



Yemen Review

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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 diplomatic, political, social, economic and security-related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

Cover photo: An aerial view of Eid al-Adha prayers in Taiz city on June 16, 2024. // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha

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Executive Summary

Houthis Round Up NGO Employees

Houthi intelligence arrested dozens of local and international aid workers and UN and non-government organization (NGO) staff in early June, alleging they were part of a US-Israeli conspiracy to undermine Yemeni society. The detainees were paraded on television and forced to give scripted confessions. The Houthis seem to have targeted monitoring and evaluation workers, perhaps to better control information on the economic and humanitarian situation. While the group continues to enjoy public support for its Red Sea attacks, pressure has been mounting over unpaid salaries, a deteriorating economic situation, and new banking restrictions. The detentions likely serve both to intimidate and to afford leverage vis-à-vis international institutions: a week before the arrests, 44 people were sentenced to death on similar charges of espionage.

Major Taiz Road Opens

Houthi forces announced the reopening of the main route from Sana'a into Taiz city on June 13, which had been closed since 2015. Travelers and traders had been forced to take a dangerous mountain road through the front to access the nearby Al-Hawban industrial area, adding hours to what was previously a 15-minute journey. The group also agreed to open the Al-Siteen-Bir Basha route north of the city. In May, the government and the Houthis reopened roads connecting Marib city to Sana'a and Al-Bayda. Road reopenings were a source of repeated dispute during truce talks in 2022. Houthi acquiescence was reportedly secured via Omani pressure but may also relate to the deteriorating economic situation. Taiz security forces have already arrested alleged Houthi spies, and there are suspicions that the group could use the routes to smuggle much-needed hard currency.

Government Appoints New FM

The government appointed Shaya al-Zindani as its new foreign minister in late March. Al-Zindani was formerly the ambassador to Saudi Arabia and has some forty years of experience in the diplomatic service. The post became vacant following the appointment of former FM Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak as prime minister. Al-Zindani's appointment proceeded over the apparent objection of some members of the divided Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). The PLC has been under pressure due to falling revenues, high inflation, and electricity shortages. The government remains wholly reliant on Saudi financial and political support.

Houthis Accelerate Red Sea Attacks

After quieting down for much of April, the Houthis have accelerated the pace of their attacks on Red Sea shipping. In early May, the group announced a "fourth phase" of its campaign, which it declared would expand into the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. While its claimed attacks far exceed those reported by shipping lines or independent

observers, confirmed actions rose sharply in June. The Houthis say they are now working in concert with the Iranian-linked Islamic Resistance in Iraq, and reports suggest they are now benefiting from weapons smuggled through Eritrean and Sudanese ports. While it remains unclear if the Houthi possess the means to accurately target vessels in the Mediterranean, the rise in strikes comes as questions are being raised about the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of the US, British, and EU response.

Fighting Escalates in Lahj

Fighting between Houthi forces and the government and STC-aligned soldiers has escalated on multiple frontlines in Lahj governorate, resulting in hundreds of casualties over the past three months. Much of the action has taken place along the Karesh front and in nearby areas. Both sides have sent reinforcements, and May saw the first major engagements between Saudi-trained Nation's Shield forces and Houthi fighters. Other frontlines in Hudaydah, Taiz, Marib, Al-Bayda, and Al-Dhalea have also seen regular action. At present, the frontlines appear stable, though the government seems particularly concerned that the Houthis could renew their offensive against the oil and gas fields outside Marib city. PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi visited the governorate in late April to meet with local leaders and inspect troops.

Central Bank Crisis Deepens

Yemen's already fractured financial system has been imperiled by regulatory competition between its rival central banks in a high-stakes power struggle for control of monetary policy and cash flows. The contest has taken many forms, but escalation began in earnest with the government-aligned Central Bank of Yemen in Aden (CBY-Aden) announcing that it would launch a unified money transfer system to help it track and control payments but also to assert greater control over cash flows into Houthi territory. The Houthi-aligned central bank (CBY-Sana'a) raised the stakes when it announced that it would issue its own coinage, further cementing the bifurcation of the Yemeni rial.

The CBY-Aden has since dramatically escalated the contest, leveraging its international recognition to put pressure on the Houthis, who are suffering from a liquidity crisis due to sanctions and the physical degradation of older bank notes. The central bank has demanded that all Yemeni banks remove their headquarters to Aden so that they can be better monitored and announced a deadline for all old rial banknotes to be exchanged for new ones. It has also attempted to impose further controls on local and international money transfer networks. The CBY-Aden has already suspended several banks for non-compliance.

The Sana'a Center Editorial

The Houthi Crackdown on Yemeni Voices and Civil Society: Silence is Not an Option

The arrests of dozens of Yemeni aid and NGO workers in recent weeks on allegations of spying for the United States and Israel is no run-of-the-mill crackdown on civil society, but an unprecedented assault that breaks the social norms of political engagement in Yemeni culture.

Never have the repressive practices of previous regimes stooped to rounding up dozens of employees of local and international aid organizations that had been working with official approval for years, including the UN, World Bank, and foreign embassies. Whole families, including children, are being held. A series of dramatic TV 'confessions' have been aired, humiliating Yemenis who have been in incommunicado detention without formal indictments. After years of serving the country diligently for the sake of its development, overnight their work has been deemed an act of high treason.

Life during wartime has brought many abuses for ordinary Yemenis since 2015, not least for those living within Houthi-run territories. But the repression has ramped up over the past year as the authorities clamp down on all manner of people who have apparently fallen foul of regime imperatives, including women, judges, businessmen, social media influencers, journalists, and politicians. Things have only gotten worse since relations with Western governments deteriorated over the Red Sea attacks.

Given the extraordinary nature of this round of repression, mild statements or even silence in the hope of securing a deal to release detainees is not the way to go. It's understandable that many families have kept quiet, but international organizations who take this approach make a serious mistake.

To its credit, the UN has been open about the detentions and the efforts of its Special Envoy's office to secure their release. But without a comprehensive, coordinated response to ensure all detainees are released unharmed, the detentions will drag on for at least some, if not all, of those jailed. In reality, silence will put their lives in even more danger. Worse, it could encourage the Houthis to detain even more people as they seek to extract political and financial gain by negotiating terms with each of the organizations separately, or with the international community more broadly. One batch of detainees could be released only to be replaced by a new group. The only way to avert that eventuality is a united stance in which the impacted organizations speak with one voice.

International organizations and diplomatic missions have an extra obligation to their Yemeni employees, who are at greater risk than their foreign coworkers inside and outside Yemen. The risk is hardly reduced if they happen to carry foreign passports since dual nationality only raises their value as a bargaining chip in the eyes of a Houthi regime looking for leverage over Western adversaries. There should be no room for suspicion that the advocacy for these detained workers is any less than it would be were they holders of Western passports.

It should go without saying that these outrageous arrests hardly bode well for the peace process that many still see moving forward once the Gaza crisis ends. But what kind of country does anyone expect to emerge from peace talks when the current power in Sana'a stamps all over social and legal norms in this way? Detention without formal charges, amid forced confessions for some, looks more like enforced disappearance than a judicial process.

Those claiming to fight for a pluralistic political system that allows representation of all the country's diverse elements need to step up and condemn these actions. The worst outcome is if the demonization of civil society work – which all parties to the conflict have engaged in over the past decade – becomes the new model for Yemeni politics, a template for crushing civil society that appeals to the authoritarian tendencies seen in many parts of the country.

External powers, especially Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, make a catastrophic mistake if they think the roadmap for resolving their Yemen problem can come through normalizing this kind of repression. Indeed, if there had been a more inclusive approach to ending hostilities rather than the rushed process witnessed over the past year, then perhaps we would not even be in this position.

But there's no point looking back. The important thing now is to be clear that in crossing these red lines, the Houthis risk destroying the last remnants of Yemen's civic culture. Further, there are reasonable grounds to fear for the safety of the detainees, and that the crackdown could easily be expanded in Sana'a and emulated beyond. For all those reasons, public silence and backroom deals should not be an option.



Family members of Yemenis detained by the Houthis gather outside Al-Saleh Mosque in Sana'a on May 26, 2024. // Sana'a Center photo

Politics and Diplomacy

Casey Coombs

Foreign Minister Appointment Tests Anti-Houthi Unity

Ongoing Houthi maritime attacks and security crackdowns in northern Yemen have given Prime Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak and members of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) plenty of reasons to band together and strengthen their position in the face of the common enemy. But popular protests over electricity shortages in southern governorates and disagreements over the appointment of a new foreign affairs minister tested the government's willingness and ability to form a united front.

In late March, PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi signed a **republican decree** appointing Yemen's ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Shaya al-Zindani, as the new foreign minister amid quiet disapproval from several PLC members and his predecessor, Bin Mubarak, who felt like the appointment was not in their best political interests. Bin Mubarak fears that Al-Zindani's authority to staff diplomatic missions around the world could imperil years of appointments that Bin Mubarak oversaw during his time as foreign minister. The PLC members, for their part, had other candidates in mind for the cabinet position. In mid-April, Saudi officials summoned the entire PLC and the prime minister to Riyadh, reportedly to smooth over the tensions resulting from

Al-Zindani's appointment. In return for cooperation on the matter, several PLC members pushed for approval of the body's internal bylaws, an issue that has been delayed since the council was formed in April 2022. The purpose of the bylaws is to delineate the authority and mandate of each PLC member. In the absence of clearly defined roles, Rashad al-Alimi has used his executive authority to unilaterally appoint a number of loyalists to key positions in the government, which has frustrated the other members. In addition to limiting the PLC chief's power to issue decrees, the bylaws could also restrict his ability to spend government funds.

The disagreement over Al-Zindani's appointment has been a distraction at a time when the government leaders are under pressure to respond in a coherent manner to Houthi maritime attacks and a banking crisis that threatens to spiral out of control. Despite their reservations, Al-Zindani comes highly qualified to the key ministerial office, with 40 years of diplomatic experience and a deep understanding of Saudi Arabia.

In late April and early May, Rashad al-Alimi sought to curry the favor of important political and military figures in Marib during an official visit to Marib city. As a strategic oil and gas hub in the crosshairs of Houthi forces, Marib is vital to the survival of the government. During a meeting with military commanders, community leaders, sheikhs, and social dignitaries, Al-Alimi expressed his thanks for their resisting Houthi advances in a rousing [speech](#) that described Marib as "the main gate in the ongoing sanctified battle for restoring the state's institutions and recapturing the capital Sana'a and the entire the country's regions from the terrorist Houthi militias."

At the same time as the PLC chief's visit to Marib, the US government-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) organized a [meeting](#) of political parties in Aden aimed at promoting unity. Although Southern Transitional Council (STC) Secretary General Fadl al-Jaada attended the event, the secessionist group issued a statement [condemning](#) the meeting. Days later, STC chief Aiderous al-Zubaidi [reasserted](#) the group's goal of restoring the south Yemeni state while hinting that their patience with peaceful options was running thin. "We will redouble our efforts in the coming period, both domestically and internationally, until victory is achieved for our people's cause and their independent federal state is restored and rebuilt," he said. "While the people of the south are committed to the approach of negotiations as the basis for resolving their cause, they are not [oblivious to their readiness](#) for any other options, if necessary."

Meanwhile, as temperatures started to climb in May, government officials faced growing criticism over electricity shortages in Aden, Abyan, Hadramawt, and other areas outside Houthi control. STC leaders, who enjoy virtually uncontested rule in Aden, attempted to shift blame for the mismanagement of public resources there onto the government and the PLC. Chronic electricity shortages are a perennial source of criticism for the dysfunctional government.

Houthis Arrest "Spy Cells" to Deflect Failures

Accusations of foreign infiltration are the latest Houthi tool of choice to crush dissent and further consolidate power amid [public scandals](#), governance failures, and other potential threats to the group's rule. Three developments during the reporting period highlighted the focus on a foreign bogeyman as the source of Houthi shortcomings. In early April, following the official opening of Al-Makha airport on Taiz's Red Sea coast for commercial flights, Houthi officials, including Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein al-Ezzi, framed the new airport as a conduit for

spies to enter Yemen, **citing** suspicion that Israeli intelligence elements may have already entered Yemen through the airport. In early May, Houthi media **announced** the arrest of the “400 Cell,” a group of Yemenis allegedly working on behalf of US and Israeli forces to identify and monitor missile, drone, and boat launch sites and assassinate military officials. The Houthis claimed that Ammar Saleh, a former intelligence official and brother of PLC member and commander of the UAE-backed National Resistance forces in Al-Makha, Tareq Saleh, led the cell.

On June 1, the Houthi Specialized Criminal Court in Sana’a sentenced **44 people to death** on allegations of espionage. Among the most high-profile individuals receiving the death penalty was businessman Adnan al-Harazi, who ran Sana’a-based Prodigy Systems, a company that conducted monitoring and evaluation for international aid organizations in Yemen, before he was detained in January 2023.

Less than a week after the announcement of the death sentences, the Houthi’s Intelligence and Security Service launched an **arrest campaign** detaining more than 45 Yemeni aid workers and employees of local and international organizations, including **at least 13 UN staff**. Houthi officials claimed the arrests were aimed at breaking up a US-Israeli spy network, which allegedly took root in the US embassy before it closed in 2015 and then spread to international organizations. Houthi officials bolstered the claims by publishing five rounds of purported confessions by former Yemeni employees of the US embassy in Sana’a. The carefully scripted confessions blame the US and Israel for problems in Houthi-controlled parts of Yemen. **Purported confessions** have focused on alleged American-Israeli influence on Yemen’s **agricultural sector, economy, and culture**.

The June arrests occurred a few months after the Houthis released the head of the now-disbanded teacher’s union protests, Abu Zaid al-Kumaim. Al-Kumaim was detained in October as the teachers’ demands for unpaid salaries in Houthi-held areas were inspiring other segments of society to speak out. The crackdown that followed took the wind out of the protest movement as the group rallied public opinion behind its intervention in the Gaza war. Releasing Al-Kumaim appeared to reflect the Houthi conclusion that the teachers’ strike had been neutralized. However, with no current prospect of reviving a Saudi-Houthi peace deal that envisions the payment of public salaries by the kingdom, the Houthis are simply kicking the can down the road. The current crackdown on alleged spies has sent a similar warning to others thinking about challenging Houthi rule – particularly as the Aden-based central bank has ordered Sana’a-based financial entities to relocate their headquarters to the interim capital, which would marginalize Sana’a in the international banking system.

The crackdown also serves other purposes. First, amid ongoing US-British airstrikes and domestic troubles, they provide the Houthis with justification to further consolidate power by casting anyone suspected of opposing the group as infiltrators or fifth columnists. Second, the ensuing paranoia has allowed Houthi hardliners to test loyalty within the group to its leader, Abdelmalek al-Houthi. Third, by targeting individuals who work in aid monitoring and evaluation, the Houthis will gain more control over the information that forms the basis of Yemen’s global humanitarian aid response. As a result, the Houthis will be able to further shape narratives about humanitarian crises (**real or imagined**) in areas under their control and benefit from the resulting aid. Fifth, Houthi authorities can use recently detained aid and NGO workers as bargaining chips to make demands on their various employers to secure favorable new terms for their release, all while diverting attention from other long-standing issues.

Taiz Siege Lifted After Nine Years

Growing pressure on Houthi authorities may have played a role in the group's decision to reopen key roads between Sana'a, Marib city, and Taiz city after neglecting the issue for years. On May 10, more than three months after Marib's government-aligned governor, Sultan al-Aradah, **reopened** sections of main roads leading from Marib city to Sana'a and Al-Bayda governorates, Marib's Houthi-appointed governor, Ali Mohammed bin Taiman, **announced** the opening of a southern stretch of the Al-Bayda-Marib city road.

On June 13, Houthi forces announced the **reopening of the main road** for passenger cars into and out of Taiz city, which had been blocked since the early months of the war in 2015. Renewed access to the main thoroughfare shortens travel time between the Houthi-controlled Al-Hawban industrial area and Taiz city from roughly 5-6 hours to 15 minutes and is a much safer alternative than the rugged mountain road that travelers were forced to take through the Al-Aqroud front in Al-Misrakh district. Reopened in the days before Eid al-Adha, the new route witnessed an influx of Yemenis from Houthi-controlled areas into Taiz city to reunite with their families for the holiday. The Houthis also agreed to reopen the Al-Siteen-Bir Basha road northwest of the city, which is designed for heavy transport trucks.

Amid the jubilation over the Taiz city road reopenings, which reportedly occurred due to Omani pressure over the issue, security and military forces in Taiz city arrested a number of individuals accused of entering the city to establish Houthi spy cells. Some observers have **accused** the Houthis of lifting the siege to move officials and fighters there, or perhaps as a way to smuggle hard currency from government areas to Sana'a to stave off liquidity problems and increasing US sanctions.

Other Developments in Brief

March 28 & 31: Emergency measures were put in place in Aden and Sana'a to combat an emergent cholera outbreak. By June 21, more than **30,000 suspected new cases** were reported in both government and Houthi-held territories.

April 5: The General Authority of Civil Aviation and Meteorology in Taiz announced the **official opening** of Al-Makha Airport to commercial flights. Funded in part by the UAE and under the control of PLC member and commander of the National Resistance Forces Tareq Saleh, the airport had previously only received military aircraft and a lone humanitarian flight transporting Yemenis stranded in Sudan's civil war in January. The Houthi leadership has **accused** the government of using it to let Israeli spies infiltrate the country.

April 20: Abdelmalek al-Houthi **inaugurated** the group's annual summer camp program, aimed at indoctrinating children with Houthi ideology through sectarian lectures on a range of topics, including jihad. Houthi opponents **argue** that the goal of the camps is to brainwash children and prepare them to fight other Yemenis under the pretext of preparing for conflict against the US and Israel.

May 6: The local authority in Hadramawt reached an agreement with teachers following several weeks of strikes across the governorate over the disbursement of salaries and poor working conditions. However, low-level protests would continue in the following weeks.

June 26: Yemenia Airways **suspended** all flights to Sana'a after the Houthis grounded four planes from its fleet at Sana'a airport. The grounded planes had been transporting Hajj pilgrims back from Jeddah. Following widespread criticism on Yemeni social media for the stranding of more than 1,300 pilgrims in Saudi Arabia, the Houthi-run Ministry of Transport **justified** the move as a response to illegal measures taken by the Yemenia Airways management in Aden at the behest of Riyadh and the internationally recognized government.

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A man plants a Yemeni flag in a tree along the Al-Hawban-Taiz city road following its reopening for the first time in nine years on June 13, 2014 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al-Basha

Military and Security

William Clough

Houthi Attacks Pick Up Pace as US Grows Weary

In assessing the situation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in early April, one might have said Operations Prosperity Guardian and Aspides, the US- and EU-led coalitions tasked with defending the seas from Houthi attacks on commercial vessels, were achieving their declared goals. Attacks on ships were down, and Pentagon officials even **speculated** that the Houthis could be running out of munitions.

But appraising events at the end of June, the facts on the ground now paint a very different picture. Houthi maritime attacks are at an all-time high, and the group is boasting a surprisingly advanced arsenal that has made their attacks more accurate and lethal. At the same time, US officials overseeing the numerous warships protecting waterways around Yemen – while publicly enthusiastic – told the Wall Street Journal they worry the conflict is “**simply not sustainable**” after more than seven months at sea and US\$1 billion spent in munitions. So what changed in the last three months, and how did the Houthis turn the tide? The keys to this conundrum are a long-flawed US strategy that has failed to both recognize the importance of an asymmetric battleground and tackle known weapons smuggling routes from African coasts to Yemeni ports under Houthi control.

Early Months: A Possible Reprieve?

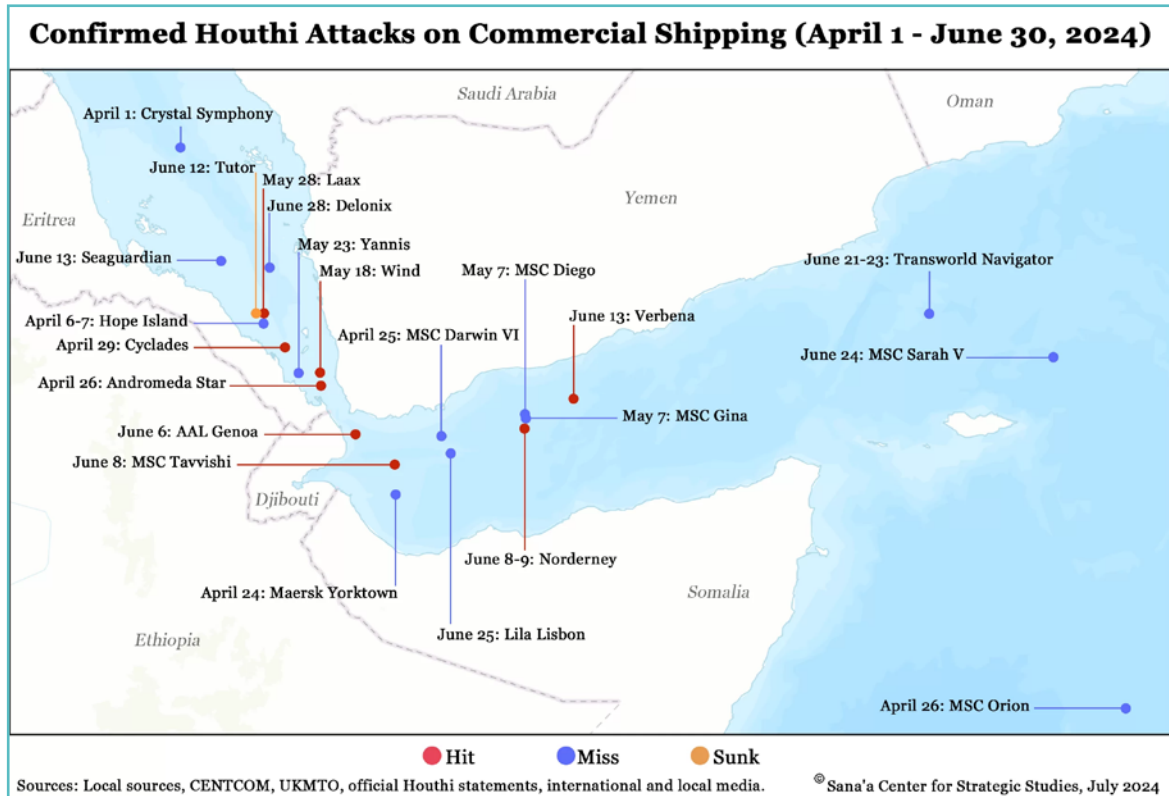
At the outset of April, the seas surrounding Yemen were among the calmest they had been since Houthi forces targeted their **first commercial vessel** on November 19, 2023. While far from being resolved, a 12-day hiatus of confirmed attacks between April 7-19 seemed to signal there could be a period of de-escalation on the horizon. The April 4 **departure** of the suspected Iranian spy vessel Behshad from the Gulf of Aden after **nearly three years** also gave the impression that the strategic waterways could be witnessing an extended calm. Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi himself even gave observers hope that tensions could be easing: on April 18, he **announced** that European ships sailing to destinations other than Israel could pass through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden “safely and soundly.”

