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Saudis Visit Sana'a as Warring Parties Conduct Prisoner Exchange

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The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

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Political Developments	6
Saudi-Houthi Talks Stall	6
Prisoners Exchanged	8
Other Items	9
Al-Qaeda in Yemen reshuffles leadership	9
Egypt to ease visa restrictions	10
Houthis open summer camps	10
Al-Bahsani steps away from PLC	10
Houthis move to ease Ramadan tensions.....	10
Military & Security	11
Eid Lull in Fighting as Govt Seeks to Unify Forces	11
Govt Announces Joint Operations Room	11
Fighting continues in Marib	11
Ongoing Insecurity in Abyan	12
Frontline Clashes in Other Governorates	13
Other Developments in Brief	13
The Economy.....	15
Saudi Arabia Eases Import Restrictions at Yemeni Ports	15
WFP Announces Arrival of Wheat Shipment	16
CBY-Sana'a Increases Capital Requirements for Money Exchanges	16
Central Bank and Finance Ministry Issue Conflicting Orders on Salary Payments	17
Central Bank Warns Against Rejecting YR200 Notes	18
Fuel From Saudi Grant Arrives in Aden	18
LNG Tanks Arrive in Mukalla	19
Currency	19
Editorial.....	21
The Risk of Flawed Peace	21

Commentary/Features.....	23
Returning Home: An Arduous Journey to a Changed Yemen	23
A Perilous Ride Back Home	24
Approaching Sana'a	25
A Bitter-Sweet Return	27
A Stop in Aden	28
A Changed Yemen and Threads of Hope	29
Commentary/Features.....	30
An Unfinished Deal: Yemen's Prisoner Exchanges	30
Special Negotiations	31

Saudi-Houthi talks in Sana'a during Ramadan failed to produce a final agreement on a roadmap for final status peace talks and a permanent ceasefire. Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) leaders in Riyadh were left out of the loop although the Saudis continued to insist that the Houthis co-sign any deal with the internationally recognized government. A major prisoner exchange took place in mid-April following a deal reached in March in which the government and Houthis agreed to the release of 973 detainees. Included among the prisoners released were former defense minister Mahmoud al-Subaihi, Nasser Mansour Hadi, the brother of former president Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and Samira Marish, a woman accused of planning several bombings and assassinations on behalf of the Houthi movement. A senior government military commander, Faisal Rajab, was released in a separate deal following a mediation in Sana'a between an Abyan tribal delegation and Houthi officials.

Fighting continued on several frontlines, most significantly in Marib governorate, where Houthi forces are trying to capitalize on their gains in March. On the economic front, the government-held port of Aden received a commercial ship without it being subject to inspection in Jeddah, and more than 500 types of goods were removed from a list of banned products, including fertilizers and batteries. The government is still struggling to cover the cost of public sector salaries after losing oil revenues following Houthi drone attacks late last year and Houthi pressure on importers to redirect shipments from Aden to Hudaydah, while the Houthi authorities drew in revenue from various informal taxes and duties imposed during Ramadan.



Head of the Supreme Political Council of the Houthi group, Mahdi Al-Mashat, shakes hands with the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Muhammad Al Jaber, at the Republican Palace in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, on April 9, 2023. Photo credit: the Houthi-affiliated Saba news agency.

Political Developments

Saudi-Houthi Talks Stall

April began with a flurry of activity in the ongoing bilateral talks between Riyadh and the armed Houthi movement, including a highly publicized [visit](#) by a Saudi-Omani delegation to Sana'a. But the month concluded without a signed agreement and uncertainty over the provisions of a deal. Saudi Arabia appears keen to conclude its disastrous military intervention in Yemen and is attempting to reposition itself as mediator rather than a primary party to the conflict. The Saudis hope to strike an agreement on a comprehensive ceasefire soon, but numerous contentious issues remain unresolved, including the very ones which derailed last year's truce negotiations. The talks continue, but appear to be in a holding pattern.

At the outset of the month, Riyadh summoned the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and other leading figures of the internationally recognized government, including Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed, Finance Minister Salem bin Breik, and Central Bank Governor Ahmed Ghalib, [reportedly](#) to brief them on the talks and solicit their visions for a final settlement. All PLC members agreed in principle to a proposal put forward by Saudi Ambassador Mohammed al-Jaber, though they likely had little choice in the matter. The deal presented to the Houthis was for a three-stage process for negotiations with the government, which would take place in the two years following the conclusion of the current Saudi-Houthi talks. During the first six months, confidence-building measures would include the payment of back salaries to civil servants, the reopening of roads, and the expansion of flights from Sana'a airport, followed by three months of preparations ahead of final status talks. Notably, the specifics of these measures are precisely what bedeviled efforts to extend the UN-brokered truce last October, and there has been no further information on how they might be resolved.

A Saudi-Omani delegation then traveled to [Sana'a](#), holding a highly publicized meeting on April 9 with the head of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat. The talks appeared to hit a snag over who the Houthis would sign a deal with: the Yemeni government or Saudi Arabia. Various Houthi media outlets said that a ceasefire agreement should be signed with

Riyadh as the leader of the coalition that launched the war in March 2015, and **not with the government**. Senior Houthi official Mohammed al-Bukhaiti tweeted that Saudi Arabia could only present itself as a mediator after a formal end to military operations and the ending of the blockade. Houthi TV channel Al-Masirah read a statement saying Saudi Arabia should officially declare an end to the war, lift the blockade, withdraw all foreign forces, promise compensation and reconstruction, and pay all public sector salaries from oil and gas revenues. The five-day visit to Sana'a ended without an agreement.

Officials in Riyadh were optimistic that a formal ceasefire could still be rapidly engineered, reportedly hoping for a signing ceremony in Mecca during the final days of Ramadan, but there has been little further progress. Low-level contacts have resumed in Muscat, and the Saudis now aim for a Houthi delegation to visit Riyadh or for another Saudi delegation to head to Sana'a, but the timing of these prospective visits is not clear. Saudi ambassador Mohammed al-Jaber's political standing has taken a knock from the lack of progress, giving sustenance to those who oppose his strategy for securing a Saudi exit.

The Saudi expectation appears to be that Houthi authorities will ultimately relent if they secure an agreement on Saudi-funded reconstruction and the payment of public sector salaries to civilian and military personnel. Houthi estimates for reconstruction **reportedly** run to \$30 billion. The government's leading finance officials have discussed US\$1 billion in short-term support, starting with US\$100 million to cover public finances over the next three months. But having been proactive and public in its desire for peace, Saudi Arabia has opened itself up to escalating demands from the Houthis. Such maximalist conditions are by now familiar – the Houthis have exacted concessions from their intransigence in negotiations, and their military position affords substantial leverage. But if the talks ultimately fail, Riyadh appears to believe that the international community will now hold the Houthi leadership at fault. In that case, even in a return to open war, Riyadh might avoid some of the opprobrium it has faced in US political circles in recent years.

In an **interview** with Saudi-owned Asharq al-Awsat, US Envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking revealed some frustration with the talks. He described them as the result of US and UN efforts over the past two years, emphasized that the international community should lead the reconstruction process, and stressed that Yemenis themselves must tackle the sensitive issues. The diplomatic community does still expect the talks to produce some result, and that the UN will eventually take over once an initial agreement is signed.

There are also numerous reservations about the plan from within the PLC, which has been sidelined in the process and left largely in the dark about the status of the talks. Southern Transitional Council (STC) chief Aiderous al-Zubaidi expressed the general sense of unease among members of the council, saying the plan was unclear. He also insisted during a meeting with Saudi officials on the need to discuss the "national issue" in future talks, in reference to the southern question, and said the idea of placing southern resources at the disposal of the Houthis in Sana'a was "unacceptable." However, he later gave a televised interview to Asharq al-Awsat, in which he praised Saudi proposals and spoke repeatedly, against habit, of the 'Yemeni people' rather than 'southerners.' Other officials have said privately that they agreed to the Saudi proposal but expected the Houthi side to reject it. The UAE has so far remained silent on the talks, having spurned Houthi overtures.

Prisoners Exchanged

The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) **facilitated** the release of 973 detainees over four days as part of a prisoner swap agreed in Switzerland in March. On April 14, approximately 250 Houthi fighters arrived in Sana'a, exchanged for around 70 soldiers affiliated with the government, UAE-backed Giants Brigades, and Southern Resistance forces. Among the latter were former Minister of Defense Mahmoud al-Subaihi and Nasser Hadi, the brother of former President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who were flown to the interim capital Aden. On April 15, the Houthis released 16 Saudi and three Sudanese soldiers, as well as the son and brother of PLC member and commander of the National Resistance forces Tareq Saleh. They were flown to Riyadh, while 350 Houthi-affiliated prisoners arrived in Sana'a on separate flights from Abha, Saudi Arabia, and the port city of Al-Makha. On April 16, around 105 pro-Houthi prisoners were flown from Marib to Sana'a in exchange for roughly 90 pro-government prisoners, including the son and three other relatives of former Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and four Yemeni journalists who had been detained for eight years and sentenced to death by Houthi authorities. On April 17, 104 Houthi prisoners were flown from Abha to Sana'a and Aden in a unilateral release by Saudi authorities.

