



# The Yemen Review

August 2023

## Saudi-Houthi Talks Resume

August 2023



### **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.

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A child plays in an exposed drain pipe on August 8, 2023, following torrential rains near the Al-Qafalah IDP camp in the Abs district of Hajjah governorate // Sana'a Center Ghader Murad

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# Executive Summary

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## Military and Security

The strategic city of Marib saw an increase in fighting on several fronts. The Houthis have been reinforcing their positions in the area, which they attempted to seize in a massive and costly offensive two years ago. Should negotiations break down, Marib is seen as a likely area of renewed contestation due to its oil and gas resources.

A new counterterrorist campaign was launched in Abyan to target Al-Qaeda forces in the governorate. Named 'Swords of Haws', the operation is being conducted by an array of STC and pro-government forces. The campaign reported it had succeeded in securing the Rafd and Jenin Valleys, but had faced strong resistance from Al-Qaeda forces in Mudiya district.

Frontline fighting on the border of Al-Bayda and Lahj rose significantly in August, including a particularly large Houthi assault on STC positions on August 26-27 that resulted in dozens of casualties.

Two Doctors Without Borders employees were kidnapped by unidentified gunmen in Marib as they traveled from Seyoun. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the incident.

An officer investigating last month's killing of World Food Programme Moayad Hameidi was assassinated. The officer, a member of the Taiz Political Security department, had received death threats and demanded he halt the investigation.

Five UN employees were released on August 11, after being held captive by Al-Qaeda for more than 18 months. The group was reportedly released after lengthy Omani mediation and the payment of a ransom, though the UN has disputed these claims.

Houthi forces continue to besiege villages of the Bani Nawf tribe in Al-Jawf following the killing of a prominent local Houthi commander. A number of tribes have responded by calling for united action, others have sided with the Houthis.

## Politics and Diplomacy

The UN and US continued efforts to revive dormant peace talks, with UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg and US Special Envoy Tim Lenderking traveling extensively to meet with political leaders in Yemen and the Gulf. A UN-brokered truce expired last October, but wholesale fighting has not resumed. Grundberg briefed the Security Council on the situation on August 16, and a senior US delegation headed to Riyadh at the end of the month.

After a summer hiatus, Saudi-Houthi bilateral peace talks resumed, with Saudi officials and Omani mediators, reportedly joined by two Iranian diplomats, visiting Sana'a on August 17. The talks will resume in Muscat. The negotiations have long been stuck on Houthi demands for the payment of public sector salaries and a debate over whether Saudi Arabia is a belligerent or mediator.

The UN completed the removal of oil from the FSO Safer, ending a years-long saga in which the decrepit oil tanker threatened the Red Sea with environmental and economic disaster. The oil has been transferred to a new ship, but questions remain over its future.

With public sector salaries some seven years in arrears, discontent in Houthi areas has been rising over authorities' refusal to disburse payments. Unprecedented dissent from the teacher's union has garnered equally rare support in the Houthi-controlled parliament, with members of the General People's Congress party publicly criticizing the ruling authorities.

Houthi authorities have threatened to block the social media websites Facebook and YouTube after accounts linked to the group were removed from the platform. Facebook is widely used in Yemen for coordinating social events and commercial transactions. The Houthis make extensive use of social media for propaganda purposes and monitor platforms for dissent.

The government and Southern Transitional Council (STC) continue to compete domestically with the support of their respective suzerain backers. Saudi Arabia continues to push for greater local autonomy following the set-up of a new political body in Hadramawt. To this end, the head of the Presidential Leadership Council Rashad al-Alimi traveled to Al-Mahra to tout new Saudi-funded development projects. Such initiatives run counter to the ambitions of the secessionist Southern Transitional Council, supported by the UAE.

Forces from the UAE-backed Giants Brigades stormed the presidential palace on August 13, in an apparent effort to shake down Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed for additional funds. Government coffers have run low since the suspension of hydrocarbon exports last fall. The incident was widely condemned and the government has promised an investigation.

A declaration by Yemeni civil society groups demanding the provision of transitional justice in any future negotiated settlement has reportedly rattled Saudi officials, who fear consequences for their wartime conduct. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly sought to head off such oversight, successfully lobbying the UN to end the investigation of war crimes in Yemen in 2021.

Human Rights Watch released a report alleging that Saudi border guards had engaged in the systematic killing of hundreds of Ethiopian migrants crossing the Yemeni-Saudi border, many of whom were also subjected to rape and torture. The Saudi government has denied the accusations, but the Ethiopian government announced it would launch an investigation.

## The Economy

Saudi Arabia announced US\$1.2 billion in new funding for the beleaguered internationally recognized government, which was quickly running out of foreign currency. The belated assistance should help the government continue public salary payments and could alleviate fuel and power shortages in the south.

The government has approved a controversial telecommunications deal to establish a joint public-private venture with the Emirate company NX Digital Technology. Critics have accused the government of selling off public assets in the form of carrier Aden Net, but the government says more investment is necessary to provide reliable service.

A parliamentary report accused the government of widespread mismanagement and corruption across numerous sectors, alleging in particular that it had squandered vast sums on the provision of electricity amid widespread shortages. The allegations were angrily denied by Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed, who defended his government's performance.

The government unveiled plans to pay public sector salaries through private banks, citing the opportunity for greater efficiency and transparency in disbursement, which would help it limit corruption. The initiative has been criticized by a number of unions, which have threatened to strike.

After months of depreciation, the value of the riyal in government-controlled areas stabilized following the announcement of new Saudi financial support. Rials in the government-held south ended the month trading at YR1471 to the dollar. In Houthi-controlled areas, riyals traded at YR535 to the dollar. Yemen's currency bifurcated in 2020 when Houthi authorities banned newly printed notes.

Some 80 percent of power stations in government areas have been forced to shut down due to an acute fuel shortage. Government stocks had been bolstered by a Saudi fuel grant that expired in April, and it has spent vast sums attempting to purchase sufficient supplies. Residents of Aden are reportedly receiving less than four hours of electricity per day for periods during the month.

The government signed a memorandum of understanding with the UNDP to reduce insurance costs for ships entering Yemeni ports. The cost of insurance has reportedly increased 16-fold since the outbreak of the conflict, raising the prices of imported foodstuffs and other goods. Yemen imports some 90 percent of its food.

Houthi authorities announced tax and customs hikes on items entering from government-controlled territory, from 50 to 100 percent of the value of goods. The Houthi are hoping to capture a larger share of customs revenue by pushing importers to use the port of Hudaydah, which they control.





## Politics & Diplomacy

# UN, US Continue Shuttle Diplomacy

The UN-led peace process has remained stalled since a formal truce expired without extension last October, and has since been superseded by direct bilateral talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*). Nevertheless, the UN and US special envoys have continued to actively consult with the respective belligerents.

On August 9, UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg met with PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi in Riyadh along with other members of the PLC. In separate meetings, Grundberg spoke with Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed, Foreign Minister Ahmed bin Mubarak, and Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber. Discussions revolved around improving living conditions in Yemen, the political peace process, and increasing regional support. On August 15, Grundberg traveled to [Muscat](#), where he met with the Undersecretary for Political Affairs at the Omani Foreign Ministry, Khalifa al-Harthy, to discuss Oman's role in the ongoing peace negotiations. He also met chief Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdelsalam, to whom he stressed the importance of both parties making compromises in order to implement a nationwide ceasefire and move the political process forward.

Grundberg [briefed](#) the UN Security Council on August 16, where he denounced the assassination of World Food Programme employee Moayad Hameidi, while simultaneously praising efforts that led to the release of five UN employees kidnapped by Al-Qaeda last year. He also warned against "public threats to return to war," noting reported fighting in Taiz, Marib, Al-Dhalea, Hodaydah, Shabwa, and Sa'ada. Amat al-Salam al-Hajj, the head of the Abductees' Mothers Association, also [spoke](#) at the briefing, sharing that the organization had recorded thousands of young men who have been kidnapped or forcibly disappeared since 2016, including civilians with no relation to the conflict.



On August 15, US Special Envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking [met](#) Al-Alimi in Riyadh to discuss possibilities for reviving the peace process. The meeting came as part of Lenderking's larger Gulf tour, which began the day prior. Lenderking [met](#) with Grundberg in Amman on August 19. In a tweet following the meeting, the US Envoy's office welcomed the visit of an Omani delegation to Sana'a and reiterated its commitment to intra-Yemeni peace talks.

Grundberg has also reached out to various players. He held a [virtual meeting](#) with Ali Asghar Khaji, senior advisor to Iran's foreign minister, on August 27. Two days later, he traveled to Cairo where he [met with](#) the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sameh Shoukry, the Assistant Secretary-General to the Arab League, and several Yemeni politicians, and to Aden, where he [met with](#) PLC chief Al-Alimi and Prime Minister Saeed to discuss ongoing peace efforts. On September 6, Grundberg [concluded](#) a visit to Abu Dhabi, where he met with Shabwa Governor Awad bin al-Wazir al-Awlaqi, UAE Foreign Minister Khalifa Shaheen, and the diplomatic advisor to the UAE president Anwar Gargash. Discussions focused on regional and international efforts to bring sustainable peace to Yemen.

Senior US officials, including Middle East adviser Brett McGurk, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Barbara Leaf, and Special Envoy Lenderking have recently traveled to Riyadh for talks with Saudi officials. According to National Security Adviser Jack Sullivan, one of the primary purposes of the visit was to work toward "[a permanent peace in Yemen.](#)" US officials confirmed that Yemen was on top of [McGurk's agenda in Saudi Arabia.](#)

## Saudi-Houthi Talks Resume

After a summer hiatus and concerns over a resumption of full-scale hostilities, negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi group have resumed, though there have been no breakthroughs on familiar points of contention. Along with a debate regarding Saudi Arabia's role as a mediator, money, in the form of salary payments, has been the primary impediment. Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi said he would suspend negotiations until public sector salaries are paid and has maintained a stream of hostile rhetoric. In a speech carried on Al-Masirah on August 12, he accused the United States of holding Riyadh back from making a deal, and implicitly threatened that the Saudi development project [Neom](#) could be a future target if hostilities resume.

The suspension of negotiations invited fears of escalation, and the threat remains should they fail again. Concern over renewed fighting led intra-coalition tensions to briefly subside. Coalition leaders met with STC leader and PLC member Aiderous al-Zubaidi, and reportedly told him that the talks with the Houthis had reached a dead end. There were joint efforts to de-escalate tensions in Aden and neighboring governorates, including Hadramawt. Marib saw a build-up of Houthi troops, and the group said they intend to test new weapons on islands in the Red Sea, following reports that the Iranians were relocating missiles and drones to Hudaydah. A maritime display would allow the Houthis to demonstrate their ability to threaten international shipping lanes, perhaps for leverage in negotiations. Coalition forces have also shown a renewed interest in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, control of which would be a valuable bargaining chip in any final settlement and confer a degree of international authority.

But a massive escalation is seen as less likely with the talks again active. An Omani delegation landed in Sana'a on August 17 to meet with Houthi negotiators. The talks were reportedly requested by the Houthis, who are frustrated with the current status of the de facto truce. Houthi

leaders are reportedly under the impression they have been enticed into a situation where they have neither the leverage of frontline fighting, nor the relief they sought in the form of salary payments. Their agency has been further curtailed by the Saudi-Iranian understanding, which, while limited in scope, reportedly includes recent assurances that the Houthis will not launch cross-border attacks into the kingdom. The delegation spent four days meeting with Houthi officials, but returned to Muscat with no official announcement on the outcome of the talks.

The Omani contingent was reportedly joined by a four-man Saudi delegation and two Iranian diplomats. The trip appears to have been coordinated with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian's [visit](#) to Riyadh on August 18, which follows the China-brokered Saudi-Iran detente reached in March. The Saudi delegation included intelligence officers, an advisor to the royal court, and an ambassador to an EU country.

The Saudis reportedly offered to pay public salaries from oil and gas revenues within a year, though there were no further details on how this might be done with exports suspended. The issue is equally sensitive for the government: the STC has signaled that it considers the use of oil and gas to pay Houthi salaries as an abuse of southern resources, and that a Saudi-Houthi agreement with this provision could be a trigger for further violence. A statement issued after the STC's presidium met on August 20 read: "the resources and wealth of the south are the sovereign right of its people," who alone should decide their political future. Mukhtar al-Nubi, the STC-aligned commander of the Abyan Military Axis, said during a trip to Shabwa on August 20 that the governorate's oil fields "cannot be neglected, no matter the price."

The talks will continue in Oman. On August 20, senior Houthi official Abdelmalek al-Ejri posted on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) that a delegation had arrived in Muscat ahead of a new round of negotiations that could be "[decisive](#)." Their direction could be shaped by a new Saudi approach: [reports are circulating](#) in Arabic media that Saudi ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber is on the way out. Al-Jaber was not part of the entourage of officials who visited Sana'a, and a wing within the Saudi policy establishment is known to be unhappy with him over his high-profile trip to the Houthi capital during Ramadan in May. The visit did not lead to a final deal, giving the impression in some quarters that the Houthis were playing the Saudis for fools. Al-Jaber's reputation has also suffered from his leadership of the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen. Recent storm damage to Aden airport exposed shoddy work carried out by the organization, raising questions in the media about corruption.

## FSO Safer Operation Completed

On August 29, the salvage team overseeing the transfer of oil from the FSO Safer oil tanker [announced](#) the completion of operations and their departure from the coast of Hudaydah. The UN says it is relying on the "additional generous support" of US\$22 million to finish the operation, [which includes](#) constructing a CALM buoy offshore loading terminal, mooring the replacement ship Yemen to the buoy, and scrapping the Safer.

