

WAR IN SAADA: FROM LOCAL INSURRECTION TO NATIONAL CHALLENGE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PAPER IN A NUTSHELL

- Since 2004 the Yemeni government has been mired in a militarily unwinnable civil conflict against the Houthis in the northern governorate of Saada. Rather than improving security and stability in Yemen, the war has instead exposed greater vulnerabilities for the regime, weakened the central government, and emboldened other threatening actors such as al-Qaeda. Perhaps most ominously, the high cost of prosecuting the war in Saada has brought Yemen perilously close to economic collapse. An immediate de-escalation of hostilities is necessary in order for the Yemeni government to refocus its efforts on other urgent national priorities and avoid the very real risk of state failure.

VITAL STATISTICS

- The governorate of Saada is located along Yemen's northern border with Saudi Arabia. Saada is among Yemen's poorest governorates and receives little in the way of civil services.
- A rebel group known as the Houthis is leading the fight against the Yemeni government in Saada. The Houthis are members of the Zaidi branch of Shi'i Islam, a relatively small sect that is confined primarily to northern Yemen and is in practice very similar to Sunni Islam.
- When fighting first broke out, it was driven by a sense of sectarian marginalization, economic underdevelopment, and displeasure at government cooperation with the United States and Saudi Arabia. Over time the conflict has metastasized. Today the war is being spurred by broader anger and dissatisfaction with the Saleh regime.
- The conflict has begun to spread beyond Yemen. Following a series of cross-border incursions by the Houthis, Saudi Arabia openly joined the fighting in November 2009.
- More than 250,000 people have been displaced to date; the number of casualties is unknown.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY MAKERS

- **Support mediation between the Houthis and the Yemeni government:** After nearly six years of fighting, neither the rebels nor the government can expect a military solution to the conflict. In tandem with other major donor countries, the United States should encourage both sides to seek a negotiated political settlement. Without serious international mediation, likely under the auspices of the Gulf States, further fighting is inevitable and poses a serious threat to Yemeni stability.
- **Shift Yemeni resources away from Saada:** Through diplomatic channels, the United States should urge the Yemeni government not to keep pouring ever more resources into the conflict in Saada. Prosecuting the war has already hampered the Yemeni military's effectiveness and preoccupied the central government to the exclusion of nearly every other issue.
- **Address underlying grievances:** The United States, in concert with other interested countries, should encourage the central government to address the Houthis' core concerns about economic development and the role of Zaidi Islam. Until the Yemeni government addresses these root causes of the conflict, fighting is likely to continue indefinitely and at enormous cost.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Christopher Boucek is an associate in the Carnegie Middle East Program where his research focuses on regional security challenges. He is a widely published expert on terrorism, the Middle East, and U.S. foreign policy.*

ABOUT THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE: *Founded in 1910, the Carnegie Endowment is a leading, nonpartisan think tank specializing in foreign affairs. It is also the world's first truly global think tank with operations in Washington, D.C., Moscow, Beijing, Beirut, and Brussels.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION: *A full-length version of this study is available on the web at: www.carnegieendowment.org/yemenonthebrink. For more information or to speak with one of our scholars, please do not hesitate to contact our congressional liaison, Scott Toussaint, at (202) 939-2307 or stoussaint@ceip.org.*