In an **interview** given shortly after he landed in Marib on April 16, freed journalist Tawfiq al-Mansouri accused the head of the Houthi's National Committee for Prisoner Affairs, Abdelqader al-Murtada, of the systematic torture of detainees and extortion of their families. The journalists were released in exchange for Samira Marish, who government authorities accuse of leading a cell in Al-Jawf that was responsible for planting roadside bombs and assassinating senior army commanders in 2017.

The exchanges could have substantial political ramifications. Former president Hadi chose the release of his brother and the month of Ramadan to hold a gathering of PLC members, marking his first foray into public life since he stepped down last year. The April 14 meeting brought together the members of the PLC, who were in Riyadh to be briefed on the ongoing Saudi-Houthi talks. Hadi has reportedly been advised by PLC member Abdullah al-Alimi, his former office director, to try and persuade Saudi authorities to let him travel to the United States for medical treatment. Riyadh is wary of Hadi making statements from abroad that could complicate its efforts to end the conflict, including criticism of the Saudi decision to go to war, its conduct during the conflict, or his own removal from power last year.

STC attempts to win over former defense minister Mahmoud al-Subaihi, one of the highest-profile prisoners released by the Houthis, appear to have failed. Though he fought in the southern army during the 1994 war, Al-Subaihi went on to serve as a national figure, garnering a reputation for integrity, and could be a powerful player if he chooses to return to politics. He held a **phone call** with PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi after returning to his village, and met with STC chief Aiderous Al-Zubaidi on April 29 in Aden after days of argument over protocol. The STC wanted to choreograph the event for propaganda purposes, but Al-Subaihi insisted he meet Al-Zubaidi in his capacity as a PLC member, without secessionist symbols appearing in videos and photos; one report said he even tried to press Al-Zubaidi on his vision for a unified federal Yemen. Al-Subaihi is from Al-Subaiha tribal region of Lahj governorate, where the STC has had difficulty making political inroads.

After initially declining to include military commander Faisal Rajab in the Red Cross-organized prisoner exchanges, Houthi authorities released him on April 30 in an apparent attempt to curry favor with tribes in his home governorate of Abyan. Houthi media said Abdelmalek al-Houthi ordered his release out of appreciation for a tribal delegation that visited Sana'a on April 27 to request it, after the government neglected to include his name on prisoner lists. The government countered that the Houthis had staged the situation for public effect. Senior Houthi spokesman Mohammed al-Bukhaiti tweeted a video of Rajab's welcome in Dhamar governorate, from where he was flown to Abyan. Houthi authorities appear to be capitalizing on the bad relations between Abyan tribes and the STC to win a form of de facto recognition and legitimacy. The tribal delegation from Abyan met northern tribal leaders during their trip to Sana'a, comparing stability in the capital favorably to the situation in the south. Sheikh Al-Khidr Suleiman al-Zamki **asserted** "...we are able to solve problems by ourselves without any external interference," and the visit could lead to the opening of roads between Sana'a and Abyan via Al-Bayda, which is under Houthi control. More broadly, the Abyan tribes' outreach could augur a new stage of separate deals that parties make with the Houthi movement – especially if the Saudi-Houthi talks drag on without result.

The releases also included Samira Marish, who was accused of carrying out IED attacks against the Saudi-led coalition in Al-Jawf. Government officials say Marish led a cell of women after her husband was killed fighting for the Houthis. Marish was exchanged for the four journalists and given a hero's welcome in Sana'a. Her importance to the Houthis stems from her background in a poor social class known as the Muhammasheen, "the marginalized," rather than the Hashemite class who enjoy privileges according to Houthi Zaydi ideology. Her return was an opportunity for Houthi authorities to convey to the public that they take care of their own, and to answer critics of their policies toward women – though they may also have wanted her back for fear that she could provide important information to her Islah-affiliated captors in Marib. Marish later appeared at public events where she was hailed as an example of the "wronged Yemeni woman."

The Islah party was clearly a major beneficiary of the first round of releases. Most of those released were residents of Marib governorate – including family members of former vice president Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who were released in return for members of the Marib Hashemite Al-Ameer family. Tareq Saleh's negotiator, on the other hand, focused on his family members, while Salafi groups had no representative at all. Frustrated families of detainees in Taiz and Ibb must now wait for future prisoner swaps, leading to a reported complaint by Taiz Governor Nabil Shamsan.

Other Items

Al-Qaeda in Yemen reshuffles leadership

Efforts to restructure the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) group are being led by Ibrahim al-Banna, head of the local security wing, and Ibn al-Madani, a son of Saif al-Adel, the Egyptian Al-Qaeda leader based in Iran. They aim to curb the authority of AQAP leader Khaled Batarfi and restructure the group's top bodies, including its Shura council, to give Saif al-Adel a direct role. The initiative seems to have been spurred by a US drone strike in February that killed Hamad al-Tamimi, AQAP's Saudi-born media chief. The Egyptian faction led by Saif al-Adel is trying to fill the vacuum and take advantage of the rivalry between Batarfi and senior Yemeni figure Saad al-Awlaqi. Sources say Al-Adel has dangled the prospect of more funding if the restructuring is approved. This would put him in a position to follow through on plans to bring in more senior figures from outside Yemen to scale up AQAP's operations.

Egypt to ease visa restrictions

Egyptian officials have said they intend to lift recently implemented travel restrictions on Yemenis and replace them with a system that makes travel easier. The previous requirement to provide a medical report – which most Yemenis could acquire easily within Yemen – will be scrapped, as will additional security requirements imposed in early April. They will be replaced by a simple tourist visa, though its cost is not yet known. Media reports first linked the new restrictions to anger over Yemeni government outreach to Ethiopia, with which Egypt is in a bitter dispute over access to water from the Nile. Egyptian security officials then said they were concerned about Yemenis flying to Egypt from Jordan after flights out of Sana'a resumed last year; other officials cited complaints over diplomats at the Yemeni embassy in Cairo.

Houthis open summer camps

The armed Houthi movement launched its annual summer camp program, aimed at indoctrinating children with Houthi ideology, including jihadism, through sectarian lectures. Houthi officials claimed about 1.5 million children were expected to enroll in the summer camps this year. In April 2022, the Houthis signed an action plan with the UN to work toward preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers, but in its latest annual [report](#), the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen stated that the Houthis continued to indoctrinate, recruit, and, in some cases, train children at the camps for use as combatants.

Al-Bahsani steps away from PLC

PLC member and former Hadramawt governor Faraj al-Bahsani announced the suspension of his participation in the work of the PLC. On April 19, unconfirmed reports circulated that Al-Bahsani gave a [speech](#) in Mukalla explaining his decision to leave PLC discussions in Riyadh, describing the meetings as “not honorable,” and lamenting the lack of attention paid to Hadramawt. He added that his absence would continue until the discussion of the situation in the governorate is put on the table and accused unnamed parties of dividing the PLC. Southern Resistance Council leader Abdul Nasser al-Bawah, known as Abu Hammam, applauded Al-Bahsani for his move in defense of Hadramawt and the south in general. Abu Hammam, who is affiliated with the STC, criticized PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi for neglecting to discuss the status of the south and demanded that STC chief Aiderous al-Zubaidi clarify the PLC's position.

Houthis move to ease Ramadan tensions

Authorities in Sana'a made an effort to placate public opinion with the surprise [pardon](#) on April 3 of three popular social media influencers, Mustafa al-Moumeri, Ahmed Hajar, and Hameed al-Misbahi, who had been sentenced to short prison terms for their comedic criticisms of Houthi governance on YouTube. A fourth figure, Ahmed Allaw, was released on April 22, following mediation from a tribal sheikh from Allaw's home governorate of Al-Bayda. The pardons reflect in part family status, but also regime concern over inciting popular animus, especially in Sana'a. In recent years, Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr have been accompanied by tensions within some sectors of society because of taxes levied by the authorities. Officials have also tried to limit participation in the Ramadan evening prayers known as Tarawih by imposing restrictions on the volume of loudspeakers, which has prompted many imams and worshippers to perform the prayers inside their homes. The Houthis view the prayers as a Sunni practice that has spread among the Zaydi population.



The arrival of Yemeni government prisoners and the four released journalists at Tadween Airport in Marib, April 16, 2023. Photo by Abdulmajeed Al-Khadami.