The United Nations oversaw the operation, which removed 1.14 million barrels of crude oil from the decrepit FSO Safer tanker moored off the coast of Hudaydah. The oil was transferred to a replacement vessel as part of a US\$143 million operation aimed at averting an environmental disaster in the event of a spill. Efforts to commence a salvage operation were repeatedly delayed by Houthi officials and funding shortages. Control of the replacement ship Nautica, renamed [The Yemen](#), was handed over to Houthi officials before the operation began.

It remains unclear what will be done with the **transferred oil**, which is worth an **estimated** US\$80 million, and the profits from any sale are likely to be contested by the warring parties. The Safer itself would be **worth** some US\$33 million if scrapped. While environmental catastrophe has been averted, the Houthis could still use the new vessel for ecological blackmail. Some officials in the Aden-based government have called the entire operation “**fruitless**,” but US officials have **urged** international donors to continue supporting the initiative and efforts to remove the Safer from the Red Sea.

## Discontent Surfaces in Houthi Areas

A number of incidents in August drew attention to rising discontent in Houthi-controlled territory. Though their economic fortunes have improved over the past year, with the lifting of restrictions on the port of Hudaydah and the Sana’a airport, many people living in areas under Houthi control face increasingly desperate circumstances. The ruling authorities have faced unprecedented criticism as public sector salaries continue to go unpaid: some payrolls are now seven years in arrears. The lack of payment is pushing some families into extreme poverty. In one recent case, publicized on social media on August 20, a teacher in Ibb drew up a **legal document** offering his eight-year-old daughter to a couple in return for a guarantee that they would see to her food and shelter.

The disbursement of salaries is being held up by the Houthi leadership’s insistence they be paid through the government’s oil and gas revenues. Disputes over such an arrangement, including Houthi demands that payment be extended to their military and security forces, derailed truce talks last fall. The Houthis appear to want to set a precedent with such an agreement, but the government no longer has access to such revenues due to a Houthi blockade on oil exports, and appears unwilling to budge.

The withholding of salaries has fueled unprecedented dissent from political and labor leaders, and a violent response from the authorities. Teachers in particular have demanded their back salaries, with some staging isolated **protests** despite orders from religious officials to keep quiet. Houthi forces kidnapped the head of a teacher’s union in Sana’a who spearheaded a strike over the issue. The union leader, who was invited to meet with Houthi authorities under false pretenses, was taken to an unknown location. In Sana’a, Houthi gunmen beat prominent journalist Majali al-Samadi in front of his home in retaliation for criticizing the group’s failure to pay salaries. Al-Samadi’s radio station, the Voice of Yemen, was shut down by Houthi authorities in January 2022.

Dissent has also been voiced in the political sphere. A General People’s Congress (GPC) MP requested in parliament that the minister of finance answer questions about revenues and expenditures related to the disbursement of public salaries, and was subsequently assaulted by an employee of the Houthi-run ministry. Houthi media have begun a social media campaign to remove immunity from MPs who demand the payment of public salaries. But GPC MPs have persisted, making a **rare move** to demand a response from Minister of Education Yahya al-Houthi at an August 20 parliamentary session. The minister did not attend, apparently to avoid the situation escalating into a vote of no-confidence.

The head of the GPC in Sana’a, Sadeq Amin Abu Ras, raised the stakes further on August 24, **at a conference** marking 41 years since the GPC’s founding. In his first public attack on Houthi authorities, Abu Ras accused officials of a lack of transparency on government finances: “We

have to put our budget and resources before the people. Nations are not built via late-night meetings and basement *diwans*; it requires transparency,” he said. Criticizing the Houthi group for interference in the affairs of a government technically headed by a member of the GPC – Abdelaziz bin Habtoor has been prime minister of the Sana’a-based government since 2016 – Abu Ras tempered his remarks by praising Abdelmalek al-Houthi as “the leader who realized victory,” claiming to have recently met him in Sa’ada.

Houthi authorities appear to be unnerved by the teachers’ protests and their support by the GPC, their nominal allies in power. Abu Ras’s comments drew a furious response from the head of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat, who gave a series of speeches in Sana’a, Amran, and the Houthis’ historical base of Sa’ada, where senior Houthi figures had congregated to meet with local tribes. Al-Mashat talked of “fools” and “traitors” working to “disturb the domestic front” by undermining the demand that salaries be paid by the government and Saudi-led coalition. He said GPC efforts to promote greater transparency only played into the hands of the UN sanctions committee. In retaliation against Abu Ras, senior Houthi figure Mohammed Ali al-Houthi announced on September 2 that homes and other properties owned by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s supporters would be put up for auction in order to pay the public sector salary bill.

Yemeni media has been full of speculation about the dispute. One analysis suggested Abu Ras was trying to preempt action against the GPC, after Abdelmalek spoke recently of unspecified “fundamental changes” that he planned to enact. This might mean removing the GPC prime minister and moving to a model that more reflects the system in Iran, where Al-Mashat’s post would be akin to that of President Ebrahim Raisi, and Abdelmalek’s to that of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. It could also be that Al-Mashat fears for his own position and being scapegoated for simmering public anger over economic deterioration, despite the wealth accrued by the upper echelons of Houthi society during the war. Some anti-Houthi media outlets have speculated that the first signs of internecine conflict are emerging as divisions widen between different wings of the Houthi movement against the backdrop of de-escalation and social discontent, though as yet there are few signs of broader instability.

## Houthis Threaten to Block Social Media Websites

Houthi authorities threatened to shut off access to the social media websites YouTube and Facebook after the technology giants Google and Meta removed a number of accounts linked to the group. Government Information Minister Muammar al-Eryani alleged that the accounts were closed at the behest of the government to prevent the spread of the Houthis’ radical ideology and indoctrination of children: “We renew our call on all international platforms and satellite [stations] to block TV channels, websites, and pages linked with the Houthi militia, which is listed as a terrorist organization in Yemen and a number of other countries.”

Facebook is widely used in Yemen, and maintains a more significant reach than Twitter and other similar platforms. It is used to coordinate all manner of organizations and informal social networks, including those that provide humanitarian aid. Social events are promoted on the site, and it is the primary forum for the publication of political and religious speech. It also has a large commercial component: cars and electronics are often bought and sold there, and businesses use it for advertising and promotion, sometimes employing prominent online “influencers.” Its primacy is illustrated by a WhatsApp and Facebook data package available to mobile phone users.

Facebook and other social media sites have been a recurrent target of Houthi ire. But the Houthis are also **well-versed** in their instrumentalization, and the group has a large and influential social media presence where it regularly posts propaganda. It is accordingly wary of online dissent, and surveils Yemeni social media users: in March, Houthi authorities **arrested** four prominent YouTubers for criticizing the regime. The threat to ban the service may be related to recent domestic criticism and the teachers' strike.

## Government-STC Competition Continues

Saudi-UAE tensions continue to undermine unity within the internationally recognized government. The political tussle between Saudi-backed PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi and UAE-backed STC chief and PLC member Aiderous al-Zubaidi could intensify in September if both figures attend the UN General Assembly in New York. The event could provide a public demonstration of the government's dysfunction, if its leading figures, with their rival Gulf backers, offer substantively different visions of a future political settlement. Al-Zubaidi may not be able to attend – he has reportedly been unable to secure a visa – perhaps reflecting US displeasure at his moves to undermine the PLC's authority. But recent political and military changes in the STC's structures and leadership positions have strengthened Al-Zubaidi's position, and the group has increased media outreach in the West to cast itself as the natural heir to the former state of South Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has pushed on with its effort to outflank the STC in Al-Mahra. PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi arrived in the governorate, which borders Oman, on August 16, for a week-long trip to inaugurate development projects and meet with local officials. Al-Alimi made a major play for local support in a **speech** to a gathering of political, military, and security leaders, praising efforts to combat weapons and drug smuggling, promising more local autonomy, and declaring steps to preserve the Mahri language. On August 21, he laid the foundation stone for the Al-Ghaydah power station and inaugurated the first phase of the tourist and residential city of Marina, due for completion in 2028 at a cost of US\$100 million. The total cost of the projects announced during the trip, which cover the rebuilding of roads and other public works, was given as 93.3 billion Yemeni rials, to be funded by the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen. This follows the reopening of Al-Ghaydah's international airport last month after its refurbishment by the Saudi program. The government praised Al-Alimi's trip as "fruitful" despite protests in both Al-Mahra and Aden, with southern activists alleging that Al-Alimi "came to strip Al-Mahra from the south." Al-Alimi is understood to be planning a trip to Taiz next.

The UAE fears local Saudi-backed political initiatives, such as the Hadramawt National Council, could become successful models of autonomy, which, if applied in other southern governorates, could see the Emiratis lose the influence they thought they had gained through their backing of the STC and other armed groups. But Saudi leaders seem to have slackened in their resolve to rally Hadramawt against STC influence. The Hadramawt National Council was meant to finalize its statutes and leadership within a two-month period that ended on June 20, but nothing has materialized. Saudi leadership may have concluded that it has already effectively blocked the STC by easily mobilizing social and political forces for the council. It could also be that bureaucratic malaise in the heat of summer, on either the Hadrami or Saudi side, has simply slowed the initiative down. However, it is notable that Amr bin Habrish, the head of the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference – another anti-STC bloc – took aim at the Hadramawt National Council in an **interview** published on August 12, in which he described his Conference as an independent body formed by Hadramis to represent Hadrami interests alone. The implication was that the new Saudi-backed council was a foreign project that lacked local legitimacy.



Al-Alimi is pushing ahead to increase the powers of local government, which the STC views as a scheme to strengthen federalism at the expense of its secessionist agenda. According to Badr Basalama, the Hadrami former minister of transport who heads the technical committee, a plan for “enabling local authorities,” is to begin in Aden, Hadramawt, and Taiz governorates. The idea is to encourage development, led by local private sector initiatives, that would include the provision of basic services and create jobs. Al-Alimi promoted the plan during his trips to Hadramawt and Al-Mahra. Basalama said eight years of war had weakened the central state to the point that it was no longer able to provide basic services, making federated government with private sector help the only way forward. The project will face resistance because of the implied loss of revenue to the financially embattled central government, which Basalama said could be solved by employing a gradualist approach.

## Giants Brigades Storm Presidential Palace

The STC is not the only faction represented on the PLC to openly pursue a separate agenda. On August 13, Giants Brigades forces loyal to PLC member Abdelrahman al-Muharrami (Abu Zaraq) stormed the Maashiq Presidential Palace to confront Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed. The palace is under the protection of the STC-affiliated Al-Asifah Brigades. Several narratives have emerged regarding the motivation behind the raid, with Giants Brigades forces apparently surprised at the rapid reporting of the incident. They quickly denied it had taken place, alleging that a team had gone to follow up on security issues with the prime minister. Other sources would later allege that Saeed had intentionally kept a Giants Brigade delegation waiting for some 12 hours in an intentional demonstration of disrespect to Abu Zaraq. This is unlikely given that the incident was already being reported by mid-afternoon. The promulgation of such narratives is likely intended to obscure a darker truth, that Abu Zaraq sent his forces to the palace to intimidate the prime minister and extract additional funds for his troops and supporters. The UAE-backed Giants Brigades are currently the most powerful coalition force on the ground in Yemen – their counteroffensive was vital to checking the Houthis push to seize Marib in 2020-2021. They have also interceded internally, notably during an orchestrated push by the STC to drive Islah forces from Shabwa last September. But in general, Abu Zaraq has publicly maintained that his forces, despite their foreign sponsorship, operate only on behalf of the Yemeni state.

But Abu Zaraq also operates on behalf of himself, his Yafea tribesmen, and his Salafi troops and supporters. Imprisoned in Sa'ada during the wars with the Houthis in the 2000s, he was later empowered by the UAE because of the influence he had over Salafi groups. His military authority soon gave him a seat at the table – the Emiratis added him to the PLC in a belated attempt to counterbalance the influence of the STC. His addition was reportedly such an afterthought that he was listed as ‘Abu Zaraq’, rather than by his legal name. But he quickly made the most of the opportunity, appointing Yafea tribesmen and other supporters to influential positions, particularly those with access to financial resources. He successfully installed a Yafea tribesman on the banking board and has pressured officials to grant banking licenses to Salafi associates. Abu Zaraq also operates outside the environs of the government beyond the reach of just his Giants Brigade forces, maintaining his own prisons, links with Salafi and jihadi networks, and benefiting from a business network that includes oil traders and money exchangers, and preferential access to financial institutions. The extent of the graft is unknown, and perhaps even unremarkable in a notoriously corrupt system in the throes of conflict. But the war economy has been good to Abu Zaraq – he is one of the few figures who unambiguously benefits from the continuation of the conflict, and he has efficiently extracted substantial government resources for his problematic supporters at a time when the government is running out of money. The confrontation with Saeed, in all likelihood, was an attempted shakedown after Abu Zaraq experienced difficulty maintaining such levels of parasitism as government coffers ran low.



Raiding the Maashiq Palace was likely a miscalculation. The prime minister is not popular, but Saeed has no obvious successor, and so enjoys the tacit support of both the UAE and Saudi Arabia. PLC chief Al-Alimi has now **instructed** the Minister of Defense to investigate the incident, and the French, American, and British embassies issued a **statement** noting their concern that the incident threatened security in the capital and could compromise the government's authority. But Abu Zaraq's power and influence remain unchecked, and with them his ability to coerce members of the government. In the interim, his clientele networks will continue to pull the strings of the bureaucracy to secure funding for his Yafea tribesmen and Salafi associates.