In the following weeks, the group made several unverified claims about targeting ships, but an attack was not confirmed by an independent source until April 24, when a missile **hit the water** near the Maersk Yorktown. In the following week, the Houthis claimed attacks on two American destroyers and four commercial vessels, hitting **two** of the **latter**.

“Fourth Phase” Spoils Calm

Exactly two weeks after Abdelmalek al-Houthi’s address ensuring safe passage, he again touched on Red Sea operations in a May 2 speech, this time with a very different tune. Starting immediately, he announced, the group would begin a new **“fourth phase”** of their attacks, in which they would target not only ships sailing to Israel but any ship owned by a company that was utilizing Israeli ports. Attacks would also now be expanded to the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. The following week, the tone was even harsher, with vague intimations of fifth and sixth stages and promises that the group had **“no red lines.”** On May 23, the group **announced** its first operation targeting a ship in the Mediterranean Sea. While the alleged attack on the **Essex** was never confirmed and likely erroneous, given reports that the ship had not yet left the Egyptian coast, it appeared to validate the group’s intent to follow through on its promises of an extended battlefield.

In the months that have followed, the Houthis have claimed attacks on 11 ships in the Mediterranean or the Israeli port of Haifa – seven of which were unnamed vessels. None of the claimed attacks have been publicly confirmed by a third party. While it is difficult to discern whether the group is bluffing or ships are simply not reporting attacks (which they often do for safety or business concerns), the Houthis have been known to engage in **disinformation** in the past. In recent weeks, the group has increasingly turned to **collaboration with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq**, a network of Iranian-backed militant groups, to launch **“joint military operations”** against commercial ships in the Mediterranean and Israeli targets, mainly the **port of Haifa**. Again, these claimed attacks have been either unconfirmed or **denied** by the Israeli military.



Iranian Weapons Arrive via Africa

The key to the resurgence in Houthi maritime attacks lies not in US and European forces' failure to counter the strikes but rather in their inability to prevent weapons from reaching the group. The resulting asymmetric warfare, in which dozens of cheap automated drones, missiles, and boats can be used simultaneously against a single target, has not only cost the US government hundreds of millions of dollars but also valuable time and manpower as tensions remain high in other waterways.

In early April, a security source divulged to the Sana'a Center that Iran had begun smuggling arms to Eritrea, and from there to Hudaydah and Red Sea islands under Houthi control. This information corroborates previous suspicions of locals in coastal areas regarding the source of some arms coming in by boat. In March, Sana'a authorities reached an agreement with the Eritrean navy to allow large Yemeni dhows to fish in Eritrean waters, after which Eritrean authorities began issuing permits, according to local sources. Dozens of boats from Houthi-controlled territories reportedly sailed to the Eritrean port of Massawa to complete paperwork for these permits, while representatives from the Eritrean navy were also present in Hudaydah city.

Another security source revealed to the Sana'a Center in May that a separate, increasingly important smuggling route exists between Port Sudan and the Houthi-run port of Al-Salif, north of Hudaydah, for the movement of weapons and fighters. The route seems to connect to Bandar Abbas in Iran and is overseen by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force. It's likely that the Houthis have used this route to stock up on weaponry, which they could deploy at a later stage of their Gaza-related operations.

This claim, too, has been supported by locals who reported cargo ships reportedly carrying weapons and dhows entering the naval cargo dock north of Hudaydah city on multiple occasions. On May 27, local and military sources informed the Sana'a Center that the Iran-flagged container ship *Daisy* docked at Port Sudan, where it stayed for two days before sailing toward the southern Red Sea and anchoring parallel to several Houthi boats near Jabal al-Tair Island and the Farasan Archipelago. The vessel remained there until May 30 before shutting off its AIS tracking system. The *Daisy*, whose parent company is sanctioned by the US, has been **accused** of smuggling weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon from Iran's Bandar Abbas port vis-à-vis a clandestine stop in the Syrian port of Latakia, before later heading to European cities publicly listed as ports of call.

Local officials and international observers have not been blind to the influx of arms in Houthi-held ports. Government Defense Minister Mohsen al-Daeri told the UN that a **number of Iranian arms shipments** had arrived in Hudaydah without inspection, while British representative to the UN Barbara Woodward **reported** to the UN Security Council that as many as 500 truckloads of material had bypassed the UN Verification and Inspections Mechanism (UNVIM) in Djibouti and entered Houthi ports since October 2023. Meanwhile, experts surmise that the Houthis still possess significant capabilities for the domestic manufacture of drones and missiles; the group has even released **elaborate promotional videos** showcasing what they claim are newly introduced ballistic missiles.

Attacks Escalate While US Strike Group Sails Home

The result of this influx of firepower into Houthi hands has been more attacks and an increased likelihood of accurate hits. The most significant of these was against the *Tutor*, a Liberia-flagged cargo vessel that the Houthis **hit** on June 12 with an unmanned surface vessel (USV) and later an aerial projectile, likely a drone. The attack killed a Filipino crewman and eventually caused the ship to **sink**, making it the second to do so after the *Rubymar* in early March. Another vessel, the *Verbena*, took **heavy damage** the day after the *Tutor*, when it was struck by three missiles. One sailor was seriously injured, and the crew was forced to abandon ship. The vessel was left adrift in the Red Sea and was **reportedly** afloat for weeks before eventually being **salvaged**, according to Reuters.

In recent weeks, the Houthis have announced multiple ship targetings at a time, sometimes as many as ten in a single week. However, the vast majority of these remain unconfirmed, indicating that the group is likely announcing unrealized attacks or claiming successful hits for missiles and drones shot down by US and coalition forces. Among the ships most commonly misreported as being targeted and/or hit is the *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower*, the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier that had been stationed in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden since the outset of Operation Prosperity Guardian. Houthi forces claimed two separate attacks against the *Eisenhower*, on **June 1** and again on **June 22**, both of which the US Navy **denied**. Associated Press journalists also **verified** that the ship was in good shape, save from the wear and tear to be expected from a combat deployment. Nonetheless, on June 22, the *Eisenhower* – along with the three other ships in the strike group, the *USS Philippine Sea*, *USS Gravelly*, and the *USS Mason* – **exited** the Red Sea, ending its twice-extended stay in the region. The *USS Carney*, another destroyer that played an active role in combating Houthi attacks, **returned** to the United States on May 14 after seven months in the region during which it reportedly **shot down** 45 Houthi drones and missiles. The *Eisenhower* carrier strike group was replaced by the *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, which arrived on

July 12 after a military exercise off the coast of Korea. The transition between *Ike's* departure and the *Roosevelt's* arrival has likely left European navies and shipping merchants alike nervous – the region has now been without a US carrier strike group for more than **two weeks**. The fact that the British frigate *HMS Diamond* also recently **returned home** likely does not excite European sailors who have remained behind to escort commercial vessels. Operation Aspides' leader has **expressed concerns** about the group's ability to continue combatting strikes at its current operating capacity, saying they need double their manpower to remain effective.

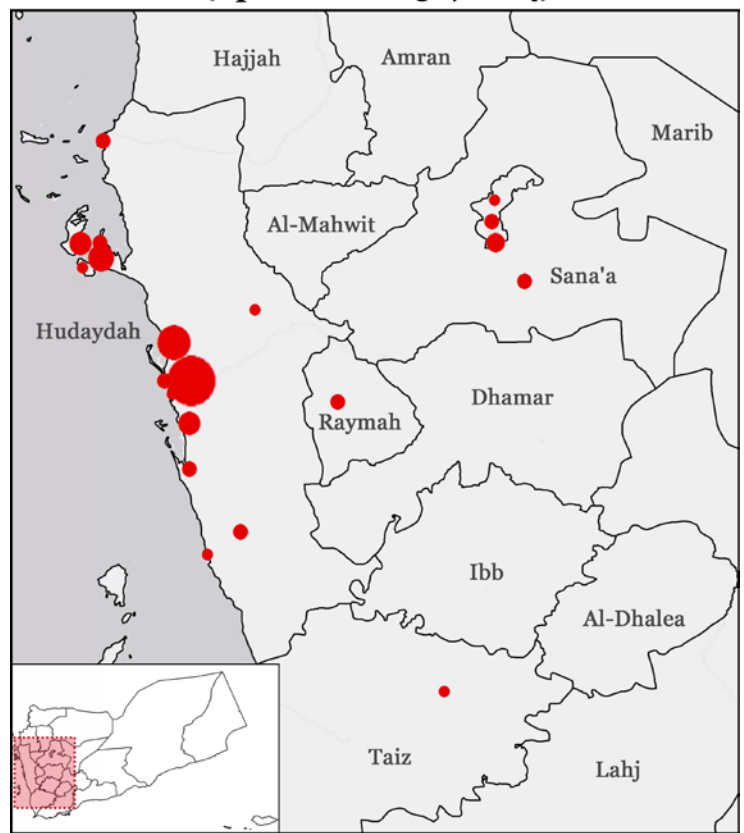
As a new fleet of US sailors prepares to arrive in Yemen's coastal waters, the US Navy is likely reassessing its mission and that of its European partners. Current military operations are not working: after nearly nine months of tit-for-tat seaborne conflict, attacks remain frequent, shipping insurance costly, and Houthi morale high. Western navies would be prudent to take note of the fact that weapons continue to flow into Houthi ports – no matter how many missile battalions coalition forces target on land, they cannot halt attacks as long as new munitions continue to arrive on a regular basis. Looking forward, US and European forces would need to assess not only an immediate plan to reduce the recent spike in Houthi operations but also develop a long-term strategy for dealing with the group as they continue to innovate and re-supply their increasingly more complex arsenal.

Airstrikes Resume at Steady Clip

US airstrikes targeting Houthi weapons stockpiles and strategic sites have fluctuated in recent months, with April experiencing a relative reprieve and strikes picking back up as Houthi maritime attacks became more aggressive in mid-May.

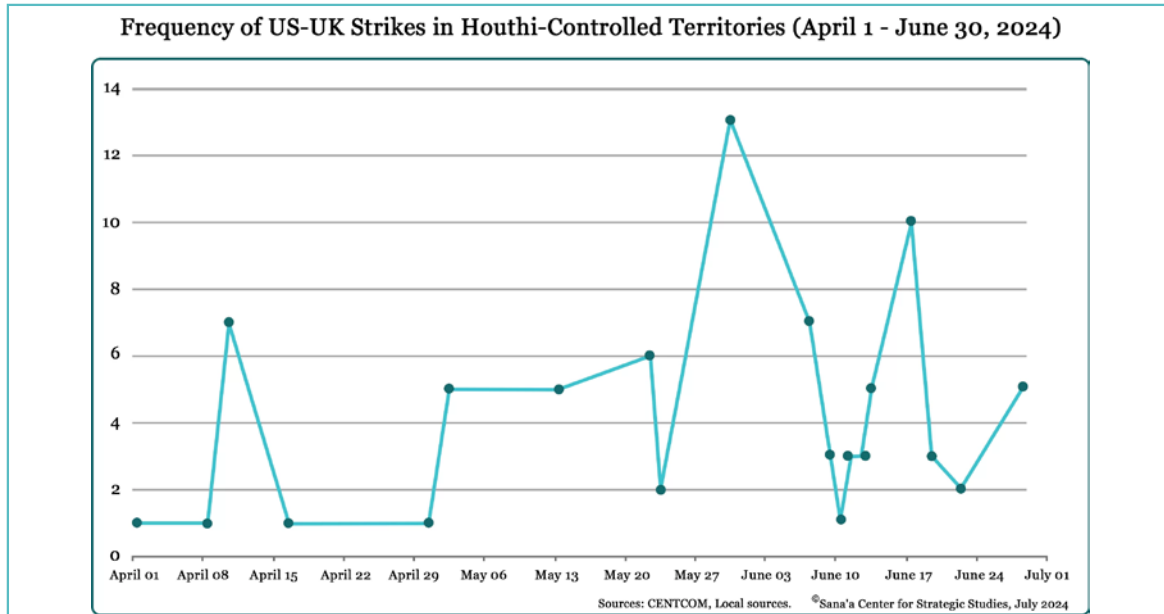
As the situation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden calmed in mid-April, so too did US attacks on Houthi territory. The second half of the month saw one of the longest reprieves in strikes against Houthi targets, with a one-week gap between April 17-24. In the subsequent 30 days, strikes only occurred on four days (April 25 and 30, and May 2 and 13). US forces redoubled their attacks toward the end of the month, peaking on May 30, when UK forces joined their American partners in targeting **13 sites** across Sana'a, Hudaydah, and Taiz. This round

US-UK Strikes in Houthi-Controlled Territories (April 1 - June 30, 2024)

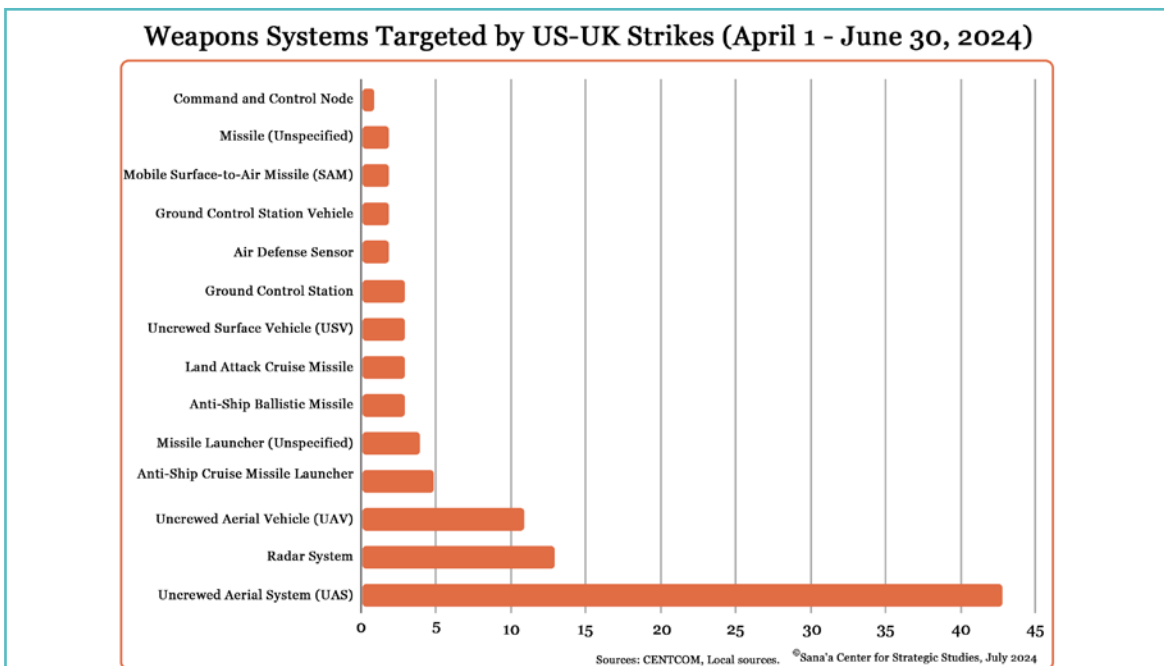


Sources: Local sources, CENTCOM, ACLED, official Houthi statements, international and local media.

of air raids was unusual in that it provoked a response from Houthi forces – who otherwise tend to report minimal details regarding damages and casualties. The Houthi-run Saba News network **announced** that 16 people were killed and 42 others were injured as a result of the strikes, including both military personnel and civilians. Local medical sources told the Sana'a Center that several of the deceased and wounded were non-Yemeni nationals, indicating that foreign military experts could have been among the casualties. On June 3, Houthi forces in Hudaydah held a **public funeral** for 15 officers who were reportedly killed in the airstrikes.



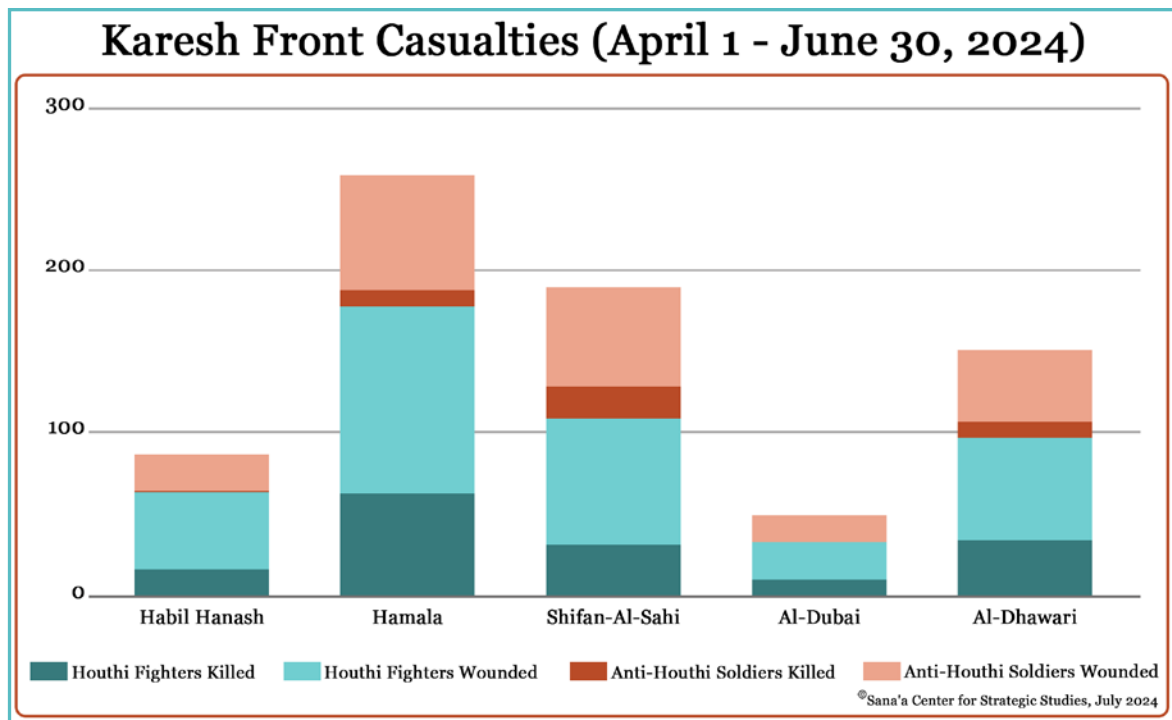
Another intense round of bombing occurred one week later when US forces launched 19 raids between June 7-14 against targets in Sana'a, Hudaydah, and Raymah governorates. Among these, a series of strikes on June 13 targeted a radio tower in Raymah governorate's Al-Jubayn military complex, **reportedly** leaving five civilians dead. The day after, US forces destroyed seven Houthi radar systems that assisted Houthi forces in targeting maritime vessels.



To the south, there is evidence that Houthi operations could be ongoing near the Al-Kour mountain range, which lies on the border between Al-Bayda’s Mukayras district and Abyan’s Lawdar district. Residents there have reported regular military activity, with suspected military aircraft heard in the area on April 25 and May 5 and suspected Houthi missile launches occurring on June 8, 13, and 21. Despite the fact that local residents regularly report these activities, neither US nor Houthi forces have confirmed strikes in Al-Bayda in recent months.

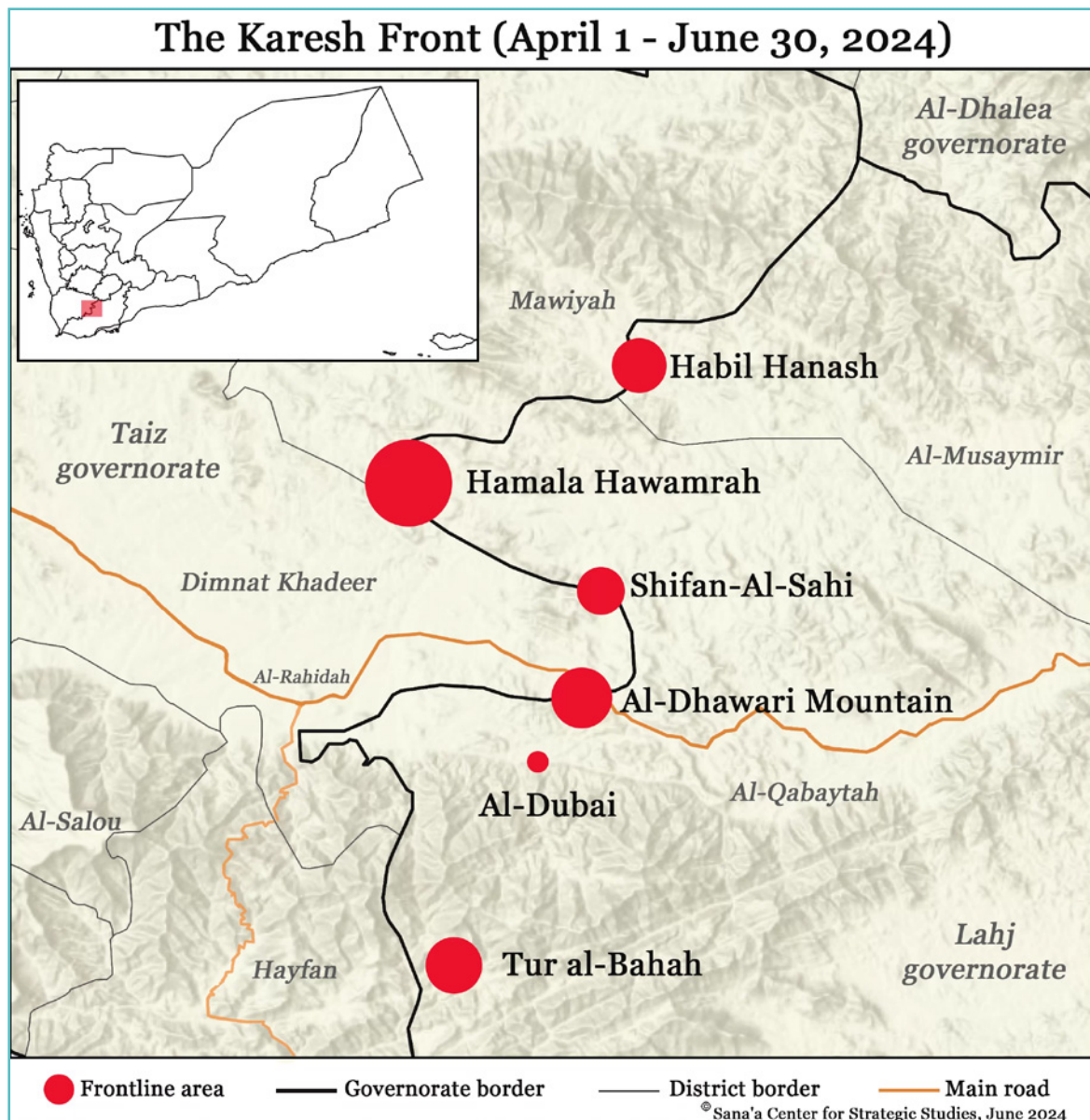
Lahj Frontlines Heat Up, Others Remain Active

Intense fighting broke out on several frontlines in Lahj, as Houthi reinforcements arrived to counter pro-government and STC forces stationed in the governorate. The Karesh front – which lies in Lahj’s Al-Qabaytah district along the border with Taiz, and is made up of the Hamala Hawamrah frontline in the far north, Shifan-Al-Sahi, Al-Dhawari Mountain Range, and Al-Dubai frontline in the south – saw an uptick in violence in recent months, as the Houthis attempted to capture strategic heights and cut supply lines. The fighting was intense enough to warrant a **mention** from UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg in his April 15 address to the UN Security Council. In the last three months, a total of 41 STC-affiliated and pro-government soldiers were killed and another 215 were injured along the Karesh front. Meanwhile, Houthi forces saw an estimated 155 fighters killed and 326 wounded, according to anti-Houthi soldiers, tribal sources, and local activists.