Military & Security

Eid Lull in Fighting as Govt Seeks to Unify Forces

Govt Announces Joint Operations Room

On April 27, Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) President Rashad al-Alimi established a Joint Operations Authority under the Minister of Defense. Tasked with coordinating the operations of the armed forces and the various anti-Houthi factions, the **authority** will be led by Major General Aleh Ali Talib, currently Chief of Operations of the Southern Armed Forces, with Major General Youssef Ali al-Sharaji as his deputy.

The idea to unify anti-Houthi factions under a single military command was first floated as part of the 2019 Riyadh Agreement and picked up again during the Riyadh consultations in 2022. The impetus seems to be uniting the ranks in case talks fail and a new round of fighting begins, but after nine years of war, and with factionalism rife, the chances of creating an effective joint command remain limited.

Fighting continues in Marib

After taking territory in southern Marib in March, Houthi forces launched daily, coordinated military attacks on several fronts between April 3 and 9, according to pro-government security, tribal, and media sources. Active frontlines included the eastern Balaq mountain range, Umm al-Reesh, and the nearby Al-Akd area on the southern outskirts of Marib city, and on the Mala'a front to the west of Harib city.

Following a lull in fighting in mid-April, coinciding with the prisoner exchange and the Eid al-Fitr holiday, fighting resumed in Harib on April 20, when Houthi forces attacked units of the UAE-backed Saba Axis of the Giants Brigades in the Bawara Arak area, according to a local tribesman and a member of the Saba Axis. Houthi shelling also targeted villages in Harib's Al-Aqil area on April 21, damaging a prayer hall, but no casualties were reported.

Fighting also occurred west of Marib city on April 11 along the Kasara and Raghwan fronts. On April 21, Houthi forces blew up three homes in the Al-Zour area in the east of Serwah district. Local residents have been displaced from the area and only Houthi fighters are allowed to enter, according to a community activist and former resident. Since the beginning of the year, at least 17 homes have been blown up in Al-Zour by Houthi forces.

In neighboring Al-Jawf governorate, on April 27, five Houthi fighters raided a camp of the pro-government 7th Border Guard Brigade outside a five-kilometer buffer zone established along the Saudi-Yemeni border. Both sides suffered casualties and three Houthi fighters were captured. The Saudi-led coalition established the buffer zone and assigned the 7th Border Guard Brigade to protect its perimeter in 2020, following Houthi raids on Saudi border patrols and the planting of landmines along the border.

Ongoing Insecurity in Abyan

In Abyan, numerous security incidents were recorded in the Omayran Valley in Mudiya district, a former Al-Qaeda stronghold that pro-STC forces moved into during Operation Arrows of the East, a counterterrorism campaign launched in August 2022. On April 1, three soldiers from the STC-affiliated 5th Support and Backup Brigade were killed in a roadside bomb likely planted by Al-Qaeda militants. On April 18, sources from the STC-affiliated Security Belt forces reported the killing of Musab al-Jaadani, one of the most prominent Al-Qaeda leaders in the region and confidant of Abu al-Hayja al-Hadidi, emir of Al-Qaeda in Abyan and Shabwa. On April 27, the commander of the 3rd Battalion of the Abyan Delta Security Belt forces, Fawzi Shaif al-Bakri, was killed and two of his comrades were injured after an explosive device detonated in the village of Al-Baqira, according to a Security Belt-affiliated source.

Abyan also witnessed infighting among STC-affiliated forces over jurisdiction. On April 3, Security Belt forces commander Captain Saddam Hussein al-Salihi was killed by Abu Ali al-Shabwani, a member of the 5th Support and Backup Brigade. Al-Salihi tribal gunmen joined the clashes, during which two people were killed and 16 wounded before senior commanders negotiated an end to the fighting in exchange for the handing over of Al-Shabwani. On April 18, tribal sheikhs and leaders of the Security Belt forces' Central Region issued a joint statement requesting Al-Shabwani's prosecution. According to a Southern Resistance-affiliated military source, the statement also requested the withdrawal of all forces associated with Brigadier General Mukhtar al-Nubi, who commands the Abyan Military Axis, and their replacement with other STC-affiliated forces.

Frontline Clashes in Other Governorates

In southern Hudaydah, irregular clashes continued between Houthi forces and Joint Forces soldiers on several frontlines. On April 5 and 8, fighting broke out in the Al-Sard area in the north of Hays district, according to military sources on both sides. On April 9, Houthi forces fired mortar shells at Joint Forces extending fortifications along the southern border of Al-Shaaniyah Hill in the Rubaa al-Mahel district, southeast of Hays city, according to a military source from the Joint Forces. Houthi forces also targeted fortifications in the north of the Al-Haymah area, southwest of Al-Tuhaytah city in southern Hudaydah. Houthi drones were seen flying over the new fortifications.

On April 18, a Houthi drone attack killed a 12-year-old child and two members of the 2nd Tihama Resistance Brigade stationed at Al-Udayn Junction in southern Hays district. That same day, Houthi forces exchanged mortar and Katyusha rocket fire with Joint Forces in Al-Haymah. According to a local source, the Joint Forces were extending combat fortifications in the area when they came under attack. On April 24, three explosives-laden Houthi drones targeted the Joint Forces in the eastern part of the Al-Qataba area in the north of Al-Khawkhah district in southwestern Hudaydah, according to soldiers on both sides. Two days later, on April 26, clashes erupted between the Joint Forces in the Al-Qataba area and Houthi forces stationed in the nearby Al-Hajroufah area in the south of Al-Tuhaytah district.

In neighboring Taiz, two civilians were **shot** dead by Houthi snipers in two separate incidents on April 21 and 25. **Shelling** from Houthi forces stationed in Maqbanah district in western Taiz killed three and injured nine members of the same family in the nearby village of Al-Majsh al-Ala in Mawza district. Ever since the Red Sea coast offensive by UAE-backed forces in late 2018, Mawza has been under the control of Tariq Saleh's National Resistance forces, while most of Maqbanah has been under Houthi control.

Regular fighting was recorded in Lahj and Al-Dhalea governorates between Houthi and pro-STC forces. However, the clashes were less intense than in March, when dozens of Houthi fighters and STC and pro-government forces were killed and wounded.

Other Developments in Brief

April 6: Yemeni Coast Guard forces **seized** a dhow carrying over three tons of drugs during an inspection at the port of Nishtun. Minister of Information Muammar al-Eryani accused Houthi forces of being behind the smuggling, which included over three tons of hashish and 173 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine and heroin. The government-run Sabanet news agency **said** the dhow was flying an Iranian flag and manned by seven Iranian nationals.

April 10: The Commander of the 2nd Military Region, Fayez Mansour al-Tamimi, announced the establishment of a **military site** at Aqaba Harouba, which overlooks the road linking Wadi Amd and Sut Batis on the western edge of Amd district in Hadramawt, used by smugglers to transport goods across the Hadramawt-Shabwa border.

April 11: Eritrean authorities released 28 Yemeni fishermen who had been detained for three months at a naval base on Terma Island along the Eritrean coast, according to local residents, who noted that around 120 fishermen were still being held by Eritrean authorities, with some being subjected to torture and forced labor.

April 13: Houthi forces carried out military exercises on Kamaran Island and in the surrounding sea to the northwest of Hudaydah city. A video of the exercises showed a Houthi naval unit marching along the beach and driving heavily armed boats that symbolically circled a larger ship near the international shipping lane.

On April 13: Gunmen on a motorcycle **assassinated** Judge Abdulaziz Sufyan al-Tamimi in the village of Sinwan in Al-Maafer district, south of Taiz city.

April 19: Some 40 military vehicles belonging to the Saudi-backed Nation's Shield forces passed through Ataq city in Shabwa, according to eyewitnesses. The convoy of Nation's Shield forces, which are loyal to PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi, came from the Al-Wadea border crossing with Saudi Arabia and were on their way to Aden. The last time reinforcements of this size were sent from Al-Wadea to Aden was in February.

April 21: In Shabwa's Bayhan district, forces from the 6th Brigade of the STC-affiliated Shabwa Defense forces **killed** Islah-affiliated Sheikh Abdullah al-Bani, the Director-General of the local Health and Population Office and longtime preacher at the Al-Matar mosque in Al-Ulya city as he was driving home from Eid prayers. The killing came after Al-Bani defied orders from the governorate-level Office of Endowments and Guidance to have the Salafist Director of Endowments in Bayhan lead the Eid prayer. In reaction to the killing, Governor Awadh bin al-Wazir al-Awlaki formed a security and military committee to investigate the incident, and eight soldiers of the 6th Brigade of the Shabwa Defense forces were arrested. On April 24, the Al-Musabeen tribe and clans in Bayhan set up a camp in the Eid prayer hall to demand retribution.