## Saudi Arabia Displeased with Calls for Justice

The recent announcement of a joint declaration signed by 70 victims' and civil society organizations in Yemen has rattled Saudi officials, who reportedly perceive the declaration as an attack on their conduct and an obstacle to their ongoing talks with the Houthis. Riyadh and its coalition partner the UAE have repeatedly opposed calls for justice and accountability measures which may target them. The **declaration**, which was first announced at the second Yemen International Forum in June, and of which the Sana'a Center is a signatory, seeks to build common ground on a rights-based approach to justice and reconciliation in Yemen and address the numerous violations of international human rights and humanitarian law perpetrated by national and international parties to the conflict. The declaration has received **support** from prominent regional and international non-governmental organizations working in Yemen, including Human Rights Watch and Save the Children. The US envoy and ambassador and the EU delegation to Yemen tweeted their support.

Transitional justice is notoriously difficult, as the belligerent parties benefit from an environment of impunity and refuse to admit misconduct or concede judicial authority over their forces to an outside party. Collecting evidence and witness testimony is extremely difficult in wartime, and post-conflict judicial processes are susceptible to accusations of politicization. But the attempts to obfuscate the investigation of abuses in Yemen are particularly brazen. In October 2021, the UN Human Rights Council **voted** not to renew the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, tasked with investigating war crimes. Though they did not have a vote, Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners **reportedly** lobbied intensely against extending the investigator's mandate. The kingdom had drawn negative attention from the panel and the international community for the high civilian toll from its disastrous aerial bombing campaign.

Yemeni civil society groups have taken it upon themselves to renew calls for documentation and justice. Saudi Arabia is annoyed by the initiative, which it reportedly interprets as being undertaken in collusion with the US to discredit them. It is highly unlikely that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the government, or the Houthi group will ever agree to participate in a process that opens up their forces to the threat of prosecution, and each would likely dispute further charges of misconduct. Civil society organizations hope that elements of transitional justice can be integrated into the wider peace process, and seek to protect future efforts from obstruction.

Damning reports of Saudi crimes continue to surface. On August 21, Human Rights Watch released a **report** claiming that Saudi border guards had systematically shot and killed African migrants trying to cross from the Saudi-Yemen border, killing hundreds of people in the past 15 months. Migrants had also reportedly been subjected to beatings, torture, and rape. The Saudi government has **denied** the accusations, calling the report "unfounded and not based on reliable sources." On August 22, the Ethiopian government announced it would launch an **investigation** into the matter with the cooperation of the Saudi government.

The report, which received extensive coverage in international media, also suggested there could be a secret Saudi government policy in place to kill migrants, which would constitute a crime

against humanity. It said too that Houthi forces work with the smugglers, extorting migrants or transferring them to detention centers in Sa'ada, along the Saudi border, where they are abused until they can pay exit fees.

The allegations are not new. In April 2020, Houthi fighters expelled thousands of Ethiopian migrants from northern Yemen, forcing them to try to cross the border into Saudi Arabia where they were fired on by border guards. The current conflict has made the border zone, which Saudi Arabia views primarily as a conduit for illegal immigration, gun-running, and drug smuggling, even more **dangerous than before**. The securitization of the Yemen-Saudi border dates back to 2009, during one of the last rounds of the Sa'ada wars, when Saudi authorities **relocated villagers** living on the Saudi side to a distance of at least 50 km away, freeing up the Saudi military to act with impunity. Abuse of African migrants elsewhere in Yemen was highlighted in a **report that emerged** in August detailing a government official's plan to evict Ethiopians from Shabwa for "religious and moral corruption that destroys society." The official, who is head of the governorate's religious endowments office, had presented a memorandum to the governor's office and organized a meeting with mosque preachers to encourage incitement against the presence of migrants.

## Other Developments

### Government Receives New Saudi Support

On August 1, Saudi Arabia **announced** it would support the internationally recognized Yemeni government with a US\$1.2 billion grant to finance the public budget and prop up the value of the Yemeni rial (see Economic section). The support comes at a critical time for the government: Houthi missile and drone attacks on oil export terminals halted hydrocarbon sales last fall, denying the government access to what was by far its largest source of revenue. The government's fiscal deficit was further compounded when Houthi authorities began pressuring commercial importers to redirect imports from Aden to Hudaydah in mid-January, costing the government some YR45-50 billion per month in customs duties. The Central Bank of Yemen in Aden **confirmed** on August 3 that Saudi Arabia had deposited 1 billion Saudi riyals (nearly US\$267 million) into its account at the Saudi National Bank in Riyadh. The deposit is the first tranche of the grant and appears to consist of completely new funds unrelated to previous pledges.

### Blackouts Persist in Aden

Amidst soaring summer temperatures, the energy crisis in Aden, Abyan, and Lahj governorates continued as fuel for electricity generation ran out. Blackouts in Aden reached nearly 18-20 hours per day, causing massive protests in the Al-Mansoura, Sheikh Othman, Al-Mualla, and Khormaksar districts. Protests broke out in Abyan, which witnessed a total blackout for four consecutive days, and in Lahj, where residents took to the streets to demand immediate government intervention.

### Taiz Security Cracks Down on Criticism

Military and security forces in Taiz attacked two activists and a journalist in three separate incidents in retaliation for their social media activity. Security forces in Al-Salou district in southern Taiz assaulted a human rights activist and abducted his son to pressure him to stop

posting on Facebook about the recent assassination of a World Food Programme (WFP) official in Al-Turbah city. In Taiz city, security forces arrested a journalist for similar Facebook posts. Military police at a checkpoint at the entrance to Taiz city stopped a truck driver and social media activist, confiscated his phone, and beat him for publicizing arbitrary levies imposed on truck drivers at security checkpoints between Taiz and Aden.

## Aden Officials Condemn Mine Clearing Assistance

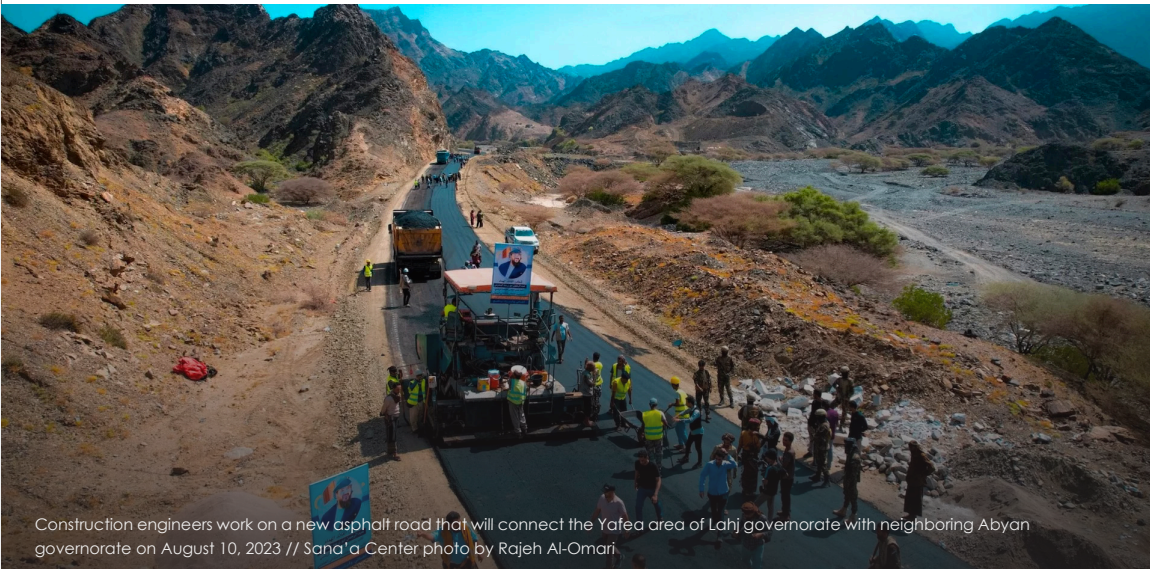
On August 11, Saudi daily Asharq al-Awsat **reported** that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had sent nearly US\$750,000 worth of minesweeping equipment to Houthi authorities in Hudaydah, sparking outrage among Aden-based government officials and humanitarian agencies who highlighted that Houthi forces are the main culprits behind mine planting in the country.

## Women Inmates Criticize Abuse

At the Central Prison in Sana'a, women inmates raised complaints of abuse and violence by the Zainabiyat, an all-female Houthi security unit known for its harsh practices. The complaints include physical and emotional abuse, forced labor, and cutting prisoners' clothing in ways designed to humiliate them.

## WFP Cuts Food Assistance

The World Food Programme (WFP) **announced** on August 10 that it has been forced to curtail aid to Yemen due to budget shortfalls. Rations were cut to 65 percent of the standard food basket per cycle, and the WFP said further cuts may be necessary during the final three months of the year unless urgent additional funding is secured. Currently, the WFP is aiming to provide assistance to 13 million Yemenis during each distribution cycle (approximately 45 days).



Construction engineers work on a new asphalt road that will connect the Yafea area of Lahj governorate with neighboring Abyan governorate on August 10, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Rajeh Al-Omari.

## Military & Security

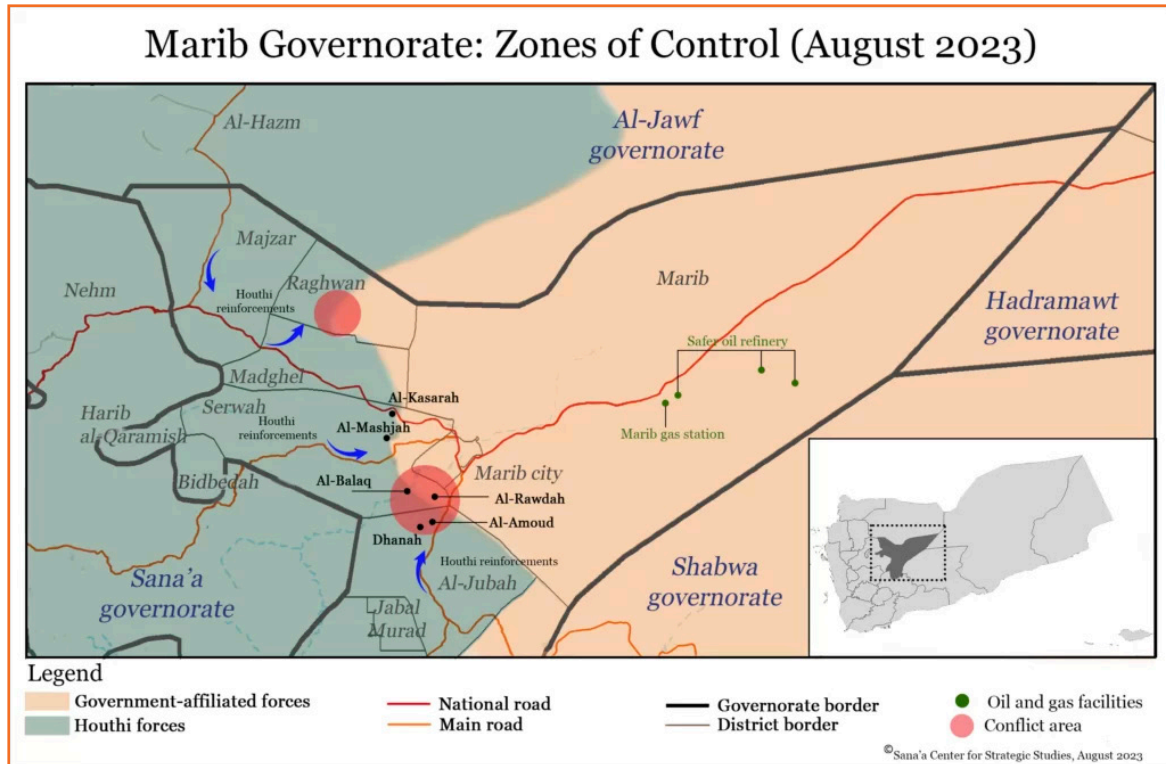
# Marib Witnesses Uptick in Fighting, Maneuvers

Tensions rose in Marib as Houthi forces continued to send reinforcements to the governorate and clashes broke out on several fronts. A series of Houthi military tests and maneuvers provided some insight into the scale of mobilization that has happened over recent months. During the first week of August, foreign munitions experts were **reported** attending Houthi weapons testing in the Habab Valley in western Serwah district. The demonstration apparently went awry, causing a series of **explosions** that reportedly killed several Houthi military commanders and foreign experts, likely Iranian, in attendance. On August 7, Houthi military maneuvers were held near the border of Sana'a's Nehm district and Marib's Majzar district, complete with a **display** of paratroopers jumping from a helicopter.

In mid-August, Houthi forces began to bolster their frontlines around Marib city, sending reinforcements to the Al-Kasarah front to the northwest on August 14, and mobilized additional reinforcements, including soldiers, armored vehicles, radar jammers, and missiles, to the Dhanah and Al-Amoud areas along the Al-Rawdah front, southwest of Marib city, on August 15. The following day, another group of reinforcements arrived in the Al-Balaq and Al-Mashjah areas west of Marib city, and on August 17, Houthi soldiers from Al-Jawf fortified positions in Raghwan district in northwestern Marib.

