

The Yemen Review

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WAR'S ELUSIVE END



The Yemen Review

The Yemen Review – formerly known as Yemen at the UN – is a monthly publication produced by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. Launched in June 2016, it aims to identify and assess current diplomatic, economic, political, military, security, humanitarian and human rights developments related to Yemen.

In producing The Yemen Review, Sana'a Center staff throughout Yemen and around the world gather information, conduct research, and hold private meetings with local, regional, and international stakeholders in order to analyze domestic and international developments regarding Yemen.

This monthly series is designed to provide readers with contextualized insight into the country's most important ongoing issues.

COVER PHOTO:

The Old City of Sana'a, July 24, 2019

Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

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List of Acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AP	The Associated Press
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
CAAT	The Campaign Against Arms Trade
CBY	Central Bank of Yemen
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
DGSI	France's General Directorate for Internal Security
EU	European Union
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEE	UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen
GPC	General People's Congress
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IOM	International Organization of Migration
IS	The Islamic State Group
JIAT	Joint Incidents Assessment Team
LCs	Letters of Credit
MOPIC	Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NAMCHA	National Authority for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSC	National Salvation Council

NYT	The New York Times
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OSESGY	Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen
RCC	Redeployment Coordination Committee
RSF	Reporters Sans Frontières
SCMCHA	Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation
SPC	Supreme Political Council
STC	Southern Transitional Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNMHA	United Nations Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WSJ	Wall Street Journal
YHRP	Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan
YJS	Yemeni Journalists Syndicate
YPC	Yemen Petroleum Company
YR	Yemeni Rial



The Old City of Sana'a, July 24, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

Executive Summary

Coalition Collapse and Rebirth

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates led a regional military intervention into Yemen in March 2015 on behalf of the internationally recognized Yemeni government, which had fled the capital, Sana'a, following a takeover by the armed Houthi movement and its allies. At the time, Riyadh claimed that the coalition it headed would need only weeks to drive Houthi forces back and restore the Yemeni government to power – fast forward five years and the war is still raging. What 2019 made clear is that the conflict has become an unwinnable quagmire, while the means to end it remain elusive.

Major new complications emerged in 2019 when disunity within the anti-Houthi ranks burst to the fore, with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and forces loyal to Yemeni President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi turning their guns on each other in August. The STC – which harbors deep-seated grievances against the central government and seeks to revive an independent state in south Yemen – pushed pro-Hadi forces out of the interim capital of Aden in what amounted to a coup d'état, and fighting quickly spread to other southern governorates. Similar violence had also broken out in Aden between the two sides in January 2018, but then the STC was reined in by its primary backer, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, 2019 saw the UAE reassess its involvement in the conflict and eventually withdraw most

of its forces from the country. Abu Dhabi's decision to pull out of most of Yemen allowed it to distance itself from the STC's actions and set the stage for Saudi Arabia to eventually assume sole leadership of the anti-Houthi coalition.

With fighting threatening to irrevocably split the coalition and open up a new front in a civil war, Saudi Arabia called for an urgent dialogue in Jeddah between the Hadi government and the STC. After gaining Abu Dhabi's buy-in for the talks, Saudi Arabia was able to broker a deal between the Yemeni parties that, on paper, would unite them under Riyadh's ultimate authority. The accord signed in November, which became known as the Riyadh Agreement, laid out an overly optimistic timeline for the STC to be absorbed militarily and politically into the Yemeni government. On the military front, all security forces would come under overall Saudi command, enshrining the UAE's pullout from Yemen by making previously Emirati-backed groups, such as the STC, now dependent on Riyadh for support and financing. On the political front, all major government decisions would be subordinated to Saudi Arabia. However, since the signing ceremony, every implementation benchmark has been missed, save for the return of some government ministers to Aden. Thus, it remains to be seen whether Saudi Arabia can truly force two groups who harbor deep distrust and enmity toward one another to implement a deal that seeks to reconstitute a more effective and accountable Yemeni government and stabilize southern Yemen.

Saudis, Houthis Enter Talks as Drone Warfare Ups the Ante

The armed Houthi movement increasingly demonstrated its lethal capabilities with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) – otherwise known as drones – and guided missiles in 2019. The group escalated targeted strikes both in Yemen and across the northern border into Saudi Arabia, with two game-changing attacks last year being claimed by the Houthis.

An August 1 attack in Aden killed influential Security Belt forces commander Muneer al-Mashali, better known as Abu al-Yamama, and 35 other soldiers, setting flame to simmering tension in the interim capital and the stage for the STC's coup against the Yemeni government that month. Houthi forces claimed they had used a drone and medium-range ballistic missile to strike the camp.

The next month, the Houthis claimed credit for the September 14 strikes on a Saudi Aramco oil facility in Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia. This temporarily sent global oil prices skyrocketing and cast a pall in the lead-up to an initial public offering for shares in Saudi Aramco, the state-owned oil producer and most profitable company in the world, with an estimated worth of well over a trillion dollars. Riyadh, Washington and European allies blamed Iran for the attacks, though the immediate result was that Saudi Arabia began exploring behind-the-scenes deescalation talks with both Iran and Houthis, with the preservation of the Saudi economy being Riyadh's primary motivation.

Life Under the Houthis: A Descent into the Dark Ages

When the armed Houthi movement and forces loyal to former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh took over Sana'a and much of northern Yemen in 2014, maintaining the alliance between them demanded compromises on both sides. Though positions of political, security and economic clout in their governing apparatus were hotly contested, their common enemies – the Yemeni government and the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition – created the impetus to make deals and parse appointments. This process limited each's ability to pursue their respective agendas, with Saleh's secular-minded General People's Congress party generally checking the Houthis' ability to institutionalize their hardline religious ideology through the mechanisms of state.

In late 2017, the Houthi-Saleh alliance dissolved in spectacular violence, ending – after days of street battles – with Houthi fighters parading the former president's bullet-ridden corpse before the cameras. In the two years since, Houthi authorities have used their uncontested rule behind the frontlines to increasingly build a mafia statelet in their own theocratic, totalitarian image. In 2019, this process continued to accelerate and involved further remaking school curriculums to disempower free-thought, facilitate child conscription into Houthi forces and inculcate the Zaidi Shia doctrine. The movement mandated public servants' attendance at regular indoctrination classes and at a swathe of new official religious celebrations – the latter of which were financed through 'donations' solicited from businesses and individuals that often amounted to officially-sanctioned extortion and protection rackets.

The iron grip with which Houthi security and intelligence forces control northern Yemen – home to the country's largest population centers – has allowed them to impose new taxes and fees at will, bully businesses and manipulate markets to fund their war effort; extreme examples of the latter being the manufactured fuel shortages in the spring and autumn that created massive cash windfalls for Houthi-affiliated black market fuel vendors.

Houthi security forces have eradicated dissent in the public sphere, having shut down all independent media outlets and continued the imprisonment of journalists and political activists, while the persecution of religious minorities also persisted through 2019 in northern Yemen. New regulations the Houthi authorities brought in also further choked the independence of international NGOs and their ability to operate, with aid groups already facing widespread harassment, theft, threats and restrictions on their operations before the year began.

Political Developments: Fragmentation and the Struggle for Legitimacy

While frontlines shifted little, territorial and political fragmentation continued in Yemen throughout 2019. Houthi-held areas were relatively stable, though life under the "iron fist" was suffocating for many as the armed Houthi movement tightened its grip over Yemen's largest population centers in the country's north. On the other

hand, several areas controlled by anti-Houthi forces suffered from instability and local infighting, with different groups competing for power. The internationally recognized government, nominally controlling these areas, largely remained in exile throughout 2019.

Continuing a trend from the previous year, the government of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi retained limited leverage on the ground and its authority was increasingly challenged. In an attempt to reaffirm some legitimacy in 2019, Hadi's backer Saudi Arabia put considerable effort into holding a parliamentary session in territory nominally held by the government. It was the first session held by the government since the beginning of the war. Houthi authorities had repeatedly held parliamentary sessions in their areas in the past, and did so again in 2019. However, both failed to garner a legal quorum of MPs in the House of Representatives, which has been split due to the war.

The legislative session of MPs loyal to the Hadi government took place in Sayoun, northern Hadramawt governorate. Challenges posed by the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) prevented the session from being held in the government's temporary capital, Aden. Despite the lack of a legal quorum, it was the first time that a Yemeni legislative body had endorsed the Saudi-led military intervention. Divisions within the anti-Houthi alliance were one factor preventing a quorum on the government side, with STC-aligned MPs not attending the session.

Greater unity appeared to be on the horizon after the signing of the Riyadh Agreement, crafted to unite anti-Houthi forces under a Saudi umbrella. However, as of January 2020, the implementation appeared to be indefinitely delayed, and the fragmentation of the country was becoming ever more entrenched.

Local power struggles in Yemen often have been reinforced by foreign powers, with Taiz a case in point. While the city continued to suffer from a partial siege imposed by the armed Houthi movement, competition among anti-Houthi forces, namely the Islah party and its opponents, led to further instability in the governorate and increased the risk of a new advance by Houthi forces. The conflict within the anti-Houthi camp was reinforced by regional rivalries, with Qatar funding a new military camp established by Islah-affiliated forces – a move clearly intended to antagonize the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition.

In other areas, de facto federalism continued with local actors pushing for more autonomy from any outside authorities. Marib remained relatively stable under the rule of its powerful governor in an alliance with tribes and the Islah party. Yemen's largest governorate in terms of area, Hadramawt, also became more vocal in articulating a Hadrami identity and expressing its desire for local autonomy. This Hadrami particularism has proven to be stronger than divisions within the governorate. The south of Hadramawt around the port city of Mukalla is controlled by UAE-backed forces, while Saudi-backed forces, including Islah-affiliated troops, dominate the north. Hadramawt stayed neutral vis-à-vis the conflict in the south between the UAE-backed STC and Saudi-backed government forces in 2019.

Likewise, the separatist STC was unable to garner significant support in Al-Mahra and Socotra during its attempted takeover of southern Yemen in the fall of 2019. The desire for local autonomy is historically stronger than for southern secession,

as Yemen's easternmost governorate once formed a sultanate together with the Socotra archipelago. Meanwhile, both Al-Mahra and Socotra witnessed protests against the presence of coalition powers. In Socotra, an Emirati attempt to install a local proxy force was met with local opposition. In Al-Mahra, a protest movement against Saudi military expansion has, since 2018, increasingly gained the support of neighboring Oman, an unusual development given Muscat's traditional politics of non-interference.

Matters seemed to take an even more complicated turn in southern Yemen with the establishment of the National Salvation Council, a collective of southern factions opposing the Saudi- and UAE-led military coalition. Among the southern opposition figures to call for the council in September was a prominent representative of the anti-Saudi movement in Al-Mahra. However, its relevance on the ground has yet to be demonstrated.

As southern Yemen was riven by power struggles and the north was suffocating under the tightening Houthi grip, a new actor quietly began establishing his own statelet on Yemen's Red Sea Coast. Tariq Saleh had emerged in 2018 as the leader of the battle for the Houthi-controlled port city of Hudaydah. After the offensive was halted with the signing of the Stockholm Agreement in late 2018, the nephew of the late ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh began to consolidate his power along the western coastline. Enjoying unequivocal support both from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Tariq Saleh has become a sort of gatekeeper in the area in terms of both military and financial support.

Frontlines and Security

Frontlines nationwide shifted little in 2019, but the armed Houthi movement ended the year with an upper hand militarily, primarily by maintaining its cohesion while factions within the anti-Houthi coalition turned on each other. Houthi forces continue to control most of Yemen's largest population centers, including the capital, Sana'a, and its fighters also managed to reverse 2018 gains by coalition forces in northern Yemen near the border with Saudi Arabia. It was a significant change of fortune from the year before, when the anti-Houthi coalition was exerting pressure on several fronts, most notably along the Red Sea Coast in an offensive toward the port city of Hudaydah.

Apart from the northern front, the only other significant shifting of primary frontlines centered around Al-Dhalea governorate. In Hudaydah, the December 2018 Stockholm Agreement that froze frontlines around the port city held throughout the year. Zones of control on other fronts, most notably in Taiz and Marib governorates, also remained unchanged, despite occasional bouts of heavy fighting.

Throughout the war, the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition's modern air force has dominated from the sky, and its forces on the ground are better armed and trained, but the Houthis were able to maintain countervailing pressure by stepping up their use of drones and missile strikes in 2019 inside Yemen and across the border into Saudi Arabia. It was an effective use of an asymmetric warfare tactic, and it ultimately

contributed to Riyadh accepting a partial cease-fire offer by the Houthis in September. That, in turn, was a catalyst for direct talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi movement.

On the counterterrorism front, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula found itself weaker than ever in 2019, focused on a four-front war against various Yemeni foes. One of these enemies was the Yemeni affiliate of the Islamic State group, with the two rival jihadi groups carrying out more operations against one another than any other entity in 2019. Simultaneously, while the United States under the Trump administration has become more opaque about reporting its counterterrorism operations in Yemen, data suggests that American drone and air strikes in the country continued to decline dramatically from their 2017 peak.

The most dramatic military advances and retreats of 2019 occurred when anti-Houthi forces turned their weapons against each other in southern Yemen in August and September. Though Saudi Arabia ultimately patched over the factions' differences with the Riyadh Agreement, it remained unclear at the end of the year whether troops aligned with the Yemeni government and other anti-Houthi forces would be capable of overcoming their mutual distrust and eventually mount coordinated offensives against Houthi-controlled areas. The prospect of an all-out military victory against the armed Houthi movement – a daunting task even when the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition entered the war in 2015 – appeared as remote as ever as 2020 began.

Economic Warfare: Government and Houthi Struggle for Control Deepens

The confrontation between the Yemeni government and Houthi authorities' for regulatory control over fuel imports, monetary policy, commercial banks, money exchangers and other aspects of the economy continued to escalate in 2019. Each side sought to exploit its specific leverage points in this struggle: the Yemeni government, its Economic Committee and the Aden-based Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) hold international legitimacy and the accompanying connections to international financial markets, while Houthi authorities and the Sana'a-based CBY branch have remit over the country's largest financial hubs and commercial markets. Meanwhile, ordinary Yemenis continued paying the price of this economic warfare through commodity shortages, inflation, a fragmenting national currency system, unemployment and lost earnings.

For instance, Yemeni government attempts to impose regulations and tariffs on fuel imports to Houthi-held Hudaydah port, and Houthi attempts to thwart such measures and protect their business interests, led to widespread fuel shortages in the spring and autumn as fuel tankers idled offshore waiting to unload. UN intervention in the fall led to a tacit, if tenuous, cease-fire in this battle: both parties agreed to deposit fuel import tariffs at the Hudaydah central bank branch and use the funds to pay public servants in the governorate; none were paid by year's end, however, over a dispute whether to include those hired after the Houthi takeover in 2014.

Yemeni banks and money exchange companies were another battleground. The Aden central bank has attempted to stabilize the Yemeni rial exchange rate and restart formal financial cycles through providing traders import financing for basic commodities at preferential rates. Simultaneously, however, requirements that letters of credit be paid for in cash through commercial banks threatened to draw liquidity out of Houthi-held areas and undermine Houthi-linked importers; the Sana'a-based authorities thus prohibited compliance with the government's decrees and deployed strongarm tactics against bankers and traders.

Economic brinkmanship hit a dangerous new precipice by year's end when the Houthi authorities in Sana'a banned the use of currency notes printed by the Aden central bank since 2016. Black market currency trading and currency smuggling flourished as exchange rates began to diverge dramatically between Sana'a and Aden. This domestic currency destabilization comes as yet another threat looms; the US\$2 billion deposit Saudi Arabia provided the Aden central bank in 2018 to finance imports is expected to be exhausted before the end of the first quarter of 2020. Without new foreign currency reserves the Yemeni rial will almost certainly plummet in value, which would leave vast swathes of the population unable to purchase basic necessities and at risk of famine.

Efforts to reunify the CBY – which is fragmented not just between Sana'a and Aden, but also divided within Yemeni government-held areas as well – largely floundered in 2019; government efforts to combat corruption appeared on a collision course with big business interests; and the disused FSO SAFER oil terminal offshore of Hudaydah governorate continued to threaten environmental disaster as the warring parties bickered about what to do with the million-plus barrels of crude oil aboard. The ongoing financial crisis in Lebanon and the resultant restriction on withdrawals also left many Yemeni banks and businesses unable to access their correspondent accounts with Lebanese banks.

Humanitarian and Human Rights

War-exhausted Yemenis found little respite in 2019 as they coped with broken education and health systems, water and fuel shortages prompted by warring parties' strategy of weaponizing the economy, and insecurity that permeated all aspects of home and community life. Actions on the ground exacerbated the dire humanitarian situation, including Arab coalition airstrikes and Houthi-planted landmines, and the number of people displaced by the war kept growing. Warring parties continued to violate international humanitarian law by attacking schools, hospitals, and water and sanitation systems, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported in December. Cholera remained widespread at the close of 2019, and only half of all health facilities were fully functional. Humanitarian aid agencies – frustrated by restricted access to people in need, harassment and deadbeat donors – struggled to keep up, but found themselves scaling back instead.

Salary suspensions continued to plague public-sector employees in Houthi-controlled areas. As the war dragged on, even the most skillful juggling of family finances could stretch the devalued rial only so far, and parents' struggle to pay for

food, water and petrol turned other necessities — bus fares, school and university fees, school uniforms and supplies — into luxuries no longer in reach. Some students, as well as parents and teachers, also feared schools were simply too unsafe to attend, according to key studies and NGO reports in 2019 that highlighted the damage to Yemeni youths' future caused by boys dropping out of school to work odd jobs or join fighting forces, and girls being kept home or married off early. In Houthi areas, teachers reported being pressed to indoctrinate students into Houthi ideology and cooperate in conscripting children.

The Houthi authority's crackdown on dissent and differing viewpoints continued in areas under its control in 2019, visible in its detentions and trials of journalists, activists and religious minorities. The Yemeni Journalists Syndicate noted serious press freedom violations by all parties, including arbitrary detentions, assaults, threats and work bans, and said Houthi authorities opened a trial in December for 10 journalists allegedly tortured and detained since 2015. The Syndicate, however, noted a significant drop in the number of reported violations committed by all sides in 2019 compared to 2018, and in the number of journalists killed. The decline, however, appeared to be more related to the repressive and hostile work environment having pushed journalists out of the field than any security improvements.

In September 2019, the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen (GEE), a UN-appointed investigative panel, reported on an array of violations by the Houthis, the internationally backed Yemeni government, Arab coalition member states and various fighting forces on the ground. It found, for the second year running, that parties to the conflict may have committed war crimes amid an environment defined by lack of accountability. It also turned over a confidential list of names to consider for future prosecution. Among acts the GEE said may amount to war crimes were murder, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, sexual violence including rape, torture and child recruitment. It noted the security of women and girls had deteriorated since the outbreak of the war, and said there were grounds to believe all parties to the conflict had committed gender-based violence in acts that may amount to war crimes. The report also highlighted the precarious position of refugees, migrants and minorities, and it said economic policies of both the Houthi authorities and the internationally recognized Yemeni government — particularly those impacting the value of the Yemeni rial — had exacerbated the crisis. The experts reported that all warring parties had impeded humanitarian access, an increasing frustration throughout the conflict for aid agencies.

During 2019, these access challenges were brought into sharp focus in Houthi-held areas, with restrictions on aid organizations soaring over the course of the year. In tandem, the Houthis' tight grip on government ministries and institutions has raised questions about accountability in the use of aid funds, while the movement has sought to control humanitarian response in the north through its own aid coordination body. The UN World Food Programme (WFP), frustrated by aid diversion in Houthi-controlled areas, announced a partial suspension of operations in June 2019. While the suspension has since been lifted, talks between the WFP and Houthi authorities regarding mechanisms to ensure aid reaches those in need remain ongoing. Toward the close of the year, humanitarian actors sought to exert pressure on the Houthi authorities to improve the operating environment — the implicit threat being cuts to funding that millions of Yemenis rely upon.

Humanitarian actors also have found themselves under greater scrutiny. A Yemeni social media campaign probed the fate of billions of dollars in humanitarian aid since the outbreak of the war, while the UN found evidence supporting allegations of corruption at one of its own agencies in Sana'a. Underpinning these myriad challenges is a contradiction at the heart of the humanitarian response in Yemen: that the largest contributors to the aid pot are those states that are prolonging the suffering of the population through their military intervention in the Yemen conflict. Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to restrict commercial and humanitarian access to the country and destroy infrastructure and agricultural land through airstrikes while bankrolling politicians and armed actors who perpetuate violence. After pledging more than a billion dollars at the beginning of 2019, the UN has spent much of the year hounding the coalition partners to pay up while shutting down programs due to underfunding. In its planning for 2020, OCHA spoke of narrowing its priorities to target far fewer people in need.

Humanitarian actors will face new obstacles in 2020, including increased fees because of a strict Houthi ban that took effect in December 2019 on the use of currency issued by the government-run Aden central bank. Aid agencies deliver much of their direct aid relief as cash transfers using currency issued by the Aden central bank, which is no longer permitted in Houthi-controlled northern areas where the majority of aid recipients are located. These same restrictions will also make it more expensive for Yemenis who left the north for work in government-controlled areas to send remittances to family back home. Combined with continued salary suspensions, the economic impact on families will almost certainly worsen as agencies cut back their programs.

Yemen and the Region

Against the backdrop of escalating animosity between Washington and Tehran in 2019, the Yemen conflict caught international attention as part of the regional calculus around Iran. At the same time, Iran and the armed Houthi movement continued to strengthen their ties, a process that had gained pace over the course of the war. In 2019, Iran was the first country to officially accredit an ambassador representing the Houthi leadership in its capital, Tehran. While this enforced the reductionist view of the Houthis being a proxy of Iran in some circles, importantly the administration of US President Donald Trump had actually walked back from this narrative by the end of the year, saying that Tehran does not speak for the Houthi movement.

The Houthi-claimed attack against Saudi Aramco oil facilities in August could, indeed, be seen in the context of increasing tension between Iran and the US. According to a Sana'a Center source in contact with parts of the Houthi leadership, it was coordinated between Tehran and Sana'a. The Houthis claimed the attack while Tehran denied any role, yet the message to Riyadh — and by extension the US and Western allies — was apparent from both: if escalation continued, Saudi Arabia could be hit where it hurts. The strike also demonstrated the Houthis' relevance as an actor to be considered in any efforts to achieve regional security. The armed Houthi movement in 2019 also continued to maintain ties with Hezbollah in Lebanon, another party in the "resistance" camp backed by Iran.

As 2019 progressed, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) increasingly looked for diplomatic paths to reduce imminent threats posed by Iran and its allies. The UAE, which previously had pushed for an aggressive policy confronting Iran, in July 2019 signed a document with Tehran on joint maritime security. This came shortly after the announced withdrawal of Emirati troops from Yemen and other indications of the UAE reassessing its relationship with Iran. In the wake of the Aramco attack and restrained response from the US, the Saudi faith in Washington as a guardian was shown wanting. Without it, and after more than four years of warfare against what Abu Dhabi and Riyadh had seen as Iranian encroachment on Yemen, the military path increasingly seemed exhausted. At the same time, other countries in the region such as Oman and Pakistan assumed intermediary roles in Riyadh's secret talks with Houthi representatives and efforts to ratchet down tensions with Tehran.

By hosting Saudi-Houthi talks in 2019, Oman continued to play its traditional role as a mediator even though Muscat and Riyadh differed sharply on developments in Yemen's Al-Mahra governorate. Muscat continued its support for a protest movement against Saudi military encroachment in the eastern governorate bordering Oman. There was also anecdotal evidence of a collaboration between Oman and Qatar, and possibly Iran, in supporting Yemeni groups and movements that acted against the interests of the Saudi- and UAE-led military coalition. Since being expelled from that coalition in 2017, Qatar has taken a different stance on the Yemen war, most visibly so in its media empire, as Qatari-funded TV channels shifted from supporting the military intervention to becoming a platform for its most outspoken critics.

In addition to the UAE, other minor partners also pulled back their involvement in the Yemen War in 2019. Sudan began to withdraw some of its troops from the anti-Houthi coalition, though the gradual pullout indicated that the move was happening with the consent of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the most important financial supporters of Sudan's ailing economy. Morocco, meanwhile, suspended its participation in the coalition, which had been marginal to begin with, at the start of 2019.

In 2020, the potential for open conflict between Iran and the US, and its respective allies, continues to loom over the Middle East. This was demonstrated just two days into the new decade with the US assassination of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani, who was responsible for organizing Iran's military operations across the region, including with allied groups such as the armed Houthi movement.

Yemen and the United Nations

The UN's diplomatic achievements in Yemen were notable in 2019 for their absence; breakthroughs during the year took place outside the UN framework. While 2019 began with guarded optimism over the UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement, reached in December 2018 between the internationally recognized government and the armed Houthi movement. The accord contained three points: an immediate cease-fire in Hudaydah and mutual withdrawal of forces from the city and the nearby ports of Hudaydah, Saleef and Ras Issa; prisoner exchanges; and a statement of understanding on the city of Taiz. By year's end none of the promises had been fully delivered.

Events on the ground in Yemen during the second half of 2019 pushed the already stalling UN efforts to implement the Stockholm Agreement further to the margins. Fighting in August between the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) diverted attention to the need to prevent a new front opening in Yemen's civil war. Deescalation efforts there were led by Saudi Arabia, culminating in the signing of the Riyadh Agreement in November.

The talks in Riyadh were driven by Deputy Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman, the younger brother of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman; UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths welcomed the Saudi initiative, characterizing it as complementary to the UN-led efforts. Meanwhile, in late September, a backchannel opened for direct talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis to negotiate confidence-building measures outside any formal framework. These discussions remained ongoing at the end of the year and have already resulted in multiple prisoner releases. These conciliatory moves were characterized by both sides as attempts to fulfill the prisoner exchange aspect of the Stockholm Agreement, but they were negotiated outside the UN framework after multiple UN-led efforts to facilitate prisoner exchanges through the year had stalled.

There were various reasons for the lack of progress on the Stockholm Agreement. The text of the accord was left purposely vague to ensure buy-in from the warring parties, with the consequence that it was open to different interpretations. Also, it lacked a realistic timetable for implementation. The cease-fire in Hudaydah was implemented immediately – the agreement's only clear success – but UN efforts on the redeployment of forces and what to do with port revenues repeatedly hit impasses as the year progressed. UN-led negotiations for a prisoner exchange ended in the spring without success, and there was little discernible effort to even begin talks for a deescalation in Taiz.

UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths spent much of 2019 engaged in shuttle diplomacy, between Sana'a and Riyadh in particular, along with visits to other regional and world capitals to meet with stakeholders in the Yemen conflict. But diplomacy veered off in a new direction after the STC ousted the Yemeni government from Aden in August in a violent coup. The two parties reconciled in November, signing the Riyadh Agreement and agreeing to form a blended government, with the STC also gaining a seat in peace negotiations. Such a government has yet to be formed, and at the end of 2019 the Yemeni government had no negotiating team to send to peace talks. In 2020, progress will be necessary on this aspect of the Riyadh Agreement for a formal peace process to begin. Going into 2020, the UN envoy's office envisioned this could be achieved and peace negotiations could begin in March 2020.

The UN envoy remains committed to a framework that seeks the most reductive agreement possible to stop the war – an “end the war agreement” rather than a “peace agreement”. This approach seeks a swift agreement – without extraneous negotiations – on basic security and political arrangements, with major decisions on post-conflict Yemen deferred to the transitional period. Under this roadmap, wartime leaders would not be relied on to make decisions for peacetime. However, Griffiths' detractors have criticized the limited scope of his vision and the deferral of complex details, and argue that critical issues such as the economy, which has been weaponized by both sides in the conflict, must be addressed in any peace agreement if it is to have any hope of success.

Yemen and the United States

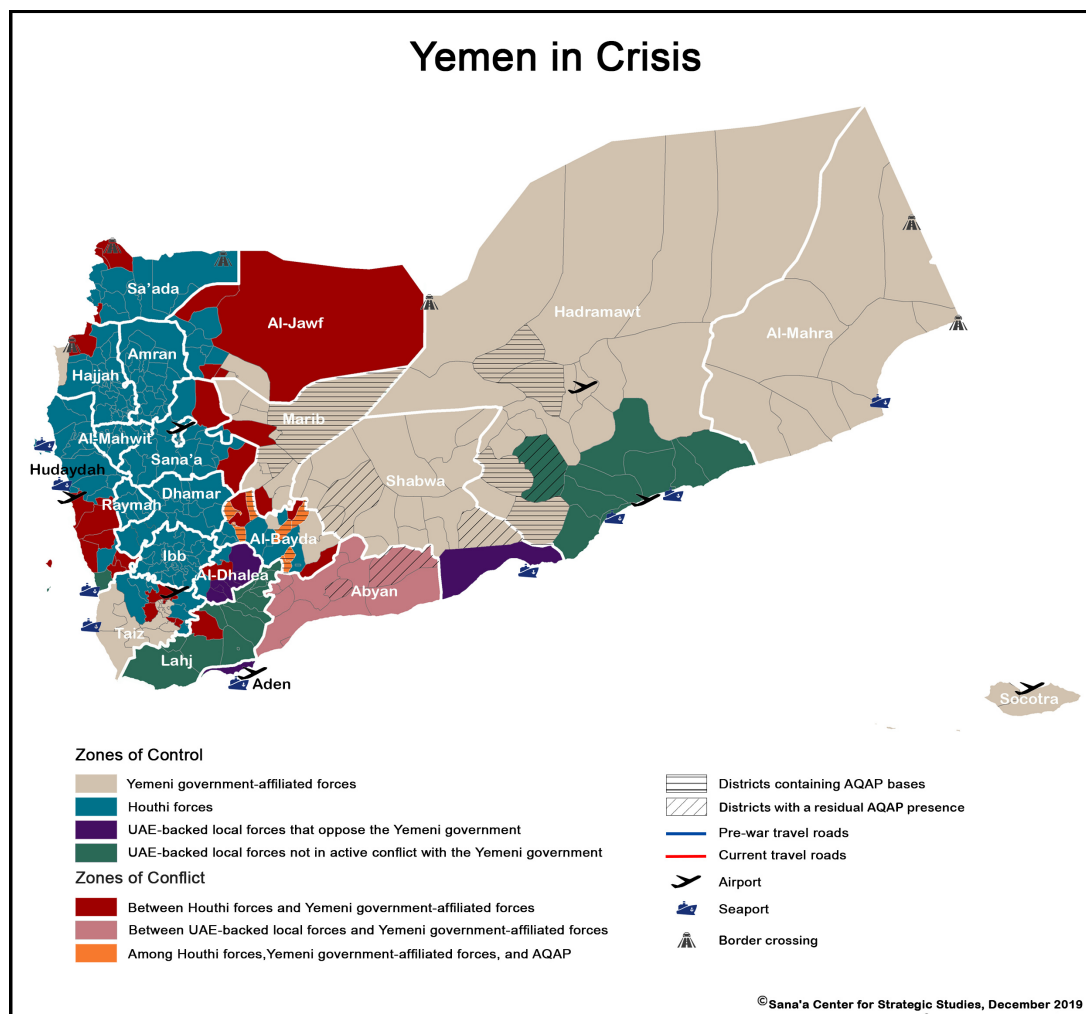
Away from tension in the Gulf and back in Washington, domestic legislative pressure on issues related to Yemen became less visible in 2019 following the escalation that began in late 2018 with the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. A bipartisan resolution to end US support for the Saudi-led coalition came to the end of the road in April with a presidential veto, yet arguably fulfilled its symbolic rather than legal aims. Other standalone bills taking aim at US involvement in Yemen and weapons sales to coalition member states saw little progress over the course of the year. Meanwhile, the US State Department said in late 2019 that it, along with the Pentagon, was investigating allegations made in CNN investigations that the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition had passed on, sold or abandoned US-made weapons in Yemen. Such actions, CNN reported, may have violated arms export agreements.

Yemen and the European Union

European domestic debates about Yemen in 2019 largely focused on arms exports to the Saudi- and Emirati-led military coalition. Aside from attention in the media, among NGOs and in parliaments, European arms exports also triggered legal cases and diplomatic quarrels. By the end of the year, however, the uproar over arms sales to Saudi Arabia that was prompted by the Khashoggi affair had died down. Despite some individual countries still curtailing exports — by choice or legal challenge — broader European defense projects appeared back on track.

On the European diplomatic front, the first half of 2019 saw frequent visits by European officials to Yemen and the region to discuss the UN-led peace process, with Britain taking its usual front-running role in Yemen-related diplomacy. Besides Britain's significant military-economic interests in the region generally, the former colonial power in southern Yemen is penholder of the Yemen file at the UN Security Council. A former British diplomat, Martin Griffiths, also leads the UN's diplomatic efforts as the UN's special envoy to Yemen. However, Boris Johnson's assumption of the prime minister's office in July came with an overriding focus on British domestic affairs. Britain's new government, including its newly appointed foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, did not appear to share its predecessor's interest or even knowledge in the Yemen file. Diplomatic rotation swept aside another diplomat, EU Ambassador Antonia Calvo-Puerta, who had developed a reputation for engaging with and hearing out all sides.

The second half of the year was overshadowed by broader regional tension with Iran, and the Europeans, especially Britain and France, focused on trying to ease the escalating Iran-US crisis in the wake of a series of security incidents. The slow-going international mediation efforts led by the UN in Yemen since 2015 and supported by European powers were essentially overtaken by initiatives from Riyadh, which abruptly changed course after its anti-Houthi military coalition imploded in August and its oil facilities came under attack in September.





A watermelon vendor shows off his produce in the Old City of Sana'a, January 28, 2019 // Photo Credit: Doaa Sudam

Coalition Collapse and Rebirth

Khalid bin Salman Takes Saudi Lead on Yemen

Setting the context for the year, there was a significant shift regarding the Yemen file in Saudi Arabia in the early weeks of 2019, when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's brother, Khalid bin Salman, was named deputy defense minister and handed responsibility for Yemen. He was a key force in pushing through the Riyadh Agreement (see 'The Road to the Riyadh Agreement'), and in the Saudi-Houthi backchannel talks established in the autumn of 2019 (see 'Saudis, Houthis Enter Talks as Drone Warfare Ups the Ante').

With Khalid bin Salman's appointment, there was a clear responsibility for the Yemen file for the first time in years. While Mohammed bin Salman is regarded as the architect of Riyadh's 2015 Yemen intervention, the last prince fully overseeing Saudi Arabia's relationship with its southern neighbor was longtime defense minister Sultan bin Abdulaziz, who died in 2011. Prince Sultan was known as being deeply familiar with the Yemeni context, maintaining a strong personal network and presiding over a special committee that bought loyalties through the disbursal of salaries to key political figures in Yemen and oversaw development projects in the country. The committee had been founded as a result of the North Yemen civil war of the 1960s, when Saudi Arabia supported the royalists against the republicans.

After Prince Sultan's death, the Yemen file was transferred to the Ministry of Interior, where it was more or less adrift. This led to a vacuum regarding in-depth knowledge about and personal ties with stakeholders in Yemen, which has contributed to ill-founded assumptions and political failures in Riyadh's Yemen policy. With the appointment of Khalid bin Salman, the Yemen file is back at the Ministry of Defense. According to a report by Foreign Policy, Prince Khalid was tasked with delivering a face-saving deal to extract Saudi Arabia from the Yemen War.⁽¹⁾

Shock UAE Drawdown Sets the Stage for Coalition Turmoil

Throughout 2018, the UAE led the coalition campaign to capture Houthi-held Hudaydah city on Yemen's Red Sea Coast, the entry point of most of the country's commercial and humanitarian cargo and, consequently, a major revenue stream for the armed Houthi movement through the levying of import duties and fees. Emirati efforts included both heavy international lobbying efforts – particularly in the US – for diplomatic and military backing for the offensive, as well as arming, funding and coordinating between various armed groups on the ground to lead a military drive north up the coast. The Emirati argument had been that Hudaydah could be taken quickly with minimal interruption in the flow of goods through the area's vital ports, and that the loss of the city and port revenues would pressure Houthi leaders to return to the negotiating table. Many UN agencies, INGOs, Western lawmakers and diplomats, among others, argued that Houthi fighters were well entrenched, the battle would be prolonged and the resultant disruption in imports would cast Yemen into mass famine.

As UAE-backed local forces fought their way to the city's periphery in autumn 2018, coalition partner Saudi Arabia, and in particular Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was coming under blistering international criticism for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. This snowballed into criticism of the Saudi intervention in Yemen generally and the coalition attack on Hudaydah specifically. Leveraging this momentum – and international and UNSC backing – UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths was able to bring the Yemeni government and Houthi representatives to Sweden in December 2018 for peace talks. Seeking reprieve from international scorn, Bin Salman compelled the Yemeni government to accede to the UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement, which, among other things, froze the coalition assault on Hudaydah.

Diplomatic sources told the Sana'a Center that Emirati officials were furious their efforts to take Hudaydah had been undercut, and that the Stockholm Agreement prompted the UAE to reassess its role in Yemen. By June 2019, Abu Dhabi was undertaking a large-scale removal of military assets and personnel from the country in a move that injected further uncertainty in an already fractious anti-Houthi coalition. Emirati officials at the time characterized the redeployment as a "natural progression" from the 2018 Stockholm Agreement in comments to Reuters, with

1) "Can a Young Saudi Prince End the War in Yemen?," Foreign Policy, November 20, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/20/can-khalid-bin-salman-young-saudi-prince-end-yemen-war-mohammed-mbs/>

the news agency also quoting western diplomats who ascribed the move to the UAE wanting to shore up the homefront amid rising regional tension with Iran (see 'UAE Reassesses Relations With Iran').⁽²⁾

In July, a senior Emirati official claimed the drawdown had been coordinated with Saudi Arabia for more than a year and that the decision marked a shift from a "military-first" strategy to a "peace-first" plan. Coalition spokesman Colonel Turki al-Malki said the UAE and other coalition member states remained committed to the restoration of the Hadi government.⁽³⁾ On August 2, the Emirati minister of state for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, said the UAE had "agreed with Saudi Arabia on the strategy of the next phase in Yemen."⁽⁴⁾

Following a military drawdown across most of its areas of operations in southern Yemen, the UAE eventually completed a full withdrawal from Aden on October 30 and handed over security responsibility to Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government. However, the General Command of the UAE Armed Forces stated that Emirati forces would continue the "war on terrorist organizations" in Yemen's southern governorates.⁽⁵⁾ As of the end of 2019, Sana'a Center research was able to confirm that the UAE had maintained a presence along the Red Sea Coast at Mokha, as well as along Yemen's southern coast at Balhaf in Shabwa governorate and in Hadramawt at Mukalla port and Riyan airport.

From Military Expansionism to Withdrawal: Four Years of the UAE in Yemen

The rulers of Abu Dhabi have long seen their alliance with Riyadh as key to their country's geostrategic security. The preservation of this alliance was their primary motivation in following Saudi Arabia into the Yemen War in 2015. The Saudi campaign was led by the then-29-year-old newly minted defense minister, Mohammed bin Salman, who essentially came under the wing of the elder Mohammed bin Zayed, crown prince of Abu Dhabi and head of the Emirati campaign in Yemen. The Emirati role also ensured that Abu Dhabi would have its own hand in guiding developments in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE led and were by far the largest contributors to a regional military coalition that initially also included Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar.⁽⁶⁾ The general division of tasks had Riyadh taking responsibility

2) Aziz El Yaakoubi and Lisa Barrington, "Exclusive: UAE scales down military presence in Yemen as Gulf tensions flare," Reuters, June 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-exclusive/exclusive-uae-scales-down-military-presence-in-yemen-as-gulf-tensions-flare-idUSKCN1TT14B>

3) Aziz el Yaakoubi, "UAE troop drawdown in Yemen was agreed with Saudi Arabia: official," Reuters, July 8, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-emirates/uae-troop-drawdown-in-yemen-was-agreed-with-saudi-arabia-official-idUSKCN1U31WZ>

4) Anwar Gargash, Twitter post, "Redeployment in Hodeidah is the result of extensive dialogue in the coalition... [AR]," August 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AnwarGargash/status/1157315221272367105>

5) "The return of Emirati forces operating in Aden after the successful liberation and securing of the city [AR]," Emirates News Agency, October 30, 2019, <https://wam.ae/ar/details/1395302798763>

6) Qatar was expelled from the coalition after Saudi Arabia and the UAE cut diplomatic ties with Doha in June 2017.

for the air campaign and Abu Dhabi heading the ground war. The UAE was also the more active of the two on the international diplomatic front, lobbying at the UN and in Western capitals for support for the coalition campaign and keeping criticism at bay.

While quickly establishing a significant military presence of its own forces in Yemen's southern governorates and Marib, Abu Dhabi's calculus changed dramatically following an attack in Marib on September 4, 2015, which left 45 Emirati soldiers dead.⁽⁷⁾ It was the deadliest single day for the Emirati military since the country's founding in 1971. Following this the UAE pulled its troops away from the frontline and began investing heavily in recruiting, training, arming and financing numerous paramilitary groups in Yemen. Among these have been the Security Belt forces in Aden, "Elite Forces" in Shabwa and Hadramawt, the Abu al-Abbas Brigades in Taiz, the Giants Brigades, and since 2018 Tariq Saleh's National Resistance Forces. The Emirates also became the primary backer of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Yemen when the southern secessionist group emerged in 2017.

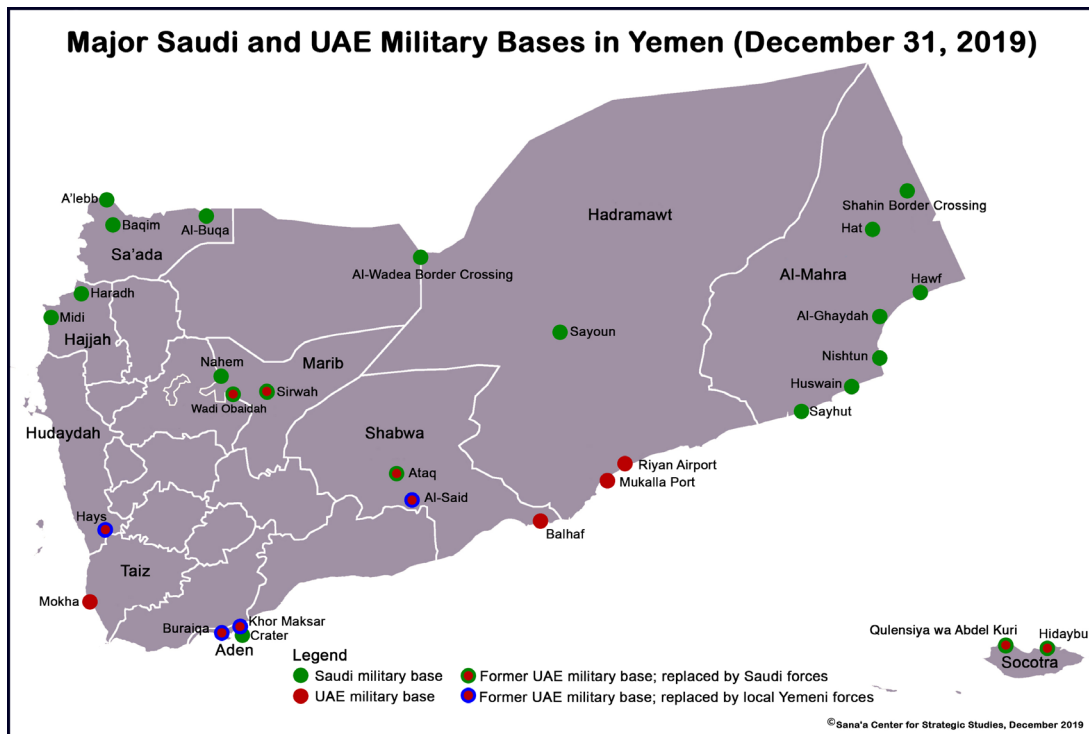
Officially the UAE, as part of the regional coalition, entered Yemen to push back the Houthi advance and restore the Hadi government to power in Sana'a. Emirati actions on the ground, however, demonstrated that an array of other agendas were at play, and ones that seemingly undermined its stated intentions. Fostering paramilitary groups that operated outside the purview of the Yemeni government served a confluence of these Emirati aims. For instance, Abu Dhabi regards the regional Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and often employed its Yemeni proxies against the brotherhood's sister party in Yemen, Islah, even though the party constitutes President Hadi's largest political and military support base in Yemen. The STC, whose founding principle is the reestablishment of South Yemen as a separate country, also regularly challenged the Yemeni government's authority – a situation regarding which Abu Dhabi seemed wholly unconcerned. Additionally, the UAE used its proxies to secure coastal areas and ports along Yemen's southern, and later western, shoreline, which can be seen as part of the Emirate's larger regional strategy of asserting influence over crucial waterways for global trade, such as the Gulf of Aden, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea. Local proxy forces also became the backbone of the UAE's counterterrorism efforts against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), through which Abu Dhabi continued to cement, through demonstrated dependability and effectiveness, its relations with the US military.

As international criticism of coalition actions in Yemen mounted, in particular indiscriminate Saudi airstrikes on civilian targets and accusations that the coalition was instigating famine in Yemen, the UAE found the image it has attempted to build for itself – that of a modern, progressive society – being tarnished. The Khashoggi murder, and subsequent Stockholm Agreement – which undermined more than a year of intense Emirati military and diplomatic efforts aimed at capturing Hudaydah – was the tipping point. Having demonstrated loyalty to Riyadh in entering the Yemen War, after four years the rulers of Abu Dhabi had enough.

The Emirates has already stated, however, that it will maintain a reduced troop presence in Yemen in the name of counterterrorism – with these forces also happening

7) "UAE soldiers killed in Yemen fighting," The Associated Press, September 4, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/04/uae-soldiers-killed-yemen-fighting>

to be based at strategic ports along Yemen's coast, and in the case of Balhaf, at a multi-billion dollar LNG export terminal owned by an international consortium led by France's Total. It would thus appear that, moving ahead, Abu Dhabi does not intend to abandon its interests in Yemen. Rather, the troop drawdown was intended to reduce Emirati responsibility for, and limit its exposure regarding, the wider war with the Houthis.



The Anti-Houthi Coalition Implodes

After Aden Attacks, STC Stages Coup D'état Against Yemeni Government

On the morning of August 1, Aden was hit with two mass-casualty attacks. In the first, an IS suicide bomber blew up an explosives-packed vehicle just outside the gates of the Sheikh Othman police station, killing 13 police officers.⁽⁸⁾ Just an hour later, another explosion tore through a graduation ceremony at Al-Jalaa military camp, a base for the UAE-backed Security Belt forces. The armed Houthi movement later claimed it had attacked the camp with a drone and medium-range ballistic missile.⁽⁹⁾ Video of the incident showed hundreds of soldiers marching in place before a loud explosion sent grey smoke billowing behind the stage and soldiers running. The attack killed 35

8) "Daesh claims the attack on the Sheikh Osman police station in Aden and announces the name of the attacker [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, August 3, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/170257>

9) "Dozens of dead and wounded in an operation targeting a camp for the Saudi aggression force in Aden [AR]," Al-Manar, August 1, 2019, <http://almanar.com.lb/5538700>

soldiers, according to interior ministry figures,⁽¹⁰⁾ and a popular commander, Brig. Gen. Muneer al-Mashali, better known as Abu al-Yamama.

