussions between sheikhs Yasser Al-Awadhi and Hussein Hazib and Houthi representatives based in Marib and neighboring Al-Baida governorate.

"The truce took effect early Wednesday and both parties have kept to the agreement, there have been no further clashes," he told the Yemen Times on Wednesday afternoon.

Mohammed Al-Jedasi, a journalist based in Marib, confirmed fighting had stopped and said negotiations would continue between the sides until a formal agreement is reached.

Fighting between the groups began in Qania on March 19 when Houthi militants, backed by forces from the 26th Mechanized Brigade, entered the area ostensibly in pursuit of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). They sought to



Fighting previously broke out between Houthis and Marib tribesmen on March 19 in Marib, near the border of Al-Baida.

close off roads leading into Al-Baida from Marib as a security measure.

Houthis had previously signed an agreement with Marib tribesmen on Nov. 25 following clashes in the northern Marib district of Al-Jidan, and have been fighting AQAP-affiliated militants in the Al-Zahir district of Al-Baida that are said to be entering the governorate from Marib.

"There is no deadline for the ceasefire, which will remain in place until an agreement is reached between both sides," said Walid Al-

Dailami, a Houthi popular committee leader in the Rada'a district of Al-Baida.

Mohammad Al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi Political Office in Sana'a, said his group are keen to avoid bloodshed and to reach agreement with other parties whenever possible.

"Ansar Allah [Houthis] have no intention to enter Marib, we are only in pursuit of Al-Qaeda fighters, we do not attack areas needlessly," he said, adding that clashes will not resume unless the other party breaches the ceasefire agreement.



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Fatima Al-Selwi to the Yemen Times: “Yemeni women have great abilities”



Yemen has for long ranked poorly in gender equality. The Global Gender Gap Report, released annually by the World Economic Forum, has repeatedly ranked Yemen dead last.

Despite this, Fatima Al-Selwi, the businesswomen office director at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Sana'a's Capital Secretariat, is optimistic things are changing.

The chamber, which serves as “the union of the private sector,” as she puts it, “gives women a chance to be under the umbrella of an organized sector.” The chamber’s mission is to strengthen the role of the private sector in improving economic development and bettering the national economy.

Speaking about women in the economy, Al-Selwi says she is confident that Yemeni businesswomen are playing an important role and their contribution is not inferior to men’s. As the businesswomen office director for the chamber, Al-Selwi coordinates training, certification, and the participation of Yemeni businesswomen in conferences inside the country and abroad. She also offers consultation to businesswomen.

Al-Selwi was born in Taiz governorate and received her bachelors in business management in Sana’a. She has worked in the Chamber of Commerce and Industry for five years and was promoted to her current position in 2013.

The Yemen Times spoke to Al-Selwi about the role she believes Yemeni businesswomen are playing in the economy, how the current instability impacts their role, and why—despite the current situation and Yemen’s poor gender equality—she remains steadfast in her optimism.

Interview and photo by
Khalid Al-Karimi

It is often said that Yemeni women are marginalized. How do you evaluate women’s economic role in Yemen?

Yemeni women are playing a pioneering role in the economic situation of the country. Women, either employed in rural or urban areas, are shouldering a big responsibility, not less than men. The Yemeni woman is running the domestic affairs of the house in the absence or presence of her partner. Moreover, the Yemeni woman has grown stronger and become part of the labor market. Today, Yemeni businesswomen are working in various fields, including service-related sectors such as education, health, trade, among others. Women’s current role is greater than it used to be. Women’s jobs used to be confined only to household affairs, but nowadays they have made major strides in different walks of life.

How does the volatile situation affect the economy in general and Yemeni businesswomen in particular?

The current political situation has negatively affected the status of the national economy. There are worries, and financial capitals are receiving blows because of the insecurity. Some businesses have stopped and others have been relocated. Yemeni businesswomen are not separated from this, and thus they have felt the consequences. Their businesses are small and their capitals are not that large. So, all of them can not resist such hard times. The bottom line is that stability and prosperity are inseparable.

As the businesswomen office director in the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, what assistance are you offering Yemeni businesswomen?