Clashes were reported concurrently on several fronts, as Houthi forces attempted to capitalize on the de facto truce, much to the **chagrin** of UN Special Envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg. Reports indicate that fighting was focused in Serwah and Raghwan districts. The Al-Rawdah front, which extends from the Al-Balaq mountains in the east of Serwah district to the north of Al-Jubah district, was particularly active, with clashes reported on August 14, 17, 24, and 25. Much of the fighting was focused near the Al-Balaq area, which also experienced intermittent shelling and Houthi drone flyovers from August 28-31, according to a community activist. Fighting between Houthi and pro-government forces also picked up in Raghwan district later in the month, with clashes on August 17 and 24, according to a community activist.





In late August, Marib saw a spike in political activity as well, with the **return** of PLC member and Marib Governor Sultan al-Aradah from Saudi Arabia for the first time in nearly a year. Al-Aradah quickly got to work, **meeting** with UN Special Envoy Grundberg on his first visit to Marib on August 30.

## New Counterterrorism Campaign Targets Al-Qaeda in Abyan

Counterterrorism forces in Abyan's Mudiya district gained momentum with the formation of **Operation Swords of Haws**, a new campaign to complement the ongoing Operation Arrows of the East. The campaign, which is comprised of STC-affiliated Security Belt forces, Abyan Military Axis forces, Support and Backup Brigades, and local Abyan security and pro-government forces, is named in honor of the late commander of popular resistance forces in Lawder, Tawfiq al-Junaidi (nicknamed Haws), who was killed in an Al-Qaeda bombing in 2011.

Since the announcement of its formation on August 6, the campaign has reported several successes as it focused on securing the Rafd and Jenin Valleys in northern Mudiya district. Among its major accomplishments were the **arrest** of Al-Qaeda military commander Saeed Ali Saeed al-Anbouri (Abu Al-Qaqaa) in the Al-Habaj area of Mudiya on August 6, the securing of the Rafd and Jenin Valleys on August 20, and the discovery of a clandestine Al-Qaeda base in Jenin Valley on August 27, according to Security-Belt affiliated sources. The forces are now working to secure the mountain and valley regions of Mudiya, where Al-Qaeda members are difficult to flush out, and tightening their control over the Al-Hanaka area near the border with Shabwa's Hateeb district.

Al-Qaeda militants fought back, raiding Swords of Haws positions several times throughout the month. On August 10, an Al-Qaeda landmine **killed** Abdellatif al-Sayed, who was appointed overall commander of the STC-aligned Security Belt forces in Abyan earlier in the month, along with three other soldiers, according to a Security Belt-affiliated military source. Experts and intelligence sources believe the killing may have been an inside job, and that Al-Sayed's location and movements had been betrayed to Al-Qaeda, as the commander was famously cautious when it came to revealing his location and movements.

## International Employees Targeted

A government investigation has linked the killing of Moayad Hameidi, the World Food Programme employee who was killed in Al-Turbah city last month to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Information from security and jihadi sources suggests that the assassination of Hameidi is reportedly part of a grander scheme to target employees of international organizations. On August 15, unidentified gunmen **assassinated** an officer of the Taiz Political Security department who was part of the team investigating Hameidi's death, after sending him death threats demanding he stop the investigation. A week later, a local Al-Qaeda affiliate released a statement **condemning** raids that came as part of the post-assassination security crackdown in Taiz, threatening that continued security efforts would provoke more violence.

Al-Qaeda leaders appear to be sticking to their new strategy, as several other attempted attacks were linked to the group this month. According to security sources, a car bomb discovered in Taiz governorate was believed to belong to Al-Qaeda and was intended for a similar assassination operation. In Aden, UN and security sources reported that the headquarters of two international organizations were recently attacked with RPGs. On August 28, two Doctors Without Borders (MSF) employees, one German and a Myanmar national, were reportedly **kidnapped** by unknown gunmen in Marib as they were **traveling** from Seyoun city in Hadramawt without a security escort. No group has yet to claim responsibility for the abduction.

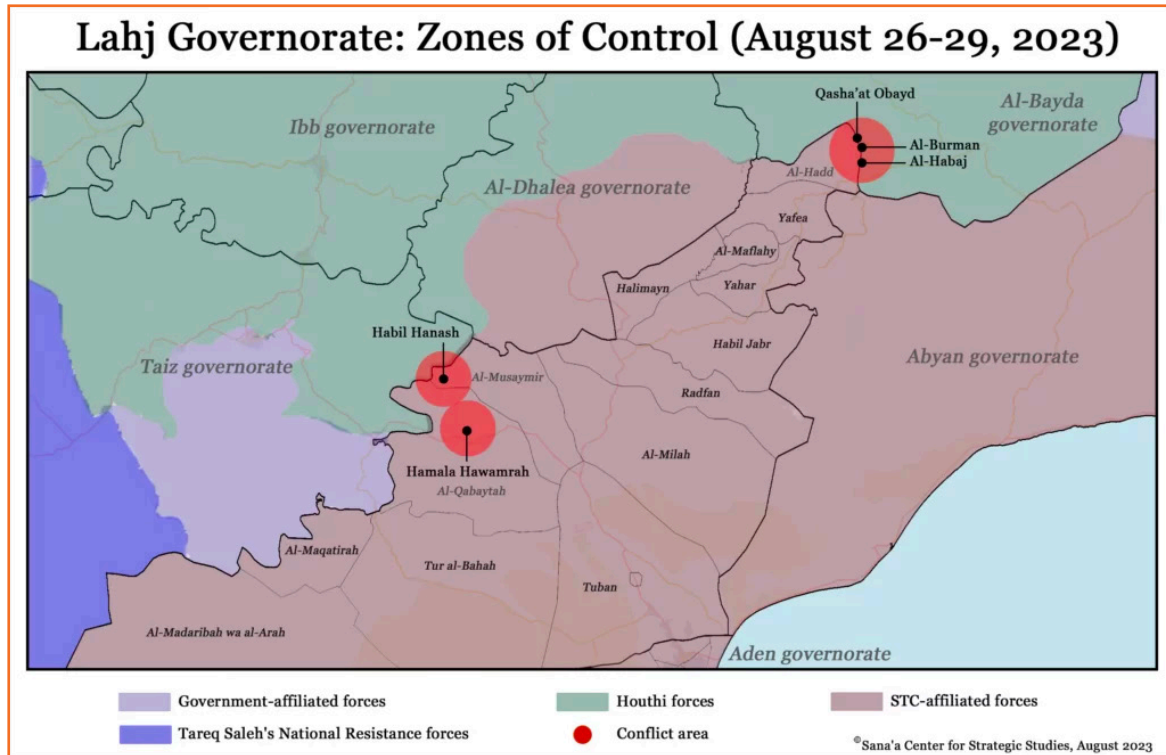
On a brighter note, five UN employees, four Yemenis and one Bangladeshi, who were kidnapped by Al-Qaeda in Abyan, were **released** on August 11, after being held captive for more than 18 months. According to anonymous security and tribal officials, the group's release was a **lengthy process** that involved officials from Oman, in which a ransom was eventually paid to Al-Qaeda militants – a claim disputed by the UN.

## Al-Bayda-Lahj Borderlands Heat Up

Regular frontline fighting between Houthi forces and the STC-affiliated 4th Support and Backup Brigade rose significantly this month in the area straddling Al-Bayda's Al-Zahir district and Lahj's Al-Hadd and Yafea districts. The Al-Burman and Al-Habaj areas saw heavy casualties, but fighting climaxed in the Qasha'at Obayd area in the east of Al-Hadd district on August 26-27 with an uncharacteristically large Houthi assault on this front that killed and wounded dozens of fighters on both sides. While online casualty reports vary drastically, local sources report that across the various fronts in the border region, at least 13 STC-affiliated soldiers were killed and 26 were wounded throughout the month, while at least 22 Houthi fighters were killed and 28 wounded.

To the north, the border between Al-Bayda's Naaman district and Shabwa's Bayhan district also witnessed an uptick in fighting, with Houthi forces clashing with STC-affiliated Shabwa Defense forces and UAE-backed Giants Brigades for the first time along the Aqbat Adma front on August 8, according to eyewitness reports. Fighting also resumed on the Aqbat al-Qantha front on August 6 and 28, which had been dormant since March.





## Houthis Clash with Al-Jawf Tribes

Houthi forces arrested a number of tribesmen in three districts of Al-Jawf along the governorate's border with Marib. The Houthis have besieged villages of the Bani Nawf tribes since mid-July, following the killing of a prominent Houthi commander in the area. At the same time, Houthi forces have besieged villages along Al-Jawf's border with Sa'ada, in an attempt to exploit a tribal land dispute and expand their control in the area. In response, tribal leaders from across Al-Jawf have convened meetings in government-controlled areas in and around the governorate, calling on tribes to settle their internal disputes and unite against the Houthis. But a large number of tribal sheikhs have also completed a Houthi cultural indoctrination course in Sana'a and met the president of the Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat. The tribal leaders signed a document pledging to fight outlaws and drug dealers in Al-Jawf, where the Houthi-run Ministry of Interior has deployed additional forces under the pretext of combating crime and smuggling, but coinciding with a siege of Bani Nawf tribal areas.



Yemeni women construct handicrafts at a home in the Deir Ayash area of Al-Zaydiyah district in Hudaydah governorate on August 6, 2023 // Sana'a Center by Ghader Murad

## The Economy & Finance

# Government Approves Controversial Telecoms Deal

The government **approved** an agreement to establish a joint telecommunications company with an Emirati company to provide mobile phone and internet services in government-controlled areas on August 21, over opposition from several members of parliament. In a letter to Prime Minister Maen Abdelmalek Saaed, 22 MPs in the government-aligned House of Representatives **objected** to the proposed sale of Aden Net to NX Digital Technology, a UAE-based technology company, characterizing it as a deliberate attempt to bypass parliament's supervisory and legislative authority. The MPs called on the government to await the outcome of a report by a parliamentary fact-finding committee studying the deal. In a previous **letter** sent to PLC head Rashad al-Alimi in mid-July, the MPs said the proposed deal could only be approved by the House of Representatives, and that granting NX a license to operate Aden Net would negatively affect the country's security and sovereignty, and violate principles of transparency and fair competition.

Critics **accused** the government and the Ministry of Communications of selling 70 percent of Aden Net's assets to NX, which has no previous experience as a mobile operator. In December, the government issued decree No. 79 of 2022, granting a license to NX to operate in partnership with Aden Net, rather than selling an ownership stake, to improve telecommunications and internet services in government-held areas. Aden Net was established in September 2018 to replace internet services previously provided by the Sana'a-based Yemen Net telecommunications company and reduce Houthi authorities' control over the sector.

## Parliament Report Alleges Corruption in Public Institutions, Prime Minister Responds

The House of Representatives issued a [report](#) on August 25 documenting purported violations and corruption by several public institutions. Addressed to Prime Minister Saaed, the report alleged mismanagement and corruption in the electricity, energy, telecommunications, and financial sectors. The report is the outcome of a parliamentary fact-finding committee formed to investigate the legitimacy of the government's decision to [approve](#) the sale of Aden Net to UAE-based technology company NX Digital Technology, among other accusations of corruption.

According to the report, the electricity ministry has suffered from widespread corruption and has become a black hole in the government's budget, requiring massive funding without supplying even minimum levels of electricity. The report accused the government of failing to implement PLC Resolution No. (2) of 2022, which aimed to address power supply deficits in Aden and other regions under government control by raising capacity to 635 megawatts. Electricity generation capacity is less than half of the targeted amount; the deficit has increased further since power stations stopped operating in recent months due to lack of fuel, extending electricity cuts in Aden and other areas during the hot summer months.

The report said the government has spent an estimated US\$100 million per month to purchase fuel derivatives for power stations. The budget allocated to electricity provision amounted to YR569 billion (approximately US\$400 million) in 2022, not including funds allocated to the government-owned Public Electricity Corporation or funds available via a Saudi fuel grant. From November 2022 to April, the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY) supplied the government with over 1.2 million metric tons of diesel and mazut, valued at US\$422 million, for power generation at more than 80 stations.

The report noted that the purchase of oil derivatives has been conducted outside the existing Tenders Law. It accused the Ministry of Oil and Minerals and the Yemen Petroleum Company of importing poor-quality fuel and allowing fuel derivatives shipments to enter government-held ports and markets without payment of the taxes and customs tariffs owed to the government. It also accused the oil minister of deliberately withholding data, information, and agreements signed by the ministry and its affiliate bodies.

In the telecommunications sector, the parliament report reiterated that the government violated the constitution and existing laws by approving the sale of 70 percent of Aden Net to the UAE-based NX Digital Technology Company on August 21. The cabinet refused to share copies of the agreement with the parliamentary fact-finding committee under the pretext that it should remain confidential, while critics argue that the deal would reveal corruption and a violation of the country's sovereignty. The report demanded the government be held accountable for deliberate violations that harm national interests, waste public funds, and disregard the parliament's supervisory role.

In the financial sector, the report criticized the government's failure to mobilize revenues and deposit them into state treasury accounts in the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY-Aden). It also accused local authorities in some governorates of failing to cooperate with the central government to collect and deposit revenues in line with existing laws. The House of Representatives ordered the prime minister and the government to respond to the report within two weeks.

On September 5, Prime Minister Saeed denied the allegations of corruption and mismanagement at a [press conference](#). The prime minister attacked the report of the fact-finding committee, calling the accusations malicious, and backed by influential individuals whose personal interests have suffered. He alleged that certain partisan individuals have attempted to obstruct the work of the government, and said that it has formed a committee headed by the minister of justice to respond to the allegations outlined in the report.