Abu al-Yamama first gained prominence fighting the Houthis during the 2015 Battle of Aden, and had an intensely loyal following in his native Lahj governorate, with many residents from his home district of Yafa joining Emirati-backed security forces. He was also an ardent southern separatist and his death sparked widespread rage among supporters. Anti-northerner sentiment spiked in Aden, with northerner-owned businesses vandalized and northerners forcefully deported. Hani bin Breik, a militant Salafist and vice president of the STC, capitalized on the event by accusing the Yemeni government and Islah party of colluding with the Houthis to assassinate Abu al-Yamama, further inflaming public anger.⁽¹¹⁾

On August 7, during Abu al-Yamama's funeral, tension erupted into open violence between Security Belt forces and the government-affiliated President Protection Brigades, with Bin Breik then calling on STC-affiliated forces to march on the palace and overthrow "the pro-Islah government."⁽¹²⁾ Fighting spread through the city in the following days, with Security Belt forces seizing control of government buildings and military bases and the few ministers present in Aden at the time fleeing, including Interior Minister Ahmed al-Maysari, who had led the fighting on the government side. By August 10, after the surrender of pro-government forces at Ma'ashiq presidential palace, the STC was in full control of the city.⁽¹³⁾ The fighting left up to 40 people dead and 260 injured, according to the UN humanitarian coordinator's office.⁽¹⁴⁾

Bolstered by their victory over the Yemeni government in Aden, STC-aligned forces quickly moved to seize other areas across southern Yemen. Security Belt forces captured government military bases in neighboring Abyan governorate on August 19,⁽¹⁵⁾ and on August 22, fighting broke out in Ataq, the capital of Shabwa governorate, with fighters from the UAE-backed Shabwa Elite Forces squaring off against the pro-government 21st Mechanized Brigade.⁽¹⁶⁾ However, government troops in Abyan, the home governorate of President Hadi, mobilized to cut off STC-aligned reinforcements being sent from Al-Dhalea and from Yafa in Lahj, while prominent Shabwa tribes – including some members of the Shabwa Elite Forces – declined to join the fight against government forces. The STC advance thus hit a wall.

10) "Urgent: Ministry of Interior issues an important statement on the targeting of Al-Jalaa camp and the bombing of Sheikh Othman police station and publishes the results of the two operations [AR]," Al-Wattan, August 1, 2019, <http://alwatan.net/news/80783>

11) "Hani Bin Breik accuses the government and the Islah party of being behind the Jalaa camp attack [AR]," Al-Mawqea Post, August 6, 2019, <https://almawqea.com/news/42506>

12) Hani bin Breik, Twitter post, "Southern Transitional Council statement... [AR]," August 7, 2019, <https://twitter.com/HaniBinbrek/status/1159085348074545152>

13) Sana'a Center confidential interview with a senior government security official, September 1, 2019.

14) "Scores of civilians killed and wounded by fighting in Aden," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, August 11, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HC%20Statement_Sanaa_11%20August_FINAL.pdf

15) "Yemeni separatists extend control in south, Saudi-led forces strike capital," Reuters, August 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-sanaa/clashes-hit-yemens-south-saudi-led-forces-strike-capital-idUSKCN1V91UG?il=0>

16) "Command of the joint forces of 'Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen' stresses necessity of commitment by all parties in Shabwa province to continued ceasefire, maintaining truce," Saudi Press Agency, August 26, 2019, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1961765#1961765>

On August 25, coalition spokesperson Turki al-Maliki announced the creation of a joint committee to supervise a cease-fire in Shabwa. Government forces then took over Shabwa Elite positions, including its headquarters in Balhaf.⁽¹⁷⁾ STC-aligned forces, pushed out of all of Shabwa, were then forced to contend with Yemeni government troops marching on Aden toward the city's airport and eastern suburbs.⁽¹⁸⁾ On August 29, Emirati warplanes launched airstrikes against pro-Hadi forces to protect its STC allies, killing at least 30 troops and prompting the Yemeni government to seek Saudi action and UN Security Council intervention against the UAE.⁽¹⁹⁾⁽²⁰⁾ By the end of August, the STC controlled Aden, the government held Shabwa, and Abyan was split between the two.

Separatist Ambitions Hit Southern Reality: How the STC was Humbled

The STC defeat in Shabwa was a reality check for the group. It was founded on the vision that South Yemen, united and autonomous, could be carved out once again from the larger republic, and that the STC, as the representative of all southern interests, was the group that could make this happen. The loss in Shabwa revealed this vision to be fanciful. Chiefly what was made apparent was that southern Yemen was far from united and that the STC, rather than being a great unifier of a greater cause, was another one of many localized stakeholders in the Yemeni conflict with limited influence. While southerners may still widely share an animosity against the north, the events of 2019 showed that this was not a sufficient condition to bridge the divides among them.

Collective southern grievances with the north originated from the concentration of power in Sana'a following the 1990 unification of Yemen. The south's defeat in the north-south civil war in 1994 and southerners' subsequent marginalization only reinforced the sense that they were victims of injustice. The central government's violent suppression of protest movements in the south beginning in 2007 gave birth to the Southern Movement (commonly known as *Hirak*), a loose umbrella organization encompassing various pro-separatist groups.

In 2017, Aidarous al-Zubaidi formed the STC after Hadi dismissed him as governor of Aden over his support for the Southern Movement. The STC gradually established de facto security control over Aden through the Security Belt forces and formed a would-be southern parliament, the National Assembly. The August 2019 events were not the first time the STC had flexed its muscles in Aden; in January 2018, STC-aligned forces took control of the government's headquarters in the interim capital

17) "Shabwa Governor: We brought down the UAE-backed 'transitional' coup [AR]," Al-Quds Al-Arabi, August 25, 2019, www.alquds.co.uk/ل-انتقال-أسقطنا-انقلاب-الانتقال

18) "Yemen government forces storm Aden, seize airport: residents, officials," Reuters, August 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemen-government-forces-storm-aden-seize-airport-residents-officials-idUSKCN1VI109>

19) Yemen Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Twitter post, "#Al-Hadrami: the Yemeni government officially asked the Security Council to hold a session on the UAE 's blatant strikes... [AR]," August 29, 2019, https://twitter.com/yemen_mofa/status/1167165058981351424

20) "The presidency renews its request to Saudi Arabia to intervene to stop the UAE interference [AR]," Saba Net, August 29, 2019, <https://www.sabanew.net/viewstory/53232>

and briefly kept ministers under house arrest. Saudi and Emirati mediation brought the hostilities to an end but the wheels had been firmly set in motion; since then, the STC has effectively dominated the city. From this base of strength, the STC has projected for itself the image of representing all southerners. The events in August laid bare how tenuous this claim was and how the Southern Movement was internally fractured.

Old divisions from South Yemen's own civil war in 1986 between Lahj and Al-Dhalea on one hand, and Abyan and Shabwa on the other, became apparent when the STC's expansion into the latter two governorates was met with faltering local support. Abyan and Shabwa have historically benefited through cooperation with the ruling regimes of the time, first during British occupation and later in the united Yemeni republic, which saw many members of the security forces, including top officials, recruited from these two governorates. Lahj and Al-Dhalea on the other hand, where STC-affiliated units mainly recruit, were historically more marginalized and thus tended to stand in opposition to ruling authorities. President Hadi has also been able to secure a base of loyalty in his home governorate of Abyan through military and government appointments, which helped counter the STC expansion there.

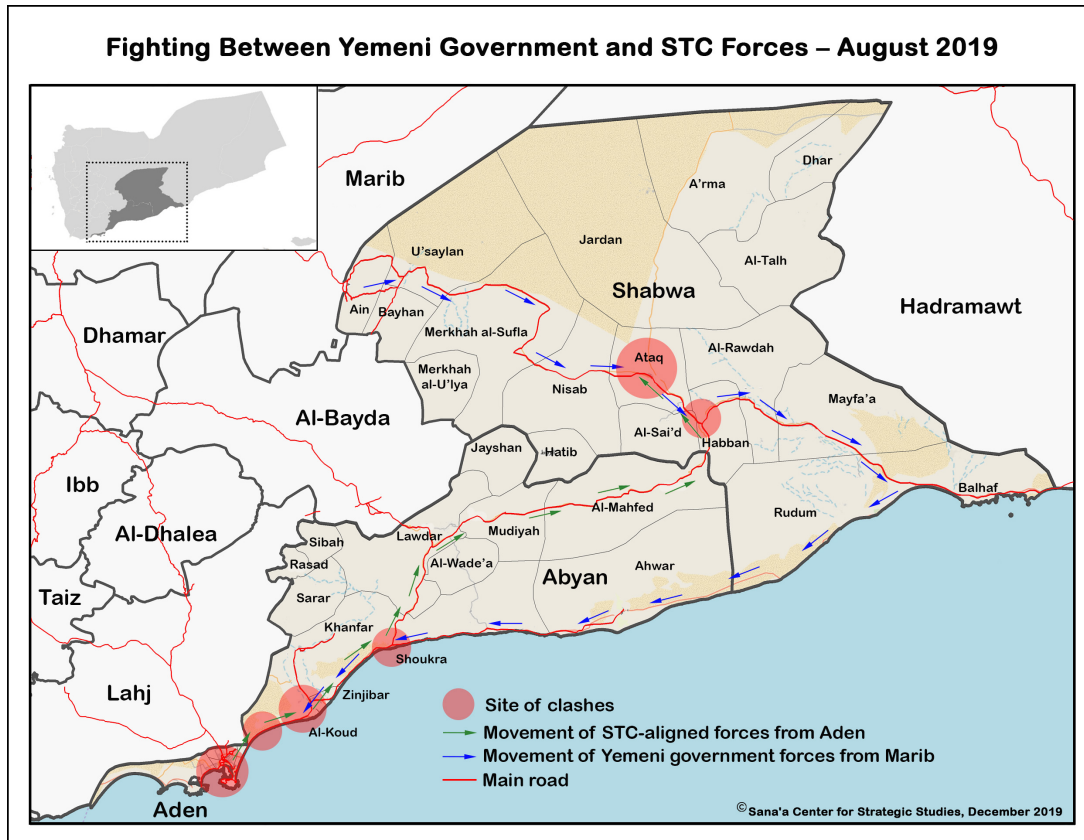
In Shabwa, the STC is allied with UAE-backed Shabwa Elite Forces, and yet tribal dynamics also played against the STC's advance. The UAE had recruited members into the Elite Forces along tribal lines. This strategy harmed overall cohesion as each tribe had its own calculations related to the government-STC split, and a significant part of the Shabwa Elite Forces chose not to fight with the STC. Most importantly, influential Sheikh Saleh bin Fareed al-Awlaki refused to support the STC in its battle against the Hadi government.

Fears over being cut off from neighboring Marib, a stronghold for the government-allied Islah party, likely also played into the decision of Shabwa tribes. Marib and Shabwa share cultural, linguistic and tribal similarities, and also economic interests. Shabwa relies on liquefied petroleum gas produced from Marib, and there have been talks about exporting Marib crude via Shabwa.⁽²¹⁾ Furthermore, Saudi Arabia maintains historical ties with tribes from Shabwa. When government troops advanced into Shabwa from Marib to counter the STC advance, tribes allied with the government stayed neutral and refused to support the STC. Thus humbled and their ambitions for southern Yemen shown to be beyond them, STC leaders were seized with a new pragmatism when Saudi Arabia launched efforts to reconcile division in the anti-Houthi side.

(For more, see the Sana'a Center's analysis of developments in the south from the August monthly review.⁽²²⁾)

21) "The Southern Implosion — The Yemen Review, August 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 4, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8016>

22) Ibid.



The Road to the Riyadh Agreement

Saudis Bring Rival Parties Together for Talks

Riyadh's reaction to the violence in Aden was to attempt to halt the fighting and start peace negotiations between the STC and Yemeni government. To facilitate this, Riyadh first had to address its rift with Abu Dhabi that had become apparent in the latter's military drawdown in Yemen. Saudi King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met on August 12 with Emirati Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan in Mecca, after which the leaders reiterated calls for the Yemeni factions to resolve their differences through dialogue.⁽²³⁾ Despite the public unity, Reuters news agency reported that the Saudi ruler had taken the unusual step of expressing his "extreme irritation" with the UAE during the Mecca meeting.⁽²⁴⁾

Initially, the Yemeni government said it would not begin any talks without a complete STC withdrawal from areas it had seized in August. Both parties eventually agreed to take part in negotiations in Jeddah despite continuing clashes, and an STC delegation, led by council head Aiderous al-Zubaidi, arrived in Jeddah on September 4.⁽²⁵⁾ Abdel

23) "Saudi Arabia, UAE urge Yemenis to resolve differences through dialogue," Arab News, August 12, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1539106/saudi-arabia>

24) "UAE loosens Saudi alliance to push peacemaker image," Reuters, August 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-emirates-diplomacy/uae-loosens-saudi-alliance-to-push-peacemaker-image-idUSKCN1VI1WA>

25) Ali Mahmood, "Southern Transitional Council delegation arrives in Saudi Arabia for Yemen talks," The National, September 4, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/southern-transitional->

Rahman al-Sheikh, a leading figure in the Security Belt forces who was pivotal in the STC's victory in Aden, and Nasser al-Khabji, a longtime southern secessionist leader, were also among the delegation.

On September 9, Saudi Arabia and the UAE issued a joint statement in which they welcomed the response of the Yemeni government and the STC to the proposed negotiations, labeling it “a major and positive step” toward resolving the current tension in southern Yemen, and calling for an immediate end to all armed confrontations.⁽²⁶⁾ The STC responded to the statement by expressing its readiness to attend the talks in Jeddah without preconditions.⁽²⁷⁾ Meanwhile, President Hadi rejected the notion of any deal and reiterated the August demand that STC-aligned forces withdraw from all military bases seized during the fighting as a precondition to any dialogue.⁽²⁸⁾ A breakthrough between Saudi Arabia and the UAE appeared to come following an October 6 meeting between Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Khalid bin Salman, the Saudi deputy defense minister.⁽²⁹⁾ After this meeting, pressure was brought to bear on both sides and talks continued throughout October, culminating in the signing of the Riyadh Agreement in early November.

Deal Inked For STC to be Blended into the Yemeni Government, Security Forces

On November 5, the internationally backed Yemeni government and the STC signed the Riyadh Agreement to end their power struggle in southern Yemen.⁽³⁰⁾ As part of the deal,⁽³¹⁾ the STC would be given an official role in a reshuffled Yemeni cabinet of political technocrats and at future peace talks to end the larger Yemen conflict. In exchange, all STC-aligned military and security forces would be blended into units under the authority of the government's Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior, respectively. The agreement also called for the return of the Yemeni government to its interim capital of Aden and for reactivating all Yemeni government institutions. Although brokered during weeks of talks in Jeddah, the accord was signed in Riyadh during a ceremony attended by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, Yemeni President Hadi and STC leader Al-

council-delegation-arrives-in-saudi-arabia-for-yemen-talks-1.906052

26) “UAE and Saudi Arabia issue joint statement on Yemen,” UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, September 9, 2019, <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2019/9/09-09-2019-uae-ksa>

27) “The Southern Transitional Council welcomes the Saudi-UAE Joint Statement [AR],” Hadramawt Net, September 9, 2019, <https://www.7adramout.net/almasghadalaraby/7161269/-بالتفاصيلاندلاع-اشتباكات-في-حرم-مطار-صنعاء-الدولي.html>

28) “Yemeni gov't demand withdrawal of separatist forces before Saudi-backed dialogue,” Xinhua Net, August 15, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/15/c_138309442.htm

29) “Abu Dhabi crown prince, top Saudi defense official discuss military, defense matters,” Reuters, October 6, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-saudi-security/abu-dhabi-crown-prince-top-saudi-defense-official-discuss-military-defense-matters-idUSKBN1WL0JN>

30) “Yemen war: Government and separatists agree deal to end infighting,” BBC News, November 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50306171>

31) “Riyadh Agreement: Full text of the Yemeni government, STC agreement (unofficial translation by Al-Masdar Online),” Al-Masdar Online English, November 6, 2019, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/58>

Zubaidi. The actual signing was done by Yemeni government Deputy Prime Minister Salem al-Khanbashi and Aden's former governor and STC member, Nasser al-Khabji.

While the agreement calls for reactivating the Yemeni government and giving the ministries of defense and interior full purview over the unified military and security forces, in the end all of these institutions remained directly answerable to a Saudi-run committee. As undisputed lead actor in the anti-Houthi coalition, Saudi Arabia would assume command responsibilities previously held by the UAE, security responsibility for Aden and other southern governorates, and overall authority over the integrated military and security forces of the anti-Houthi coalition. Saudi military reinforcements began entering Aden and other southern governorates in October to take over positions from withdrawing Emirati forces. The transition from Emirati to Saudi patronage also began occurring for formerly UAE-backed groups in southern Yemen, a process that was not without growing pains. One Security Belt forces member who spoke to the Sana'a Center complained about the Saudis being less generous than Emiratis, highlighting that the military kitchen hadn't provided dessert since the Saudis' takeover.

Along with a timeline for securing Aden and reactivating the government in the interim capital, the Riyadh Agreement also contained several clauses aimed at improving government efficiency and transparency. All state revenues were to be deposited in the central bank in Aden, which would end the growing practice, in some governorates nominally under government control, of local administrations collecting and spending what legally are state revenues. The mention of reactivating parliament's oversight role and supervisory agencies such as the Supreme National Anti-Corruption Commission and the Central Organization for Control and Auditing implied a Saudi-backed push to root out graft and corruption. However, without initiatives to address high-level corruption, including patronage appointments made by Hadi, any improvement in accountability in Yemeni governance would likely be partial and piecemeal at best.

For more on the Riyadh Agreement, see the Sana'a Center's analysis of the accord.⁽³²⁾

Stalled Implementation and Missed Deadlines

The lofty goals laid out in the Riyadh Agreement also included an ambitious timeline, and between the signing of the agreement and the end of 2019 every implementation deadline had been missed. While there was progress on some aspects of the agreement, most saw little movement. On November 18, Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed arrived at Aden airport, six days later than the stipulated November 12 return of the government to the interim capital and reactivation of all state institutions in areas outside Houthi control. The return of the PM would be the only benchmark in the entire Riyadh Agreement reached by the end of the year.

On the political front, other deadlines passed unheeded in November and December, including the appointment of a new governor and security director for Aden

32) Maged al-Madhaji, "The Riyadh Agreement: Saudi Arabia Takes the Helm in Southern Yemen," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 5, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/8324>

governorate, new governors for Abyan and Al-Dhalea governorates and, in the first missed deadline of 2020, the planned appointments by January 4 of governors and security directors in all remaining southern governorates.

Sensitive military aspects of the agreement also failed to materialize on schedule, most notably the redeployment of Yemeni government and STC-aligned forces from areas they moved into in Aden, Abyan and Shabwa governorates to their pre-August positions, and their replacement with security forces from the relevant local authorities. These and other measures on the military front failed to materialize by their December 5 deadline, including the redeployment of all government and STC military forces in Aden to camps outside the governorate – except for the 1st Presidential Protection Brigade charged with securing the Ma'ashiq presidential palace – and the transfer of medium and heavy weapons in Aden to camps in the city under Saudi supervision.

On the security front, the missed December 5 deadline also included local police assuming responsibility for security in Aden governorate; and the reorganization of special forces and counterterrorism forces in Aden, and of forces responsible for the protection of government facilities, as well as their placement under the control of the Ministry of Interior. By January 4, all military and security forces across southern Yemen were supposed to be assigned, unified and placed under the authority of the Ministry of Defense or Ministry of Interior.

As 2019 came to a close, there was little indication that either the Yemeni government or the STC was genuinely committed to the union both sides signed onto in Riyadh. On the first day of the new year, the STC announced that it was suspending participation in joint committees intended to implement aspects of the accord, citing a minor flareup in violence in Shabwa governorate that it blamed on the Islah party.⁽³³⁾ However, even before the STC move, the committees were doing very little to achieve their stated purpose of ironing out contentious details ahead of forming a unified political and military front. Government and STC officials confirmed to the Sana'a Center that both parties have generally refused to negotiate with each other, preferring instead to meet with Saudi emissaries.

If the Hadi government and the STC did come together as a single governing entity as envisioned in the Riyadh Agreement, the united front under Saudi direction would be far better placed to escalate pressure on the Houthis politically, militarily and economically. This, in turn, could provide the anti-Houthi coalition additional leverage at the negotiating table, as a weakened Houthi position may make the armed movement's leaders more amenable to concessions which they currently see no need to make. A unified anti-Houthi front would also be a reversal of the recurring cycles of fragmentation the country has experienced since the 2011 Yemeni uprising. Even the partial success of the Riyadh Agreement remains an optimistic prospect, however, given the lack of movement since the signing of the deal.

33) "Yemen's southern separatists pull out of Riyadh agreement committees," Reuters, January 1, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemens-southern-separatists-pull-out-of-riyadh-agreement-committees-idUSKBN1Z01ZE>



A member of the Security Belt forces stands on a vehicle during a military ceremony in Aden. Shortly after dozens were killed in an attack on the base, August 1, 2019 // Photo Credit: Rajeh Al-O'mary

Saudis, Houthis Enter Talks as Drone Warfare Ups the Ante

The Year of the Drones

On January 10, 2019, Houthi forces targeted a military parade at Al-Anad air base in Yemen's Lahj governorate with a bomb-laden drone, killing, among others, the Yemeni government's military intelligence chief, General Mohammed Tamah, and the army's deputy chief of staff, Saleh al-Zindani.⁽³⁴⁾ Shortly after, Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea declared that 2019 would be "the year of the drones." This proved to be an apt characterization.

Despite coalition attempts to destroy alleged Houthi drone storage facilities later that month, Houthi drone and missile attacks would continue to ramp up in the months that followed. For instance, in April, Saudi air defenses positioned around Sayoun, in Hadramawt governorate, shot down almost a dozen drones the evening prior to a parliamentary session being held in the city.

Mid-May to September witnessed a steady stream of Houthi aerial attacks against military, commercial and civilian infrastructure in Saudi Arabia. On May 14, Houthi forces employed drones to target oil pumping stations for a Saudi Aramco

34) "Yemen soldiers killed in Houthi drone attack on base," BBC, January 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46822429>

pipeline near Riyadh. Houthi chief spokesperson Mohammed Abdel Salam said the attack marked a “new phase of economic deterrence” in response to the coalition’s intervention in Yemen.⁽³⁵⁾ Senior Houthi leader Mohammed Ali al-Houthi said his forces had stepped up cross-border attacks – including strikes later in May against Jizan airport in southern Saudi Arabia – after the Saudi-led military coalition had spurned “peace initiatives” by the movement.⁽³⁶⁾ In the months that followed, Houthi forces continued to launch missiles and armed drones at targets in southern Saudi Arabia, including Jizan and Abha airports and King Khalid Air Base near Khamis Mushait. In August, an aerial attack targeted Shaybah oilfield near Saudi Arabia’s eastern border with the UAE.

The Houthi movement publicly showed off some of its new weapons capabilities in July at an exhibition in Sana’a, including long-range combat and surveillance drones, as well as ballistic and cruise missiles. Among them was the latest incarnation of the Samad drone, which the Houthis claim has a range of 1,700 kilometers and said was used in attacks on airports in Saudi Arabia. Houthi forces spokesperson Yahya Sarea said that the weapons were made in Yemen and were the product of domestic innovation.⁽³⁷⁾ However, the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen had previously concluded in its 2018 report that certain models of drones in the Houthi arsenal or their components originated from Iran.⁽³⁸⁾

After the September Aramco strikes, Mahdi al-Mashat, head of the Houthis’ Supreme Political Council, announced a unilateral cease-fire on cross-border attacks. Attacks in Yemen continued, however: In November, the Houthis claimed to have targeted anti-Houthi coalition military sites in Mokha, Taiz governorate, with nine ballistic missiles and more than 20 drones in an attack that also badly damaged a nearby Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital.⁽³⁹⁾ A Houthi missile also hit the anti-Houthi coalition’s military headquarters in Marib in November, where at least five soldiers were reported killed.⁽⁴⁰⁾

35) “Abdel Salam: Targeting Aramco a New Phase of Economic Deterrence,” Al-Masirah, May 15, 2019, http://english.almasirah.net/details.php?es_id=6914&cat_id=1

36) “Houthi leader says drone attacks a response to spurned Yemen peace moves,” Reuters, May 26, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-houthis/houthi-leader-says-drone-attacks-a-response-to-spurned-yemen-peace-moves-idUSKCN1SW0S1>

37) “A Spokesman For The Armed Forces Reviews In A Press Briefing New Details About The Yemeni Military Industries [AR],” Ansar Allah, July 9, 2019, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/262426>

38) “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen,” United Nations, January 26, 2018, p. 32, https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2018/594

39) “Yemeni quality operation through 9 ballistic missiles and 20 drones against the camps of aggression in Mokha [AR],” Al-Manar, November 25, 2019, <https://almanar.com.lb/5997180>

40) “At least five Yemeni soldiers killed by Houthi missile in Marib military base,” Reuters, November 13, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/at-least-five-yemeni-soldiers-killed-by-houthi-missile-in-marib-military-base-idUSKBN1XN1MY>

Aramco Attack Exposes Vulnerability of Saudi Economy, Cease-Fire Ensues

On September 14, attacks on two oil facilities in Saudi Arabia briefly knocked more than 5 percent of the world's crude production offline, grabbing international attention as the consequences of the Yemen War became global. Saudi Arabia's oil output was cut by half — to 5.7 million barrels per day⁽⁴¹⁾ — and Brent crude prices ended 15 percent higher at the end of the first day of trading after the attacks, the largest dollar increase since 2008 and the biggest one-day percentage jump in more than 30 years.⁽⁴²⁾ The attack on the state-run oil giant Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq processing plant and Khurais oil field in the kingdom's Eastern Province also came as the company was in the final stages of preparing for its much-anticipated initial public offering on the Riyadh stock exchange, from which the Saudi government hoped to raise tens of billions of dollars from even a small floatation of shares.⁽⁴³⁾

The armed Houthi movement claimed responsibility for the Aramco strikes, which it said were a response to Riyadh's intervention in Yemen, though Saudi Arabia, the United States, and European leaders quickly dismissed the Houthis' claim and asserted that Iran was responsible.⁽⁴⁴⁾⁽⁴⁵⁾ It benefited both, however, and a Sana'a Center source in contact with parts of the Houthi leadership described it as a coordinated strike by Tehran and Sana'a. Houthi forces launched the drones, the source said, while Iranian forces fired missiles. The specter of US military retaliation against Iran or the Houthi movement grew when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called the attacks an "act of war."⁽⁴⁶⁾ However, despite President Trump saying that the US was "locked and loaded" to respond to the attacks, the US commander in chief later added that he "would like not to have war."⁽⁴⁷⁾⁽⁴⁸⁾ Instead, the United States announced the deployment of additional troops and air defense systems to Saudi Arabia.⁽⁴⁹⁾ A

41) "Attacks on Saudi oil facilities knock out half the kingdom's supply," Reuters, September 14, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-fire/attacks-on-saudi-oil-facilities-knock-out-half-the-kingdoms-supply-idUSKCN1VZ01N>

42) Sheela Tobben, "Oil Prices Jump Most on Record After Saudi Arabia Strike," Bloomberg, September 16, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-15/oil-prices-jump-19-after-attack-cuts-saudi-arabian-supplies>

43) "Saudi Aramco is gearing up for what could be the largest IPO ever. Here are 10 public offerings its massive listing would dwarf," Business Insider, September 12, 2019, <https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/10-largest-ipos-in-history-ranked-by-total-proceeds-2019-9-1028521587>.

44) Mike Pompeo, Twitter post, "Tehran is behind nearly 100 attacks on Saudi Arabia...", September 14, 2019, <https://twitter.com/secpompeo/status/1172963090746548225>

45) "Coalition Spokesman: Initial Operational Indicators in Terror Targeting of Abqaiq and Khurais Oil Plants Confirms Weapons Used are Iranian," Saudi Press Agency, September 16, 2019, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=ar&newsid=1969944#1969944>

46) Stephen Kalin, "Pompeo says attack was 'act of war' on Saudi Arabia, seeks coalition," Reuters, September 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-pompeo/pompeo-says-attack-was-act-of-war-on-saudi-arabia-seeks-coalition-idUSKBN1W32AG>

47) Roberta Rampton and Asrhad Mohammed, "U.S. blames Iran for Saudi oil attack, Trump says 'locked and loaded'," Reuters, September 15, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks/evidence-from-saudi-oil-attack-points-to-iran-not-yemen-u-s-official-idUSKBN1W00SA>

48) Steve Holland & Rania El Gamal, "Trump says he does not want war after attack on Saudi oil facilities," Reuters, September 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco/trump-says-he-does-not-want-war-after-attack-on-saudi-oil-facilities-idUSKBN1W10X8>

49) Aime Williams, "US to send 200 troops and missile system to Saudi Arabia," Financial Times,

reeling Saudi Arabia realized the potential economic costs⁽⁵⁰⁾ of its conflict with Iran and the Houthi movement and – given the restrained response from Washington – determined that the US could not be counted on for protection.

On September 20, head of the Houthi Supreme Political Council Mahdi al-Mashat announced the unilateral cease-fire from future cross-border drone and missile attacks during a speech on Houthi-run Al-Masirah TV, calling for a “comprehensive national reconciliation that does not exclude anyone.”⁽⁵¹⁾ On September 27, the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported that Saudi Arabia had agreed to a limited cease-fire in Yemen. Senior Houthi officials and international diplomats at the time confirmed to the Sana’a Center that Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman and Al-Mashat had spoken by telephone, and agreed to try to build on the cease-fire.⁽⁵²⁾ In early October, the Houthis indicated they weren’t satisfied with the lack of a positive Saudi public response to their halt in cross-border strikes, warning they may reconsider it.⁽⁵³⁾ A day later, Khalid bin Salman, the Saudi deputy defense minister, said Riyadh viewed the partial cease-fire “positively.”⁽⁵⁴⁾ It held, Saudi aerial raids were noticeably fewer, and the Houthi-Saudi backchannel had been officially launched.

The Saudi-Houthi Backchannel

A Houthi delegation held talks with Saudi officials during November in Muscat, Oman, which, as the only member of the Gulf Cooperation Council not to join the Saudi- and UAE-led military intervention in Yemen, has fostered for itself the image of neutrality in the Yemen conflict (see ‘Oman: Between Mediation and Meddling’). A source close to the Houthi leadership told the Sana’a Center that talks between the movement’s officials – which included the chief spokesperson and negotiator Mohammed Abdel Salam and senior officials Abdelmalek al-Ajri and Ahmed al-Shami – and Saudi Arabia focused on military deescalation between the two sides in Yemen, prisoner exchanges and the reopening of Sana’a airport. The source also added that discussions broached the possibility of holding official peace talks, with Oman and Kuwait both mentioned as possible hosts for such negotiations.

Other media reports emerged in November to paint a fuller picture of the scale of the secret negotiations. Foreign Policy reported that talks between the two sides were held on the sidelines of a November 11 meeting between Saudi Deputy Defense

September 27, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/003fd2aa-e0a9-11e9-9743-db5a370481bc>

50) Benoit Faucon, Summer Said & Warren Strobel, “Saudi Arabia Seeks to Ease Tensions with Iran,” The Wall Street Journal, December 12, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-seeks-to-ease-tensions-with-iran-11576178194>

51) “Yemen’s Houthis propose to Saudi Arabia that both sides halt missile strikes,” Reuters, September 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-saudi/yemens-houthis-say-will-cease-targeting-saudi-arabia-if-other-side-does-same-al-masirah-idUSKBN1W5261>.

52) Sana’a Center interviews with senior Houthi officials and international diplomats in September 2019.

53) “Riyadh Picks Up the Pieces -- The Yemen Review, October, 2019, Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, November 10, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8363#Houthi-Partial-Cease-Fire-Holding>

54) Khalid bin Salman, Twitter post, “The calm announced from Yemen... [AR],” October 4, 2019, <https://twitter.com/kbsalsaud/status/1179918350887071744>

Minister Khalid bin Salman and Omani Sultan Qaboos bin Said in Muscat. Prince Khalid bin Salman — the younger brother of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who also formally holds the position of defense minister — took over the Yemen file in February and has been a driving force behind the push for deescalation (see: ‘Khalid bin Salman takes Saudi Lead on Yemen’). Foreign Policy also reported, citing diplomatic sources, that the British government had arranged a meeting in the Jordanian capital, Amman, in September between Houthi deputy foreign minister Hussein al-Azzi and the deputy of Khalid bin Ali al-Humaidan, the director-general of the Saudi General Intelligence Directorate.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Hadi later confronted Al-Humaidan and accused him of talking to the Houthis behind the government’s back, according to meeting notes seen by the Sana’a Center that detailed the encounter. They indicated Al-Humaidan denied doing so, telling the Yemeni president, “may my hand be cut if I ever did,” to which Hadi responded with details of where and when, then added: “Now give me your hand to cut it.” When knowledge of the talks became public, an adviser to President Hadi, Abdel Aziz Jabari, told The Associated Press that the internationally recognized Yemeni government had been sidelined from the talks.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Saudi King Salman, meanwhile, appeared to give his blessing to the dialogue when he told Saudi Arabia’s Shura Council that the Riyadh Agreement would “open the door” for a wider political settlement in Yemen.⁽⁵⁷⁾

In November, the backchannel bore fruit on the humanitarian front. On November 28, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) facilitated the release of 128 prisoners from Khamis Mushait prison in Saudi Arabia, who were then flown into Sana’a International Airport where they were greeted by relatives and Houthi officials.⁽⁵⁸⁾ The coalition’s freeing of prisoners followed the Houthis’ unilateral release of 290 detainees in September and an offer in October to free an additional 2,000 prisoners in a “first phase” if the coalition responded in kind.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Both parties characterized their moves as part of efforts to advance the Stockholm Agreement — in which the Yemeni government and the armed Houthi movement agreed to release about 7,000 prisoners each (see ‘Prisoner Exchange Plan Falters’).

In the same November statement in which the imminent prisoner release was publicized, the coalition announced that Sana’a airport, closed for more than three years, would reopen to Yemenis in need of medical treatment abroad. In addition to easing restrictions on Yemeni airspace, the coalition said it would coordinate with the World Health Organization to transport patients abroad, noting that the move was part of efforts to ease the humanitarian situation in the country.⁽⁶⁰⁾

55) Colum Lynch, Lara Seligman & Robbie Gramer, “Can a Young Saudi Prince End the War in Yemen?,” *Foreign Policy*, November 20, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/20/can-khalid-bin-salman-young-saudi-prince-end-yemen-war-mohammed-mbs/>

56) Ahmed al-Haj & Maggie Michael, “Saudi Arabia, Yemen rebels in indirect peace talks,” *The Associated Press*, November 13, 2019, <https://apnews.com/cb393079f7be48d2951b3ae3f2d4361b>

57) “Riyadh Agreement to ‘open the door’ for broader peace talks on Yemen, says King Salman,” *Arab News*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1587076/saudi-arabia>

58) “128 detainees repatriated back to Yemen from Saudi Arabia,” *International Committee of the Red Cross*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/128-detainees-repatriated-back-yemen-saudi-arabia>

59) “Yemen’s Houthis offer Saudi-backed government new prisoner swap deal,” *Reuters*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemens-houthis-offer-saudi-backed-government-new-prisoner-swap-deal-idUSKBN1WP31I?il=0>

60) “Coalition: 200 Houthi prisoners released [AR],” *Al Arabiya*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/yemen/2019/11/26/>

Sana'a airport has been closed by the coalition for commercial flights and civilian use since August 2016. Until November, with the announced reopening of Mukalla airport in Hadramawt, Yemenis were only able to fly abroad from Aden and Sayoun airports. The opening of the Sana'a airport was among the main initial demands by the armed Houthi movement going into the UN-led talks in Sweden in December 2018; the Stockholm Agreement failed to address the issue, even while the UNSC resolution endorsing the agreement called for the airport to be reopened for commercial flights.⁽⁶¹⁾ Diplomatic sources also told the Sana'a Center that the European Union had expressed a willingness on multiple occasions to send a team to conduct a logistical assessment of Sana'a International Airport.

Deescalation Loses Momentum as Year Ends

Despite the coalition's announcement, as of the end of 2019 no medical flights had taken off from Sana'a airport. Indeed, the only publicized humanitarian flights in or out of the Yemeni capital were those transporting Houthi prisoners in November.

While the backchannel talks led to some concessions on the humanitarian front, there were no clear agreements reached on military deescalation. Toward the end of the year, there also appeared to be a split within the Houthi movement between those who favored talking to Saudi Arabia about avenues to wind down the conflict and others who were closer to Iran and favored continued confrontation. This divide could be witnessed in several aggressive acts that were celebrated by some Houthi officials and not others. On November 30, Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea announced the downing of a Saudi Apache helicopter near the Yemen-Saudi border, killing both pilots on board.⁽⁶²⁾ On December 27, Sarea announced that a ballistic missile had been fired at a Saudi National Border Guard base in Najran, the first claimed cross-border attack since the cease-fire offer in September.⁽⁶³⁾ However, neither Abdelmalek al-Houthi nor his top political aide, Mahdi al-Mashat — who had announced the partial cease-fire — made any public remarks in support of the missile strike. And despite the hostilities, the Houth-Saudi talks remained ongoing.

61) "Security Council Authorizes Immediate Deployment of Advance Team to Monitor Force Withdrawals, Ceasefire in Yemen, Adopting Resolution 2451 (2018)," United Nations, December 21, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13643.doc.htm>

62) "Yemen's Houthis say they shot down Saudi helicopter, pilots killed: spokesman," Reuters, November 29, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemens-houthis-say-they-shot-down-saudi-helicopter-pilots-killed-spokesman-idUSKBN1Y30JL>

63) Yahya Sarea, Twitter post, "The missile force launched this afternoon a ballistic missile... [AR]," December 27, 2019, <https://twitter.com/army21ye/status/1210508476520259586>



Sabeen Street in Sana'a decorated in preparation for Houthi-mandated public commemorations of Mawlid al-Nabi (the Prophet Mohammed's Birthday), October 30, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

Life Under the Houthis: A Descent into the Dark Ages

Bringing Government and Security Apparatuses into the Houthi Fold

A key part of the process of the Houthi authorities tightening their grip over government has been to gradually remove the clout of members of Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) party who had previously represented a majority of government officials and bureaucrats. This has entailed the dismissal of functionaries or the replacement of those who left due to the Houthi takeover. With bigger institutions, Houthi authorities have also placed a *mushrif* (supervisor) loyal to them atop the hierarchy of each institution who reports to the Houthi leadership and has veto power over all institutional decisions. With smaller state entities, as well as those deemed crucial for securing resources or power, Houthi authorities have at times dissolved the original institutions and created new ones to replace their functions.

Houthi authorities' merger of Yemen's two largest intelligence agencies in 2019 can be seen as reconstructing the state mechanisms for performing what was seen as a crucial function. By decree on September 20, the National Security Bureau and the Political Security Agency were dissolved. Two senior Houthi security officials took

charge of the new entity, named the Security and Intelligence Agency.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Abdelhakim al-Khaiwani was appointed the new director and Abdelqader al-Shami the deputy director. This followed on the heels of a shakeup at the National Security Bureau earlier in the year, with Fawaz Hussein Nashwan replacing Abdelrab Garafan as head of the intelligence agency on February 18; Garafan had held the post since Houthi forces took control of Yemen's state security and intelligence apparatus in 2014.

Another move in 2019 to dovetail state security apparatuses with the core Houthi leadership came in May, when Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi appointed his uncle, Abdelkarim al-Houthi, as interior minister.⁽⁶⁵⁾ He replaced Abdelhakim al-Maori, who had died in April in a hospital in Beirut, according to media reports.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Abdelkarim is the second member of the Houthi family to become a minister, the first being Minister of Education Yahya al-Houthi, who was appointed before Saleh's death.

Abdelkarim al-Houthi holds power and authority comparable to Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi himself, with great influence over Houthi relations with Iran and decisions related to peace negotiations. Abdelkarim al-Houthi also heads the Houthis' executive office and signs off on all major day-to-day decisions, from financial issues to security to matters of the state, Western and regional government officials separately confirmed to the Sana'a Center.

Despite the armed Houthi movement consolidating its power and demonstrating closed ranks toward the outside, one incident in 2019 tarnished the image of full security control. In August, Ibrahim Badreddine al-Houthi, the brother of Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi, was killed in the capital Sana'a.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Houthi authorities vaguely labeled the murder "US-Saudi-Israeli aggression", while the Saudi-led military coalition claimed it was the result of an internal dispute. However, Ibrahim al-Houthi had not been a figure with any significant military or political role. A senior security source within the Houthi authority in Sana'a told the Sana'a Center that Ibrahim al-Houthi had been targeted in a set-up, being lured to an apartment in the capital's Haddha district. The source, who requested to remain anonymous, suggested money was part of the motive for the killing without hinting at any suspects.⁽⁶⁸⁾

The Houthis, while allowing their former allies in the GPC to nominally operate in northern Yemen, have kept a short leash on the party. In August 2019, Houthi authorities prevented their former allies in the GPC from celebrating the anniversary of the party's founding. In October, the Houthi leadership negotiated a prisoner exchange with the Islah party, including the release from Houthi custody of five prisoners who had been accused of attempting to assassinate former President Ali

64) "The Houthis are creating a new intelligence service as an alternative to the National Security and Political Security [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, September 2, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/1712236>

65) "Al-Houthi appoints his uncle as interior minister of the putschist government... who is he? [AR]," EREM News, May 5, 2019, <https://www.erenews.com/news/arab-world/yemen/1799923>

66) "Yemen's Houthi official dies in a Hezbollah hospital in Beirut," Al Arabiya, April 23, 2019, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2019/04/23/Yemen-s-Houthi-interior-minister-dies-in-Lebanese-hospital.html>

67) "Ministry of Interior mourns martyr Ibrahim Badr al-Din al-Houthi [AR]," Al-Masriah, August 9, 2019, https://www.almasirah.net/details.php?es_id=43473&cat_id=3

68) "The Southern Implosion — The Yemen Review, August 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 4, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8016>

Abdullah Saleh in 2011. This stoked anger among members of the late president's political party. In response to the release, the Sana'a GPC branch announced a boycott of all future work in Houthi governing institutions, including the Supreme Political Council and the Shura Council.⁽⁶⁹⁾ However, the boycott lasted only six days, allegedly ending as a result of Houthi threats against GPC officials. The spat ended in a declaration of unity between Mahdi al-Mashat, head of the Houthi executive body, the Supreme Political Council, and Sheikh Sadiq Amin Abu Ras, the GPC president in Sana'a.⁽⁷⁰⁾

Religious Indoctrination

Schools and Public Service

In 2019, the Houthi movement increased the intensity, and institutionalization, of religious propagation in areas under its control. From a Houthi perspective, Yemenis had strayed from God due to miseducation in schools and mosques, as well as the Wahhabi influences from Saudi Arabia, and needed to be brought back on the righteous path of Zaidi Shiism.

The new policies regarding education began taking shape in 2018 in a change in curricula for schools. A September 2019 report by the UN-appointed Group of Eminent Experts said Houthi authorities clearly had been using the education system to indoctrinate students and to enlist them in their armed forces. They said at least three teachers had been arrested or had to flee Houthi territory after refusing to teach the Houthi curriculum or cooperate with efforts to conscript children.⁽⁷¹⁾

In May 2019, Houthi authorities forced the closure of the Sana'a office of AMIDEAST. The international educational non-profit organization had offered education, foreign language training, accredited testing and exchange opportunities abroad to tens of thousands of Yemenis since 1981. The school was renowned as an incubator and stepping stone for future members of the Yemeni intelligentsia, with AMIDEAST offering a window for developing new generations of critical thinkers. Many alumni went on to attain prominent positions in society, such as government ministers or high-level bureaucrats, leaders in the private sector, academia or civil society organizations. In a country like Yemen with extremely limited education opportunities, institutions with such teaching success are exceedingly rare. The Houthi authorities' decision to close it, for which they offered no justification, in concert with the other changes they have imposed on primary and secondary education, clearly demonstrates a policy

69) "Sana'a conference announces boycott of the Houthis in protest against the release of five youths of the February Revolution [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, October 20, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/173005>

70) "President Al-Mashat meets the president of the General People's Congress and his deputy to discuss many issues [AR]," Ansar Allah, October 26, 2019, <https://www.ansarallah.com/archives/287996>; "GPC Officials Rejoin Houthi Institutions After Receiving Threats," Asharq al-Awsat, October 28, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1964836/gpc-officials-rejoin-houthi-institutions-after-receiving-threats>

71) "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since 2014," Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts, September 3, 2019, p. 173-4, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A_HRC_42_CRP_1.PDF

agenda that aims to stifle the development of independent, forward-thinking youth.⁽⁷²⁾ (See also 'A Houthi Masterclass in Dystopia'.)

In the public service, in 2018 the Houthi authorities instituted mandatory sessions for government-sector employees to listen to speeches by Abdelmalek al-Houthi or recordings of his older brother, Hussein, the deceased founder of the movement. In 2019, those mandatory sessions became more institutionalized in a weekly schedule, with employees obliged to gather every Wednesday and listen to pre-recorded speeches by Abdelmalek. The speeches revolved around jihad, the so-called media war, religious occasions, war and victory, religiously framed military and political rhetoric and nonspecific threats against Saudi Arabia.⁽⁷³⁾

Religious Commemorations and Officially Sanctioned Extortion

As the spreading of Houthi ideology has become more directed and institutionalized, commemorations of religious holidays have become lavish. Houthi authorities have pressured individuals and businesses into providing donations and paying special taxes to finance the events, and have implemented new taxes to capitalize on the celebrations, according to numerous residents in Houthi-controlled areas who spoke with the Sana'a Center. For instance in August, prior to Eid celebrations when people traditionally buy new clothes, Houthi representatives visited clothing stores and demanded special tax payments; similarly, in the lead up to Ashoura commemorations and Mawlid celebrations Houthi representatives went door-to-door to collect money from individuals and businesses. In particular, a committee representing the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Trade and Industries and the tax authorities has been instrumental in imposing new fees. Shop owners told the Sana'a Center, for example, that they were asked for "voluntary donations" for the Mawlid celebrations. If they refused, committee representatives would return and fine the business for lacking a certain permit.

In September 2019, for the first time in Yemen, Ashoura was declared an official holiday in Houthi-held areas. An occasion that mourns the death of Prophet Mohammed's grandson Hussein, Ashoura commemorations have a long tradition among Twelver Shia communities in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon, but were not common among the Zaidi Shia community in Yemen. Shias view the death of Hussein, at the battle of Karbala in 680, as a martyrdom in the righteous struggle for leadership of the Muslims, and it has developed into an integral component of the concept of martyrdom culture articulated by Iran and its proxies such as Hezbollah.

The Houthis regard observing Ashoura as part of a wider effort to 'revive' the values of the family of Prophet Mohammed, descendants of which, according to Shia beliefs, are the only ones entitled to become legitimate leaders of the Muslim community. Public

72) "A Houthi Masterclass in Dystopia: The Sana'a Center Editorial," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7517>

73) See: "Manifestations of soft war and ways to confront it [AR]," Ansar Allah, December 1, 2019, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/196798>; "Lecture of general mobilization by Sayyid Abdul Malik Badr Al-Houthi [AR]," Islamic Zaidi Council, www.zaidiah.com/content/-محاضرة-التعبية-العامة-للسيد-القائد-عبدالمك-بدر-الحوثي

sector employees were required to take a day off and participate in the processions that took place on September 10.

The same had been the case for Eid al-Ghadir in August, when mass rallies organized by the Houthi leadership marked the day when Ali bin Ali Talib was said to have been designated Prophet Muhammad's successor. Abdelmalek al-Houthi delivered a speech that, in his typical style, combined religious oratory with political rhetoric directed against Saudi Arabia.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Like Ashoura, Eid al-Ghadir was not an official celebration in Yemen before the Houthi takeover, though limited private commemorations had been held in northern areas of Yemen.

In early November, the Yemeni capital witnessed celebrations of Mawlid al-Nabi, the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, in a manner previously unseen. While Mawlid had been a public holiday in Yemen under previous rulers – marked both by Sunnis and Shias, though generally on slightly different days – the Houthi leadership turned this year's festivities into a major sectarian event.

A series of interviews conducted by the Sana'a Center with a dozen residents in different areas under Houthi control depict a concerted effort to stage a mass event at various levels: as during Eid al-Ghadir and Ashoura events, all government employees were obliged to participate. Shop and restaurant owners were ordered to hang posters with celebratory wishes for Mawlid on their doors and windows and to decorate their venues with green flags. Houthi representatives visited schools prior to the holiday, some residents told the Sana'a Center, where they told children to ask their parents to decorate their homes for the occasion.