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry is considered the union of the private sector. The chamber gives Yemeni businesswomen a chance to be under the umbrella of an organized sector. If a businesswoman encounters a problem with some concerned authorities like customs and taxation, we take action and step in, considering that the busi-

nesswoman is registered with the chamber. We also provide Yemeni businesswomen with legal advice. In order for businessmen or businesswomen to embark on export and import businesses, the foreign parties make sure that the businesswoman or businessman is registered with the chamber. Therefore, having membership in the chamber is one’s identity for business. We are offering Yemeni businesswomen rehabilitation, training, workshops and symposiums. Also, we select Yemeni businesswomen to take part in foreign conferences.

Which businesses are Yemeni businesswomen more likely to initiate, or prefer to launch?

The Yemeni businesswoman has come to the forefront particularly in service businesses such as schools, universities, pharmacies, hospitals and contracting. Yemeni businesswomen have become present in all aspects. Yemeni businesswomen have also been running industrial businesses such as making incense, perfume and accessories.

How many Yemeni businesswomen are registered in the Chamber of Commerce and Industry?

I would like to clarify that no authority gives businesswomen or businessmen their title [of businessperson] except the chamber. Some mistakenly think that only those with handsome capitals can register in the chamber. We do care about nascent entrepreneurs more than more established ones. The former needs care and support in order to be able to compete and flourish. So, I want to say that the presence of businesswomen in the chamber gives strength to her business. Until the end of last year, the number of registered Yemeni businesswomen reached 352. Also, other businesswomen have been registered since the beginning of this year.

Do you think Yemeni businesswomen have been able to compete against Yemeni businessmen, or even outdo them in some ways?

The Yemeni businesswoman is a competitor, but she is not stronger than the Yemeni businessman. I think women’s capitals are smaller

than the men’s. Also, cultural values and a patriarchal society have been among the major obstacles facing the Yemen businesswoman. The chamber is trying to make businesswomen connected to businessmen through different activities like conferences and workshops. There are some Yemeni businesswomen who have proven a shining example of woman’s positive role. It is not necessary that businesswomen compete with businessmen. The process should be interdependent.

In your view, how are women different than men when it comes to work responsibilities?

I think women are more diligent than men. I am not alone in saying this. Actual studies have proven that. Thus, Yemeni women have great abilities and can reach decision-making positions. Yemeni women have been taking on a big position in society, and have been able to overcome difficulties.

Do you think Yemen’s national economy can keep afloat without foreign aid and grants?

Generally speaking, Yemen has lots of natural resources such as tourism, oil, fishery and human resources. If these resources are appropriately exploited, the country’s economy will improve. For the time being, the country is still in need of foreign aid, and this will continue unless we see financial and administrative reforms.

What do you want to say to Yemeni businesswomen?

My advice to Yemeni women, whether a businesswoman, a housewife, or employee, is to start up their own businesses. Business begins with an idea. If she has a business idea, she can turn it into a project. There are many places that can help Yemeni women and the youth turn their ideas into real businesses. I also urge Yemeni businesswomen who work in their relatives’ shadow to go ahead and make a name for themselves. Being part of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry helps businesswomen get their voices heard.

What do you hope to see change in Yemen?

I hope that Yemen becomes a stable and secure country, and I hope that

Yemenis can work hand-in-hand to defuse and resolve the crisis the country is undergoing. I hope that Yemeni people really cherish their

homeland. In my opinion, what is happening today results from peoples’ unreal love for the nation. Everyone should work diligently

regardless of her or his position in order to establish development. If this materializes, our situation will change for the better.



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More than 15,000 Beneficiaries from Family Planning Education Sessions in Seven Governorates

Funded by Yamaan Foundation for Health & Social Development (the German Government Support through the German Development Bank -KfW), National Foundation for Development and Human Rights (NFDHR) concluded the first phase of the health education session program. The program aims to educate people about reproductive health and family planning issues as well as STDs. During the first phase, a total of 790 sessions were conducted in seven governorates (San’aa district, San’aa, Taiz, Aden, Hajjah, and Mahawet)

Mr. Tariq Abdulmoula, NFDHR Project Coordinator, reported that during the first phase, the program reached more than 15,000 beneficiaries, most of whom men and women on reproductive age. He also indicated that a group of specialists in reproductive health reached people in universities, organizations, associations and mosques as well as in marginalized areas.