April 27-28: A yacht carrying three Russians and two Egyptians **resurfaced** after disappearing off the Red Sea coast of Yemen three days prior. The ship's owner alleged they were attacked by pirates, and the yacht sustained scrapes and bullet holes. The next day, armed security guards on **another yacht**, once owned by Richard Burton, opened fire on Yemeni security forces, killing a member of the Coast Guard. The altercation began after Coast Guard boats approached the yacht, which they claimed was not flying a flag and ignoring radio calls after entering Yemen's territorial waters off the coast of Al-Mahra. On May 7, Djibouti authorities seized the yacht.



The container terminal at Aden port on January 24, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Waqqas.

The Economy

Saudi Arabia Eases Import Restrictions at Yemeni Ports

The government-held port of Aden **received** the commercial ship Blue Nile on April 8, without it being subject to inspection by the Saudi-led coalition at Jeddah, a first since the expansion of the conflict in 2015. The arrival followed a **statement** released by Aden Governor Ahmed Hamed Lamlas on April 4, encouraging shipping companies to operate direct routes to the port of Aden and announcing several deregulation measures, including the suspension of container fees and action against illegal levies. On April 6, the government-affiliated Ministry of Transport followed up with a statement **confirming** the eased import restrictions, and said it had informed local and international shippers of the new regulations, which include covering insurance fees for war-related risks, increasing the capacity of loading and offloading operations, and allowing the entry of all types of legal goods through government-held ports and border crossings. The same day, the deputy head of Yemen's Chambers of Commerce in Aden, Abu Bakr Abeed, **told** Reuters that more than 500 types of goods were removed from a list of products previously banned by the Saudi-led coalition, including fertilizers and batteries. Under previous requirements, shipping companies seeking to import goods to government-held ports had to apply for permission from the Yemeni Ministry of Transportation at least a week prior to their intended arrival, and vessels had to undergo inspection by the Saudi-led coalition before being allowed to enter Yemeni territorial waters.

The eased import rules follow the relaxing of restrictions on commercial goods entering Houthi-held ports in March. The head of the Houthi-affiliated Yemen Red Sea Ports Corporation, Mohammed Abu Bakr Ishaq, **said during an interview** on March 7 that the United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM) had agreed to allow more types of goods to enter Houthi-held ports and expand its operating hours to clear additional ships for entry.

Ishaq also claimed that vessels were no longer subject to a secondary inspection by the Saudi-led coalition and could proceed directly from Djibouti to the port of Hudaydah following UNVIM approval. UNVIM, based in Djibouti, was established in 2015 to prevent arms shipments to Yemen, and previously only approved the entry of ships carrying specific goods to Houthi-held ports, including foodstuffs, fuel derivatives, and cooking oil. UNVIM clearance requirements often resulted in long delays in vessel docking.

The easing of restrictions comes amid ongoing Saudi-Houthi talks. Barriers on shipping to ports under the group's control have been among the central points of negotiation. Restrictions on imports into Yemen, which imported up to 90 percent of its food before the conflict, have had devastating effects on the economy and contributed to the humanitarian crisis.

WFP Announces Arrival of Wheat Shipment

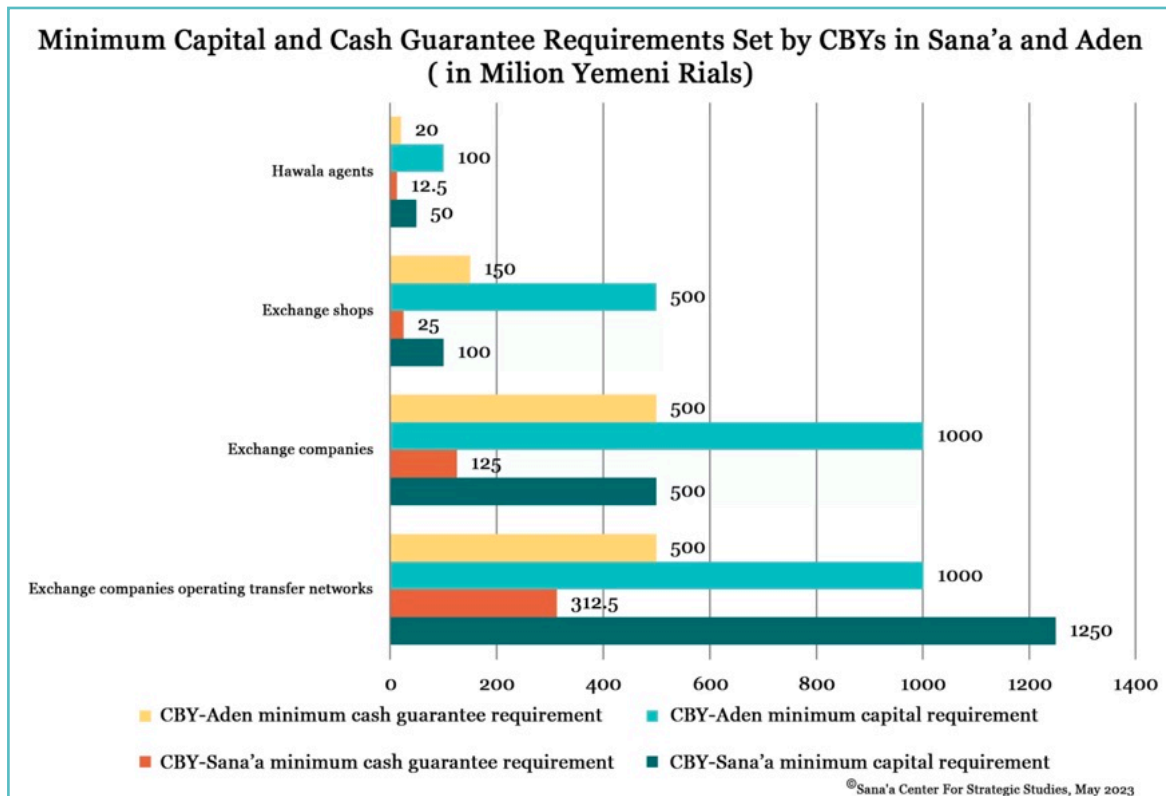
On April 17, the World Food Programme (WFP) **announced** the arrival of a ship carrying 30,000 metric tons of wheat to the western port of **Hudaydah** to support humanitarian aid in Yemen. The vessel, MV Negmar Cicek, sailed from the Ukrainian Black Sea Port of Chornomorsk in Odessa following the renewal of the Black Sea Grain initiative last month. Backed by the WFP, the shipment is jointly funded by the United States, France, and Spain, and will provide a 50-kg bag of wheat flour to nearly 4 million Yemeni citizens for one month. Enacted on March 18, the Black Sea Grain Initiative was launched with the aim of overcoming the global food crisis, in particular in countries that are facing high levels of food insecurity. USAID **reported** that prior to this shipment, WFP-chartered vessels had transported more than 511,000 tons of wheat through various Black Sea ports to support humanitarian operations in Yemen, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia as of March 23. WFP Country Director and Representative in Yemen Richard Ragan said the shipment came at the right time, especially in light of the funding constraints that the program is facing. The response is only 17 percent funded in Yemen over the coming six months. The WFP needs around 85,000 tons of wheat each month in Yemen, where donor support has so far kept famine at bay. Ragan indicated that continued assistance, along with the six-month truce, has helped to reduce the number of Yemeni people living in famine-like conditions from 161,000 to zero. However, there are still 6.1 million people living at emergency levels of food insecurity. According to Regan, continued donor support will allow the WFP to eventually transition from life-saving assistance to resilience and development work.

CBY-Sana'a Increases Capital Requirements for Money Exchanges

On April 30, the Central Bank of Yemen in Sana'a (CBY-Sana'a) issued Resolution No. (4) of 2023 to increase minimum capital and cash guarantee requirements for money exchange outlets. According to the decree, money exchange companies operating transfer networks will have their minimum capital requirement raised to YR1.25 billion. Those that do not operate networks will have theirs raised to YR500 million. The requirements also affect local shops. Money exchange shops operating in areas where financial services are available must now hold YR100 million, while those operating in areas where such services are not available (defined as at least seven kilometers from any licensed bank, exchange company, or exchange shop) must hold YR50 million. The decree stipulates that money exchange companies and shops must each deposit a cash guarantee with the CBY-Sana'a equivalent to 25 percent of their new capital requirement to ensure compliance. They have been given eight months to fulfill the new requirements.