Military parades and mass rallies with speeches were held, cars were painted in green for the processions, public spaces were decorated with banners and illuminated with green lights, and school boys performed traditional Houthi dances, as emerged from interviews with residents and video footage. There were separate spaces for men and women during the festivities, and special buses transported only female passengers.⁽⁷⁵⁾

74) "The text of Abdelmalik Badreddine al-Houthi's speech on the occasion of Eid al -Ghadir [AR]," 26 September Net, August 29, 2019, http://www.26sep.net/news_details.php?sid=140879

75) See: Al-Masirah, "Military parade for police academy graduates for the occasion of the Prophet's birthday [AR]," YouTube video, November 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1S6jmBSabw>; Al-Masirah, "Large crowds gather in a square in Dhamar to mark Prophet's birthday [AR]," YouTube video, November 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0ubWutvVWo>; and Al-Masirah, "Celebrations marking the occasion of the Prophet's birthday in Hudaydah [AR]," YouTube video, November 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0HTIbqndxk>



A man sells raisins and nuts in the Old City of Sana'a, January 28, 2019 // Photo Credit: Doaa Sudam

Continuing Crackdown on Dissent

Houthi authorities also tightened their grip and cracked down further in 2019 on potential dissent and independent thinkers. This included the detention and sentencing in sham trials of dissidents, the closure of the international education organization AMIDEAST, and a new law imposing heavy regulations on the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Since the law came into force, every NGO operating in Houthi-held areas requires approval for new projects from the Houthi authorities and must pay a percentage of their project budget as “tax”, while international NGOs have reported increased harassment and obstruction (see ‘Aid Interference Comes Into Sharp Focus’).

The Houthi crackdown often went hand-in-hand with attempts to extort taxes, also in some cases of prisoners, where relatives said that Houthi authorities tried to extort money from them or to pressure them into sending their sons to fight at the frontlines.⁽⁷⁶⁾ In July, a court in Sana’a sentenced 30 people to death in a mass trial, which human rights groups, lawyers and detainees’ relatives described as a sham.⁽⁷⁷⁾ While most of them were tried for allegedly cooperating with the Saudi- and UAE-led military coalition or for being members of “armed gangs”, a lawyer representing the majority of the defendants said they were mainly imprisoned due to political or

76) “An Interim Capital of Carnage — The Yemen Review, July 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, August 5, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7941>

77) “Yemen: Huthi-run court sentences 30 political opposition figures to death following sham trial,” Amnesty International, July 9, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/yemen-huthi-run-court-sentences-30-political-opposition-figures-to-death-following-sham-trial/>

religious disagreement with Houthi policies.⁽⁷⁸⁾

In January 2019, reports emerged of Houthi authorities abducting, torturing and blackmailing dozens of women without charge. The women, taken from parks and cafes, were accused of being prostitutes and collaborating with the Saudi- and Emirati-led military coalition, The Associated Press reported.⁽⁷⁹⁾ The Houthi-run Interior Ministry rejected the allegations, according to the report. Prostitution allegations also have been made against detained women political activists as a way to publicly shame them; the issue of these jailed activists has been so sensitive, according to a Sana'a Center source familiar with women's issues in Yemen, that civil society groups on the ground are unable to actively document the detainees.

A Yemeni activist for an international NGO, Saferworld's country director Awfa al-Naami, was detained by Houthi authorities along with a colleague, Alhassan al-Qawtari, on January 28 and released nearly three weeks later after local and international condemnation.⁽⁸⁰⁾ Al-Naami, also active on women's rights issues, had been threatened and intimidated for months before being detained.⁽⁸¹⁾

While all sides have suppressed, threatened, arbitrarily detained and killed journalists during the conflict, their extended detention, torture and prosecution has been most prevalent in Houthi-controlled areas. Sixteen journalists remained in Houthi jails at the end of 2019, some of whom have been imprisoned for more than four years, and a capital city that once boasted a variety of perspectives in its local and national media has none today.

The Yemeni Journalists Syndicate recorded 62 violations in 2019 by the armed Houthi movement, with the Houthis blamed for both journalists killed in Yemen in 2019, as well as for torturing detained journalists and sending them for unjust trials.⁽⁸²⁾ It also documented 10 Houthi violations for blocking media websites, bringing the total of blocked websites to 200 as the crackdown on dissent heads into 2020 (see 'Journalist Killings Down, but Media Suppression Intense').⁽⁸³⁾

78) "An Interim Capital of Carnage — The Yemen Review, July 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 5, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7941>

79) Maggie Michael, "Yemeni group: Houthi rebels hold, torture female detainees," The Associated Press, January 17, 2019, <https://apnews.com/0b4af81e4c1a4e5abce813d5eacdd975>

80) "Houthis Must Release Awfa Al-Naami Immediately," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 2, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/news/7008>

81) "Stockholm Agreement Meets Yemeni Reality — The Yemen Review, January 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 11, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7027#Houthi-Security-Forces-Detain-Saferworld-Country-Director>

82) Yemeni Journalists Syndicate, Facebook post, "The Yemeni Journalists Syndicate tracks 134 violations..." January 2, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1484011145084198&id=542893015862687&__tn__=-R

83) Ibid.



Dowan district, Hadramawt governorate, February 3, 2019 // Photo Credit: Naif Alnajm

Political Developments: Fragmentation and the Struggle for Legitimacy

Competing Parliaments

In 2019, there was intense competition between Yemen's warring parties to assert their legitimacy through a parliament. No fewer than three rival bodies held parliamentary sessions backing three rival governments: the internationally recognized government of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the Houthi-controlled de facto government based in the capital Sana'a, and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which was established in 2017 as a self-styled separatist government for southern Yemen.

Yemen's House of Representatives in the capital was initially split between Houthi-aligned MPs and pro-government MPs following the armed Houthi movement's takeover of Sana'a in late 2015 and its ousting of Hadi's government in a coup in early 2015. Later in 2015, Hadi named the southern port city of Aden as his government's interim capital, though since then his government has mostly operated out of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Two years later the STC set up its own "national assembly" claiming to represent southern Yemen, though the assembly does not amount to an independent legislative body, as it was established as part of the STC with the aim of creating a parliament once secession is achieved.

The case for legislative legitimacy was hard to make both for the Houthi authorities in Sana'a and the internationally recognized government. Apart from being split since the war began, the Yemeni House of Representatives has not seen a general election in

16 years. Its mandate has been extended twice since the last general election in 2003, the second time being at the start of the failed transition following the 2011 Arab Spring uprising.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Meanwhile, the number of representatives has been decreasing as MPs have passed away. By the beginning of 2019, 28 of a total of 301 parliamentary seats were empty due to the deaths of MPs. For a quorum, a minimum of 151 members is required. Neither the Houthis nor Hadi has managed to reach a quorum in their parliamentary sessions.

While the armed Houthi movement has held parliamentary sessions throughout the war, in 2019 the internationally recognized government of President Hadi did so for the first time, from April 13 to 16 in Sayoun, in central Hadramawt governorate. President Hadi and his Saudi supporters had made various failed attempts to hold parliamentary sessions since mid-2017, both in the government's interim capital Aden and in Saudi Arabia. Both the unstable security situation and southern separatists' de facto authority in Aden made it impossible for the parliament to convene there. Sana'a Center sources also reported that the UAE refused to allow the parliament to meet in the southern port cities of Aden or Mukalla, in coastal Hadramawt, where Abu Dhabi had established major zones of influence through local proxy forces.⁽⁸⁵⁾

The government's institutional legitimacy had been increasingly challenged by both the armed Houthi movement and the STC in early 2019. The Houthi government charged the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum (SCER) in Sana'a with preparations for by-elections on February 2. Days later, on February 16-17, the STC's would-be parliament, the Southern National Assembly, held its second session in Mukalla, likely with Emirati backing. The choice of Mukalla as a location seems to have been an attempt to assert the relevance of the STC beyond Aden.

The armed Houthi movement eventually staged by-elections on April 13, the same day that the government opened its parliamentary session in Sayoun. On April 15, the elections commission in Sana'a working under Houthi authorities said that 24 of the vacant seats in Houthi-controlled areas had been filled. On April 17, the new lawmakers were sworn in. The remaining vacant parliamentary seats are in territories controlled by anti-Houthi forces.⁽⁸⁶⁾

Meanwhile in Sayoun, the formal outcomes of the parliamentary session of the government were few. Parliament managed to ratify the new state budget and elect a new speaker, Sultan al-Barkani of the General People's Congress (GPC), the party founded by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Barkani then adjourned the session, officially until after Ramadan in June, though no further sessions were held in 2019. As MPs who are also members of the STC refused to take part in the gathering, the parliament did not reach a quorum, with only 118 MPs attending the session.⁽⁸⁷⁾

84) Maged al-Madhaji, "How Yemen's post-2011 transitional phase ended in war," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 19, 2016, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/39>

85) "Game of Parliaments – The Yemen Review, April 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7357>

86) "Yemen leader-in-exile Hadi returns for meeting of divided parliament," Reuters, April 13, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-election/yemen-leader-in-exile-hadi-returns-for-meeting-of-divided-parliament-idUSKCN1RP0CS>

87) "Game of Parliaments – The Yemen Review, April 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7357>

While the outcomes were limited, Hadi and his Saudi allies had put significant effort into making the parliamentary session happen. It was an opportunity to assert legitimacy, which the internationally recognized government is in dire need of. Not only had Hadi's mandate formally expired in 2014. His widely unpopular government has also been operating mostly from exile since 2015. For Saudi Arabia, it provided a "legal" backup for its activity in Yemen as the parliament, for the first time, endorsed the military coalition's intervention. Furthermore, the Saudis made sure that a transition mechanism was in place in the event that Hadi should stop being able to fulfill his duties; in that event, the parliament would have to confirm his replacement. During the parliamentary session, Riyadh provided air defenses around Sayoun that shot down almost a dozen aerial drones, according to Sana'a Center sources. The Saudi kingdom also offered each MP hundreds of thousands of Saudi riyals just to attend the session in Sayoun.⁽⁸⁸⁾

In September, in an apparent move to punish parliamentarians who had attended the session in Sayoun, prosecutors under Houthi rule charged 35 government-aligned MPs with treason and ordered their assets confiscated.⁽⁸⁹⁾ Those targeted mostly belonged to the General People's Congress (GPC) and the Islah party. The practice of confiscating property from officials aligned with the internationally recognized government has been common in Houthi-held areas not just as a means of punishment but also as a source of income. On September 14, Mahdi al-Mashat, the chief of the Supreme Political Council, a body executing presidential powers in Houthi-held areas, swore in 42 new members of the Shura Council, the upper house of the Yemeni parliament whose members are traditionally appointed by the president.⁽⁹⁰⁾

88) Ibid.

89) "Houthis Order Seizure of Assets of 35 Deputies," Asharq al-Awsat, September 15, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1903216/houthis-order-seizure-assets-35-deputies>

90) "42 members of the Shura Council take the constitutional oath before President Mashat [AR]," 26 September News, September 14, 2019, https://26sep.net/news_details.php?sid=162486

De Facto Federalism in Government-Held Areas: Marib and Hadramawt

Both Marib and Hadramawt have developed into centers of almost de facto federal rule. Strong tribal networks and local resources such as oil in both governorates have helped them preserve relative stability and expand their autonomy as the central Yemeni state's authority, already tenuous, further declined over the course of the conflict.

Marib: Occasional Missiles Disturbing the Peace

Sultan al-Aradah, the governor of Marib and a powerful tribal leader, has built a power base relying on an alliance with local tribes and the Islah party, as well as support from Saudi Arabia in the form of political backing and investments. Thanks to local water resources, an oil refinery and local gas production, Marib has continued to retain a strong degree of self-reliance. In October, the Yemeni government began transporting crude oil from Marib through Shabwa in preparation for exporting it via the Nashima terminal on the Shabwa coast.

With regard to security, little has changed in Marib in 2019 as the governorate has managed to preserve its relative stability. For this reason it has become a hub for people displaced from other governorates, and due to the large influx of people, infrastructure has been increasingly strained. Meanwhile, Houthi missiles remained an occasional threat. In July, a missile hit the residence of the governor Aradah,⁽⁹¹⁾ though he wasn't present at the time and no casualties were reported. In November, a Houthi missile hit the anti-Houthi coalition's military headquarters in Marib and seven soldiers were reported killed.⁽⁹²⁾

Hadrami Particularism

Similar to Marib, Hadramawt remained relatively stable throughout 2019 and continued to consolidate its relative local autonomy. Oil production in combination with a strong local identity has helped Hadramawt evolve into a de facto federal state following the collapse of the Yemeni central state. Hadramawt's governor, Faraj al-Bahsani, has used the governorate's rich oil resources in the past as leverage in dealing with the government of President Hadi; Hadramawt accounts for about half of Yemen's oil production.

In recent years, leading Hadrami figures have articulated a specific Hadrami identity more pronouncedly, rejecting both southern secessionist plans as well as a return of the central government with power concentrated in Sana'a. The so-called Inclusive

91) "Houthis launch ballistic missile on Marib governor's house," Official Website of Marib Governorate, July 4, 2019, https://marib-gov.com/news_details.php?sid=1623&lng=english

92) "At least five Yemeni soldiers killed by Houthi missile in Marib military base," Reuters, November 13, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/at-least-five-yemeni-soldiers-killed-by-houthi-missile-in-marib-military-base-idUSKBN1XN1MY>

Hadramawt Conference, promoted since 2016 and officially launched in 2017, calls for putting Hadramawt's interests above all within a strong federal framework, while not advocating for secession. During negotiations of the Riyadh Agreement, leaders from Hadramawt demanded direct privileges as well as significant representation in any new quota-based government, including northern and southern representatives, as reported by media outlets and confirmed by Sana'a Center sources.⁽⁹³⁾

Despite the promotion of a distinct Hadrami identity, the governorate has been effectively divided in two by two different military areas: the northern area of Wadi Hadramawt and Sayoun and the southern area along the coast with the port city of Mukalla. In the north, Saudi-backed forces and army troops affiliated with Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and the Islah party dominate, whereas in the south the UAE-backed Hadrami Elite Forces were calling the shots. Governor of Hadramawt Faraj al-Bahsani is also the commander-in-chief of the Hadrami Elite Forces and rarely visits the northern parts of Hadramawt. However, the southern Hadrami Elite Forces' priorities could be described as follows: Hadramawt first, southern Yemen second, Yemen third. Unlike the STC-affiliated Security Belt Forces in other southern governorates, they do not adhere to an ideology of enmity toward northern Yemen. Aside from minor clashes, the military division did not lead to any destabilization in 2019.

The Emirates maintains considerable clout through the funding and training of the Elite Forces in the south. In November 2019, also with the help of UAE funding, Riyan airport in Mukalla was restored and reopened after it had been shut down since 2015. An AP investigation from 2017 alleged that the airport hosted a secret Emirati-run prison, where prisoners endured systematic torture during interrogations, in the presence of US military personnel.⁽⁹⁴⁾

At the time of writing, the UAE has withdrawn from some positions in Mukalla city, but kept its presence at Mukalla port and maintained control over its military base at Riyan airport, despite the earlier declared military withdrawal from Yemen. According to Sana'a Center research, Hadrami Elite Forces still receive funding from Abu Dhabi. In Hadramawt, the UAE has mainly legitimized its military presence under the mission of combating terrorism, which it declared it would continue to do even after the withdrawal from Aden and other areas of Yemen.⁽⁹⁵⁾

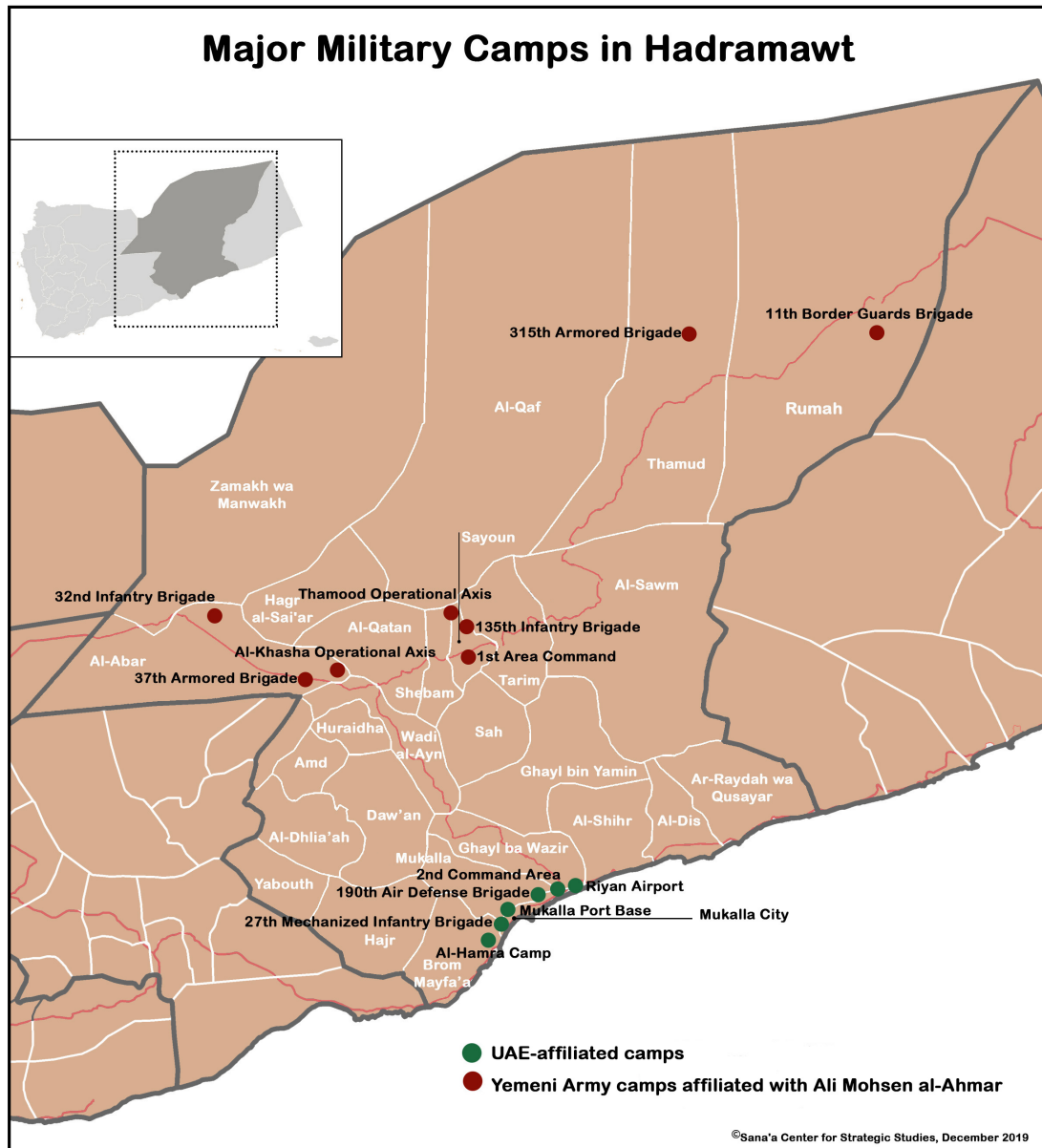
The STC is weak in Hadramawt, as the governorate puts federalism above all else, distancing itself both from the central government and the demands for a separate state and government based in Aden in the south. This policy became apparent as the STC staged a parliament session in Mukalla in February. While Hadramawt allowed the session to take place, likely at the request of the UAE, Hadramawt's governor did not meet with the STC leadership, nor did local leaders participate in the session.⁽⁹⁶⁾

93) “Yemen – Leadership of Hadramawt asks Hadi for half of the quota for southern representatives [AR],” Anadolu Agency, November 5, 2019, www.aa.com.tr/ar/-/الدول-العربية/اليمن-قيادات-حضر موت-تطالب-هادي-بنصف-حصه-الجنوب-في-الحكومة-1636071

94) Maggie Michael, “In Yemen’s secret prisons, UAE tortures and US interrogates,” The Associated Press, June 22, 2017, <https://apnews.com/4925f7f0fa654853bd6f2f57174179fe/In-Yemen’s-secret-prisons.-UAE-tortures-and-US-interrogates>

95) “The return of Emirati forces operating in Aden after the successful liberation and securing of the city [AR],” Emirates News Agency, October 30, 2019, <https://wam.ae/ar/details/1395302798763>

96) “Diplomacy sinking at Hudaydah port — The Yemen Review, February 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, March 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7162>



Taiz: A Showcase of Power Struggles and Shifting Alliances

Events took a dramatic turn in Taiz toward the end of the year. On December 2, Adnan al-Hammadi, the commander of the 35th Armored Brigade and a popular military figure who had played a key role in the battle for Taiz against the Houthi forces, was shot dead. Yemeni media reported that he was killed by his own brother.⁽⁹⁷⁾

There were suspicions among some observers that the killing was not merely a private family matter but rather linked to a power struggle with the Islah party, to which members of Al-Hammadi's family are known to have strong ties. Brigadier General

97) "Brigadier Adnan al-Hammadi was killed by his brother following personal disputes [AR]," Al Masdar Online, December 2, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/17465>

Al-Hammadi's troops were affiliated with Islah's opponents, the UAE-backed Abu al-Abbas Brigades. There were popular protests demanding justice for Al-Hammadi and numerous calls by military leaders and political parties for a transparent investigation of his killing, including from the Islah party.⁽⁹⁸⁾ However, at the time of writing, none of the various theories circulating about the circumstances of Al-Hammadi's killing were supported by available evidence.

Al-Hammadi's death risks destabilizing the frontlines in Taiz. The 35th Armored Brigade controls the largest area along the north-south frontline facing the armed Houthi movement. Competition over who would succeed Al-Hammadi, which already has seen attempts by Islah to install a military leader affiliated with the party, could provoke further infighting among anti-Houthi forces, and in a worst-case scenario, a collapse in the frontlines that would allow Houthi fighters to advance toward Aden for the first time since 2015.

Infighting and power struggles between Islah-affiliated forces and those backed by the UAE have beset the anti-Houthi front in Taiz for several years. In 2018, after heavy clashes with the Abu al-Abbas Brigades, Islah consolidated its military and political power in Taiz. While there were no reports of major clashes on the frontline between Islah-affiliated forces and Houthi fighters, there were new rounds of fighting between Islah-affiliated forces on one side and the UAE-backed 35th Armored Brigade and Abu al-Abbas Brigades on the other in 2019. This mirrors the ongoing rift between Qatar and other regional countries, primarily Saudi Arabia and UAE. While Doha, formerly a member of the anti-Houthi military coalition, has strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and its sister party in Yemen, Islah, Abu Dhabi views the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and generally supports any force opposing it, in this case the Salafi Abu al-Abbas in Taiz.

Another event that has been tied to the rivalry between Qatar and the UAE and Saudi Arabia occurred only days after the killing of Al-Hammadi, when the Islah-affiliated militia leader Hammoud al-Mikhlaifi brought several thousand soldiers to Taiz who had previously been stationed at the Saudi border and opened a new military camp in a strategic location on the route toward Aden, local media and Sana'a Center sources reported.⁽⁹⁹⁾ The camp appeared to be positioned to counter the UAE-backed southern separatists of the STC rather than the Houthi forces in the north. Recruits told the Sana'a Center that it was an open secret that salaries were being disbursed by Oman but paid by Qatar. Al-Mikhlaifi currently resides in Muscat after spending several months in Istanbul with frequent travels to Doha, and contacts from his inner circle confirmed to the Sana'a Center that he was receiving funding from Qatar. Local political parties such as the Taiz GPC branch along with Islah itself – under pressure from Saudi Arabia – denounced Al-Mikhlaifi's move as an attempt to transform the battlefield into a ground for settling regional conflicts,⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ (see 'Qatar: Undermining the Coalition').

98) "Mass demonstrations demand the formation of a fair investigation committee into the circumstances of the assassination of Adnan al-Hammadi[AR]," Debrief, December 7, 2019, <https://debrief.net/news-13274.html>; "Military and political party statements call for an urgent transparent investigation into the assassination of the military commander Adnan al-Hammadi [AR]," Debrief, December 3, 2019, <https://debrief.net/news-13181.html>

99) Thousands of recruits return from the southern border on invitation by Mikhlaifi [AR]," Al-Yemen News, December 8, 2019, www.alyemen.news/العائدون-من-الجنوب-لالاف-المجندين-العائدين-من-الجنوب

100) "Yemeni parties announce their position against the opening of a military camp with Qatari support by Sheikh Hammoud al-Mikhlaifi in Taiz [AR]," Yemen News, December 13, 2019, www.alyemen.news/

Popular discontent was rife in October when Taiz witnessed a wave of protests directed against the local authority, corruption and economic hardship.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ Protesters also demanded the opening of humanitarian corridors and the reopening of major supply routes. Houthi forces currently encircle the city to the west, north and east, with anti-Houthi forces controlling the main road south toward Aden. UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths had briefed the UN Security Council on October 17 that Yemen's warring parties had offered to open humanitarian corridors to Taiz, which was a stated aim of the Stockholm Agreement, reached between the warring parties at the end of 2018. However, by year's end this promise had not materialized.⁽¹⁰²⁾

Al-Mahra and Socotra: Pushing Back Against Saudi and Emirati Influence

Saudi-Omani Rivalry Escalates in Al-Mahra

Al-Mahra has seen a further escalation in a conflict pitting local tribes supported by Oman against an increasing Saudi military presence in Yemen's easternmost governorate. Al-Mahra has never been directly affected by the war between the government and the armed Houthi movement, being far away from the frontlines. While the idea of local autonomy is popular in Al-Mahra, it has remained committed to the Hadi government. However, as the conflict evolved and parties to it strayed from declared war goals, in 2018, Al-Mahra found itself at the heart of a geopolitical struggle between Saudi Arabia and Oman.

Citing the need to combat weapons smuggling through Al-Mahra, Riyadh began establishing a military presence in the governorate in late 2017. Since then, the increasing intensity of the Saudi effort to exert security and military control in Al-Mahra seems to suggest broader ambitions, with Saudi troops asserting control over various ports and border crossings and establishing almost two dozen military bases in the governorate by the end of 2019. Riyadh also has recruited paramilitary security forces from other areas of Yemen as proxies to assert its influence, after a previous UAE attempt to recruit a proxy force from the Mahri population failed. As the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra grew a protest movement began in response.

Oman, which historically has close ties to the Yemeni governorate on its western border, saw the Saudi military presence as an infringement in its backyard. Thus, Muscat has supported the protest movement. According to Sana'a Center research, during 2018 and 2019, Muscat increasingly provided financial support to tribes opposing the Saudi military presence. The former deputy governor, Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, has emerged as the leading figure of the protest movement. Al-Hurayzi, previously also a commander of the border guard, has faced accusations of being a

101) "Taiz .. Demonstrations demand the departure of the corrupt in power and the provision of services and salaries [AR]," Al-Mashhad al-Yemeni, October 26, 2019, <https://www.almashhad-alyemeni.com/147878>

102) Briefing of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen to the open session of the Security Council," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, October 17, 2019, https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/security_council_briefing_-_17_october_2019_-_as_delivered.pdf

key figure in Al-Mahra's powerful smuggling networks, with smuggling being a major source of income in the governorate.⁽¹⁰³⁾ He is a major player receiving Omani funds and distributing them to protesters, Sana'a Center research has found.

Some individuals from Al-Mahra opposed to the Saudi presence confirmed to the Sana'a Center that they were receiving funding from Qatar. Doha has also been providing a media platform for Yemeni voices opposing the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition, including Mahrhis.

In March 2019, clashes erupted around the Shahin border crossing with Oman after local tribesmen blocked the passage of Saudi shipping containers entering the country. A presidential committee sent to mediate departed on March 25 with no agreement reached, Al-Masdar Online reported.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Two days later, the Al-Mahra and Socotra People's General Council held a meeting, where its chairman Sultan bin Isa al-Afrar confirmed the council's support for the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led military coalition. The council had been formed in the wake of the 2011 uprising and seeks to revive the Al-Mahra sultanate. Al-Afrar is one of the last descendants of the former ruling family of the Al-Mahra sultanate that lasted until 1967. He has been one of the most prominent voices opposing the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra and has close ties to Oman, but has also been trying to play a balancing and inclusive role. Tribal opposition to Saudi Arabia's presence in Al-Mahra is not unanimous. Riyadh has in the past established a degree of influence among tribes of Al-Mahra, among other things by offering citizenship to tribal leaders from Al-Mahra.

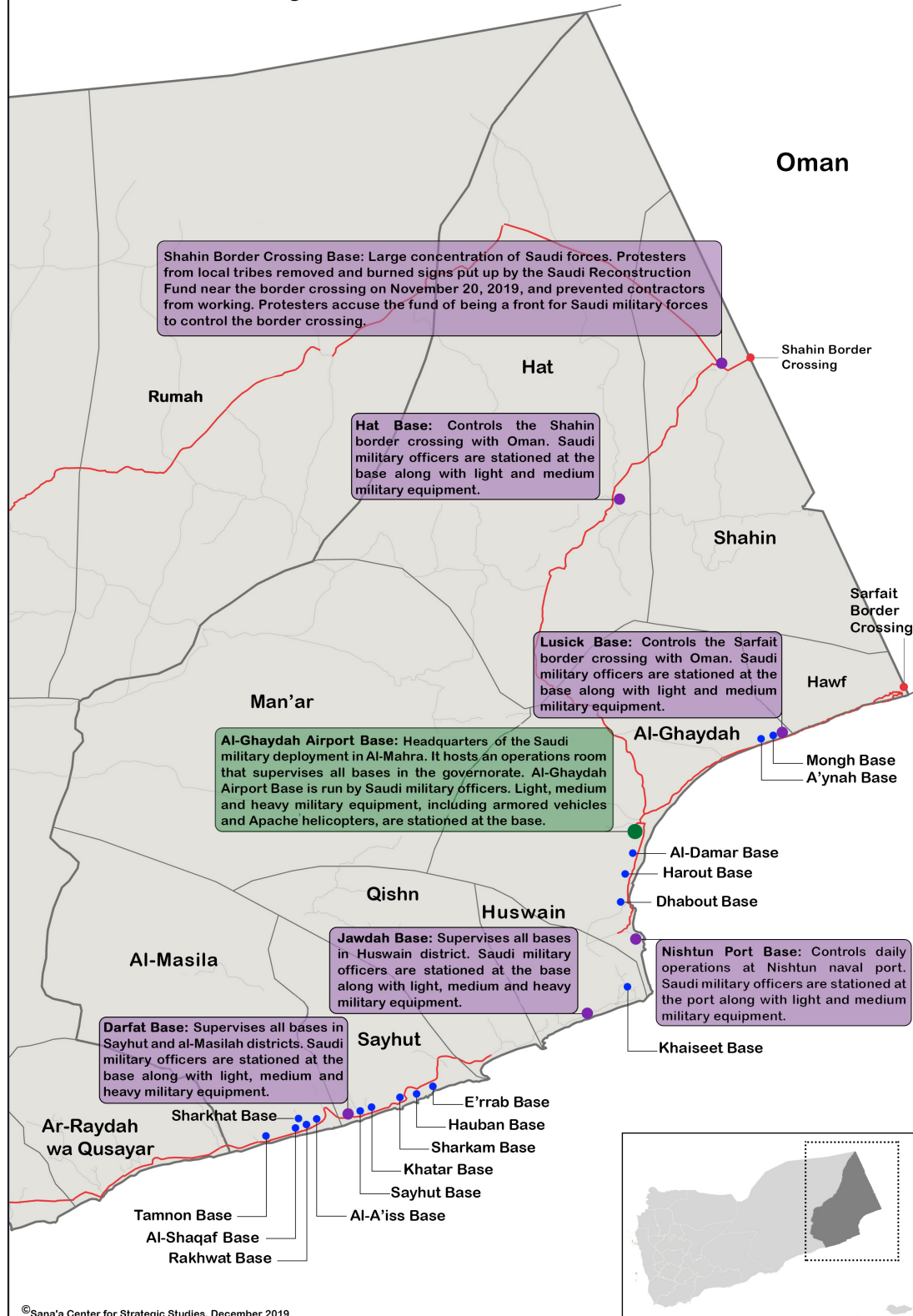
Protests against the Saudi presence have continued through 2019, with violent dispersals leading at times to the exchange of gunfire. Saudi attack helicopters even carried out airstrikes against a local tribal checkpoint in April.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ Activists further complained about detentions of opponents of the Saudi presence and journalists reporting about it, and said torture was used during detention in an attempt to silence such voices. The Yemeni government Minister of Interior Ahmed al-Maysari complained about Saudi activity in Al-Mahra in a rare public statement critical of the government's main supporter in the war against the armed Houthi movement: "The Yemeni government wanted our allies in the coalition to march with us north, not east," he said. Notably, following a disagreement with the government regarding the Riyadh Agreement, Al-Maysari relocated with his family to Muscat, according to relatives who spoke with the Sana'a Center.

103) "Ali al-Hurayzi, the story of the smuggler of Iranian weapons and drugs to the Houthis [AR]," Al-Arabiya, October 5, 2018, <http://ara.tv/p3rkd>

104) "Presidential Commission arrives in Al-Mahra after escalating tension between security forces and anti-Saudi presence tribes [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, March 17, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.info/articles/165438/amp>; "An official talks about the fail the presidential commission to reach a formula that ends the tension in Al-Mahram [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, March 28, 2019, <https://mail.almasdaronline.com/articles/165893/amp>

105) "Game of Parliaments — The Yemen Review, April 2019," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7357>

Saudi Military Bases in Al-Mahra Governorate



While opposition to the Saudi- and UAE-led military coalition's presence in Al-Mahra is currently intertwined with an Omani agenda, Al-Mahra's opposition to the secessionist project of the UAE-supported STC has deep historical roots. Though geographically part of southern Yemen, popular sentiment in Al-Mahra has largely been opposed to the governorate becoming part of an independent South Yemen, but rather favors an independent state for Al-Mahra or autonomy within a federal system. Many locals see Al-Mahra's incorporation into South Yemen in 1967 as the result of a military incursion against its will.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

To complicate matters more, in September 2019, after the STC had staged its coup in Aden, Al-Hurayzi, the leader of the anti-Saudi opposition, called for the creation of a National Salvation Council (NSC) representing all southern factions. The plan to create such a council seems to have been coordinated with, among others, Fadi Baoum, son of prominent southern leader Hassan Baoum, who has been leading a branch of the Southern Movement opposed to the Saudi- and UAE-led military coalition. Baoum has maintained ties to Iran⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ and was provided a house in Muscat by Omani authorities, according to Sana'a Center sources. Some figures from Hadramawt and Aden have joined the effort, as well as the prominent military leader Aoudh Mohammed bin Fareed from Shabwa, who in 2015 was accused of handing over Shabwa to the Houthi forces before the latter were pushed back by the anti-Houthi coalition.

The Sana'a Center has learned from a number of sources close to the NSC and regional players that after initially receiving support from Iran, Fadi Baoum has been sponsored mainly by Doha against the backdrop of a loose alliance of interest between Tehran, Doha and Muscat that appears to have begun to emerge following the Saudi- and UAE-imposed siege against Qatar. While the influence on the ground of this new council remains elusive as of now, its proclamation surely hasn't reduced the complexity of shifting allegiances and alliances in the Yemeni war.

For more on Al-Mahra, see the Sana'a Center paper published in July: Yemen's Al-Mahra, From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

The UAE Remains Active on Socotra

On Socotra, the UAE's attempts to cement its presence on the island governorate had previously led to protests, culminating in a Yemeni government complaint at the UN Security Council in 2018. After US intervention and Saudi mediation, Abu Dhabi publicly recognized Yemeni sovereignty in Socotra and withdrew some of its troops, which were replaced by Saudi troops at the time.

106) Elisabeth Kendall, "The Mobilization of Yemen's Eastern Tribes: Al-Mahra's Self-Organization Model," in "Yemen and the Search for Stability: Power, Politics and Society After the Arab Spring," Marie-Christine Heinze (ed.), New York: I.B. Tauris, 2019

107) "Starvation, Diplomacy and Ruthless Friends – The Yemen Annual Review 2018," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 22, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6808>

108) Yahya al-Sewari, "Yemen's Al-Mahra: From isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 5, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7606>

However, in 2019 it became clear that the UAE had not given up on its ambitions on the UNESCO-listed archipelago. In April 2019, the governor of Socotra, Ramzi Mahrous, expressed his opposition to the formation of “security organizations outside of the Yemeni state and local authorities,” in a direct rebuke of the UAE’s attempts to establish its own proxy security forces in Socotra, similar to other UAE-backed proxy forces in mainland Yemen. The governor reiterated this position again in May, after the arrival of UAE-trained security forces and equipment to the island. The UAE also remained active on the archipelago via its local representative Khalfan al-Mazruai, who distributes Emirati aid in Socotra.

Socotra has historical and family ties to the UAE, whose offer of citizenship to a significant number of Socotris in 2018 and 2019 sparked some criticism by opponents of the UAE presence in Yemen. The Islah party also has sway on the island, particularly through the local government, including the governor. Ties among Socotris to the Islah party – the UAE’s number one enemy within the anti-Houthi coalition due to its proximity to the regional Muslim Brotherhood – are tribal rather than ideological in nature. While the Islah party is trying to use the conflict on Socotra in its own struggle with the UAE, the Emirati presence on the island has genuine local opposition. Protests against the UAE that had erupted in 2018 continued in 2019.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

Tariq Saleh’s Statelet by the Red Sea

A new player in the Yemeni power struggle has managed to carve out his own little statelet on the Red Sea Coast: Tariq Saleh, leader of the anti-Houthi offensive against the port city of Hudaydah in 2018. After his uncle, ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh, was killed by his former allies in the armed Houthi movement in late 2017, Tariq Saleh began mobilizing troops of his own under the banner of the National Resistance forces.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ He was funded and backed by the UAE, which had maintained ties with the Saleh family over the course of the conflict. Since the Stockholm Agreement in late 2018 prevented the battle for Hudaydah from advancing, the frontlines have not changed substantively.

In the meantime, Tariq Saleh has consolidated his power in the areas under his control, which stretch from the Bab al-Mandab Strait to the southern perimeter of Hudaydah city. The Saleh family has long maintained ties to the Hudaydah region and Tariq Saleh has proven to be a talented military commander able to mobilize troops. His influence above all is owed to strong support from both leading coalition powers; Saleh is the only leader who has enjoyed unwavering political, military and financial backing from both the UAE and Saudi Arabia. His standing is such that any payment for security forces or the local administration in his areas goes through him.

The UAE pays regular salaries to Saleh and his National Resistance Forces. It also provides logistical support to his troops via the military base it maintains in the port

109) “Popular and governmental escalation... will the Emirati presence in Yemen turn into an occupation? [AR],” Al-Estiklal, September 6, 2019, <https://www.alestiklal.net/ar/view/2292/dep-news-1567464055>

110) “Starvation, Diplomacy and Ruthless Friends – The Yemen Annual Review 2018,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, January 22, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6808>

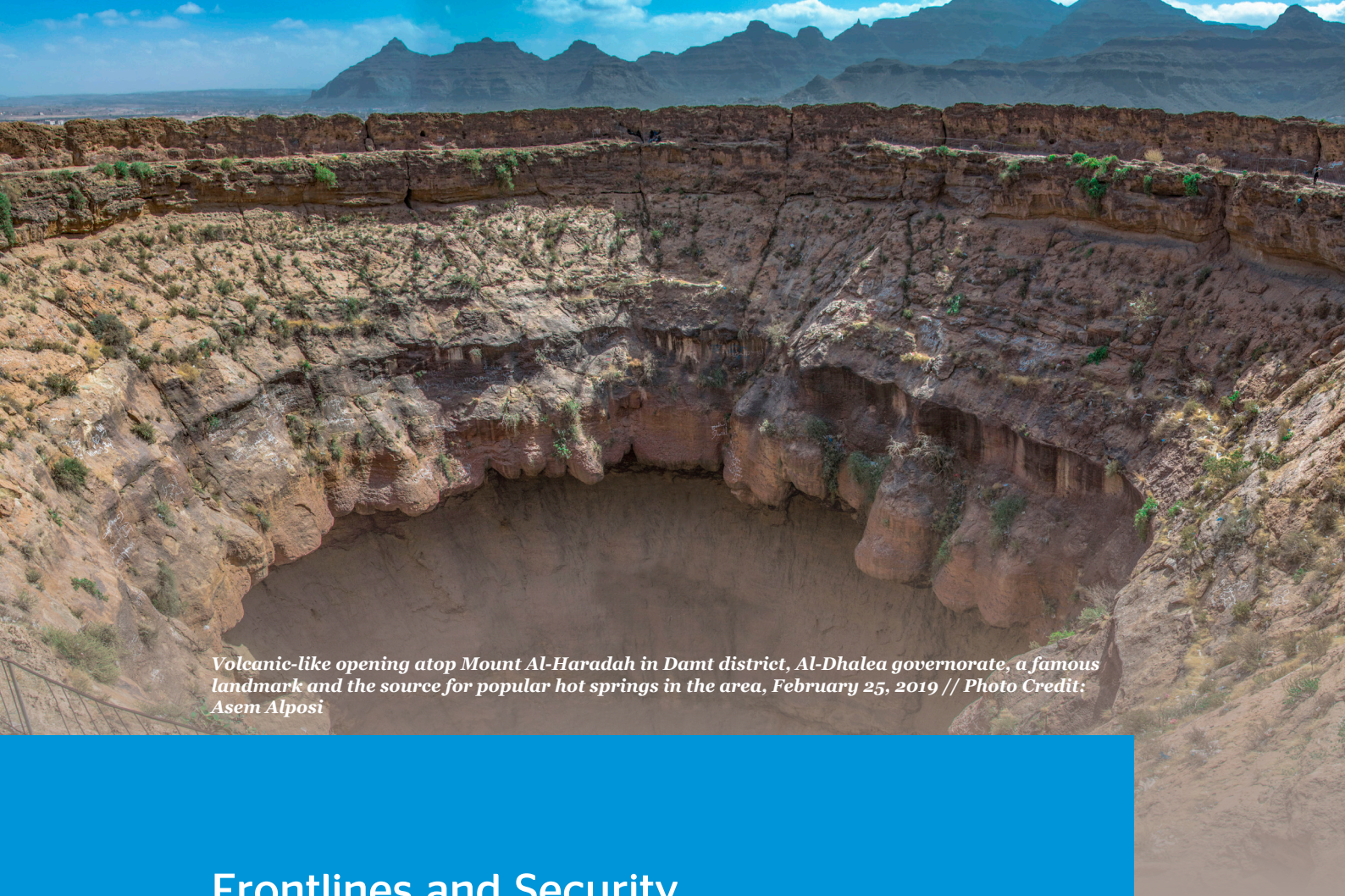
city of Mokha, where about two dozen Emirati generals are stationed, according to Sana'a Center research.

There are indications that Abu Dhabi, despite its declared withdrawal from Yemen, intends to maintain a presence in certain strategic areas along Yemen's coastal regions. This would be in line with the UAE's strategic goal of projecting control over ports and trade routes around the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. A journalist working in the area told the Sana'a Center that the Emirates was rehabilitating the port of Mokha and building an airport there.

In 2019, over a period of only six months, Tariq Saleh recruited about 8,000 new troops, growing by almost two-thirds, a source close to Saleh told the Sana'a Center. While careful vetting procedures and requirements regarding past military experience had typified previous recruitment into the National Resistance forces, the pace and scale of new recruitment suggests standards may have been relaxed. With the National Resistance Forces now numbering some 20,000, they proceeded to take over areas from the southern Giants Brigades (al-Amaliqa) around Hudaydah, which partially withdrew over the course of 2019.

Along with continuing Emirati support, Saleh receives more irregular payments from Saudi Arabia, according to the same source. Furthermore, the Saudis offered logistical support to recruit new brigades with the aim of taking control of the area of Haram in Al-Jawf governorate in the north, where the Yemeni vice president and top general Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar is in charge. Parts of the Yemeni army, including Al-Ahmar, lobbied against this plan, which had not progressed toward implementation by the end of the year.





Volcanic-like opening atop Mount Al-Haradah in Damt district, Al-Dhalea governorate, a famous landmark and the source for popular hot springs in the area, February 25, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

Frontlines and Security

Most Important Anti-Houthi Ground Forces

The Yemeni national army fractured when the civil war broke out in 2014. Some army units fought alongside now-deceased former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the armed Houthi movement, others with the government and allied militias. Saudi Arabia supports army units loyal to the government. Prior to the withdrawal of most UAE troops from the country, Emirati-backed forces such as the Giants Brigades, the National Resistance Forces and the Security Belt operated largely outside the control of the government, answering directly to the UAE. Per the terms of the Riyadh Agreement, Saudi Arabia would assume overall responsibility for such groups in the wake of the UAE pullout.

- **National Resistance Forces:** Led by Tariq Saleh, nephew of late former Yemeni President Saleh. Mainly backed by the UAE, Tariq Saleh also began to receive irregular support from Saudi Arabia in 2019. Previously composed mostly of former army units from northern Yemen, around 4,000 of Saleh's forces led the 2018 battle for Hudaydah together with the Giants Brigades. In 2019, a recruitment drive led to 8,000 new troops – mostly from Taiz, Lahj, Ibb and other northern governorates – joining the National Resistance Forces over a six month period. Now at a strength of roughly 20,000 fighters, pro-Saleh troops took over areas along the Red Sea Coast from withdrawing Giant Brigades in 2019, particularly around Hudaydah.
- **Giants Brigades (al-Amaliqa):** Composed of tribal fighters from southern Yemen as well as Salafis who adhere to the principle of *wali al-amr*, meaning they reject any disobedience to the ruler, who in the case of Yemen is President Hadi. At the same time, they were loyal to the UAE to the extent that Abu Dhabi funded and armed them. Some of these Salafis also previously lived under Houthi siege and thus are motivated by sectarian zeal and desire for revenge. Overall, southerners (particularly from more western governorates) who fought against Houthi forces since 2015 but did not want to be involved in the power struggle between Hadi and the STC joined the Giants after the latter deployed to the Red Sea Coast. With six battalions totalling some 20,000 fighters, the Giants were the largest contingent of the ground forces spearheading the coalition-backed Hudaydah offensive in 2018. In 2019, roughly half the Giants Brigades was redeployed from the coast to Aden, Abyan and Lahj governorates in the aftermath of fighting between government troops and the STC, with the mission of maintaining security and acting as a buffer between the two sides.
- **Joint Forces for the Western Coast:** Formed in 2019, the Joint Forces bring together anti-Houthi forces operating along the Red Sea Coast under a unified command structure. The Joint Forces include Yemeni government troops, the Giants Brigades, National Resistance Forces and the Tihama Resistance – a force of locals, likely totaling several thousand fighters, recruited to join the Hudaydah offensive in 2018. Backed by the UAE, the Joint Forces are led by former Yemeni Defense Minister Haytham Qasem Taher. A logistical base in Mokha, which includes as many as eight Emirati officers, is responsible for managing and provisioning the Joint Forces.
- **Government Army Factions:** Troops from the fractured Yemeni national army affiliated with the government; a significant number of them are affiliated with the Islah party and Yemeni Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar.
 - Islah-affiliated troops control Marib together with tribal alliances. They are also present in parts of Taiz and Hadramawt. Many pro-Islah units were formed in 2012 when President Hadi, in the course of security sector reform during the political transition, recruited more than 20,000 new soldiers affiliated with Islah.
 - In Taiz, Islah-affiliated factions were in conflict with the UAE-backed Abu al-Abbas Brigades, but also with another Yemeni army faction, the 35th Armored Brigade. This latter group, based in the Al-Turbah on the road to Aden, is made up of Yemeni army personnel and left-leaning nationalist figures from around Taiz governorate. The 35th Armored Brigade is supported by the UAE and the two parties have a mutual interest in combating Islah. The killing of the 35th Armored Brigade commander Adnan al-Hammadi in December risks destabilizing the anti-Houthi front in Taiz.

