

Houthi Militia Takes Over Taiz as Yemen Descends into Civil War

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Houthi militia members seized the military airport in Taiz on Saturday without any resistance from Yemeni military forces. The capture of Taiz brings the Houthi forces within 180 kilometers of the southern port city of Aden, the hometown and stronghold of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.

Fighters from the Special Security Forces reportedly fired their automatic weapons and volleys of tear gas to disperse large crowds of protesters who turned out to oppose the Houthis' presence in the country's third largest city.

Amid the country's descent into sectarian conflict, the United States announced that it was evacuating approximately 100 US Special Operations soldiers who had been stationed at the Al Anad airbase in Lahj province. They cited security threats after Al Qaeda militants briefly seized control of the nearby city of Al Houta on Friday.

The Houthis, who belong to the Zaydi Shiite branch of Islam, began an occupation of the capital, Sanaa, in August last year to protest the slashing of fuel subsidies. They seized control of the presidential palace in January and in February forced the resignation of Hadi and his ministers. Mohammed Ali Al Houthi, a cousin of Houthi leader Abdel Malik Al Houthi, was subsequently declared the new president.

The beleaguered Hadi was able to escape house arrest in Sanaa last month, fleeing to Aden, where he has organized loyal military forces to fight against the Houthis, who are allied to former longtime dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Fighting between the competing factions escalated after the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) carried out suicide bombings Friday at two Houthi mosques in Sanaa, killing more than 130 people and wounding more than 300 others.

On Saturday, Hadi issued a televised statement calling on the Houthis to give up control of Sanaa and other cities. He accused Iran of being responsible for the Houthis' advances and promised to push the militias back to their home province of Saada in the country's far northwest, on the border with Saudi Arabia.

The Houthi Supreme Revolutionary Committee responded by issuing a statement condemning Hadi and the forces fighting for him. It called on soldiers, security officers and civilian volunteers to fight "terrorist forces all across the country."

The Houthis have been receiving financial and military support from Iran and have been

backed by former longtime dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ceded power to then-Vice President Hadi in 2012 in the aftermath of mass Arab Spring protests. Saleh, who is living in exile in Ethiopia, still commands the loyalty of military forces in Yemen, particularly among the Special Security Forces.

Last Thursday, forces loyal to Saleh launched an attack on the airport in Aden in an attempt to push out Hadi's supporters but were repelled. Saleh loyalists also released 300 inmates from the main jail in the city, reportedly letting several Al Qaeda militants go free. Air force jets have been flying over Hadi's compound and launched at least two airstrikes in the last four days.

The United Nations held a closed emergency Security Council meeting Sunday afternoon to discuss a possible response to the escalating conflict in Yemen. UN special envoy to Yemen Jamal Benomar warned that if immediate action was not taken, the country "could turn into something of an Iraq-Libya-Syria combination."

American imperialism bears the ultimate responsibility for the chaos that is now engulfing the impoverished Arab country. Intervening aggressively to maintain its strategic control of the nearby Bab-el-Mandab Straits between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, which connect Asia and the Persian Gulf to Europe, Washington has stoked tensions inside Yemen with its ongoing drone war against Islamic militants.

The war was one of President Barack Obama's main foreign policy initiatives, launched in December 2009 with the firing of a cruise missile loaded with cluster bombs against the village of Al Majan in Abayan province. The strike killed as many as 41 civilians, including five pregnant women and 22 children.

The Al Anad airbase has been one of the key sites used by the American military and CIA to launch drone strikes on targets in Yemen. Saleh quietly signed off on the drone operations in 2009, and Hadi was a vocal supporter of the drone war after he came to power in 2012.

After the Houthis ousted Hadi from Sanaa, the US indicated it had struck a deal with the Houthis in order to maintain its operations. "The Houthis are anti-Al Qaeda, and we've been able to continue some of our counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda in the past months," Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence Michael Vickers told *Al Monitor* in January.

The American drone war, which has killed more than 1,000 people in less than six years, has taken a country with longstanding tribal and sectarian divisions and plunged it into a bloody sectarian civil war. The war has taken on the character of a proxy war between the leading Sunni and Shiite powers in the region—Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively.

As the Houthis made their advance into Taiz Sunday, Iran's deputy foreign minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian called on Hadi to resign and forestall the outbreak of more violence in the country. "The expectation is that President...Hadi will resign rather than repeat mistakes, to play a constructive role in preventing the breakup of Yemen and the transformation of Aden into a terrorist haven," Abdollahian stated.

Officials from the Arab Gulf states, including Saudi Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, released a statement on Saturday backing Hadi as Yemen's legitimate leader and announced that they were prepared to use "all efforts" to defend his administration.

“Yemen is sliding into a dark tunnel which would have serious consequences not only on Yemen but on security and stability,” the statement read. “The security of Yemen and of the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries is an indivisible whole.”

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