The CBY-Sana'a also issued a resolution regulating licensing, limiting the locations from which new outlets can operate. It suspends the provision of licenses to any new exchange companies, shops, or branches if there are three or more similar financial outlets within four kilometers. The resolution bans branches of exchange companies and shops from moving more than one kilometer away from their current location on the same license. It also states that licenses that have been suspended will not be renewed. This decree follows Resolution No. (58) of 2022, issued by the CBY-Aden in August last year, in an attempt to tighten requirements for money exchanges in order to improve oversight and limit currency speculation.

The CBY-Aden mandated that money exchange companies hold YR1 billion as a minimum capital requirement and deposit another YR500 million with the CBY-Aden as a cash guarantee to ensure legal compliance, and pay YR20 million as an annual licensing fee. Money exchange shops were required to hold YR500 million and deposit another YR150 million with CBY-Aden. Hawala agents, which are only legally licensed to operate in remote areas, were mandated to hold YR100 million and YR20 million in minimum capital and cash guarantee requirements respectively. The CBY-Aden gave exchange outlets until 2025 to fulfill the requirements.



Central Bank and Finance Ministry Issue Conflicting Orders on Salary Payments

The Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden (CBY-Aden) issued conflicting orders for the payment of public sector salaries. On April 16, the finance minister directed the CBY-Aden to start paying April salaries to all civil, security, and military units on April 17, prior to the celebration of Eid al-Fitr.

On the same day, a document signed by the deputy governor of local banking operations at CBY-Aden ordered branches to pay salaries following the holiday, during the last five days of April. Media sources indicated that executives at CBY-Aden rejected the Ministry of Finance's directive due to the current fiscal position of the government and the need to finance rising expenditures, postponing payments until the ministry accumulates the necessary liquidity for their disbursement. By law, the CBY acts as the treasurer and implementer of the state budget, including the payment of salaries drawing on revenues deposited into its treasury.

The government is struggling to cover the cost of public sector salaries after losing oil revenues following Houthi drone attacks on infrastructure at ports in Shabwa and Hadramawt in October and November. Its fiscal deficit has been further compounded since mid-January, when Houthi authorities began pressuring commercial importers to redirect imports from Aden to the port of Hudaydah, which has resulted in the loss of customs revenues. Despite the CBY-Aden's directive, bank branches, including those in Taiz and Hadramawt, took measures to begin implementing the finance ministry's order before suspending payment procedures after receiving further orders from CBY headquarters in Aden. This reflects the weak level of coordination between the CBY-Aden headquarters and its branches, which still operate independently and are not fully subject to the authority and directives of the central bank.

Meanwhile, the Sana'a-based Ministry of Finance issued orders on April 9 for the Houthi-controlled Central Bank of Yemen in Sana'a (CBY-Sana'a) to pay public servants a half month's salary, covering the first half of August 2018. This payment comes ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Houthi authorities also distributed a half month's salary ahead of the start of Ramadan, meaning civil servants working in Houthi-held areas have received one full month's salary since December 2022. Public servants are still owed nearly five years of back pay.

Central Bank Warns Against Rejecting YR200 Notes

On April 19, the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden (CBY-Aden) issued a cautionary statement to businesses regarding the acceptance of older-design YR200 notes. The warning came after media outlets reported that some money exchange shops and commercial outlets have refused to accept the notes. The bank reiterated that all banknotes of the national currency in all denominations are considered legal in their full nominal values as means of payment, and stated that any violations would be monitored in order to take legal measures against the offending parties. The older design of the YR200 note was first issued by the CBY in 1996, but the notes have gradually disappeared from the money market and currently have the lowest circulation of any denomination by volume. Their relative rarity was compounded following the issuance of a YR250 note in 2009 and a new version of the YR200 note in August 2018, which came in a different size and color.

Fuel From Saudi Grant Arrives in Aden

On April 8, the fourth batch of a Saudi fuel grant, amounting to 30,000 metric tons of fuel derivatives, arrived at the port of Aden, according to the government-run Sabanet news agency. The grant is provided through the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY) to operate more than 70 power stations in government-controlled areas.

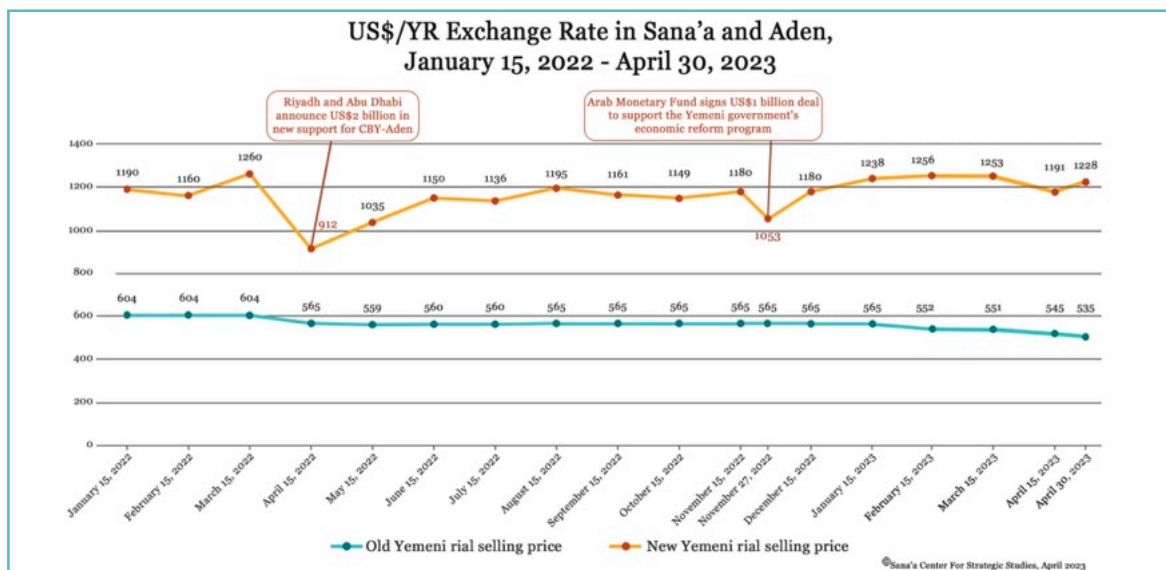
Since November 2022, SDRPY has supplied the Yemeni government with approximately 150,000 tons of diesel and 100,000 tons of mazut.

LNG Tanks Arrive in Mukalla

On April 18, the government-run Sabanet news agency reported that four liquefied natural gas tanks with a total storage capacity of 400 tons had arrived at the port of Mukalla in Hadramawt. Executive Director General of the Yemeni Gas Company Mohsen Wahit said the tanks arrived by directive of the Ministry of Oil and Minerals in coordination with the local authority, and will help to modernize and expand the Brom facility, located in the Brom Mayfaa district in western Hadramawt. He said the new tanks will raise storage levels to help meet local demand and reduce bottlenecks in supply.