He also stated that they already started the second phase in March and will last until May 2015 targeting seven governorates including Hadramout, Aden, Lahij, Abyan, Dhamar, Hodeidah, and Amran. A total of 1400 session will be conducted by the end of the project reaching a total of 28,000 beneficiaries.

Dr. Jamal Badr, BCC Manager at Yamaan Foundation, stressed on the urgent need to raise people awareness of family planning indicating that BCC activities are great technique to reach people and change misconception of family planning. «At Yamaan, we put a lot of effort and invest a lot of resources on BCC activities because it important to



convenes people of the benefit and the importance of family planning» he said.

Dr. Naseam Alhaobani, one of the specialists on reproductive health in Taiz, was thrilled to see women enthusiasm during the sessions and their eager to learn more about family planning. Additionally, she noticed a significant change on respondents concepts of reproductive health issues including family planning and STDs.

One female beneficiary, Abeer Alkholali from Hajjah, expressed her support to family planning and birth spacing pointing out to the benefit it adds to individuals families and communities. Abeer is a mother of two and has been using birth control pills for two years, «My husband and I chose to use the pill after consulting a doctor, my life is better as I can concentrate on my kids and my health» she said.





The spectre of sectarianism in Yemen



A funeral procession was held Wednesday morning for the victims of the March 20 mosque bombings.

Story and photos by
Ali Aboluhom

Ishraq Mohammed says she would be grateful if her 11-year-old son had been among the hundreds killed and wounded last Friday, on March 20, when suicide bombers attacked the Badr and Al-Hashoush mosques in the capital Sana'a.

Killing at least 137 and injuring scores more, it was the worst terrorist attack Sana'a has ever seen. Targeting mosques frequented by Shia Houthis, including a failed attack on a mosque in the group's heartland of Sa'ada, the bombings were also marked by their apparent sectarian motivations.

Mohammed claims her son is upset, too, for not being martyred with those who died that day. It is all part of a mindset that has become increasingly common in Yemeni society but is not homegrown, says Mohammad Saleh Othman, a Sunni imam who preaches at Al-Hasaba mosque in the capital.

Othman points to the influence of Saudi Wahhabism, a movement

started by Mohammad Abdalwahab in the nineteenth century but only began taking root in Yemen in the 1980s, finding formal representation in Yemen's Islah Party.

"One of the pillars of this doctrine is Jihad against disbelievers and those siding with them," says Othman, who argues the notion may be inherent to Islam but "is not a binding principle" for the moderate Zaydi and Shafi Muslims who make up the majority of Yemenis.

This began to change with growing immigration to Saudi Arabia, he thinks, where Yemeni children were exposed to Islamic teaching that put a new emphasis on particular interpretations of Jihad. "When they came home they brought those headline beliefs with them, and introduced them into Yemeni society," he said. "Wahhabis even think Muslims with different readings of their shared religion need to be fought against."

These differences have nonetheless had little impact on Yemeni society until very recently, the imam believes. With growing conflict and the violence that accompanies it,

however, differences become crystallised and take on new importance. Ishraq Mohammed and her son's wish for martyrdom is a product of this process, he says.

Long a symbol of coexistence within Yemeni society, with little thought given to who is attending or preaching at a given mosque, many feel Friday prayers in Sana'a have become a means to differentiate who belongs to what sect.

This change was set in motion as soon as Houthis took over the capital in September 2014, says Mohammed Abdal Moghni Al-Hadi, a graduate of Al-Eman University, an Islamic institution established by the well-known Sheikh Abdulmajeed Al-Zandani, who was formerly a spiritual advisor to Osama Bin Laden.

"Yemenis have lived with different beliefs for centuries, but sectarian conflict is emerging as a reaction to Houthi attempts to impose their beliefs on Sunnis by force. Others react in the same way, and it leads to a cycle of violence," he said, adding that the deadly mosque bombings are a result of this sectarianism.

For Al-Hadi, a sign of things to come was first evident when Houthis displaced Sunnis from Dammaj district in Sana'a months before entering the capital. "Where one chose to pray used to be a matter of convenience, they used to attend whatever mosque was closest to them, but after Dammaj people began to be more selective and it has only gotten worse since Houthis took control of the capital."