Saeed also defended his government's performance, noting that it has continued to pay salaries and provide public services despite the suspension of oil exports, which accounted for 60 percent of total budget revenues before they ended last fall. In the first eight months of the year, the government's expenditures amounted to YR1.3 trillion, while public revenues reached YR600 billion. Saeed said the recent Saudi US\$1.2 billion pledge represented a lifeline for the government, despite its being conditional on a further set of reforms.

Since the beginning of the year, non-oil revenues have only declined by 5 percent, which Saeed attributed to reforms his government has implemented to reduce fiscal leakage and combat smuggling. The prime minister said the government has had to spend large amounts to provide electricity this year, allocating US\$229 million for payments to the sector, not including accumulated arrears. The increase in electricity consumption in Aden and the government's inability to complete strategic projects in this sector, such as a 120-megawatt solar power generation project, has compounded the problem. Saeed added that the government has allocated US\$100 million to help governorates transition to renewable energy.

In the telecommunications sector, the prime minister acknowledged the government's failures but said the challenges could be overcome. He detailed irregularities in the granting of licenses in the sector under former president Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who purportedly granted mobile service operator Y-telecom an exceptional license to provide fourth-generation telecommunications services and to use the state's telecommunications infrastructure without paying fees to the government. As of writing, the company has neither paid license fees owed to the government nor operated mobile services. On the contrary, the company has called on the government to refund US\$149 million, which it said it paid to the then-government in Sana'a for obtaining the license when it was established in 2006.

The government would need some US\$3 billion of investment in the telecommunications sector to keep pace with regional standards, such as those in the Horn of Africa, and to be able to offer a minimum level of telecommunication services. Addressing the controversial sale of Aden Net, Saeed said that it is in the country's interest to attract foreign investment and that the Emirati company will invest US\$700 million in the telecommunications sector. This joint investment will grant the government a 30 percent share of the envisioned company assets. The prime minister said the government needs to develop telecommunications infrastructure, and that it would have been better for the House of Representatives to await its response on the matter, instead of rushing to issue a report. He stated that the government had spent a full year negotiating with the Emirati company, the negotiations took place publicly, and their outcomes were submitted to the PLC, the highest state authority.

Several high-ranking public officials and MPs have since criticized Saeed's fiery attack on the parliament and the committee report, stating that his speech did not refute the allegations of corruption committed by his government across multiple sectors.



## Saudi Arabia Announces US\$1.2 Billion in New Financial Support

Long-awaited financial support for the government finally materialized after it reached a dire fiscal situation in June and July. On August 1, Saudi Arabia **announced** it would support the internationally recognized government with a US\$1.2 billion grant to finance the public budget and prop up the value of the Yemeni rial. Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber **stated** that the first batch of new funds would be released for use on August 2. The next day, CBY-Aden announced that Saudi Arabia had deposited 1 billion Saudi Riyals (nearly US\$267 million) into its account.

High-ranking government officials, including the **CBY governor** Ahmed Ghaleb and the **Minister of Finance** Salem bin Breik, said that funds from the new grant would be essential to compensate for the large reduction in public revenues following Houthi drone and missile attacks against infrastructure at oil ports in Shabwa and Hadramawt last fall, and to pay for vital expenditures, including public sector salaries and fuel for power stations in government-held areas. The support will also help the CBY-Aden to continue its holding of weekly foreign exchange auctions to finance the import of basic commodities and stabilize the rial.

Saudi Arabia has given substantial sums to the government in recent years. In April 2022, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi committed US\$2 billion in financial support following the formation of the Presidential Leadership Council. Saudi Arabia stated it would provide US\$1 billion through a deposit with the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF) to support economic reforms through 2025, and the UAE announced it would make available 1.1 billion dirhams (nearly US\$300 million) to the CBY-Aden. In late February 2023, CBY-Aden head Ghaleb **revealed** that the government was struggling to utilize the funds, as Saudi Arabia had strengthened requirements for accessing them after earlier accusations of corruption. In 2021, the UN Panel of Experts **accused** the government of mismanagement of a 2018 Saudi deposit of US\$2 billion for financing the import of basic food commodities. The lack of transparency created an environment conducive to embezzlement and mismanagement, though UN accusations against the CBY-Aden and Yemeni importers were ultimately withdrawn.

The new deposit appears to be completely new funds, unrelated to previous pledges. The support comes at a critical time for the government: Houthi drone attacks on oil export terminals halted hydrocarbon sales, denying the government access to what was by far its largest source of revenue. Its fiscal deficit was further compounded when Houthi authorities began pressuring commercial importers to redirect imports from Aden to Hudaydah in mid-January, costing the government 45-50 billion Yemeni rials per month in customs duties, roughly **equivalent** to salaries of military and security forces operating under their control. A ban on domestically produced cooking gas cylinders manufactured in Marib cut off another source of funds. By mid-summer, the government's position had become critical, and it could no longer afford to keep the lights on. Rolling blackouts across the south fueled protests and political recrimination, and weekly FX auctions were postponed as the value of the rial plummeted.

## Government Unveils Plan to Pay Public Salaries via Yemeni Banks

The government-affiliated Ministry of Finance in Aden issued Circular No. (6) of 2023 to prepare for paying public servant salaries through qualified Yemeni banks. The banks nominated by the CBY-Aden to disburse payments for central and local government employees are the National Bank of Yemen, the Cooperative and Agricultural Credit Bank (CAC Bank), Al-Kuraimi Bank for Islamic Microfinance, Tadhamon International Islamic Bank, Shamil Bank of Yemen and Bahrain, Al-Qutubi Bank for Islamic Microfinance, and the Aden Microfinance Bank. The Ministry of Finance later expanded the list of approved banks to disburse salaries to include Yemen Kuwait Bank, Bin Douk Bank for Microfinance, Hadramawt Commercial Bank, Al-Basiri Microfinance Bank, Saba Islamic Bank, and Al-Inma Bank for Islamic Microfinance.

According to the circular, banks would be selected to distribute payments based on their location and capacity to provide government employees with high-quality financial services. The circular prohibits banks from conducting transactions with money exchangers to facilitate salary payments. It also mandates that government institutions provide the Ministry of Finance with an electronic copy of their payrolls to verify that employees whose names appear are working for the public entity in question. The requirements must be met by the end of the month or August salary payments will be frozen by the ministry.

Several public sector employee unions registered their objection to the proposal. On August 20, the General Syndicates for Teaching and Educational Professions in southern governorates issued a statement demanding a retraction of the decision, saying that collecting salaries from select commercial banks would force teachers to stand in long lines. Another union, the Coordination Council of Unions and Civil Society, called on the Ministry of Finance to continue disbursing salaries through money exchange companies rather than commercial banks.

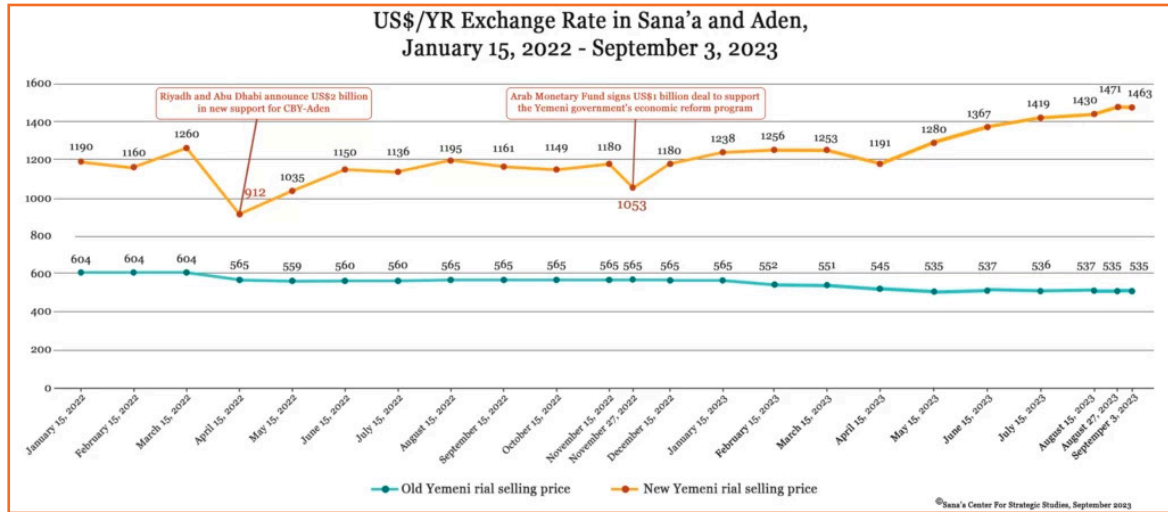
The ministry says the decision will benefit government workers and the economy at large and that it was taken to combat financial and administrative corruption in government institutions and comply with requirements set by foreign donors, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It confirmed the existence of irregularities in the salary lists of civilian, military, and security personnel, which required action to mitigate manipulation of the government's fiscal resources. The ministry has cited several other benefits of paying salaries through formal banking channels. The plan will allow employees to withdraw salaries from any ATM or bank branch rather than having to distribute salaries in cash and in person, which protects against theft. Salary payments via banks would be documented in official records, allowing for easier tracking of payments and review of cases in the event of errors or payment issues. Government employees would also be able to benefit from additional banking services, such as personal loans and credit cards.

## Rial Stabilizes in Govt-Held Areas

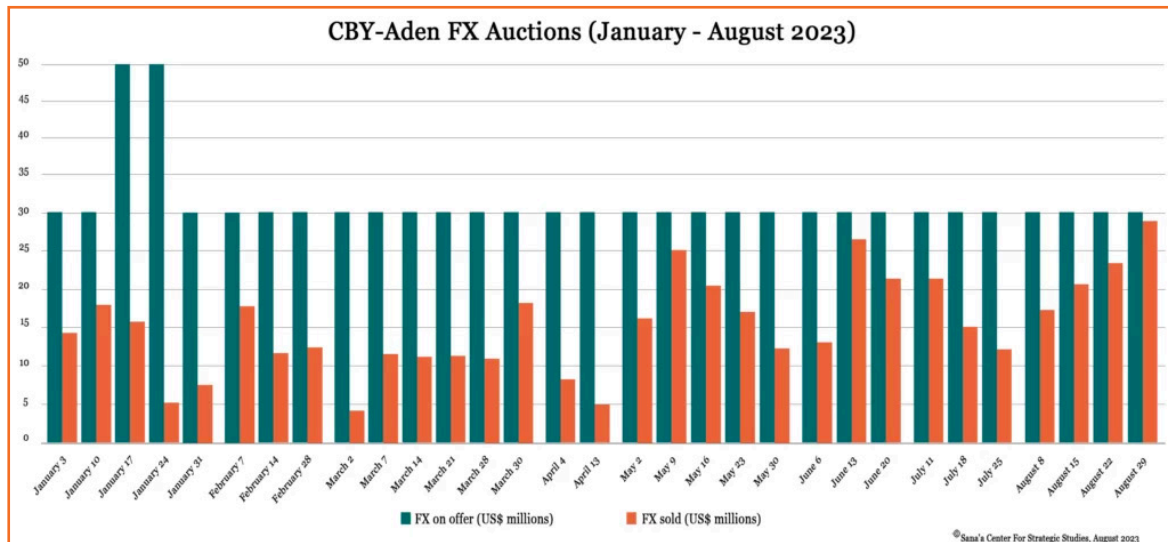
After several months of repeated depreciation, the value of new rials stabilized in August, following the arrival of the first tranche (nearly US\$267 million) of a US\$1.2 billion Saudi grant to support the government's budget early in the month. New rials traded at YR1,438 per US\$1 at the end of July before appreciating to YR1,389 per US\$1 on August 6. Their value would decline gradually throughout the rest of the month, trading at YR1,471 per US\$1 on August 28 before appreciating slightly to YR 1,463 per US\$1 as of September 3.



In Houthi-controlled areas, old rials remained stable, trading around YR535 per US\$1 during the month.



The CBY-Aden held four FX auctions during the month of August. The weekly auctions, which channel hard currency to Yemeni banks to support the import of essential commodities, had been postponed from July 25 to August 8. The central bank’s reserves were running dangerously low before the arrival of new Saudi support at the beginning of the month, and the CBY-Aden said several banks later requested a delay until the rial rebounded further and its value stabilized. The last auction of the month, held on August 29, was subscribed by 97 percent, the highest level of 2023. Since the beginning of the year, 31 FX auctions have been held, with Yemeni banks purchasing US\$483 million (50 percent) of the US\$970 million on offer.



## Power Stations Shut Down in Aden

The General Electricity Corporation in Aden **announced** on August 20 that 80 percent of public and private-owned power stations had been forced to halt electricity generation due to a lack of fuel. All residential neighborhoods of the city are experiencing extended blackouts, with electricity provision declining from six to less than four hours a day. Aden experiences regular power outages, which intensify during the hot summer months when demand for energy increases, deepening the suffering of residents and restricting internal mobility. Their exacerbation has fueled widespread discontent.

The General Electricity Corporation said the government has failed to respond to repeated appeals to supply fuel. Power stations in Abyan and Lahj have been forced to cut electricity, with the General Electricity Corporation in Abyan stating that the governorate is experiencing a complete power outage due to the lack of fuel. Protests over the situation took place in Aden, Abyan, and Lahj. Angry demonstrators blocked roads and burned tires in several neighborhoods of Aden and cities in Lahj. On August 22, the General Electricity Corporation **announced** that 13,000 metric tons of fuel had arrived at the port of Aden, enough to supply the city's power stations for approximately two weeks.