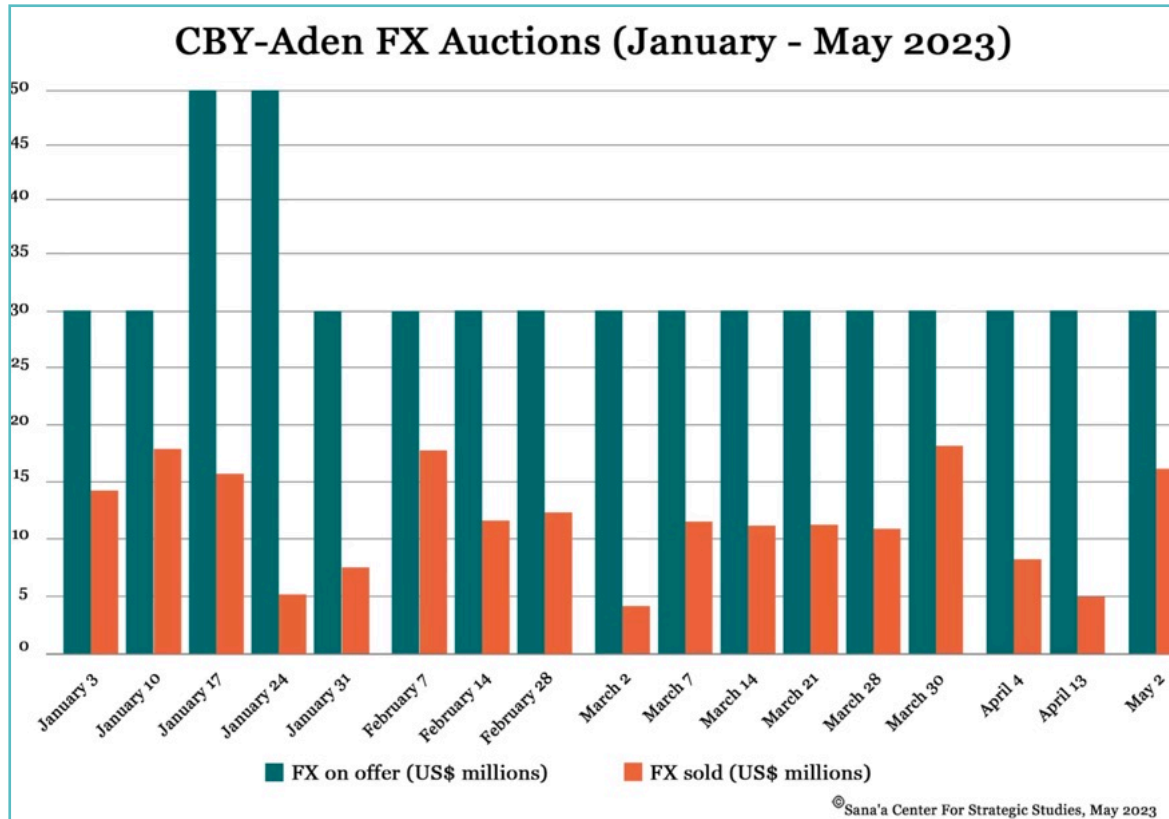
Currency

New rials in government-held areas experienced up and down fluctuations over the course of April. In the first half of April, new rials appreciated by over 4 percent, from YR1,251 to YR1,194 per US\$1 amid positive market sentiment following reported progress in Oman-mediated talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi movement. In the second half, however, the new rials entered a relative cycle of devaluation, depreciating by almost 3 percent, from YR1,194 to YR1,228 per US\$1. Old rials in Houthi-controlled areas appreciated almost 4 percent, from YR550 to YR530 during the month.



Migrant workers tend to increase remittances to relatives in Yemen when celebrating Eid al-Fitr, and in response, money exchangers often exploit the high levels of incoming remittances to purchase these hard currencies at undervalued prices – while refraining from selling them for Yemeni rials. This allows them to sell hard currency at a higher rate when the rial enters cycles of depreciation and inflows of remittances decline.

CBY-Aden temporarily suspended its weekly hard currency auctions, holding three auctions in April and the first two days of May, compared to six in March. The latest foreign currency auction, announced on May 2, was 55 percent subscribed. Since the beginning of the year, the CBY-Aden has held seventeen FX auctions, with a total of US\$550 million on offer, but only 37 percent (or US\$203 million) has been purchased by Yemeni banks. Subscription rates have been down this year as the CBY-Sana'a has sought to restrict banks' participation and the exchange rates offered have been perceived as less favorable.



Editorial

The Risk of Flawed Peace

As direct Saudi-Houthi talks inch toward a roadmap for comprehensive negotiations followed by a permanent ceasefire, it is crucial that the process of resolution be based on a firm footing. We do not need to look far back into Yemen's past to appreciate the danger of losing the peace, when missteps in the delicate diplomatic dance that brings de-escalation and rapprochement end up opening the door to more rounds of bloodletting. Sadly that was the fate of the 2011 protests and their aftermath. When the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh failed to crush a popular uprising against his rule, the Gulf Cooperation Council sponsored a peace process that saw Saleh step aside in favor of his deputy Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the launch of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). But the country only plunged into further chaos.

Understanding why is key to making sure it doesn't happen again. Some of the mistakes are obvious. Saleh's regime continued in all but name, while he himself was able to take time out and plot revenge. The NDC ultimately failed to address historical grievances felt by myriad Yemenis across the country. Political violence continued regardless throughout the process, which was in any case stage-managed by foreign powers driven by their own interests and limited imagination for a new future for Yemen and Yemenis.

But the fundamental mistake was the failure to address justice – first and foremost, justice for the ordinary people who suffered under the Saleh regime for decades and specifically those killed and maimed during the 2011 uprising. Security forces used live rounds against protesters in its first weeks, and the violence escalated to new levels when government snipers killed at least 45 people in Sana'a on March 18, a protest day that had even been named in advance as the **Friday of Dignity**. **Over 2,000 people died** before Hadi was sworn in as president, yet Saleh and his inner circle were granted **immunity from prosecution** as part of the transfer of power. Amid muted criticism of that deal from **United Nations officials** and **international rights organizations**, crimes went unpunished and grievances were left to fester.

Failure to truly address transitional justice through a working group formed to tackle the issue was among the many tragic shortcomings of the NDC. Death and unaccountability became normalized and Yemen has not looked back since. **UN agencies** have estimated war casualties since 2014 of at least 150,000 people, but the figure rises to at least 377,000 when famine and disease are factored in. Hidden among the statistics are the untold numbers of Yemenis killed through indiscriminate and deliberate shelling of civilian neighborhoods, the reckless planting of landmines, and the tyranny of warring factions.

This inability to attend to the wounds of the past is a familiar tale for Yemen and other countries. Following the Taif Agreement ending its civil war, Lebanon passed an amnesty law granting **immunity from prosecution** for wartime crimes, trading justice for temporary stability. Failure to deal with political and social grievances is a historical problem that continues to haunt Yemen in particular. The tribal and ideological tensions underlying the South Yemen civil war in January 1986 bubbled up again during the post-unification war in 1994, and those same tensions underpin **political rivalry in the south** during the current moment.

The situation has worsened with massive violations of the current war, which only add to the historical antagonisms already in play. This is going to make the challenge of restituting rights and mediating conflicts at an individual and group level all the more difficult, not least because of the role of external forces in the war. But the daunting nature of the task should not become an excuse to delay or sideline this most basic issue, since breaking the cycle of violence is in the interest of all Yemenis

For this reason, the international community must resist the temptation to avoid brooking the issue of transitional justice for fear of offending the warring factions and spoiling the talks. Senior foreign diplomats rarely mention the issue, and it's telling that it was only last year that the UN special envoy's office appointed an official to manage this file. And yet, the UN's Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts has talked with welcome clarity about the pandemic of "[impunity in a tortured land](#)."

Justice must not be traded for security this time round. For this to happen we need to ensure that two basic conditions are met. Firstly, talks must shift to an inclusive Yemeni process sponsored by the UN as soon as possible. These negotiations must include not just the government's Presidential Leadership Council and Houthis but as broad a range of Yemenis as possible. The UN special envoy's office must ensure that transitional justice is locked in place on the agenda. This is the minimum required to avoid the risk of a flawed peace that portends a return to conflict over simmering resentments and unresolved injustice.



The outskirts of Taiz during a road journey from Aden to Sana'a in 2023 // Photo taken by the author.

Commentary/Features

Returning Home: An Arduous Journey to a Changed Yemen

By Redha Qarhash

After eight years of absence from Yemen and my hometown of Sana'a, I decided to travel home, longing to see my family and loved ones after a long separation enforced by the war.

The flight from Amman took three-and-a-half hours, landing in Aden in the early hours of the morning. My older brother came to pick me up and accompany me on the 16-hour car journey home. We headed straight to Sana'a, stopping just once, at 3 am, to buy the popular Adeni delicacies of Khobz al-Tawa and Chai Adeni (thick flatbread and sweetened milk tea). Our driver, who knew the roads well, advised us not to waste time in Aden so as to avoid problems at checkpoints. In his experience, nighttime was the best time to travel, a time when soldiers didn't ask too many questions, giving us a better chance of avoiding being detained for hours.

The hired car was from one of the companies now widely used to travel the country. Yemenis use these outfits to facilitate their journeys, since they deal with the multitude of checkpoints extending from Aden to Sana'a, and on to other cities in Yemen. It's an expensive way to travel – as expensive as a flight – but it provides travelers with a modicum of safety on the roads.

A Perilous Ride Back Home

Everyone talks about the difficulties of traveling in Yemen since the start of the war, but no one can prepare you for the reality. The war has wreaked havoc. These were not the roads I once knew. I could not believe the cities looked the way they did. Almost a decade of war has made them unfamiliar.

As we made our way north, my brother joked that I should appreciate the roads that were still somewhat paved. I did not understand what he meant until we passed Lahj, taking a different route than the one we had used before the war. Yemen's main **highways** have been closed off by the warring parties due to their proximity to the frontlines, to block access to opposing forces, or because of damage incurred in the conflict. Motorists now take alternative roads that are often unpaved, remote, and unsuitable for high volumes of traffic or heavy vehicles. These remote secondary roads often have limited mobile and internet coverage, roadside amenities, or emergency rescue services.

No matter how difficult or dangerous, Yemenis have had to find alternative routes to their destinations. Ours was through Wadi Hayfan. The path goes through a valley that acts as natural drainage for rainwater. The middle of the track is made up of rocks and boulders, with thick vegetation on both sides.



