

# Saudi-backed militias capture key Yemen port city

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Militias backed by the Saudi-led Arab coalition captured portions of Yemen's key southern port city of Aden on Friday.

Anti-Houthi militants gained control over the city center and government buildings and were engaged in mopping-up operations against remaining Houthi elements in and around the city as of Sunday evening, according to statements by an unnamed official with Yemen's government-in-exile, currently based in Saudi Arabia.

The apparent gains of Saudi-backed forces have come amid intense clashes throughout the country, which have fueled the continuing rise of the already substantial civilian death toll produced by the US-backed campaign. Scores have been killed in fighting over the weekend, adding to the more than 140 civilians killed by military forces over the past week and a half.

According to Al Jazeera, shelling by Houthi militants killed some 50 people in Aden on Sunday. Dozens more were killed as a result of fighting in the western city of Taiz.

At least 3,500 have been killed as a result of the Saudi-led war, launched on March 26 of this year. Some 1,700 of these have been confirmed as civilians, according to the UN, with some 3,800 more civilians confirmed wounded.

Nearly 80 percent of the Yemeni population faces conditions of starvation, near starvation, and/or lack of reliable access to drinking water.

More than 1.2 million Yemenis have been forced to flee their homes by the war. At least 50,000 of the displaced have fled the country entirely, seeking refuge in neighboring countries of Oman, Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan.

Responsibility for the bloodshed and humanitarian disaster in Yemen lies squarely with Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf monarchies and their backers in Washington. While technically headed by the Saudi monarchy, the military onslaught against Yemen is a direct outgrowth of US imperial policy in the Middle East.

Equipped with state-of-the-art US-made weaponry and closely supported by the US military, Saudi and Gulf jet fighters have pounded cities and towns across the country

for months. Saudi forces have repeatedly deployed illegal cluster munitions against Houthi villages in the country's north, according to reports published by Human Rights Watch.

Saudi coalition air strikes killed at least 24 people, including 12 members of a single extended family in the Ibb governorate on Sunday, according to testimony from residents cited by the *New York Times*.

From the outset, the Saudis have benefited from US intelligence and logistical support, as they have sought to reimpose the government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. Prior to and during the war against Yemen, Saudi forces have been outfitted with large caches of new US-made weaponry. Elite US military personnel have been directly involved in planning and facilitating the Saudi air war throughout its duration.

Relations between the US and the regimes affiliated with the Saudi-coalition are so close that the US Defense Department's Special Operations Command maintains a detachment known as Special Operations Command Task Force Gulf Cooperation Council in Bahrain. The Task Force is dedicated to orchestrating the US military's joint commando operations with the Saudi monarchy, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and the other Gulf states.

The growing air and ground interventions of the Gulf monarchies in Yemen are aimed at restoring to power a government which, though given a facelift during the 2011-2012 "democratic transition" process stage-managed by the US and the Saudi-led Gulf Coordination Council, was principally based around a power network built up by the US-backed dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh.

In the decades following Yemen's reunification in 1990, Saleh developed close relations with Washington. The US generously funded Saleh's security apparatus in exchange for his cooperation with covert US drone and commando wars inside the country.

Saleh's collaboration with US imperialism's military intrigues earned him widespread hatred, and his government became destabilized during mass protests that coincided with

the 2011 “Arab Spring” uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia.

Saleh’s replacement, President Hadi, was “elected” during a one-man election in February 2012, and continued to govern the country as a de facto protectorate of the US and Saudi Arabia until his overthrow.

The Hadi government largely collapsed during the final months of 2014 and the opening months of 2015, with Hadi himself being forced to flee Yemen after being deposed at gunpoint by Houthi rebel militias now backed by forces loyal to Saleh.

The Houthis succeeded in capturing the presidential palace and Hadi’s own personal residence in January, after seizing control of the capital city of Sanaa in the fall of 2014. The Houthi victory came as a humiliating blow against Washington, coming after years of US support for the Hadi government and the presence of substantial US military and intelligence assets on the ground at Yemeni military bases.

Hadi has since taken up residence with his backers in Riyadh, where he leads a government-in-exile that has already asserted its claim to sovereignty over the areas of Aden recaptured from the Houthis last week.

Meanwhile, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), frequently labeled the “most dangerous” terrorist outfit in the world by US media, has managed to thrive amidst the US-supported Saudi bombardment. The group has exploited the chaos flowing from the air campaign and civil war to consolidate its hold over substantial areas of the country, now referred to as AQAP’s own “Hadramawt emirate.”

The Saudi coalition has studiously avoided strikes against AQAP territory, to such an extent that the largest city currently under its control, Al Mukkalla, has become a main destination for internally displaced Yemenis. In fact, the *New York Times*’ own report on this weekend’s uptick in civilian deaths was written from the city, which currently functions as the headquarters for AQAP.

The emergence of this de facto alliance between the Saudi government and AQAP, therefore, effectively entails the recruitment of the Islamist militant group as an instrument of US imperialism in Yemen.

“Since the start of the Yemen war, the Royal Saudi Air Force and its coalition partners have not targeted AQAP’s Hadramawt emirate. It has not been subjected at all to the bombing other Yemeni cities are enduring,” the Brookings Institution’s Bruce Reidel noted last week.

“There are longstanding suspicions that the [Saudi] Kingdom would like to annex Hadramawt to give it access to the Indian Ocean and a route for an oil pipeline to Mukkalla that would allow oil to reach the sea without transiting the Straits of Hormuz,” Reidel wrote.

“It is a great time for AQAP, when you look at the situation on the ground,” Adam Baron of the European

Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) told International Business Times.

With the Houthis still holding the capital and strategic portions of Yemen’s north and west, the US and its Gulf allies are clearly calculating that a strengthened AQAP, composed of Sunni extremist forces hostile to the Zaidi Shiite Houthis, can serve as a useful proxy army for their efforts to retake the country.

The protection afforded to AQAP stands as further exposure of the limitless hypocrisy, deception and cynicism underlying Washington’s claims to be fighting an international struggle against Islamist extremism.

Efforts to utilize AQAP as an instrument of the US-Saudi war aims may also explain the timing of the targeted killing of the group’s leader Nasir Al Wuhayshi, who was targeted by a US drone strike in June.

Wuhayshi’s death, touted by the US media as a victory for the “global war on terror,” has brought to power a new AQAP leader with longstanding back channel ties to the security forces of the US-Saudi backed government, according to investigations by Al Jazeera.

“Celebrating the death of al-Wuhayshi as if it means the death of AQAP is a very flawed way to look at this,” the ECFR’s Baron said, noting that the much-celebrated assassination came just as AQAP is enjoying unprecedented success on the ground.

Just as in Syria, Libya and elsewhere, the very same Islamist forces vilified in the media as a dire threat to the US “Homeland,” are being utilized as front-line shock troops of Washington’s drive to smash every manifestation of resistance to its control over the Middle East’s vast oil resources and strategic shipping chokepoints, including the crucial Bab el-Mandeb straight sitting astride Yemen’s western coast.



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