Aden and other governorates under government control have witnessed increasing electricity cuts since the expiration of a Saudi fuel grant in April. In November 2022, the SDRPY began supplying the government with over 1.2 million metric tons of diesel and mazut, valued at US\$422 million. A new US\$1.2 billion Saudi grant was announced in early August to address the government's budget shortfalls, including the purchase of fuel to operate power stations, which is estimated to cost the government US\$75-100 million per month.

## Houthi Authorities Refer Power Stations to Judiciary

The Sana'a-based Ministry of Electricity and Energy **announced** on August 23 that it had referred 18 private power stations to the public prosecutor for violating new electricity tariffs aimed at regulating electricity prices in Houthi-controlled territory. The ministry announced reductions in electricity tariffs on June 21: the Houthi-controlled General Electricity Corporation would sell power to consumers at YR234 per kilowatt-hour, while private generator owners were mandated to sell electricity at YR248 per kilowatt-hour, effective July 1. The price cut was the second since mid-April, when the ministry reduced the kilowatt-hour price for electricity provided by the General Electricity Corporation and private generator owners to YR270 and YR284, respectively.

The tariff reduction came in response to declines in the price of diesel and mazut fuel derivatives used to fuel power stations. A series of campaigns to enforce the electricity tariff have been launched in recent months, leading to the closure of several commercial power stations and the replacement of non-compliant power stations with service from the public utility.

## CBY-Aden Governor Details Govt's Economic Situation

The head of the government-run CBY-Aden, Ahmed Ghaleb, **detailed** the government's current financial state and recent challenges it has faced in an interview with local media. Topics covered in the interview included volatility in the value of new rials in recent months, the utilization of foreign financial support, and controversy surrounding the government's plan to raise the customs exchange rate. Ghaleb acknowledged that the government is running a large fiscal deficit, with total revenues amounting to less than 40 percent of the public sector payroll. He also noted that the cost to purchase fuel to provide electricity in government-held areas exceeds US\$95 million per month.

There are few options available to increase government revenues in the short term. The CBY-Aden is facing difficulties repaying debts, which complicates efforts to obtain external loans or assistance, except for funds channeled from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Ghaleb said the CBY-Aden has approximately US\$110 million available in the form of IMF Special Drawing Rights (SDRs), but there are currently no plans to tap this revenue source, as the government prefers to replenish its foreign currency by resuming oil and gas exports.

On the issue of the planned customs exchange rate hike announced in January, which has garnered public opposition and led to moves by Houthi authorities to entice importers to redirect shipping to Houthi-held ports, Ghaleb confirmed that the government was pressured by foreign donors to raise the rate as a requirement for obtaining external grants and deposits. He argued that the prevailing customs exchange rate, which is below the exchange rate for new rials in the parallel market, is improper policy, as it deprives the government of 50 percent of custom tariffs it could collect, and favors commercial importers over consumers. This is due to the fact that commercial traders tend to price their goods at YR1500 relative to the US dollar, plus a safety margin, to counter fluctuations driven by higher uncertainty in the commodity market.

## Government and UN Agree Plan to Reduce Shipping Insurance Costs

The government **inked** a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) aimed at reducing maritime shipping insurance costs for ships entering government-controlled seaports. Signed on August 13 by Minister of Transport Abdelsalam Humaid and UNDP Regional Director for Arab States Abdullah al-Dardari, the MoU lays out a plan to deposit US\$50 million with the Insurance Protection Club in London. A final agreement is expected to be signed in September.

**According** to Humaid, the cost of shipping insurance for vessels heading to Yemeni ports has increased 16-fold since the onset of the conflict, which has led to the redirection of commercial shipping to other seaports in the region, including Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, Salalah in Oman, and the port of Djibouti. In 2021, the UNDP **estimated** shipping insurance premiums exceeded more than US\$200 million annually. Increased insurance costs have raised transport and logistics costs across supply chains in Yemen. Costs levied on international suppliers and importers are ultimately absorbed by Yemenis, who pay higher prices for imported food commodities.

## Houthis Increase Tariffs on Goods From Govt-Controlled Areas

On August 6, the Houthi-affiliated Ministry of Finance increased taxes and customs fees on goods entering Houthi-controlled territory from government-held areas. According to the decree, the new tax will be set at 100 percent of the total customs value of all imports, up from the 50 percent tax currently collected at Houthi-controlled border crossings. The increase took effect on August 8 and will affect all traders importing goods through government-held territory.

The move comes as part of an ongoing struggle between Houthi authorities and the government over customs revenue, with the former pressuring importers to redirect shipments to the port of Hudaydah. The new fees will complicate the movement of goods across zones of control and ultimately lead to increases in commodity prices. The Houthis have moved to collect such tariffs before. In 2018, when the government reduced customs tariffs by 30 percent on imports, the Houthi authorities acted to erase the reduction by collecting the 30 percent difference. In March 2021, the Houthi authorities increased customs fees from 30 to 50 percent on commercial imports from government-held areas.

## Sana'a Center Editorial

# In Gulf Rivalry, Yemen is Collateral Damage

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Recent revelations of bad blood between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates confirm what observers of Yemeni politics have long known – that the relationship between the two countries leading the military campaign to restore the internationally recognized government has deteriorated to an alarming degree. On the ground, the rift is contributing to political and economic instability, and escalating conflict between the Gulf powers' respective proxy forces.

The Wall Street Journal recently reported Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) stunned journalists at an off-the-record briefing by describing the UAE as having “stabbed us (Saudi Arabia) in the back,” and threatened to take action, echoing its 2017 boycott of Qatar. The diplomatic embargo and economic blockade of Doha failed, but another such campaign could incur substantial collateral damage. The place where Saudi-UAE animosity will play out – indeed, where it already has – is in Yemen.

The strained relations between the coalition partners first manifested in 2018, when fighting broke out in Aden between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Saudi-backed government of then-president Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Hadi's government was nominally supported by both parties, but in 2017 the UAE established the STC to protect its interests in the south. After driving government forces from the interim capital in August 2019, the STC became the de facto power in Aden. The Riyadh Agreement was signed in November 2019 in an effort to establish a new modus vivendi.

But in April 2022, Saudi Arabia set up the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) to replace Hadi's ineffective government, which quickly signed a UN-brokered ceasefire. The truce with the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*) has largely held, even after its acrimonious expiration last October, but ushered in a period of renewed infighting among coalition forces as Saudi-UAE relations deteriorated toward a breaking point. Last August, STC-aligned forces and the UAE-backed Giants Brigades ousted government forces aligned with the Saudi-backed Islamist Islah party from [Shabwa](#) and parts of Abyan, as PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi looked on helplessly.

Alarm bells really began to ring in September 2022, when the STC started agitating against Islah-aligned government forces in Hadramawt and Al-Mahra in a bid to impose its writ throughout the territory of the former South Yemen. Viewing these vast eastern governorates, with which it shares a long border, as strategically important to its security, Saudi Arabia was in no mind to give in to the STC's demands, which centered on removing 1st Military Region forces from their headquarters in Seyoun.

Riyadh gradually ramped up its response – mobilizing Hadrami tribes, launching development projects, and building a new force to operate under Al-Alimi's nominal control in areas around Aden. The STC upped the ante in May by forming a new presidium, even including two members of the PLC, issuing a [charter](#) asserting its ambitions, and holding a southern national assembly

in Mukalla in coastal Hadramawt. Saudi Arabia then went one step further, sponsoring the creation of a Hadramawt National Council whose ambition of autonomy within a federal state is clearly designed to ruin the STC's plans, and backing up Al-Alimi with a raft of development projects in Hadramawt and Al-Mahra.

In an effort to reconcile the two sides, the Biden administration set up a meeting in May between Mohammed bin Salman and Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, the UAE national security advisor. The Saudi leader apparently promised some form of concession on Yemen in return for a UAE agreement not to jeopardize the de facto ceasefire while Saudi-Houthi negotiations continued. But reports say the crown prince later told his advisers privately not to change tack, declaring: "I don't trust them anymore."

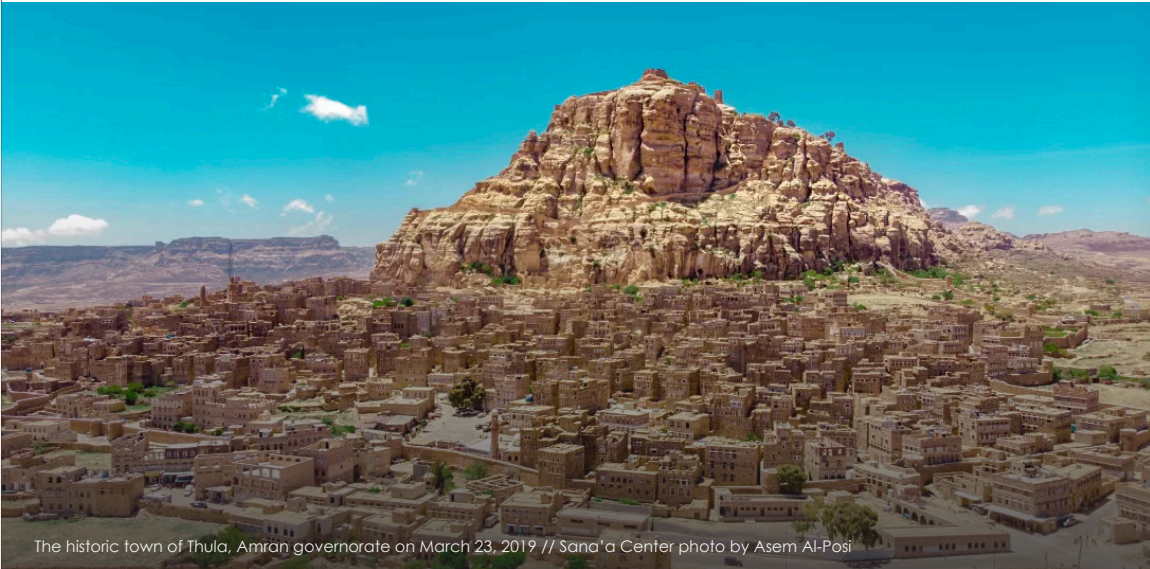
To be clear, the dispute extends beyond Yemen. The two Gulf monarchies are engaged in a multifaceted **political and economic rivalry** over regional leadership and their role as global players. The UAE threatened to exit the oil cartel OPEC after Saudi Arabia strong-armed members into agreeing to production cuts last October. Saudi Arabia has warned foreign businesses they must locate their Gulf headquarters inside the kingdom. But the consequences of the rift are most visible and most damaging in Yemen. Abu Dhabi gives the impression of wanting to spoil the Saudi leadership's plan to overcome the stigma of its disastrous intervention in Yemen and reconfigure the country to permanently remove its southern neighbor as a threat.

The question is what this will mean for Yemen. Riyadh hopes to conclude a formal agreement with the Houthis that would end Saudi-Houthi hostilities and establish a formal peace process between the Houthis and the government, which Saudi Arabia, and other regional and international actors, would then support with development programs. Al-Alimi has been tasked with implementing this Saudi vision, and international pressure on the STC to let the process play out has been intense, **particularly in recent weeks**. The UAE is the main sponsor of four of the PLC's eight members, who will likely remonstrate against the terms of an agreement if and when it happens, but the international community is clearly behind Riyadh's program to conclude its involvement in the war and push the parties into a formal peace process.

On the ground it's another story. Any of the armed groups under the control of PLC members could agitate against Houthi or Saudi and government-backed forces in any number of locations, should they view the new arrangements as unsatisfactory. Riyadh seems to have prepared itself for this eventuality by placing the Saudi-backed Nation's Shield forces under Al-Alimi's control, but the STC's actions in Hadramawt clearly worry the Saudi leadership. The Houthis may view the fracturing of the alliance as an opportunity, and there are already signs of their mobilizing for conflict in Marib, Taiz, and Lahj. Disorganization could provide openings for other groups too: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is currently more focused on government and STC forces in the south than targeting the Houthis.

The door for provoking continued conflict on the ground is wide open: low-level attrition has the power to undermine whatever gains are made in peace talks. Absent a return to a broader conflagration in Yemen, this is perhaps the greatest danger of the Saudi-UAE rift – no war, but no peace, and the slow draining of hope after what finally looked like a chance for deconfliction and a measure of stability.





The historic town of Thula, Amran governorate on March 23, 2019 // Sana'a Center photo by Asem Al-Posi

## Analysis

# What Remains of the Hashid's Power? The Rise and Fall of Yemen's Most Powerful Tribe

Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen

## Introduction

A decade of seismic shifts in Yemen's political landscape has seen the influence of one of its most powerful tribes wane. Among Yemenis and observers alike, however, developments within the Hashid tribal confederation<sup>[1]</sup> continue to be closely watched, and merit closer scrutiny. The Hashid's large presence in Amran,<sup>[2]</sup> which borders the governorate of Sana'a from the north, has historically been instrumental in defining who controls the capital. The tribe's backing of republicans during the 1962 revolution<sup>[3]</sup> and ensuing civil war gave the Hashid unparalleled privileges in the decades that followed. Three out of five presidents<sup>[4]</sup> of North Yemen hailed from the Hashid, including Ali Abdullah Saleh, whose reign spanned more than three decades into the unified Republic of Yemen.

[1] Along with the Bakil confederation, the Hashid are a branch of the Hamdan tribe. Together, they form the two most prominent tribal confederations in the areas north of and surrounding Sana'a, commonly referred to as the "Land of the Hamdan."