Motorcyclist going through narrow track used by motorists in Wadi Hayfan, Lahj governorate 2023 // Picture taken by author.

As we went through, I started to feel nervous. Could our car make it through this? It was still dark. Trucks filled with goods were in front of us, or going in the other direction, blinding us with their headlights. The narrow pass meant every couple of minutes we had to stop and make way

for other vehicles. It took a couple of hours, moving at an excruciating pace, to make it through the valley. The driver told us that we were lucky to have made it through relatively quickly, noting that there are sometimes flash floods in the wadi, and people have to avoid the middle of the road so as not to be swept away.

Once we crossed the valley, a refreshing breeze picked up as the rays of the morning sun started to filter through. The view reminded me of the times my family and I would travel for holidays. We took these trips during the rainy season, when waterfalls and greenery covered these areas. I had memories of its beauty, but I was struggling to find any now. The roads were in utter disrepair, everyone you saw had a look of despair on their faces, and the trees were littered with different colored plastic bags.

We continued driving north, navigating the various checkpoints, which made the difficult journey even harder. After the twentieth, I stopped counting. Were it not for the desperate need to work or travel, no one in their right mind would put up with these conditions.



Truck loaded with goods slowly making its way through Wadi Hayfan before dawn, Lahj governorate, 2023 // Picture taken by author.

Approaching Sana'a

After hours of travel, we approached our first checkpoint under Houthi control. I saw a group of children and young men waving new rial banknotes, which are used in the areas under government control, and offering to exchange them for the old banknotes used in Houthi territory. I could not comprehend how these old banknotes, worn and wrinkled beyond recognition, held together more with tape than paper, were still being used.



Old Yemeni Rial used in territories under the control of the Houthi authorities, 2023 // Picture taken by author.

Our car was stopped and we were asked to provide our passports, explain how we were related, and why we were traveling. Restrictions imposed by Houthi authorities mandate that women cannot travel alone and must be accompanied by a male guardian. Even if they present all the necessary documentation, unaccompanied women risk being detained at checkpoints until a **male guardian** picks them up. If the woman is an activist, an NGO employee, or affiliated with a political party opposed to the Houthis, they can be detained for days, and forced to pay a bribe or sign documents pledging adherence to the new rules.

Thousands of pictures of Houthi ‘martyrs’ displayed along the roads coupled with slogans of death and jihad, left no doubt that we had entered Houthi territory. It was a chilling experience that is difficult to put into words. It reminded me of a scene from the movie *The Hunger Games*, where the pictures of people who had died in a dystopian survival contest were displayed in a similar fashion. But this was reality, and these were pictures of Yemenis, many of them young, who had died on the frontlines.

As we approached the outskirts of Sana’a, I realized I no longer knew the areas we were passing through. New buildings and luxurious homes had sprouted without any visible planning or organization. There were dirt roads everywhere. It was difficult to even tell the paved roads apart, or know where they started and ended. The new houses stood in stark contrast to the destitute people walking on the streets, or the vendors on the sidewalk selling vegetables, fruit, and cheap clothes. They looked resigned, poverty and misery engraved on their faces.

A Bitter-Sweet Return

The first moments after my arrival at my family home in Sana'a are hard to describe. Reuniting with my family, and the moments of happiness that we shared, surrounded by the scent of home-cooked food wafting through the house, is what I replay in my mind. We ate on the floor so that the whole family could sit together, enveloped by the atmosphere of laughter and contentment. We stayed up late into the night. The next day was filled with visits to friends and relatives whom I hadn't seen in eight years. I listened to stories of their daily lives, how it's been since the war began, and the deteriorating conditions they face.

Yemenis now live without basic services like electricity, fuel, or cooking gas. Many have started to rely on solar power, while private companies have stepped in to provide electricity, albeit at a very high cost that few can afford. Incredibly, refrigerators have become a luxury item, used only by the few who have the means to keep them switched on. Groceries are thus purchased on a daily basis, and women only cook what will be consumed on the day, since it is no longer possible to keep leftovers. State services and salaries have become absent, with the de-facto Houthi authorities only stepping in to collect fines, Zakat, and the controversial **Khums** tax, which requires Muslims to pay 20 percent of their profits towards Ahl Al Bayt (descendants of the prophet).

Education in Yemen has also undergone a grave downturn. Public schools, which were once free, are now charging fees, the justification being that these are needed to pay teachers' salaries. Due to difficult living conditions and public sector employees having not received regular salaries since 2016, many parents have had to either select which of their children can continue their education, or pull them out of school to look for work. In 2021, **UNICEF** quoted the number of children taken out of school at more than 2 million, many of whom have started working or been recruited to fight on the frontlines.



Outskirts of Sana'a, 2023//Picture taken by author.

Schools also now adhere to the Hijri calendar, the Gregorian calendar no longer being used in territories under Houthi control. The de-facto Houthi authorities want Ramadan to mark the beginning of what was the summer vacation, even if Ramadan coincides with winter.

I talked at length about these changes with friends of mine. One, an academic at the College of Literature at the University of Sana'a, suggested I visit the university. As a former student and having taught there in the past, I took her up on the suggestion. The university felt eerily empty, with just a few students. As a public institution, students were not required to pay tuition in the past, but this too has changed, leading to a drop in enrollment. For women studying or working at Sana'a University, things are even harder. Bathroom facilities for female staff are now closed. I kept thinking to myself why such oppressive measures?

Women's rights have been particularly hit hard. A week after I arrived in Sana'a, a social media campaign took off, led by several women activists and academics, who posted pictures of themselves wearing traditional Yemeni clothing under the hashtag #YemeniIdentity. Yemeni women's traditional clothes are colorful, patterned, and detailed with intricate embroidery, with every region of the country displaying different styles. The campaign was a reaction to a decision by the Houthi authorities to close shops selling clothing that was not in line with their regulations. Shop owners were instructed to stop selling abayas that are short, form-fitting, colorful, or have frills. Abayas must now be black and lacking any adornment. This is just one measure among many that are limiting women's participation in public life.

I spent a month in Sana'a, listening to countless stories of hardship from people I met, taking in the changes since the war, while being enveloped by the love of my family. But now it was time for me to go back.

A Stop in Aden

We arrived back in Aden on a Friday evening. We purposely chose Friday, a day off in Yemen, in the hope there would be fewer trucks going through Wadi Hayfan. As soon as I saw the sea, I forgot all about the strain and toll of the trip. Early the next morning, my brother and I went for a walk on the beach overlooking the Abyan coast, which has numerous hotels whose guests are mostly northerners traveling to Aden to reach its airport. Winter months, when the weather is mild, are one of the most beautiful times of the year to visit Aden.

Since the war, Aden's cost of living has gone up and inflation is high. But compared to territories under the control of the Houthi authorities, civil servants receive more frequent salaries and electricity is still available, even if there are significant outages (especially problematic during the hot summer months). Government facilities and hotels use electricity generators, although not all residents are able to afford these.



Caption: View of the Abyan coastline, Aden 2023 // Picture taken by author.

A friend picked us up by car to take us for lunch in an area called Sirah, known for its fish markets. There, you can pick a fish of your choice and take it to one of the many restaurants to be cooked. We chose a restaurant with a table overlooking the coastline. It was full of families. The last time I had spent time in Aden was in 2009. My family and I used to travel to Aden during Eid vacation to enjoy its beautiful coastline and stay in one of the many hotels that had been built in the beginning of the 1990s. Aden was then a destination for Yemenis coming from all governorates. I couldn't help but notice the way women were dressed. Nearly all were wearing face coverings (burqa) and dressed in black, which stood out in a city like Aden which can get extremely hot. In its heyday, Aden was a beacon of pioneering women in all fields of work. On that day, I did not see a single woman driving.

I also sensed reservation, if not outright discomfort, towards visitors from the north. Aden has witnessed vast destruction since the Houthis' attempt to take the city in March 2015. The effects of war are heavily marked on the city's buildings and homes. Many of its hotels have been destroyed. I discerned a sense of blame toward people from northern areas, colloquially sometimes referred to as Dahabishah, a derogatory term used since unification for people from the north. I could palpably feel the reluctance in the faces of the people I met, once I talked with them and they realized I was not from the city. I cannot blame Adenis for this.

