

Yemen

Yemen's embattled president cedes power to ruling council

Move seen as sign that Saudi Arabia is committed to seeking end to seven-year civil war



Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, president of Yemen, delegates his powers to a new ruling council during a speech in Riyadh on Thursday
© Reuters

Samer Al-Atrush in Dubai YESTERDAY

Yemen's exiled president has ceded control of the war-torn country to a new ruling council in the biggest shake-up of the Saudi-backed government in years.

President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who is beholden to Saudi Arabia, said on Thursday he would “delegate his full powers” to the presidential council, which includes representatives from multiple Yemeni factions fighting Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

The apparent sidelining of the president comes as Saudi Arabia, which leads an Arab coalition that intervened in the conflict in 2015, steps up efforts to find a diplomatic solution to end the seven-year civil war.

Riyadh urged the new council to negotiate with the Houthis, who have launched repeated attacks on oil installations in Saudi Arabia, including a missile strike on Jeddah last month as the port city was hosting a Formula One grand prix.

“The presidential council makes the burden lighter on Saudi as they make up various factions that actually represent the current political territories/realities on the ground,” said Yemeni analyst Raiman al-Hamdani. “This also gives Saudi Arabia the chance to signal to the Houthis their commitment to end the conflict.”

Hadi came to power a decade ago, after protests toppled the country's veteran dictator

Ali Abdullah Saleh. His government lost the capital, Sana'a, to the Houthis in 2015 and Hadi has since spent much of his time in Saudi Arabia.

His rule became problematic for Saudi Arabia, analysts said, because he was viewed as leading a weak, divided administration and to be out of touch with Yemen. It also caused friction between the kingdom and the United Arab Emirates, its main partner in the coalition fighting in Yemen, as Abu Dhabi objected to his ties to Islah, an Islamist movement, and its influence on his government.

But Riyadh has been reluctant to abandon Hadi because it could justify its intervention in Yemen by saying it was backing the internationally recognised government.

Islah has less representation in the new council, which also includes factions backed by the UAE, which analysts say are better equipped to negotiate with the Houthis.

Peter Salisbury, the senior Yemen analyst at Crisis Group, a think-tank, said the presidential council was more representative of anti-Houthi factions.

The “signalling is that this group was formed in part to act as a more credible negotiating partner for the Houthis”, he added. Should talks fail, “you now have a governing body which on paper is much more able to co-ordinate a military campaign”.

The Yemen war has put a strain on Saudi Arabia's relations with its main security ally, the US. Washington initially supported the military intervention in Yemen but has frozen the sales of offensive weapons since President Joe Biden came to office last year.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have drawn widespread criticism for their conduct over the war.

Two years ago the UN said the conflict had triggered the world's worst man-made humanitarian crisis. More than 300,000 Yemenis have died in the war, mainly because of malnourishment and disease.

The Houthis, who control Yemen's populous north, have also been accused of using aid as a weapon of war, recruiting child soldiers, and other abuses.

The conflict morphed into a proxy war with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi accusing Tehran of supplying the Houthis with missile and drone technology.

Saudi officials have said that, while they seek to end the war, they want to avoid any outcome that leaves the heavily-armed Houthis in control of the long border between Yemen and the kingdom.

Infighting among Yemeni factions opposed to the Houthis has also been a hindrance to talks.

“The council now faces a tough road ahead, with many issues and challenges to deal with. The members of the council themselves have also conflicting political positions,” al-Hamdani said.

The Yemeni government and the Houthis accepted a UN-mediated two-month truce that started on April 1, although each side has since accused the other of violating it.

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