[2] The Hashid confederation branches out into four main offshoots: Bani Suraim, Al Usaimat, Kharif, and Adhr. Located in the governorate of Amran, this group of tribes are also known as the "Little Hashid." There are other branches of Hashid, such as the Dhulaymah tribe, as well as many allies, including the Sahaar tribe, the Khawlan bin Aamir tribe, the Sanhan tribe, the Bilad Al Rous, and Bani Bahloul. Although it has roots in five governorates (Sana'a, Amran, Al-Jawf, Hajjah, and Sa'ada), the confederation's strongest presence is in the governorate of Amran.

[3] Yemen's republican revolution erupted on the morning of September 26, 1962, giving rise to a protracted civil war fought between the republicans, supported by Egypt, and the royalists, supported by Saudi Arabia.

[4] Five presidents ruled North Yemen between 1962 and 1990, three of whom were from the Hashid confederation. These include Abdullah al-Sallal (1962-1967), Ahmad al-Ghashmi (1978) and Ali Abdullah Saleh (1978-2012).



Today, debates among Yemenis on what remains of Hashid's influence, and the tribe's relationship with the Houthis group (*Ansar Allah*), abound. Speculation on whether the Hashid eased the Houthis' capture of Sana'a in 2014, and whether they abandoned Saleh when he broke his alliance with the Houthis in 2017, remains rife. In July of this year, reports started to circulate on social media, announcing the appointment of a new paramount sheikh, loyal to the Houthis,<sup>[5]</sup> replacing Himyar al-Ahmar, who in January succeeded his brother Sadiq as leader of the Hashid. Although these reports were unsubstantiated, they once again put the spotlight on the Hashid and point to the enduring interest among Yemenis in the role of northern tribes vis-à-vis ruling authorities in Sana'a.

This analysis gives a brief historical timeline of the rise of the Hashid, charting its decades-long dominance of Yemeni politics. It then goes on to describe their fragmentation in the last years of Ali Abdullah Saleh's reign, and downfall from power following the takeover of Sana'a by the Houthis in 2014. To conclude, it looks at recent developments within the confederation, shedding light on the role of the Hashid today. Observations are based on extensive research, a review of the relevant literature, as well as interviews conducted with members of the Hashid tribal confederation.<sup>[6]</sup>

## The Hashid in Power: The Al-Ahmar Triangle (1978-2000)

***"He is my President and I am his Sheikh."***<sup>[7]</sup>

*Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar (1933-2007)*

Ali Abdullah Saleh became President of North Yemen in 1978, embarking on a term no one expected to last. Saleh was the third Yemeni president with a tribal background and the third from the Hashid confederation. Like Abdullah al-Sallal, the first president of North Yemen, he came from Sanhan, one of the smaller tribes of Hashid.<sup>[8]</sup> Defying all odds, and in spite of the two presidential assassinations that preceded his reign,<sup>[9]</sup> Saleh ended up ruling Yemen for more than three decades, in a tacit partnership with two other prominent figures from the Hashid.

Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, leader of the Hashid tribal confederation, and Yemen's second most powerful man at the time,<sup>[10]</sup> and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a high-powered military commander from the Hashid, controlled the reins of power within the state together with Saleh.

[5] Various Yemeni news websites circulated the story on social media platforms, including Twitter and YouTube. "Sana'a announces the Hashid tribes have chosen Sheikh Ameen Atef as their Sheikh and Sheikh al-Ahmar Threatens War [AR]," July 9, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdE2FoeH3UA>; "Al-Houthi and the Attempt to Reconstitute the Hashid on his Terms [AR]," Al-Masdar, July 18, 2023, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/277638>; "The Hashid abandons the Al-Ahmar family [AR]," Sawt al-Shoura, July 10, 2023, [www.sawtalshouara.com/اخبار-محلية-حاشد-تتخلى-عن-آل-الأحمر/](http://www.sawtalshouara.com/اخبار-محلية-حاشد-تتخلى-عن-آل-الأحمر/)

[6] Confidential Interviews were conducted by the author between February and July 2023, primarily via Zoom, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp. These include interviews with two Hashid tribesmen, one sheikh from the Hashid, and a former high-ranking official from the General People's Congress Party (GPC). In addition, a WhatsApp interview was also conducted with Adel Dashela, a prominent researcher on Yemen's tribes.

[7] This quote by Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar is widely cited to illustrate the relationship between Ali Abdullah Saleh and Sheikh Abdullah. Tawfiq al-Shanwa, "What is left of the position of Sheikh of the President in Yemen [AR]," Independent Arabia, January 14, 2023, <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/411171/>

[8] Tribes in Yemen can be political and social alliances, not just groups of people with a common ancestry. Author's confidential WhatsApp interview with tribal figure and former GPC member, February 23, 2023.

[9] Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim al-Hamdi was assassinated in 1977, within three years of becoming president, paving the way for President Ahmad al-Ghashmi, who was assassinated in 1978, just six months into his presidency.

[10] Adel al-Ahmadi, "The Legacy of Abdullah al-Ahmar Continues in Yemen," The New Arab, December 30, 2014, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/legacy-abdullah-al-ahmar-continues-yemen>

As close partners to the president, their influence transcended their respective political, military, and social status, and the alliance turned them into a core part of the country's power structure and foundational poles of the regime.

At the height of their rule, the relationship between Saleh and Sheikh Abdullah in particular was a subject of intrigue among many Yemenis. Questions around who was more powerful (the state or the tribe?) and who exercised higher authority (the sheikh or the president?) dominated many a conversation among Yemen's political and social elites. Their alliance would prove indispensable. Sheikh Abdullah, defying Saudi Arabia,<sup>[11]</sup> one of his key allies, supported Saleh when he sided with Iraq during its invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Saleh was also given unbridled support by Sheikh Abdullah against the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP). It was in the conflict with the YSP, during the country's post-unification political crisis that led to the civil war in 1994, that the alliance between Saleh, Sheikh Abdullah, and Ali Mohsen was at its most unified and cohesive, with all three using the Al-Ahmar name despite not being blood relatives. Such was the bond that it became commonplace for the media to call Ali Mohsen President Saleh's "half-brother."<sup>[12]</sup>

With the unification of North and South Yemen came the legalization of a multi-party system. In a televised interview, Sheikh Abdullah, in characteristic frankness, once said that it was Saleh who personally asked him to establish the Islah party,<sup>[13]</sup> which included the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood but which also garnered crucial non-ideological support from Yemen's northern tribes.<sup>[14]</sup> The founding of the Islah party would enable Saleh to coalesce support against the YSP since he, as a partner to the former ruling party in South Yemen in post-unification Yemen, could not do so alone.

In the aftermath of the victory of northern forces in the 1994 civil war, Saleh's quest to monopolize power soured ties between him and Islah, but did little to sever the bond with Sheikh Abdullah. Pragmatic calculations based on tribal alliances took precedence over political affiliations, and the partnership continued even when tensions escalated during their sons' competition for power.

## Fractures: Rise of the Second Generation (2000-2011)

The 2000s witnessed the beginning of the rise of a new generation to positions of power, notably Saleh's eldest son Ahmad, and his nephews, Yahya, Tareq, and Ammar. Sheikh Abdullah's sons were also playing larger political and business roles, leading to competition among the younger generation over who controlled Yemen's wealth.<sup>[15]</sup>

[11] Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar's close relationship with Saudi Arabia was somewhat contradictory, with some arguing that his staunch support for the republic during the 1962 revolution was driven out of personal motivation, as revenge against the Imamate, following the murder of both his father and brother during the Hashid rebellion against the Imam Ahmed in 1958. Rim Mugahed, "Tribes and the State in Yemen," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 31, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/16156>

[12] "Yemeni president's half-brother confirms assassination attempt [AR]," Al-Riyadh, April 6, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/620899>

[13] Al Shaibani, Muhammad Abdulwahab, "The Islah Party: From Its Founding to the State of Deteriorating Alliances [AR]," Belqees Net, September 16, 2022, [www.belqees.net/articles/حزب-الاصلاح-من-التاسيس-الى-خارطة-التحالفات-المتناكدة](http://www.belqees.net/articles/حزب-الاصلاح-من-التاسيس-الى-خارطة-التحالفات-المتناكدة)

[14] It is important to note that not all northern tribes were a unified bloc. One of the most prominent tribal leaders of the Bakil confederation, Sheikh Sinan Abu Luhoum, along with a prominent Hashid tribal leader, Sheikh Mujahid Abu Shawarib, criticised the post-unification political crisis, and the role played by the Al-Ahmars and Saleh, and issued a statement claiming that the cause of the crisis was a conflict over power and had nothing to do with the interests or unity of the country. Sadiq Nasher, "Sheikh Sinan Abu Luhoum: My Relationship Had Its Ups and Downs [AR]," Elaph, September 11, 2007, <https://elaph.com/Web/NewsPapers/2007/9/263113.html>

[15] Sarah Philips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (Routledge, 2011) Chapter 3.

The conflict between the second generation of Salehs and Al-Ahmars started to show the first cracks at the top of the alliance, especially when Saleh started to prepare his son for the presidency.

In preparation for his succession, Ahmad was given command of the Special Security forces, a paramilitary force under the Ministry of Interior, and the Republican Guard, a unit that became the largest and best trained within Yemen's military. Saleh's nephews Yahya, Tareq, and Ammar were also given prominent roles in the security establishment. Yahya, who was married to Saleh's eldest daughter, was put in charge of the Central Security Organization, the largest security force in Sana'a. Ammar held several security and military positions and was the de facto commander of the National Security Bureau (NSB), the most important security and intelligence agency in Yemen,<sup>[16]</sup> while Tareq commanded the president's personal guard.<sup>[17]</sup>

Sheikh Abdullah's sons were also gaining prominence. A running joke among Yemenis at the time was that the Al-Ahmar family bloc in parliament was larger than that of most political parties. Four of Sheikh Abdullah's sons were members of parliament, while Sheikh Abdullah himself was the speaker.<sup>[18]</sup> His sons Hamid and Madhhag had strong ideological leanings, which guaranteed their influence among the Muslim Brotherhood-influenced cadres of Islah, but it was Hamid, wealthy and ambitious, who held the most sway. On top of being a prominent leader of Islah, Hamid was also a wealthy businessman whose empire included SabaFon, Yemen's telecommunication company.<sup>[19]</sup> Hussein, another son of Sheikh Abdullah, wielded a different sort of power, primarily among his tribesmen,<sup>[20]</sup> while two other sons, Hashem and Himyar, were personal bodyguards of President Saleh and members of his General People's Congress (GPC) party.<sup>[21]</sup>

As growing competition between the second generation of Al-Ahmars and Salehs caused increasing fractures between the two camps, Yemen's 2003 parliamentary elections marked a key turning point. Saleh decided that the GPC would run in districts of Amran, a stronghold of the Hashid. Up until then, these were non-competitive districts, typically held by loyalists of Sheikh Abdullah and his sons. Nominating the GPC was a symbolic turning point,<sup>[22]</sup> constituting a challenge to the authority of the Al-Ahmars.<sup>[23]</sup>

In retaliation, during Yemen's 2006 presidential elections, Hamid al-Ahmar mobilized the Islah party and a coalition of opposition parties (collectively known as the Joint Meeting Parties), to support Faisal bin Shamlan, the presidential candidate running against Saleh. Shamlan was of Hadrami origin and known for his integrity.

[16] This was despite the fact that Ammar was actually Deputy Chief of the NSB. Chief of the NSB Ali al-Ansi would reportedly take his orders from Ammar.

[17] "President Saleh's Relatives in Power," Al Jazeera Net, September 11, 2007, <https://1-a1072.azureedge.net/news/2011/3/6/السلطة-في-اليمني-الرئيس-اليميني-في-السلطة>

[18] Members of the Yemeni Parliament (2003 – 2009 Elections), National Information Center, February 27, 2023, <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https://yemen-nic.info/contents/Politics/memdername2003.xls>

[19] Noman Mustapha, "Ali Abdullah Saleh 30 [AR]," Independent Arabia, October 8, 2019, <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/61936/آراء/علي-عبد-الله-30-صالح>

[20] Unlike his father and most of his brothers, Hussein spent most of his time in his ancestral village among tribesmen, and became well-known for being generous, traits that earned him a special place among members of the Hashid tribe. Author's confidential WhatsApp Interview with a tribesman and former high-level GPC member, February 23, 2023.

[21] Saleh Al-Baidhani, "The Rise and Fall of the Al Ahmar Family [AR]," Independent Arabia, February 8, 2014, <https://alarab.co.uk/-الاحمر-في-اليمن-وقسوطهم>

[22] Yemen's 2003 elections demonstrated that the state had the capacity to challenge the authority of the sheikhs. It also showed how the Al-Ahmar's residence in the capital (with the exception of Hussein), far from their villages and tribal areas, had created a weakness that could be exploited politically.

[23] Author's confidential WhatsApp interview with a tribesman and former high-level GPC member, February 23, 2023.

This would be the first time Saleh faced genuine competition in an election, with popular rallies supporting his opponent and an increase in the rhetoric against him.<sup>[24]</sup> Saleh won re-election that year, but the opposition continued to cast a shadow on the results.<sup>[25]</sup>

A year later, in December 2007, Sheikh Abdullah passed away in a hospital in Saudi Arabia, passing on the tribe's sheikhdom to his son Sadiq. Abdullah's death would have critical ramifications. He had been able to exert control over his sons, playing a crucial role in preventing disputes from spiraling out of control. More crucially, he was one of the few individuals that Saleh listened to; his death took away the most important barrier to direct confrontation between the two sides.

## Fragmentation (2011)

The 2011 wave of the Arab Spring protests spread to Yemen at a time when it was ripe for popular protest. The country was already witnessing protests in the south, a broad political and civil society movement opposed Saleh in Sana'a, and the regime was contending with a military rebellion in the north and mounting security threats posed by Al-Qaeda.