- **Abu al-Abbas Brigades:** UAE-backed force from Taiz composed mostly of fighters from the old city of Taiz and surrounding areas. Its members are of a variety of ideological leanings, led by the Salafi Abu al-Abbas whom the US has designated a fundraiser and military trainer for AQAP. The brigades have regularly been in conflict with Islah-affiliated forces in Taiz. Aligned with the 35th Armored Brigade, the Abu al-Abbas Brigades were severely weakened in 2019 after the defection of hundreds of fighters to pro-Hadi forces.
- **Presidential Protection Forces:** Established in 2012 as a force to protect President Hadi in the framework of security sector reform during the political transition and commanded by his eldest son, Nasser. In many ways, the force is a pale imitation of the Republican Guard former President Ali Abdullah Saleh created for his eldest son, Ahmed. The Presidential Protection Forces were mainly stationed around government institutions in Aden but were routed from the interim capital during fighting with STC-backed Security Belt forces in August. The Riyadh Agreement to end the infighting stipulated the return of the 1st Presidential Protection Brigade to Aden to protect the Ma'ashiq presidential palace while the remaining units would deploy in Abyan and Taiz governorates.
- **Security Belt Forces:** From southern Yemen and affiliated with the STC; numbers more than 15,000 troops, deployed in Aden, Abyan, Al-Dhalea and Lahj. The majority of troops hail from Al-Dhalea and Lahj governorates. Involved in UAE-led operations against AQAP and IS. The UAE set up the Security Belt with fighters from the Southern Resistance that was formed to expel Houthi forces from Aden in 2015. The Security Belt has generally dominated security in Aden and was the primary force battling pro-Hadi forces during the August infighting. The Riyadh Agreement to end the split within the anti-Houthi coalition envisions bringing the Security Belt Forces into a unified command structure with Yemeni government troops, under the overall authority of Saudi Arabia. Previously funded by the UAE, Saudi Arabia began supporting the group following the Emirati pullout from Aden at the end of October. Some members of the Security Belt are both secessionists (opposing Hadi) and Salafis – a rather unusual combination; however, the current Security Belt leader, Wadhah Omar Abdel Aziz, has no Salafi background. Other senior leaders include Hadi bin Breik and Abdelrahman Sheikh, STC officials with Salafi leanings.
- **Hadrami Elite Forces:** UAE-backed force operating in the southern part of Hadramawt, composed of tribal fighters and other locals. Involved in UAE-led operations against AQAP and IS.
- **Shabwa Elite Forces:** Tribal force operating in Shabwa backed by the UAE. Involved in Emirati-led operations against AQAP and IS. Shabwa Elite generally subscribe to a secessionist ideology and support the STC. Some Shabwa Elite elements battled pro-government troops in the governorate following the STC's takeover of Aden. After the signing of the Riyadh Agreement, the group has been sidelined, with most commanders currently based in Aden while fighters have been sent home but continue to receive salaries from the UAE. The group no longer has checkpoints in Shabwa but still maintains a security presence at military camps in Al-Alam and Balhaf.
- **Tribal Alliances** have been formed in various areas to fight alongside anti-Houthi forces or to secure tribal areas nominally held by the government.

The Northern Front

As 2019 began, the Houthis faced a significant threat to their control in northern Yemen in the form of an open challenge from local tribes in Hajjah governorate. Since 2015, the Houthi movement and the Hajjur tribes had maintained a detente based on mutual non-interference. However, tension between the two had been escalating since December 2018 as Houthi forces moved into Kashar district, a strategic area on the edge of the Yemeni highlands that could serve as a stepping stone to Sa'ada governorate, which has considerable strategic and symbolic significance as it borders the southern Saudi province of Jizan and is the birthplace and stronghold of the Houthi movement.

Clashes erupted in February after tribesman cut off Houthi supply lines in reaction to the movement's recruitment and press-ganging of local youths into its military forces. Coalition forces sought to assist the tribesman with airstrikes on Houthi positions.⁽¹¹¹⁾ Meanwhile, the Yemeni government said it had ordered the deployment of seven battalions to Hajjah to "lift the siege" on the Hajjur tribes.⁽¹¹²⁾ Houthi forces responded to the uprising with decisive force, likely in an effort to quell any other nascent tribal rebellions in areas under their control. By mid-March, the fighting had largely subsided following the killing of tribal leader Abu Muslim al-Zakri⁽¹¹³⁾ and the subsequent surrender of other prominent figures.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ A campaign of mass arrests followed and Houthi forces resumed their focus on fighting around Harad city.

As the year went on, fierce fighting took place in Sa'ada governorate, and the Houthi movement publicly trumpeted several major victories along Yemen's northern border with Saudi Arabia against Yemeni government and coalition forces. Coalition-backed forces had launched a 2018 offensive from Jizan into Sa'ada, and regaining ground there provided the Houthis with a morale as well as military boost.

In late August, Houthi forces scored a massive victory in Sa'ada's Kitaf region, near the border with the Saudi province of Najran. Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea, in a press conference the following month, claimed that the movement had destroyed three government brigades and captured 2,000 soldiers in 72 hours of fighting. Video footage broadcast during the press conference showed attacks against armored vehicles, captured small arms as well as men in civilian clothing marching as apparent Houthi prisoners.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ Yemeni military and security sources confirmed to the Sana'a Center at the time that the fighting had resulted in many casualties on both sides and that some government troops had found themselves surrounded after

111) "The Arab coalition launched raids on Houthi militias in Hajjah governorate [AR]," Youm7, February 2, 2019, www.youm7.com/story/2019/2/2//4125904

112) "Presidential directives to move forces from several military areas to break the siege of Hajjur [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, February 28, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/164797>

113) "The president and his deputy offer condolences for the martyrdom of the leader of the Hajjur resistance," Aden Lang, March 11, 2019, <https://adnlnq.info/news/113316/>

114) "The leader of the resistance group, Abu Muslim al-Zakri, has been killed after heavy fighting against the Houthis," Al-Masdar Online, March 10, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/165164>

115) "Press conference of the Armed Forces Speaker Brigadier General Yahya Sarea – Operation Victory from God [AR]," Al Masirah, September 29, 2019, https://almasirah.net/gallery/preview.php?file_id=30579

entering into battle with insufficient prior planning.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ In October, Houthi forces launched another offensive in Sa'ada, this time along border with Jizan. This resulted in the capture of positions surrounding Al-Malahidh, a strategic town in Zaher district that links Sa'ada to Haradh city in Hajjah governorate.⁽¹¹⁷⁾

Fighting in Kitaf and Al-Malahidh managed to reverse many hard-fought gains by anti-Houthi forces in Sa'ada. Coalition forces had captured Al-Malahidh in 2018 in an effort to put pressure on Houthi supply lines in the north. Fighting in the rugged Sa'ada terrain since then has generally been defined by high casualty figures and small gains. Both pro-Saudi and pro-Houthi media regularly report clashes along the Yemeni-Saudi border. It has also been increasingly common to see Saudi Arabia issue death notices for soldiers killed along the border.⁽¹¹⁸⁾

Al-Dhalea Front

Al-Dhalea – situated in Yemen's southwest – also witnessed intense fighting in 2019, as rival forces sought control of the strategic governorate linking northern and southern Yemen. The Houthis were largely pushed out of Al-Dhalea in 2015, though they maintained footholds in parts of the northern Damt and Qataba districts, which link the governorate to neighboring Ibb and Taiz respectively.

Fighting in 2019 centered mainly on the mountainous areas of Al-Oud, located along the border between Al-Dhalea and Ibb and only sparsely populated by remote villages with minimal road access.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ April saw the Houthis gain ground in Qataba and Hasha districts and push into Al-Azariq district by the end of the month. Yemeni media outlets reported that the Houthi advance was bolstered by support from local tribal leaders and high-level defections within anti-Houthi forces.⁽¹²⁰⁾

Houthi forces continued to push toward the town of Qataba in May. The town lies on the intersection of two main roads: one running east-west to Ibb governorate and the other connecting Sana'a and Aden. An attempt to encircle the town by Houthi forces failed after anti-Houthi forces, backed by coalition airstrikes, pushed Houthi forces back to the north in mid-May. The second half of the month saw anti-Houthi forces move toward Houthi positions to the west of Qataba, repelling attempted counterattacks.

The coalition of anti-Houthi forces in Al-Dhalea in April and May contained a diverse array of parties. This included: southern groups backed by the UAE, chiefly the

116) Sana'a Center interviews with Yemeni military and security officials, September and October 2019.

117) "Ansarallah forces launch large-scale offensive in northern Yemen, capture 40 sites," Al-Masdar Online, October 25, 2019, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/ansarallah-forces-launch-large-scale-offensive-in-northern-yemen-capture-40-sites/>

118) Hussein Mahmoud, Ragab Elkabany & Safiye Karabacak, "2 Saudi soldiers killed near Yemen border," Anadolu Agency, November 17, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/2-saudi-soldiers-killed-near-yemen-border/1648189>

119) "Mountain Photos Published For The First Time: Oud ... The Lion Guarding Al-Dhalea [AR]," Maeen Press, April 7, 2019, <https://maeenpress.net/newsyemen/6914/>

120) "Betrayals cause a major setback for the army and resistance and the fall of strategic positions to Houthi hands [AR]," Mareb Press, April 18, 2019, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=150099

governorate's Security Belt forces and the Giants Brigades; Yemeni army brigades; Presidential Protection Forces; Tariq Saleh's National Resistance Forces; and local units and tribal forces.

The diversity of anti-Houthi actors present in Al-Dhalea created tension that occasionally escalated into violence. UAE-backed southern separatist groups also accused the Islah party of deliberately withdrawing from areas in the north of the governorate to allow Houthis to advance south. The threat of the Houthi advance into historically southern territory – and the perceived inability or unwillingness of divided anti-Houthi forces to counter it – led Al-Zubadi, the STC chief, to announce the creation of a joint operations room comprising all southern separatist forces in May.

Following intra-coalition clashes between STC-allied forces and government troops in August and September, the two parties were able to put aside their differences in Al-Dhalea and launch a joint offensive in early October. The combined anti-Houthi forces pushed the Houthis out of most of northern Al-Dhalea and captured the strategic Al-Fakhir area – west of Qataba – that links Al-Dhalea to neighboring Ibb governorate. Houthi forces counterattacked with reinforcements brought in from Ibb, and fighting in western Al-Dhalea continued into November.⁽¹²¹⁾ Saudi-owned media reported that the Houthi movement had destroyed at least eight bridges in the governorate – four bridges linking Murais and Damt district, and four on the main road between Qataba district and neighboring Ibb governorate – to hinder advances from anti-Houthi forces.⁽¹²²⁾ The advances of STC and government forces in Al-Dhalea in October could be an indication of potential benefits of enhanced military coordination – as outlined in the Riyadh Agreement – in future battles against their shared Houthi adversaries.

The year ended on a bloody note when a Houthi missile attack targeted a military parade of STC-aligned forces in Al-Dhalea city, the governorate's capital, on December 29, killing at least 10 and wounding over 20, according to an STC spokesperson.⁽¹²³⁾

Jihadis and Counterterrorism

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

AQAP is at its weakest point since the group was formed 11 years ago. In January 2009, the Yemeni and the (largely exiled) Saudi branches of Al-Qaeda announced they were joining to form a new group called Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Four men – two Yemenis and two Saudis – oversaw the merger. Almost immediately, the new group made international headlines. The two Saudis – Said al-Shihri and Mohammed al-Awfi – were both former Guantanamo Bay detainees, who had been returned to Saudi Arabia and subsequently released. News that both men had

121) "Violent battles in Al-Dhalea and the thunderbolt brigades break militia attacks in Al-Fakhir and Batar [AR]," November 6, 2019, <https://newsyemen.net/new/47666>

122) Osan Salem, "Houthi militias blow up a vital bridge on the road between Sana'a and Aden [AR]," Al Arabiya, November 4, 2019, www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/yemen/2019/11/04/

123) Ahmed al-Haj, "Missile attack kills 10 at military parade in Yemen's south," The Associated Press, December 29, 2019, <https://apnews.com/5d330c2c87d5f7b0c79f148aa3e956ef>

rejoined Al-Qaeda broke the day after newly sworn-in US President Barack Obama signed executive order 13492, announcing his intention to close the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay.⁽¹²⁴⁾

Throughout the remainder of 2009, the newly formed AQAP made itself known as a serious international terrorist threat, wounding Saudi's then-deputy Minister of the Interior Mohammed bin Nayef in an assassination attempt in August and coming close to igniting a bomb on a Detroit-bound passenger jet on Christmas Day. For years, this would be the dominant image of AQAP: an innovative and ruthless terrorist organization determined to carry out international attacks.

But the AQAP of 2019 bears little resemblance to its predecessor from a decade ago. Only one of the four men in AQAP's 2009 announcement video, Qasim al-Raymi, the current head of the group, is still alive and with the organization. The group's initial leader, Nasir al-Wihayshi, and his deputy, Said al-Shihri, were killed in US drone strikes. Shortly after appearing in the video, Mohammed al-Awfi recanted and returned to Saudi Arabia and government oversight. In 2011, the group's best-known figure, Anwar al-Awlaki, was killed in a US drone strike. In 2017, AQAP's top bombmaker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, who designed both the bomb used against Bin Nayef and the one smuggled on to the flight to Detroit, was killed in a US counterterrorism operation.⁽¹²⁵⁾

AQAP has always had two wings: an international terrorist wing and a domestic insurgency wing.⁽¹²⁶⁾ But over the past three years, AQAP's international terrorist wing has withered, due at least in part to US drone strikes and the recruiting appeal of the then-Islamic State (IS) group caliphate, even as its domestic wing continues to fight nearly all sides in Yemen's ongoing war. AQAP still has the desire to strike against the West; it simply lacks the capacity and technical skill to pose the same threat it did a decade ago.

Indeed, of AQAP's most well-known figures, only two are foreigners, including the Norwegian Anders Cameron Ostenvig Dale, and all are focused on the fighting inside Yemen. Throughout 2019, AQAP fought what was essentially a four-front war against its various domestic enemies: the IS affiliate in Yemen, the Houthis, STC-aligned forces and Hadi's government. But in terms of priorities, 2019 can be divided in half. During the first part of the year, AQAP focused much of its attention and most of its attacks against IS. The second half of 2019, however, saw AQAP shift its attention and focus to targeting UAE-backed and STC-affiliated units throughout southern Yemen, particularly in Shabwa and Abyan governorates.

124) Robert F. Worth, "Freed by the U.S., Saudi Becomes a Qaeda Chief," *New York Times*, January 22, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/23/world/middleeast/23yemen.html?searchResultPosition=21>

125) "Statement from the President," The White House, October 10, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-from-the-president-11/>

126) Gregory D. Johnsen, "The Two Faces of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *War on the Rocks*, October 11, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/the-two-faces-of-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula/>

AQAP vs. IS

The jihadi civil war between AQAP and IS, which began in July 2018,⁽¹²⁷⁾ continued throughout 2019. For both AQAP and IS this was a key fight of 2019. Each side claimed more attacks against the other than they did against any other single target. As in 2018, this fighting spilled into internet forums and each group's propaganda output, as both sides repeatedly demonized the other in videos and written statements.

Much of the fighting, which was localized to Al-Bayda governorate, took the form of sniper attacks and hit-and-run ambushes. However, in March, an IS suicide bomber managed to detonate his explosives inside the house of Abu Wafa al-Suraymi, an AQAP commander, who was killed in the blast.⁽¹²⁸⁾ AQAP responded in the following weeks by overrunning several IS positions, including a seven-cell cement prison. This attack, along with a purported "confession" of a former IS fighter, was featured in the AQAP video, "Prisoners of the Khawarij in Yemen."⁽¹²⁹⁾ That video along with AQAP's running series – "God Testifies that They are Liars" – were designed to highlight IS "hypocrisy" for a local Yemeni audience.⁽¹³⁰⁾

AQAP vs. the Houthis

Much like in 2018, AQAP continued to clash with the Houthis in Al-Bayda. Most were mortar attacks, but AQAP also launched periodic ambushes against Houthi targets. Notably, however, on September 13, AQAP and the Houthis conducted a prisoner exchange. Although initial news reports suggested that AQAP had received back 50 fighters in exchange for releasing 65 Houthi prisoners, later reports from the ground suggested that the exchange was actually much smaller with each side receiving six prisoners.⁽¹³¹⁾

Most of the Houthi prisoners had been captured in the past two years of fighting, while according to sources on the ground, the Al-Qaeda prisoners had originally been detained before the start of the current war by then-President Saleh's government and held by what was then known as the National Security Bureau. AQAP later released pictures of fighters welcoming the prisoners.⁽¹³²⁾ However, the exchange did nothing to change the situation on the battlefield. Three days after the prisoner exchange, AQAP carried out a bomb attack against a Houthi position.

127) Tore Refslund Hamming, "Why Did the Jihadi Cold War in Yemen End?" War on the Rocks, November 7, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/11/why-did-the-jihadi-cold-war-in-yemen-end/>

128) Tore Refslund Hamming, Twitter post, "New escalation in AQAP - IS...", March 28, 2019, <https://twitter.com/ToreRHamming/status/1111275402968920064>

129) "New video message from Ansar al-Shari'ah in the Arabian Peninsula: 'Prisons of the Kharijites in Yemen,'" Jihadology, May 21, 2019, <https://jihadology.net/2019/05/21/new-video-message-from-ansar-al-shariah-in-the-arabian-peninsula-prisons-of-the-kharijites-in-yemen/>

130) "New video message from Al-Qaidah in the Arabian Peninsula: 'God Testifies That They Are Liars #7,'" Jihadology, May 7, 2019, <https://jihadology.net/2019/05/07/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-arabian-peninsula-god-testifies-that-they-are-liars-7/>

131) Prisoner Exchange between the Houthis and Ansar al-Shariah [AR], Al-Ayyam, September 19, 2019, <https://www.alayyam.info/news/TXT7706G-Y48T4R-1CA3>; Interviews with sources in Al-Bayda governorate, September and October 2019.

132) Elisabeth Kendall, Twitter post, "#AQAP releases photos of prisoner swap Friday with #Yemen's Houthis...", September 16, 2019, https://twitter.com/Dr_E_Kendall/status/1173492281091010562

AQAP vs. STC-Affiliated Forces

Throughout the first half of 2019, AQAP carried out relatively few attacks on STC-affiliated forces, focusing most of its attention on its ongoing tit-for-tat war with IS. However, on June 4, AQAP issued a brief statement to “Muslims living in Shabwa,” warning of future attacks on the UAE-backed Shabwa Elite Forces.⁽¹³³⁾ “Do not congregate near them, ride in their vehicles or gather around their camps,” the statement said.

On August 2, AQAP attacked and overran a UAE-backed Security Belt base in the Al-Mahfad region of Abyan.⁽¹³⁴⁾ At least 19 soldiers were killed in the attack, and AQAP remained inside the base for several hours.⁽¹³⁵⁾ Within weeks of the attack, according to both sources on the ground and international analysts, AQAP began transferring fighters from Al-Bayda to Shabwa, suggesting that AQAP was beginning to focus more on its war with STC-affiliated units than on fighting IS.⁽¹³⁶⁾ One of the individuals who moved to Shabwa in late August or early September was Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki, also known as Abu Laith, AQAP’s emir in Shabwa. On November 7, the United States announced a reward of up to \$6 million for “information leading to the identification or location” of Al-Awlaki.⁽¹³⁷⁾

Following this move of fighters into Shabwa, AQAP stepped up its attacks on STC-affiliated forces in both Shabwa and Abyan, hitting a Security Belt forces’ post in early September, and carrying out multiple strikes against individuals linked to the STC in December.

AQAP vs. the Hadi Government

Of the four fronts in the domestic war, AQAP has targeted soldiers and units affiliated with the Yemeni government the least. This is partly because Hadi’s government has fewer frontline targets to hit in Al-Bayda, Shabwa, and Abyan governorates, and partly because pro-Hadi units have targeted AQAP the least.

133) “AQAP Statement,” Jihadology, June 4, 2019, https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2019/06/al-Qa%CC%84%E2%80%99idah-in-the-Arabian-Peninsula-%E2%80%9CStatement%E2%80%9D2.pdf

134) Mohammed Aydarus, “The Details of the Al-Mahfad Raid [AR],” Al-Masdar Online, August, 3, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/170288>

135) “Al-Qaeda attacks Yemen army base in Abyan,” The National, August 2, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/al-qaeda-attacks-yemeni-army-base-in-abyan-1.893767>

136) Katherine Zimmerman, Twitter post, “Saad bin Atef al Awlaki is #AQAP’s emir in Shabwah...,” November 7, 2019, <https://twitter.com/KatieZimmerman/status/1192491953428090880>; Confidential interviews with sources in Shabwa governorate

137) “Remarks by Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Diplomatic Security,” State Department, November 7, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/assistant-secretary-of-state-for-the-bureau-of-diplomatic-security-michael-evanoff-and-ambassador-nathan-a-sales-coordinator-for-counterterrorism-on-the-state-departments-rewards-for-justic/>

The Islamic State Group

Much like AQAP, the IS affiliate in Yemen is at its weakest point since the group was formed in 2014. IS, also known as *Daesh*, suffered a number of defections and casualties as a result of its ongoing war with AQAP, losses it can ill afford as the group's footprint in Yemen continues to recede. Perhaps its greatest loss, however, was the arrest of its commander, Mohammed al-Sayari, known as Abu Osama al-Muhajir as well as Abu Sulayman al-Adani. Al-Sayari was captured by Saudi Special Forces, backed by US Special Operations, reportedly in Al-Ghaydah, the capital of Al-Mahra governorate, far from IS camps in Al-Bayda.⁽¹³⁸⁾ (Al-Muhajir was sanctioned by the US in October 2017.) The raid reportedly also captured the group's top financial expert.⁽¹³⁹⁾

Despite these losses, however, IS is still capable of launching one-off attacks, such as the August 1 suicide attack, which targeted a police station in Aden, killing 13.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾

US Counterterrorism Operations

Unlike during the final years of the Obama administration and the first year of the Trump administration, the US now only rarely acknowledges drone and airstrikes in Yemen. The US made one statement in 2019, taking credit for eight strikes during the months of January, February and March.⁽¹⁴¹⁾ One of those strikes was the January 1 strike that killed Jamal al-Badawi, one of the architects of the 2000 USS Cole attack, in Marib. This change is the result of a March 6 Executive Order, which revoked part of a 2016 Obama-era executive order that required the United States to report on drone strikes it conducts outside “areas of active hostilities.”

According to the New America Foundation, which tracks the number and type of US strikes in Yemen, the United States carried out 11 total strikes in 2019, four drone strikes and seven airstrikes. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism tallied nine confirmed strikes in 2019. Regardless of the exact number, US drone strikes and airstrikes in Yemen have fallen off dramatically from 2017, when they totaled more than 130 strikes in the first year of the Trump administration.

138) Kareem Fahim & Missy Ryan, "Saudi Arabia announces capture of an ISIS leader in Yemen in a U.S.-backed raid," The Washington Post, June 25, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/saudi-arabia-announces-capture-of-islamic-state-leader-in-yemen-in-us-backed-raid-backed/2019/06/25/79734ca2-976a-11e9-9a16-dc551ea5a43b_story.html?noredirect=on

139) Ayman al-Ghabaywi, “Details of the Seizure of a Daesh Leader in Yemen [AR],” Independent Arabia, June 25, 2019, www.independentarabia.com/node/35801-إلغاء-هذه-تفاصيل-العربي/الأخبار/العالم-القبض-على-زعيم-تنظيم-داعش-في-اليمن

140) “Daesh Claims Attack on Police Station in Aden [AR],” Al-Masdar Online, August 2, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/170257>

141) "CENTCOM Yemen Strikes Summary, January 1 - April 1, 2019," CENTCOM, April 1, 2019, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1801674/centcom-yemen-strike-summary-jan-1-apr-1-2019/>



The city of Ibb, September 19, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

Economic Warfare: Government and Houthi Struggle for Control Deepens

International Legitimacy vs. Domestic Market Dominance

Over the course of 2019, economic warfare between the government and the Houthis intensified in a jockeying for supremacy that shortchanged ordinary Yemenis in terms of opportunities, income and essentials as basic as fuel and water. Battles that began in previous years over fuel imports, monetary policy, control over commercial banks, money exchangers and telecommunication companies gained pace, evolved and continued to narrow the space in which business and financial interests could operate in Yemen. The struggle over various aspects of the economy has developed a familiar rhythm, with the Yemeni government typically issuing a new directive or regulation and the Houthi authorities moving to block, regardless of the consequences. At each turn, the government has grounded its policy choices in economic rationale, however, given the wider context in which these policies are made, there is no escaping their provocative and politically motivated nature. On the other side, the armed Houthi movement lacks the cover of “international legitimacy” to sanction its policy responses; instead, these are usually justified as self-defense against measures intended to choke the group economically. It is clear both sides are battling to protect and advance their own economic interests and those of their allies, often with negative repercussions for the wider population.

The difficult operating environment that banks, businesses and money exchange companies must contend with is shaped by the competing points of economic leverage that the government and Houthis use to their advantage. The government has the upper hand in regulating goods entering Yemen, specifically fuel and food imports, due to its international recognition and the logistical and financial support it receives from Saudi Arabia. These factors enhance the appeal for Yemeni merchants and bankers to work within the parameters set by the government through its Economic Committee and the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) in Aden. The CBY offers Yemeni banks an internationally accepted route to connect to regional financial networks and facilitate imports for the country's merchant class.

As for the Houthis, their leverage comes from ruling over Yemen's most densely populated areas and thus the greatest share of the local consumer market. The Houthis retain tight control over the capital, Sana'a, Yemen's economic hub where the majority of banks, money exchangers, businesses and state-run economic institutions are located, along with a large concentration of individual and company assets. Aside from the central bank in Sana'a, which is responsible for regulating formal and informal banking activity in Houthi-held areas, one of the other key economic institutions that the Houthis lean on to offset the government's external leverage over imports is the state-run Yemen Petroleum Company (YPC).

Since July 2018, the Houthi-run YPC has technically operated as the sole distributor of fuel in Houthi-controlled territory. Any fuel importer that wishes to import via Hudaydah port – the country's busiest – needs not only permission from the government and the Saudi-led coalition to enter the port and unload, but also the Houthis. In order to gain the requisite Houthi permission, the fuel importer must essentially agree to hand over their shipment to YPC, which then distributes the fuel – both officially and on the black market – in Houthi-controlled territory.

Fuel Impasse Leads to UN Special Envoy's Mediation

In 2019, the contrasting points of economic leverage outlined above shaped a recurring impasse between the government and the Houthis over fuel imports in Hudaydah. The first major impasse began in March and continued into April and the second broke out in September.⁽¹⁴²⁾ In both instances, vessels were backed up off the coast of Hudaydah and prevented from advancing from the coalition holding area to Hudaydah port.

In March and April, the Houthis blamed the government for the fuel hold up, singling out its enforcement of Decree 75 as the main contributing factor. They also criticized the Saudi-led coalition for the logistical support it provides the government regarding the policing of vessels headed toward Hudaydah port.⁽¹⁴³⁾ Decree 75, announced by

142) "Game of Parliaments – The Yemen Review, April 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7357#Warring-parties-Economic>; "Aramco's Ashoura – The Yemen Review, September 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 14, 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8221#New_Fuel_Crisis_Causes_Price_Spikes

143) "The Yemen Review - October 2018," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 10, 2018, <http://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6620>

the government in September 2018 as a way to stabilize the rial, outlines a set of requirements that fuel importers are technically meant to meet in order to be granted government and Saudi-led coalition permission to import fuel to Yemen.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ Among the main requirements are documents that show the importer intends to use the formal banking system to pay the exporter.⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ The Technical Office of the government's Economic Committee has been known to grant exceptions, occasionally having approved importer requests to use a money exchange company to either cover part of a payment due or to transfer funds into a correspondent bank account abroad or the exporter's bank account.

The Houthis sought to work within the parameters of Decree 75 while simultaneously trying to undermine it.⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ Decree 75 left a number of Houthi-linked importers suddenly unable to import fuel to Hudaydah directly due to their inability to meet requirements related to bank statements. These importers had been using informal financial networks, namely the money exchange companies, to facilitate their imports.⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ The fact remains, however, that importers who wish to import via Hudaydah port require Houthi permission to berth and unload.⁽¹⁴⁸⁾ Hence, the Houthis mitigated the impact of Decree 75 by entering into partnerships with government-approved importers who also agreed to meet the terms set for doing business in Houthi-controlled territory, namely the acceptance of the YPC as sole distributor.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾

In March and April 2019, with fuel tankers sitting idle in the Red Sea rather than docking at Hudaydah, the Houthi movement, in a well-executed lobbying campaign targeting various UN agencies, sought to pin the blame on the government.⁽¹⁵⁰⁾ In addition to directly communicating the Houthi position over the phone or in meetings with UN officials, the Houthi-run YPC also organized demonstrations outside the UN compound in Sana'a.⁽¹⁵¹⁾ The Houthis called for the UN to pressure the government to ease some of Decree 75's conditions and let the vessels stacked up off the coast of Hudaydah dock at the port.⁽¹⁵²⁾

Vessels stacking up off the coast was a powerful image that supported the Houthi argument that the government and the coalition were imposing a blockade. The Houthis' argument was strengthened further when they warned of the fuel shortages that eventually hit Houthi-controlled territories in northern Yemen.⁽¹⁵³⁾ Indicators suggest, however, that the Houthis had a direct hand in stage managing the fuel crisis despite trying to absolve themselves of any responsibility.

144) Ibid.

145) Ibid.

146) Sana'a Center interviews with fuel importers and brokers, October 2018 and March, April and September 2019.

147) "The Yemen Review – October 2018," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 10, 2018, <http://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6620>

148) Sana'a Center interviews with fuel importers and brokers, July 2018–December 2019.

149) Sana'a Center interviews with fuel importers and brokers, October 2018–April 2019.

150) Sana'a Center interviews with UN officials, March and April 2019.

151) YPC, "Protest in front of the United Nations...[AR]", Facebook, March 24, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/ypcye.OilNews/photos/a.1012954425382461/2434619376549285/?type=3&theater>; "The UN's Stockholm Syndrome – The Yemen Review, March 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, April 8, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7269>

152) Sana'a Center interviews with UN and YPC officials, March and April 2019.

153) Ibid.

Sana'a Center investigations in March, April and May 2019 found that the Houthis urged fuel importers not to submit their fuel import applications to the Technical Office of the Economic Committee, the government body responsible for assessing their compatibility with Decree 75.⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ Fuel importers told the Sana'a Center that the Houthis, anticipating ships would be denied entry to Hudaydah port due to the fact that no application had been submitted, offered to pay the subsequent demurrage costs racked up while their shipments sat idly off the coast.⁽¹⁵⁵⁾ The importers, frustrated with more burdensome government regulations and not inclined to risk their access to the more lucrative markets in Houthi-controlled territory, went along with the scheme.

Irrespective of the government's stated economic rationale as to why Decree 75 was necessary, it represented a clear escalation of the economic warfare being waged against the Houthis. The decree also has been interpreted as a politically motivated attempt to curb Houthi revenues from fuel imports that could be used to fund their war effort. Thus, the measures taken by the Houthis in response to Decree 75 can be understood as part of a concerted effort to protect the economic interests of its business associates and the movement as a whole.

New Rules, a New Ban and a New Crisis

The government upped the ante further still in June and July 2019, starting with a blanket ban on any fuel shipments arriving from Al-Hamriya Port in Sharjah, UAE, or any port in Iraq or Oman, and followed by the introduction of Decree 49.⁽¹⁵⁶⁾ The Economic Committee promoted the ban as a necessary measure to curb "illegal fuel trade" and "fraudulent specifications" on fuel import applications.⁽¹⁵⁷⁾ Specifically, the restrictions were an attempt to reduce the import of cheap Iranian fuel transhipped since 2016 via the UAE or Oman and then sold on the local market in Houthi-controlled territories for a markup; the ban was accompanied by a new condition that importers provide a certificate of origin with their import permit application.⁽¹⁵⁸⁾

Decree 49 stipulated that fuel importers must pay predetermined fuel import taxes and customs fees to the government (calculated in accordance with the weight of the shipment) as well permit an inspection of the fuel prior to its arrival to Yemen.⁽¹⁵⁹⁾ The government's proposed blanket enforcement of Decree 49 to all Yemeni ports was interpreted as another attempt to strip the Houthis of revenues the group was

154) Sana'a Center interviews, March, April and May 2019.

155) Ibid.

156) Economic Committee, "Based on Cabinet Decree No. 75...[AR]," Facebook, June 22 2019, <https://bit.ly/2KAE5z9>; "An Interim Capital of Carnage – The Yemen Review, July 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 4, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7941#Analysis-The-Challenges-to-Implementing-Decree-49-to-Regulate-Fuel-Imports>

157) Economic Committee, "Based on Cabinet Decree No. 75...[AR]," Facebook, June 22 2019, <https://bit.ly/2KAE5z9>

158) Ibid.

159) "The Government Issued Decree for Reinstating the Mechanisms to Import Fuel through the Aden Refineries Company," Economic Committee, July 3, 2019, <https://ecyemen.com/announcements/1468/>



A shipment of wheat flour from the WFP being offloaded at Hudaydah port, June 25, 2019 // Photo Credit: Abduljabbar Zeyad

generating as a result of its control over Hudaydah port.⁽¹⁶⁰⁾ Although the government started implementing Decree 49 from August 2019, it failed to do so at Hudaydah because of resistance from the Houthi authorities and fuel importers.

In September 2019, fuel imports to Hudaydah were blocked as a result of another fuel impasse that bore clear similarities to the standoff in March and April.⁽¹⁶¹⁾ This time, however, the Houthis could cite Decree 49 alongside Decree 75 for the build up of vessels and subsequent fuel shortages that hit Houthi-controlled territories.⁽¹⁶²⁾ Once again, fuel importers were encouraged not to submit any fuel import applications to the Economic Committee. And once again, while the Houthis lobbied UN agencies, INGOs, and other humanitarian actors headquartered in Sana'a, including the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSES-GY), available fuel was sold for vastly inflated prices in northern Yemen, with 20 liters of fuel going for up to 20,000 Yemeni rials (YR) on the black market in Sana'a.⁽¹⁶³⁾ This was a 174 percent increase from the August market rate of YR7,300.⁽¹⁶⁴⁾

160) Sana'a Center interviews with Yemeni economists and YPC officials in July and August 2019.

161) "Aramco's Ashoura – The Yemen Review, September 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 14, 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8221#New_Fuel_Crisis_Causes_Price_Spikes

162) Ibid.

163) Ibid; Sana'a Center interviews with UN officials, September and October 2019.

164) Sana'a Center interviews with Sana'a based officials, August 2019 and January 2020.

UN Steps In to Coordinate Port Access Issues, but Revenue Dispute Remains

The difficulty that OSESGY and other UN agencies face when being lobbied by the Houthis or the government, is access to independently verified information regarding, for example, the status of fuel import applications and the amount of fuel that has actually entered Hudaydah. Data is intentionally distorted in pursuit of political and economic objectives. While the Houthis pinned the blame on the government and the coalition, a closer examination of vessel activity at Hudaydah port during the months of August, September and October 2019 indicates that the Houthis may have delayed the entry of fuel shipments in order to strengthen their arguments.⁽¹⁶⁵⁾ During this time, like during the spring crisis, there also was an uptick in activity on the black market. One clear example that supports this analysis concerns the movements of the fuel vessel DAMAS. Despite it being granted approval from both the Economic Committee and the Saudi-led coalition to enter Hudaydah, the vessel remained outside of Hudaydah port from August 20 until September 12.⁽¹⁶⁶⁾ Google Earth satellite imagery also revealed that some of the berths at Hudaydah port were vacant on a number of occasions during September thus could have been used to unload fuel shipments.⁽¹⁶⁷⁾

At the end of September, the OSESGY stepped in to mediate the impasse and secured a waiver from both the government and the coalition for the entry of a number of vessels to Hudaydah.⁽¹⁶⁸⁾ The waiver paved the way for the mechanism that remained in place at the end of 2019, which sees the OSESGY acting as the initial point of contact for fuel importers who wish to bring in fuel via Hudaydah.⁽¹⁶⁹⁾ The OSESGY then forwards any fuel import applications it receives to the Technical Office of the Economic Committee.⁽¹⁷⁰⁾ The OSESGY, along with the Hudaydah central bank branch and government and Houthi authorities, also has a degree of oversight as to whether the fees paid to the government by fuel importers in accordance with Decree 49 are deposited in the Hudaydah central bank, as agreed by both parties.⁽¹⁷¹⁾ Per government figures published on the Economic Committee website, YR12.8 billion were generated via fuel imports to Hudaydah from August 13 until November 14, 2019.⁽¹⁷²⁾ The funds that have been deposited thus far — \$80 million as of January 2020 — are due to be disbursed to public health and education employees in Houthi-controlled territories, although discussions continue over the list of names selected to receive salary payments.⁽¹⁷³⁾ The government's list is essentially public sector employees on

165) Sana'a Center investigation using vessel tracking software, August-October 2019.

166) Sana'a Center investigation using vessel tracking software, August-September 2019.

167) Sana'a Center review of Google Earth satellite imagery, September 2019.

168) Sana'a Center interviews with UN officials, September and October 2019.

169) Sana'a Center interviews with UN officials, October, November and December 2019; "Negotiation and Deescalation – The Yemen Review, November 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 16, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8501#Payroll-Initiative-Hudaydah-CBY-Account-to-Collect-Import-Tariffs>

170) Ibid.

171) Ibid.

172) "Among results of implementing Cabinet Decree 49 of 2019," Economic Committee, November 15, 2019, <https://ecyemen.com/economic-reports/1996/>

173) Sana'a Center interviews with government and UN officials, September, October and November 2019.

the government payroll before the Houthis captured Sana'a in September 2014. The Houthis argue that the payments should reflect changes since 2014, in which time there has been a significant influx and integration of Houthi loyalists as well as more general changes of personnel brought about by sickness and retirement across state-run institutions in Houthi-controlled territories.

Another potential obstacle concerns the import of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) via Hudaydah and whether the importer should be made to pay fees into the central bank branch in accordance with Decree 49.⁽¹⁷⁴⁾ The Houthis argue LPG shipments should be exempt and warned of shortages otherwise, while the government continues to insist that no exception should be granted to LPG shipments.

Battle for Control Over Yemeni Banks and Money Exchangers

Food Imports and Competing Banking Regulations

The government and Houthi authorities have good reason to wrestle for control over Yemeni banks and money exchange companies: Access to foreign currency through formal and informal banking networks is critical for Yemeni merchants to facilitate trade, specifically imports, with the country overwhelmingly dependent on goods from abroad.⁽¹⁷⁵⁾

In 2018, the government offered incentives to both food and fuel importers to adhere to new import, and accompanying banking, regulations (For full details on fuel import regulations, see 'Fuel Impasse Leads to UN Special Envoy Mediation'). The food import mechanism introduced in July 2018 and refined in October 2018⁽¹⁷⁶⁾ is tied to the \$2 billion deposit that Saudi Arabia provided the government in January 2018 to facilitate import financing.⁽¹⁷⁷⁾ In June 2018, the government announced that funds from the Saudi deposit would be allocated to underwrite imports of five essential commodities: rice, wheat, sugar, milk and cooking oil. Select essential medicines were later added to the list.⁽¹⁷⁸⁾ In October 2018, the government introduced a new financial mechanism for accessing funds allocated from the Saudi deposit at a favorable

174) Sana'a Center interviews with government and UN officials, November and December 2019.

175) Farea al-Muslimi, "Revitalizing Yemen's Banking Sector: Necessary Steps for Restarting Formal Financial Cycles and Basic Economic Stabilization," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 15, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7049>; "Starvation, Diplomacy and Ruthless Friends: The Yemen Annual Review 2018," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 22, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6808>

176) "Yemen at the UN – July 2018 Review," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 5, 2018, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/yemen-at-the-un/6341>; "The Yemen Review – November 2018," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 8 2018, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6712>

177) "Yemen at the UN – January 2018 Review," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 12, 2018, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/yemen-at-the-un/5389#billion_in_Saudi_Support_for_the_CBY

178) "Yemen at the UN – July 2018 Review," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, August 5, 2018, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/yemen-at-the-un/6341>

below-market exchange rate of 440 Yemeni rials per US dollar.⁽¹⁷⁹⁾ Fuel importers were required to obtain letters of credit (LCs) from Yemeni banks and then deposit the equivalent Yemeni rials at the central bank in Aden to access dollars from the Saudi deposit.⁽¹⁸⁰⁾ The Houthis responded by trying to disincentivize importers from engaging in the government food import mechanism in the form of a circular issued by the central bank in Sana'a in October 2018.⁽¹⁸¹⁾ The circular prohibited Yemeni banks from using cash to underwrite LCs for food importers, instructing them to issue checks instead.⁽¹⁸²⁾

The central bank in Sana'a introduced an additional protective measure in March 2019.⁽¹⁸³⁾ Worried about the loss of liquidity to government-held areas, Houthi authorities essentially banned Yemeni banks from issuing LCs for food and medicine importers headquartered in Sana'a.⁽¹⁸⁴⁾ Although several major food and medicine importers are headquartered in areas outside Houthi control most are in the capital and were subject to the new restriction. Unable to access the funds at the below-market exchange rate from the Saudi deposits, importers began purchasing US dollars from the market, specifically from money exchange companies. Generally speaking, any increased costs that importers must pay, including costs tied to a higher exchange rate, are passed on to the consumer. Moreover, any increased demand for foreign currency from the market threatens to place downward pressure on the value of the Yemeni rial and thus further decrease Yemenis' local purchasing power.

The targeting of Yemeni banks was a key and recurring feature of Houthi attempts to respond to and mitigate the impact of the government's economic decrees. Aside from trying to disincentivize importers from complying with government regulations and prevent the loss of liquidity from Sana'a to Aden, the Houthis sought to secure access to foreign currency for Houthi-linked importers. One of the main components of this strategy was to demand access to the foreign currency that had been deposited in Yemeni banks by UN agencies and INGOs.

During the conflict, humanitarian funding has come to represent the second-largest source of foreign currency after remittances. The bank most used by the UN humanitarian response plan has been the International Bank of Yemen (IBY), which has handled an estimated \$1 billion per annum since the current conflict began.⁽¹⁸⁵⁾ In 2019, \$3.51 billion was delivered in accordance with the UN humanitarian response plan, in addition to at least \$409.5 million outside of the plan.⁽¹⁸⁶⁾ Aside from IBY,

179) "The Yemen Review – November 2018," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 8, 2018, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6712>

180) Ibid.

181) "The Yemen Review – October 2018," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 10, 2018, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6620>

182) Ibid.

183) "The UN's Stockholm Syndrome – The Yemen Review, March 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, April 8, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7269#Houthis-Restrict-Import-Financing>

184) Ibid.

185) "Stockholm Agreement Meets Yemeni Reality – The Yemen Review, January 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 11, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7027#UN-to-Channel-Humanitarian-Aid-Through-the-Central-Bank-in-Aden>

186) "Country snapshot for 2019," Financial Tracking Service, January 22, 2020, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/248/summary/2019>

another major handler of humanitarian funds is Tadhamon International Islamic Bank (TIIB), more commonly referred to as Tadhamon. Both banks were targeted by the Houthi authorities over the course of 2019.

On February 10, 2019, members of the Houthi-run National Security Bureau (NSB) entered Tadhamon's main branch in Sana'a and arrested three senior employees, who were released at the end of the month.⁽¹⁸⁷⁾ According to several Sana'a Center sources, the NSB's actions came after Tadhamon refused to sell foreign currency to Yahya Ali al-Habari, one of the biggest Houthi-linked importers.⁽¹⁸⁸⁾ Al-Habari turned to Tadhamon after the Central Bank in Aden declined his request for import financing, and sought to purchase foreign currency at the same below-market exchange rate that Tadhamon had received from external actors supporting humanitarian assistance efforts in Yemen.⁽¹⁸⁹⁾ In July 2019, the Houthis also detained IBY general manager Ahmed Thabet al-Absi, more commonly known as Ahmed Thabet. At the time of his detention, Al-Masdar reported he was taken in after refusing the Houthis' demand for access to foreign currency.⁽¹⁹⁰⁾ Ahmed Thabet was released in late October 2019. IBY, the top conduit of humanitarian funding, found itself in a vulnerable position as a result of the economic warfare between the government and the Houthis.

The government, too, sought greater control over the foreign currency funding humanitarian aid efforts. In January 2019, the then-governor of the central bank in Aden, Mohammed Zammam, met with the UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, Lise Grande, and advocated for humanitarian aid to be channeled through the central bank in Aden rather than IBY or Tadhamon.⁽¹⁹¹⁾ Zammam and Grande reportedly reached an agreement in principle, but by the end of the year, the government had yet to convince UN agencies, INGOs and humanitarian actors of the central bank in Aden's readiness — or suitability, given its lack of impartiality — to handle humanitarian funding before exchanging the foreign currency to Yemeni rials and forwarding the allocated funds to the assigned partners or beneficiaries.⁽¹⁹²⁾

The idea that the UN was considering channeling humanitarian aid through the central bank in Aden was still sending shockwaves through Sana'a when, a month later, the internationally recognized government made its next move: It secured the reallocation of the SWIFT code from the Cooperative and Agricultural Credit Bank (CAC Bank) in Sana'a to a parallel bank that the government had set up in November 2018 under the same name.⁽¹⁹³⁾ This was significant as CAC Bank in Sana'a had been operating as the Houthis' international banking arm following the transfer of the Central Bank of Yemen headquarters from Sana'a to Aden in September 2016 and, a year later, the reallocation of the Sana'a central bank's SWIFT to Aden.⁽¹⁹⁴⁾

187) "Diplomacy Sinking at Hudaydah Port – The Yemen Review, February 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, March 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7162#Yemeni-Banks-Face-Repercussions>

188) Ibid.

189) Ibid.

190) "Houthis Kidnap International Bank of Yemen Director in Sana'a," Al Masdar Online, August 10, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/170191>

191) Yemen Satellite Channel Youth Yemen Youth TV Channel, "The United Nations decides to transfer the funds...[AR]," Facebook, January 22, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=348910679028865&id=173809122693747

192) Sana'a Center interviews with UN and government officials, December 2019.

193) Sana'a Center interviews with senior Yemeni banking officials, November 2018 and February 2019.

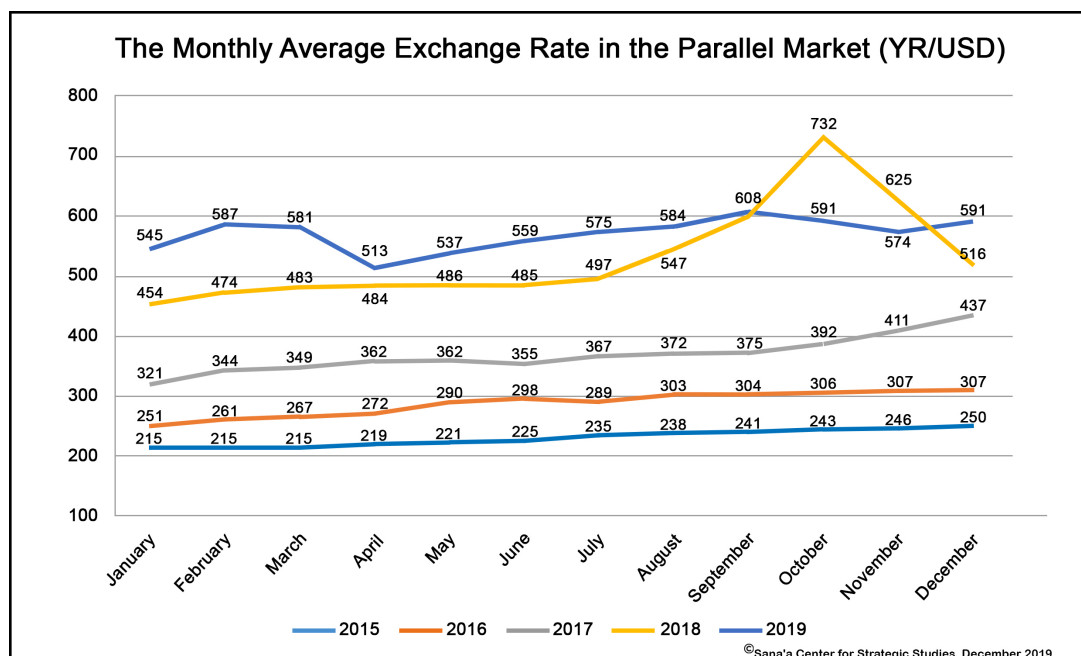
194) Ibid.

