

Could Yemen conflict get worse?

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(The Christian Science Monitor) Amid a dramatic uptick in violence, the conflict in Yemen is sinking deeper into sectarianism, scholars and analysts warn, including deadly suicide attacks in Sanaa claimed by the local franchise of the self-described Islamic State.

In the attacks Friday targeting two mosques frequented by Zaydi Shi'a worshippers in the capital, suicide bombers killed 142 people and wounded hundreds.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is well-established in Yemen but says it draws the line at the targeting of mosques and public places, distanced itself from the bombings. But the local affiliate of rival Sunni jihadist group IS claimed responsibility for the attack— first in Yemen. Experts said they regarded the claim as credible.

"The emergence of IS in Yemen may fuel a broader sectarian conflict," said Alexis Knutsen, Yemen analyst for the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats project in Washington. "The conflict has reached a tipping point, and the international community needs to get both the al Houthis and Hadi to the negotiating table before the situation spirals out of control."

The impoverished nation, torn between rival authorities, is already facing a severe political crisis. A descent into civil war along sectarian lines could be a tragedy for a nation that is already riven by competing personal rivalries.

The Houthis, a Zaydi Shia militia traditionally anchored in the north, hold the capital, Sanaa, as well as large swathes of the country. President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi, who resigned in January then retracted his resignation, has been struggling to hold on after fleeing to the port city of Aden in the south.

The chaos has emboldened AQAP and provided fertile soil for IS. Both extremist groups view the Houthis as heretics because they belong to a Shiite minority.

Small groups of IS sympathizers, notes Knutsen, began emerging in Yemen in August, and IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi accepted a pledge of allegiance from Yemen supporters in November. Last month, IS backers in Yemen's southern and eastern provinces distributed leaflets declaring their own *wilayats* (provinces).

"Abu Bakr al Baghdadi explicitly called for attacks against the al Houthis from his supporters in November," Knutsen said. "The attack follows his guidance, whether this specific attack was ordered or not. It is possible that ISIS claimed the attack after the fact for its propaganda value."

Conflict at 'tipping point'

The Houthis, she said, may use Friday's violence as an excuse to further crack down on Sunni dissenters and anti-Houthi political actors. The militia has already bombed Hadi's residence in Aden, prompting a plea from Hadi's side for a no-fly zone enforced by the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Deteriorating security led to the closure of the U.S. and other diplomatic missions in Sanaa in February. While drone strikes continued after the closing of the embassy, the absence of an effective government is a blow to the U.S. fight against AQAP or IS in Yemen in the long term.

On Saturday the US military announced it was pulling its last remaining troops—100 Special Operations forces members—from Al Anad air base in Yemen.

"It's going to be extremely difficult for the US to implement any counter-AQAP or ISIS strategy," Knutsen said. "The U.S. needs to figure out the state of our intelligence on Yemen and whether we can salvage a counter-terrorism partnership from some of Yemen's intact military units."

Warnings at UN Security Council

In response to the escalating violence, the United Nations Security Council convened an emergency meeting Sunday. Its presidency issued a statement reiterating support for Hadi. But the Houthis have continued to gain ground, seizing the military airport and government buildings of Yemen's third city, Taez.

"Emotions are running extremely high and, unless solutions can be found, the country will fall into further violent confrontations," said Jamal Benomar, UN special

envoy to Yemen. “Events in Yemen are leading the country away from political settlement and to the edge of civil war.”

Benomar, who has been struggling to reignite talks and broker a political solution in Yemen, warned the county was locked in a “rapid downward spiral” as the conflict takes on “worrying sectarian tones and deepening north-south divisions.”

Across the impoverished country, old grievances threaten to crystallize in new violence. Resentful of their marginalization in the political process and emboldened by the chaos, southerners are demanding full separation. In the oil-rich province of Mareb, tensions are rising between Houthis and local tribesmen.

“Yemen is undeniably at a crossroads, a failure of negotiations towards a power-sharing deal risks ushering in full-on civil war,” wrote Adam Baron, a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Trajectory of increased sectarianism

While Yemenis generally don’t subscribe to the sectarian logic, analysts warn the conflict will turn sectarian if it continues on the same trajectory. Saudi Arabia has long intervened in the internal affairs of its smaller neighbor and currently backs Hadi against the Houthis, who draw their support from Iran.

“It is important to remember that historically the conflict between the Houthis and the government was not of a sectarian nature, but what we are seeing is an increase in sectarian language on both sides that has given a sectarian dimension to the conflict,” said Belkis Wille, Yemen and Kuwait researcher for Human Rights Watch.

“The fragmentation of the state has meant that individual groups have to rely on themselves to protect their political interests, encouraging each political group to consolidate its own military might,” she said.