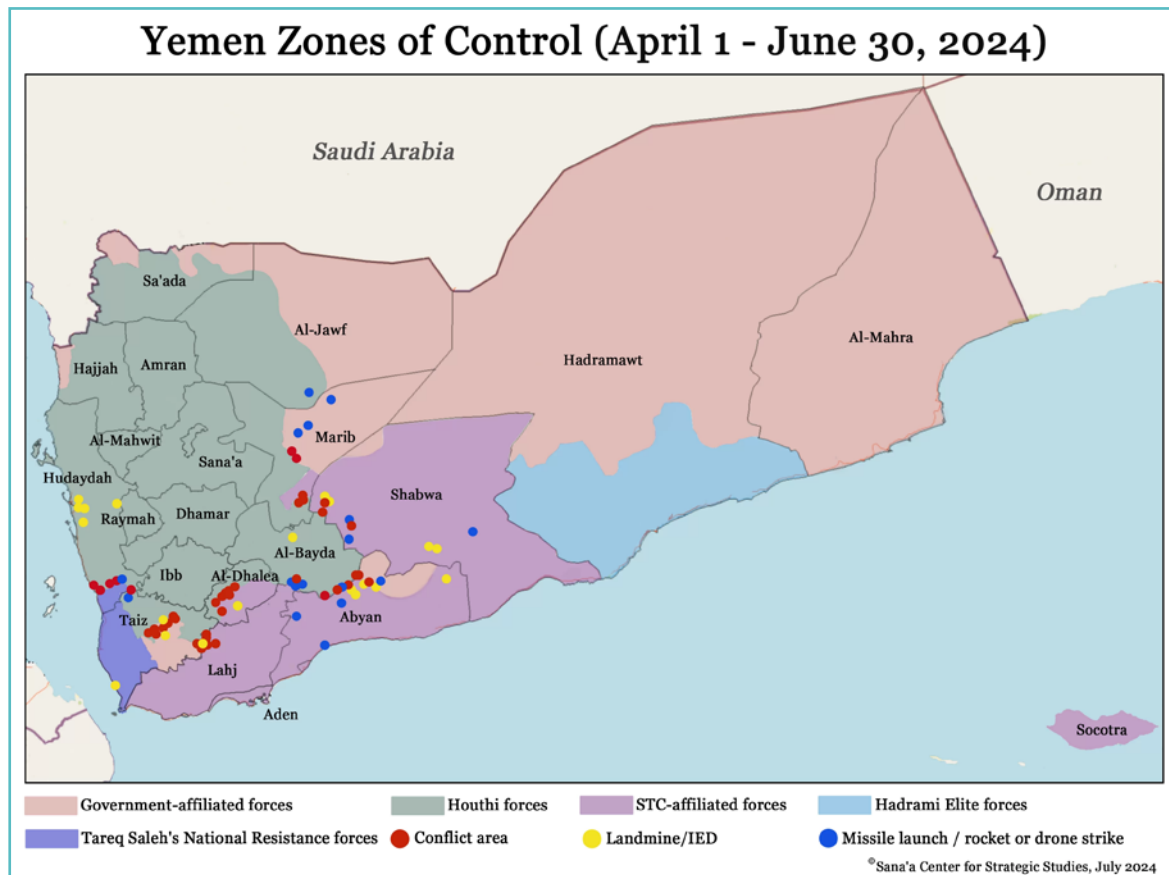
In the nearby Tur al-Bahah area, which lies at a critical junction overlooking Hayfan district in Taiz and Al-Qabaytah district in Lahj, Nation's Shield forces **took over military posts** from the 4th Hazm Brigade on April 27. The handover from the STC-aligned forces was agreed with Saudi-led coalition forces, under whose umbrella the Nation's Shield operates.

On May 9-10, the first major clashes broke out between the Saudi-trained soldiers and Houthi forces, leaving three Houthi fighters dead and seven wounded, and five Nation's Shield soldiers wounded. In the following weeks, the front stayed active, with clashes occurring on a weekly basis. On May 16, Nation's Shield forces captured a group of Houthi soldiers in possession of large sums of money (likely for salaries) and lists of fighters near the fronts in both Al-Qabaytah and Tur al-Bahah districts. Since the outbreak of fighting in May, 12 Nation's Shield soldiers were killed on the frontline, and 45 others were injured. Meanwhile, 26 Houthi fighters were killed and an additional 57 were wounded, according to anti-Houthi soldiers, tribal sources, and local activists.



Other frontlines in Hudaydah, Taiz, Marib, Al-Bayda, and Al-Dhalea have witnessed regular fighting since the start of April. Among these, Hudaydah has been particularly active, perhaps unsurprisingly given Houthi activity along the coast. Houthi forces have reportedly been digging and fortifying a series of **tunnels** along frontlines in southern Hudaydah, including in Al-Hajroufah area in the south of Al-Tuhayta district and the Bayt al-Hashash area in Hays district, according to local military sources. In Taiz, the Islah-affiliated Military Axis reported thwarting several Houthi advances on the Kalaba and Asifra fronts to the northeast of Taiz city, which see regular fighting.

To the north, Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) members have reportedly been **watching** tensions in Marib, where they fear the Houthis could resort to military action if pushed too far in the mushrooming banking war between Sana'a and Aden . While fighting has not escalated beyond the usual clashes between UAE-backed Saba Axis of the Giants Brigade forces and Houthi fighters along the border between Harib and Al-Abdiyah districts, there are numerous points of contact in western and southern Marib that the Houthis could test.



Other Developments In Brief

May 12: A team from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Yemen was allowed to **board** the *Galaxy Leader* ship, which Houthi forces hijacked on November 19. The Houthis repeatedly refused to negotiate the release of the crew members, saying their release was directly linked to Israel's campaign in Gaza.

May 17: The pro-government 35th Armored Brigade claimed to have captured a Houthi spy cell, consisting of 16 individuals, in Al-Mawasit district in Taiz. The arrests were **criticized** by some activists as unjustified.

May 28: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on the Houthis to **stop attacking** commercial vessels in a meeting with newly appointed government Foreign Affairs Minister Shaya al-Zindani in Beijing. The demand comes only ten days after Houthi forces **hit** an oil tanker traveling from Russia to China, despite an agreement they would not target either country's cargo.

June 11: The International Organization for Migration **announced** that a boat carrying nearly 260 Somali and Ethiopian migrants had capsized in the Gulf of Aden, leaving at least 49 people dead and 140 missing.

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An aerial view of the power plant in Ataq, Shabwa, on May 16, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo by Hafez Makwar

The Economy

Sana'a Center Economic Unit

Currency Crisis

Sana'a Introduces New Currency in Central Bank Face-off

Yemen's already fractured financial system faces a dangerous escalation as its rival central banks engage in a high-stakes power struggle, threatening a full-blown currency war. On March 31, the Houthi-controlled Central Bank in Sana'a (CBY-Sana'a) made a controversial decision to **introduce** a new coin to replace deteriorating 100 rial banknotes. The governor of the CBY-Sana'a **claimed** the move was simply intended to replace damaged banknotes and would not affect exchange rates. While he claimed the bank was operating transparently and committed to stabilizing the economy, key details, including the number of replaced banknotes, remain unclear. The lack of information regarding the quantity of coins and their potential impact on existing liquidity raises concerns about inflation. There is concern that their rollout could later be followed by a massive introduction of new rial banknotes, threatening the Central Bank in Aden's (CBY-Aden) monetary mandate as the sole printer of the national rial currency.

The internationally recognized government and CBY-Aden have vehemently opposed the move. The CBY-Aden **branded** the coin “illegitimate” and “counterfeit” and has prohibited its circulation. It warned financial institutions and citizens against using the coins, arguing they would further disrupt trade, complicate inter-region transactions, and destabilize the existing exchange system. These accusations highlight the deepening rift between the two monetary institutions and raise serious concerns about the future of the Yemeni rial and the banking system.

The Houthi coin issuance, while purportedly only intended to replace a small percentage of damaged notes, carries a hidden threat. It could be the first step towards printing more such “replacement” currency at higher denominations, ultimately flooding the market with new money and eroding confidence in the rial. Uncontrolled monetary base expansion coupled with Houthi war financing could trigger hyperinflation in Houthi-controlled areas, further destabilizing the already fragile economy. The CBY-Aden’s own reckless resort to printing excessive amounts of new Yemeni rial banknotes to fund operations earlier in the war backfired spectacularly. The massive monetary expansion caused the currency to plummet in value, fueling a surge in food prices and ultimately destabilizing the economy. The Houthis’ ban on the newly printed currency in January 2020 effectively created two monetary zones with distinct exchange rates. This ongoing monetary division significantly hinders the central banks’ ability to manage monetary policy and throws a wrench into any future plans for their reunification.

The dispute over the new 100 rial coin issued by Houthi authorities worsened following an ultimatum issued by the government-affiliated CBY-Aden on April 2, giving Yemeni banks in Sana’a 60 days to move their headquarters to Aden or be subject to anti-money laundering and terrorism laws. The government has toughened its position, saying that for the order to be rescinded, the Sana’a authorities should not only withdraw the coins but vow to lift the **blockade of oil and gas** exports, which have decimated government revenues and contributed to the steep depreciation of the rial in government-held areas.

A UN-mediated attempt to get the Aden and Sana’a central bank governors together in the same room to resolve the **currency crisis** failed, with Aden insisting on a clear agenda in advance. There is a conspicuous absence of pressure from Saudi Arabia or the United States – both busy discussing their security deal – to resolve the issue, which offers them a chance to see the Houthis sweat a little under pressure.

International Outrage Over New Houthi Currency

The Houthis’ new coinage ignited a firestorm of international condemnation. The US, EU, UK, and France erupted in a chorus of outrage on April 4, blasting the Houthis’ issuance of a “counterfeit” 100 rial coin as a deliberate attempt to shatter the country’s fragile financial stability, deepen existing divisions, and derail the already precarious peace process.

The US Embassy in Yemen **condemned** the Houthis, which the US has already listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group, for issuing counterfeit currency and urged them to prevent it from entering circulation. It warned that such unilateral action threatens to further divide the economy, undermine the integrity of the banking sector, and jeopardize Yemen’s commitment to global regulations to fight terrorism financing. The European Union delegation to Yemen **echoed** these concerns, highlighting the devastating consequences for the financial sector and Yemen’s compliance with international financial regulations. They declared that such actions “undermine the path to peace and prosperity for Yemenis.” The British Embassy in Yemen minced no words, **calling** the Houthi action “a deliberate attempt to destabilize the

banking system and exacerbate divisions within the already crippled Yemeni economy.” They warned that “further fragmentation will only worsen the plight of ordinary Yemenis.” France joined the chorus of condemnation, calling the Houthi move “an illegal and unilateral decision by an unrecognized entity.” They emphasized that “this action deepens the country’s divisions at a time when unity, particularly around the currency, is paramount for the Yemeni people.” All four reaffirmed their unwavering support for the government-affiliated CBY-Aden and its critical role in maintaining financial stability. They urged the Houthis to abandon “reckless behavior” and engage constructively in UN-led peace efforts, particularly on crucial economic issues. The international community, previously hesitant to take a strong stance, seems to be shifting its approach. But by issuing new currency, the Houthis may have trapped themselves. The move reinforces doubts about their commitment to peace, painting a picture of a group prioritizing escalation over stability.

The West’s stance provoked angry reactions from the Houthis. The Houthi-run CBY-Sana’a branded the statements from the American and British embassies as “blatant and illegal interference” and a continuation of the “US-Saudi economic war” against Yemen. This escalation in rhetoric highlights the deepening rift between the Houthis and the international community. In an interview, CBY-Aden head Ahmed Ghaleb described the Houthis’ minting of new coins as “crossing a red line,” highlighting the potential for hyperinflation in Houthi-controlled areas. This, coupled with the existing currency divide, could pave the way for a disastrous dual currency system, crippling 70 percent of the Yemeni economy and isolating millions.

Liquidity Crisis Grips Sana’a as Depositors Protest

A wave of panic swept through Sana’a as a liquidity crisis threatened to engulf the city’s banking sector. The crisis, simmering for years, reached a boiling point on May 12, sparking protests and raising fears of a banking collapse mirroring Lebanon’s recent financial meltdown.

Dozens of depositors, their anxieties mounting, staged a protest in front of the International Bank of Yemen (IBY). This act of defiance, a difficult feat in Houthi-controlled Sana’a, where public demonstrations are heavily suppressed, was a stark indicator of the desperation gripping the city. Protestors demanded access to their frozen savings and the resumption of monthly cash disbursements of even small amounts of interest earned on non-cash deposits. Previously, the IBY had been one of few banks offering such limited relief, disbursing decreasing payments before stopping entirely in March.

The liquidity crisis stems from a confluence of factors. Sana’a’s banks are plagued by a severe shortage of Yemeni rials, and Houthi authorities have exacerbated the issue by forcing the recirculation of damaged banknotes. Compounding the problem is the Houthis’ Anti-Usury Transactions Law, issued in March of last year to prohibit banks from paying interest on savings, crippling a key source of income for depositors and banks alike.

The cash shortage left ATMs in Sana’a devoid of Yemeni rials, forcing customers to queue at bank branches in a desperate attempt to access their money. This created an atmosphere of panic, leading some banks to resort to offering withdrawals in Saudi riyals, a desperate measure that underscores the collapse of the local currency. Adding fuel to the fire was the deafening silence from the Houthi authorities and a lack of concrete steps to address the crisis.

The crisis in Sana'a threatens to have a devastating impact on the already fragile economy. Without access to their savings and with businesses struggling to operate, residents face an uncertain future. The lack of decisive action from parties to the conflict to address the liquidity crisis only serves to deepen public anxiety and raise the specter of a financial meltdown.

CBY-Aden's Currency Reform Sparks Fresh Crisis

On May 30, the CBY-Aden **mandated** that all citizens, businesses, and financial institutions exchange pre-2016 Yemeni rials within 60 days. It set two options for surrendering older currency. Those without CBY-Aden accounts (e.g., citizens, businesses, and other non-financial institutions) must deposit their old rials at commercial and Islamic banks operating in government-held areas. Financial institutions with CBY-Aden accounts must deposit all pre-2016 rials at the central bank's headquarters or at its branches in government-held areas.

The move was part of a tit-for-tat battle between the central banks over the nation's fragmented monetary system. Part of the regulatory contest centers around the management of the Yemeni rial, now effectively divided into two currencies with vastly different values.

The CBY-Aden is attempting to assert its dominance over the monetary system by guaranteeing a one-to-one exchange for its new notes. While it claims sole authority due to its internationally recognized status, this is undermined by the harsh realities of Yemen's dual currency system, now firmly entrenched across the divided zones of control. The Houthis **banned** post-2016 currency at the end of 2019 in an attempt to assert control over monetary policy and spiraling inflation. At the time, the CBY-Aden was printing vast quantities of notes to pay soldiers and public sector employees. The result has been two-fold: divergent exchange rates, with new rials worth less than a third of the older, physically degraded notes, and the concentration of an estimated 90 percent of old rials in Houthi territory as the good money drove out the bad.

This distribution reveals the likely true motivation – the unification of the currency at a lower value. New rials are currently trading at less than YR1,800 per US\$1 and continue to fall, while old rials have maintained a steady value of near YR532 per US\$1. Bills exchanged at a one-to-one rate would lose two-thirds of their present value.

The CBY-Aden warned that failure to comply will result in unspecified consequences. The central bank's legal justifications for the order are tenuous. While its officials have cited Article 126, this article prescribes a two-year window for currency replacement, not a mere 60 days. The extended timeframe reflects the logistical complexity of withdrawing old notes and issuing new ones. However, the central bank's claim that pre-2016 notes – designed with an estimated 18-month lifespan – have been "completely destroyed" is evident in the condition of still circulating bills.

For its part, the CBY-Sana'a responded by **announcing** a rival compensation scheme for holders of old rials in government-controlled areas and **gave** details of its mechanism for absorbing pre-2016 rials currently circulating in government-held territory. Starting **June 8**, the Al-Rahida Customs Control Center in Taiz and the Afar Customs Control Center in Al-Bayda would operate as "compensation points," with other locations to be announced at a later date. Houthi authorities will reportedly exchange old rials for new rials at the market rate as determined by the CBY-Sana'a. Amounts of YR3 million or less can be readily exchanged; amounts exceeding YR3 million require prior approval, and customers must fill out a disclosure form as stipulated in Articles 23 and 24 of the Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing Law.

It is unclear exactly what terms the Houthis will offer, but they will likely be closer to the prevailing market rate, with new rials currently worth roughly a third of the old bills. The Houthi scheme will thus be more attractive to holders of old rials in government areas, though around 90 percent of the older bills already circulate in the Houthi-controlled north.

While they are offering them in exchange, Houthi officials still referred to new rials as “illegal.” The initiative was likely intended to counter the government’s scheme, reassert the status of old rials, and continue the bifurcation of the currency. The acquisition of additional old rials could also help the Houthis as they attempt to manage an ongoing liquidity crisis driven partly by the physical degradation of notes.

On June 21, CBY-Aden issued **new regulations** to regulate the flow of hard currency between government-controlled and Houthi-held areas. The directive banned travelers from transporting foreign currency into areas controlled by the Houthis and capped the amounts of new rials permitted to leave or enter government-controlled areas at YR200,000. It also prohibited the transport of old rials into Houthi-held areas, requiring them to be exchanged in government-controlled areas for new rials at a one-to-one rate.

The reopening of roads between government- and Houthi-held areas in Marib and Taiz complicates efforts to enforce restrictions on the leakage of hard currency. In Taiz, where the road between Taiz city and Hawban industrial area was reopened on June 13 for the first time since 2015, the Islah-affiliated Taiz Military Axis **ordered** military and security forces to carry out the CBY-Aden’s orders at all security checkpoints leading to Houthi-controlled territories.

Battle Over Banks Escalates

Central Bank in Aden Demands Banks Relocate

The CBY-Aden issued a **resolution** on April 2, demanding all Yemeni banks relocate their headquarters to Aden within 60 days. The move, ostensibly designed to maintain control over the banking sector and shield it from “illegal measures by Houthis,” who have been recast by the US as a Specially Designated Global Terror group (SDGT), threatens to cripple the already struggling financial system. A stern warning accompanied the resolution: any bank failing to relocate within the designated timeframe would face legal repercussions under the Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing Law and its associated regulations. Failure to comply would result in punitive measures, including potential exclusion from the SWIFT network and international money transfer services like Western Union and MoneyGram. This could cripple the banking sector’s capacity for essential international financial transactions.

The directive has some precedent. In August 2021, the CBY-Aden published a statement on its official website stating that all commercial and Islamic banks licensed to operate in the country must expedite the relocation of their operations management centers in Aden so it could carry out verification procedures and direct field inspections of their operations and ensure their commitment to fulfilling legal requirements. While this statement included threats of legal action against banks refusing to share operations data with the CBY-Aden, there were no penalties for banks failing to relocate.

The new demand by the CBY-Aden is more serious. It comes in the form of a resolution, which, from a legal perspective, is much stronger and includes threats of legal action against non-compliant banks. The circumstances are also different. The directive came in retaliation to the

Houthis' new coinage and their attempt to disrupt the CBY-Aden's new Unified Money Transfer Network. The CBY-Aden also cited military developments in the Red Sea and the Houthis' recent redesignation as a terrorist group as justification for demanding relocation, saying it will protect banks from risking being associated with anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism financing measures.

Sana'a-Based Banks Association Denounces Relocation Order

The Sana'a-based Yemeni Banks Association (YBA) fiercely criticized the CBY-Aden's demand that all Yemeni banks relocate their headquarters to Aden, labeling it as a reckless risk to Yemen's financial sector and economy. YBA President Mahmoud Naji **blasted** the move as "arbitrary" and said it was fueled by political pressure. He argued that banks strategically choose their locations based on market forces, specifically supply and demand, and this made Sana'a the clear choice. The majority of Yemeni commercial and industrial companies are based in the city and surrounding governorates – the lifeblood of the economy and the primary customers of banks. He also pointed to the absence of any legal mandate dictating where banks must be headquartered, arguing that current banking laws empower shareholders to determine the location of their respective headquarters.

The CBY-Aden's relocation decree even ignited criticism from financial experts who typically support the government, such as Mohammed Halboub, Chairman of the Yemeni National Bank based in Aden, who **highlighted** several major roadblocks that could derail the plan. He noted that Houthi authorities could block the transfer of vital IT infrastructure, the backbone of banks' operations. Even if this hurdle is overcome, significant technical challenges will remain. Setting up new data centers in Aden would be a complex and expensive undertaking. Compelling bank staff to relocate is another major obstacle. Low morale and financial constraints, exacerbated by recent Houthi policies that have crippled bank revenues in Sana'a, make employee buy-in highly unlikely. The most fundamental obstacle, however, lies in the impossibility of physically relocating the banking market itself. Clients cannot be uprooted and forced to move their business to Aden. Halboub cited a potential option of last resort, the "Venezuelan model," where banks operate electronically despite geographical separation. However, the success of such an approach hinges on the consent of both the Yemeni public and the international community – both highly doubtful prospects. Halboub ultimately warned against continuing with any attempts at forceful relocation, saying it would be akin to "killing" the Yemeni banking system.