Yemeni Rial and Government Food Import Mechanism Under Threat

Volatile Currency, Commodity Markets Expected as Saudi Deposit Runs Out

Remaining funds from Saudi Arabia's \$2 billion January 2018 deposit had dwindled to \$300 million by the end of 2019.⁽¹⁹⁵⁾ With the Saudi deposit expected to be fully depleted before the end of the first quarter of 2020, one of the major stabilizing forces for the local currency and local commodity prices would be removed.⁽¹⁹⁶⁾ Senior Yemeni banking officials feared what might happen if the government and the central bank in Aden were unable to obtain a significant amount of foreign currency to help fill the gap. A further injection of foreign aid from Saudi Arabia had been rumored, but hadn't come to pass by mid-January 2020.⁽¹⁹⁷⁾

Without a foreign currency injection, the Yemeni rial is likely to be hit hard; some Yemeni economists fear its value could plummet to 1,000 rials per US dollar, or more.⁽¹⁹⁸⁾ Yemenis already struggling to get by can expect to feel the pain of that depreciation in the form of dramatic price increases of consumer goods.⁽¹⁹⁹⁾ The Saudi deposit was used to help meet market demand for foreign currency to finance imports, and as such helped Yemen maintain a degree of price stability. Yemeni importers will inevitably pass on to the consumer the increased costs of doing business as a result of any significant depreciation of the rial.⁽²⁰⁰⁾ This scenario becomes even bleaker when considering that Yemen imports up to 90 percent of its basic food commodities.



195) Sana'a Center interview with senior government official, December 31, 2019.

196) Sana'a Center interview with a senior Yemeni banking official, October 26, 2019.

197) Sana'a Center interviews with Yemeni economists and banking officials, November and December 2019.

198) Ibid.

199) Ibid.

200) Ibid.

Economic Brinksmanship: Implications of the Houthi Ban on New Currency

The stability of the rial was further threatened by a controversial directive by the central bank in Sana'a on December 18, 2019, that formally prohibited the use in Houthi-controlled territories of Yemeni rial banknotes printed by the central bank in Aden. In 2017 and 2018, the Houthis banned banks from using and circulating newly-printed 500 and 1000 rial banknotes that the Aden central bank issued after September 2016 (the month in which the central bank headquarters was transferred from Sana'a to Aden). The December move extended the prohibition to all Yemenis, making illegal the use or, indeed, the holding of any newly printed Yemeni rial banknotes.

Houthi authorities' ban on new rials and their promotion of e-Rials as an alternative to physical currency were only the latest maneuvers in the long-running currency war wrought by the central bank branches on opposite sides of the frontlines. Still, they sparked immediate turmoil: Black market currency trading flourished along with currency smuggling across frontlines; exchange rates began to diverge drastically between Sana'a and Aden; and, in response, the government said it would suspend its partial public salary and pension payments to recipients in the north.

For a close look at how monetary policies have evolved since 2016 and analysis of the broader implications of the currency ban on commercial operations and the value of the rial, see the Sana'a Center's report, "Yemen Economic Bulletin: The War for Monetary Control Enters a Dangerous New Phase."⁽²⁰¹⁾

Impact of Lebanon's Financial Crisis on Yemen

Lebanon's deepening financial crisis that coincided with the outbreak of mass demonstrations across the country in October 2019 was another key development that threatened Yemeni banks and businesses, most critically imports to Yemen.⁽²⁰²⁾

On November 17, the Association of Banks in Lebanon (ABL) introduced a series of soft capital controls designed to prevent capital flight from Lebanon that included withdrawal limits of up to \$1,000 per week and a ban on transfers abroad in almost all circumstances.⁽²⁰³⁾ By December, the withdrawal limits were reduced dramatically to \$300 per week or less in most cases, with limits set by individual banks.⁽²⁰⁴⁾ The restrictions applied to all account holders, including foreign banks and businesses

201) Anthony Biswell, "Yemen Economic Bulletin: The War for Monetary Control Enters a Dangerous New Phase," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 21, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/8674>

202) "Negotiation and Deescalation – The Yemen Review, November 2019," December 16, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8501#LebanesCapital-Controls-Squeeze-Yemeni-Banks-Correspondent-Accounts>.

203) Eric Knecht and Tom Perry, "Lebanon banking association agrees \$1,000 weekly withdrawal cap – statement," Reuters, November 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-protests-banks-limits/update-1-lebanon-banking-association-agrees-1000-weekly-withdrawal-cap-statement-idUSL5N27X0S5>

204) Sana'a Center interviews with Lebanese banking officials, December 2019.

that previously opened correspondent accounts with a Lebanese bank. After Yemeni banks were categorized as high-risk in 2015, which led banks in Europe and the US to suspend direct engagement with Yemeni banks and businessmen, Lebanese banks, with their high interest rates, became an attractive alternative option.⁽²⁰⁵⁾

As a result of the deepening political and financial crises in Lebanon, Yemeni banks and their clients (the majority of whom are traders) that had opened correspondent accounts with Bank of Beirut and other Lebanese banks had their foreign currency deposits locked in Lebanon.⁽²⁰⁶⁾ Given the lack of liquidity and difficulties that Yemeni banks and traders have faced trying to access foreign currency during the Yemen conflict, events in Lebanon threatened to further derail trade, specifically food imports. Yemeni bankers and traders responded by searching for alternatives for foreign correspondent banking, with Turkey and the United Arab Emirates emerging as the most attractive options.⁽²⁰⁷⁾

The Struggle to Rejoin a Divided Central Bank

The fragmented state of the Central Bank of Yemen only increased in 2019 following failed talks between the Aden and Sana'a branches in the spring. A lack of trust and willingness to cooperate between the government and the Houthis remained the biggest obstacle to the OSESGY's attempts to mediate a redistribution and sharing of functions between the rival the central bank branches.⁽²⁰⁸⁾ According to UN staff and senior Yemeni banking officials, the Yemeni government was uncompromising in its position, and thus a preliminary framework for discussions that OSESGY had worked on in February was scaled back by the time the UN Special Envoy brought delegations from the central bank branches to Amman for talks in May.⁽²⁰⁹⁾

Also hampering the talks was the fact that the special envoy's office initially scheduled only a single day for negotiations, and that the envoy did not attend in person – factors which were interpreted by both sides as the UN's lack of seriousness to actually mediate a deal, according to members of both delegations who spoke to the Sana'a Center at the time. Of the 90-plus members of the special envoy's office, only one at that time was fully dedicated to the economic file; a measure of the OSESGY's relative incapacity and lack of commitment internally to mediate crucial economic aspects of the conflict. The delegations from Aden and Sana'a did not officially meet face-to-face, and the government had threatened to pull out if there was any attempt to include the status of the central bank on the agenda.⁽²¹⁰⁾ In the end, the focus of the

205) Sana'a Center interviews with two senior Yemeni banking officials, November 29, 2019.

206) Ibid.

207) Sana'a Center interview with a senior Beirut-based banking official, December 2, 2019.

208) Sana'a Center interviews with UN officials and senior Yemeni banking officials, February and March 2019.

209) Sana'a Center interviews with UN officials and senior Yemeni banking officials, April and May 2019.

210) Sana'a Center interviews with UN officials and senior Yemeni banking officials, May 2019; "An Environmental Apocalypse Looming on the Red Sea — The Yemen Review, May 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 6, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7504#UN-led-Amman-Talks-Fail>

Amman talks was how to distribute revenues from Hudaydah port.⁽²¹¹⁾ No agreement was reached, however, only an understanding that the delegations would be open to resuming the discussion at a later date.⁽²¹²⁾

The central bank in Aden remains dogged by lingering doubts about its institutional capacity and previous claims that the bank has been used as a vehicle for senior staff to engage in corrupt activities (see ‘Favoritism, Currency Shenanigans and Market Monopolies’). Despite the international recognition afforded to the central bank in Aden as a result of its direct association with President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the internationally recognized Yemeni government, it has struggled to assert its authority over the other central bank branches. This includes not just the central bank in Sana’a, which opposes the Aden branch for obvious reasons, but other governorate-level branches located in government-controlled territories.

There has been a continued reluctance among the central bank branches in Marib and Al-Mahra to deposit locally generated revenues in the central bank in Aden. In June and July 2019, then-governor of the central bank in Aden, Hafedh Mayad, sought to address this issue head-on by publicly calling out the governors of Marib and Al-Mahra governorates, Sultan al-Aradah and Rajeh Bakrit, respectively.⁽²¹³⁾

On Marib, Mayad drew attention to the special status of the governorate’s central bank branch, pointing out that locally generated revenues from oil and gas sales were not being transferred from the central bank branch in Marib to the central bank in Aden.⁽²¹⁴⁾ Although that prompted a reconnection between the Marib and Aden branches, which Mayad announced June 15,⁽²¹⁵⁾ not all funds ended up being transferred. As noted by the Sana’a Center in June, there is an account at the central bank in Marib where revenues extracted from the state-run SAFER Exploration & Production Operations Company are deposited.⁽²¹⁶⁾

As for Al-Mahra, Mayad’s initial frustration stemmed from the fact that revenues generated from customs fees at Nishtun port and the Shahren and Sarfait border crossings with Oman were not being transferred to the central bank in Aden. In July, Mayad called for the freezing of a local government account at the central bank branch in Al-Mahra, following the decision of the government’s Public Prosecution Office to launch a corruption case against Bakrit, Al-Mahra’s governor.⁽²¹⁷⁾

211) Sana’a Center interviews with UN officials and senior Yemeni banking officials, May 2019.

212) “An Environmental Apocalypse Looming on the Red Sea — The Yemen Review, May 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, June 6, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7504#UN-led-Amman-Talks-Fail>

213) Hafedh Mayad, “Following the guidance and followup...[AR],” Facebook, June 8, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=325242078409874&id=100027722542809; Central Bank of Yemen, “The Public Funds prosecution specialized in corruption cases...[AR],” Facebook, July 10, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/CentralBankOfYemen/photos/a.2357682721187650/2388745654748023/?type=3&theater>

214) Hafedh Mayad, “Following the guidance and followup...[AR],” Facebook, June 8, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=325242078409874&id=100027722542809

215) Economic Committee, “The technical linking of the Central Bank branch...[AR],” Facebook, June 15, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=376833602945900&id=272799003349361; Sana’a Center interview with a senior banking official, June 17, 2019.

216) “Drone Wars – The Yemen Review, June 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, July 10, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7665#Central-Banks-Marib-Branch-Connected-to-Aden-HQ>.

217) Central Bank of Yemen, “On behalf of the Public Funds...[AR],” Facebook, July 10, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/CentralBankOfYemen/photos/a.2357682721187650/2388745654748023/?type=3&theater>

The fragmented state of the Central Bank of Yemen has been further impacted by key personnel changes in 2019. In March 2019, the head of the government's Economic Committee, Hafedh Mayad, was appointed to replace Mohammed Zammam as governor of the central bank in Aden, two months after Mayad had called into question the branch's November 2018 foreign currency purchases under Zammam.⁽²¹⁸⁾ Mayad, however, vacated the post in September 2019, having served what he described as a pre-determined six-month mandate.⁽²¹⁹⁾ President Hadi then appointed Minister of Finance Ahmed Obaid al-Fadhli as the new governor, making him the fourth person to hold the post in the three years since Hadi ordered the transfer of the Central Bank of Yemen headquarters from Sana'a to Aden.⁽²²⁰⁾ Salem bin Breik was appointed as the new Minister of Finance.⁽²²¹⁾ Yemeni law stipulates that the central bank governor's term should be five years – notwithstanding exceptional circumstances. The revolving door at the central bank in Aden has not helped the bank's attempts to enhance its capacity and instill confidence in banks, traders and money exchange companies or the international community.

Arguably the biggest personnel change occurred in Sana'a in August 2019 when the head of the Supreme Political Council (SPC) Mahdi al-Mashat announced Rashid Aboud Sharian Abu Lahom as the new governor of the Sana'a central bank, replacing Mohammed al-Sayani. Al-Sayani was appointed as an SPC advisor.⁽²²²⁾ Al-Sayani's effective dismissal was in some ways surprising, given his technical knowledge, experience and the respect he garnered among bankers, businessmen and traders. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi is said to have personally trusted Al-Sayani and his financial judgement, financial sector officials told the Sana'a Center on condition of anonymity. That said, there was growing frustration among some in the Houthi leadership over Al-Sayani's readiness to protect the central bank and its institutional integrity against what he deemed to be excessive Houthi interference, to the point that he had previously offered his resignation many times, including a week before his dismissal in opposition to certain expenditure requests.⁽²²³⁾

According to a number of senior banking officials in Sana'a, Abu Lahom was considered a safe option for members of the Houthi leadership who had grown frustrated with the level of autonomy enjoyed by Al-Sayani. On September 2, Houthi authorities appointed Sharafuddin Ali Hussain al-Kohlani to replace Abu Lahom as finance minister.⁽²²⁴⁾

218) "Republican Decree Appointing Hafedh Mayad Governor of the Central Bank of Yemen [AR]," Saba Net, March 20, 2019, <https://www.sabanew.net/viewstory/47167>; Hafedh Mayad, "Note by the Economic Committee...[AR]," Facebook, January 20, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=241242340143182&id=100027722542809

219) Hafedh Mayad, "A source close to the governor... [AR]," Facebook, July 29, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=358334048434010&id=100027722542809&ref=content_filter

220) "Text of the Republic Decrees Released Today [AR]," Al-Ittihad, September 19, 2019, <https://www.alittihadnet.net/news7440.html>

221) Ibid.

222) "The Southern Implosion – The Yemen Review, August 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 4, 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8016#Houthis_appoint_new_governor

223) Ibid.

224) "Republican Decree Appointing a Minister of Finance [AR]," official release carried by Ansar Allah website, September 2, 2019, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/274996>



Al-Sawel area in Hajjah governorate, April 4, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

The departures of Al-Sayani and Mayad delivered further blows to any hope of slowly reconfiguring the fractured Central Bank of Yemen and trying to ease the tension between Sana'a and Aden branches. Mayad and Al-Sayani were known to communicate indirectly through a handful of interlocutors; the pair explored ways of diffusing tension and the impact of competing regulations between the branches while at the same time warning of their respective capabilities to ramp up the pressure on one another.⁽²²⁵⁾ Judging by the currency and exchange regulations introduced in November and December 2019, escalation as opposed to reconciliation is the name of the game as 2020 begins.

225) Sana'a Center investigations, May–July 2019.

Favoritism, Currency Shenanigans and Market Monopolies

Corruption Claims Cast Doubt on Application of Food and Fuel Import Regulations

Fresh corruption allegations against key government officials at the beginning and close of 2019 threw into question whether the government was making money off its new food and fuel import regulations and who was benefiting from it. Several food importers complained in 2018 and early 2019 of preferential treatment given to other food importers, whose applications appeared to be processed much quicker than others.⁽²²⁶⁾

And in January, Hafedh Mayad, the businessman and head of the government-run Economic Committee who later would run the central bank in Aden, posted on his personal Facebook page about the central bank in Aden purchasing 448.5 million Saudi riyals from the local market in November 2018.⁽²²⁷⁾ Mayad essentially accused the central bank of paying an above-market price, with the difference between the market price and the price paid being valued at roughly 9 billion Yemeni rials (equivalent to roughly \$14.4 million relative to the average November 2018 exchange rate). The differences could have been legitimate if due to a combination of significant rial appreciation throughout November 2018 and delays of up to 48 hours between when the bank agreed to a price and when the actual trade was made, but combined with importers' allegations of favoritism, smoke was building.

Challenging Al-Essi Fuel Import Monopoly Will Test Talk of Transparency

A more glaring example of administrative corruption concerns the circumstances in which Ahmed al-Essi, a business tycoon and close confidant to President Hadi, came to enjoy a monopoly over fuel imports to Aden. From October 2018 until March 2019, a Saudi fuel grant that saw the delivery of three bulk shipments of fuel for electricity purposes in October and December 2018 and January 2019. As soon as supplies from the final bulk shipment ended, however, normal service was resumed — with Al-Essi as the primary benefactor as he has been since bailing out Hadi in July 2015 by offering to import fuel for electricity purposes on credit.

Today, the government still owes Al-Essi, whose monopoly also allows him to charge well above market rates for fuel, about US\$200 million. Al-Essi also appears to hold sway over figures within Aden Refinery Company (ARC), the only entity authorized to import fuel to Aden. This appeared to work in his favor in August 2019 when the ARC issued a tender that was never made public and for which only three companies, all owned by Al-Essi, applied.

226) Sana'a Center interviews with food importers, December 2018–February 2019.

227) Hafedh Mayad, "Note by the Economic Committee... [AR]," Facebook, January 20, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=241242340143182&id=100027722542809

Current prime minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed has signaled he intends to make future fuel import tenders for Aden public and allow real competition in how they are awarded. Senior government officials told the Sana'a Center that Al-Essi has threatened retaliation that includes disrupting fuel imports to southern Yemen to spur public protests against the government. Whether Abdelmalek is in any position to take on Al-Essi is questionable. The prime minister is a technocrat lacking in heavyweight political backers; Al-Essi, on the other hand, has close connections to Hadi and his inner circle. But an answer may come soon. The government and the STC are, under the terms of the 2019 Riyadh Agreement, forming a new cabinet, and who fills the prime minister's post could shed light on the depth of the government's commitment to transparency.

FSO SAFER Environmental Threat Rises

UN Continues to be Barred from Assessing Decrepit Oil Export Terminal

Throughout 2019, the Sana'a Center issued repeated warnings about the FSO SAFER and the environmental devastation risk to Yemen's western coastline, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. FSO SAFER, a vessel that had operated as a marine export terminal in the Red Sea since the 1980s, went offline when crude oil exports were suspended following the onset of the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in 2015. Zero maintenance has since been carried out on the vessel, which has an estimated 1 million barrels of crude oil on board with a market value of approximately \$80 million.⁽²²⁸⁾ This has led to mounting concerns regarding explosive gases building up in the holding tanks. The context of the Yemen conflict, however, has transformed the decrepit vessel from a looming – and avoidable – environmental mega-catastrophe into a bargaining chip in the warring sides' multifaceted brinkmanship.

The crude oil technically belongs to the government, but the marine export terminal is located in Houthi-controlled territory. So, for the removal and sale of the oil to take place, an agreement would need to be reached between the Houthis, the government and private stakeholders.⁽²²⁹⁾ Even steps simply to ensure the vessel does not explode or leak while the political and financial issues are sorted have been frustrated. The United Nations has been unable to secure Houthi permission to carry out an independent assessment of the state of the vessel.⁽²³⁰⁾ Despite repeated verbal

228) Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, "An Environmental Apocalypse Looming on the Red Sea – The Yemen Review, May 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 06, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7504>; "Aramco's Ashoura – The Yemen Review, September 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 14, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8221>; "Negotiation and Deescalation – The Yemen Review, November 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 16, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8501#UNSC-Members-Discuss-Lack-of-Progress-on-FSO-SAFER>

229) Ibid.

230) "Negotiation and Deescalation – The Yemen Review, November 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 16, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8501#UNSC-Members-Discuss-Lack-of-Progress-on-FSO-SAFER>.

assurances, the UN has been denied access, most recently in August 2019⁽²³¹⁾ — a fact that was condemned during a UN Security Council briefing in November.⁽²³²⁾ Privately, UN officials have told the Sana'a Center the Houthis appear to be preventing the assessment from being carried out as political leverage.⁽²³³⁾

Going into 2020, the UN Envoy's office was exploring an alternative solution to the crisis, which it had discussed informally with Houthi authorities. This initiative would see the oil pumped from FSO SAFER into a tank, removing the threat without the need for repairs to the vessel. The issue of who would benefit from the sale of the oil would still need to be resolved; a possible solution could be depositing revenue at the Hudaydah central bank branch.

231) Ibid.

232) Ibid.

233) Sana'a Center interviews with UN officials, July until November 2019.



Children play on Jamal Street in Taiz city, May 18, 2019 // Photo Credit: Ahmed Basha

Humanitarian and Human Rights

Looking Beyond the Numbers

Statistics on the human cost of the Yemen War, often lumped in neatly rounded figures, build each year: more than 100,000 direct conflict deaths and at least 131,000 indirect deaths by the end of 2019,⁽²³⁴⁾ 3.65 million displaced,⁽²³⁵⁾ 20 million food insecure,⁽²³⁶⁾ 14.3 million in acute need,⁽²³⁷⁾ 2 million out of school.⁽²³⁸⁾ Such headcounts conveying a catastrophe's scope can help aid organizations raise money but are of little use informing how to spend it wisely. Understanding and targeting specific needs in concert with local communities can, however, be challenging in Yemen.

234) Jonathan D. Moyer, David Bohl, Taylor Hanna, Brendan R. Mape & Mickey Rafa, "Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen," UNDP and the Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, 2019, p. 9, <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/yemen/General/Docs/ImpactOfWarOnDevelopmentInYemen.pdf>

235) "UNHCR Operational Update," UNHCR, November 15, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Yemen%20Operational%20Update%20-%2015NOV19.pdf>

236) "Global Humanitarian Overview 2020," UN OCHA, December 4, 2019, p. 44, https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO-2020_v9.1.pdf

237) "YEMEN Situation Report," UN OCHA, last updated December 18, 2019, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/yemen/#cf-43I17TvF8tz2mZsLK3jAKg>

238) "As school year starts in Yemen, 2 million children are out of school and another 3.7 million are at risk of dropping out," UNICEF, September 25, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/school-year-starts-yemen-2-million-children-are-out-school-and-another-37-million>

Beyond considerable access and logistical problems (see ‘Aid Interference Comes into Sharp Focus’), Yemen is geographically and culturally diverse; nearly two-thirds of Yemenis live in rural areas,⁽²³⁹⁾ some so insulated their communities retain their unique customs, rules and, in some cases, languages. Historical, social, political and cultural divides, tribal affiliations and rivalries, and ideological differences also diversify the nature of support needed. Some parts of the country have been frontlines for five years, directly devastated by fighting; others have been spared significant open conflict but struggle economically or to absorb displaced families with essentially no functioning government to assist. Furthermore, as Sana’a Center research published in December 2019 showed, Yemeni women, men, girls and boys experience and cope with war and its consequences differently. Findings of the Center’s two-year gender research project aimed to fill some of those gaps, particularly in understanding the gender-differentiated impacts of war and its consequences.⁽²⁴⁰⁾

Investigating the Gendered Impact of the Yemen War

The study, “A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experiences of Yemen’s War,” was based on discussions with 674 participants in 88 focus groups held in and around Aden, Taiz, Sana’a and Hadramawt as well as interviews with gender and education experts and community activists in 2018 and early 2019. The study documented participants’ perceptions of the prolonged crisis and found gender roles shifting as women and men struggled to cope, especially with the war’s economic fallout. Many women entered the workforce, it found, sometimes finding employment with aid agencies or opening successful businesses in their communities, out of their homes or online, but also taking low-paid jobs with little security to feed their families. Some Yemeni men, having lost their jobs or had their salaries suspended, joined government forces or militias to financially support their families.

Children paid a high price, with their education increasingly cut short, the study found. Boys tended to join the labor market or fighting forces (see ‘Education: Unsafe Schools and a Broken System’). Study participants perceived increases in early marriage among girls, saying parents were driven by fear and economic motives, hoping their daughters would be safer with husbands to protect and provide for them.

The report also documented women’s sense of rising violence against themselves and children, perceiving increases in domestic violence, sexual harassment and the kidnapping and rape of women, girls and boys. Men, as the primary fighters, tend to be the direct combat-related casualties of war, and the study acknowledged a lack of information from its participants on issues of male rape and sexual assault that have been documented in UN and international reports.⁽²⁴¹⁾ Residents and community

239) “Rural Population (% of total population) - Yemen, Rep.,” The World Bank, 2018 Revision, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=YE>

240) Fawziah Al-Amman, Hannah Patchett & Shams Shamsan, “A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experiences of Yemen’s War,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, December 15, 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/files/A_Gendered_Crisis_en.pdf

241) “Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014; Report of the detailed findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen,” UN Human Rights Council, September 3, 2019; reissued September 9, 2019, p. 155, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A_HRC_42_CRP_1.PDF; Maggie Michael, “Sexual abuses rampant in UAE-controlled prisons in Yemen,” The Associated Press, June 21, 2018, <https://apnews.com/df23b77019d34564ae3ee2dddb222279>

leaders quoted by the Sana'a Center researchers spoke of increased impunity for perpetrators of gender-based violence (GBV), which they blamed on the broken state, presence of armed fighters and displacement. Although women reported feeling less safe in public spaces, women and men said that, overall, women's entry into the labor market out of economic necessity had sparked a shift in attitudes toward acceptance of women going out to work. The study questioned whether those shifts and women's economic empowerment could be sustained post-war, suggesting donor organizations explore how to shore up women's gains and expand them across the socio-economic spectrum.

Other Sana'a Center recommendations that specifically addressed war-related GBV included calling on warring parties to release all child soldiers from their military obligations, further research into and the provision of gender-differentiated psycho-social support, and to resume full and regular salaries to public sector employees, starting with the health and education sectors, with the financial support of Gulf countries. The report, noting Yemen's deep-rooted patriarchal system, also recommended measures designed to shift social attitudes more generally, such as working within community and tribal frameworks toward ending child marriage and redefining masculinity. It urged donors and international organizations to pay attention to Yemen's local diversity and be flexible when working toward these ends, noting "what works in Taiz may not be appropriate in Hadramawt."⁽²⁴²⁾

Education: Unsafe Schools and a Broken System

School enrollment in Yemen long has been depressed by poverty and poor access to schools in rural areas, but had appeared to be rising prior to the war,⁽²⁴³⁾ only to drop significantly since the conflict expanded in March 2015. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated 2 million school-age children were not attending classes in Yemen in 2019, including a half-million who had dropped out since the 2015 escalation.⁽²⁴⁴⁾ Another UN agency, OCHA, said millions more were attending only irregularly.⁽²⁴⁵⁾ University students, too, were said to be dropping out due to cost and the conflict.⁽²⁴⁶⁾

Warring parties had failed to uphold their obligations regarding children's right to education by preventing schools from being "available and accessible," according to the September 2019 report by the UN-appointed Group of Eminent Experts. It said at least 20 schools in Hudaydah, Taiz and Sa'ada were being used in 2019 by the Yemeni armed forces, coalition forces, UAE-backed Security Belt forces, Sudanese forces and

242) Al-Ammar, Patchett & Shamsan, "A Gendered Crisis...", p. 73, https://sanaacenter.org/files/A_Gendered_Crisis_en.pdf

243) "UNICEF Annual Report 2012 for Yemen, MENA," UNICEF, https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/Yemen_COAR_2012.pdf

244) "As school year starts in Yemen, 2 million children are out of school and another 3.7 million are at risk of dropping out," UNICEF, September 25, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/school-year-starts-yemen-2-million-children-are-out-school-and-another-37-million>

245) "Global Humanitarian Overview 2020," UN OCHA, released December 4, p. 49, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GHO-2020_v8.8.pdf

246) Al-Ammar, Patchett & Shamsan, "A Gendered Crisis..." https://sanaacenter.org/files/A_Gendered_Crisis_en.pdf

Houthi fighters. Attacks on schools often were prompted by their use for military purposes, according to the report, which in some cases could make them lawful. The experts also cited instances of children being killed while at or leaving their schools, noting an April 7, 2019, explosion at a Houthi base next to a school in Sana'a that killed at least 10 students. Later in April, Houthi shelling in a populated area killed a student as she was leaving her school in Taiz. The report also noted June 13, 2019, strikes by the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition that severely damaged a school in Sa'ada but did not cause casualties as students were on holiday. The experts did not determine whether the school was being used for military purposes. Such incidents, they wrote, contributed to a growing fear among children, parents and teachers of attending school that was undermining the entire education system.⁽²⁴⁷⁾

Children who did attend found a broken education system: shortened hours, fewer teachers and a school environment that mirrored war-time societal ills.⁽²⁴⁸⁾ Teachers and parents reported a growing militarization in schools and said students were often unable to focus on their studies, arriving hungry and displaying visible signs of psychological trauma.⁽²⁴⁹⁾ About 2 million school-age children also are counted among Yemenis displaced by war,⁽²⁵⁰⁾ which, besides causing interruptions to their education, can strain already struggling schools in host communities. Safety couldn't be assured even inside classrooms, with a Sana'a Center report published in December relaying anecdotes of students arriving armed and teachers being threatened. And teachers, also traumatized by the war, were seen as being more violent toward students.⁽²⁵¹⁾

The Sana'a Center report outlined how the war has impacted boys' and girls' education differently, in ways that would affect the rest of their lives. When money was tight, daughters were most often pulled from school before sons, sometimes because boys were viewed as needing it more for future employment and also for security reasons. Boys were seen as able to walk, bike or hitchhike if transportation became unaffordable, options viewed as unsafe or inappropriate for girls. Girls were considered more vulnerable to being harassed or abducted by armed men on the way to school. Sometimes, household chores such as cooking, cleaning or collecting water kept girls from attending school. Early marriage was identified by study participants and experts as a key factor driving girls out of education. Boys were more likely to leave school to earn money, the study found, often doing small jobs — washing cars, selling candy, collecting plastic — and were more likely to be recruited into fighting forces.⁽²⁵²⁾

Salary suspensions that plagued teachers nationwide in the early years of the war had eased in some areas by 2019, including Aden, Taiz and Hadramawt, though rampant

247) "Situation of human rights in Yemen..." report of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts, September 3, 2019, p. 171, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A_HRC_42_CRP_1.PDF

248) Al-Ammar, Patchett & Shamsan, "A Gendered Crisis..." https://sanaacenter.org/files/A_Gendered_Crisis_en.pdf

249) Ibid.

250) "USAID Yemen Education Fact Sheet," USAID, November 1, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/yemen/fact-sheets/education-fact-sheet>

251) Al-Ammar, Patchett & Shamsan, "A Gendered Crisis..." https://sanaacenter.org/files/A_Gendered_Crisis_en.pdf

252) Ibid.



La'ah Valley, Bani Qays district in Hajjah governorate, April 16, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

inflation decreased their value.⁽²⁵³⁾ OCHA reported that more than 135,000 teachers and more than 10,000 schools remained affected by salary suspensions in 2019.⁽²⁵⁴⁾ Teachers in Sana'a and northern areas under Houthi control, like public health sector and other state employees, remained without salaries throughout the year. UNICEF, noting salary suspensions had forced teachers to find other work, began in March paying teachers and school staff the equivalent of US\$50 a month as an incentive to keep teaching.⁽²⁵⁵⁾

The UN-affiliated eminent experts reported that Houthi authorities in the north clearly had been using the education system to indoctrinate and conscript students. At least three teachers had been arrested or had to flee Houthi territory after refusing to teach the Houthi curriculum or cooperate with efforts to conscript children, the report said.⁽²⁵⁶⁾ Curriculum changes were made in 2018 that reflected Houthi ideology,

253) Ibid.

254) "2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, December 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_Yemen_HNO_FINAL.pdf

255) Geert Cappelaere, "To keep children in education...", statement from UNICEF regional director for the Middle East and North Africa,, UNICEF, March 10, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/keep-children-education-unicef-starts-incentives-school-based-staff-yemen>

256) "Situation of human rights in Yemen..." report of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts, September 3, 2019, p. 173-4, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A_HRC_42_CRP_1.PDF

and in October 2019, the internationally recognized Yemeni government complained that by financing the printing of new textbooks, Qatar was helping the Houthis with “poisoning the mind of the Yemeni student.”⁽²⁵⁷⁾

Another example of attempts to control the nature of education available to Yemenis, even at higher levels, was the Houthi authorities’ forced closure of the Sana’a office of AMIDEAST, an international educational non-profit organization, in May 2019. AMIDEAST had provided education, training, accredited testing and exchange opportunities abroad to tens of thousands of Yemenis since 1981.⁽²⁵⁸⁾

Water Scarcity, Worsened by War, Fuels Cholera and Instability

Water scarcity in Yemen – a simple fact of geography compounded by climate change, population growth and inadequate policies – is an existential threat worsened by war, with Yemenis having to travel farther to fetch water and to pay more when it is available. The lack of potable water and functioning sewage services throughout 2019 also worried health workers trying to contain a cholera epidemic blamed for at least 3,886 deaths since it began in October 2016.⁽²⁵⁹⁾

After a slight reprieve in 2018, cholera cases began to surge again in early 2019. In March, Save the Children said flash flooding, conflict-driven fuel shortages and the displacement of families, leaving them on the move and without access to clean water, had created the “perfect conditions” for cholera to spread quickly.⁽²⁶⁰⁾ Early rains and contaminated irrigation water also were thought to contribute to the spike in cases,⁽²⁶¹⁾ which led in April to the highest monthly cholera death toll for 2019: 202 people.⁽²⁶²⁾ From January through November, the World Health Organization (WHO) had confirmed 1,014 cholera deaths.⁽²⁶³⁾ WHO has recorded tens of thousands of suspected cholera cases each month, a fraction of which were sent for laboratory confirmation; of 9,656 stool specimens tested from January through November, 5,292 – or 55 percent – were laboratory confirmed as positive for the bacterium that causes cholera.⁽²⁶⁴⁾

257) “Yemen denounces Qatar Charity financing Houthi-produced school books,” Arab News, October 12, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1567826/middle-east>

258) “A Houthi Masterclass in Dystopia, The Yemen Review – May 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, June 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7517>

259) “Cholera Situation in Yemen, November 2019,” World Health Organization, Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, <http://applications.emro.who.int/docs/YEM/YEM-Chol-Nov-2019-eng.pdf?ua=1>

260) “Yemen Cholera Outbreak: 100,000 Children Infected Since Start of 2019,” Save the Children, April 24, 2019, <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2019-press-releases/yemen-cholera-outbreak-children-infected>

261) “Yemen Humanitarian Update Covering 7-21 March 2019 | Issue 5 [EN/AR],” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs via ReliefWeb, March 24, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-covering-7-21-march-2019-issue-5-enar>

262) “Cholera Situation in Yemen, April 2019,” World Health Organization, Regional office for the Eastern Mediterranean, April 2019, http://applications.emro.who.int/docs/EMROPub_2019_cholera_apr_EN_23514.pdf?ua=1

263) “Situation Report ... Yemen Update,” World Health Organization, Issue No. 11, November 2019, <http://applications.emro.who.int/Docs/YEM/YEM-SitRep-Nov-2019-eng.pdf?ua=1>

264) “Cholera Situation in Yemen, November 2019,” World Health Organization, Regional office for the Eastern Mediterranean, <http://applications.emro.who.int/docs/YEM/YEM-Chol-Nov-2019-eng.pdf?ua=1>

The WHO, which monitors drinking water supplies, reported in November 2019 that Yemen's National Water Resource Authority had tested water sources in 14 districts considered high-risk for cholera within Hudaydah, Ibb, Taiz, Dhamar, Al-Dhalea and Hajjah governorates. Forty-five percent of them were unfit for human consumption.⁽²⁶⁵⁾

Health officials in northern areas faced another disease outbreak in late 2019, with local authorities in Hudaydah and Taiz governorates reporting spikes in Dengue fever, a virus carried by mosquitoes that breed in stagnant water. They blamed at least 38 deaths in October and November on Dengue fever. Houthi health authorities in Sana'a responded by declaring a state of emergency in those governorates as well as in Hajjah, Raymah, Al-Mahwit, Ibb and Sa'ada.⁽²⁶⁶⁾

Securing clean water for drinking and sanitation was only made more difficult, especially in northern Yemen, by warring parties' attempts to control and make money off the imported fuel needed to pump and truck clean water nationwide. Save the Children considered fuel crises a factor in the spring spike in cholera cases, and aid groups feared cholera would surge after a similar crisis hit in September, though the October and November suspected cases were far fewer than those in the spring.⁽²⁶⁷⁾ During the autumn fuel crisis, Oxfam blamed fuel shortages for significantly cutting clean water supplies to 15 million people – more than half Yemen's total population – 11 million of whom relied on fuel-dependent piped networks and 4 million of whom depended on trucked water. Central water systems temporarily shut down in some cities, including Ibb, Dhamar and Al-Mahwit, and other piped-water systems ran at half capacity, Oxfam said.⁽²⁶⁸⁾ Even once water was restored in cities, rural areas – where two-thirds of Yemenis live – took longer to recover.

Fuel shortages in the spring and fall of 2019 resulted from a standoff between the Yemeni government and the Houthi authorities over the import tariffs fuel traders should pay, to whom, and how these revenues should be spent (see 'UN Steps In to Coordinate Port Access Issues, but Revenue Dispute Remains'). Each standoff triggered fuel shortages that doubled water prices, forced partial or complete shutdowns of water pumping and sanitation systems, and increased the risk of illnesses such as cholera. Frustrated aid organizations have called for an end to using fuel imports as a weapon of war.⁽²⁶⁹⁾ UN intervention prompted band-aid fixes during multiple 2019 crises, but a potential lasting solution relating to how taxes and fees would be collected and used was only emerging at year's end and remained untested.

265) "Situation Report, November 2019, Issue No. 11, Yemen Update," World Health Organization, Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, November 2019, p. 5, <http://applications.emro.who.int/Docs/YEM/YEM-SitRep-Nov-2019-eng.pdf?ua=1>

266) "33 people died of dengue fever in less than two months in Hudaydah, Yemen [AR]," Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, November 18, 2019, www.alaraby.co.uk/society/2019/11/18/وفاة-33-شخصا-بحمى-الضنك-في-الحديدة-اليمنية

267) Analysis of statistics in 2019 monthly cholera reports on Yemen, World Health Organization, Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, <http://www.emro.who.int/health-topics/cholera-outbreak/cholera-outbreaks.html>

268) "15 million Yemenis see water supplies cut amid fuel crisis," Oxfam, October 22, 2019, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/15-million-yemenis-see-water-supplies-cut-amid-fuel-crisis>

269) "Fuel shortages deepen crisis in Yemen-Save the Children," Save the Children, October 9, 2019, <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/fuel-shortages-deepen-crisis-yemen---save-children>; "15 million Yemenis see water supplies cut amid fuel crisis," Oxfam, October 22, 2019, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/15-million-yemenis-see-water-supplies-cut-amid-fuel-crisis>

Fighting also complicates already limited access to functioning wells, forcing women and children, who generally fetch the water, to go farther to find it. For those receiving water transported by truck, prices jumped at various times in the year, driven by fuel crises as well as battle lines that complicated suppliers' ability to access wells to fill their tankers. In Taiz, for example, spring fighting inhibited or cut access to wells in Al-Hima and Al-Dhabab that supply the area.

Water: A Long-Term Challenge in Yemen

Sorting the fuel import issue between the Yemeni government and the Houthi authorities, and ending the war, would help ensure more available water flows, but won't solve Yemen's broader water crisis.

Water disputes long have led to clashes among Yemenis, some stretching back decades. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported in September what it described as the end of one such dispute, in an agricultural area of Al-Faradha district in Lahj governorate. In 1982, flooding damaged an irrigation channel used by Al-Faradha's farmers and many lost their livelihoods, the IOM said. Eventually, some desperate Al-Faradha farmers diverted water from main channels irrigating farms in other nearby areas – helping some, harming others, leaving too little for all and causing upstream flooding that wasted excess water, pushing it into the sea. The diversions also triggered what stretched into a 30-year dispute between about 500 Al-Faradha farmers and those in neighboring communities. The IOM and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization worked with farmers and other residents to negotiate a solution. They settled on a plan that included building a new dam, reconstructing water gates and removing sediment from an old channel, which the two agencies helped implement and the IOM said resolved the access problem and the source of their conflict.⁽²⁷⁰⁾

Competition for water between urban and rural areas also is severe, and the pressure to meet demand is likely only to get worse. Yemen's population has grown steadily from 8 million in 1980 to more than 29 million in 2019; by 2045, it is projected to reach 45 million.⁽²⁷¹⁾ By nature, Yemen is largely arid, and it already extracts more groundwater than its aquifers can sustain. The rapid population growth combined with poor planning, inadequate enforcement of water-related laws and climate change projections of rising sea levels that would increase saltwater in coastal aquifers, augur bleak prospects for Yemen's future water supply.⁽²⁷²⁾

270) "Decades-Old Conflict over Water in Yemeni Village Comes to an End," International Organization for Migration, September 20, 2019, <https://www.iom.int/news/decades-old-conflict-over-water-yemeni-village-comes-end>

271) "Population of Yemen (2019)," Population of the World, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.livepopulation.com/country/yemen.html>

272) "Climate Change Profile Yemen," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, April 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen_2.pdf

3.65 Million Yemenis Displaced by War, Each With a Story of Survival

Through five years of war, more than 3.65 million Yemenis have been forced to flee their homes,⁽²⁷³⁾ becoming, in aid agency shorthand, IDPs. Between January and November 2019 alone, more than 390,000 people were displaced in Yemen, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).⁽²⁷⁴⁾ Some of these internally displaced persons ultimately leave, resettling as refugees or migrants — about 375,000 are believed scattered in Ethiopia, Oman, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan and elsewhere.⁽²⁷⁵⁾ Far more, however, move about inside Yemen, renting rooms and flats, moving in with relatives, filling IDP settlements and shelters, seeking new jobs and often depending on humanitarian aid. Some return to their homes only to flee again. Although general themes exist, depending in part on whether a family is urban or rural and their available financial resources, each story is different.

Sana'a Center Programs Coordinator Sala Khaled tells hers in “One of 3.65 Million Stories: A Yemeni Journey of Displacement.”⁽²⁷⁶⁾

273) “FACT SHEET > Yemen / June 2019,” UNHCR via ReliefWeb, June 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen%20Factsheet_June%202019%20%28Final%29.pdf

274) “Rapid Displacement Tracking,” International Organization for Migration, December 1, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen%20DTM%20Rapid%20Displacement%20Tracking%20Update%20-%20Nov%2030%2C%202019.pdf>

275) “Yemen Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan,” Operational Data Portal operated by UNHCR, accessed December 20, 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/yemen>; “UNHCR Fact Sheet, Jordan, May 2019,” UNHCR via ReliefWeb, September 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/71536>; “UNHCR Fact Sheet, Egypt, August 2019,” UNHCR, August 2019, http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Egypt%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20August%202019_0.pdf

276) Sala Khaled, “One of 3.65 Million Stories: A Yemeni Journey of Displacement,” Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 4, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/8593>

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE INTERNALLY DISPLACED

Photographer Ahmed Basha visited Jabal Zaid camp for internally displaced people in western Taiz governorate on October 5, 2019.





Aid Interference Comes into Sharp Focus

Restrictions on humanitarian access in Yemen and interference with programming have hampered response to growing need since the beginning of the conflict, affecting large parts of the country and involving all of the warring parties. OCHA describes Yemen's operating environment as "one of the most non-permissive in the world."⁽²⁷⁷⁾ The UN agency said 5.1 million people in need live in 75 districts defined as "hard-to-reach," not only owing to conflict-related security concerns, but also to interference and restrictions on humanitarian actors.⁽²⁷⁸⁾ This interference takes a variety of forms, from bureaucratic restrictions, taxing goods and aid diversion, to harassment and threats of violence. Humanitarian organizations sought to exert pressure where they faced the most significant of these challenges in 2019: on local authorities in Houthis-held areas that are largely dependent on aid money for both their running costs and to meet the basic needs of the population in territory under their control.

Fighting in Al-Dhalea from early 2019 also put further pressure on the Aden-Sana'a road — a key artery for the transportation of humanitarian supplies and personnel. Road closures have left only circuitous roads with multiple checkpoints accessible. In May, OCHA cited significant delays and a 60 percent increase on average in transport costs from Aden to Sana'a for humanitarian organizations.⁽²⁷⁹⁾

Whether for aid organizations or Yemeni travelers, the abundance of checkpoints — some well-established and others more informal and transient — erected by various factions along main roads nationwide has made war-time travel tedious and risky.

This map indicates checkpoints encountered by travelers en route from Aden to Sana'a one day in August 2019.

The final weeks of 2019 saw a series of attacks on premises of three INGOs in Al-Dhalea, prompting 12 organizations to suspend operations in the governorate.⁽²⁸⁰⁾ On December 21 and 22, unidentified individuals targeted buildings used by Oxfam and the International Rescue Committee with rocket-propelled grenades, injuring one individual and causing damage to the properties. Officials speaking on condition of anonymity told The Associated Press that extremist militant groups — which accuse the foreign-funded organizations of promoting "anti-Islamic activity" — were behind the attacks. Similar attacks targeted MSF premises in Al-Dhalea in 2018.⁽²⁸¹⁾ Mark Lowcock, the UN humanitarian chief, said that 217,000 people would be affected by the resulting suspension of aid operations.⁽²⁸²⁾

277) "Humanitarian update: 29 August to 27 October 2019," ReliefWeb, November 4, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen_Humanitarian_Update_12_FINAL_0.pdf

278) Ibid.

279) "Yemen Humanitarian Update Covering 7 – 20 May 2019 | Issue 8," UN OCHA, May 20, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-covering-7-20-may-2019-issue-8-enar>

280) Ahmed al-Haj and Isabel Debre, "Aid groups halt work in south Yemen after targeted bombings," The Associated Press, December 24, 2019, <https://apnews.com/983fe3bd3cb0cdd5bc403cef32c77f65>

281) "MSF suspends activities after attack in Ad Dhale," Médecins Sans Frontières, October 2, 2018, <https://www.msf.org/yemen-msf-suspends-activities-after-attack-ad-dhale>

282) "Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Yemen, 23 December 2019," UN OCHA, December 23, 2019, <https://>

The World Food Programme Partially Suspends Operations

At the end of 2018, the WFP said aid diversion was taking place in Houthi-controlled areas after an investigation by The Associated Press revealed the widespread theft of food aid and fraud by Houthi authorities.⁽²⁸³⁾ A WFP survey showed that those identified as in need had not been receiving their food rations.⁽²⁸⁴⁾ The WFP amassed evidence of food being removed from distribution centers, changes to lists of aid recipients and doctored distribution records. The agency said that the diverted stocks were either being channeled to persons not entitled to aid or sold on the open market – all with the complicity of local officials and at least one local partner organization with links to the Houthi movement. WFP chief David Beasley said in January 2019 that its food aid was reaching only 40 percent of those eligible in Sana'a and only one-third of those identified as in need in Sa'ada governorate.⁽²⁸⁵⁾

After calling on the Houthi leadership to take steps to stop this diversion, WFP announced in June a partial suspension of aid deliveries in Sana'a city – a move that affected 850,000 people.⁽²⁸⁶⁾ The statement added that the decision came after long-running negotiations to introduce a biometric registration system for beneficiaries had failed. Meanwhile, Beasley told the UN Security Council that despite improvements in early 2019, WFP had continued to receive reports about aid theft.⁽²⁸⁷⁾

In early August, WFP said it had signed an agreement to resume aid deliveries in the capital following “important, positive steps” by the Houthi authorities.⁽²⁸⁸⁾ It added that a “smartcard-driven” system would be rolled out for 9 million people in Houthi-held areas. While such systems to aid in accountability are in use in areas controlled by the internationally recognized government, the Houthis have cited security concerns in blocking implementation in their areas, with disagreements over who should be in control of the data proving the sticking point.⁽²⁸⁹⁾ A source in the humanitarian sector told the Sana'a Center at the close of 2019 that, despite near-daily meetings between the WFP and Houthi authorities since August, these issues remained and biometric identification still had not been introduced.

reliefweb.int/report/yemen/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-mark-25

283) Maggie Michael, “AP Investigation: Food aid stolen as Yemen starves,” The Associated Press, December 31, 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/bcf4e7595b554029bcd372cb129c49ab>

284) “WFP demands action after uncovering misuse of food relief intended for hungry people,” World Food Programme, December 31, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/wfp-demands-action-after-uncovering-misuse-food-relief-intended-hungry-people>

285) Samy Magdy, “Yemeni groups call on WFP to reveal aid ‘corruption’,” The Associated Press, January 9, 2019, <https://apnews.com/aa2eeb34612541cf95b3954957e2583a>

286) World Food Programme begins partial suspension of aid in Yemen,” World Food Programme, June 20, 2019, <https://www.wfp.org/news/world-food-programme-begins-partial-suspension-aid-yemen>

287) “United Nations Officials Urge Parties in Yemen to Fulfil Stockholm, Hodeidah Agreements, amid Security Council Calls for Opening of Aid Corridors,” 8551st meeting of the United Nations Security Council, June 17, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13845.doc.htm>

288) “World Food Programme welcomes progress on key accountability measures with the Sana'a-based authorities,” World Food Programme, August 9, 2019, <https://www.wfp.org/news/world-food-programme-welcomes-progress-key-accountability-measures-sanaa-based-authorities>

289) “Yemen's Houthis and WFP dispute aid control as millions starve,” Aziz El Yaakoubi and Lisa Barrington, Reuters, June 4, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-wfp/yemens-houthis-and-wfp-dispute-aid-control-as-millions-starve-idUSKCN1T51YO>

Humanitarian Actors Turn Up The Heat on Houthi Authorities; Houthis Push Back

Amid growing restrictions on humanitarian access in Houthi-controlled areas, the humanitarian community began a pressure campaign in the final months of 2019 to improve the operating environment. In early October, the UN humanitarian coordinator, Lise Grande, wrote a letter to the Houthi authorities calling for an end to practices she said were stopping aid from reaching those in need. These included constraints on freedom of movement for humanitarian personnel and impeding needs assessments, including those used to determine famine classifications.