It is still unknown who was behind the deadly mosque bombings. A Yemeni branch of Islamic State, which considers Shia Muslims heretics, claimed responsibility for the attacks on Friday, although the claim has not been verified and precisely who Islamic State in Yemen consists of remains unclear. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have denied involvement, citing directions from its leadership to avoid attacks on mosques and other public gatherings.

In a statement released by his office in Aden, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi said, "[Shia] extremism, represented by the armed Houthi militia, and Sunni extremism, represented by Al-Qaeda, are two sides of the same coin, who do not wish good and stability for Yemen and its people."

However amicable relations between different religious sects have been in Yemen over the long-term, it is not the first time fears of sectarian conflict have surfaced. Sunni-Shia tensions were thought to have reached new levels in 2010 following suicide attacks by AQAP on Houthis marking Ghadir Dar, a Shia event, in northern Al-Jawf governorate. Twenty-five died in those attacks, for which AQAP later claimed responsibility in a statement titled "Operations to defend Sunnis."

In July 2013, clashes broke out between attendees at Al-Taiseer Mosque in the capital Sana'a following allegations the traditionally Sunni mosque was being overrun by Shia Houthis. Fighting erupted after the latter mounted opposition

to Taraweeh prayers—extended nighttime prayers held by Sunnis during Ramadan—being held at the mosque, which they consider heretic.

It would appear that Houthis have escalated these minor disputes since establishing control of the capital, but it is not always clear who sparks such confrontations and which actions should be treated as reactionary or sectarian in nature. It remains the case that most if not all mosques are open to Muslims of any persuasion. Prominent Houthi imam Al-Mortada Al-Mahatwari died in Friday's mosque attacks, and video footage shows attendees chanting the Houthi slogan at the time the attacker detonated his explosives, but it remains unknown if Sunnis were among the dead and how many were present during the explosion.

Hassan Al-Haifi, an independent political analyst, believes sectarian tensions are not a driving force for conflict in the country, but are being stoked by external actors. "The attacks on the mosques were meant to create the impression of sectarian conflict, which is something that works in the Saudis' interests," he said. "The planning, financing, and equipment came from outside."

Mohammed Al-Qis, 22, a Sunni who lives in Moseek neighborhood of Shoub district in Sana'a, said attacks on mosques associated with Houthis are a bid to frighten those associated not only with the political movement of the Houthis but all Zaydi Shias in the country. He says he is determined not to let

the attackers, whoever may be behind them, to drive a wedge in his society.

"I will continue praying at Shia-dominated mosques to send a message to the terrorists that we are not afraid. We believe in our doctrine and want to perform our ritual in our own local mosques" Al-Qis said.

While there are many citizens like Al-Qis determined to resist sectarian divisions, it has become more difficult as a result of overt distinctions being made at various mosques, largely as a result of Houthi campaigns to redecorate once-neutral mosques with colors and slogans associated with the movement.

However opposed to sectarian distinctions citizens like Al-Qis may be, attending one mosque or another often sends a public message of one's allegiance, especially if it is painted green and adorned with Houthi slogans and banners. Many, like 34-year-old Senan Masowd, now choose to avoid public displays altogether.

"I personally do not go to mosques associated with any sect, I'd rather pray at home these days. I don't want to become involved in these trivial disputes. We are all Muslims, what is the point?"



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As Yemen crumbles, civilians brace for the worst



Protests against the Houthi takeover of the city of Taiz in Yemen on March 23, 2015.

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foes the Houthis—a Zaydi Shia Muslim group from the north of the country—to try to reclaim control of Yemen. Houthi forces have seized Sana'a and other northern cities and look set to try to take to the south.

Hadi escaped to the Red Sea port city of Aden, where his Presidential Palace has been bombed—allegedly by forces loyal to the Houthis. The United Nations envoy to the country has warned that the country is on the “edge of a civil war.”

Calls for calm are falling on deaf ears. In an aggressive speech on Sunday night seen by many as a declaration of war, Houthi leader Abdulmalik Al-Houthi lambasted Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, accusing them of undermining Yemen's security in league with the United States and Israel. He rejected all calls for political dialogue. Hadi has since called on Gulf States to intervene militarily.