While the CBY-Aden's demand that banks relocate is intended to cripple Houthi control over finances and safeguard the CBY-Aden's own legitimacy, it presents a significant challenge for the internationally recognized government. Implementing the decision is fraught with risk. Banks with a majority of their business in Houthi-controlled areas will face threats, intimidation, and even asset seizure if they comply. Past measures have been reversed, including a ban on five banks, suggesting pressure on the government to back down. Continuing to succumb to such pressure would severely weaken the government's position and erode public confidence in the CBY-Aden – a clear victory for the Houthis.

Central Bank Conflict Escalates to Remittance System

On May 23, CBY-Aden issued a new **resolution** to tighten regulations on foreign transfers processed through international remittance companies. The CBY-Aden's resolution mandates that foreign transfers flow exclusively through qualified banks and money exchange companies

it approves. Institutions must be authorized to partner with international remittance services like Western Union and MoneyGram. Qualified institutions offering remittance services must operate through their main branches, and any sub-agents must register with the CBY-Aden for approval. Recipients must receive transfers in the currency sent, with conversion only occurring at the beneficiary's request and prevailing market rates.

This action directly counters the Houthis' restrictions on international remittances. In March 2024, the CBY-Sana'a issued a **decree** forcing all transfers to be disbursed in Saudi riyals, regardless of the original currency. This move, fueled by a desperate need for US dollars, also prohibited the disbursement of remittances through agents that had not received authorization from the Houthis, which has caused significant hardship for Yemenis relying on overseas remittances.

The CBY-Aden's resolution continues its push to regulate the country's entire money transfer market by extending control over remittance activities even in Houthi-held territories, potentially forcing local exchange companies to cease unauthorized operations. By mandating original currency delivery, the CBY-Aden directly challenges the Houthis' attempt to control the flow of US dollars. Importantly, by emphasizing adherence to international banking standards, the CBY-Aden aims to solidify its position as the internationally recognized monetary authority overseeing Yemen's financial system.

However, the CBY-Aden faces significant challenges in achieving this. The fractured financial landscape, with most Yemeni banks and exchange companies headquartered in Sana'a, makes enforcing nationwide compliance daunting. The lack of a centralized monetary authority reflects broader political and economic fragmentation, and securing commitments from Sana'a-based institutions may not be possible. The CBY-Sana'a could also retaliate with punitive measures to discourage financial institutions from cooperating with the resolution.

Banks Blacklisted as Financial Divide Deepens

The CBY-Aden **blacklisted** six Sana'a-based banks on May 30 after accusing them of failing to adhere to anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorism financing (CTF) regulations. The six banks were the Tadhamon Islamic Bank, the Yemen and Kuwait Bank, the Shamil Bank of Yemen and Bahrain, Al-Amal Microfinance Bank, Al-Kuraimi Islamic Microfinance Bank, and the International Bank of Yemen. The CBY-Aden assured depositors that the sanctioned banks would continue basic operations in government-controlled areas, but the situation has reached a breaking point as further retaliatory measures threaten to plunge the economy into chaos.

The Houthi-controlled CBY-Sana'a proactively responded to the blacklisting with a series of punitive measures to prohibit banks from any sort of cooperation with CBY-Aden. In late May, its Financial Information Unit issued a circular banning all banks under their control from sharing any information with CBY-Aden or the internationally recognized government. Any bank that breached the order was threatened with harsh legal consequences, including being charged with "communicating with the aggression" – a serious offense punishable by severe penalties. This move effectively severed financial communication between the two halves of the country.

On May 31, the CBY-Sana'a escalated further, **banning** 13 Aden-based banks from operating in Houthi territories, citing a lack of proper licenses. This claim appears spurious, as 11 of the banks held valid licenses issued by the CBY-Aden. The list of sanctioned institutions includes Al-Qutaibi Islamic Microfinance Bank, Al-Busairi Bank for Microfinance, the Aden Islamic Microfinance Bank, the Aden First Islamic Bank; the National Bank of Yemen – Aden, the Cooperative and

Agricultural Credit Bank in Aden (CAC Bank-Aden), Al-Shumul Bank for Islamic Microfinance, Al-Salam Capital Bank for Islamic Microfinance, Tamkeen Microfinance Bank, the Alinma Bank for Islamic Microfinance, Al-Sharq Yemeni Bank for Islamic Microfinance, Hadramawt Commercial Bank, and the Bin Dowal Islamic Microfinance Bank.

The CBY-Aden's new sanctions have triggered a domino effect. Major international banks like Al-Rajhi Bank in Saudi Arabia have moved to cut ties with the blacklisted Sana'a banks and **asked** their financial agents, including several Yemeni banks, to produce a no-objection certificate from the CBY-Aden giving permission to continue dealing with Yemeni financial institutions. MoneyGram, a leading remittance company, is also complying with the CBY-Aden's regulations, limiting the flow of funds into Houthi-controlled areas. On May 28, the company **issued** an ultimatum to its Yemeni branches and agents: obtain a no-objection certificate from the CBY-Aden or risk being shut down. Many banks and financial agents are struggling to obtain the CBY-Aden's authorization to handle international remittances coming into the country. This bureaucratic hurdle could potentially create a chokehold on money transfers, a vital lifeline for many Yemeni families.

Following the CBY-Aden blacklisting of six financial entities in Sana'a and its order to hand in all old banknotes within 60 days, the Ministry of Transportation instructed **Yemenia Airways** on June 6 to shift its revenues to its bank accounts in Aden or overseas. Similarly, the Ministry of Communications called on **mobile phone companies** to move their offices from Sana'a to Aden.

For the Houthis, the threat they face is no less than being completely cut out of the international financial system and facing a similar set of constraints imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. Using Russia's alternative to the SWIFT transfer system could be one option for Sana'a, but it would hardly be a sufficient replacement. The most likely scenario is that the black market would flourish. Migrant workers would have no choice but to use it to move money, and client trust in banks operating in Houthi territories would plummet. The Houthi authorities would lose control over remittances and humanitarian aid, leading to a flow of cash into government areas. This would benefit the government, though it hardly makes up for their other complaints: the Houthis' blockade of oil and gas exports, the group's ban on domestically produced cooking gas cylinders, and Saudi Arabia's tightening of purse strings.

The Houthis have their demands, too. They have signaled a readiness to make some concessions but want to tie a resolution to the frozen Saudi-Houthi peace deal and the roadmap that would follow. These include the payment of salaries to teachers, military personnel, and others in Houthi territories, a share in migrant remittances, which are currently under government control, and a role in external trade policy.

CBY-Aden Bans Unauthorized Electronic Payments, Money Transfer Platforms

On June 26, the CBY-Aden issued a **new directive** prohibiting banks and exchange outlets from dealing with electronic payments companies operating without licenses issued by the government-affiliated central bank, in accordance with the pre-war Circular No. 11 of 2014. Numerous such entities were established following a March 2020 **directive** by CBY-Sana'a, which permitted non-bank institutions such as money exchange companies, traders, and other non-financial institutions to offer e-rial services. The ban included 12 e-wallet companies, reasoning that such wallets also operate and prompt electronic payment services and transfers without being officially licensed by the CBY-Aden.

Since the central bank split in 2016, the CBY-Sana'a has worked to establish a minimally regulated, non-bank-led model for electronic payments, an initiative that its counterpart in Aden has opposed. The CBY-Aden's new directive appears intended to increase pressure on the Houthis by limiting alternatives to the deteriorating banknotes in use in the north, thereby exacerbating attendant liquidity problems.

On the same day, the CBY-Aden also **suspended** the operation of local money transfer networks owned by banks, exchange houses, and other financial institutions, giving network operators 15 days to finalize unfinished transactions and hand over information about all unreceived Hawala transfers. Banks have been given until the end of July to bring their networks into compliance. Operators must then commit to using the CBY-Aden's Unified Money Transfer Network (UNMONEY) for all local money transfers. The central bank first announced UNMONEY in February. The network is intended to improve transparency and control of money flows and drew immediate condemnation from authorities in Sana'a. The CBY-Aden has threatened various punitive measures for entities that do not comply, including fines and the suspension or withdrawal of licenses.

The directive runs contrary to earlier de-escalation measures the central banks had agreed to. The CBY-Sana'a had said it would lift its ban on exchange houses dealing with UNMONEY; in return, the CBY-Aden would revoke its directive prohibiting transactions with five Sana'a-based banks and other exchange companies. The measures could lead to further escalation of the conflict between the respective central banks and fuel further fragmentation and deterioration of the private sector. The restrictions could cripple the ability of private sector actors to operate across zones of control, further destabilizing the rial and exacerbating the economic recession.

Rial Experiences Continued Volatility

New Yemeni rials experienced continued depreciation over the reporting period. The currency held steady over the course of April, trading between YR1,660 to YR1,680 per US\$1 on average. Old rials, used in Houthi-controlled areas, also remained stable over this period, trading at an average of YR531 per US\$1.

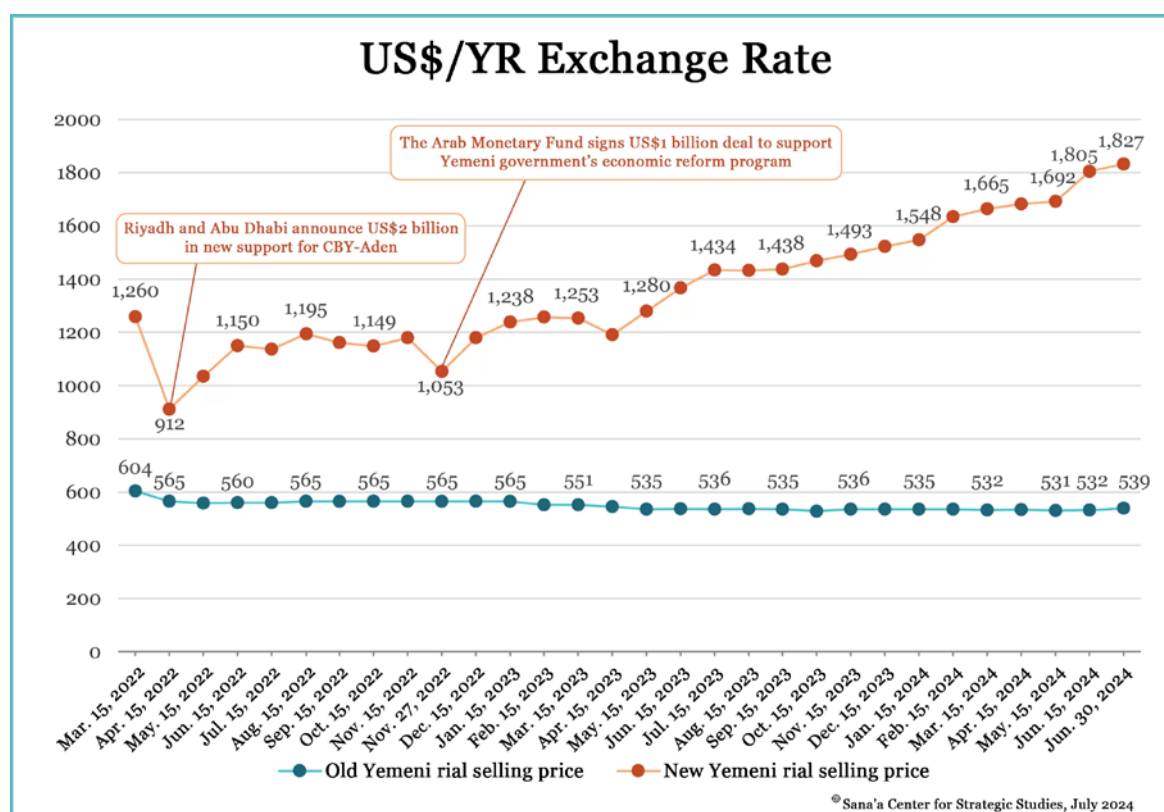
But the government has huge financial obligations compared with the limited resources it can currently mobilize, and it is running a large fiscal deficit as it struggles to pay public sector salaries. Only five FX auctions had been held in 2024 by the end of June, with Yemeni banks purchasing US\$178 million (78 percent) of the US\$230 million on offer. Inspired by the prospect of renewed support, the CBY-Aden briefly resumed foreign currency auctions after suspending them in late March. It held two currency auctions in May, each with US\$30 million on offer, which were 89 and 73 percent subscribed, respectively.

On June 13, PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi **confirmed** the arrival of a new batch of funding from Saudi Arabia to support the internationally recognized government. Amounting to some US\$300 million, the Saudi deposit was the third tranche of a US\$1.2 billion aid package **announced** in August 2023 to support the government's budget and prop up the value of the Yemeni rial. The sorely needed financial support came as the rial's value dropped to record lows, depreciating 5 percent in May alone. Despite the arrival of the new Saudi funds, the rial declined a further 3.8 percent in June, hitting YR1,827 per US\$1 as of June 30. This could be partly attributed to an increase in the money supply in the market after public servant salaries were disbursed ahead of the Eid al-Adha holiday on June 17.

Market uncertainty amid the escalation in economic warfare between the CBY-Aden and the Houthi-run CBY-Sana'a is undoubtedly another factor behind the rial's decline. Still, the arrival of new Saudi funds amid the ongoing struggle for control over Yemen's banking sector and money transfer systems could be interpreted in some quarters as tacit support by Riyadh for CBY-Aden's recent escalatory measures.

Defying expectations, the CBY-Aden did not announce the resumption of its suspended foreign currency auctions in June, which might have partially stabilized the exchange rate. Instead, on June 26, the CBY-Aden announced an auction for treasury bills with a maturity period of one year and a discount rate of 18 percent. The Central Bank also announced an auction for longer-term government bonds. The bank is hoping to absorb some of the excess money supply to finance the budget deficit and help the government pay for public expenditures. Such monetary tools could help the CBY-Aden manage the persistent decline of the rial. However, success depends on how much the bank can raise in these auctions. The high interest rates offered on bills and bonds could instead add a new burden to the public budget in the absence of sustainable revenue.

Old rials in Houthi-controlled areas also slightly declined in value in June, trading at an average of YR539 per US\$1 as of June 30. Although the CBY-Sana'a imposes a fixed exchange rate, the fluctuation can be attributed to a severe shortage of US dollars in Houthi-controlled areas.



Government Finances in Peril

Government Suffocates as Houthis Continue to Throttle Oil Exports

Prime Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak **painted** a grim picture of government finances on April 9, revealing the brutal cost of Houthi attacks on Yemen's oil infrastructure in late 2022. These assaults, targeting key export facilities, severed the government's access to its primary source of revenue and foreign currency. Mubarak declared a staggering loss of 3 trillion Yemeni rials (approximately US\$2 billion) in government revenue last year due to the complete halt of oil exports. This act marked the start of a relentless economic strangulation with devastating consequences for the Yemeni people.

In early August 2023, the government **reported** losses of US\$1.5 billion as a result of the attacks. The Houthis' demand to divert oil revenues toward public sector salaries, including those of military personnel in the areas they control, has removed any prospect of an agreement to restart exports. In an April **interview**, CBY-Aden head Ahmed Ghaleb said the Houthi stranglehold on oil exports has crippled the government, precipitating a staggering 70 percent decline in hard currency reserves and a 75 percent cut to government funding. The result has been a financial crisis, jeopardizing public employee salaries, electricity generation, and the stability of the Yemeni rial.

Aid Funding Falls Short

USAID Commits to Five-Year Aid Package

On April 21, the United States and Yemen agreed on a five-year assistance agreement. Signed by Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Waed Abdullah Batheeb and USAID Yemen Country Director Kimberlee Bell, the economic growth program aims to assist the stabilization of Yemen's economy through improved monetary and fiscal policies and facilitating international trade. It also includes initiatives related to access to essential healthcare, improved nutrition for children and pregnant women, water and sanitation, improved service delivery, and education focused on literacy and numeracy skills in early grades. USAID has provided more than US\$5.8 billion in humanitarian and development assistance to Yemen since 2015.

WFP Update Reveals Grim Realities

The World Food Programme's (WFP) **report** covering March 2023 to March 2024 painted a stark picture of Yemen's food security crisis, significantly exacerbated by ongoing political fragmentation. While the WFP continues to support 3.6 million people in government areas, albeit with reduced rations, their General Food Assistance (GFA) program has been suspended in Houthi-controlled areas since December. This has had a devastating impact, particularly in the northern Houthi-controlled governorate of Hajjah, where the share of households experiencing poor food consumption skyrocketed by 165 percent between November and February. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are bearing the brunt of the cuts in assistance – the share of IDPs facing poor food consumption has surged since the program's suspension, reaching 41 percent in February.

The cost of the minimum food basket (MFB) reached record highs in government-controlled areas between February and March. Compared to March 2023, MFB prices have increased by 12 percent. All government-controlled governorates saw price hikes, with the sharpest increases occurring in Marib and Abyan. Notably, MFB costs in Houthi-controlled areas are still 8 percent lower than March 2023 levels.

This price surge in government territories is driven by a combination of factors. The Yemeni rial depreciated by 25 percent against the US dollar year-on-year in government-controlled areas. This has led to unprecedented local food and fuel price inflation. The global increase in prices of essential commodities like sugar, vegetable oils, red beans, and wheat flour (up by 45, 36, 8, and 6 percent, respectively) further compounds Yemen's food security woes.

The disparity in fuel prices highlights the stark economic divisions across zones of control. In government areas, petrol and diesel prices saw significant year-on-year increases of 26 and 17 percent, respectively. In contrast, aggregate fuel prices, which include cooking gas, remained unchanged in Houthi-controlled regions compared to March 2024. But this masks a year-on-year decrease of 4 percent and 18 percent for petrol and diesel, respectively. This is likely due to a combination of a stronger local currency and relaxed import restrictions on fuel through the Houthi-controlled ports of Hudaydah.

Despite recent tensions in the Red Sea, the overall volume of food imports remained relatively stable in the first quarter of 2024 and increased by 12 percent year-on-year. However, food imports via Red Sea ports declined by 14 percent compared to the last quarter of 2023, despite a 24 percent year-on-year rise. This drop can be attributed to limited storage capacity at the port, which has caused delays with ships unloading cargo. Food imports via the southern ports of Aden and Mukalla nearly tripled compared to last quarter but were still 17 percent lower than the first quarter of 2023. Despite these fluctuations, Yemen's current reserve stocks of food are expected to last for the next two to three months.

The WFP report indicates that fuel imports have not been disrupted by the Red Sea crisis. Fuel imports through Red Sea ports increased by 6 percent compared to the last quarter of 2023 and by 29 percent year-on-year. This is likely due to incentives offered to traders by Houthi authorities in Sana'a, including covering demurrage costs and providing favorable customs rates. While fuel imports via southern ports also saw a 30 percent increase compared to last quarter, they have declined by 11 percent annually. Given the rising insurance costs for Yemeni ports, the situation requires close monitoring in the coming months.

Aid Organizations Issue Dire Warning

On the eve of the Sixth Senior Officials Meeting in Brussels, 190 humanitarian organizations, including UN agencies, issued a [joint statement](#) on May 6, warning of a looming humanitarian catastrophe unless drastically increased funding is secured.

On May 7, the Swedish government [announced](#) that European governments and the United States had pledged another US\$791.69 million to address humanitarian crises in Yemen. However, the Norwegian Refugee Council criticized the announcement for "failing" to go far enough, as the pledged funding is still far below what is required this year for Yemen to reach its humanitarian needs.

With millions in desperate need, the situation is dire. Ahead of the Brussels meeting, a mere US\$435 million of the 2024 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan had been funded – a fraction of the US\$2.7 billion required. Humanitarian organizations warned that “underfunding poses a crippling challenge,” translating to delays, cutbacks, and suspension of vital programs delivering food, healthcare, and other essential services.

The numbers paint a grim picture. Over 18.2 million Yemenis – more than half the population – require urgent assistance after enduring over nine years of war. Food shortages, disease outbreaks, and a crumbling infrastructure threaten their very survival. In 2023, 229 humanitarian actors, mostly local partners, provided life-saving support to an average of 8.4 million people a month.

Donors must urgently address the funding gap and prioritize sustained support for the 2024 Response Plan. This investment will not only save lives but also enhance Yemeni resilience and reduce dependence on aid in the long term.

IMF Mission Highlights Challenges and Reforms

On May 2, representatives of the internationally recognized government, including CBY-Aden Governor Ahmed Ghaleb and Minister of Finance Salem Bin Breik, concluded a five-day **meeting** with an IMF mission led by Joyce Wong in Jordan’s capital, Amman. Discussions centered on the latest economic and political developments, the future outlook, and progress on key reforms in Yemen. The findings paint a concerning picture, with ongoing conflict and a dormant oil sector creating a precarious future.

The halt in oil exports since Houthi attacks on key facilities in October 2022 continues to strangle Yemen’s economy. Growth is estimated to have shrunk by 2 percent in 2023, with inflation stubbornly high despite declining global food prices. The loss of oil exports, previously accounting for over half of government revenue, widened the fiscal deficit to an alarming 4.5 percent of GDP in 2023. This depletes reserves and weakens the exchange rate, further pressuring an already fragile economy.

The IMF warned that 2024 could see further deterioration due to heightened regional tensions. An escalation of the conflict in the Red Sea could disrupt trade and financial channels, potentially leading to a decline in external support, including critical humanitarian assistance. The mission emphasized the urgent need to accelerate fiscal reforms. Key areas include improving tax collection, prioritizing essential expenditures, and maintaining consistent and predictable foreign exchange auctions. Strengthening the CBY-Aden’s governance and data collection is crucial to enhancing transparency and accountability. The mission further highlighted the importance of a stable financial sector with robust compliance measures aligned with international Anti-Money Laundering/Combating the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) frameworks and national standards. This will facilitate trade and remittances, which are vital lifelines for the Yemeni people.

External financial support to Yemen remains essential for alleviating fiscal pressure, curbing reliance on money printing, and maintaining price stability. Active engagement with donors will remain crucial to addressing outstanding funding needs and ensuring consistent financial assistance.

Electricity Blackouts Plague Government Areas Sabotage Plunges Marib into Darkness

Media sources reported that on May 6, the bombing of an electrical tower crippled the Marib power station, plunging the city into darkness. The attack came a mere five days after another act of sabotage, targeting a tower between the Safer oil facilities and the city of Marib, that also forced the power station to shut down. While engineers managed to swiftly repair the network and restart operations, the attack highlights the tenuous nature of Marib's energy security.