The letter, seen by humanitarian sources who spoke to the Sana'a Center, also pushed back on efforts to place conditions on organizations that are either seeking to work in Houthi-controlled areas or renewing their approvals — conditions it said could undermine the ability for humanitarian actors to maintain impartiality. Houthi authorities have sought to apply similarly compromising conditions to agreements at the project level, which are also subject to lengthy delays; a source told the Sana'a Center in early November that humanitarian organizations faced on average a 145-day wait for approvals in northern areas, leaving 60 percent of projects on hold.

In November, a letter from mainly European donors echoed the concerns raised in Grande's letter. The donor signatories said any organization that signed a "principle agreement" required to operate in Houthi-controlled territory would risk losing their funding, while also urging swift project approvals, greater freedom of movement and allowing independent assessments to take place. Revised terms within the "principle agreement" would infringe on humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence, according to aid workers familiar with the document.

As the humanitarian community turned up the heat, the Houthi leadership announced the dissolution of its aid coordination body, the National Authority for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (NAMCHA), in early November.⁽²⁹⁰⁾ Its replacement — the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation (SCMCHA) — took over NAMCHA's mandate, along with some functions previously carried out by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC). The international cooperation section of MOPIC had been the conduit between donors and Houthi-run ministries in Sana'a — many of which receive millions in humanitarian funding to support their running costs.

A copy of the decree outlining SCMCHA's mandate seen by the Sana'a Center stated that the new body would be the national partner for all aspects of humanitarian activity, from needs assessments and budget allocations to donor reporting — a potential threat to the independence required by humanitarian actors. Separate sources from the humanitarian sector told the Sana'a Center that organizations and agencies were facing an even more prohibitive operating environment since the new body was announced in November, with increasing restrictions on assessments and

290) "Resolution Establishing The Supreme Council For The Administration And Coordination Of Humanitarian Affairs And International Cooperation," Al-Thawrah Net, November 6, 2019, <http://althawrah.ye/archives/600344>

freedom of movement. Criticism of the UN and INGOs by Houthi authorities and in pro-Houthi media also escalated through November, with the head of SCMCHA accusing humanitarian actors working in Yemen of corruption and political bias.⁽²⁹¹⁾

Ursulla Mueller, the UN's assistant secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, told the UN Security Council in New York on November 22 that little progress had been made in improving access for humanitarian agencies in Houthi-controlled areas and that mistreatment of aid workers had worsened.⁽²⁹²⁾ Mueller cited attacks, intimidation and the detention of humanitarian staff. There had been 60 separate incidents over the past three months, she said, including cases in which relief supplies were looted and humanitarian facilities occupied.

WHO Investigates Internal Corruption, Houthis Confiscate Evidence

In August, The Associated Press reported that the World Health Organization was investigating allegations of corruption at its offices in Sana'a.⁽²⁹³⁾ The accusations included the deposit of millions of dollars in staff's personal bank accounts, the appointment of unqualified people to high-paid positions, the disappearance of tons of medicine and fuel, and the approval of contracts without proper paperwork. The investigations centered on Nevio Zagaria, an Italian national who headed the agency's Yemen office from 2016 to September 2018. Officials told AP that Zagaria appointed a university student and a former intern to senior posts, where their sole task was to look after his dog. He also approved contracts without a competitive bidding process; firms awarded WHO contracts hired friends and family of WHO staff and overcharged for services, according to the AP.

Zagaria also approved the deposit of \$1 million into WHO employees' personal bank accounts. The WHO allows aid funds to be transferred directly to staff in order to speed up procurement in a crisis, but under Zagaria it was often unclear how employees were spending the money, the AP reported. Several hundred thousand dollars in aid money made its way to the account of Omar Zein, the deputy head of WHO's Aden office. The report said that Zein, who also worked as an adviser to the Yemeni government's health minister, could not account for half of the amount. At the same time, Zein was heading a nonprofit with a \$1.3 million UN contract to run programs in Mukalla, though UNICEF later found that the nonprofit had no presence in the city.

291) Facebook post, The Supreme Council for the management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation," @scmchayemen, November 22, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/scmchayemen/photos/a.187800595304951/569706940447646/?type=3&theater>

292) "Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ursulla Mueller - Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Yemen, 22 November 2019," Reliefweb, November 22, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/assistant-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-deputy-emergency-relief-2>

293) Maggie Michael, "UN probes corruption in its own agencies in Yemen aid effort," The Associated Press, August 5, 2019, <https://apnews.com/dcf8914d99af49ef902c56c84823e30c>

UN auditors had collected evidence of WHO graft on laptops, but these were confiscated in October 2018 at Sana'a airport by Houthi militiamen as the auditors were leaving Yemen, the AP reported. The Houthis allegedly had been tipped off by a WHO employee.

The humanitarian sector has found itself in the spotlight elsewhere through 2019. In April, a social media campaign called “Where’s the Money” demanded greater transparency and accountability around the use of UN aid funds in Yemen.⁽²⁹⁴⁾ A June report by MSF’s Centre de Réflexion sur l’Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires (MSF CRASH) found indications of inadequate assessments of need, poor accountability and monitoring of the activities of UN agencies as well as control of projects being relinquished to local authorities with close ties to the warring parties.⁽²⁹⁵⁾ MSF CRASH questioned the diagnoses of need in Yemen — noting concerns over methodological approaches to assessing need, reports of pressure to inflate numbers and the difficulties of accurately monitoring indicators when parts of the country remained inaccessible. Dramatic fluctuations in OCHA’s figures of the number of “people in need” — by up to 5 million from one year to the next — were not explained, MSF CRASH noted, adding that the methods by which the figures were calculated were not clear.

Funding Shortfall Shuts Down Aid Programs, UN Chases Gulf Pledges

In February 2019, Saudi Arabia and the UAE each pledged \$750 million to the 2019 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP) — contributing more than half of the total \$2.62 billion raised at the pledging event.⁽²⁹⁶⁾ For the remainder of the year, the UN chased the Gulf states — who led the regional intervention into Yemen’s war on the side of the Yemeni government — to honor their pledges and release the funds.

By August, only half of the \$2.62 billion pledged had been released, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE paying out “only a modest share.”⁽²⁹⁷⁾ Projects were closed or postponed due to the shortfall; most vaccination campaigns were suspended in May and plans for new nutrition centers and water treatment systems shelved.⁽²⁹⁸⁾ The United Nations Population Fund said in September that 100 of 268 of the hospitals they supported had closed due to lack of funds, leaving 650,000 women without access to

294) “‘Where’s our money’: A campaign seeks the fate of 20 billion dollars in international aid to Yemen [AR],” Al-Masdar Online, April 21, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/166825>

295) “Yemen: questions about an aid system,” MSF Centre de Réflexion sur l’Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires (CRASH), June 20, 2019, <https://www.msf-crash.org/en/blog/war-and-humanitarianism/yemen-questions-about-aid-system>

296) “High-Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen,” UN OCHA, February 26, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen-HLE-PledgeResults.pdf>

297) “Assistant-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Ursula Mueller - Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Yemen, 20 August 2019,” UN OCHA, August 20, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/assistant-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-deputy-emergency-relief-1>

298) “Humanitarian programmes in Yemen forced to shut due to lack of funding,” UN OCHA, August 21, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HC%20Statement_Sanaa_21August2019_Final.pdf



reproductive health services.⁽²⁹⁹⁾ At the close of 2019, OCHA said its partners would seek to assist 15.6 million people in Yemen in 2020, far fewer than the 2019 target of 24.1 million; it attributed this decrease to “stricter prioritization and targeting.”⁽³⁰⁰⁾

Several sources told the Sana’a Center that the coalition partners were delaying payment until they received assurances of favorable media coverage and visibility. This visibility came in September during the UN General Assembly meeting, when Saudi Arabia told OCHA that it would shortly release \$500m.⁽³⁰¹⁾ As of the end of 2019 the YHRP was 83 percent funded; Saudi Arabia had contributed a total of \$970.5 million while the UAE had released \$420 million.⁽³⁰²⁾

299) “Life-saving services at risk as humanitarian funding dries up in Yemen,” United Nations Population Fund, September 6, 2019, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/life-saving-services-risk-humanitarian-funding-dries-yemen#>

300) “Global Humanitarian Overview 2020,” UN OCHA, December 4, 2019, p. 49, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GHO-2020_v8.8.pdf

301) Michelle Nichols, “U.N. aid chief says Saudi Arabia to pay \$500 million for Yemen aid next week,” Reuters, September 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-un/un-aid-chief-says-saudi-arabia-to-pay-500-million-for-yemen-aid-next-week-idUSKBN1W11TL>

302) “Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2019 - Funding Status,” UN OCHA, December 31, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/YHRP_funding_status_31122019.pdf

Human Rights: Seeking Accountability in the Yemen Conflict

Saudi Airstrikes on Dhamar Prison Deadliest Single Incident of 2019

September saw the largest confirmed single mass-casualty incident of the year, when the Saudi-led military coalition bombed a Houthi-run detention facility in Dhamar governorate, killing more than 120 people.⁽³⁰³⁾

In the pre-dawn hours of September 1, Saudi-led coalition airstrikes hit the facility just north of Dhamar city, 100 kilometers south of Sana'a. UN Humanitarian Coordinator Lise Grande later said that repeated strikes had made it difficult for first responders to reach the area and search for survivors.⁽³⁰⁴⁾ The detention compound held 170 people, and all had been killed or wounded, according to the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC). Forty prisoners were being treated for injuries; the rest were presumed dead.⁽³⁰⁵⁾ Days later, Turkey's Anadolu Agency reported 123 bodies had been recovered.⁽³⁰⁶⁾ Footage of the aftermath showed severe damage to almost all of the buildings in the compound, with some flattened.⁽³⁰⁷⁾ The facility had been a community college before the Houthis repurposed it in 2015 as a detention center; it had held anti-Houthi combatants since 2017, according to Mwatana for Human Rights. At least four of seven children detained in the compound were believed to have died, the group said.⁽³⁰⁸⁾

The coalition said at a September 2 press conference that it had bombed a "legitimate military target" used for Houthi drone and missile storage.⁽³⁰⁹⁾ The site was known to the ICRC and a UN investigative panel, both of which had visited, to be an informal prison.⁽³¹⁰⁾ Coalition spokesman Turki al-Maliki, however, denied knowing it held detainees. A survivor told The Guardian newspaper that the facility held captured

303) Dahlia Nehme, "Saudi-led coalition bombs Yemen prison, scores killed," Reuters, September 1, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-dhamar/saudi-led-coalition-bombs-yemen-prison-scores-killed-idUSKCN1VM0ZU>

304) "Joint Statement by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-general for Yemen and the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen: Mass casualties reported following air strikes in Dhamar Governorate," Reliefweb, September 1, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Draft%20joint%20templates%20SE_HC_1%20September%202019.pdf

305) "Yemen: Scenes of devastation as every single detainee either killed or injured in attack," International Committee of the Red Cross, September 1, 2019, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/yemen-scenes-devastation-every-single-detainee-either-killed-or-injured-attack>

306) "123 bodies pulled from rubble at Yemen's Dhamar prison," Anadolu Agency, September 3, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/123-bodies-pulled-from-rubble-at-yemens-dhamar-prison/1571837>

307) "Saudi-led air strikes in Yemen kill more than 100 prisoners," YouTube Video, France 24 English, September 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUwLp-fjuMM&t=1m4s>

308) "Horrific Saudi/UAE-Led Coalition Attack on Houthi Detention Center in Dhammar," Mwatana for Human Rights, September 3, 2019, <https://mwatana.org/en/airstrike-on-detention-center/>

309) "The coalition presents the first photos to target the weapons store in Dhamar," Al Arabiya Youtube channel, September 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btm40ud0y04>

310) "Yemen: Scenes of devastation as every single detainee either killed or injured in attack," International Committee of the Red Cross, September 1, 2019, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/yemen-scenes-devastation-every-single-detainee-either-killed-or-injured-attack>

anti-Houthi combatants and civilians arrested by the Houthi authorities.⁽³¹¹⁾ Former detainees told The Associated Press that the Houthis had previously repaired weapons at the site.⁽³¹²⁾

By the end of the year, there had been no indication of an independent investigation into the attack. Throughout 2019, 1,181 coalition air raids killed at least 364 civilians in Yemen, the fewest raids and casualties in a year since the aerial campaign began in 2015, according to the Yemen Data Project, which collates data on political violence.⁽³¹³⁾

UN Experts: All Warring Parties May be Responsible for War Crimes

UN-appointed experts submitted a confidential list of individuals who may be responsible for international crimes in Yemen to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2019, recommending they be investigated with a view to prosecution. In a press conference accompanying the report's September 2019 release, panel member Charles Garaway said, "there are no clean hands in this combat, in this contest."⁽³¹⁴⁾

It was the second year running that the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen (GEE) outlined potential war crimes and rights violations, though the first time it had drawn up a list of names. The GEE also found in its report that Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom and France may have been complicit in some of these crimes through their support to the warring parties, specifically noting the legality of weapons sales by the US, the UK and France to coalition members remained "questionable."⁽³¹⁵⁾

The GEE was mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate alleged human rights abuses and violations of international law in Yemen, a mandate that was renewed in September 2019 for another year.⁽³¹⁶⁾ In preparing their latest report, the experts said they had conducted more than 600 interviews and reviewed extensive documentary and open-source material, but added that their investigations faced severe restrictions. The governments of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemen all refused to cooperate, with the latter refusing investigators entry to areas under their control.

311) Bethan McKernan, "'Now it's just ghosts': Yemenis living under the shadow of death by airstrike," The Guardian, September 30, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/30/yemenis-living-under-the-shadow-of-death-by-airstrike>

312) Ahmed al-Haj and Samy Magdy, "Saudi-led airstrikes on Yemen rebel-run prison kill over 100," The Associated Press, September 2, 2019, <https://apnews.com/131ce2899df04a89bc3858910a3aa989>

313) "2019 Coalition Air War Data Summary," Yemen Data Project, accessed January 22, 2020, <https://mailchi.mp/811d6797529d/january2020-yemen-data-project-update-614955>

314) Stephanie Nebehay, "U.S., France, Britain may be complicit in Yemen war crimes, U.N. report says," Reuters, September 3, 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-security-un/u-s-france-britain-may-be-complicit-in-yemen-war-crimes-u-n-report-says-idUKKCN1VO117>

315) "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014 - Report of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts as submitted to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 3, 2019, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/240/87/PDF/G1924087.pdf?OpenElement>

316) Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 26 September 2019," UN Human Rights Council, October 2, 2019, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/42/2>

Despite a lack of access, the experts investigated a number of mass casualty incidents, concluding that the warring parties may have violated principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution in acts that could amount to war crimes. While the report noted a decrease in the frequency of coalition airstrikes since the previous reporting period, it said the “patterns of harm” remained “consistent” and “significant,” and the incidents mentioned may have violated international humanitarian law.

The report said forces loyal to the Houthis and the Yemeni government may have violated international humanitarian law in their use of shelling and small arms, saying evidence suggested these weapons were habitually used in populated areas. The report highlighted the lethality of Houthi landmines, which it said were often placed in unmarked locations frequented by civilians and thus deemed indiscriminate. The experts cited findings of the latest report on Children and Armed Conflict in Yemen, which documented 728 child casualties from landmines in Yemen between 2013 and 2018.⁽³¹⁷⁾ The report also referred to allegations of indiscriminate shelling in Taiz and Hudaydah, which it said was perpetrated by forces affiliated with the Yemeni government, including UAE-backed armed groups.

The report detailed gender-based violence, the impact of the war on children and the targeting of marginalized groups – particularly refugee, migrant and Muhamasheen communities – by UAE-backed militias and members of the Yemeni armed forces. Both the Houthis and Yemeni government forces were found to have continued recruiting children – some as young as 12. The GEE found that detainees in Houthi-run facilities were subjected to ill-treatment, torture and rape, while relatives reported paying money for information on the location of detainees, for their release, or to retrieve their bodies in the case of death. Houthi fighters in Hudaydah and Sana’a kidnapped and detained women and girls for up to eight months to blackmail relatives, the experts said.

The GEE said it continued to probe allegations of arbitrary detention, sexual violence and torture in facilities run by the UAE, the Yemeni government or Saudi Arabia. UAE personnel at a coalition facility in Buraiqa district, Aden, regularly used sexual violence including rape against detainees in 2018-2019, the experts found. They also verified dozens of cases of sexual violence by UAE-backed militias and the Yemeni army between 2016 and 2019. Electrocutions, mock executions and forced nudity were documented at an unofficial detention center run by the Yemeni army and Saudi Arabia in Sayoun, Hadramawt governorate.

The experts found that the actions of the warring parties had exacerbated Yemen’s dire humanitarian situation. The report said coalition airstrikes had damaged agricultural land, essential infrastructure and medical facilities, while the Houthis routinely planted landmines in farmland and appropriated hospitals for military purposes. As in its previous report, the GEE said the coalition’s access restrictions on Yemen violated international humanitarian law – adding that it could amount to collective punishment – while the Houthis had used “siege-like warfare” in some areas. It also expressed concern that all parties to the conflict may have used starvation as a method of warfare, adding it “remains to be established” whether such methods have been pursued intentionally.

317) “Children and armed conflict in Yemen - Report of the Secretary-General (S/2019/453),” UN Security Council, June 3, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/children-and-armed-conflict-yemen-report-secretary-general-s2019453-enar>

The report cited a “pervasive lack of accountability” for human rights violations committed by all parties to the conflict. It questioned the independence and credibility of the Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT) – a body set up by the coalition to review coalition airstrikes in response to allegations of violations. The GEE singled out the JIAT’s assessment of the coalition’s targeting process as “particularly worrying,” saying that appears to disregard the principle of proportionality.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia’s most visible response to the report came in their votes against the resolution renewing the GEE’s mandate, with Abdulaziz al-Wasil, Riyadh’s ambassador to the UN in Geneva, accusing the GEE of publishing “non-credible, unfounded information which hadn’t even been verified.”⁽³¹⁸⁾ Yemen’s Human Rights Minister Mohammed Askar accused the panel of bias.⁽³¹⁹⁾ A UK government spokesperson said Britain “takes alleged violations of International Humanitarian Law extremely seriously.”⁽³²⁰⁾ Britain supported renewing the GEE’s mandate, but urged greater attention be paid to what he said was Iran’s role in violations through support provided to the Houthis.⁽³²¹⁾ Alireza Miryousefi, a spokesman for Iran’s mission to the UN, called allegations against Iran “ridiculous.”⁽³²²⁾

Journalist Killings Down, but Media Suppression Intense

The number of journalists killed and arbitrarily detained in Yemen fell in 2019, though the decrease may have had more to do with fewer journalists being willing or able to work in the repressive media environment than any improvements on the ground. Noting violations came from several parties, the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate (YJS) said the violators “displayed intolerance of any differences and accused those who voiced their opinions of treason.”⁽³²³⁾

Overall, the number of press freedom violations documented by the YJS dropped from 226 in 2018 to 134 in 2019, with the number of killings down from 10 to two and the number of arbitrary detentions down from 86 to 31. Nationwide, 35 journalists

318) “UN Human Rights Council votes to extend Yemen war crimes investigation,” The Defense Post, September 26, 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/09/26/un-yemen-war-crimes-investigation-extended/>

319) “Yemeni Minister Rejects UN Group of Experts’ Extension,” Asharq al-Awsat, September 26, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1919581/yemeni-minister-rejects-un-group-experts%E2%80%99-extension>

320) “Yemen: Armed Conflict: Written question - HL17662,” UK Parliament Publication & Records, September 3, 2019, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2019-09-03/HL17662>

321) “UN Human Rights Council 42: general comment on the human rights situation in Yemen,” Foreign & Commonwealth Office, September 26, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-42-general-comment-the-human-rights-situation-in-yemen>

322) “US, UK, France and Iran may be complicit in Yemen war crimes, UN says,” CNN, September 3, 2019, https://m.cnn.com/en/article/h_e2d3389d71af69241c0eb3feb4cbc560

323) Yemeni Journalists Syndicate, Facebook post, “Press Freedom Report in Yemen for the Year 2018,” January 1, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1192187527599896&id=542893015862687&_tn_=K-R; Yemeni Journalists Syndicate, Facebook post, “The Yemeni Journalists Syndicate tracks 134 violations...,” January 2, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1484011145084198&id=542893015862687&_tn_=-R

have been killed since the war began.⁽³²⁴⁾ While its numbers varied, the international press freedom group Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) noted a similar trend. It said the number of journalists killed in Yemen dropped from eight in 2018 to two in 2019, a decline it attributed to an oppressive environment pushing journalists into other professions.⁽³²⁵⁾ Yemen ranks 168 out of 180 countries in the RSF press freedom index.⁽³²⁶⁾

The YJS recorded 62 violations committed in 2019 by the armed Houthi movement and 44 by the government side. It also noted 10 violations by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), two by the Arab coalition and 13 incidents in which the responsible party could not be determined. Houthi militants were responsible, it said, for both journalists killed during the year, Ziyad al-Shirabi in Mokha and Ghalib Belhash in Al-Dhalea. Al-Shirabi, an Abu Dhabi TV producer, was killed January 28 in a market bomb blast in Mokha,⁽³²⁷⁾ and Belhash, a local photojournalist and videographer, was killed while covering fighting on May 5.⁽³²⁸⁾

While the Yemeni government and its allies were responsible for the most arbitrary detentions of journalists documented by the YJS in 2019 — 18 compared to the Houthis' five and Southern Transitional Council's three — the Houthis have tended to keep journalists longer. Sixteen of the 18 journalists still in custody at the end of 2019 were held by the Houthis, the YJS report noted, most of them since 2015. A trial for 10 of those journalists, who are accused of espionage, opened in late 2019, the YJS said in a December 9 statement.⁽³²⁹⁾

Houthi authorities also were cited for torturing journalists in detention and for putting them on trial, with all 15 torture violations documented by the YJS in 2019 pointing to the Houthis as well as 22 of the 23 violations related to putting journalists on trial. The YJS statement rejected the trial that opened in December as unfair and said it was presided over by a judge who called the 10 defendants "enemies of the people." It cited a lawyer in the case as saying the journalists told the court about being beaten in prison a month earlier. Some of them, YJS said, already suffered from torture-related health conditions.

After the Houthis took over Sana'a in September 2014, the movement began closing independent, private and partisan media organizations while gradually taking over

324) Yemeni Journalists Syndicate, Facebook post, "Press Freedom Report in Yemen for the Year 2018," January 1, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1192187527599896&id=542893015862687&_tn_=K-R; Yemeni Journalists Syndicate, Facebook post, "The Yemeni Journalists Syndicate tracks 134 violations...", January 2, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1484011145084198&id=542893015862687&_tn_=-R

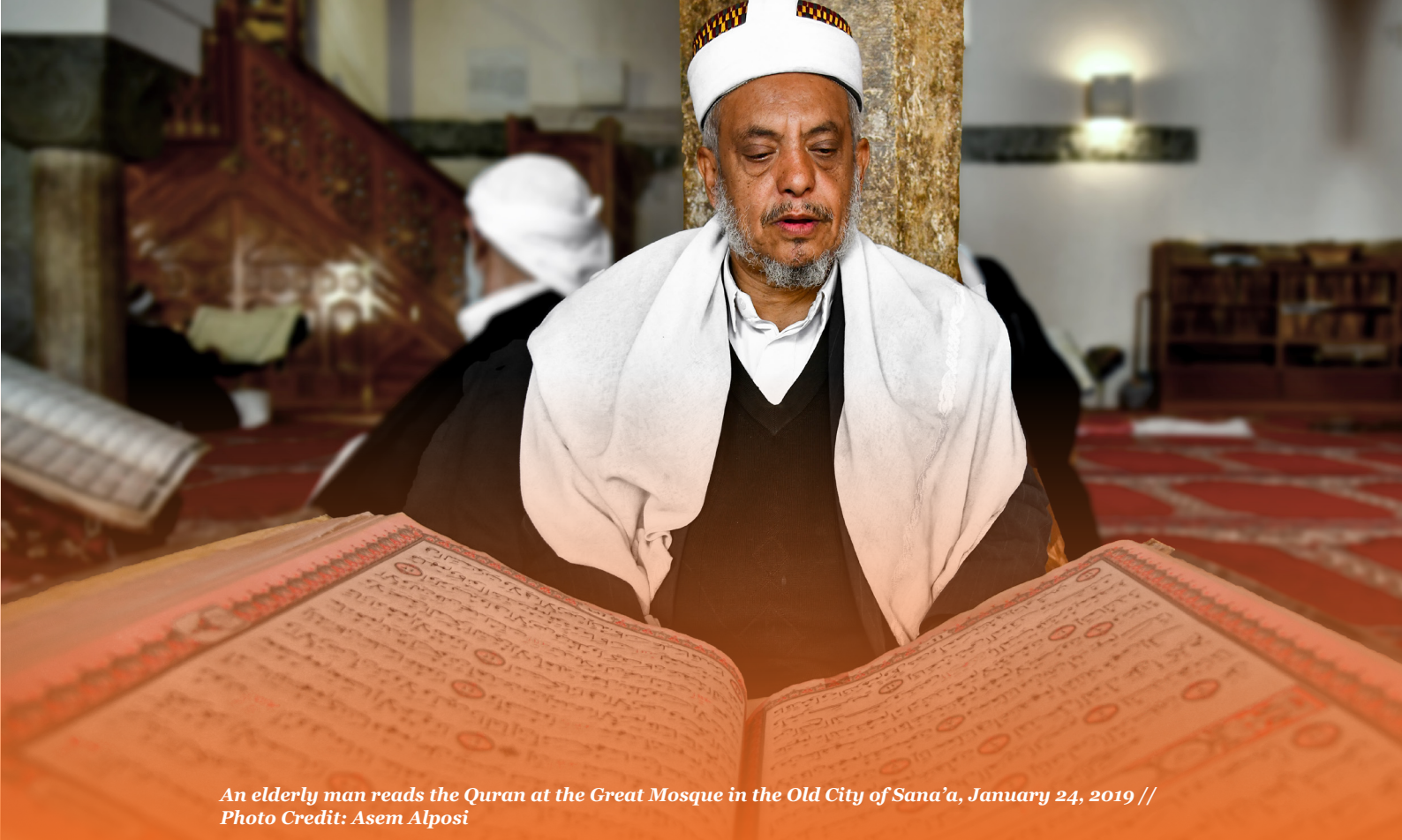
325) "Worldwide Round-UP of journalists killed, detained, held hostage, or missing in 2019," Reporters Without Borders, Released December 16, 2019, p. 9, https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/rsf_2019_en.pdf

326) "2019 World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders, accessed January 14, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2019>

327) "Ziad al-Sharabi Killed," Committee to Protect Journalists, January 28, 2019, <https://cpj.org/data/people/ziad-al-sharabi/>

328) "Ghalib Belhash," International Federation of Journalists, May 5, 2019, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/middle-east-arab-world/article/ghalib-belhash.html>

329) Yemeni Journalists Syndicate, Facebook post, "Journalists Syndicate rejects bringing journalists before an unrelated court...", December 9, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1457889804362999&id=542893015862687



An elderly man reads the Quran at the Great Mosque in the Old City of Sana'a, January 24, 2019 //
Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

state media institutions, including two newspapers, the official television station and the Saba news agency. In March 2015, when the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition launched operations in Yemen, Houthi gunmen stormed television stations and newspaper offices. Most Yemeni media outlets opposed to the group stopped operating, some journalists were arrested and others fled Sana'a.⁽³³⁰⁾ Houthi efforts to control Yemenis' access to news online also were apparent in 2019, with YJS saying Houthi authorities were responsible for all 10 newly documented instances of blocked websites. Since the war began, it said, 200 websites have been blocked. By the end of 2019, a capital with a once-vibrant media had fallen silent to all but Houthi-controlled news and information.

Beyond arbitrary arrests and one trial-related violation, the YJS reported that the internationally recognized Yemeni government's documented violations included a few cases of not paying salaries and benefits owed. Other 2019 violations against journalists the group cited involved confiscating equipment, work and travel bans, assaults, threats and incitement. The report did not break down who was responsible for those, though all but eight Houthi violations were accounted for elsewhere.

On December 31, the YJS condemned a leader of the separatist Southern Transitional Council, Hani bin Breik, for accusing journalists in Aden of working against their homeland. Such remarks make journalists an easy target, it said.⁽³³¹⁾ The group's 2019 report documented three death threats and 10 attacks described as attempted murders..

330) "Ten Yemeni journalists held by Houthis now face possible execution," Reporters Without Borders, March 12, 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/news/ten-yemeni-journalists-held-houthis-now-face-possible-execution>

331) Yemeni Journalists Syndicate, Facebook post, "The Yemeni Journalists Syndicate condemns the incitement..." December 31, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1481528138665832&id=542893015862687

Religious Freedom: Six Yemeni Baha'is Still Held in Houthi Jails

Houthi authorities also continued to detain adherents to the Baha'i faith in 2019, violating their right to freedom of religion. Baha'is also have been charged with apostasy, sentenced to death and threatened by Houthi authorities, the UN-appointed Group of Eminent Experts reported in August.⁽³³²⁾ Baha'is fear meeting even privately in Houthi-controlled territory, Baha'i spokesperson Abdullah al-Olofi told the Sana'a Center in March.

The Baha'i faith is a monotheistic religion founded in the mid-19th century in Iran, where Baha'is have since faced state persecution. Discrimination against Baha'is in Yemen predates the current conflict, but abuses have escalated since the armed Houthi movement took control of Sana'a.⁽³³³⁾ Houthi authorities have detained dozens of Bahai's, including 65 who were arrested during a raid on a youth workshop in Sana'a in August 2016.⁽³³⁴⁾ In 2017, Houthi authorities issued arrest orders for 25 Baha'is, a move described by the UN Special Rapporteur as "an act of intimidation pressuring the Yemeni Baha'is to recant their faith."⁽³³⁵⁾

In 2019, six Baha'is remained in prison, including community leader Hamed bin Haydara, who was sentenced to death in a Houthi-run court in December 2018.⁽³³⁶⁾ Bin Haydara had been charged with collaborating with Israel, apostasy, insulting Islam and trying to convert Muslims to the Baha'i faith through charitable giving.⁽³³⁷⁾ In October 2019, a Houthi-run court ordered the seizure of his money and property.⁽³³⁸⁾ Another 19 Baha'is were being tried in absentia in 2019 on charges of apostasy and espionage, according to Al-Olofi, the community spokesperson. Baha'is under threat of arrest have been forced into hiding with their families, the Baha'i International Community reported.⁽³³⁹⁾

In September 2019, the UN Human Rights Council called for the immediate release of all Baha'is detained in Yemen for their religious beliefs and for an end to "harassment and judicial persecution" against them.

332) "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014 - Report of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts as submitted to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 3, 2019, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/42/17

333) "Yemen: Fear of forcible return/possible POCs," Amnesty International, September 12, 2008, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/56000/mde310062008en.pdf>

334) "Yemen: Huthi authorities must release detained Bahá'ís, end crackdown on minorities," Amnesty International, August 17, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/08/yemen-huthi-authorities-must-release-detained-bahais-end-crackdown-on-minorities/>

335) "Yemen must stop persecution of Bahá'í community, urges UN expert on freedom of religion," UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, May 22, 2017, <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21643&LangID=E>

336) "2019 in review - A year of historic developments, Baha'i World News Service, December 31, 2019, <https://news.bahai.org/story/1380/>

337) "Yemen: Baha'i Adherent Faces Death Penalty," Human Rights Watch, April 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/01/yemen-bahai-adherent-faces-death-penalty>

338) "Riyadh Picks Up the Pieces - The Yemen Review, October 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 10, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/>

339) "The Baha'i Community in Yemen: A brief history of the recent persecution," Baha'i International Community, August 2018, <https://www.bic.org/situation-in-yemen/background>

Select 2019 Human Rights Reports

January: The Sana'a Center, Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic and the George Warren Brown School, Washington University, jointly submitted a report on the right to mental health in Yemen to the UN Human Rights Council's 3rd Universal Periodic Review.⁽³⁴⁰⁾

February: An open source investigation by Amnesty International explores how the UAE has become a major conduit for arms illicitly diverted to unaccountable militias in Yemen.⁽³⁴¹⁾

April: The Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) summarizes the review of Yemen, its recommendations, and the Yemeni government's responses, during the UPR sessions in January 2019.⁽³⁴²⁾

April: The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) examines the effectiveness of institutions tasked with resolving land, housing and water disputes in Yemen.⁽³⁴³⁾

April: Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reports on the mothers and children dying without medical care.⁽³⁴⁴⁾

April: The Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures uses a quantitative modeling system to assess the impact of the conflict on development in Yemen in different conflict scenarios, in a report commissioned by the UN Development Programme.⁽³⁴⁵⁾

June: The Sana'a Center spotlights the marginalization of Yemen's Muhamasheen community.⁽³⁴⁶⁾

September: The UN-appointed Group of Eminent Experts details possible war crimes committed in Yemen since 2014 in a report submitted to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.⁽³⁴⁷⁾

340) "Yemen's obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil the right to mental health," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic and Brown School, Washington University, January 12, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/6789>

341) "When Arms Go Astray: The Deadly New Threat Of Arms Diversions To Militias In Yemen," Amnesty International, February 6, 2019, <https://arms-uae.amnesty.org/en/>

342) "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Yemen," UN Human Rights Council, April 17, 2019, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3830839?ln=en>

343) "Repairing fractured landscapes: Challenges and opportunities for resolving disputes over land, housing, water and other natural resources in Yemen," Norwegian Refugee Council, April 2019, <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/repairing-fractured-landscapes/>

344) "Complicated delivery: The Yemeni mothers and children dying without medical care," Médecins Sans Frontières, April 24 2019, <https://www.msf.org/complicated-delivery-yemeni-mothers-and-children-dying-without-medical-care>

345) "Assessing the impact of war on development in Yemen," UNDP/Fredrick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, April 23, 2019, <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/yemen/General/Docs/ImpactOfWarOnDevelopmentInYemen.pdf>

346) Aisha al-Warraq, "The Historic and Systematic Marginalization of Yemen's Muhamasheen Community," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 4, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7490>

347) "Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014," Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts, Submitted to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 3, 2019, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/42/17

October: Amnesty International documents attacks by the Saudi- and Emirati-led military coalition in Yemen since 2015.⁽³⁴⁸⁾

November: Oxfam explores the gendered impact of the use of explosive weapons in Yemen.⁽³⁴⁹⁾

December: Amnesty International looks at how people with disabilities face unequal access to healthcare, education and jobs and the difficulties they face fleeing violence.⁽³⁵⁰⁾

December: The Sana'a Center reports how gender norms have shaped Yemenis' experience of conflict, and how conflict is reshaping gender norms in Yemen.⁽³⁵¹⁾

348) "Air strikes and cluster munitions attacks: Amnesty International documentation of coalition attacks in Yemen: 2015 – present," Amnesty International, October 22, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE3110942019ENGLISH.PDF>

349) The Gendered Impact of Explosive Weapons Use in Populated Areas in Yemen, Oxfam, November 2019, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620909/bp-yemen-gendered-impact-explosive-weapons-261119-en.pdf>

350) "Yemen: Excluded - living with disabilities in Yemen's armed conflict," Amnesty International, December 3, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde31/1383/2019/en/>

351) Fawziah Al-Ammar, Hannah Patchett & Shams Shamsan, "A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experiences of Yemen's War," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 15, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/8480>



Al-Rajm area in Bait Mukhtar village, Al-Mahwit governorate, November 21, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

Yemen and the Region

All Eyes on Iran

Houthis Strengthen Ties with Tehran in Jittery Gulf

Describing the armed Houthi movement as an Iranian proxy mischaracterizes the nature of the alliance, which is rather based on mutual interest and ideological affinity. Iran is the only country backing the armed Houthi movement, providing the group with political advice, military training, weapons and diplomatic support. However, there is no indication that direct Iranian command and control exists as it would in a traditional sponsor-proxy relationship. While the Houthis maintain autonomy to act domestically in Yemen, the group does align itself with Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' against US influence and American allies in the Middle East. Thus, with tension between the US and its allies on one side and Iran on the other becoming the most pressing threat to stability in the region, the Houthis are another factor that must be considered.

Although the declared reason for the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen was to combat Iranian influence by waging a war against the armed Houthi movement, the latter has essentially moved closer to Tehran over the course of the war. On August 17, Iran became the first country to officially recognize the Houthi government by accepting Ibrahim al-Delami, director-general of Houthi-run Al-Masirah TV, as Yemen's ambassador to Iran. The internationally recognized Yemeni government denounced the appointment, describing it as a "flagrant violation of international

laws and customs.”⁽³⁵²⁾ Although Al-Delami resigned as chairman of Al-Masirah to take up the ambassador’s post to Tehran, media sources based in Beirut told the Sana’a Center that he still exerts a large influence behind the scenes. In December, Al-Delami said the next stage of the diplomatic relationship between the Houthi movement and its Iranian allies would see Tehran appoint a new ambassador to Yemen, along with the implementation of 70 bilateral agreements — negotiated by Yemen’s Saleh-era governments — in the economic, medical, educational, cultural, and relief and development fields.⁽³⁵³⁾

Prior to the announcement, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had publicly expressed support for the armed Houthi movement in an August 13 meeting in Tehran with the Houthi spokesperson, Mohammed Abdel Salam.⁽³⁵⁴⁾ During the meeting, Abdel Salam handed Khamenei a letter from the head of the Houthi movement, Abdelmalek al-Houthi, while the supreme leader asked the Houthi delegation to share its vision of a peace deal or compromise to end the conflict, Abdelmalek al-Ajri, a senior official in the Houthi delegation, told the Sana’a Center at the time. Abdel Salam also met with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif during his visit to Tehran. On August 18, the Iranian Foreign Ministry arranged a meeting between the Houthi delegation and ambassadors from the UK, France, Germany and Italy.

UN investigators, among others, have established that Houthi military forces have benefited through much of the conflict from advanced Iranian technology, in particular in relation to militarized drones and missile guidance systems.⁽³⁵⁵⁾ The vast majority of Houthi arms, however, come from pre-existing stockpiles in the country or smuggling from Yemeni government-controlled areas, meaning that Iranian military support is a force multiplier for the Houthis rather than foundational.⁽³⁵⁶⁾

At the same time, there appears to have been coordination in a case of mutual interest in 2019, in particular the attack on Saudi Aramco facilities in September. According to a source in contact with parts of the Houthi leadership, the Houthi-claimed strike was, in fact, coordinated between Tehran and Sana’a, with Houthi forces launching drones and Iranian forces firing missiles. While the Houthis claimed full responsibility and Iran denied any involvement, the message from both was clear to Riyadh and its allies in Western capitals, particularly Washington: Saudi Arabia is critically vulnerable and could be made to pay dearly if there were continued escalation.

352) “Government outraged as Yemen rebels make TV boss ‘ambassador’ to Iran,” The National, August 18, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/government-outraged-as-yemen-rebels-make-tv-boss-ambassador-to-iran-1.899666>

353) “Al-Daylami: The next stage will witness changes in the country’s external relations [AR],” Ansarollah, December 3, 2019, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/272315>

354) “Iran’s Khamenei backs Yemen’s Houthi movement, calls for dialogue,” Reuters, August 13, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran/irans-khamenei-backs-yemens-houthi-movement-calls-for-dialogue-idUSKCN1V31W3>

355) “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen,” UN Security Council, January 26, 2018, <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2018/594>

356) “Beyond the Business as Usual Approach: Combating Corruption in Yemen,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, November 10, 2018, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/6614>

In December, US officials reported the seizure by the US navy of a boat in the Arabian Sea carrying guided missile parts they suspected had been sent from Iran to Yemen.⁽³⁵⁷⁾ They said the missile parts discovered were more advanced than other parts that had been previously seized. The same month, the US announced a \$15 million reward for information on Abdul Reza Shahlai, an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp commander believed to be based in Yemen as a military adviser to the Houthi movement.⁽³⁵⁸⁾

Along with increased diplomatic relations and military cooperation, the growing relationship with Iran's Islamic Republic was reflected in religious mobilization in Houthi-controlled areas. In 2019, the Houthi leadership made Ashoura commemorations, previously not common among Yemen's Zaidi Shias but central to Iran's Twelver Shia faith, a public holiday, staging mass rallies and speeches (see 'Religious Commemorations and Officially Sanctioned Extortion').

Notably, Iranian involvement in Yemen remains lower than its stake in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, which form part of the 'Shia Crescent' in the Middle East that reaches right to the Iranian border. Tehran's support for the Houthis in Yemen in recent years appears to have been a relatively low-cost investment for high returns, in terms of harassing its arch-rival Saudi Arabia. The deliberately public strengthening of these ties in 2019 would seem to indicate that the Houthis have been upgraded in importance in the Iranian geostrategic calculus, however, and that they are playing an increasingly useful role in Tehran's 'Axis of Resistance'.

Mutual Backing: The Houthis and Hezbollah

Opponents of the armed Houthi movement, most notably the Yemeni government, have long accused it of being supported logistically and militarily by the Lebanese party-cum-militia Hezbollah.⁽³⁵⁹⁾ Hezbollah displays public solidarity with the group⁽³⁶⁰⁾ and has welcomed its representatives,⁽³⁶¹⁾ but the group's leader Hassan Nasrallah has remained vague about whether Hezbollah is assisting the Houthis on the ground in Yemen.⁽³⁶²⁾ However, a Houthi source responsible for coordinating between the movement and the Hezbollah told the Sana'a Center that Houthi fighters had participated in Hezbollah-run military training and capacity building in southern

357) Mosheh Gaines and Adiel Kaplan, "Officials: U.S. Navy seizes suspected Iranian missile parts set for Yemen," NBC News, December 5, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/officials-u-s-navy-seizes-suspected-iranian-missile-parts-set-n1096096>

358) Chad Garland, "US offers multi-million dollar bounty for info on Iranian planner of deadly 2007 attack," Stars and Stripes, December 6, 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/us-offers-multi-million-dollar-bounty-for-info-on-iranian-planner-of-deadly-2007-attack-1.610080>

359) "Yemen government says Hezbollah fighting alongside Houthis," Reuters, February 24, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemen-government-says-hezbollah-fighting-alongside-houthis-idUSKCN0VX21N>

360) Angus McDowall, "Hezbollah vows at mass Beirut rally to keep up 'jihad' in Syria," Reuters, October 12, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-ashura/hezbollah-vows-at-mass-beirut-rally-to-keep-up-jihad-in-syria-idUSKCN12C1II>

361) "Nasrallah, Houthi delegation discuss Yemen situation" The Daily Star, August 19, 2018, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Aug-19/460636-nasrallah-houthi-delegation-discuss-yemen-situation.ashx>

362) "Hezbollah denies 8 fighters killed in Yemen," Agence France-Presse, June 29, 2018, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/hezbollah-denies-8-fighters-killed-yemen-165623427.html?guccounter=1>

Lebanon. In March 2019, in a rare interview with Al-Akhbar, a Lebanese newspaper politically aligned with Hezbollah, Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi stated that his group was ready to fight alongside Hezbollah in any future war against Israel.⁽³⁶³⁾

Iran also funds two pro-Houthi TV channels based in Beirut – Al-Masirah and Al-Sahat.⁽³⁶⁴⁾ Media sources based in Beirut told the Sana'a Center that employee salaries were arriving late for several months after the reimposition of US sanctions against Iran in 2018, though regular payments resumed in 2019.

Regional Stand-Off Brings More US Weapons, Ships into Arena

Tension between Iran and the US peaked on January 2, 2020, with the targeted killing of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Major General Qassem Soleimani in a US airstrike at Baghdad airport.⁽³⁶⁵⁾ Soleimani was commander of the Quds Force, the group responsible for coordinating Iran's foreign military activities, including with allied non-state actors such as Hezbollah and the armed Houthi movement. The assassination of Soleimani was the culmination of a string of escalations between the US and Iranian-backed militant groups in Iraq during December 2019. However, military tension had been growing in the Gulf since April. After the Trump administration announced that it would seek to cut Iranian oil exports – Tehran's primary source of income – by sanctioning any country importing Iranian oil,⁽³⁶⁶⁾ a spate of alleged attacks on vessels in the region's waterways occurred in May and June, which the United States blamed on Iran and which brought the sides closer to open conflict.

