

Video: Yemeni War Report: Houthi-Saleh Conflict Leads to New Round of Escalation

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Former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was killed amid fighting between his supporters and their former allies, the Houthi movement on December 4. Until recently, Saleh loyalists had been fighting alongside the Houthis in a war against the Saudi-backed president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, but a dispute over control of the Yemeni capital of Sana'a on November 29 triggered armed clashes that have left more than 125 people dead. On November 2, Saleh offered to "turn a new page" with the Saudi-led coalition if it stopped attacking Yemen and ended its crippling blockade of the country. The Houthis accused him of a "coup" against "an alliance he never believed in".

Sources in the Houthi forces said its fighters stopped Saleh's armoured car with an RPG rocket outside the embattled capital Sanaa and then shot him dead. Sources in Saleh's party confirmed he died in an attack on his convoy. His death marks a shift three years into a war in a state of stalemate. It risks the conflict becoming even more volatile.

Saleh, a former military officer, became the president of North Yemen in 1978 after a coup but, when north and south reunited in 1990, was elected as the first president of the new country. Saleh was an important player in Yemen's descent into civil war, when his reluctant departure from power by the Houthis in 2012 brought his Saudi-backed deputy, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, into office. The Houthis fought a series of rebellions against Saleh between 2004 and 2010. They also supported an uprising in 2011 that forced Saleh to hand over power to Hadi.

But in 2014 Saleh forged an alliance with his former opponents, the Houthis, to facilitate their takeover of Sanaa and ultimately to force Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia. While it lasted, the alliance benefited both sides. Saleh used Houthi firepower and manpower, while the Houthis gained from Saleh's governing and intelligence networks.

In late November, that equation changed as Saleh moved to increase his power in Sanaa and signaled that he was swapping sides, seeking a dialogue with the Saudis and their allies. In a speech on December 2, Saleh appeared to indicate the end of his loyalists' alliance with the Houthi fighters. He said he was ready to turn a "new page" in ties with the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis, if it stopped attacks on Yemeni citizens and lifted a siege. For that moment, army units loyal to Saleh had been clashing with Houthi fighters few days already.

The war in Yemen has hit a stalemate, and it is hard to say which side is winning. The both sides cannot deliver a decisive blow to each other. Now, Saleh's apparatus will likely be

weakened and the Houthis will become the only power in northern Yemen.

On the other hand, the conflict between the loyalists and the Houthis is exactly what the Saudi-led coalition wants. Together Saleh's forces and the Houthis were strong enough to hold on to Sanaa, repel the forces of the Saudi-backed government and its Gulf Arab allies and to conduct constant attacks against Saudi-led forces in Yemen and even against targets inside Saudi Arabia. Now, the military capabilities of anti-Saudi forces will be partly reduced.

Despite that, even if some part Saleh's former forces ally themselves with the Saudis, that by itself won't guarantee their victory. Indeed, this will mean that Yemen, a now near-permanently unstable and divided state, will become even more nagging a thorn in Saudi Arabia's side, with constant threat of missiles and Houthi raids. Add to that growing power of Hezbollah and Iran in the region and you get difficult times for Saudi Arabia.

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