The attacks coincided with a visit by PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi to the governorate, raising troubling questions about their motive. The repeated targeting of the Marib power station, coupled with ongoing clashes between government forces and tribal militants, not only plunges Marib into darkness but severs the international road linking the city to the Al-Abr region. This effectively halts the movement of fuel tankers from the Safer facilities, further exacerbating existing fuel shortages.

The Houthis have also issued statements saying they could take steps to prevent the domestic use of Marib crude oil: "Without any sense of shame or guilt, they seize Marib's oil, while 90 percent of the people are completely deprived, as if it is the private property of [Marib Governor Sultan] Al-Aradah and the Islah party," Houthi-affiliated Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein al-Ezzi [wrote on X](#), opening a poll asking whether the Houthi authorities should take action to stop Marib oil production.

Aden Power Station Runs Out of Fuel

On May 1, the Aden General Electricity Corporation (GEC) [announced](#) the shutdown of the crucial PetroMasila power station due to depleted fuel supplies. A temporary reprieve came on May 3 with a meager supply of additional fuel, but the corporation warned it was a temporary and unsustainable solution. The 260-megawatt station has been operating at a fraction of its potential for over a year due to unbuilt transmission lines and other missing infrastructure.

The PetroMasila station, with a capacity of 260 megawatts, has been operating at a fraction of its potential for over a year. This was initially due to an incomplete transmission line and transfer station project. But even after its supposed completion months ago, the government's failure to secure sufficient fuel has kept the station running at or below half capacity. Before the fuel shortage took it offline, it was generating a mere 50 megawatts.

The outage at PetroMasila is just one symptom of a larger crisis. The official spokesman for Aden Electricity, Nawar Abkar, previously [confirmed](#) the worsening situation in the city, saying an estimated 40 percent of Aden's power stations were paralyzed by fuel shortages. Diesel stations lay dormant for more than two weeks, awaiting the arrival of a delayed fuel shipment.

The consequences of this inaction are borne by the residents of Aden. Homes and businesses are plunged into darkness, with only two hours of unreliable electricity during peak summer temperatures for every eight hours of blackout. As a result, dozens of citizens took to the streets to protest the lack of electricity, blocking the road leading to the Aden International Airport in Khormaksar district and setting fire to several cars, according to local security sources. After several days of 12-hour blackouts, the interim capital experienced a 20-hour blackout on May 13, with homes and businesses receiving only four hours of electricity. The drastic reduction in electricity provision provoked public anger, leading to protests.

Further exacerbating the issue are payment disputes between the internationally recognized government and the private energy companies that supply the fuel for power stations. The GEC is desperately trying to secure additional shipments, but negotiations have stalled due to the government's financial woes. A crucial diesel shipment **arrived** at the port of Aden, but its owner refused to unload it until the government settled outstanding debts. In a **memorandum** made public on May 8, private companies, including Sapson Energy and Al-Ahram Energy, threatened to halt operations entirely if outstanding debts accumulated since 2021 were not settled by May 21. This could further complicate the fuel supply chain and throw the entire electricity grid into disarray.

The current crisis is not a recent development. Years of neglect and a lack of investment in Aden's electricity infrastructure have contributed significantly to the current situation, and last summer saw similar protests as blackouts and living conditions became unbearable. The government has faced a barrage of criticism for its handling of the problem, and accusations of mismanagement and lack of transparency abound. The government claims to spend US\$100 million a month on fuel and power plant rentals, but revenues from the heavily subsidized electricity sector barely reach US\$5 million. With the recent depletion of a US\$250 million Saudi aid package, the government is again facing criticism for its handling of resources. The wartime closure of the Aden Oil Refinery has forced the city to rely on imported fuel, a costly option further hampered by the government's dwindling financial resources. The cessation of crude oil exports after Houthi attacks on oil terminals in late 2022 has deprived the government of the revenue needed to cover energy costs.

Critics point out that the government, heavily reliant on foreign aid, has failed to address the underlying causes of the crisis or otherwise improve living conditions for Yemeni citizens. Its apparent inaction, particularly during the scorching summer months, has pushed residents to the brink. Anger and frustration have **boiled** over into street protests, and residents have blocked roads and burned tires in a desperate attempt to force the government to act. However, much of the criticism remains online – residents have taken to social media to vent their frustration, and criticism of Southern Transitional Council (STC) and government officials has reached new levels. A slogan circulating among activists jokes that the STC doesn't represent Adenis in summer, only in winter. Others have satirically lamented the days of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who at least provided services. Some have even advocated more extreme measures, urging citizens to besiege government headquarters to demand solutions. The STC, a key partner in the government that controls and administers much of Aden, has leveled harsh criticisms of its own, accusing the government of neglecting service provision in the south and minimizing its own responsibility.

Al-Alimi Unveils Strategy to Resolve Electricity Crisis

In a **televised address** on May 21, one the eve before the 34th anniversary of Yemeni unification, the head of the PLC, Rashad al-Alimi, outlined a comprehensive strategy to tackle the nation's chronic electricity crisis. The plan combines immediate relief measures with a long-term vision for sustainable power generation. Immediate measures include securing consistent fuel supplies for existing power plants. This will increase generation capacity and enable a swifter response to service disruptions. In collaboration with the government and local authorities, the PLC has also been formulating a long-term plan over the past two years. This strategy, supported by the Saudi-led coalition, aims for permanent solutions to the country's perennial electricity shortages.

Al-Alimi said improvements were imminent, including the securing of a sustainable fuel supply and the addition of 120 megawatts (MW) to the grid from a renewable energy plant in Aden next month, followed by 25 MW from Al-Makha in Taiz. A key pillar of the long-term strategy involves a significant investment in renewable energy sources. Plans include establishing a 56 MW renewable energy facility in Shabwa, with additional projects planned for Hadramawt, Taiz, and Hudaydah's Al-Khawkhah and Hays districts, totaling 135 MW. The government is committed to increasing the capacity of the President Power Station in Aden to over 200 MW after network renovations, and Kuwait is funding a US\$40 million project to restore and rehabilitate the Marib gas station, complemented by contributions from the local authorities.

The focus on both immediate relief and long-term infrastructure development is a promising sign. However, effective implementation will require overcoming challenges posed by the ongoing conflict and an inefficient distribution system.

Other Items

Govt Cracks Down on Pharmaceutical Imports

The internationally recognized government is taking a hard line on pharmaceutical imports that violate safety regulations. The Industry and Commerce Prosecution in Aden has issued a directive demanding the re-export of all pharmaceuticals shipped in non-compliant iron containers. The official [memorandum](#), dated April 23, announced a proactive investigation into the use of unsuitable containers for pharmaceutical imports. To safeguard public health, authorities have mandated the re-exportation of these shipments to their origin countries. Pharmaceutical company owners have been notified of this requirement and face legal repercussions if they fail to comply within one week.

The directive reinforces a ban implemented by the Appeals Prosecution in Aden in late March. That decision prohibited the import of any medicines via containers that don't meet the established specifications for safe pharmaceutical transport and storage. The circular, issued to all medicine importers, explicitly outlined the ban on "dry, unrefrigerated iron containers or any other method that does not conform to the requirements and conditions of storage and specifications required for the safe preservation of medicines."

Investigation Halts Red Sea Cable Repairs, Threatening Global Internet Connectivity

On May 15, Bloomberg [reported](#) that a critical artery of the global internet passing through the Red Sea faces a unique challenge: repairs to a damaged subsea cable have stalled due to an investigation into the cable owner's alleged ties to the Houthis. The situation, coupled with the Houthis' history of disrupting maritime traffic, raises concerns about the vulnerability of internet infrastructure and potential disruptions for Europe and Asia.

The AAE-1, a 25,000-kilometer cable connecting Europe and Southeast Asia, is one of three cables that were damaged in the Red Sea. In February 2024, a Houthi missile attack sank the commercial ship Rubymar, whose anchor may have severed the three subsea cables (AAE-1, Seacom/TGN, EIG) as it foundered. The incident significantly impacted internet connectivity in the Middle East, and traffic was rerouted or directed to other Red Sea cables. The internationally recognized government is now investigating the AAE-1 consortium, which includes Yemen's sole

international carrier, TeleYemen, for links to the Houthi group. The investigation is preventing repair crews from accessing the cable, hindering restoration efforts for internet traffic between Europe and Asia.

Repairing internet cables in Yemen presents a complex legal and political landscape for international companies. Two permits are needed for any work to begin. The internationally recognized government retains the power to grant these permits and pursue legal action against companies operating without authorization. But the Houthis, who control territory near where the damaged cables lie, exert de facto authority. Securing their permission is necessary for safe and efficient repairs.

Over 90 percent of Europe-Asia internet capacity transits through the Red Sea, making it a critical chokepoint for telecoms. Disruptions in the region significantly impact countries like India, Kenya, and the UAE, which are heavily reliant on the cables for internet connectivity with Europe. The upcoming addition of new subsea cables, including the Blue-Raman, India-Europe-Xpress, and 2Africa, further underscore the Red Sea's importance. The Bab al-Mandab Strait, a natural bottleneck between Africa and the Middle East, forces cables to pass near Yemeni waters off the coast of Houthi-controlled territories.

The Houthis control significant telecommunications infrastructure, including parts of TeleYemen, a member of the AAE-1 consortium. US-based NGO the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) has accused the Houthis of exploiting this control by monitoring and censoring internet traffic and profiteering from a growing user base. While the Houthis insist they have not targeted subsea cables, their attacks on commercial ships raise concerns about potential future disruptions.

The government's investigation, while legitimate, is slowing down cable repairs and prolonging internet disruptions. Exploring alternative repair routes or collaborating with neutral third parties could be options if delays persist.

Aden Bakers Strike: Crippling Flour Costs Threaten Supply

Simmering tensions between Aden's bakery owners and local authorities erupted into a full-blown crisis on May 24. The Professional Bakeries and Automated Bakeries Association, flexing its collective muscle, announced a two-pronged strike to protest the closure of bakeries in Buraiqa district for alleged pricing violations. The association announced a partial strike, followed by a complete, open-ended shutdown of all bakeries across Aden beginning the next day. In a scathing statement, the association condemned the "arbitrary measures" imposed on Buraiqa bakeries, highlighting the disconnect between government regulations and the realities on the ground.

Their core demand is official recognition of a new bread price – YR100 for a 60-gram loaf – reflecting the "increased costs of ingredients used in bread production." Current bread prices remain unchanged since 2022 – despite ever-increasing costs of flour, yeast, oil, and other essential ingredients. Diesel fuel, rent, and labor costs have also skyrocketed, further squeezing profit margins. As such, the association's statement emphasizes the bakery industry's precarious situation, caught between surging ingredient prices and a weakening local currency.

The association warned against further "arbitrary actions" targeting other bakeries, hinting at an escalation of the strike if these measures continue. Its resolve has been bolstered by support from several automated bakery owners in Aden, who predict a complete shutdown and industry-

wide bankruptcy unless price hikes are implemented. The statement also implored all relevant authorities to acknowledge the dire circumstances and formulate a sustainable solution. This solution, they emphasize, must safeguard the interests of both citizens and bakery owners. Ultimately, the strike is a stark reminder of the domino effects of economic instability. Without a swift and comprehensive solution that addresses the concerns of both producers and consumers, the dispute could further destabilize an already fragile situation in Aden.

Transport Ministry Chases Yemenia Revenues

On June 2, government Minister of Transport Abdelsalam Humaid **issued** a directive calling for the immediate transfer of Yemenia Airways revenues to the airline's accounts in Aden or abroad. The move is purportedly aimed at removing the airline's revenues from Houthi control and allowing the company to allocate resources to developing and modernizing its fleet. According to the directive, Houthi authorities in Sana'a have seized or frozen more than US\$100 million belonging to the airline. The ministry also requested the immediate transfer of Yemenia's other departments in Sana'a to the company's Aden branch.

The ministry appears to be trying to tie the issue to the CBY-Aden's recent suspension of six commercial banks for failing to relocate their headquarters to Aden. Yemenia offices and agencies currently handle transactions with these banks in governorates under Houthi control. The directive coincided with the brief suspension of some flights from Sana'a, as traffic was limited to pilgrims traveling to Saudi Arabia. Yemenia resumed flights on June 5, but with the **requirement** that flights only be booked through the company's offices outside Sana'a.

Disputes over the airline's revenues have occurred before. Last October, Yemenia **suspended** commercial flights due to a disagreement with Houthi authorities over access to more than US\$80 million in airline funds held in Sana'a-based banks. Houthi officials retaliated by suspending flights designated for international organizations and then limiting their operation to once a week. Houthi Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein al-Ezzi **admitted** they had put restrictions on Yemenia withdrawing money: "We have only ceased the withdrawal of large sums in order to prevent corruption and to ensure and establish honest, disciplined, and transparent behavior for the benefit of the company." At the time, the government-run Ministry of Transport **said** that although Houthi authorities were continuing to block Yemenia's access to funds, flights would resume due to humanitarian concerns, and they **restarted** later that month. But Yemenia's Aden offices stopped selling tickets for flights from Sana'a, and divisions deepened between the airline's respective branches.

Ticket sales in Houthi-controlled areas represent nearly 70 percent of total ticket revenues, roughly reflecting the proportion of the Yemeni population living there. Yemenia had **proposed** that Houthi authorities take 70 percent of the funds accumulated in Sana'a, with the remainder going to the internationally recognized government, but Houthi authorities reportedly rejected the proposal.

Oil Workers Protest Layoffs

Employees of the Austrian oil and petrochemical group OMV protested the dismissal of 33 of their coworkers to the Ministry of Oil and Minerals. OMV **announced** the layoffs last September after a sale of its interests to Dutch-owned Zenith Energy **fell through**. Some 200 workers at the S2 block in the Al-Uqlah area of Armaa district in Shabwa now stand to lose their jobs. The 33 were the first batch of workers to be let go, and another 120 were transferred to leave without

pay, with no guarantee of further employment. The employees have called on Minister of Oil Saeed al-Shamasi to intervene on their behalf. They say they blame the layoffs for the death of a coworker, who suffered a stress-induced heart attack, and are incensed that the firings were announced on May 1, International Workers Day.

Yemeni oil and gas exports have been suspended since the fall of 2022 when Houthi attacks on southern oil terminals and attendant tankers initiated a de facto blockade. Companies in affected industries have seen a total loss of revenue, as has the internationally recognized government. OMV has been in **prolonged talks** with the UAE's state-owned Abu Dhabi National Oil Co. (ADNOC) to merge their chemicals units, but after a series of delays, no deal is expected before Austrian elections this fall.

Al-Makha Airport Takes Flight

In a welcome sign of progress amidst the ongoing conflict, the internationally recognized government **announced** the opening of Al-Makha Airport in Taiz governorate. This critical air hub on the southwest coast will now serve both arriving and departing flights. The announcement, made by the General Authority of Civil Aviation and Meteorology (GACM) in Aden, highlights the airport's readiness following the successful completion of preparations. Operating as a Category G airport, Al-Mokha will operate during daylight hours starting April 5. The GACM extended an invitation to all airlines and international organizations operating in Yemen to leverage Al-Makha Airport's capabilities. The airport boasts full technical and administrative preparedness, complete with an internationally recognized code (OYMK) designated by the International Civil Aviation Organization. The airport will have limited operational capacity for the time being due to a lack of electricity. PLC member and head of the National Resistance forces Tareq Saleh, who controls coastal Taiz, including Al-Makha, announced plans to open the airport in 2022 with Emirati assistance.

New US Sanctions Target Houthi Networks

On June 17, the US **announced** new sanctions targeting Houthi weapons smuggling and financial networks. The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated two individuals and five entities allegedly involved in procuring weapons for the Houthis.

One sanctioned individual, Ali Abdelwahab Mohammed al-Wazir, and his company are based in China, where the group has procured materials to manufacture advanced conventional weapons inside Yemen. Sanctions also targeted an Oman-based company and its operator, Muaadh Ahmed Mohammed al-Haifi. Both men are Hashemites, a segment of Yemeni society that claims descent from the Prophet Mohammed and includes the Al-Houthi family, and is estimated to make up 5-10 percent of Yemen's population. The Houthis have taken several measures since their takeover of Sana'a in September 2014 that privilege Hashemites in politics, military and security, and the economy.

The most recently announced sanctions also targeted a UAE-based company, a Cameroon-flagged vessel, and its captain for facilitating the shipment and sale of commodities on behalf of the group. An earlier **round of sanctions** on June 10 designated individuals, entities, and vessels involved in the illicit transport of oil and other commodities as part of a network run by Houthi financial facilitator Said al-Jamal. Overall, the sanctions come as part of a concerted US effort since the beginning of the year to pressure the Houthis financially over their attacks

against commercial vessels in the Red Sea and other strategic waterways. The Houthis were redesignated as a terrorist group by the Biden administration shortly after the US and UK began an air campaign targeting the groups' military assets in Yemen in January. OFAC also **announced** sanctions that month targeting several Houthi military officials for their role in attacks against commercial shipping.



A flooded street in the Al-Jaraf neighborhood of Sana'a on April 20, 2024, following a period of heavy rain. // Sana'a Center photo

The Environment

Houthis Face Mounting Criticism Over Harmful Pesticides

Sana'a Center Staff

Following the widespread dissemination of leaked documents and a very public debate on the risks of agricultural pesticides, including accusations that Houthi leaders are involved in the trade of banned chemicals, Mahdi al-Mashat, the head of the group's Supreme Political Council, [addressed](#) the thorny issue on May 19. Al-Mashat spoke during a meeting with leaders from the Ministries of Agriculture and Irrigation and the Environmental Protection Authority and other officials from the Houthi authorities in Sana'a. He dismissed public concerns over the use of banned pesticides and their potentially harmful effects on public health and the environment, characterizing the concerns as part of an international conspiracy.

Al-Mashat noted that the pesticide methyl bromide had been used around the world before being largely phased out by what he called the ‘European Protocol’^[1] as an ozone-depleting substance. However, he claimed it can still be used in Yemen “because Yemen has no ozone layer problem and no global warming.” Al-Mashat added that the furor surrounding the leaked documents and concern over the carcinogenic effects of banned chemicals was “smearing and discrediting pesticides used to combat epidemics and pests that are spread in agricultural products in Yemen.” He implied that such pests were being deliberately spread in acts of sabotage and declared that the ongoing campaign on social media platforms is “unjust and aligns with the intention of espionage cells within Yemen to destroy the agricultural process, and this will not be allowed to happen.” Al-Mashat’s choice of words implied that the Houthis could act to silence voices calling for oversight, revised policies, and continued research.^[2]

In response, Muammar al-Eryani, Minister of Information, Culture, and Tourism in the internationally recognized government, stated that “Al-Mashat’s defense of the trade in expired and internationally banned pesticides, which endanger the lives of millions of Yemenis, confirms the direct involvement of the militia leaders [...] in financing what is known as the war effort.” He added that the speech was part of the Houthis’ attempts to intimidate activists and prevent them from addressing the issue. However, it is worth noting that some of the controversial shipments of pesticides were imported into or passed through areas controlled by the internationally recognized government.

Since the onset of the war, weakened oversight has allowed hazardous pesticides and fertilizers to be imported, even those banned in Yemen and elsewhere due to their carcinogenicity, high toxicity, and environmental impact. Houthi authorities have established a new General Administration of Pesticides that formally falls under the Ministry of Agriculture, but it operates with financial and administrative autonomy. This has raised questions about its role in regulating the import and use of hazardous materials and its relationships with the entities that profit.

Over the last two months, activists have launched a campaign on social media following the disclosure of documents showing the volume of hazardous chemicals and pesticides imported over the past few years. On April 27, activist Khaled al-Araasi was arrested at his home in Sana’a, likely over his leaking of documents that revealed the involvement of prominent traders and Houthi leaders in importing previously banned pesticides. In an April 26 Facebook post titled “Stop Killing Us... Pesticides are Mass Extermination,” Al-Araasi stated that “the biggest aggression faced by Yemen is drowning it with smuggled pesticides” and criticized Houthi officials’ silence on the issue. He said a solution would require acknowledging the problem, stopping the import and use of such pesticides, and prosecuting perpetrators. He proposed various steps to the authorities in Sana’a, though he added that “these procedures will not happen, for the simple reason that the authority in this degrading situation cannot prosecute and try itself.” Authorities in Sana’a denied being behind his arrest when his family asked where he was being detained.

The leaked documents and other disclosures since the end of 2023 have shed light on irregularities and illegal activity. According to one allegedly issued by Houthi-affiliated Minister of Agriculture Abdelmalek al-Thawr, over 14 million liters of pesticides were imported in 2023 alone, a far greater quantity than normal. The minister has reportedly ordered the Deputy Minister for Agricultural Services to halt import approvals and work to re-export the pesticides to the country of origin.

1 He was likely referring to the UN Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, to which 198 countries, including Yemen, are a party.

2 One Yemeni researcher investigating the topic has stopped work, informing the Sana’a Center that continuing was too risky after Al-Mashat’s comments about “espionage”.

Another leaked [document](#), dated September 20, 2021, was allegedly from the General-Director of Plant Protection in Sana'a and addressed to the Minister of Agriculture, detailing the 2018 seizure of illegal pesticide shipments belonging to the Daghsan Group, including methyl bromide, by the Public Prosecutor and the Security and Intelligence apparatus at the Al-Rahidah border crossing in Taiz governorate. The memo clarified that the seized chemicals could not be released by law and expressed surprise at Al-Thawr's instruction to hand over the shipment to farmers in the Bani Mua'ad district of Sa'ada governorate, despite a prior agreement with the minister on limiting the distribution of hazardous chemicals.

A further leaked [document](#), dated November 28, 2023, details the release of a Saba International Company shipment belonging to trader Abdelazim Daghsan, a stakeholder in the Daghsan Group, also containing methyl bromide. According to the document, the shipment was released after the forceful intercession of the Houthis' Al-Najdah forces, led by commander Abu Badr al-Murani, despite repeated attempts by customs officials to impound it for lacking authorization from the Ministry of Agriculture.

The Daghsan Group has emerged as a central player in the [import and distribution](#) of banned pesticides, as well as other alleged illicit [activities](#) such as arms trafficking, oil smuggling, and money laundering. The company has a history of environmental violations. In 2014, the Public Funds Court issued a decision to close the Daghsan Pesticides Company after it was found to have dumped hundreds of tons of toxic waste in the Al-Jaraf neighborhood in eastern Sana'a city. In 2018, Daghsan Group was implicated in the relocation of toxic waste from Al-Jaraf to Harf Sufyan district in [Amran](#) governorate after residents attempted to prevent it. Drivers then moved the waste toward Sa'ada governorate before being referred to court. Finally, the quantity was [dumped](#) in Harf Sufyan based on judicial instructions, despite Law No. 25 of 1999 requiring importers to return confiscated goods to the country of origin at their own expense. A parliamentary report also documented the seizure of a ship belonging to Daghsan Group carrying 251 tons of [banned substances](#). During his [trial](#) in Sana'a in 2024, Daghsan admitted to importing pesticide varieties through smuggling.