Washington blamed Iran for May 12 attacks on four ships – including two Saudi oil tankers – near the Emirati port of Fujairah that were damaged by what the Oil Companies International Marine Forum (OCIMF) identified as waterborne improvised explosive devices.⁽³⁶⁷⁾ The White House responded to the “credible threat” from Iran by deploying the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln to the Persian Gulf.⁽³⁶⁸⁾ Citing the growing threat from Iran, on May 24 Washington also expedited weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE that had been held up in Congress over concern

363) Elie Hanna, Khalil Kawtrani and Doaa Swaidan, “Al-Houthi: We are ready to fight on the side of Hezbollah against Israel [AR]”, Al-Akhbar, March 23, 2019, <https://al-akhbar.com/Yemen/246826>

364) “Starvation, Diplomacy and Ruthless Friends: The Yemen Annual Review 2018,” Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 22, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6808#YW-Iran-and-Hezbollah>

365) “Iran's Soleimani and Iraq's Muhandis killed in air strike: militia spokesman,” Reuters, January 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-blast-soleimani/irans-soleimani-and-iraqs-muhandis-killed-in-air-strike-militia-spokesman-idUSKBN1Z201C>

366) David Jackson and Deirdre Shesgreen, “President Donald Trump moves to cut off Iran oil exports; decision could roil markets,” USA Today, April 22, 2019, www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/04/22/donald-trump-cut-off-iran-oil-exports-roil-markets/3536966002/

367) “Update following attacks on shipping in Gulf of Oman on 13 June 2019,” Oil Companies International Marine Forum, June 21, 2019, <https://www.ocimf.org/news/press-releases/intertankooicmf-maritime-security-update-on-fujairah-attacks.aspx>

368) Jon Gambrell, “US aircraft carrier deployed over Iran remains outside Gulf,” The Associated Press, June 4, 2019, <https://apnews.com/e28d5ce56956498ebf54dc7190e548a3>

they would be used in Yemen.⁽³⁶⁹⁾ A month later, on June 13, the US blamed Iran once again for attacks on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman, near the Strait of Hormuz; Iran denied the accusations.⁽³⁷⁰⁾

A week later, US Central Command (CENTCOM) stated that an Iranian surface-to-air missile had shot down a US surveillance drone over the Gulf of Oman.⁽³⁷¹⁾ Tehran said the \$130 million American drone violated its airspace, while the US called it “an unprovoked attack.” The Pentagon eventually responded by announcing the deployment of an additional 1,000 troops to the region for “defensive purposes.”⁽³⁷²⁾ Half of these troops were sent in July to Prince Sultan Air Base near Riyadh, ending a 16-year absence of American military personnel from the kingdom.⁽³⁷³⁾

Despite the “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran’s economy over the past 18 months, Washington’s response to the alleged attacks – particularly messages from the White House – were not as resolute or consistent. Even when the US accused Iran of attacking American military assets by shooting down the drone, President Trump said he abruptly called off planned retaliatory airstrikes due to concerns over the projected death toll of 150 people.⁽³⁷⁴⁾

Nevertheless, the US did present itself in a leadership role with the formation of the International Maritime Security Construct – a maritime coalition providing escort naval vessels to counter threats to shipping in the Gulf. It struggled to draw in European and Asian allies,⁽³⁷⁵⁾ however, when initiated in July.⁽³⁷⁶⁾ France and Germany rejected the US proposal to join the mission, considering it an aggressive step that would aggravate tension with Iran.⁽³⁷⁷⁾ Even the UK, despite Iran’s seizure

369) Michael R. Pompeo, “Emergency Notification of Arms Sales to Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia,” US Department of State, May 24, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/emergency-notification-of-arms-sales-to-jordan-the-united-arab-emirates-and-saudi-arabia/>

370) “US blames Iran for attack on oil tankers, releases video purporting to show Iranians removing mine,” The Washington Post, June 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/oil-tankers-attacked-in-gulf-of-oman-us-navy-says/2019/06/13/d59b784c-8db0-11e9-b162-8f6f41ec3c04_story.html

371) “U.S. Central Command Statement: Iranians shoot down U.S. drone,” US Central Command, June 20, 2019, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/1881682/us-central-command-statement-iranians-shoot-down-us-drone/>

372) Nicole Gaouette, “US sending 1,000 additional troops to Middle East amid Iran tensions” CNN, June 18, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/17/politics/us-additional-troops-iran-tensions/index.html>

373) Anthony Capaccio, “U.S. Says 500 Troops Sent to Saudi Arabia on Mideast Deployment,” Bloomberg, June 18, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-18/u-s-preparing-to-send-500-troops-to-saudi-arabia-cnn>

374) Michael D. Shear, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “Trump Says He Was ‘Cocked and Loaded’ to Strike Iran, but Pulled Back,” New York Times, June 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/21/us/politics/trump-iran-attack.html>

375) Sylvia Westall and John Irish, “Allies play hard to get on U.S. proposal to protect oil shipping lanes,” Reuters, July 19, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-tanker-allies/allies-play-hard-to-get-on-u-s-proposal-to-protect-oil-shipping-lanes-idUSKCN1UE0KI>

376) “U.S. Central Command Statement on Operation Sentinel,” US Central Command, June 19, 2019, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/1911282/us-central-command-statement-on-operation-sentinel/>

377) “Merkel’s ally calls on Europe to go it alone in the Gulf [FR],” News 24, <https://news-24.fr/lalliee-de-merkel-appelle-leurope-a-faire-cavalier-seul-dans-le-golfe/>

of a British tanker in the Strait of Hormuz on July 19,⁽³⁷⁸⁾ was reluctant at first, proposing instead a European-led maritime force to either coordinate with the US or form a broader alliance of countries.⁽³⁷⁹⁾ Ultimately, however, the US-led command center for the mission opened in November in Bahrain, with Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK, Australia and Albania having signed on to the venture by the close of 2019. Japan, which relies heavily on Mideast oil imports, decided to escort its own ships and cooperate with the US-led effort rather than join it.⁽³⁸⁰⁾

Over 12 Months, US Softens View of Houthis as Iranian Proxies

Washington's portrayal of the Houthis as Iran's puppet prompted fears that Yemen could be brought into the fray – especially in the context of a ramp-up in Houthi missile and drone attacks in southern Saudi Arabia (see 'The Year of the Drones'). The response to the September Aramco attacks – which briefly knocked out 5 percent of the global oil supply – also was restrained despite the State Department's characterization of the incident as an "act of war."⁽³⁸¹⁾ In the end, this amounted to a few thousand troops deployed to the kingdom and additional Patriot air-defense missiles – weapons which have proved incapable of defending against modified Scud missiles and drones in the Houthis' arsenal.⁽³⁸²⁾⁽³⁸³⁾

Commentators have suggested that the US response to alleged Iranian attacks contributed to Riyadh's change of course. Former US Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein said that the lackluster reaction signaled to Saudi Arabia and the UAE that "they really couldn't rely on the United States to ensure their security and therefore need to find a way of ratcheting the tensions down."⁽³⁸⁴⁾

The United States also beefed up its unilateral drive toward deescalating the Yemen conflict, reactivating channels that had been largely dormant since President Trump came into office. The Wall Street Journal reported in August that the US was

378) "UK-flagged oil tanker seizure; Iran's will to respond to threats: Defense Minister," Islamic Republic News Agency, July 22, 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83406347/UK-flagged-oil-tanker-seizure-Iran-s-will-to-respond-to-threats>

379) Jeremy Hunt, "Situation in the Gulf," UK Parliament, July 22, 2019, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-07-22/debates/1436057A-CE0D-4FBB-AF23-CD93E4AFFA0A/SituationInTheGulf>

380) "Japan Won't Join U.S. Coalition, But Will Send Own Escort Ships To Gulf Region," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 19, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/japan-vessels-protect-shipping-persian-gulf-iran-oman-trump-abe/30224681.html>

381) Stephen Kalin, "Pompeo says attack was 'act of war' on Saudi Arabia, seeks coalition," Reuters, September 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-pompeo/pompeo-says-attack-was-act-of-war-on-saudi-arabia-seeks-coalition-idUSKBN1W32AG>

382) Dan De Luce, Courtney Kube and Mosheh Gains, "Trump admin sending thousands more U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia," NBC News, October 11, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/trump-admin-sending-thousands-more-troops-saudi-arabia-n1065051>

383) Jeffrey Lewis, "Patriot Missiles Are Made in America and Fail Everywhere," Foreign Policy, March 28, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/28/patriot-missiles-are-made-in-america-and-fail-everywhere/>

384) Colum Lynch, Lara Seligman and Robbie Gramer, "Can a Young Saudi Prince End the War in Yemen?," Foreign Policy, November 20, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/20/can-khalid-bin-salman-young-saudi-prince-end-yemen-war-mohammed-mbs/>

planning to hold direct talks with the Houthis in Oman, reports which senior Houthi leaders confirmed to the Sana'a Center.⁽³⁸⁵⁾ Leading the talks from the US side would be Ambassador to Yemen Christopher Henzel, who assumed the post in May after taking over for Matthew Tueller, who had served as ambassador since May 2014. Those plans, however, had stalled by the end of the year, an Omani diplomatic source told the Sana'a Center.

While preserving its hard line on Iran, the State Department appeared to pave the way for a new narrative on the Houthis to underpin support for these various new channels; in December, the department's Special Representative for Iran, Brian Hook, said that "Iran clearly does not speak for the Houthis."⁽³⁸⁶⁾ This was a radical departure from previous comments through the year. In June, Hook said stopping the Houthis was critical to "pushing back on Iran's long game in Yemen."⁽³⁸⁷⁾ In a September op-ed, Hook called the Houthis an Iranian proxy group.

UAE Reassesses Relations with Iran

In recent years, the United Arab Emirates had adopted an aggressive stance toward Iran and, with Saudi Arabia, was one of the main regional countries pushing the US to pursue a maximum pressure campaign against Tehran. In 2016, Abu Dhabi reduced its diplomatic representation in Tehran in response to the attacks against the Saudi diplomatic mission in Iran following the Saudi execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr.⁽³⁸⁸⁾ Moreover, the UAE supported Washington's decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal,⁽³⁸⁹⁾ despite Dubai being a hub for Iranian business overseas and trade between the two countries reaching \$19 billion in 2018.⁽³⁹⁰⁾ The rising threat of conflict with Iran, however, amid a series of escalatory incidents in 2019 saw Abu Dhabi rethink its position, with some Western diplomats linking the UAE's troop drawdown from Yemen to an Emirati desire to shore-up its defenses at home (see 'Shock UAE Drawdown Sets the Stage for Coalition Turmoil').

Tension peaked in May and June, first with the four ships sabotaged near Fujairah and then the twin oil tanker attacks near the Strait of Hormuz (see 'Regional Stand-Off Brings More US Weapons, Ships into Arena'). In an attempt to deescalate the

385) Dion Nissenbaum and Warren P. Strobel, "U.S. Plans to Open Direct Talks With Iran-Backed Houthis in Yemen," The Wall Street Journal, August 27, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-plans-to-open-direct-talks-with-iran-backed-houthis-in-yemen-11566898204?mod=e2tw>

386) Laura Rozen, "In shift, State's Hook says Yemen's Houthis independent from Iran," Al-Monitor, December 5, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/state-department-hook-shift-yemen-houthi-independent-iran.html>

387) Patrick Wintour, "Iran says progress made in nuclear talks is still not enough," The Guardian, June 28, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/28/world-powers-iran-nuclear-deal-abandoned-us>

388) Caline Malek, "UAE recalls ambassador to Iran," The National, January 4, 2016, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/uae-recalls-ambassador-to-iran-1.180964>

389) "UAE Support US President's Decision to Withdraw from Iranian Nuclear Agreement," UAE Embassy in Washington, February 18, 2018, <https://www.uae-embassy.org/news-media/uae-support-us-president%E2%80%99s-decision-withdraw-iranian-nuclear-agreement>

390) "US sanctions put chill on Iranian trade with UAE," Financial Times, July 25, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/bbe3c99a-ae9-11e9-8030-530adfa879c2>

situation, Abu Dhabi did not join Washington in blaming Iran for the attacks.⁽³⁹¹⁾ The UAE took further steps to defuse the threat of conflict with its neighbor across the Gulf: A seven-member delegation from Abu Dhabi met with Iranian officials, including Iran's police border guard commander, General Ghasem Rezaei, in Tehran on July 31 and signed a memorandum of understanding to boost maritime security in waters bordering both countries.⁽³⁹²⁾ The meeting was the first of its kind since 2013. President Rouhani later said in an October press conference that Iran's relations with the UAE had been improving, noting recent talks and visits.⁽³⁹³⁾

Pakistan: Driving Mediation Efforts Between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Pakistan took the initiative in early October to drive deescalation efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁽³⁹⁴⁾ This was not the first time Pakistan had attempted to mediate between the two rivals; in 2016, Pakistan engaged in shuttle diplomacy to Iran and Saudi Arabia following Riyadh's execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr.⁽³⁹⁵⁾ On October 13, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Rouhani, the Iranian president, to attempt to ease tension in the Gulf, discussing the war in Yemen and US sanctions on Iran.⁽³⁹⁶⁾ Khan also met with Khamenei, the supreme leader,⁽³⁹⁷⁾ who touched on a four-point Iranian plan for peace in Yemen, likely referring to a peace initiative Iran submitted to the UN in 2015.⁽³⁹⁸⁾

On October 15, Khan visited Saudi Arabia and met with King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The premier's office reported that Khan had called for deescalation and a peaceful resolution to the tension in the region.⁽³⁹⁹⁾ Saudi state media did not elaborate on the meeting. Following these visits, Pakistani

391) Vivian Yee, "Claim of Attacks on 4 Oil Vessels Raises Tensions in Middle East," The New York Times, May 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-oil-tanker-sabotage.html>

392) "Iran, UAE sign document to boost maritime security cooperation," Press TV, August 1, 2019, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2019/08/01/602439/Iran-UAE-maritime-security>

393) "President Rouhani says Iran has no problem resolving disputes with Saudi Arabia," Islamic Republic News Agency, October 14, 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83517494/President-Rouhani-says-Iran-has-no-problem-resolving-disputes>

394) Sanaullah Khan, "Welcome peace gesture by Pakistan, says President Rouhani alongside PM Imran," Dawn, October 13, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1510619>

395) Mateen Haider, "Saudi Arabia, Iran brotherly countries: PM Nawaz," Dawn, January 19, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1233996>

396) "Can Pakistan's Imran Khan mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia?," Deutsche Welle, October 13, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/can-pakistans-imran-khan-mediate-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia/a-50813144>

397) "A proper end to the war on Yemen will bear positive effects on the region: Imam Khamenei," Khamenei IR, October 13, 2019, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/7107/A-proper-end-to-the-war-on-Yemen-will-bear-positive-effects-on>

398) Louis Charbonneau, "Iran submits four-point Yemen peace plan to United Nations," Reuters, April 17, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran/iran-submits-four-point-yemen-peace-plan-to-united-nations-idUSKBN0N823820150417>

399) "Prime Minister Imran Khan's Visit to Saudi Arabia," Prime Minister's Office of Pakistan, October 16, 2019, https://pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=3093



Wadi Klesan on the Socotra archipelago, January 27, 2019 // Photo Credit: Naif Alnajm

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi hinted to reporters at a possible cease-fire.⁽⁴⁰⁰⁾ Saudi Arabia already had accepted a Houthi partial cease-fire on airstrikes and cross-border drone and missile attacks, but a full cease-fire proved elusive in 2019.

Pakistan's efforts to mediate came, according to Khan, in response to a request from US President Donald Trump and signals from the Saudis and Iranians indicating interest in a deescalation and diplomatic solution to their ongoing conflict.⁽⁴⁰¹⁾ However, Saudi officials quoted by the New York Times said that while Pakistan and Iraq had offered to mediate, the Crown Prince had not proposed the initiative.⁽⁴⁰²⁾

Pakistan has tried to maintain a neutral stance in the Saudi-US rivalry against Iran. Despite being a close ally of Saudi Arabia, it refused to take part in the Saudi- and Emirati-led military coalition in Yemen. However, Pakistan is among the countries whose economic interests have been affected by this rivalry. A pipeline project, for example, has been on hold for years due to US threats to sanction any country that works with Iran.

400) Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan: Threat of Saudi-Iran War Subsiding Due to Diplomacy by Islamabad" VoA News, October 16, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/pakistan-threat-saudi-iran-war-subsiding-due-diplomacy-islamabad>

401) Michelle Nicolas, "Pakistan's Khan says he is mediating with Iran after Trump asked him to help," Reuters, September 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-khan/pakistans-khan-says-he-is-mediating-with-iran-after-trump-asked-him-to-help-idUSKBN1W92W0>

402) Farnaz Fassihi and Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War," The New York Times, October 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-talks.html>

Oman: Between Mediation and Meddling

Since the beginning of the Yemen War, Oman has played its traditional role of Gulf mediator, maintaining relations with all actors in the war, including the armed Houthi movement. This enabled Muscat to serve as the setting for the late 2019 backchannel talks between Houthi representatives and their Saudi opponents (see ‘The Saudi-Houthi Backchannel’). There were also preparations for talks between US and Houthi representatives in the Omani capital,⁽⁴⁰³⁾ however, at the time of writing, those preparations had stalled, an Omani diplomatic source told the Sana’a Center. Oman also has frequently assisted in negotiating the release of Houthi detainees. In March 2019, Oman succeeded in releasing an Indonesian and a Malaysian imprisoned by the Houthis in Yemen, the state-run Oman News Agency reported.⁽⁴⁰⁴⁾ The two prisoners were transferred to Oman on March 11 and returned to their countries.

At the same time, Muscat has shifted from its neutral stance at the start of the Saudi and Emirati involvement in the conflict in 2015 as it began actively supporting a protest movement in Al-Mahra against the presence of Saudi troops in the governorate, which is situated along Oman’s southwestern border. Oman began its backing for the opponents of the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra in 2018, with Sana’a Center research indicating Omani involvement in the governorate has increased since.⁽⁴⁰⁵⁾

Meanwhile, there have been indicators of Oman cooperating with Iran and Qatar to a certain degree to undermine the Saudi- and UAE-led military coalition. For example, the pro-Islah Yemeni militia commander Hammoud al-Mikhlafi, who set up a new military camp in Taiz despite fierce criticism from within the anti-Houthi alliance, resides in Muscat and receives funding from Doha, contacts from his inner circle confirmed to the Sana’a Center (see ‘Taiz – Showcase of Power Struggles and Shifting Alliances’). Fadi Baoum, a figure within Yemen’s Southern Movement who has maintained close ties to Iran⁽⁴⁰⁶⁾ and recently took a lead in founding the “National Salvation Council”, a southern political body opposing the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition, is also hosted by Muscat.

Oman began 2020 with a new ruler for the first time in nearly 50 years following the January 10 death of Sultan Qaboos. Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, cousin of the childless Qaboos, immediately made clear Oman’s foreign policy would remain unchanged and his country would abide by “good neighborly behavior of non-interference in the affairs of others.”⁽⁴⁰⁷⁾

403) “The Southern Implosion – The Yemen Review, August 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8016#Oman_Houthi_US_talks

404) “The Sultanate Assists in Reaching Agreement with Yemeni Authorities for Return of Indonesian, Malaysian Citizens,” Oman News Agency via Oman News Gazette, March 11, 2019, <https://omannewsgazette.com/the-sultanate-assists-in-reaching-agreement-with-yemeni-authorities-for-return-of-indonesian-malaysian-citizens-2/>

405) Yahya al-Sewari, “Yemen’s Al-Mahra: From isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, July 5, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7606>

406) “Starvation, Diplomacy and Ruthless Friends: The Yemen Annual Review 2018,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, January 22, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6808#YW-A-Divided-Arab-Gulf>

407) Aya Batrawy, “New Oman ruler vows to uphold late sultan’s peaceful policy,” The Associated Press, January 11, 2020, <https://abc3340.com/news/nation-world/new-oman-ruler-vows-to-uphold-late-sultans-peaceful-policy>

Qatar: Undermining the Coalition

In 2017, Saudi Arabia and the UAE severed relations with Qatar over its support for the Muslim Brotherhood in the region and their concern Doha was too friendly with Iran and Turkey.⁽⁴⁰⁸⁾ They also expelled Qatar from the anti-Houthi coalition fighting in Yemen. Since then, Qatar has used its media empire to undermine the Saudi- and UAE-led military coalition in Yemen.

Qatari coverage of the Yemen War, most prominently in the pan-Arab satellite TV channel Al Jazeera, switched from cheering intervention against the armed Houthi movement to becoming a major critic. Similar shifts in coverage were visible at the Qatari-funded, Istanbul-based Yemeni TV channels Belqees and Yemen Shabab.

While evidence of more direct Qatari involvement inside Yemen has been scarce, there are some developments worth mentioning. Several Yemeni sheikhs recently told the Sana'a Center that they had been offered financial rewards in return for ceasing to fighting the armed Houthi movement. The money was offered, they said, by a well-known Yemeni sheikh with close ties to Doha. Another development linked to Doha was the opening of a new military camp in Taiz by Hammoud al-Mikhlafti with Qatari funding.

Sudan: Scaling Down Troop Deployment in Yemen

On October 30, AP reported that Sudan had withdrawn several thousand of its troops deployed in Yemen as part of the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition.⁽⁴⁰⁹⁾ According to the report, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), agreed with Saudi Arabia to keep a few thousand soldiers in Yemen to train Yemeni government forces.⁽⁴¹⁰⁾ AP quoted Sudanese officials as saying troop levels reached more than 40,000 in 2016-17.

In Sudan, the military deployment in Yemen had been highly controversial, though Khartoum kept its commitment to the coalition even after the ousting of the former President Omar al-Bashir. In May, Dagalo reaffirmed Sudan's support to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during a meeting in Jeddah.⁽⁴¹¹⁾ This was followed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledging \$3 billion worth of aid for Sudan in support of

408) Patrick Wintour, "Qatar given 10 days to meet 13 sweeping demands by Saudi Arabia," The Guardian, June 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/23/close-al-jazeera-saudi-arabia-issues-qatar-with-13-demands-to-end-blockade>

409) Samy Magdy, "Sudan drawing down troops in Yemen in recent months," The Associated Press, October 30, 2019, <https://apnews.com/d5705f44afea4f0b91ec14bbadefae62>

410) "Sudan withdraws 10,000 troops from Yemen," Sudan Tribune, October 31, 2019, https://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?iframe&page=imprimable&id_article=68404

411) "Sudan's military leadership pledges to back Saudi Arabia against Iran threats," The National, May 25, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/sudan-s-military-leadership-pledges-to-back-saudi-arabia-against-iran-threats-1.866068>

the country's ailing economy. The Yemen conflict had also been a source of income for Sudanese troops, many of whom have returned home with enough funds for new homes or expensive medical treatments for family members.⁽⁴¹²⁾

Given Sudan's dependence on Saudi and Emirati financial support, the partial withdrawal from Yemen has most likely happened in agreement with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as the coalition powers gradually scale back their military engagement in Yemen.

During a November press conference, Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea revealed alleged details of the Sudanese deployment, saying they were mainly stationed in northern Yemen along the border with the Saudi provinces of Najran, Asir and Jizan. Three of six Sudanese Brigades operating on the Red Sea Coast under the command of Emirati forces withdrew in 2019, he said. The Houthis claimed that Sudanese forces took significant casualties near Haradh and Midi in Hajjah governorate, labeling the area the "Sudanese army cemetery." Another Sudanese brigade was based in Aden and Lahj, according to Sarea.⁽⁴¹³⁾

Morocco: Exiting the Coalition

In February 2019, Morocco suspended its participation in the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition in Yemen.⁽⁴¹⁴⁾ The Moroccan government did not disclose details of its military support to the coalition, but Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita said in January that Morocco's military participation in Yemen had changed in "form and content" as a result of its revaluation of political and humanitarian developments in Yemen.⁽⁴¹⁵⁾

In 2015, Morocco provided intelligence and logistical support to the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition.⁽⁴¹⁶⁾ It also made six Moroccan warplanes available.⁽⁴¹⁷⁾ In addition, Yemeni media reported at the time that Morocco was sending 1,500 troops to Saudi Arabia to participate in the campaign.⁽⁴¹⁸⁾ Morocco's involvement with the coalition had already declined in 2018 and its pullout did not have had a significant military impact in Yemen. However, its withdrawal signified decreasing buy-in for the war among Saudi's traditional allies in the region.

412) Sana'a Center interview with Sudanese researcher, December 2019.

413) "Brigadier General Sarea exposes Sudan's losses [AR]," Al-Alam TV, November 2, 2019, www.alalamtv.net/news/4532121/

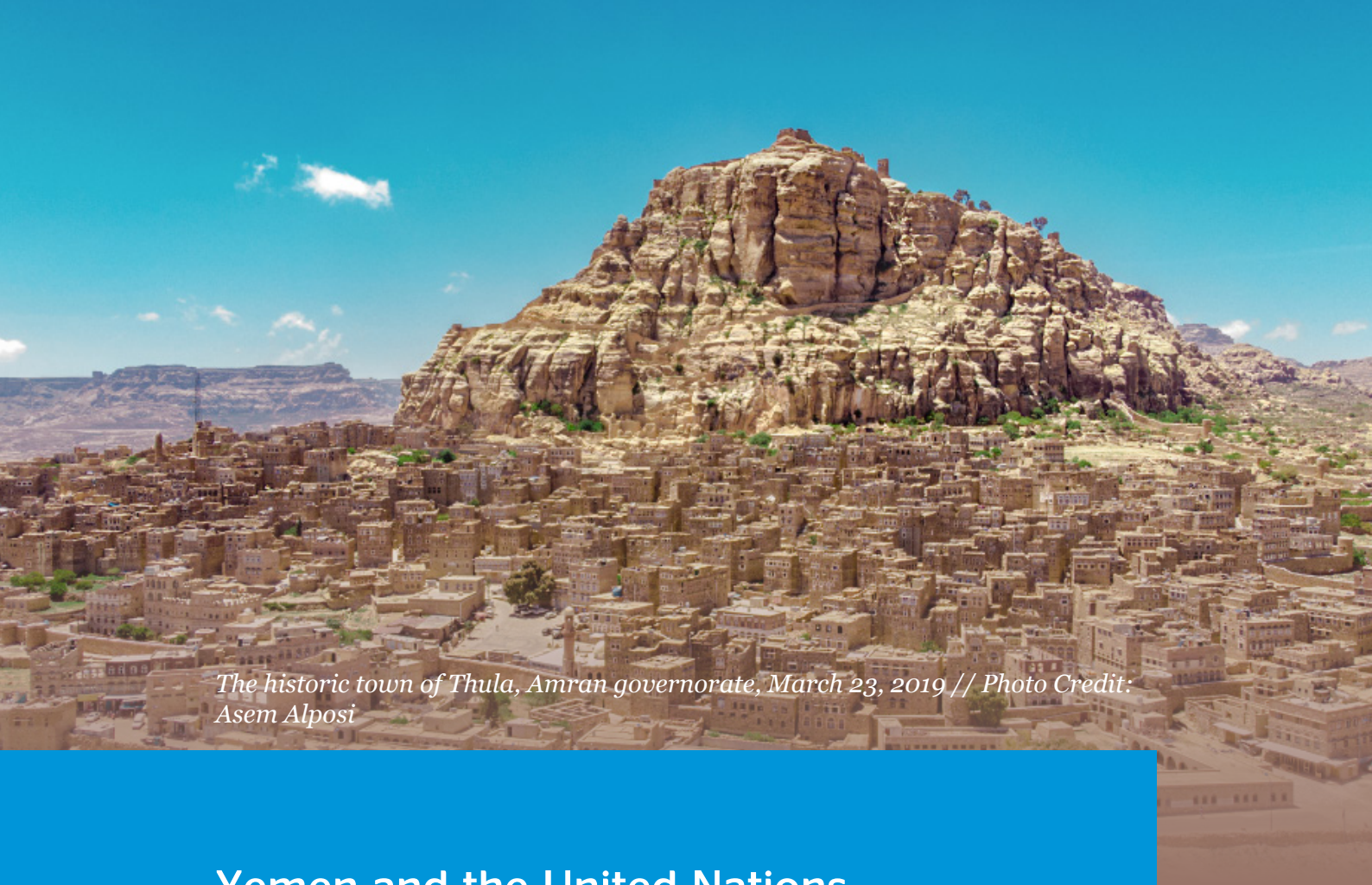
414) Amira El-Masaiti, "Morocco re-evaluates role in Saudi-led Yemen war coalition," The Associated Press, February 8, 2019, <https://apnews.com/a24362ce0f5841c0bf76e5d157b3f94d>

415) "Nasser Bourita ... Attitudes of Moroccan diplomacy on the files of the Arab region [AR]," Al Jazeera, January 23, 2019, www.aljazeera.net/programs/withoutbounds/2019/1/23/

416) "Factbox: Saudi-led coalition against Yemen's Houthis," Reuters, April 10, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-coalition-factbox/factbox-saudi-led-coalition-against-yemens-houthis-idUSKBN0N11F220150410>

417) "Yemen air strikes: a guide to the countries backing Saudi Arabia", AP via The Guardian, April 10, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/apr/10/yemen-air-strikes-countries-backing-saudi-arabia>

418) "1500 Moroccan soldiers head to Saudi Arabia to participate in the war in Yemen [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, December 5, 2015, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/77547>



The historic town of Thula, Amran governorate, March 23, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

Yemen and the United Nations

UN Launches Mission to Hudaydah

The UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement,⁽⁴¹⁹⁾ reached in December 2018 by the internationally recognized government and the armed Houthi movement, halted the anti-Houthi forces' months-long military campaign to capture Hudaydah city on Yemen's Red Sea Coast. Yemen has historically imported as much as 90 percent of its basic foodstuffs, and Hudaydah port, along with nearby Saleef and Ras Issa ports, are the entry point for the majority of the country's commercial and humanitarian imports.⁽⁴²⁰⁾ Houthi tariffs on these imports are a major revenue source for the group, which was the anti-Houthi coalition's motivation for trying to capture the port. Meanwhile, aid agencies, Yemeni experts and many others warned the battle could disrupt imports and push parts of the country into famine.⁽⁴²¹⁾

The year 2019 began with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres outlining in a proposal to the UN Security Council (UNSC) how the UN would support the

419) Full text of the Stockholm Agreement, UN Office of the Special Envoy to the United Nations, New York, December 13, 2018, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/full-text-stockholm-agreement>

420) Ala Qasem and Brett Scott, "Navigating Yemen's Wartime Food Pipeline," Deep Root, November 2017, <https://www.deeproot.consulting/single-post/2017/11/29/Navigating-Yemen%E2%80%99s-Wartime-Food-Pipeline>

421) "An open letter regarding Hudaydah," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 17, 2018, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/news/6246>

implementation of the Stockholm Agreement.⁽⁴²²⁾ On January 16, the UNSC passed Resolution 2542, establishing the United Nations Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA), which would be responsible for overseeing the cease-fire and redeployment of military forces from the city.⁽⁴²³⁾ The mission built on a UN monitoring force that was dispatched to the port city at the end of December 2018 to set up the Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) – a tripartite UN, Houthi and Yemeni government body charged with negotiating mechanisms for the demilitarization of Hudaydah city. The UN secretary-general originally proposed that 75 UN observers would be sent to the port city; as of October, the Hudaydah mission had 55 observers (35 military and police monitors and 20 civilian personnel).⁽⁴²⁴⁾ A Sana'a Center source attributed the undersized contingent to the Houthi delays in issuing entry visas for UN observers.⁽⁴²⁵⁾

The initial UN monitoring team sent to Hudaydah at the end of 2018 was led by Dutch Major General Patrick Cammaert – a veteran of UN missions in the Balkans, Asia and Africa. However, the general's tenure as head of the UN mission would last only one month, and according to the UN, a short-term contract had been the plan all along. His tenure was not without turbulence; a UN armored vehicle transporting the general was struck by a bullet on January 17.⁽⁴²⁶⁾ In comments to Dutch media upon his departure, Cammaert criticized the Stockholm Agreement as “vague”, and argued that the accord “underestimated the deep, deep mutual distrust and hatred” among the warring parties.⁽⁴²⁷⁾ Lieutenant General Michael Anker Lollesgaard from Denmark was appointed on January 31 as the second mission commander, arriving in Hudaydah in early February.⁽⁴²⁸⁾

Much Talk, Little Action on Hudaydah Withdrawal

By the end of 2019, the Redeployment Coordination Committee had met seven times since its establishment in late December 2018. The first two meetings were held in Houthi-held territory. Houthi negotiators then refused to enter Yemeni government-

422) “Letter dated 31 December 2018 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council,” United Nations, December 31, 2018, https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2019/28; “‘Overview: The Road to the Sweden Talks’ in Starvation, Diplomacy and Ruthless Friends: The Yemen Annual Review 2018,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, January 22, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6808#DCM3-overview>

423) “Adopting Resolution 2452 (2019), Security Council Establishes Special Political Mission to Support Ceasefire between Yemen’s Government, Houthi Militia,” United Nations, January 16, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13664.doc.htm>

424) “Letter dated 14 October 2019 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council,” United Nations, October 14, 2019, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3832686?ln=en>

425) Sana’a Center interview with an INGO employee well-versed in UN operations, May 2019.

426) Mohammed Ghobari, “Head of U.N. team in Yemen’s Hodeidah safe after car in convoy shot: U.N.,” Reuters, January 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/head-of-un-team-in-yemens-hodeidah-safe-after-shooting-incident-un-idUSKCN1PB1TB>

427) Theo Koele, “Major General Patrick Cammaert about his mission in Yemen: It was Russian roulette [Dutch],” *de Volkskrant*, February 11, 2019, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/generaal-majoor-b-d-patrick-cammaert-over-zijn-missie-in-jemen-het-was-russische-roulette-b3fd53a8/>

428) Suleiman al-Khalidi, “U.N. envoy says Yemen prisoner swap would help peace process,” Reuters, February 5, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-prisoners/u-n-envoy-says-yemen-prisoner-swap-would-help-peace-process-idUSKCN1PU149>

held territory for a scheduled meeting on January 8. As a result, the third meeting on February 3 was held on a UN-chartered boat anchored in Hudayah port while the fourth meeting on February 16 was held in Houthi-controlled territory.⁽⁴²⁹⁾ The RCC then did not meet again for five months amid growing mistrust between the two parties over when and how to redeploy forces from the city. As a result, General Lollesgaard was forced to meet separately with Yemeni government and Houthi representatives to coordinate the planned withdrawal.⁽⁴³⁰⁾

In mid-April, fresh optimism was injected into the UN's peace efforts after Griffiths announced during a UNSC briefing that the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement had agreed to a detailed plan for phase one of the withdrawal of military forces from Hudaydah.⁽⁴³¹⁾ In an interview with Reuters, Griffiths said the UN did not "have an exact date at the moment for the beginning of this physical redeployment," adding that it hoped to see the withdrawal begin in "a few weeks."⁽⁴³²⁾ However, a major stumbling block remained unaddressed: the composition of local forces that would assume security control after the warring parties' withdrawal. The Yemeni government argued that the forces should be those who were in place before the armed Houthi movement took control of state institutions in 2014, while Houthi negotiators favored handing over control to the current local authorities, which include personnel appointed by Houthi authorities.

Any hopes for a coordinated redeployment were scuttled when the Houthis announced in May an offer to unilaterally withdraw all fighters from Hudayah's three ports.⁽⁴³³⁾ The withdrawal of Houthi fighters, however, included replacing them with Houthi-administered Coast Guard personnel; the changeover took place May 11 through 14 and was confirmed by UN monitors on the ground.⁽⁴³⁴⁾ General Lollesgaard, during a press briefing on May 15, outlined the UN's rationale for accepting the Houthis' offer, saying that facilitating port operations was an urgent priority and the UN could not wait for both parties to agree on how to implement the phase one withdrawal.⁽⁴³⁵⁾

429) Patrick Wintour, "Yemen war: UN anchors ship off Red Sea port for 'neutral ground' talks," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/03/yemen-peace-talks-held-on-un-chartered-boat-off-hodeidah>

430) "The Yemen Review – March 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7357#UN-Special-Envoy-Briefs-Council-On-Withdrawal>

431) "Briefing of Martin Griffiths, UN Special Envoy for Yemen to the Security Council," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, April 15, 2019, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-martin-griffiths-un-special-envoy-yemen-security-council>

432) Aziz El Yaakoubi, "U.N. envoy sees troop withdrawal in Yemen's Hodeidah within weeks," *Reuters*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/u-n-envoy-sees-troop-withdrawal-in-yemens-hodeidah-within-weeks-idUSKCN1RU265?il=0>

433) Emma Graham-Harrison, "Yemen: Houthis begin Hodeidah port pullout," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/11/yemen-houthis-begin-hodeidah-port-pullout>

434) "Statement by the Chair of the Redeployment Coordination Committee," United Nations, May 14, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2019-05-14/note-correspondents-statement-the-chair-of-the-redeployment-coordination-committee-scroll-down-for-arabic>

435) "Press briefing by Lieutenant General Michael Lollesgaard, Head of the UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA)," United Nations, May 15, 2019, <http://webtv.un.org/watch/press-briefing-by-lieutenant-general-michael-lollesgaard-head-of-the-un-mission-to-support-the-hudaydah-agreement-unmha/6037265939001/>

The incident sparked a fierce reaction from the Yemeni government, which accused the Houthi movement of engaging in a “theatrical play” in Hudaydah.⁽⁴³⁶⁾ Among Yemeni government officials and their supporters, the move was reminiscent of the Houthi leadership’s announcement on December 29, 2018, shortly after the Stockholm Agreement was reached, that their forces had withdrawn from Hudaydah port.⁽⁴³⁷⁾ In reality, however, it was a staged media event, following which Yemeni government officials accused the Houthi leaders of simply moving their fighters and loyalists into positions in port management and the Coast Guard.⁽⁴³⁸⁾ In a letter to the UNSC on May 13, the Yemeni mission at the UN argued that the most recent unilateral Houthi withdrawal was not genuine and violated past agreements, including UNSC Resolution 2451 and 2452, which established mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement.⁽⁴³⁹⁾ The UN’s acceptance of the Houthi offer also set off a direct conflict between President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and Griffiths (see ‘The UN Special Envoy’).

By July, tension had eased and the UN announced that the warring parties had agreed on mechanisms to monitor the Hudaydah cease-fire during the first RCC meeting since mid-February.⁽⁴⁴⁰⁾ The RCC also finalized “concepts of operations” for phases one and two of the mutual redeployment of forces from the city.⁽⁴⁴¹⁾ Phase one would see the Houthis withdraw from the ports of Hudaydah, Saleef and Ras Issa, while anti-Houthi forces would retreat from the eastern outskirts of the city.⁽⁴⁴²⁾ Phase two envisioned the full withdrawal of all forces from Hudaydah and the demilitarization of the city.⁽⁴⁴³⁾ With these agreements, General Lollesgaard said the RCC had finalized its technical work and awaited decisions from political leaderships of both sides to proceed with implementation. The issues of what to do with revenues from the three ports around Hudaydah,⁽⁴⁴⁴⁾ the composition of local security forces to

436) Houthi withdrawal from Yemen ports going according to plan: UN,” Al Jazeera, May 12, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/houthi-withdrawal-yemen-ports-plan-190512182217520.html>

437) Ahmed al-Haj, “Yemen’s rebels say they left Hodeida port, claim disputed,” The Associated Press, December 29, 2018, <https://apnews.com/65694e6163ba4f5d8a2378d5700ec9a6>

438) “The Yemen Annual Review 2018,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, January 22, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6808#DCM-ceasefire>

439) “Letter dated 13 May 2019 from the Permanent Representative of Yemen to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council,” United Nations, May 13, 2019, <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2019/386>

440) “Redeployment Coordination Committee Chairman’s Summary of the Joint Meeting of the Redeployment Coordination Committee,” United Nations Secretary-General, July 15, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2019-07-15/note-correspondents-redeployment-coordination-committee-chair%E2%80%99s-summary-of-the-joint-meeting-of-the-redeployment-coordination-committee-scroll-down-for-arabic>

441) “Redeployment Coordination Committee Chairman’s Summary of the Joint Meeting of the Redeployment Coordination Committee,” United Nations Secretary-General, July 15, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2019-07-15/note-correspondents-redeployment-coordination-committee-chair’s-summary-of-the-joint-meeting-of-the-redeployment-coordination-committee-scroll-down-for-arabic>

442) Aziz El Yaakoubi and Michelle Nichols, “Yemen’s parties agree to start stalled troop withdrawal from main port,” Reuters, February 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-un/yemens-parties-agree-to-start-stalled-troop-withdrawal-from-main-port-idUSKCN1Q60QY>

443) Ibid.

444) Spencer Osberg and Hannah Patchett, “An Unending Fast: What the Failure of the Amman Meetings Means for Yemen,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, May 20, 2019, <http://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7433>

replace withdrawing troops, and governance post-withdrawal remained unresolved stumbling blocks. Still, Griffiths congratulated Lollesgaard for “an important breakthrough” during his July briefing to the UNSC.⁽⁴⁴⁵⁾ On July 15, the Security Council voted unanimously to extend the mandate of the UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement through January 15, 2020,⁽⁴⁴⁶⁾ with another renewal through July 2020 taking place on January 13, 2020.⁽⁴⁴⁷⁾

The issue of Hudaydah was then put on the backburner in August following the outbreak of fighting between Yemeni government and STC forces. Lollesgaard’s term as head of the UNMHA also expired at the end of August. Lieutenant General Abhijit Guha from India was named his successor in September.⁽⁴⁴⁸⁾

Stop-and-go progress on Hudaydah resumed in September when the Yemeni government and the armed Houthi movement agreed to the Cease-Fire Enhancement and De-Escalation Mechanism.⁽⁴⁴⁹⁾ This followed the 6th meeting of the RCC, held aboard a UN ship anchored off Hudaydah port, during which the parties approved the establishment of a joint observation center to monitor the cease-fire.⁽⁴⁵⁰⁾ In October, the RCC established five joint observation posts along the frontlines in Hudaydah city to facilitate “deescalation in flashpoint areas.”⁽⁴⁵¹⁾

Hudaydah Cease-Fire Largely Holds in 2019 Despite Lack of Withdrawal

While the Hudaydah cease-fire announced in December 2018 has not been adhered to fully, with near-daily breaches by all sides, it did succeed in halting the offensive on the city – and its potentially devastating humanitarian consequences – and it led to a reduction in overall hostilities in Hudaydah governorate in 2019. According to data from ACLED, the governorate averaged 289 security incidents (air and drone

445) “The UN Special Envoy for Yemen Briefs the Security Council on the Latest Developments in the Peace Process,” Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, July 18, 2019, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/un-special-envoy-yemen-briefs-security-council-latest-developments-peace-process>

446) “Security Council Extends Mandate of Mission Overseeing Yemen Ceasefire Accord for Six Months, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2481 (2019),” United Nations, July 15, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13881.doc.htm>

447) “Security Council Extends Political Mission Overseeing Peace Agreement in Yemen for Six Months, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2505 (2020),” United Nations, January 13, 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14075.doc.htm>

448) “Letter dated 11 September 2019 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General,” United Nations Security Council, September 11, 2019, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2019_735.pdf

449) “Note to Correspondents: Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) Joint Press Statement - The Sixth Joint RCC Meeting,” United Nations, September 9, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2019-09-09/note-correspondents-redeployment-coordination-committee-%28rcc%29-joint-press-statement-the-sixth-joint-rcc-meeting-scroll-down-for-arabic>

450) “Yemen Briefing and Consultations,” What’s in Blue, July 17, 2019, <https://www.whatsinblue.org/2019/07/yemen-briefing-and-consultations-11.php>

451) “Note to Correspondents: Statement by the Chair of the Redeployment Coordination Committee, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Abhijit Guha,” United Nations, October 22, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2019-10-22/note-correspondents-statement-the-chair-of-the-redeployment-coordination-committee-lt-gen-%28ret%29-abhijit-guha-scroll-down-for-arabic>

strikes, armed clashes, shelling and artillery and missile attacks) per month from January through December 2019. However, the number of security incidents from July through November were down 30 percent from the first half of the year.⁽⁴⁵²⁾

A UN Panel of Experts, meanwhile, warned that Houthi forces in 2018 had been developing more sophisticated weapons and deploying them in the Red Sea, including anti-ship cruise missiles and waterborne explosives. These, it noted in its January 2019 report, posed a security risk to shipping in the Red Sea.⁽⁴⁵³⁾ In an illustration of the Houthis' ability to destabilize the vital waterway, in September 2019 the Saudi-led coalition said it had intercepted an unmanned boat packed with explosives offshore from Hudaydah and, in response, conducted airstrikes against positions north of the city that it claimed were used for assembling booby-trapped boats and mines.⁽⁴⁵⁴⁾ On November 17, Houthi forces seized three vessels – two South Korean and one Saudi – and their crews off the coast of Hudaydah before releasing them a few days later.⁽⁴⁵⁵⁾

The UN envoy, meanwhile, appeared to redefine his measures for success at Hudaydah as the year went on. At a UNSC briefing on August 20, Griffiths tried to limit expectations of what the Hudaydah agreement could achieve, saying the deal was intended as a humanitarian stop-gap measure to avert further conflict and not as “a precedent for addressing the underlying issues of the conflict, the most essential of which, of course, is the issue of sovereignty.”⁽⁴⁵⁶⁾ This was a notable shift from earlier in the year when Griffiths said in February that the momentum created by the Hudaydah cease-fire could translate toward a political solution to the conflict.⁽⁴⁵⁷⁾ The revised mandate was reiterated in a writeup released for the anniversary of the Stockholm Agreement by the UN envoy's office, which argued that the main purpose of the December 2018 accord was “to avoid a military offensive on Hudaydah, and to alleviate the humanitarian suffering for the Yemeni people.”⁽⁴⁵⁸⁾

The UN envoy's reframing of the purpose and potential of the Stockholm Agreement, particularly related to Hudaydah, accurately reflected the reality at the end of 2019. The cease-fire left Hudaydah relatively stable, with front lines frozen in place in the city. Given, however, that no aspect of the Stockholm Agreement had been fully

452) Data collected on Hudaydah governorate from January 1 to December 31, 2019, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://www.acleddata.com/dashboard>

453) “Letter dated 25 January 2019 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council – Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen,” UNSC via Reliefweb, January 25, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/letter-dated-25-january-2019-panel-experts-yemen-addressed-president-security-council>

454) Rabie Abu Zamil “Saudi-led coalition destroys 4 Houthi positions,” Anadolu Agency, September 20, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/saudi-led-coalition-destroys-4-houthi-positions-/1589175>

455) “Negotiation and Deescalation – The Yemen Review, November 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, December 16, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8501#Houthis-Seize-Saudi-South-Korean-Ships-in-the-Red-Sea>

456) “Briefing of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Yemen to the Open Session of the Security Council,” Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, August 20, 2019, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-special-envoy-united-nations-secretary-general-yemen-open-session-security-council>

457) “Moving from a promise made in Sweden towards hope for peace in Yemen,” UN News, February 19, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1033101>

458) “A year after the Stockholm Agreement: where are we now?” Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, December 2019, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/year-after-stockholm-agreement-where-are-we-now>

implemented, it also was unrealistic to cling to the view of the accord as a base to build on toward a political solution to the conflict. The UN's efforts related to pushing the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement mitigated some of the negative aspects of the war, as seen in the deescalation around Hudaydah, but was not broad enough in scope to begin addressing the root causes of the conflict.

Prisoner Exchange Plan Falters

The prisoner exchange agreement was the first thing the parties accepted as part of the Stockholm Agreement, yet little progress was made on this front as the year progressed. The two main warring parties had committed to exchanging 15,000 prisoners,⁽⁴⁵⁹⁾ and the UN Envoy indicated to the Security Council that a prisoner swap between the warring parties could involve about 4,000 captives and take place by mid-January 2019.⁽⁴⁶⁰⁾ This did not materialize, however, despite two rounds of talks held in Amman in January and February.⁽⁴⁶¹⁾ Delays were attributed to the failure of the belligerent parties to agree on a finalized list of prisoners from both sides and to the Hudaydah component of the agreement consuming the UN envoy's attention. High-profile prisoners in Houthi custody include Major General Naser Mansour Hadi, brother of President Hadi, former minister of defense General Mahmood al-Soubaihi, and leader of the Islah party Mohammed Qahtan.