“This is the closest Yemen has been to a full on civil war in some time. Fighting is currently taking place on multiple fronts, while tensions between rival governments in Aden and Sana'a has never been higher,” said Adam Baron, a Yemen expert and visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

“There is still some possibility of some deal to prevent war—the fact is, some sort of consensus agreement remains in all parties' interests as no one faction is likely to be able to decisively establish hegemony over the country. That being said, the distrust between factions runs deep and it would likely be difficult for anyone to take a step back at this point while still saving face.”

Protest and preparation

There was an eerie silence in Sana'a on Tuesday as residents stayed in their houses. Some streets, normally bustling, were almost deserted. In some areas, men piled into shops—grabbing as much food and water as they could, packing them into cars and heading home.

“When the Houthis entered and dominated Sana'a [in September] I came and bought YR220,000 (\$1,000) of food, and now I am coming to buy more because no one knows what will happen tomorrow,” Hussein Nasser Ahmed, 45, said.

Ahmed Al-Werafi, 38, said he is responsible for 28 relatives, but doesn't have enough money to get food for them all in the event of a lockdown. “We trust in Allah, yes we fear the potential war but we have no money to buy food, so we can do nothing but to wait and see what will happen,” he said.

Despite some frantic shoppers, business is generally slow. Ameen Al-Ma'amari, a food wholesaler, explained that his sales had dropped 50 percent this year since the Houthis took over—partly because many companies and diplomatic missions have fled the city.

Protests in Taiz

The latest front for the conflict is the southern city of Taiz, where Houthi forces have seized the airport. In response, thousands of people have taken to the streets to protest, leading to violent repression. On Tuesday four people were allegedly killed when Houthi forces opened fire on protesters.

Saeed Dabwan, 56, from Taiz, was one of thousands on the streets and he said he would never accept domination by the northern Houthis. “Taiz is [a] city of flowers, civilization and education and we can not accept the reactionary forces at all,” he said.

An official security source in Taiz told IRIN that the city's police and army had rejected the arrival of the Houthi forces. The source said a meeting had been held to discuss how to expel the Houthis. “The meeting stressed the necessity of not taking any instructions from [Sana'a], unless they are confirmed by directions from Taiz governor,” he said.

Adding to humanitarian toll

The violence is likely to increase suffering in the Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country. Over half of the country's 24 million population lack access to safe water and sanitation, while ten million do not have regular, reliable access to food.

Nasser Al-Jamali, 48, a day laborer, said he had only worked for 13 days in the past six months and has been forced to move his family from Sana'a to save money. “I do not know what to do or where to go. Even the merchants and businessmen complain [of] the miserable situation. People stopped building and companies dismissed many of their staff, so who will hire us?”

Jameel Al-Yafe'e, 34, said he had cut his daily laboring rates in half but still could not find work. “No one to hire us because companies have left the country and no roads [are being] paved, no buildings built. Even the farmers cannot find diesel to irrigate lands and, therefore to hire us.”

“The humanitarian situation in Yemen is still dire—a civil war will only make things worse, deepening an already acute crisis,” Baron said.

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Almigidad Mojalli

IRIN
First published March 24

Abdu Hasan Dabwan is not willing to let it happen again. Twice before, the 54-year-old says, he waited too long, refusing to flee in the hope that the tensions in his home country would not tip over into chaos. Twice he was wrong.

The first time was 1994. Four short years after North and South Yemen had unified, the initial optimism had faded and a civil war broke out in which president Ali Abdullah Saleh brutally crushed the southern leadership. Trapped in their houses, the Dabwans were forced to watch the three-months of carnage play out around them.

The second time was in 2011 when a wave of popular protests against Saleh began. While he eventually stepped down to be replaced by his deputy Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, it was not before months of intermittent clashes.

“We had terrible experiences [before] when we waited until the war broke out [and] were besieged for many days. Some of our neighbors were killed, and we [had to abandon] much of our furniture and property.”

So, like many Yemenis, as the country looms ever closer to civil war again, Dabwan is packing his bags and leaving the capital, in his case for his birthplace in Taiz governorate.

Others feel obliged to stay. Sami Ali, 27, has ordered his family to leave Sana'a as he expects a full-blown civil war, but can't afford to leave his government job. “I sent them today in the morning because I do not want to wait till I hear the gunshot [that kills them],” he said. “I stayed here because of my job.”

A recurring theme

Once again, Saleh is not far from the chaos. The former leader never quite accepted his loss of status and has allied with his erstwhile