The killing of prominent journalist Mohammed al-Absi on December 20, 2016, was also allegedly linked to the Daghsan Group and other influential outfits in Sana'a. On February 6, 2017, the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate [said](#) that Al-Absi was poisoned because he investigated [corruption](#) involving oil smuggling on behalf of senior Houthi officials. In November 2022, the Prosecutor's office of West Sana'a closed the case due to insufficient evidence. The UN Panel of Experts [2019 report](#), citing Yemeni media, said Al-Absi had named three companies allegedly involved in oil smuggling and black market sales: Oil Primer, linked to the Daghsan Group; Yemen Life, linked to Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdelsalam; and Black Gold, linked to Ali Nasser Qirshah, a [senior Houthi official](#) close to Abdelmalek al-Houthi.

To avoid further scrutiny, the Daghsan Group has attempted to keep its name out of the limelight in recent years. However, it recently began construction of a fertilizer and pesticide factory on agricultural land between Hamdan and Bani Matar districts in Sana'a governorate via the Al-Watan Road Homeland Pioneers Company, along with other investors. The company was [established](#) in December 2021 as a joint stock company with total assets of \$40 million and operations across several sectors, including pesticide importers and traders in Yemen, 30 agricultural societies, and a grain development and production institution.

On April 25, tribesmen from Bani Matar, Hamdan, and Al-Haymah districts in Sana'a held rallies aimed at stopping the construction of the US\$5 million dollar factory, whose foundation stone was laid by Houthi leader Mohammed Ali al-Houthi two weeks prior. The protesters expressed fears over the potential impact of the factory and its waste, as it is located near a populated area home to 20,000 people. The facility could also threaten agricultural land, wells, and springs in the region. The risk is not just to residents' health and the environment – some of the materials are also used in explosives manufacturing.

Regulations have also been undermined by jurisdictional disputes. Some authorities are blocking pesticide shipments because they do not meet specifications, while others are releasing them since they are authorized to do so. On December 31, 2023, the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) lodged a complaint against the Deputy Minister for the Services Sector at the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, Dhaif Allah Shamlan, and the General Directorate of Plant Protection at the Ministry. The complaint alleged that they violated laws and regulations and interfered with the authority of the EPA, directing the EPA not to release pesticide shipments. It came in response to an October incident when a shipment belonging to trader Nayef al-Mahras was detained at the General Directorate of Plant Protection's yard in Sana'a governorate after the EPA had already released it from customs at the port of Hudaydah. The EPA requested that the public prosecutor enforce judicial rulings issued by the Sana'a court, which granted the EPA full authority over the public disbursement of pesticides and called for the release of detained shipments. Such episodes illustrate the extent of institutional fragmentation and bureaucratic competition, which are further obstacles to the regulation of pesticides and the protection of public health.



Houthi supporters chant during a demonstration in Sana'a on April 26, 2024, to express solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza. // Sana'a Center photo

Analysis

What a New President and a Looming Succession Means for Iran's Yemen Policy

Thomas Juneau

The **death of the President** of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, as well as the foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, in a helicopter accident on May 19 raises the question of the impact of their disappearance from the scene on the country's foreign policy regarding Yemen. The answer for the short term is straightforward: Raisi's death will have a marginal impact on the country's foreign policy, in general and specifically in Yemen. In the mid to longer term, however, the situation becomes less clear because of the eventual succession to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is **85 years old** and has had cancer. Because Raisi was a potential candidate to succeed him, his death changed the dynamics and added some uncertainty. Continuity remains the most likely outcome of the eventual transition to a new leader, but in the event of a more difficult transition, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy will likely be impacted. In light of the significant importance that **Iran's support for the Houthis** has had for the evolution of Yemen's civil war, it is relevant to break down this assessment further.

The conclusion that Raisi's death will not have a noticeable short-term impact is due to how foreign and national security **policy-making plays out in the complex system** of the Islamic Republic. The Supreme Leader is the ultimate decision-maker, with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also having a pivotal role in policy development and implementation. The president has a say in foreign policy, but his voice is only one among many in the constellation of actors and institutions that forms the regime. Along with the foreign ministry, the president is mostly responsible for implementing foreign policy, and he also plays a role in setting the tone, thanks to the bully pulpit he occupies.

In the short term, we should **expect continuity** in the **Islamic Republic's foreign policy**. The election in the second round of the presidential election on 5 July of Masud Pezeshkian, the lone reformist candidate, **will not lead to significant change**: the Supreme Leader and his conservative and hard-line allies, especially in the IRGC, will **remain in control of the state's key levers of power**, including in foreign policy. Recent trends in Iranian foreign policy, notably efforts to deepen relations in Asia and **with Russia** and to better manage tensions with Saudi Arabia, will continue. Khamenei has clearly made it a priority during the presidential transition to signal continuity to both domestic and international audiences, with the objective of projecting an image of strength and resilience.

Iran's approach to the war in Yemen **will be no different**: in the short term, it will not change. Support for the Houthis has provided the Islamic Republic with a **significant return** on what remains a limited investment. There does not appear to be important differences within the regime on Yemen policy. In addition, ties with the Houthis have become deeply institutionalized: the Houthis, for example, have become **integrated** into the Islamic Republic's global smuggling networks, through which it provides them with advanced parts for weapons systems such as missiles and drones. Because the IRGC, which reports to the Supreme Leader, manages Iran-Houthi ties, the identity of the new president will not have a notable impact on this support. By the same logic, the arrival of President Pezeshkian will not change Tehran's policy of supporting the political process between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. Because the Houthis have de facto won the war in Yemen, **the Islamic Republic calculates**, correctly, that this process will not lead to national reconciliation; instead, it will help the consolidation and legitimation of Houthi power, an outcome that it fully supports.

In the longer term, the implications of Raisi's death are more uncertain, as the structural constraints that explain this short-term foreign policy continuity could shift, even if only mildly. Raisi was widely viewed as **one of the leading candidates** to replace Khamenei, and he was involved in the process of searching for candidates. It was far from guaranteed that Raisi would win: even before his death, the leadership race was shrouded in uncertainty, with its results highly unpredictable. Nevertheless, there was some support for his candidacy inside the regime. He was, to some extent, a lowest common denominator type of figure: a weak and pliable candidate, loyal to the system, who would ensure the status quo without threatening the power and privilege of key power centers. His death changes these dynamics. There was already a risk that the succession process would bring more than limited instability, and a smaller risk that it could be highly disruptive. Raisi's death does not cause this level of risk to skyrocket, but it does, arguably, raise it somewhat.

That said, this uncertainty and the potential instability it could provoke should not be exaggerated: the Islamic Republic is more resilient than is often thought. It indeed suffers from important vulnerabilities, notably because of mounting economic struggles and growing popular dissatisfaction with the regime's heavy repression, brutality, and corruption. But the system was born in crisis and has consistently faced and survived crises for 45 years. In recent years, one of the most critical priorities of the current Supreme Leader has been to ensure the regime's durability, elevating conservatives and hard-liners to positions of power and marginalizing relative reformists and moderates. His eventual death presents the Islamic Republic with one

of its most important challenges since its inception, but the system has a significant capacity to absorb the shock. While key individuals and factions will fight hard to position themselves and support their favored candidate, they all have a deep vested interest in the system's survival.

As much as Khamenei's death will shake the system, the most likely scenario is continuity. One plausible scenario, for example, would see key regime power centers agree on a weak candidate, similar to Raisi, who would not threaten their position. This scenario could over time lead to an intensification of regime infighting, with a more vulnerable Supreme Leader less able to manage it. Scenarios whereby a highly contentious transition would see the regime turn inward, distracted by infighting, are also within the realm of the possible but seem less likely.

The foreign policy implications of these scenarios are difficult to forecast. The most likely long-term outlook is that the eventual leadership transition will not cause significant changes in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, in Yemen and in general. Even in scenarios of intense jockeying among factions in a complex succession or the succession of a markedly weaker leader, the Islamic Republic will likely continue to view its support for and close ties to a wide range of armed non-state actors throughout the region, including the Houthis, as prized assets that are essential not only for power projection but, crucially, to protect the regime itself.

Still, under the most challenging and contentious – albeit less likely – transition scenarios, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy could change more than marginally, though the direction of this change is unpredictable. Prolonged domestic instability in the wake of a highly contested leadership succession could, on the one hand, lead to retrenchment: in this scenario, an inward-focused Islamic Republic would cut down on some aspects of its foreign policy. Here, support for the Houthis could plausibly be reduced. Iran's penetration of Yemen has brought it tangible benefits, but it is not as vital for its national security as its support for Lebanese Hezbollah or Iraqi Shia militias on its western flank. Moreover, the Houthis are relatively self-reliant compared to many other Iran-backed groups.

On the other hand, prolonged domestic instability could lead the regime to double down instead of drawing down. Fearing that its adversaries would exploit its vulnerability, the Islamic Republic might instead increase its support for its armed non-state partners. This would be consistent with one of the pillars of its defense doctrine: to project insecurity outwards, away from its borders, by developing the means to retaliate against adversaries and raise the costs of policies aimed at pressuring the Islamic Republic. Given Tehran's success in imposing major costs on Saudi Arabia through its support for the Houthis, one might expect in this scenario that the Islamic Republic could increase this support and work with the Houthis to deter Riyadh from seeking to exploit Iran's vulnerabilities. In so doing, Tehran would try to send a clear signal of resilience to its adversaries as well as its partners.

In sum, in the short term, the death of President Ebrahim Raisi and the election of Masud Pezeshkian will likely not produce any significant shifts in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy in Yemen. In the longer term, however, his death will raise the level of uncertainty when the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, passes away. Even though the consequences are unpredictable, the Islamic Republic's policy of supporting the Houthis could then undergo some changes.

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Students gather in the courtyard of Taiz University's College of Education at the start of a new school day on January 10, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha

Analysis

The Uphill Struggle for Yemeni Women in Academia

Rim Mugahed

April 27 marked the 13th anniversary of the death of Dr. Raufah Hassan, one of Yemen's most prominent academics, feminists, and activists. In 1993, she founded the first Women's Studies Unit at Sana'a University, which later became the Empirical Research and Women's Studies Center.^[3] A pioneering undertaking of its time, the research center gained notoriety among Yemenis because of the backlash received from religious conservatives. Due to the center's work, Hassan became the primary target in religiously motivated incitement campaigns, prompting her to leave Yemen for several years.^[4] Decades later, bitter questions remain: Has anything changed concerning the lived realities of female academics in Yemen? And what of the future of women's studies centers in the country?

Although Yemen has a rich intellectual history, modern-day university traditions remain nascent and not deeply rooted in society and culture. Sana'a University was established in 1970, while

³ Margot Badran, "Gender: Meanings, Uses, and Discourses in Post-Unification Yemen," *The Yemen Times*, June 19, 2000, <https://yementimes.com/gender-meanings-uses-and-discourses-in-post-unification-yemen-archives2000-25-culture-3/>

⁴ Fathi Bin Lazraq "Raufah Hassan Has Died [AR]," *Aden al-Ghad*, April 27, 2011, <https://www.adengad.net/news/1734>

the University of Aden opened in 1975.^[5] Others, such as Abyan University, were established as late as 2018. Still, these universities have challenged the status quo, particularly related to women's empowerment and participation in decision-making. This reality has placed burdens on female academics, as women in Yemen generally face strict social conventions that limit their participation in public life, such as requiring them not to mingle with the opposite sex.

Had Yemen's political and economic situation been more stable in the decades that followed the opening of the first university, women might have better overcome these challenges, leading to more women entering public life. However, the era of totalitarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, the 1994 civil war, and the spread of conservative religious ideology have hindered this trajectory. Specifically, under President Ali Abdullah Saleh, conservative religious parties were given free rein to shape educational curricula and set the general mood in the country. The current war and the resulting fragmentation of the country into regions governed by various de facto authorities has further compounded **issues women face**, including in the education sector.

A Gender Divide at Yemen's Universities

At Sana'a University, the largest university in Yemen, there is a stark discrepancy between the number of male and female academics, particularly in senior positions. According to research conducted in 2023 by the university's Center for Gender and Development Research and Studies,^[6] there were only 12 female professors compared to 211 male professors, 59 female associate professors compared to 326 male associate professors, and 126 female assistant professors compared to 521 male assistant professors. The 32-seat University Council has no women at all; other bodies such as the Academic Council, Graduate Council, Personnel Affairs Committee, and Student Affairs Council have only one female representative each.^[7] This trend is visible in other Yemeni universities. In Abyan, the university council has two women compared to 30 men, and no women college deans and director-generals.^[8] "The political instability in the country has led men to completely take over decision-making positions," said Dr. Nada Shafik, General Director of the Women's Center at Abyan University.^[9] She also cited a pervasive view that women cannot handle the responsibilities associated with senior positions, making it difficult for female academics to progress career-wise.

Challenging Conditions for Female Academics Amidst War

How will we have female academics if girls are dropping out of the education system?

Dr. Nada Shafik General Director of the Women's Center at Abyan University

⁵ "General Education Profile," Yemen National Information Center, www.yemen-nic.info/sectors/education/#:-:text=وكلية الناصر

⁶ Abdul-Wahhab Abdul-Qader and Elham al-Reda, "Attitudes Towards Women as Managers and Leaders in Yemeni Universities," Case Study -Sana'a University, Sana'a University Journal, Vol 5, 2023, <https://journals.su.edu.ye/index.php/jhs/article/view/546/204>

⁷ At the administrative level, the situation is different, with the number of female staff slightly exceeding the number of men. The same applies further down the academic career ladder: there were 104 female instructors compared to 81 male instructors, and 282 female lecturers compared to 274 male lecturers.

⁸ Interview with Dr. Nada Shafik, General Director of the Women's Center at Abyan University and Associate Professor at the Zinjibar College of Education, May 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

Ten Yemeni female academics were interviewed for this research and asked about some of the main challenges they and women in higher education in Yemen face. Respondents held a range of different positions, from deans to assistant professors and general academic staff, and came from universities in Sana'a, Aden, Taiz, Hadramawt, Al-Mahra, Dhamar, and Abyan.

For most, the weight of the war has taken center stage. Dr. Angela al-Ma'amari, Assistant Professor of Mental Health and Head of the Department of Psychology at Taiz University, described a feeling of hopelessness in the face of the conflict's impact on Yemen's academic environment and the deterioration of university education.^[10] War has wrought havoc on educational infrastructure, according to Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi, Dean of the Women's Development Research and Studies Center at Taiz University. Teaching materials and equipment have been looted, while many classrooms and university buildings lack functioning lighting and restrooms. She also noted that Taiz University lacks any faculty lounge for female academics.^[11] Dr. Samira Khwaiter, an academic staff member at the Faculty of Education at Al-Mahra University,^[12] said many teachers have shifted focus toward helping both students and fellow colleagues deal with the difficult circumstances of war.

Dedication to serving others spurs many to persevere, but continuing in the sector, or aspiring to embark on an academic career, has become exceedingly difficult given the dire economic constraints crippling Yemen. Like all public employees in Houthi-controlled regions, employees at Sana'a University do not receive regular salaries. A former female academic from Sana'a University noted that some of her colleagues were the primary breadwinners of their families, and due to unpaid salaries, entire families lost their sole income.^[13] In areas outside Houthi control, the depreciation of the Yemeni rial means salaries no longer cover the cost of basic necessities. Dr. Rakhsana Ismail, Director of the Science and Technology Center at the University of Aden, said that her monthly salary, previously worth around US\$1,000, is currently equivalent to approximately US\$225.^[14] The economic crisis has also created an atmosphere of frustration, which inevitably affects the quality of education and academic services, said Dr. Huda Ba'alawi, Director of the Center for Women's Studies at Aden University.^[15]

While all academics are affected by the economic crisis, some challenges are particular to women. Travel outside the country has been cut, with universities unable to afford airline tickets and associated expenses.^[16] Even before the war, however, opportunities to attend events abroad were primarily given to men.^[17] The reality is that "men enjoy more freedom to move compared to women," according to an assistant professor at Dhamar University.^[18] Such bias also applies to scholarships. While women may receive internal scholarships to complete postgraduate studies, they will rarely be granted scholarships abroad. Dr. Shafik from Abyan University estimated that female students are granted only one in ten scholarships available, with the rest going to male students.

¹⁰ Interview with Dr. Angela al-Ma'amari, Assistant Professor of Mental Health and Head of the Department of Psychology at Taiz University, March 2024.

¹¹ Interview with Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi, Dean of the Women's Development Research and Studies Center at Taiz University, May 2024.

¹² Interview with Dr. Samira Khwaiter, academic staff member at the Faculty of Education in Al-Mahra University, May 2024.

¹³ Interview with a former female academic at Sana'a University, April 2024.

¹⁴ Interview with Dr. Rakhsana Ismail, Professor in the Department of Chemistry, College of Education, at Aden University, April 2024.

¹⁵ Interview with Dr. Huda Ba'alawi, Director of the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Aden, May 2024.

¹⁶ Phone interview with Dr. Rakhsana Ismail, Professor at the Department of Chemistry, College of Education, at Aden University, April 2024.

¹⁷ Interview with a former female academic at Sana'a University, April 2024.

¹⁸ Interview with an assistant professor at Dhamar University, May 2024.

This reality carries broader implications. Societal and family norms not only restrict women's freedom of movement in Yemen but also undermine their right to pursue their vocation. Poor security conditions have made travel more risky for women, as has the threat of defamation campaigns and incitement against women in the public and digital sphere.^[19] Political polarization has also increased during the conflict. Interviews with women from universities in Taiz and Sana'a indicated that while party affiliation played a significant role in the pre-war period, often dictating who got specific opportunities or received promotions, divisions now are not only political, but also regional and sometimes sectarian.

The Fate of Women's Studies Centers in Yemen

Against this backdrop, the experience of women's studies centers, set up in universities to advance knowledge on gender dynamics and women's lived experiences, are important to note in the context of Yemen. The notorious incitement campaign against Dr. Raufah Hassan in the 1990s eventually led to the shuttering of Sana'a University's Empirical Research and Women's Studies Center and prompted her exit from the country.^[20] Thirty years later, there has been little change in attitudes toward gender equality initiatives in Yemen, which are often regarded by more conservative elements of society as a violation of local Islamic values that encourage moral degradation. Such discourse, often led by conservative religious scholars, academics, and politicians, continues to fuel wide-scale incitement campaigns.

At Taiz University, as dean of the Women's Development Research and Studies Center Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi came under attack after the university approved the inclusion of a Gender and Women's Development program in their postgraduate curricula in 2023.^[21] Dr. Al-Hakimi said the campaign further intensified with the opening of a Women's Protection Unit within the center in 2024,^[22] set up to combat and protect women and girls from all forms of violence and discrimination at the university.^[23] Al-Hakimi said local conservative religious leaders "made inflammatory statements in mosques against the center's activities, alleging that the Women Protection Unit at the Center constitutes an assault against Islamic values and principles, and accusing Taiz University of inappropriate conduct as an educational institution in a Muslim country."^[24]

Meanwhile, the Center for Women's Studies at Aden University has been active for more than 23 years. "Aden's educational environment is still relatively favorable compared to other environments," said Dr. Huda Ba'alawi, the center's director.^[25] The center offers a master's program, and over 25 percent of its students are male. Still, Ba'alawi noted that the center has "refrained from engaging in any intellectual discussions about mainstreaming gender to avoid cultural controversy," adding that the "concept of gender is still vague for many."^[26]

¹⁹ Rim Mugahed, "Absent from the table and shunned from public life: Yemeni women at a crossroads," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 4, 2023, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/20761>

²⁰ The Women's Studies Center at Sana'a University has changed its name multiple times. Its current appellation, the Comprehensive Development Research Center, has no reference to either women's studies or gender, per the University President's Decision (no. 60) adopted in 2023.

²¹ "Taiz University in the Crosshairs [AR]," Yemen Future, June 22, 2023, <https://yemenfuture.net/news/15174>

²² Interview with Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi, Dean of the Women's Development Research and Studies Center at Taiz University, May 2024.

²³ "Opening of a women's protection unit at the Women's Studies Center at Taiz University [AR]," Yemen Future, February 18, 2024, <https://yemenfuture.net/news/20627>

²⁴ Interview with Dr. Ishraq al-Hakimi, Dean of the Women's Development Research and Studies Center at Taiz University, May 2024.

²⁵ Interview with Dr. Huda Ba'alawi, Director of the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Aden, May 2024

²⁶ Ibid.

A Glimmer of Hope

Overall, there were mixed opinions regarding the future prospects for Yemeni women in academia, with some expressing more hope than others. Residents in areas under Houthi control invariably noted the imposition of restrictive measures against all women that make the life of female academics increasingly difficult. Policies such as the *mahram* (guardian) requirements that a woman travel with a male relative, and violence directed against any critical voices in the public sphere, have played a clear role in the overall decline of women in the academic field in Sana'a. In Abyan, respondents cited the weight of the war and its negative impact on gender dynamics, resulting in the retreat of women from the public sphere, while in Taiz, sharp political polarization and incitement by ultra-conservative religious groups stood out more as the primary issue.

Despite the socially conservative traditions typically associated with Hadramawt, Dr. Fathia Bahashwan, Director of the Center for Human and Social Studies at Hadramawt University,^[27] expressed a sense of optimism. "Social conditions have prompted more women to go out for work," she said. "Most of the newly appointed contract teaching staff in the governorate are female lecturers. More female students have begun to complete higher studies than before, and the view of girls and parents towards education has changed. This does not go against local customs and traditions."^[28]

Other academics noted that the changes brought on by conflict have allowed women to break from previously imposed restrictions – often with support from male relatives or colleagues – and become pioneers and role models for girls in their communities. The assistant professor at Dhamar University cited an increase in female representation at the university: "For example, we have a woman as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and a woman as Dean of the Faculty of Administrative Sciences. Many women are faculty members, and a lot of them are involved in administration at the university."^[29]

Testimonies from Yemeni female academics offer a glimmer of hope in a fragile state where violence permeates every aspect of life, particularly against women. Ultimately, the struggle and triumphs of women in academia pay testament to how Yemeni women at large have managed to carve out a path for themselves, breaking one barrier after another with quiet determination and patience, despite all adversity. This is particularly poignant given the recent wave of arrests in Houthi-controlled areas and the sense of foreboding among Yemenis about what the future holds.^[30]

Rim Mugahed currently leads the "Supporting Broader Inclusion and Participation in the Yemeni Peace Process" program. She is also a sociologist and her work on Yemen focuses on women in prisons, community perceptions of women policing and female voices.