The first real sign of progress on the prisoner exchange front came on September 30 when the Houthis unilaterally released 290 detainees, saying the move was part of the movement's efforts to fulfill what was agreed to in Sweden. Two weeks later on October 11, the Houthis announced a new prisoner swap proposal to the Yemeni government involving 2,000 detainees in a "first phase."⁽⁴⁶²⁾ In November, the Saudi-led coalition announced the release of 200 Houthi prisoners.⁽⁴⁶³⁾ These prisoner initiatives came within the context of a deescalation between the Houthi movement and Saudi Arabia and the opening of backchannel talks between the parties. The latest prisoner-related development to emerge from these talks came when the Houthi movement released six Saudi nationals on January 1, 2020.⁽⁴⁶⁴⁾

459) Aziz El Yaakoubi, "U.N. proposes Yemen's warring parties pull out of key port: sources," Reuters, December 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-prisoners/u-n-proposes-yemens-warring-parties-pull-out-of-key-port-sources-idUSKBN1OA0ZQ>

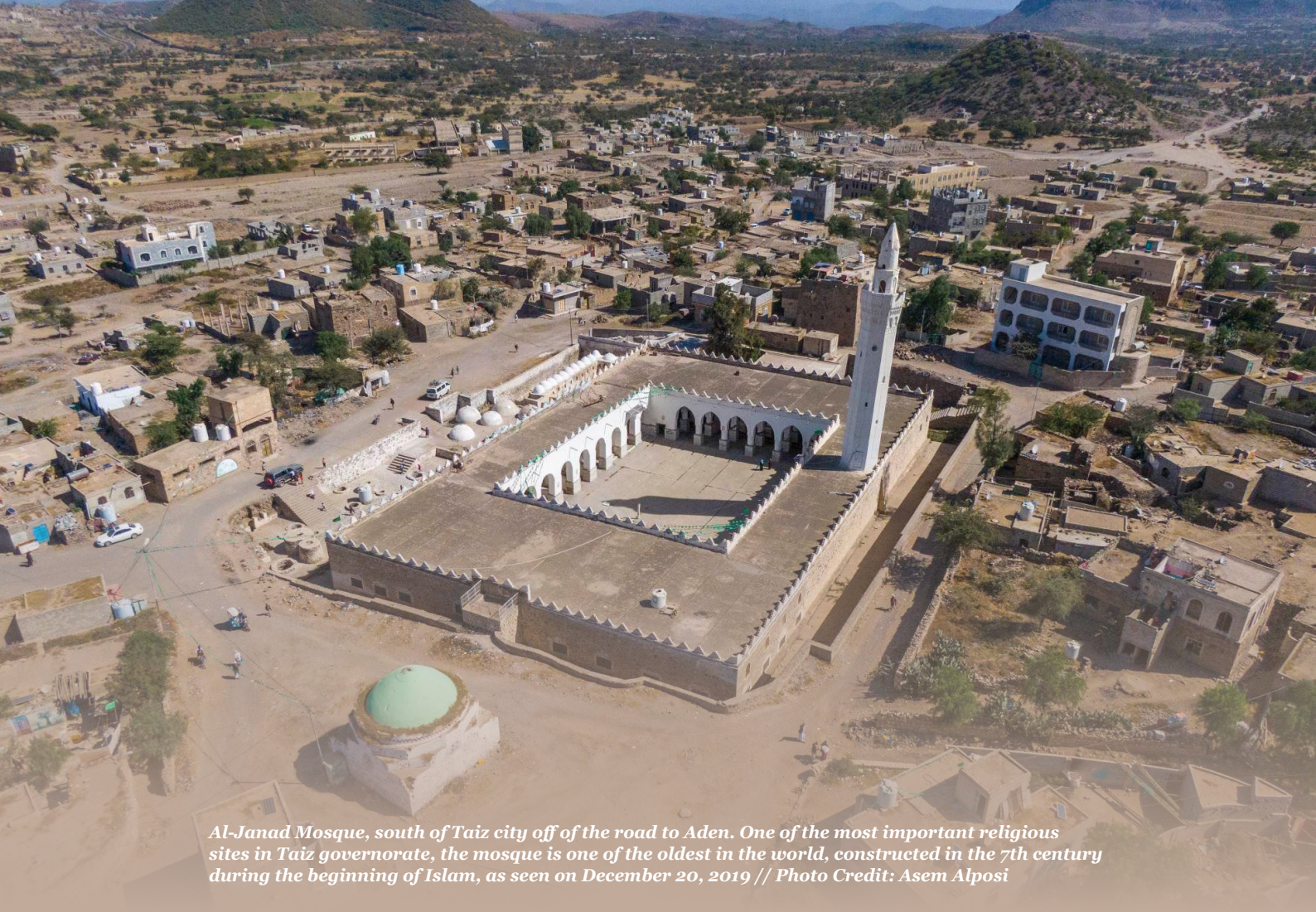
460) "Security Council Briefing of the Special Envoy for Yemen," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen, December 14, 2018, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/security-council-briefing-special-envoy-yemen-14th-december-2018>

461) "The Supervisory Committee on the Implementation of the Prisoner Exchange Agreement Continues its Work," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, February 8, 2019, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/supervisory-committee-implementation-prisoner-exchange-agreement-continues-its-work>

462) "Yemen's Houthis offer Saudi-backed government new prisoner swap deal," Reuters, October 10, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemens-houthis-offer-saudi-backed-government-new-prisoner-swap-deal-idUSKBN1WP31I?il=0>

463) "Yemen: Saudi-led coalition says it released 200 Houthi prisoners," Al Jazeera, November 26, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/yemen-saudi-led-coalition-released-200-houthi-prisoners-191126142735162.html>

464) ICRC Yemen Twitter post, "Today, the ICRC facilitated the release...", January 1, 2020, https://twitter.com/ICRC_ye/status/1212360253326667776



Al-Janad Mosque, south of Taiz city off of the road to Aden. One of the most important religious sites in Taiz governorate, the mosque is one of the oldest in the world, constructed in the 7th century during the beginning of Islam, as seen on December 20, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

While large prisoner swap deals in 2019 generally proved tricky to realize, locally negotiated exchanges have occurred regularly among various parties to the conflict. For instance, in December a prisoner exchange initiative took place in Taiz with pro-government forces releasing 75 prisoners and the Houthi movement 60 detainees.⁽⁴⁶⁵⁾ Localized swap deals are often brokered by tribes; mediation is an integral part of tribal code and Yemeni social norms that govern historical relations between groups. In 2019, locally mediated agreements, negotiated and backed by local figures, proved more successful than UN-led efforts.

No Progress on Taiz Deescalation

The third part of the Stockholm Agreement concerned Taiz, which has been one of the most active frontlines since the conflict began. In Sweden, the warring parties had pledged to form a joint committee – including UN participation and representatives from Yemeni civil society – and then determine its mission and working mechanism. However, the agreement lacked a timeframe and clear terms of reference for how the committee would be formed, resulting in a stillborn initiative.

465) “Warring Yemen parties carry out prisoner swap in front-line Taiz,” Reuters, December 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/warring-yemen-parties-carry-out-prisoner-swap-in-front-line-taiz-idUSKBN1YN1W0>

The UN Special Envoy

As part of his 2019 efforts to implement the Stockholm Agreement, Griffiths, the UN special envoy, engaged in shuttle diplomacy between a Yemeni government mostly based in Riyadh, the Houthi movement in Sana'a and other regional and international countries with a stake in the conflict. In May, tension between him and President Hadi burst to the fore. President Hadi wrote to Guterres, the secretary-general, on May 22, rebuking Griffiths' conduct regarding the announced Houthi withdrawal from Hudaydah's ports and threatening to cease cooperation with the special envoy. In the letter, Hadi also accused Griffiths of dealing with the Houthi movement as a de facto government, overstepping his mandate by adopting a political framework for negotiations outside the scope of agreed-upon UN resolutions, and focusing solely on Hudaydah while ignoring the prisoner exchange and Taiz aspects of the Stockholm Agreement.

Amid the dispute, the Security Council on June 10 publicly "underlined its full support" for Griffiths and called on all parties to "engage constructively and continuously" with him, an implicit rebuke of President Hadi's threat to cease cooperation.⁽⁴⁶⁶⁾ Signs of reconciliation could be seen at Griffiths' June 17 briefing to the Security Council, during which Yemeni Ambassador Ali Fadhel al-Saadi told the council that the internationally recognized government was determined to "cooperate with the UN special envoy."⁽⁴⁶⁷⁾ According to a Sana'a Center diplomatic source, Griffiths noted during closed-door consultations that the government's change in attitude came after UNSC members had been pressuring it to ease the tension.⁽⁴⁶⁸⁾

While the Hadi government and Griffiths managed to mend fences, there was one casualty from the spat: Yemeni Foreign Minister Khaled al-Yamani, who resigned on June 10 after holding the position for just over a year.⁽⁴⁶⁹⁾ A government official told the Sana'a Center at the time that the foreign minister felt he was being made a scapegoat for the tension between the UN special envoy and President Hadi. According to the official, Al-Yamani had also been growing frustrated with the presidential office's interference in his ministry and efforts to relegate him to a largely symbolic figure by controlling decisions within his ministry, such as directly appointing foreign ministry officials, while in other cases refusing to allow ambassadorial vacancies to be filled.

The UN envoy's work in 2019 had its share of other detractors. For example, a diplomatic source from one of the UNSC Permanent Five (P-5) members told the Sana'a Center that Griffiths should have been much more forthcoming with the Security Council and criticized his office for a lack of transparency regarding the

466) "Security Council Press Statement on Yemen," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, June 10, 2019, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/security-council-press-statement-yemen>

467) "United Nations Officials Urge Parties in Yemen to Fulfil Stockholm, Hodeidah Agreements, amid Security Council Calls for Opening of Aid Corridors," United Nations, June 17, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13845.doc.htm>

468) Diplomatic sources told the Sana'a Center in May that several P-5 ambassadors to Yemen had met with President Hadi in Riyadh to express their support for Griffiths in an effort to reduce tensions.

469) "Yemeni FM Khaled Al-Yemany submits his resignation: Al Arabiya," Al Arabiya, June 10, 2019, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2019/06/10/Yemeni-FM-Khaled-Al-Yemany-resigns-Al-Arabiya.html>

challenges and realities on the ground.⁽⁴⁷⁰⁾ To recap the year, the UN envoy's office in December issued a Q&A regarding the progress made on the Stockholm Agreement, conceding that much remained to be done.⁽⁴⁷¹⁾

The UN Security Council

Unlike other matters discussed at the UN Security Council, Yemen was not a highly contentious issue among council members in 2019. In fact, according to diplomatic sources, there has largely been agreement among P-5 countries as well as among the P-5 and non-permanent members on Yemen.⁽⁴⁷²⁾ This generally translated into supporting the efforts of the UN special envoy and calling for both sides to deescalate and adhere to the Stockholm Agreement.

In recent years, some council members had chided the UK, penholder of the Yemen file, for siding with the US during its attempts to shift the council's focus on Yemen to Iran's role in the conflict, even going so far as to push for Iran to be condemned in a draft resolution on Yemen that was ultimately vetoed by Russia.⁽⁴⁷³⁾ One UNSC member viewed the arrival of Jeremy Hunt as foreign minister in mid-2018 as a catalyst for a more constructive UK approach to Yemen that emphasized compromise and consensus within the Council. Dominic Raab took over for Hunt in July 2019, and has thus far shown less interest in Yemen than his predecessor (see 'Changes of Government, Diplomats Shift European Priorities').

The American position at the UNSC in 2019 also saw more alignment with other permanent members on negotiating language related to Yemen and backing the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement. The noticeable shift came following the departure of US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley on December 31, 2018. During her tenure, Haley had called out and pressured other countries to adopt a more hawkish posture toward Iran and its support for the armed Houthi movement and on several occasions urged the Security Council to take action on Iran over alleged violations of the UN arms embargo on Yemen.⁽⁴⁷⁴⁾ Fellow permanent members Russia and China generally stood against these positions during council negotiations and deliberations.

470) Sana'a Center interview with a diplomatic source based at the UN in New York, November 25, 2019.

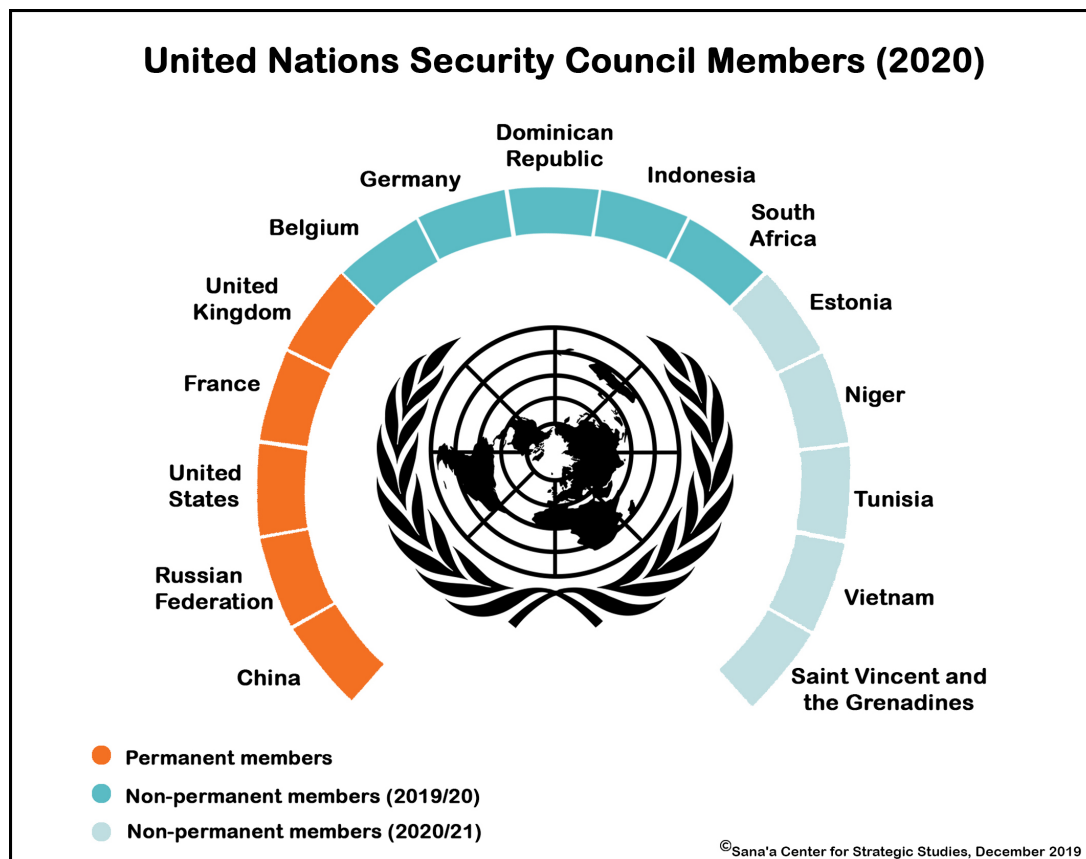
471) "A year after the Stockholm Agreement: where are we now?," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-general for Yemen, December 2019, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/year-after-stockholm-agreement-where-are-we-now>

472) Sana'a Center interviews with diplomatic sources based at the UN in New York, November, 2019.

473) Chris Gelardi, "Is the New UN Envoy for Yemen Destined for Failure?," PassBlue, March 5, 2018, <https://www.passblue.com/2018/03/05/is-the-new-un-envoy-for-yemen-taking-on-an-impossible-job/>

474) See, for example: "U.S. Calls For UN Action, Citing Report Of Iranian Arms Embargo Violations," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 16, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-calls-for-un-action-report-iranian-arms-embargo-violations-yemen-huthi-rebels/29042930.html>; Nikki Haley, "Remarks at an Emergency UN Security Council Briefing on Iran," United States Mission to the United Nations, New York, January 5, 2018, <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-an-emergency-un-security-council-briefing-on-iran/>; Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer, "Haley's 'Smoking Gun' on Iran Met With Skepticism at U.N.," Foreign Policy, December 14, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/14/nikki-haley-yemen-houthi-rebels-iran-missiles-press-conference-pentagon-skepticism-united-nations-trump-nuclear-deal-diplomacy/>

Other non-permanent members on the council – Poland, Germany, Belgium, Peru and the Dominican Republic – formed a faction on the Yemen file in 2019 in an effort to speak with a louder voice. The Yemen group pushed for accountability, humanitarian access and the protection of civilians to be at the front of the council's agenda related to the country. One staffer focused on Yemen told the Sana'a Center that the Dominican Republic was particularly vocal when it came to promoting accountability measures. This was apparent from the visit of the Group of Eminent Experts to UN headquarters in September, during which the Dominican Republic raised the possibility of linking widespread famine in Yemen to the recently enacted Security Council Resolution 2417 (2018), which threatens sanctions against parties impeding humanitarian access or employing starvation as a tactic in war.⁽⁴⁷⁵⁾



In 2020, Niger, Tunisia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Vietnam and Estonia will join as non-permanent members of the Security Council, replacing Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Kuwait, Peru and Poland. Assessing the actions of outgoing council member Kuwait, representatives of several UNSC country missions said the Arab monarchy had essentially served as a representative of Saudi Arabia's interests during its time on the council. With Vietnam replacing Kuwait as part of the Asian allotment, the only Arab state on the council in 2020 will be Tunisia. While representatives of some UNSC member countries have expressed optimism that Tunisia would differ from Kuwait's approach of closely towing Riyadh's line at

475) "Adopting Resolution 2417 (2018), Security Council Strongly Condemns Starving of Civilians, Unlawfully Denying Humanitarian Access as Warfare Tactics," United Nations, May 24, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13354.doc.htm>

the council, a representative of another member state believed that Tunisia's lack of strong interest and stake in Yemen would make it more amenable to Saudi influence.⁽⁴⁷⁶⁾

Regarding other new members, Estonia was expected to follow the lead of its European counterparts related to Yemen. These countries have expressed interest in pushing measures to ensure better protection of civilians, with a particular focus on the rights of women and children and preventing violence against women and girls during armed conflict.⁽⁴⁷⁷⁾ Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was taking charge of the committee overseeing UN sanctions related to Yemen⁽⁴⁷⁸⁾ and would focus on humanitarian access.⁽⁴⁷⁹⁾ Less was expected of Vietnam and Niger.⁽⁴⁸⁰⁾ The upcoming Security Council presidencies of Belgium and Germany, in February and July respectively, were also being touted as opportunities to include the views of Yemeni civil society and other parties.⁽⁴⁸¹⁾

476) Sana'a Center interviews with diplomatic sources in New York, November 2019- January, 2020.

477) Sana'a Center interview with a European diplomatic source, New York, January 17, 2020.

478) "Fact Sheet on the 2140 Yemen Sanctions Committee (2014)," Security Council Report, accessed January 25, 2020, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/yemen-sanctions-fact-sheet.pdf>

479) Sana'a Center interview with a diplomatic source, New York, January 24, 2020.

480) Sana'a Center interview with a diplomatic source, New York, November 15, 2019.

481) Sana'a Center meeting with NGO representatives, New York, October 2019.

Yemen and the United States

Legislative Drive Fizzles as Yemen Slips Down the Agenda

In the first months of 2019, US lawmakers continued their legislative drive to either stop or limit US involvement in the Yemen conflict, building on the momentum established in Congress toward the end of the previous year. The US announced an end to aerial refueling for Saudi-led coalition aircraft in November 2018, but still provides intelligence, advisory and logistical assistance. The nature and scope of US support in the war against the armed Houthi movement has been suspected to extend further than publicly acknowledged by the US government; in May 2018, the New York Times reported that US ground troops stationed on Saudi Arabia's southern border had assisted in locating and destroying Houthi weapons caches.⁽⁴⁸²⁾

In January 2019, lawmakers reintroduced legislation to end US involvement in the Yemen conflict.⁽⁴⁸³⁾ House Joint Resolution 37 and Senate Joint Resolution 7 invoked the War Powers Act, which asserts Congress' sole authority to approve the use of military force.⁽⁴⁸⁴⁾ After passing the House and Senate in the following months, President Donald Trump vetoed the legislation in April, saying that it infringed on his constitutional authority and would endanger American lives.⁽⁴⁸⁵⁾

While the resolution was largely seen as symbolic and was not expected to become law, the veto sent a message of enduring US support for the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition. Washington also expedited weapons sales worth billions of dollars to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in May.⁽⁴⁸⁶⁾ This included \$2 billion worth of precision-guided

482) Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff & Eric Schmitt, "Army Special Forces Secretly Help Saudis Combat Threat From Yemen Rebels," The New York Times, May 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/us/politics/green-berets-saudi-yemen-border-houthi.html>

483) Rebecca Kheel, "Lawmakers renew fight with Trump over Saudi Arabia, Yemen," The Hill, January 30, 2019, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/427639-bicameral-coalition-kicks-off-renewed-fight-over-saudi-arabia-yemen>

484) "H.J.Res.37 - Directing the removal of United States Armed Forces from hostilities in the Republic of Yemen that have not been authorized by Congress," US Congress, February 13, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-joint-resolution/37?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22war+powers%22%5D%7D&s=1&r=1>; "S.J.Res.7 - A joint resolution to direct the removal of United States Armed Forces from hostilities in the Republic of Yemen that have not been authorized by Congress," US Congress, January 3, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/7/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22yemen%22%5D%7D&r=2&s=1>

485) "Presidential Veto Message to the Senate to Accompany S.J. Res. 7," White House, April 16, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-veto-message-senate-accompany-s-j-res-7/>

486) Michael Pompeo, "Emergency Notification of Arms Sales to Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia," US Department of State, May 24, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/emergency-notification-of-arms-sales-to-jordan-the-united-arab-emirates-and-saudi-arabia/> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/910/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22actionDate%3A%5C%22115%7C2017-10-27%5C%22+AND+%28billIsReserved%3A%5C%22N%5C%22+or+type%3A%5C%22AMENDMNT%5C%22%29%22%5D%7D>

missiles to Saudi Arabia that had been held up by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for more than a year due to fears they may be used to kill Yemeni civilians. Trump's veto message and intervention to expedite the weapons sales positioned the war in Yemen within regional power struggles, with frequent mention of Iranian support for the Houthis and what he called Tehran's "malign activities" in the country.⁽⁴⁸⁷⁾

Growing weariness with the implications for the US of regular coalition airstrikes against civilian targets — as well as the Trump administration's apparent carte blanche for Saudi Arabia — has created a gulf between the executive branch and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle that continued through 2019. However, with energies focused on impeachment inquiries against President Trump and the upcoming 2020 presidential elections, Yemen was expected to quickly drop even further down the legislative agenda. Indeed, the experience of 2019 suggests that the spate of bills concerning US support for the coalition at the end of 2018 was an anomaly, largely fueled by Khashoggi's killing. Importantly, however, the 2020 presidential elections in November could impact Yemen and public discourse about the conflict: All of the Democratic candidates have pledged to reassess the US-Saudi relationship, with many calling for the immediate cessation of support to the Saudi-led coalition and a reassessment of weapons sales to the kingdom.⁽⁴⁸⁸⁾

The year ended without any real legislative wins for those seeking to redress the US role in Yemen. Though the Democrat leadership of the House of Representatives spawned high hopes for standalone bills targeting certain areas of US support, they had made little progress in Congress by the close of the year. This included: legislation seeking to prohibit the resumption of aerial refueling;⁽⁴⁸⁹⁾ another restricting the sales of certain weapons to Saudi Arabia, among other provisions;⁽⁴⁹⁰⁾ and a broader resolution calling for an end to all "security assistance" and weapons sales to Saudi Arabia.⁽⁴⁹¹⁾

The long-delayed annual defense spending bill for 2020 was seen as the last chance of the year to curb US involvement. Six amendments concerning US policy in Yemen made it into the drafts — including the defunding of military assistance for the coalition's war against the armed Houthi movement.⁽⁴⁹²⁾ In the end, only two Yemen-related amendments made it into the final bill passed in mid-December; one stipulating new reporting requirements on civilian casualties, and another banning aerial refueling of coalition aircraft — assistance that already ceased in 2018.⁽⁴⁹³⁾

487) "S.J. Res. 38 Veto Message," White House, July 24, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/s-j-res-38-veto-message/>

488) "The Presidential Candidates on Saudi Arabia," Council on Foreign Relations, July 30, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/article/presidential-candidates-saudi-arabia>

489) "H.R. 910 - Yemen Refueling Prohibition Act," US Congress, January 30, 2019, Text - HR910 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Yemen Refueling Prohibition Act | Congress.gov | Library of Congress

490) "Bill - To support the peaceful resolution of the civil war in Yemen, to address the resulting humanitarian crisis, and to hold the perpetrators responsible for murdering a Saudi dissident," US Senate, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/ARM19157.pdf>

491) "H.R. 643 - To prohibit the provision of United States security assistance to the Government of Saudi Arabia, and for other purposes," US Congress, January 17, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/643>

492) "H.Amdt.524 to H.R.2500," US Congress, July 11, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/amendment/116th-congress/house-amendment/524/text?r=41&s=a>

493) "S.1790 - National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020," US Congress, September 17, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1790?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22national+defense+authorization+act%22%5D%7D&s=1&r=3>

Reports Claim US Weapons Used by Non-State Actors in Yemen

CNN investigations published in February and October claimed that the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition passed on, sold or abandoned US-made weapons in Yemen, possibly in violation of export agreement terms.⁽⁴⁹⁴⁾⁽⁴⁹⁵⁾ The reports said that some of these arms and equipment ended up in the hands of non-state actors – including Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the armed Houthi movement and armed southern separatist groups. CNN's investigation also shone a spotlight on US weapons export controls; in response, head of CENTCOM Gen. Joseph Votel said the US must assess the claims made in the report.⁽⁴⁹⁶⁾ Saudi Arabia and the UAE have denied violating the terms of US arms sales.

In November, the US State Department said insufficient responses from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had delayed investigations into the allegations. The comments were made in a letter from the State Department to Democratic Party presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren, who pushed the state and defense departments in October for answers regarding CNN's findings.⁽⁴⁹⁷⁾⁽⁴⁹⁸⁾ In response to the State Department letter, spokesman for the Saudi-led coalition Col. Turki al-Maliki said that "all required information [is] available."⁽⁴⁹⁹⁾ The State Department added that, along with the Pentagon, it had sent teams to the UAE in September to investigate the findings and was planning to do the same with Saudi Arabia. The investigation would conclude, the letter said, once these visits and consultations with the respective governments have been completed.

494) Nima Elbagir, Salma Abdelaziz, Mohamed Abo El Gheit & Laura Smith-Spark, "Sold to an ally, lost to an enemy," CNN, February 4, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/middleeast/yemen-lost-us-arms/>

495) Florence Davey-Attlee & Nima Elbagir, "US sends investigators to UAE and Saudi to probe CNN weapons violations findings," CNN, November 26, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/26/middleeast/us-yemen-investigators-sent-uae-saudi-arabia-intl/index.html>

496) "US must probe if weapons went to Yemen militias: US general," France 24, February 4, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190205-us-must-probe-weapons-went-yemen-militias-us-general>

497) "State Dept Response Regarding Weapons Retransfers Yemen," Office for Senator Elizabeth Warren, November 18, 2019, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/State%20Dept%20Response%20re%20Weapons%20Retransfers%20Yemen%2011.19.2019%20bw.pdf>

498) "Warren Calls on DoD and State to Respond to Reports that American Military Weapons Have Been Transferred to Suspected Terrorists and Separatist Militias in Yemen," Office for Senator Elizabeth Warren, October 23, 2019, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/oversight/letters/warren-calls-on-dod-and-state-to-respond-to-reports-that-american-military-weapons-have-been-transferred-to-suspected-terrorists-and-separatist-militias-in-yemen>

499) Florence Davey-Attlee & Nima Elbagir, "US sends investigators to UAE and Saudi to probe CNN weapons violations findings," CNN, November 26, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/26/middleeast/us-yemen-investigators-sent-uae-saudi-arabia-intl/index.html>

Yemen and the European Union

Germany, France, UK: Diplomatic Quarrels and Legal Challenges

Berlin Pressed Back in Line on Arms Exports

Germany, accused of holding up approval and export of joint European arms projects, faced significant pressure in 2019 from France and the UK to loosen its arms export restrictions. This culminated in a Franco-German agreement on joint arms projects in October.

Germany's path diverged from that of the UK and France, the world's second- and third-largest arms suppliers to Saudi Arabia after the United States,⁽⁵⁰⁰⁾ in March 2018, when its ruling parties declared the government no longer would approve arms exports to countries participating in the Yemen conflict.⁽⁵⁰¹⁾ This decision, however, excluded companies that had been issued licenses prior to the conclusion of the agreement and that could prove their exported arms would remain in the recipient country. This loophole provided for continued arms exports to coalition members during 2018, but following the Khashoggi killing, Germany banned all arms exports to Saudi Arabia.⁽⁵⁰²⁾ The UK and France refrained from similar responses, with French President Emmanuel Macron dismissing any link between arms sales and the Khashoggi affair.⁽⁵⁰³⁾

These opposing arms export policies prompted terse exchanges between Germany and both France and the UK in 2019. On February 7, then-British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt criticized the German stance in a letter to his German counterpart, Heiko Maas, and called on Berlin to exempt joint European arms projects from the

500) Giovanna Maletta, "Legal challenges to EU member states' arms exports to Saudi Arabia: Current status and potential implications," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 28, 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2019/legal-challenges-eu-member-states-arms-exports-saudi-arabia-current-status-and-potential>

501) CDU, CSU and SPD, "A new departure for Europe, a new dynamic for Germany, a new cohesion for our country: coalition agreement between CDU, CSU and SPD, 19th legislative period [GR]," Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany, March 12, 2018, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975226/847984/5b8bc23590d4cb2892b31c987ad672b7/2018-03-14-koalitionsvertrag-data.pdf?download=1>

502) "Khashoggi affair: Merkel calls arms exports to Saudi Arabia into question [GR]," Der Spiegel, October 21, 2018, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/jamal-khashoggi-angela-merkel-stellt-waffenexporte-nach-saudi-arabien-infrage-a-1234369.html>

503) "Khashoggi case: Macron does not want to jeopardize arms sales in Riyadh [FR]," Le Monde, October 27, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2018/10/26/affaire-khashoggi-macron-ne-veut-pas-remettre-en-cause-les-ventes-d-armes-a-riyad_5375254_3218.html

embargo.⁽⁵⁰⁴⁾ Maas responded at a February 20 press conference in Berlin that the embargo would continue. He also noted that Germany's future decisions on arms exports to Saudi Arabia would depend on developments in the Yemen conflict and the implementation of the UN-negotiated Stockholm Agreement.⁽⁵⁰⁵⁾ France also pressured Berlin to change its policy, with the country's ambassador to Germany, Anne-Marie Descôtes, publishing a working paper in which she criticized the German export regime as unpredictable and harmful toward bilateral and European defense cooperation.⁽⁵⁰⁶⁾

Germany partly relented to the pressure. Although it approved an additional six-month extension to its export ban at the end of March 2019, Berlin also announced that previously issued export licenses for joint European projects would be extended through the end of 2019, with the caveat that none of the resulting fully assembled weaponry could be delivered to Saudi Arabia or the UAE during that period.⁽⁵⁰⁷⁾ The following month, however, German media reported that the country's Federal Security Council, which is in charge of approving German arms exports, had approved the shipment of components for military equipment that were part of projects jointly produced with France to be delivered to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁽⁵⁰⁸⁾ In October, the Franco-German Council of Ministers negotiated a bilateral agreement on joint arms projects, which was not made public.⁽⁵⁰⁹⁾ On October 4, German media reported that the country's Federal Security Council had approved the export of power generators for US-made Patriot missile batteries, delivered by the Germany-based Jenoptik Power Systems, to the UAE.⁽⁵¹⁰⁾

504) Matthias Gebauer & Christoph Schult, "Halt of arms exports to Saudi Arabia: Great Britain accuses Berlin of lacking alliance loyalty [GR]," *Der Spiegel*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ruestungsexporte-nach-saudi-arabien-brandbrief-aus-grossbritannien-an-deutschland-a-1253997.html>

505) Samuel Osborne, "Germany refuses to bow to UK pressure to resume arms sales to Saudi Arabia," *The Independent*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/germany-saudi-arabia-arms-sales-uk-jeremy-hunt-heiko-maas-yemen-war-a8789621.html>

506) Anne-Marie Descôtes, "From 'German free' to mutual trust [GR]," *Federal Academy for Security Policy*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.baks.bund.de/de/arbeitspapiere/2019/vom-german-free-zum-gegenseitigen-vertrauen>

507) "Federal Government extends arms embargo against Saudi Arabia for another six months [GR]," *Spiegel Online*, March 29, 2019, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/bundesregierung-verlaengert-ruestungsexportstopp-fuer-saudi-arabien-um-6-monate-a-1260215.html>

508) "Germany exporting weapons to Saudi Arabia and UAE — reports," *Deutsche Welle*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-exporting-weapons-to-saudi-arabia-and-uae-reports/a-48296155>

509) "Council of Ministers in Toulouse: Germany and France sign agreements for arms exports [GR]," *Die Zeit*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/2019-10/ministerrat-toulouse-deutschland-frankreich-abkommen-ruestungsexporte>

510) "Federal government approves tricky arms export to Emirates [GR]," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 4, 2019, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/bundesregierung-genehmigt-heiklen-ruestungsexport-an-emirate-16416637.html>

European Governments Face Legal Challenges over Arms Exports

In the UK, the government lost an appeal over the lawfulness of British arms sales to Saudi Arabia, part of a case still being contested at year's end. The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) had filed a lawsuit in 2016 – backed by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Rights Watch (UK) and Oxfam – against the UK government's continued issuing of licenses for the export of military equipment to Saudi Arabia, arguing that the latter was likely involved in violations of international humanitarian law in Yemen.⁽⁵¹¹⁾ In 2017, the British High Court ruled in favor of the government.⁽⁵¹²⁾

CAAT took the case to the Court of Appeal, and on June 20, 2019, the court ruled in its favor, demanding the government refrain from issuing new licenses to Saudi Arabia in cases in which the equipment might be used in Yemen, and review previously issued licenses.⁽⁵¹³⁾ A week later, the government asked for permission to appeal to the Supreme Court, which the Court of Appeal granted on July 9.⁽⁵¹⁴⁾ Until the Supreme Court rules, however, the British government has to comply with the most recent court decision.⁽⁵¹⁵⁾

British support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen exceeds providing arms, with UK Minister for the Armed Forces Mark Lancaster acknowledging to parliament in March 2019 that members of the UK Royal Air Force, on loan to BAE Systems in Saudi Arabia, had “provided routine engineering support” for Saudi aircraft active in Yemen as well as “generic training support” to the Saudi air force.⁽⁵¹⁶⁾

In Germany, meanwhile, a court ruled that the government must ensure the legality of US drone strikes that involve an American air base on German soil.⁽⁵¹⁷⁾ The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights had filed a lawsuit that had been making its way through the courts for five years on behalf of three Yemeni citizens whose relatives had been killed in a US drone strike in Hadramawt governorate in 2012.⁽⁵¹⁸⁾ They claimed that Berlin shared responsibility for lethal US drone strikes

511) “Saudi Arabia: Legal 2016 - Documents before the hearing,” Campaign Against Arms Trade, <https://www.caat.org.uk/resources/countries/saudi-arabia/legal-2016/before-hearing>

512) Alice Ross, “UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia can continue, high court rules,” The Guardian, July 10, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/10/uk-arms-exports-to-saudi-arabia-can-continue-high-court-rules>

513) “Queen v. Campaign Against Arms Trade,” Royal Courts of Justice, [2019] EWCA Civ 1020, Campaign Against Arms Trade, <https://www.caat.org.uk/resources/countries/saudi-arabia/legal-2016/appeal/2019-06-20.judgment.pdf>

514) “The Queen v. Campaign Against Arms Trade,” Royal Courts of Justice, [2019] CO/1306/2016, Campaign Against Arms Trade, <https://www.caat.org.uk/resources/countries/saudi-arabia/legal-2016/appeal/2019-07-09.order-granting-appeal-permission.pdf>

515) “Saudi Arabia – legal challenge,” Campaign Against Arms Trade, September 20, 2019, <https://www.caat.org.uk/resources/countries/saudi-arabia/legal-2016>

516) Lloyd Russell-Moyle, “Saudi Arabia: Military Aid: Written question – 228761,” UK Parliament, March 5, 2019, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-03-05/228761/>

517) “German court hands partial victory to critics of U.S. drone deaths in Yemen,” Reuters, March 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-germany/german-court-hands-partial-victory-to-critics-of-us-drone-deaths-in-yemen-idUSKCN1R025A>

518) “Yemenis sue Germany. What role does Ramstein play in the US drone war? [GR],” Der Spiegel, March 4, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/drohnen-jemeniten-verklagen-deutschland->

in Yemen controlled via data relayed through the US military's Ramstein Air Base in southwestern Germany and demanded the government forbid the air base from participating in such aerial operations in Yemen. On March 19, the administrative court of appeal in the German state of Muenster upheld an earlier ruling that dismissed the case. Nevertheless, the court stated that Germany must ensure that the use of the air base did not violate international law. The case is being reviewed by the Federal Administrative Court, and the German government said it would study the ruling.

In Belgium, the supreme administrative court canceled several licenses issued by the Government of Wallonia for arms exports to Saudi Arabia.⁽⁵¹⁹⁾ In June 2019, the Council of State voided licenses for arms exports that the Wallonia-based arms manufacturers FN Herstal and John Cockerill, the latter formerly known as CMI, had received from the regional government.⁽⁵²⁰⁾ Those licenses already had been suspended in June 2018, when the court agreed with human rights groups that the Walloon government had failed to examine the exports for compliance with Belgian law.⁽⁵²¹⁾

In December 2019, Amnesty International, CAAT, Mwatana and other human rights organizations sought to take on the arms sales issue more broadly, filing a complaint against 10 Europe-based arms manufacturers at the International Criminal Court. They argue that arms, sold by BAE Systems, Rheinmetall, Airbus and other companies to members of the Saudi- and Emirati-led military coalition, contributed to war crimes committed in Yemen.⁽⁵²²⁾

Leaks Reveal Coalition's Use of French Arms in Yemen

On April 15, French journalists leaked classified military documents detailing the widespread use of French-made armament in the Yemen war, contradicting repeated claims by the government that arms shipped to coalition members were only used for defense purposes.

Disclose, a French investigative news organization, obtained and analyzed documents produced by the French Directorate of Military Intelligence and delivered to Macron, the French president, as well as to Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and the country's defense and foreign ministers in October 2018.⁽⁵²³⁾ The documents revealed the

[in-muenster-a-1257875.html](https://www.in-muenster-a-1257875.html)

519) "Cancellation of several Walloon arms export licenses [FR]," Amnesty International Belgium, June 14, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.be/infos/actualites/armes-conseil-etat>

520) "The Council of State cancels the Walloon arms export licenses to Saudi Arabia [FR]," Sudpresse, June 14, 2019, <https://www.sudinfo.be/id124860/article/2019-06-14/le-conseil-detat-annule-les-licences-dexportations-darmes-wallonnes-en-arabie>

521) Ibid.

522) Dan Sabbagh, "BAE Systems accused of being party to alleged war crimes," The Guardian, December 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/dec/11/bae-systems-accused-of-being-party-to-alleged-war-crimes>; "Yemen war: Human rights activists file a complaint against arms manufacturers [GR]," Die Zeit, December 12, 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2019-12/jemen-krieg-menschenrechtler-zeigen-ruestungsunternehmen-an>

523) "Made In France," Disclose, April 15, 2019, <https://made-in-france.disclose.ngo/en/chapter/yemen-papers>

widespread use of French-made armaments by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and along the Saudi-Yemeni border. This included 48 CAESAR howitzer cannons, about 70 Leclerc-type tanks, French-made guided missiles, Damocles pods supporting the targeting of coalition airstrikes in Yemen, and European Airbus-manufactured A330 MRTT tanker aircraft used for air-to-air refueling of coalition combat aircraft over Yemen. The investigative report included maps outlining the position of French-made weapons in Yemen and along its border with Saudi Arabia. Disclose, using satellite imagery and video material, found that Leclerc-type tanks had been deployed in several major coalition offensives, contradicting French intelligence documents that stated the tanks had not been “observed on the front line[s]” during the conflict.

In an attempt to identify the sources that had leaked the documents to the journalists, France’s domestic intelligence agency, the General Directorate for Internal Security (DGSI), summoned the cofounders of Disclose, Geoffrey Livolsi and Mathias Destal, but the pair refused to answer questions on the source of the leaked document.⁽⁵²⁴⁾ The DGSI accused them of handling classified documents without authorization and “compromising the secrecy of national defense,” which carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison. They have not been charged.

Europe’s Mediation Role Diminishes in 2019

Changes of Government, Diplomats Shift European Priorities

Through the first half of 2019, then-British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt shuttled among representatives of the Yemeni government, the armed Houthi movement and regional state officials, continuing his previous year’s diplomatic efforts to press for a cease-fire in Yemen. While Hunt’s 2018 diplomacy sought to shore up UN-led consultations that ultimately resulted in the Stockholm Agreement, his 2019 travels were an attempt to salvage it (see ‘Much Talk, Little Action on Hudaydah Withdrawal’). Hunt’s March meeting with Yemeni officials in Aden notably made him the first Western foreign minister since 2015 – and the first UK Foreign Secretary since 1996 – to visit Yemen. In April, the UK hosted a meeting with Griffiths, the UN special envoy, and the ‘Quad’ – a group that provides a loose platform for the US, UK, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to discuss their diplomatic positions relating to the conflict in Yemen.⁽⁵²⁵⁾ The group, which Russia objects to as an attempt to circumvent the UN Security Council and craft an alternative multilateral diplomatic approach to Yemen,⁽⁵²⁶⁾ had also met on the margins of a controversial US-organized summit focused on Iran

524) Ryan Gallagher, “France takes unprecedented action against journalists who published secret government document,” The Intercept, May 17, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/05/17/france-takes-unprecedented-action-against-reporters-who-published-secret-government-document/>; Sandrine Cassini and Alexandre Berteau, “The questions raised by the summons of journalists by the DGSI [FR]” Le Monde, May 28, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2019/05/28/les-questions-que-posent-les-convocations-de-journalistes-par-la-dgsi_5468604_3236.html

525) “Yemen: Foreign Secretary to host meeting with Saudi, Emirati and US counterparts,” Foreign & Commonwealth Office, UK Government, April 26, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/yemen-foreign-secretary-to-host-meeting-with-saudi-emirati-and-us-counterparts>

526) Mustafa Naji, “Yemen’s Role in Moscow’s Mideast Comeback,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, June 28, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7576>

in the Polish capital, Warsaw, two months earlier.⁽⁵²⁷⁾ Russia, which is wary of but not formally opposed to the Saudi- and Emirati-led military coalition, has used its influence as a veto-wielding member of the UNSC to shield Iran from direct criticism in council resolutions on Yemen.⁽⁵²⁸⁾

In July, new UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson replaced Hunt with Dominic Raab, a Brexit hardliner with limited Middle East experience. Raab has occasionally commented on Yemen, tweeting in August he was “gravely concerned” about escalating violence in the south and calling for an end to hostilities and urgent talks.⁽⁵²⁹⁾ However, he has not engaged in any visible diplomacy on the Yemen front, despite the dramatic shifts seen in southern Yemen in 2019 and in Saudi war strategy.

In early 2019, two European delegations met with Yemeni government officials in Aden.⁽⁵³⁰⁾ Under the leadership of Antonia Calvo-Puerta, then-EU ambassador to Yemen who headed both of the delegations, the EU managed to maintain communication with government-aligned actors as well as Houthis throughout the conflict. French Ambassador to Yemen Christian Testot and the Dutch deputy ambassador, Jaap van der Zeeuw, accompanied Calvo-Puerta on the initial visit.⁽⁵³¹⁾ In 2017, Calvo-Puerta became the first Western ambassador to visit Sana’a during the conflict. When her term ended at the end of August, she was replaced by Hans Grundberg, who had previously led the Gulf Section at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁽⁵³²⁾ In the context of such rotation and following relative quiet on the European mediation front, Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom stepped in, touring the region in early September.⁽⁵³³⁾ Wallstrom said in an interview with *The National*, a UAE-based newspaper, that she believes Sweden “has the ear of many of the actors because they know we do not have a hidden agenda,” and she is confident her country can help.⁽⁵³⁴⁾

527) Patrick Wintour, “Time running out to turn Yemen ceasefire into peace, says Hunt,” *The Guardian*, February 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/13/time-running-out-to-turn-yemen-ceasefire-into-peace-says-hunt>

528) Naji, “Yemen’s Role...” June 28, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7576>

529) Dominic Raab, Twitter post, “Gravely concerned by the escalation of...,” August 8, 2019, <https://twitter.com/dominicraab/status/1159577731547508741>

530) “EU Ambassadors to Yemen visit Aden,” European External Action Service, January 14, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/yemen_en/56508/; “EU Ambassador, DEVCO officials visit Aden,” European External Action Service, February 18, 2019, <https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/yemen/58268/>

531) Ibid.

532) “High Representative Federica Mogherini announces senior nominations,” European External Action Service, July 9, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/65182

533) “The Southern Implosion – The Yemen Review, August 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, September 4, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8016>

534) Mina al-Oraibi, “Sweden’s Foreign Minister: Yemen peace talks must be inclusive,” *The National*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/sweden-s-foreign-minister-yemen-peace-talks-must-be-inclusive-1.906045>

Europe Steps Back Amid Tension with Iran, Shifting Saudi Strategy

In mid-2019, tension erupted between Iran and Western countries over the seizures of an Iranian and a British oil tanker, provoking fears of military escalation in the Persian Gulf (see ‘Regional Stand-Off Brings More US Weapons, Ships into Arena’). In early July, British commandos in Gibraltar seized an Iranian tanker over allegations that the vessel was breaching EU sanctions by shipping oil to a Syrian refinery. Twelve days later, Iranian authorities seized a British oil tanker, the *Stena Impero*, in the Strait of Hormuz off the coast of Iran. Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami suggested the seizure was in retaliation for the UK seizing an Iranian tanker off Gibraltar.⁽⁵³⁵⁾ Both tankers were later released. Gibraltar authorities said Iran had pledged in writing not to take the oil to Syria.⁽⁵³⁶⁾ Satellite images, however, showed the Iranian tanker approaching a Syrian port in September; Raab, the British foreign secretary, released an angry condemnation of Iran for breaking its word,⁽⁵³⁷⁾ but that drama was soon surpassed by a new one.

September 14 strikes on Aramco oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, claimed by the Houthis and blamed by the US on Iran, created a new crisis. Later that month, European leaders backed up the assertion that Tehran was responsible for the attacks.⁽⁵³⁸⁾ French President Macron tried and failed to facilitate a deescalation phone call between US President Donald Trump and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.⁽⁵³⁹⁾ When addressing the General Assembly, Macron proposed comprehensive talks be held including Iran, the United States, the signatories to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and concerned regional powers.⁽⁵⁴⁰⁾ He mentioned that an end to the “crisis in Yemen” should be among the topics discussed.

Such a meeting never materialized in the closing months of 2019, and European attention to Yemen policy remained squarely secondary to regional dynamics and policy objectives. Europe was essentially inactive through the collapse of the Saudi-led anti-Houthi coalition in August and the opening of Saudi-Houthi backchannel talks in late September. Rather, enhanced European diplomatic efforts affecting peace prospects in Yemen were triggered only by regional crises such as the British-Iranian dispute over the seizure of oil tankers and the attack on Aramco facilities, not events inside Yemen.

535) “UK-flagged oil tanker seizure; Iran’s will to respond to threats: Defense Minister,” Islamic Republic News Agency, July 22, 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83406347/UK-flagged-oil-tanker-seizure-Iran-s-will-to-respond-to-threats>

536) “Iran oil tanker: Gibraltar orders release of *Grace 1*,” BBC News, August 15, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-49362182>

537) “*Grace 1* tanker: UK condemns Iran over *Adrian Darya 1* delivery of oil to Syria,” Sky News, September 10, 2019, <https://news.sky.com/story/grace-1-tanker-uk-condemns-iran-over-adrian-darya-1-delivery-of-oil-to-syria-11806407>

538) “London, Paris and Berlin accuse Iran of being responsible for the attacks in Saudi Arabia [FR],” *Le Monde*, September 24, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/09/24/londres-paris-et-berlin-accusent-l-iran-d-etre-responsable-des-attaques-en-arabie-saoudite_6012763_3210.html

539) Julian Borger, “Rouhani reportedly refused to take call with Trump and Macron during UN stay,” *The Guardian*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/30/rouhani-reportedly-refused-to-take-call-with-trump-and-macron-during-un-stay>

540) “Speech of French President Emmanuel Macron at the 74th United Nations General Assembly (New York, September 24, 2019),” Embassy of France in Manila, October 3, 2019, <https://ph.ambafrance.org/Speech-of-French-President-Emmanuel-Macron-at-the-74th-United-Nations-General>

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