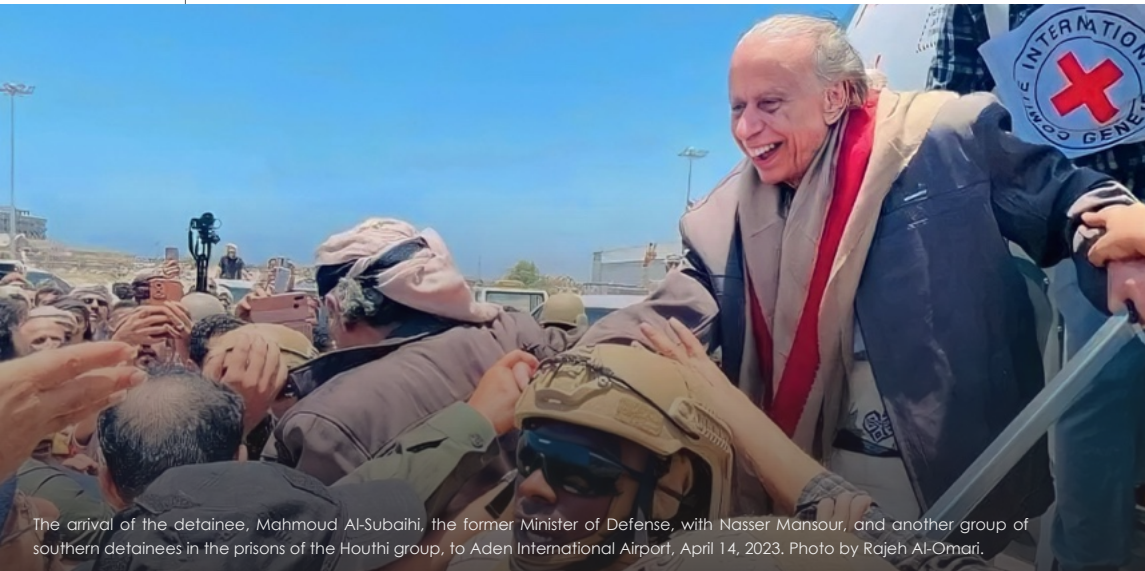
A Changed Yemen and Threads of Hope

We had a dream when we gathered in Yemen's squares back in 2011 demanding our right to a dignified life. But we have now become estranged in our own country - not just those of us living outside of it, but also those who have stayed. Traveling to Yemen from abroad has become easier than traveling from one governorate to another. Yemeni society has become fragmented, and the war, now in its ninth year, has changed all that we knew about our country. Living conditions are dire. The people look gaunt, and many seem to have given up on their dreams and aspirations for the future. The vast majority seem focused on just surviving the day. But there are signs of life, no matter how small. Defying all odds, I noticed how young Yemenis are showing incredible determination in trying to make ends meet, often innovatively. I was struck by the young women in particular, some of whom have set up small businesses to make a living, whether online or by opening home-based businesses. Despite these glimmers of hope, the overarching sentiment I was left with was that the country and its people can no longer bear the toll of this conflict. I cannot think of a single reason why this war should continue, but I can think of a million reasons why we need peace.



Window View of Sana'a city, 2023//Picture taken by author.

Redha Qarhash is a trade unionist with over twenty years' experience working in the fields of gender equality, workers' rights, and women's employment. She has worked extensively with regional and national trade union federations, and previously worked on a national strategy to support Yemeni women in reaching leadership positions. She has worked with the International Labour Organization, coordinating various ILO initiatives in Yemen, as well as with other international organizations working in Yemen. She has a Masters in Sociology from the University of Sana'a.



The arrival of the detainee, Mahmoud Al-Subaihi, the former Minister of Defense, with Nasser Mansour, and another group of southern detainees in the prisons of the Houthis group, to Aden International Airport, April 14, 2023. Photo by Rajeh Al-Omari.

Commentary/Features

An Unfinished Deal: Yemen's Prisoner Exchanges

Over the course of three days – April 14, 15, and 16 – **887 prisoners** were exchanged among Yemen's warring parties in a deal facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Houthi forces released 706 detainees in exchange for 181 prisoners held by forces affiliated with the internationally recognized government and the Arab coalition. While most detainees were Yemeni nationals, the exchange also led to the release of 16 Saudi nationals and three Sudanese soldiers. ICRC planes transferred prisoners from six airports in Yemen and Saudi Arabia: Sana'a, Aden, Al-Makha, Tadaween (near Marib), and Abha and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. On April 17, Saudi Arabia unilaterally announced the release of an additional 104 Yemeni detainees, bringing the total number to **973 freed prisoners** and making it **the largest exchange since October 2020**.

The latest prisoner exchange deal is the result of several rounds of negotiation which followed the 2018 **Stockholm Agreement**. Although an important step on the road toward peace, it still marks a sharp deterioration from the **deal reached in Sweden**, where the same parties committed to exchange all prisoners of war, and refrain from capturing future prisoners. No swap materialized until 2020, and the topic of prisoner exchanges did not gain momentum again until the declaration of a **truce** in April 2022.

During meetings in Amman, government and Houthi representatives reached an agreement to exchange **2,223 prisoners in total**. It took another full year to agree upon an implementation mechanism in Switzerland in March 2023. The negotiations, sponsored by the UN special envoy's office, were reportedly heated and entailed mutual accusations of obstruction, according to sources present during the talks. The presence of two Saudi representatives, Major General Nasser al-Thunayan and Major General Falah al-Shahrani, ultimately added pressure to secure a deal; however, the parties reduced the number of prisoners they intended to swap from 2,223 to **887 people**.

Special Negotiations

Throughout the conflict, all parties have detained politicians and civilians, often directly capturing them from their homes or workplaces. Houthi forces are particularly well-known for this tactic. In the months after they first took over Sana'a in 2014, and as clashes intensified with loyalists of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, the **Houthis detained countless civilians** on spurious grounds. In the latest deal, Houthis adopted a strategy of seeking to exchange high profile civilians or politicians for captured Houthi fighters. In one case, four journalists – **Tawfiq al-Mansouri, Abdelkhaleq Omran, Akram al-Walidi, and Al-Harith Hamed** – who were abducted from their newsroom in June 2015 and later sentenced to death, were released in exchange for one woman: **Samira Marsh**, who the government accuses of involvement in multiple assassinations and the planting of several explosive devices in Al-Jawf and Marib, leading to the deaths of dozens of government-affiliated combatants. She was the only woman included in the recent prisoner exchange deal. According to a local source, the Yemeni government demanded the release of Mohammed Qahtan, assistant secretary-general of the Islah Party, in exchange for Marsh, but the Houthis refused.

Qahtan remains unaccounted for. The Houthis originally requested the release of 500 captives in exchange for Qahtan. This number was lowered to 200, and then 100 detainees, according to a confidential Sana'a Center source. The Houthi refusal to disclose his fate has triggered debate on whether Qahtan is still alive. He has not been permitted contact with his relatives since his arrest, which is rare among high profile detainees. Another prisoner whose fate remains unknown is journalist Waheed al-Sufi, who was detained by Houthis outside the Sana'a Tahrir Post Office in 2015.

Meanwhile, Major General Mahmoud al-Subaihi, the former minister of defense and the only detainee mentioned by name in **UN Resolution 2216**, was exchanged for 100 Houthi fighters. Former President Hadi's brother, Nasser, was also released in exchange for 150 Houthi fighters. In celebration, Hadi held a **Ramadan banquet in Riyadh**, his first public appearance since he **ceded power to the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC)** in April 2022. **Afash Tareq Saleh and Mohammed Abdullah Saleh**, son and brother of PLC member and National Resistance forces commander Tareq Saleh, respectively, were also released in exchange for 100 Houthi fighters in the March negotiations.

Another high profile detainee, **Major General Faisal Rajab**, was released in an arrangement outside the framework of formal negotiations. Houthis initially refused to release Rajab, but tribal leaders from his home governorate of Abyan traveled to Sana'a to mediate a deal, and he was **released on April 30**. Rajab **participated in the six Sa'ada wars**, and was a prominent military commander during the 1994 war.

Future rounds of negotiations are needed to address several files listing outstanding detainees. This includes government soldiers captured from the Hajour area in Hajjah governorate and members of Major General Radad al-Hashemi's Brigade. The Houthis still hold 1,200 Islah party detainees, while 200 Houthi detainees are held by Islah. Moreover, the fact that some prisoners submitted fake names when arrested has complicated the process of verifying identities among prisoner lists provided by warring parties, a Sana'a Center source confirms.

Finally, an important issue not discussed during prisoner swap negotiations is the fact that many detainees will still experience a reality of a forced exile. Rather than being returned to their homes, many are sent to areas currently under the control of whichever party they are affiliated with. For example, government affiliates who were detained in Sana'a were sent to Marib. Meanwhile, captives who were originally from Marib but are affiliated with the Houthis, were sent to Sana'a. The same logic applies to those affiliated with Saleh's National Resistance Forces or the Southern Transitional Council. All detainees are treated as prisoners of war, even if the captives are civilians or politicians who simply want to return home. The [Geneva Convention](#) specifies that the detaining authority must return prisoners of war to the party the soldier enlisted with, but this legal precedent should not apply to civilians.

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