This analysis is part of a series of articles examining the role of women working in various fields in Yemen, including education, diplomacy, journalism, and civil society. It was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.

²⁷ Interview with Dr. Fathia Bahashwan, Director of the Center for Human and Social Studies at Hadramawt University, April 2024.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Interview with an assistant professor at Dhamar University, May 2024.

³⁰ Beatrice Farhat, "Yemen's Houthis arrest UN, rights workers in Sanaa," Al Monitor, June 7, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/06/yemens-houthis-arrest-un-rights-workers-sanaa>



Qalansiah fishing village in Socotra, December 2009. // Photo credit: Nick Ledger/ Alamy

Commentary

Socotra's Forgotten Travelers

Saad al-Ajmi al-Socotri

Yemen's civil war has cast a shadow over Socotra, the Indian Ocean archipelago governorate, and the daily lives of its residents. Before the war began in 2014, there were three flights to and from the islands. The first was operated by Yemenia Airways, the second by small local operator Felix Airways, and the third by the Yemeni Ministry of Defense, dedicated to transporting soldiers, their families, and people with limited income. After the start of the conflict, the ministry and Felix Airways halted their flights, while Yemenia Airways remained operational, but with interruptions that sometimes lasted for months. Ticket prices have risen steadily, with a one-way ticket from Socotra to Mukalla in Hadramawt now more than three times its pre-war price.

Residents have resorted to using fishing boats to travel to and from the islands, which lie some 210 miles from the Yemeni mainland. In good conditions, a boat takes two to three days to reach Socotra from Al-Mahra or Hadramawt. However, the trip is notoriously unsafe, with breakdowns and turbulent weather causing delays and disaster. Some boats have sunk with children, women, and the elderly on board; others were lost at sea for days or even weeks on end. I had such an experience in 2019 when the vessel I was on broke down 100 miles from the coast of Al-Mahra governorate with 50 men, nine women, and four children on board. The boat remained at sea for seven days until the Saudi-led military coalition organized a rescue in coordination with the Yemeni navy.

Despite these risks, several factors push residents to take their chances. First is the high cost of flights. Before 2011, tickets were less than US\$50 for a one-way journey, but prices rose steadily after 2015 and have now reached US\$150. At the same time, the economic collapse of recent years has had as heavy an impact in Soctora as in other government-held areas: public salaries have gone unpaid for long periods, the local currency has heavily depreciated, and exports have been held up due to the Houthis' effective blockade of government-held ports. Attendant hardship has pushed the rising cost of flights out of reach for many residents.

Flights have also become few and far between. After 2015, Yemenia Airways stopped operating flights for almost a year due to the outbreak of war before gradually resuming service with a reduced schedule. One flight a week ran between Socotra and Seyoun in Wadi Hadramawt, but frequent interruptions could last for one or two months. The situation only improved after the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic, when flights began to return to a fixed schedule, with one weekly return flight from Aden via Mukalla. At the beginning of 2024, Yemenia increased the number of flights to two per week to and from Aden, Mukalla, and Al-Ghaydah in Al-Mahrah. In addition, there have been two weekly flights between Socotra and Abu Dhabi operated by Sharjah-based Air Arabia since 2017, and ever since Saudi Arabia stationed military forces on the island in 2018, its military aircraft have, from time to time, carried local passengers from Socotra to Al-Ghaydah.

Problems Persist

However, beyond these services operated by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the government has done little to alleviate islanders' isolation. Throughout the conflict, politicians have been preoccupied with personal disputes and squabbles while the suffering of citizens has deepened. Their privileged position gives them easy access to expensive flights and blinds them to the problems of ordinary people. For their part, Socotrans believe it is the war that has forced most people into dangerous travels by sea. Still, neither local nor central authorities have given the issue proper attention.

Moreover, the failure of successive authorities to regulate sea travel (at least until political conditions stabilize and state institutions resume functioning) has exacerbated the tragic situation and loss of life. It is telling that there are no official figures for victims of sea travel, even amid suspicions that the cases of missing persons have become more frequent. Instead, locals are simply left to share their stories about the suffering they've experienced on the seas.

Fatima was on a large boat carrying 70 men, 10 women, and one child when it ran into trouble at sea in 2016. "The boat was loaded beyond its capacity. We stopped in the middle of the sea twice and were told something was wrong with the boat. But on the last night, everyone felt the end was coming, especially shortly before dawn, when I woke up to the voices, screams, and yelling of all the passengers. Somebody asked the passengers to save themselves and get into the small lifeboats on the boat." She added: "We got into these lifeboats while some families remained onboard because the situation was difficult, and darkness overwhelmed the scene. We did not know who got into the lifeboats and who did not. We used planks of wood to move the lifeboats away from the boat as it was about to sink. As we moved away, and as the morning light dispelled the darkness of the night, we saw some young men clinging to the edges of the boat as it sank. Bit by bit, it disappeared with women, children, and men still on board, either because they were unable to jump into the lifeboats, or because they had been knocked unconscious. We remained on those lifeboats for days until we were rescued and reached land."

Another survivor from that disaster says he only saw around a dozen women and six children in the rescue boat. “The magnitude of the tragedy we experienced distracted our minds for a long time. Many details have disappeared from my memory now because of the horror of the suffering we endured.”

Abdullah, a student at the Faculty of Law at Hadramawt University, described the travel situation. “I have traveled by sea many times, even though I suffer from seasickness and severe nausea while traveling. But my family’s income is not enough to afford an airline ticket.” On one occasion in 2021, he traveled with around 30 other people on board, including men, women, and children. “The boat departed in the afternoon, and when we had gone around 100 miles, a technical malfunction occurred during a storm in the middle of the night. We waited at sea while our boat floated aimlessly for five days, then we were found by an Omani warship, which took us to the Omani mainland. After that, I decided not to travel by sea again, though I was forced again to travel via boat to finish my university studies.”

A Socotra resident who preferred to remain anonymous talked of losing his teenage brother to the sea in 2016: “We’re still hoping that one day we will see my brother returning, waving his hands on a happy return, because we have not found physical evidence of his death yet,” he said, his eyes welling up as he spoke. A captain, who also preferred to remain anonymous, said the problem of overcrowding on boats was difficult to avoid given the precarious situation most people are living in now on Socotra. “The current conditions forced us to allow passengers to board the ship with us, although the dangers of the sea are many. But what to do?”

Proposed Solutions

The authorities need to understand their duty to protect people’s lives. Several proposals are offered here, some as short-term solutions and others as long-term approaches. To begin with, the governorate authorities in Socotra should regulate sea travel by limiting the number of departure points. Passenger vessels should be inspected before they set off, captains should be approved based on their competence, the number of passengers should be strictly regulated, and weather conditions should be assessed in advance.

The central government should press Yemenia Airways to lower ticket prices to make them affordable to Socotrans. Double booking should be stopped, schedules should be adhered to, and exit row seats should be identified in planes in case of emergency. Public campaigns should be organized to raise awareness of the importance of safety at sea and the dangers of overcrowding or setting sail without knowing the weather conditions.

In the long term, the authorities should explore the possibility of purchasing a private plane that could transport Socotra residents to the nearest point on the Yemeni mainland, and the central government should be lobbied to assist in this endeavor. Socotra’s tourism revenues could be used to pay to operate this service. Authorities might also consider contracting international air carriers to fly to the island from regional destinations such as Jeddah, Salalah, and Indian airports. These could serve as transit points for travelers going to and from Socotra. Finally, the local and central government should consider the possibility of passenger ships, including small cruise liners, stopping at Socotra. The archipelago, with its unique ecosystem and plant life, has been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2008. Perhaps now is the time to start channeling demand for tourism to serve the interests and needs of the local population.

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This commentary was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana’a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.



Mourners gather during a condolences for Abdelmajeed al-Zindani in Marib city on April 26, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo by Abdelmajeed al-Khadami

Analysis

Abdelmajeed al-Zindani: The Demise of Political Islam's Leading Figure in Yemen

Tawfeek Al-Ganad

With a long flaming red beard, distinctive square face, unconventional white turban, and a voice that was immediately recognizable – Abdelmajeed al-Zindani was perhaps the most famous political-religious figure in Yemen of the past 50 years, a controversial persona who stirred endless debate, even after his death on April 22 in Istanbul at the age of 82.

Al-Zindani was born in the Al-Sha'ar district of Ibb governorate in 1942 and learned to read and write in its traditional *kuttab* school. He moved to Aden to continue his education and subsequently to Cairo, where he started the enigmatic journey of his political life between Yemen, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and, finally, Turkey.

In the 1950s, Al-Zindani was affiliated with the pan-Arab Arab Nationalist Movement in Cairo, but he soon left it after failing to Islamize its orientation or its members' conduct. In the late 1950s, he formed what came to be known as the "Neutrality Cell" in 1961 with Abdou Mohammed al-Mekhlafi, another Yemeni living in Egypt. The Neutrality Cell constituted the nucleus of the first Islamist organization for Yemenis in Egypt, where it would forge links with an Egyptian Islamist group, the Young Men's Muslim Association, through an Azhari scholar, Sheikh Kamal Aoun. It would evolve into the organizational entity for the Yemeni branch of the Egypt-based Muslim Brotherhood, led by Al-Zindani, Al-Mekhlafi, and Mohammed al-Zubayri, a prominent figure in the September 26, 1962 revolution that overthrew the Yemeni Imamate. At Al-Zubayri's request, Al-Zindani kept quiet about Al-Zubayri's critical role in the organization's leadership, which only became **public knowledge** much later.

After meeting in Egypt, the two men were constant companions. It was also Al-Zubayri who introduced Al-Zindani to other revolutionaries after the two men returned to Yemen. These connections eventually led to Al-Zindani first appearing on Sana'a Radio during a "Religion and Revolution" program. From that point forward, Al-Zindani never stopped insisting on linking religion to every aspect of believers' private and public lives.

Mystery still surrounds Al-Zindani's time in Egypt. For example, it's unclear why he dropped out of Ain Shams University, where he studied pharmacy. This later inspired him to set up the Commission for Scientific Miracles in the Quran and the Sunnah, which caused controversy with its claims of having invented medicines to treat the AIDS virus and leukemia based on Islamic, or prophetic, medicine. Following the assassination of Al-Zubayri in 1965, Al-Zindani fled to Aden, where he took over the management of Al-Nour Scientific Institute – a religious institute established by Muhammad Salem al-Bayhani, a key figure in the city's Islamic movement. After the November 1967 coup in North Yemen and the declaration of an independent South Yemen, Al-Zindani returned to Sana'a, where he launched a plan to influence education in Yemen. During this time he wrote an influential book, *Al-Tawhid* (Divine Unicity), which remained on school curricula for over three decades.

Al-Zindani rode every religious wave, disguising political notions under the veil of religion in his speeches. He went to Afghanistan and met jihadi leaders Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden, as mentioned in the latter's memoirs, "The Abbottabad Papers."^[1] Subsequently, Al-Zindani would commonly be referred to as a "**one-time mentor**" of the future Al-Qaeda chief. It is true that Al-Zindani was a leading voice in favor of jihad against communism, and was commonly considered a godfather of the Afghan Arabs (aka the Arab Mujahideen). After his death, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) described Al-Zindani in a statement as "one of the pioneers of jihad with his self, money, and word."

His relationship with the Afghan Arabs continued to evolve after he encouraged many to come to Yemen once the war against the Soviets was over. He later mobilized them as an Islamist army to fight against the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) during the 1994 civil war. A major advocate for the war, Al-Zindani propagated it as a religious conflict against "Yemeni communists," rather than a national war for the sake of unity, as it was characterized by then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

³¹ "Mishari al-Zaidi and researcher Adel al-Ahmadi discuss Abdul Majeed al-Zindani's ideas about establishing an Islamic Caliphate [AR]," Al-Arabiya, June 8, 2024, <https://youtu.be/ml6dPXJHTzk?si=TvoCyPUQsJScwW>

Al-Zindani's influence during that period partly owed to his position as a founder and head of the Shura Council of Islah (formally known as the Yemeni Congregation for Reform). The Islamist political party, formed in 1990 with backing from Saleh as a counterweight to the socialists, drew support primarily from northern tribes and the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood. Following the 1993 parliamentary elections, in which Islah garnered the second largest number of seats after Saleh's General People's Congress, Al-Zindani was appointed as a member of the Presidential Council representing Islah. There he continued to wage a frantic war against the recently passed constitution, eventually succeeding in pressuring for the amendment of several contentious articles after the 1994 war. Among other amendments, the constitution's stipulation that Islamic law (Sharia) is the source of all legislation was largely the work of Al-Zindani.

At the height of his alliance with the former president, Saleh granted Al-Zindani a large plot of land to establish Al-Iman University. Saleh later defended Al-Zindani after the US Treasury Department **designated** him a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2004, consistently refusing to extradite him to the United States. Al-Iman University would become an incubator for thousands of extremists from various countries. It was also at the university that Al-Zindani furthered his controversial ideas about the treatment of incurable diseases, though he refused to reveal details of his alternative medicines, citing fears they would be stolen. This opened him up to **criticism** from many Yemenis outside the Islamist orbit that he was peddling quackery.

Al-Zindani attracted further controversy due to his involvement in establishing the Yemen Company for Fisheries and Marine Life. At the height of his influence, he could mobilize people and their money at the drop of a hat. In 1993, I witnessed two men carrying huge bags stuffed with Yemeni rials on their backs, which they gave as Islamic alms (*zakat*) to a charitable organization linked to Al-Zindani, rather than using official state channels. In the case of the Yemen Company for Fisheries and Marine Life, many Yemenis rushed to buy shares in the company in the mid-1990s, putting their faith in Al-Zindani. However, almost three decades later, investors have not received any profit or even their initial investment back.

Later, during Yemen's revolutionary period, Al-Zindani would break with Saleh in favor of supporting the youth-led protests. In a 2011 speech, he told a crowd of demonstrators that their actions had "**embarrassed**" the older generation of opposition leaders by proving more effective in holding the government to account. However, Al-Zindani would later emerge as perhaps the most vocal opponent of a civil Yemeni state. He denounced the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013, labeling it as anti-religious, and advocated for the establishment of an **Islamic caliphate** and the principle of divine governance, or what Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb had called *hakimiyya*. He would also issue a **fatwa** during the NDC declaring that one-fifth of wealth acquired by Muslims should be paid to descendants of Prophet Mohammed, by which he meant Yemen's Hashemite class.

These two positions would provoke widespread ire, even among some of his own followers, due to their alignment with principles espoused by the Houthi movement. According to the Houthi theory of *Wilaya*, the Al-Houthi family are the sole representatives of *Ahl al-Bayt*, the bloodline of the Prophet Mohammed, and the heirs of both religious and worldly authority from him. Once in power, the Houthi authorities also **amended zakat regulations** to predominantly benefit those today considered to be descendants of *Ahl al-Bayt*.

When the Houthis seized Sana'a in 2014, Al-Zindani didn't take any chances, fleeing first to Taiz and then to Saudi Arabia. The fatwa he had issued in favor of the Houthis' position on zakat failed to warm relations between them. Al-Iman University was one of the Houthis' first targets after entering the capital and remains under their control to this day. Still, as was his wont, Al-Zindani **characterized** his escape as an exceptional, even miraculous journey, claiming to have passed through 31 Houthi checkpoints before arriving at a government checkpoint near Marib.

Al-Zindani did not stay in Saudi Arabia for long, as Riyadh restricted his space for expression. Then he found his last refuge: Turkey, which, to Al-Zindani and his supporters, was the new caliphate. He spent the last four years of his life there, declaring his support for Palestine and calling for a new jihad in support of the cause. It was Al-Zindani's last stand before his death.

Tawfeek Al-Ganad has worked as a writer and editor for various Yemeni and Arab news outlets, including Al Joumhoria, Al Masdar, and Assafir. As a researcher Tawfeek has led several studies regarding Yemen's political history and contemporary gender-based issues in education. He holds a bachelor of arts in history from Sana'a University.



A Yemeni child sells pictures of Houthi leaders along a road in Sana'a on May 17, 2024. // Sana'a Center photo

Analysis

A New Axis: Strategic Coordination between the Houthis and Iraqi Factions

Adnan al-Jabarni

Adnan al-Jabarni On May 23, Abdelmalek al-Houthi, leader of the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*), **announced** that Houthi forces had begun coordinating military operations with Iran-backed Iraqi militant groups. The partnership was publicly unveiled as part of the “fourth phase of escalation” in the Houthi response to Israel’s war against Palestinians in Gaza. Under the fourth phase, the Houthis would expand the targeting of commercial shipping to the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, as well as continue to carry out attacks in the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and Gulf of Aden. In subsequent weekly speeches, the Houthi leader repeatedly referenced progress in coordination and cooperation with the Iraqi groups.

This foreshadowing culminated in a June 6 **announcement** by Houthi military spokesman Yahya Sarea that the group had conducted two joint operations with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, targeting three ships in the Mediterranean, including two in the Israeli port of Haifa. The Houthis

and Iraqi groups claimed six joint operations against Haifa port and allegedly Israeli-linked vessels during June. However, none of the claimed attacks were confirmed by Israel, nor the UK Maritime Trade Organization (UKMTO) or US CENTCOM, which typically broadcast updates on ships targeted in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. This ambiguity raises questions about the effectiveness of these claimed joint operations by the Houthis and pro-Iranian Iraqi factions.

Coordination among members of the Iran-led Axis of Resistance is nothing new. Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Al-Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have traditionally acted as the central nodes in the Axis, providing technologies, weapons, and expertise to allies, including in Yemen and Iraq, which serve as testing grounds for their paramilitary capabilities. This time was different, however, as Tehran's allies in Iraq and Yemen directly coordinated amongst themselves, with indications that the Houthis played the leading role in initiating the joint action. It is not surprising that Tehran would promote synergies among its allies, but what is striking is the Houthis' rush to declare bilateral cooperation so publicly, given its relatively new status as a regional military actor. This development has several crucial implications that warrant careful consideration.

Coordination on the Ground

The relationship between the Houthis and armed factions in Iraq goes back to at least 2015 when Abdelmalek al-Houthi appointed a personal representative tasked with focusing on political and financial relations. Iraq has always been a vital source of donations for the group, both at the popular level and through allied factions.

More recently, Abdelmalek appointed Houthi leader Abu Idris al-Sharafi as his new representative in Iraq. Al-Sharafi had been one of the most influential supervisors in the group and was previously responsible for overseeing the Houthi military manufacturing, as well as managing the movement of Iranian experts in and out of Yemen before the group established control over Sana'a in 2014. He later supervised the governorates of Hudaydah and Hajjah. Al-Sharafi now operates in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq, meeting local factions and tribal leaders and collecting donations.

Al-Sharafi's appointment, given his close ties to Abdelmalek al-Houthi, signifies the increasing strategic significance of Iraq within the Houthi vision, particularly in relation to its growing regional role. In 2019, the bilateral relationship between the Houthis and Shia militias within Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces demonstrated opportunities for security coordination. The Houthis would claim bombing operations targeting the Saudi oil giant Aramco, but later **investigations** showed the attacks likely originated from southern Iraq or Iran. Now a paradigm shift has occurred in the relationship during the Israeli war on Gaza, reshaping dynamics within the Axis of Resistance. According to a source in Sana'a familiar with the Houthis' regional relations, the IRGC oversaw the formation of a joint operations committee in March this year – consisting of the Houthis and representatives from Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, two Iran-backed factions within the Popular Mobilization Forces – to coordinate regional naval operations in response to the war in Gaza.

In an earlier statement on January 18, Abu Hussein al-Hamedawi, Secretary-General of Kata'ib Hezbollah, **said** that the targeting of the Houthis by US-British forces would be considered an attack on the Iraqi resistance. However, Al-Hamedawi was unable to fulfill this promise, as Iran reportedly **instructed** its Iraqi allies to cease attacks on US forces in February, following a tense

standoff sparked by the killing of American soldiers in Jordan on January 28. Nevertheless, Al-Hamedawi resurfaced on May 24, reportedly emphasizing the “imperative of maintaining readiness and high coordination among the forces of the Axis of Resistance, particularly between Iraq and Yemen, to support the Palestinian people” during a [phone call](#) with Abdelmalek.

Kata'ib Hezbollah is one of the largest factions within the Popular Mobilization Forces and maintains close ties to the IRGC. It was officially established between 2005 and 2007 by the merging of groups overseen by the IRGC's Al-Quds Force and was listed by the United States as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) group in 2009. Since October of last year, Kata'ib Hezbollah has been the most active faction targeting US interests in Iraq. After temporarily halting attacks in February, the group shifted focus in April to [directing drone strikes](#) at Israel.

Tactical Maneuvers

In May, Iranian foreign policy took a new tack following the death of President Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in a helicopter accident. [Indirect negotiations](#) were held with the United States aimed at de-escalating the Houthi operations in Yemen in exchange for ceasefire efforts in Gaza. However, now Iran is betting on a heating up of regional tensions and obstructing US initiatives in Gaza. There have been a number of indications of this shift: These include a show of force in Tehran by holding a [meeting](#) of the IRGC and Al-Quds Force with representatives from Hamas and other Palestinian resistance factions, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces; intensified [attacks](#) by Yemeni and Iraqi groups in May; the Houthi announcement of direct coordination with Iraqi factions in early June; and heightened military escalation on the Israeli-Lebanese front. In addition, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has made [several hawkish statements](#) praising the Axis for its response to the Gaza war, claiming that US efforts to bring about Saudi normalization with Israel have failed, and warning against hopes for a Gaza ceasefire agreement. “History is on the side of the Resistance front,” he declared.

Strategic Focus

Tehran has likely orchestrated the operational collaboration between the Houthis and the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq to achieve two key goals. The first is strategic, reconfiguring its regional influence to be more flexible and effective. The second goal is tactical, involving the management of regional conflicts and the conveyance of escalatory messages.

Apart from its daily management of the conflict, Iran is restructuring its regional axis. There are two geopolitical pivots: a north-south pivot extending from Iraq to Yemen, led by the Houthi group with its operations hub in Sana'a, and an east-west pivot from Syria to Lebanon to Palestine, led by Hezbollah with its operational hub in Beirut. Since January, the Houthis have shown significant resilience and adaptability in the face of Western military strikes. Tehran will seek to capitalize on this to help safeguard its exposed geopolitical assets in Iraq.

In its restructuring, the Axis of Resistance could be following a model previous adopted by Al-Qaeda, which transformed its strong branches into regional leadership centers. For example, its Yemen branch was also given responsibility for the Gulf and the Horn of Africa. This approach allows greater leadership flexibility and operational effectiveness. Iran's motivations for taking this step are likely three-fold.

First, Tehran is convinced of the need to leverage the ongoing Gaza war to enhance or retain the capabilities of the Palestinian resistance, given that Iran has been shut out of talks regarding post-war scenarios. In this context, Tehran is keen to mobilize the resources of Lebanese Hezbollah to pressure Israel to wind down military operations in Gaza while still avoiding an all-out war.

A second motivation stems from the increasingly influential role of the Houthis within the Axis and their potential to play an equivalent leadership role to Hezbollah. Iran has rediscovered the strategic importance of the Yemeni front and realized significant returns on its long-term investment in the Houthis' military, technological, and organizational capabilities. Tehran has now intensified its geopolitical investment in the Houthis, granting them even greater leadership responsibilities.

The third and most critical motive was to reinforce a doctrine of active deterrence in response to progress in the US-Saudi **defense partnership talks**, which have kept the normalization project with Israel alive despite the Gaza war. If realized, Riyadh would find itself in a better defensive position vis-a-vis the Iran-led Axis. So, the Iranian leadership is furthering its policy of engineering a ring of non-state militias surrounding Saudi Arabia. It has even activated armed Shia groups in the Gulf countries, such as Bahrain's Al-Ashtar Brigades, which are linked to the IRGC and **claimed** an operation against Israel in May. The Houthis have also begun transforming Sana'a **into a hub** for Gulf dissidents, a move explicitly **advocated** by Houthi leaders at the end of May.

In **recent speeches**, Abdelmalek al-Houthi has devoted substantial attention to reaffirming the core message of Khamenei's statements and cautioning regional states against seeking protection from the US and Israel, warning that this strategy will backfire. With the growing encirclement of the Gulf by Iran-backed armed groups and new operations on the Iraqi and Yemeni fronts, a US-Saudi partnership agreement could provide a pretext for the Axis to launch future attacks, even after the cessation of the war in Gaza. The alliance could continue to justify such actions by citing the need to counter US influence exercised by Washington's Gulf state puppets. Iran's ultimate aims in response to the Gaza war go far beyond Gaza itself.

Adnan al-Jabarni is a Yemeni journalist specializing in military affairs. He previously worked for Al-Masdar Online and has covered the conflict in Yemen since 2014, writing investigative reports focused on the internal structure of the Houthis and various military components in Yemen.



Screengrab from Hadil al-Mowafak's satirical video, "Underneath Houthis solidarity with Palestine".

Q&A

Hadil al-Mowafak on the Power of Satire and Comedy in Yemen's Politics and Conflict

Lara Uhlenhaut, Hadil al-Mowafak

I think people turn towards humor and satire in a society like ours because humor is one of the easiest and most efficient tools to penetrate the solid walls of entrenched customs and norms.

Hadil al-Mowafak is a non-resident fellow with the Sana'a Center, focused on peacebuilding, human rights, and environmental security. Following the outbreak of war in Yemen, Al-Mowafak joined Mwatana for Human Rights as a researcher, investigating war crimes and human rights violations. In 2016, she moved to the United States, where she graduated with a degree in Political Science from Stanford University. Over the years, Hadil has dedicated her career to

activism and human rights, working as a researcher with organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Responsible Source Network, and the Yemeni Policy Center. Her unique use of **comedic satire and witty sketches** exposing the antics of Yemen's warring parties have gained traction on social media amongst Yemeni and international audiences alike. The latest comedic sketch, *Militia Makeover for Dummies: Houthis Edition*, is a scathing critique of the group. Her work leaves no parties to the conflict untouched, however, and resonates with many Yemenis because of its plausibility. The underlying message conveyed is that there are no winners in this war and that Yemeni citizens ultimately bear the brunt of the belligerents' incompetence.

In this edition of the Yemen Review, Al-Mowafak spoke with Sana'a Center Editor Lara Uhlenhaut about what spurred her to use comedy as a tool to critique the prevailing situation in Yemen:

Sana'a Center: Can you tell us about your journey into comedic satire? How did you start making these sketches, and what inspired you?

I made the first satire sketch shortly after the Covid-19 lockdown was imposed. I had just completed the last term in college and honestly was bored out of my mind with nothing else to do – I believe boredom is a good gateway to creativity. At the time, I was experimenting with a new format, videos, because I've always used satire in my written posts on social media when discussing political developments. As for my source of inspiration, the ridiculousness of political events in Yemen is one big inspirational source. In many cases, one only needs to hold a mirror for society to see the actual dark comedy performed by our political elites and sometimes by society itself.

SC: What was your very first sketch, and how was it received?

The first sketch was a news segment featuring three stories, conveying how morbid life has become in Yemen because of the war and political failures. For example, one story showed a wife concerned for the mental well-being of her husband because he dares to imagine a better life for them and still clings to hope, despite the fact he's Yemeni and lives in Yemen. Another portrayed the large mosquito population in Aden as part of the Saudi-UAE-led coalition's military response and how, like all previous interventions by the coalition, it has backfired in the face of Yemenis. The sketch was received with much support and enthusiasm. It was widely shared on Facebook, and to my surprise, even by those coming from conservative backgrounds who overlooked the fact that a Yemeni woman was not wearing the hijab – usually a focus of debate on Yemeni social media – and related more to the content of the sketch. I saw the response as very encouraging, and so I continued.

SC: You left Yemen in 2016. What was your own experience with the war in Yemen?

I had taken part in the uprising of 2011, and lived through the short-lived Yemeni renaissance in terms of the proliferation of art and the openings in political and civic spaces that followed the revolution, only to be completely stunned by the advent of war – a war was not on most Yemenis' radars. When the war started, I don't think I fully realized the extent of horrors we were going to see as Yemenis. It all unfolded very quickly, and when you're in the midst of the action, you live through the events of war like you're in a trance, never truly realizing this is a war and always believing it will end next week. I joined Mwatana in early April 2015 as a researcher, investigating war crimes and human rights violations. I was still a fresh high school graduate, then suddenly, here I was, talking to mothers, fathers, and other family members about the loss of their loved ones in the war or taking photographs of corpses of children – I don't think I've fully reflected on my experience with the war even after having left Yemen.

SC: When you craft your sketches, are you thinking more of a Yemeni audience, an international one, or both? And what are you hoping to achieve?

This question is always present when I'm planning my sketches. For some issues, the choice of audience is clear. For example, if I'm doing a commentary or critique of a social or cultural issue that has no policy dimension, then I'd be targeting a Yemeni audience. But I grapple with which audience to target when there's a policy question. Many of my sketches were influenced by my work as a policy researcher because I sought to convey the messaging and findings of my work through an easily consumable format, like comedy sketches. The average Yemeni will not read a policy debrief or a report, and to be honest, I doubt many policymakers do, so I turned toward other tools to spread political messaging. I would later find out from friends that they shared my videos within their professional circles, including ambassadors and other high-ranking actors working on Yemen.

The goal is to offer a reflective mirror through which decision-makers, including local and international actors, can see their failures in improving life for Yemenis, for example, by making fun of the way the international community has handled the peace process. When it comes to a Yemeni audience, I'm hoping to open a debate around a certain issue, offer a new perspective, or contribute to people's agitation against political elites.

SC: Yemeni novelist and playwright Wajdi al-Ahdal said in an [interview](#) that "right now, it would be impossible to stage a theatrical performance that makes a mockery of the current war and its belligerents. But that's precisely the kind of theater Yemen needs." What role do you think comedic satire plays in Yemen? And how do you see the future of political satire given the current political climate in Yemen and the crackdown on activists?

Yemenis have a natural propensity to initiate and enjoy humor, even in their everyday lives. If you pay attention to Yemeni TV, you'll notice that most series are of a comical nature. I think people turn towards humor and satire in a society like ours because humor is one of the easiest and most efficient tools to penetrate the solid walls of entrenched customs and norms. The more rigid and conservative a society or a political structure or ideology is, the greater the need becomes for forceful tools like satire to open up spaces for dialogue, especially when traditional avenues for such conversations are limited or closed.

From my own personal observations, I think people living in Yemen are still employing satire to discuss politics and life in Yemen, more so than serious writings, which can quickly put its authors in trouble. In general, however, the idea of theater as a medium of art is almost utopian in many areas in Yemen under the current political climate. I will say, however, that I'd love to see such theatrical productions taking place outside of Yemen, in places where there are large Yemeni diaspora communities. The ripple effect through these smaller communities could find its way back to greater Yemen, either through word of mouth or even live streaming services that would bring the theater to the homes of Yemenis in Yemen. One needs to be creative in the face of such difficult challenges, and funds going for such projects would be worth every penny.

SC: Have you personally faced any challenges or been subject to backlash for your work?

I believe the only time I received backlash, in a very limited scope, was when I released a video in which I made the distinction between Hashemites, people who come from families that claim descent from the Prophet Mohammed and who do not necessarily believe in Houthi ideology, and the Houthis, a militia espousing the ideology of the

supremacy of the prophet's lineage and its divine right to rule. I made that video as a response to the rise in hate speech and attacks against Yemenis with Hashemite last names, regardless of what they thought of the Houthis. The backlash came from a small core of people who identified strongly with Al-Aqial, a nascent Yemeni nationalist movement that opposes Houthi ideology, though some Yemeni intellectuals also took part in the critique, misconstruing my video as sympathizing with the Houthi project.

Aside from this, I've been lucky enough not to receive many attacks. Now and then, someone will comment on my appearance and why I'm not wearing the hijab – and rarely do I receive inappropriate comments. I did once stumble across one of my videos uploaded to YouTube by someone else – the video got over 2.5K comments, many of which were merely attacks on my morality and appearance, not much discussion of the content itself. It was a moment to be grateful for the comparatively limited reach of my videos on my socials.

SC: Are your family and friends supportive of your work?

My family is 'mostly' supportive of my videos, and when I say this, I'm mostly thinking of my mum. Of course, there's the occasional "you didn't graduate from a top-notch university to be recording videos on YouTube." That is not to say she doesn't enjoy my videos, but I think she fails to see the potential of these new media formats in catalyzing change, as many others in her generation often do. There's also the concern over my safety, again mostly coming from my mum, especially as I mock different political actors in and outside of Yemen. Other than that, the response from my family has been very supportive and encouraging.

I'm lucky to have two filmmakers/editors as my best friends. These are Hamza Shiban and Hanan Al-Surmi. They've always been supportive, and I find myself increasingly relying on them for artistic help with video production, especially in the last couple of videos I produced. I see this professional relationship evolving over time, and hopefully, there will be more collaborations in the future.

SC: Shortly after moving to California in 2016, you became a lead plaintiff in the American Civil Liberties Union's lawsuit challenging President Trump's travel ban (*Al-Mowafak v. Trump*). Has that experience in any way shaped your work?

I'd say that experience and the decision to be a lead plaintiff was shaped by my preceding engagement in the Yemeni youth revolution, but I wouldn't necessarily say it had any influence over the trajectory of my work post-graduation. I see my satirical sketches as a continuation of my activism in and around Yemen, springing from a place of deep care and concern over the present and future of my country.

SC: You have carved yourself a niche in this genre. Do you see potential in other young Yemenis doing it, and what would your advice be?

Political satire is at least as old as ancient Greece, so I see young Yemenis adopting this genre, perhaps even in more novel forms. For folks inside Yemen, my advice would be to employ creativity as a mask for political messaging, as to not directly attack the de facto authorities in their area, but rather develop creative ways to refer to political events and actors implicitly. Regardless, they'd need to make an informed and conscious decision to pursue this type of activity, knowing what kind of and how much danger they'd be putting themselves under.

I also have one major piece of advice, one I could also benefit from, which is the importance of continuity and persistence in the success of any work. The production of any work on a regular basis is bound to help you build your name and brand, and eventually, a larger audience.

SC: *Do you have a next sketch in mind, and would you tell us a bit about it?*

I'm currently working on new sketches tackling the Houthis' current avalanche of responses to the US attempt to block their revenues. I'm still planning the angle and targeted audience, but hopefully, they'll be out soon.

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A boat approaches the hijacked Galaxy Leader cargo ship during a visit by a team from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to check on the crew of the vessel on May 12, 2024. // Sana'a Center photo

Commentary

Turkey and the Red Sea Crisis

Maher Abu al-Majd

Introduction

Turkey's meaningful engagement with Africa began during the rule of the Justice and Development Party in 2008. That year, Turkey hosted the first Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit. Ankara's quest for new horizons in its political and economic relations came during a period of notable economic growth, and over the past 15 years, it has successfully carved out a substantial presence in Africa, a continent ripe with economic prospects.

Turkey's particular focus has been on the Horn of Africa countries, where economic initiatives have an added geostrategic dimension. A key element here is Turkey's military presence in Somalia, where it established its first military base, Turksom, in 2017. The same year, the ambassador to Turkey from Djibouti **signaled** a willingness to host Turkish troops. Both countries oversee the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait, the crucial maritime trade corridor currently that has become a major international focus due to Houthi attacks on commercial shipping, purportedly in support of Palestinians during the ongoing conflict in Gaza. These attacks prompted Western powers to form naval coalitions to protect shipping, while the US and UK have also launched

airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen. Still, Houthi **attacks on shipping** have continued. Ankara's response to these major developments unfolding near the Horn of Africa, as well as its evaluation of the security and economic implications, bear further scrutiny.

On 12 January, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed dismay over the attacks carried out by Washington and London against Houthi assets inside Yemen. He characterized the US-British response as disproportionate and indicative of a Western desire to create a "**bloodbath**" in the Red Sea. This critical stance was notable from the leader of the second-largest country in NATO, but it aligned with public sentiment in Turkey, which sympathizes with Palestinians and sees the Houthi attacks as a legitimate form of support in reaction to the Israeli assault on Gaza. However, there is a prevailing consensus among Turkish political and media circles that the conflict in the Red Sea and Bab Al-Mandab Strait directly undermines Turkey's strategic interests and vision for its investments in the Horn of Africa.

First, the strategic significance of the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait for the Turkish economy and maritime trade cannot be overstated. The economy is heavily reliant on exports, which were estimated to amount to US\$255.81 billion in 2023. The Red Sea is a vital conduit for its trade activities, facilitating the exchange of goods with China and Africa. In addition, it is a critical route for the **import** of raw materials for critical industries, including the Turkish automotive, chemical, and manufacturing sectors.

There is a possibility that while Ankara grapples with the implications of disruptions in the Red Sea, the crisis could still turn into an advantage. Turkey stands to benefit from an uptick in **trade with European Union nations** as they seek to mitigate risks and surging transportation costs associated with Red Sea routes. Turkey is also eyeing this as an opportunity to exert pressure on the EU for a reevaluation of the longstanding Customs Union agreement, a key objective for Turkish policymakers.

Turkish concerns are not solely focused on balancing immediate economic gains and losses resulting from the developments in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab strait; there is also a perspective that views the Red Sea confrontations as part of broader efforts among international powers to reshape global power dynamics. Control over international trade routes, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative or the Western-led Development Corridor, are pivotal aspects of this global strategy. Ankara meticulously evaluates its options in both projects, considering their implications within the framework of Turkey's strategic vision, geographical importance, and its position between East and West. Ankara strategically avoids overreliance on the Western NATO alliance or alignment with the Eastern counterparts like China and Russia. Instead, Turkey sees an opportunity to pursue its own agenda. By navigating this intricate diplomatic landscape, Ankara aims to transition from a regional player to an international influencer within the global calculus.^[32]

Secondly, Turkey wants to protect its military presence and geopolitical interests in the Horn of Africa countries. In February, the Somali Minister of Defense, Abdulkadir Mohamed Nur, visited Ankara to **sign** a framework agreement for defense and economic cooperation with his Turkish counterpart, Yaşar Güler. The framework agreement between Ankara and Mogadishu, spanning over ten years, covers various important and strategic matters. This includes providing training, technical, and equipment support to the Somali army, as well as taking unilateral and joint measures to combat various threats in Somali maritime areas, such as terrorism, piracy,

³² Insight from the author based on discussions with Turkish political and media elites.

and smuggling. This hastily drafted agreement came shortly after the signing of a deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland, the self-declared independent region of Somalia, that would give landlocked Ethiopia a 20-kilometer foothold on the Gulf of Aden for a port and military base. The Somali government rejected that deal, labeling it illegal; however, in early July, in an example of its growing influence on the Horn of Africa, Turkey began mediating between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa over the issue.

The third element in Ankara's interactions with the Red Sea developments is its media policy of linking a cease-fire in Gaza to resolving the Red Sea dispute. Over the past eight months, Ankara has consistently linked this in its political and media discourse. The Turkish political narrative persistently rebukes the West while refraining from explicitly condemning the Houthi attacks. Although many Turkish political analysts understand the Houthi policy through the lens of its close ties to Iran and a play to alter the regional balance of power, the government is careful not to clash with public sentiment. Additionally, the substantial Western support for Israel and the extensive violations committed in Gaza have placed many Arab and Islamic countries, especially those with regional influence, in an ethical and ideological dilemma before their peoples, creating potential crises of legitimacy.

Overall, Turkey's response to the ongoing conflict in the Red Sea has been shaped by a strategic reading that intertwines economic, political, security, religious, geopolitical, and geo-strategic factors. This conflict has profound international and regional dimensions, as it entails a potential reshaping of the global and regional landscape by competing power blocs vying for dominance over critical waterways worldwide, chief among them the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait.

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Newly elected British Prime Minister Keir Starmer chairs his first cabinet meeting on July 5, 2024 // Photo credit: Simon Dawson/ No 10 Downing Street

Commentary

What Britain's New Government Can Do For Yemen

Helen Lackner

The widely expected victory of the Labour Party in Britain's July 4 parliamentary elections came with a few surprises. As widely described, it was more a collapse of the Conservative Party than a Labour success, with the Labour Party gaining almost half a million fewer votes than it did in its equally historic defeat in 2019. Despite this, Labour will have an absolute majority in parliament of 172 seats, and the leadership will be able to ignore divergent views even among its own MPs. However, the party lost thousands of Muslim votes over leader Keir Starmer's position on the Gaza war, at the cost of at least four seats, creating some pressure for course correction.

While there are signs that these losses could encourage the new government to take a more balanced position with respect to Gaza, such as possibly dropping a bid to delay the International Criminal Court's decision on arrest warrants for Israeli war crimes, that is unlikely to extend to a deeper concern with the Yemeni crisis. Among the millions of supporters of an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, few are aware of Yemen; among those who are, many are positively impressed by Houthi support for Gaza through naval actions in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

In January, Starmer fully backed Conservative Prime Minister Sunak's [alignment with the United States](#) in conducting air strikes against Yemen. "The attacks by Houthi rebels on commercial ships in the Red Sea threaten one of the world's most important trade routes and put the lives of British civilians and military personnel in danger. They must stop, and it is right that Britain plays its part, alongside our allies, in deterring these attacks," Starmer [wrote](#) in a British newspaper. And in February, he [controversially](#) manipulated a parliamentary vote to avoid calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

In the first days of his administration Starmer has focused on internal issues, but he has also reiterated his support for NATO and Ukraine, taking part in a NATO summit in the United States on July 9-11. During his first cabinet meeting, he said not a word about the Middle East, just as more than 100,000 people had assembled nearby in support of Palestine, calling for an immediate ceasefire and ending UK arms sales to Israel.

David Lammy, the new foreign secretary, is very close to US positions, as demonstrated by his [participation in high-level](#), influential think tank meetings in recent years. His and the prime minister's support for US policies, perpetuating the myth of the US-UK "special relationship," indicates that neither is likely to take any initiatives that might challenge Washington or make significant changes to the previous administration's policy on Yemen. Britain will continue participating in airstrikes on the Yemeni mainland whenever the Americans request it. Short of significant developments, Yemen is unlikely to reach the top of their agenda.

Although it is now no more than a medium-sized world power, Britain has certain assets that could enable it to play a more effective role in searching for a solution to the crisis. It is a permanent member of the UN Security Council – a body that has taken a reactive role vis-a-vis the Houthi naval attacks without addressing the outdated [Resolution 2216 of 2015](#), which demanded the Houthis withdraw from territories they seized, including the capital Sana'a.

Britain is in a position where it could promote a much-needed replacement resolution. For one, this could create a more positive perception of the UN Security Council among the Houthi leadership. It could also encourage the Houthis to consider the United Kingdom as a possible mediator rather than a mere sidekick of Washington, and in this manner, Britain would be able to support UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg in his efforts to persuade the Houthis to engage in a mechanism to bring the conflict to an end.

In addition, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs has traditionally been a position held by a Briton. A new appointment is due, as Martin Griffiths ended his term last month. This could be an opportunity for the new British government to propose a highly qualified candidate with experience in international humanitarian crises, ideally with knowledge of the Yemeni file.

More broadly, Britain prioritizes its relations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states with respect to investments in its own economy. Alongside most other foreign policy positions, this is unlikely to change under Starmer. However, a more sophisticated approach could try to influence the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to adopt a more effective joint approach to the Yemeni crisis, thus ending the rivalry between the different factions of the internationally recognized government, which only further empowers the Houthis.

Remembering that millions of Yemenis are paying the price of this conflict daily, the new government should restore aid programs to a more significant level, refocusing on the primary

needs of the population throughout the country and helping reduce morbidity and mortality rates. It could also improve the Yemeni people's confidence in the international community and the UK in particular. Some Yemenis have high expectations of Britain due to its colonial past in the south, but these have not been borne out.

Appointing a new British Special Envoy would also increase Britain's focus on Yemen, as this position has been vacant for some years now. It would demonstrate renewed commitment and could be an element of improved relations between Britain and the European Union. Such an envoy could help bolster international support for a political solution as well as relief and development activities at a time when a number of other crises command international attention. So, although the Labour leadership's approach of recent years suggests there will be little change in British policy concerning Yemen, there is scope for small steps that could make a difference – if the new government can be pressed into action. The newly elected first MP of Yemeni origin might be able to bring about more focus on the issue.

Helen Lackner is a non-resident fellow with the Sana'a Center. She lived in Yemen for more than 15 years in the past half century, working in all three of the states which existed in that period. She worked mostly in rural development, but also taught and carried out local socio-economic studies and training. Yemen's environmental issues, particularly water and the impact of climate change are among her many interests. Her most recent books are 'Yemen in Crisis, Devastating Conflict, Fragile Hope' [Saqi 2023] and 'Yemen, Poverty and Conflict' [Routledge, 2023]. Her first book on Yemen was 'PDRY, Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia' [Ithaca, 1985]

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



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