By March 2011, the protest movement had expanded, garnering the support of the opposition parties, which led to the breakdown of authority. Protests gained momentum when Ali Mohsen defected to join the revolution on March 21 in response to the Friday of Dignity Massacre.<sup>[26]</sup> Saleh clung to power, but Hamid, using the influence of Islah and the opposition coalition, rallied political and financial support, widely covering Yemen's protests on Suhail TV, a channel affiliated with Islah. With funding from Qatar, his brother Hussein, supported several revolutionary festivals.<sup>[27]</sup> In May 2011, clashes were reported between the Central Security Organization forces and Al-Ahmar guards, headed by Sadiq, whose main residence was next to the Central Security Organization's headquarters. All restraint was abandoned, ending with the al-Ahmar family home in Sana'a being attacked. Sadiq then famously vowed to force Saleh to leave the country "barefoot."<sup>[28]</sup> The final blow came with an attempt to assassinate President Saleh on June 3, 2011, inside the presidential palace mosque, during Friday prayers. Saleh accused several of al-Ahmar's sons and Ali Mohsen of being behind the attempt. The decades-long alliance was now broken beyond repair.

[24] Not all of the Al-Ahmar clan partook in mobilizing against Saleh's re-election. Sheikh Abdullah, who was ill at the time, gave a famous interview on national TV, in which he pledged his support for Saleh despite pointed criticism of his rule, using a well-known Yemeni saying: "Better the devil you know than the person you don't." Al-Baidhani, Saleh, "The Rise and Fall of the Al Ahmar Family [AR]," Independent Arabia, February 8, 2014, <https://alarab.co.uk/قصة-صعود-أل-الأحمر-في-اليمن-وسقوطهم>

[25] A source close to Saleh confirmed that the announcement of the election results was delayed because President Saleh's advisors were trying to dissuade him from claiming a victory with more than 90 percent of the vote, noting that the popular support for Shamlan might make a result with less than 80 percent more believable, which is where the 77 percent result was approved. Interview with a former GPC official, February 15, 2023.

[26] The Friday of Dignity massacre was the deadliest attack on demonstrators of Yemen's yearlong uprising. Over the course of three hours, gunmen killed at least 45 protesters and wounded 200, while state security forces made no serious effort to stop the carnage. Human Rights Watch, "Unpunished Massacre: Yemen's Failed Response to the Friday of Dignity Killings," February 12, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/02/12/unpunished-massacre/yemens-failed-response-friday-dignity-killings#:~:text=The Friday of Dignity massacre, in which gunmen in civilian,demonstrators of Yemen's 2011 uprising>

[27] Author's confidential WhatsApp interview with a Hashid tribesman and politician, February 15, 2023.

[28] The Al-Ahmar clan had by then distanced themselves from Ali Abdullah Saleh. Adding insult to injury, they referred to him by his original family name, Affash. This was a symbolic gesture meant to insult Saleh and stress the Al-Ahmars' superiority. While the sons of Sheikh al-Ahmar were direct descendants of the Al-Ahmar clan, Saleh came from a clan with lower social status. "Sheikh Sadiq Al Ahmar to Al Arabiya: Saleh Must Leave With Nothing [AR]," Al Arabiya, May 26, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_fX5v4b\\_qxQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fX5v4b_qxQ)

## Downfall (2012-2014)

Saleh officially relinquished power in February 2012, ending his 34-year reign as president. For the Al-Ahmars and Ali Mohsen this was a major victory, but events would soon show that this was a complete fracturing of the ruling political hierarchy, one that would soon lead to everyone's downfall – the Al-Ahmar clan included.

In an unprecedented turn of events, Saleh allied himself with the Houthis, against whom the government had fought a series of conflicts in the 2000s, collectively known as the Sa'ada Wars. In the Houthis Saleh found a suitable ally to pursue revenge against the parties he held responsible for his toppling – enemies turned allies in particular joined forces against their common foe, Islah, which Saleh blamed for spearheading the protests in 2011, along with the Al-Ahmar family and Ali Mohsen. Of all the motives they shared, however, their primary goal was their quest to thwart the political transition process. For Saleh, who wanted to prove the failure of the 2011 uprisings that led to his downfall, the collapse of the political process was personal. The Houthis, on the other hand, knew that they were unlikely to succeed in elections, and that they could gain influence commensurate with their military power through force of arms.<sup>[29]</sup>

Among the Hashid confederation, growing divisions and increased fragmentation came to a head. Sadiq did not have his father's commanding presence, nor was he able to control his brothers and their political aspirations. Despite Al-Ahmar's long rule of the Hashid tribe, a large part of the Hashid supported Saleh.<sup>[30]</sup> As the Houthis marched toward Sana'a, most of the Hashid's sheikhs were either passive or sided with Saleh, including key figures such as Sheikh Ali al-Julaidan and Sheikh Mabkhout al-Mashriqi of the Bani Suraim, the largest of Hashid's sub-tribes, in addition to Kahlan Abu Shawarib, son of Sheikh Mujahid Abu Shawarib, from the Kharif tribe.<sup>[31]</sup>

Fragmentation and a failure to unify against Houthi expansion ultimately weakened the tribes' and led to their defeat in Adhr and Al-Usaimat in Amran in early 2014.<sup>[32]</sup> The Bani Suraim tribes then reached an agreement with the Houthis in February, known as the "Black Line Agreement,"<sup>[33]</sup> a tribal custom that allows another party to pass their lands without resistance.<sup>[34]</sup> The Houthis proceeded to take over the Hashid's strongholds north of Sana'a and bomb the ancestral home of the Al-Ahmar family in Amran the same month,<sup>[35]</sup> a symbolic development marking a new era in Yemen's political landscape.

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[29] Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, "Yemen's Houthis and Former President Saleh: An Alliance of Animosity," Arab Reform Initiative, October 7, 2016, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/yemens-houthis-and-former-president-saleh-an-alliance-of-animosity/>

[30] This was for a number of reasons. The first is that most of the sheikhs' financial interests were linked to the authorities, which had been under the control of Saleh until then. The second is that many tribesmen blamed the Al-Ahmar family for the total absence of services in Amran. Most of the Hashid remain largely uneducated and poor due to their sheikhs wanting to maintain a supply of fighters and guards. Third, support of Saleh's affiliated media and the Houthi propaganda machine heavily influenced people into believing they were against corruption and willing to resolve tribal vendettas and provide security.

[31] Writer and Hashid tribesman Adel Dashela, Whatsapp interview, March 1, 2023.

[32] "Al-Houthi and the Attempt to Reconstitute the Hashid on his Terms [AR]," Al-Masdar, July 18 2023, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/277638>

[33] "Official in charge of the "Black Line" agreement with the Houthis challenges the militia and does this act [AR]," Al-Arabi Al-Yemeni, November 26, 2016, <https://www.elyamnelaraby.com/148171>

[34] Ibid.

[35] "Houthis blow up Sheikh al-Ahmar's house in al-Khumri in Amran [AR]," Al-Masdar, February 2, 2014, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/54286>

Following the takeover of Sana'a in September 2014, the Houthis went on to establish a tribal cohesion council<sup>[36]</sup> led by Dhaifallah Rassam<sup>[37]</sup> from the Khawlan bin Amir tribe.<sup>[38]</sup> Rassam is from Sa'ada, the Houthi stronghold, and one of the most important tribal allies of the Houthis, linked to the Al-Houthi family by marriage. The appointment of Rassam as the council's leader did not follow customary tribal practice,<sup>[39]</sup> and Rassam was ultimately imposed on the tribes, a tactic of political manipulation employed by the Imams and Saleh.<sup>[40]</sup> Aware of the critical importance of winning over the tribes to secure political influence, the Houthis continued to appoint new sheikhs and impose them on Yemen's tribes in an effort to secure control.<sup>[41]</sup> However, whereas Saleh, proficient in tribal codes, bought loyalty, the Houthis, who do not honor the values of equality customarily espoused by tribes, and who believe Hashemites are superior to the rest of Yemeni society, resorted to coercion by force.

Saleh was killed by Houthi forces on December 4, 2017, shortly after announcing his break with the group. None of the Hashid tribal confederation came to his rescue.<sup>[42]</sup> In the aftermath of his assassination, many Hashid sheikhs suffered extensive humiliation at the hands of the Houthi authorities, including those who had facilitated the Houthi takeover of Amran, and later Sana'a. Tribal leaders were marginalized and demeaned through kidnap, imprisonment, and the blowing up of their homes.<sup>[43]</sup>

## What of the Hashid Now?

On January 6, 2023, Sadiq al-Ahmar passed away. The absence of Houthi leaders at his funeral in Sana'a served as telling evidence of the tension between the Hashid and the Houthi authorities, and the latter were seen as having crossed a red line by disrespecting Yemeni traditions that call for overcoming differences in times of mourning. Among the Hashid, anger and resentment against the Houthis' unilateral and repressive rule, and their tactics of humiliation, is growing. Tribesmen have noted how they used to complain about the rule of Saleh and the Al-Ahmar family but now "yearn for the old days." In their words, at least they didn't suffer the "humiliation and terror" they face today.<sup>[44]</sup>

This goes some way in explaining the mass attendance of tribesmen at Sadiq's funeral, which was unlikely to have been solely down to his own legacy. Sadiq, in the end, was unable to resolve or alleviate the divisions within the tribe. Following his death, a swift agreement was reached

[36] Tribal councils are formed by those reaching political power to show solidarity with the tribes and forge relationships with prominent tribal leaders who will rally their tribesmen for support in case of war.

[37] Adel Dashela, "Northern Yemeni Tribes during the Eras of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi Movement: A Comparative Study," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/coercing-compliance-houthis-and-tribes-northern-yemen>

[38] The first fighters supporting the Houthis in the Saada wars (2004-2010) were from the Khawlan tribe.

[39] Adel Dashela, "Coercing Compliance: The Houthis and the Tribes of Northern Yemen," Fikra Forum, November 6, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/coercing-compliance-houthis-and-tribes-northern-yemen>

[40] During Saleh's time it became common to refer to Sheikh Abdullah as the sheikh of all Yemeni tribal sheikhs, a media creation that bore no resonance among tribes, and which caused resentment among the non-Hashid tribes, who saw it as an attempt by the regime to impose a Hashid sheikh on them.

[41] Adel Dashela, "Coercing Compliance: The Houthis and the Tribes of Northern Yemen," Fikra Forum, November 6, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/coercing-compliance-houthis-and-tribes-northern-yemen>

[42] There are a number of reasons why none of the Hashid tribes came to Saleh's rescue. The Houthis had by then succeeded in attracting to their side some of the important tribes around Sana'a. Second, it had become clear that the military balance was in favour of the Houthis, and there was no point in fighting a losing battle. Third, Saleh's shifting political positions, especially in his last years, made people lose trust in him.

[43] Adel Dashela, "Coercing Compliance: The Houthis and the Tribes of Northern Yemen," Fikra Forum, November 6, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/coercing-compliance-houthis-and-tribes-northern-yemen>

[44] Author's confidential interviews via Zoom and Facebook with Hashid tribesmen and sheikh, July 11-12, 2023.



for Himyar al-Ahmar, the only son of Sheikh Abdullah still residing in Yemen, to become the new paramount sheikh of the Hashid. His choice as the ruling sheikh carries several implications.<sup>[45]</sup> Himyar does not have a charismatic presence, nor is he influential, but his election ensures that tribal unity is maintained. Choosing Himyar was also a message to the Houthis, to whom the al-Ahmar clan continues to represent a threat. One Hashid tribesman noted how despite the fact he personally opposed the al-Ahmar clan, he agreed to support Himyar's election in order to challenge the Houthis.<sup>[46]</sup>

Just six months after the appointment of Himyar as the new head of the Hashid, news started to circulate about the alleged replacement of Himyar with Ameen Atef.<sup>[47][48]</sup> Houthi leaders neither denied nor confirmed the news. Hashid tribesmen and sheikhs expressed their surprise and denied the alleged replacement,<sup>[49]</sup> noting that these were rumors, and likely a trial balloon by the Houthi group to increase pressure on the Hashid, or at least to push Himyar – who refuses to acknowledge their legitimacy – to accept some of their demands, such as resuming work in parliament.<sup>[50]</sup>

The last decade of momentous political shifts in Yemen has led to the downfall of the Hashid confederation, which no longer holds the reins of power in Yemen. Still, the Hashid continues to be an important political force to watch. Lest we forget, in 1959, amid growing anger and resentment against the ruler's oppression of the tribes, the Hashid rose against Imam Ahmed,<sup>[51]</sup> and later became the closest ally of the republican revolution that followed. With this historical precedent in mind, the jury is still out on whether the Hashid constitute a threat to the Houthi authorities in Sana'a.

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Author's confidential personal interview with Hashid tribeman, July 11, 2023.

[47] "Hashid Tribes Choose Sheikh Ameen Atef as their Sheikh [AR]," Aden al-Ghad, July 9 2023, <https://adengad.net/posts/690331>

[48] Ameen Atef, who is not an actual sheikh, is from the tribe of Bani Suraim in Amran.

[49] Author's interviews via Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger with two tribesmen and a sheikh, July 10, 2023.

[50] Sarman Badeel, Twitter post, July 11, 2023, <https://twitter.com/SRMd126/status/1678828924246061066?s=20> <https://twitter.com/SRMd126/status/1678828924246061066?s=20>

[51] Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, "Memoirs of Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar," Sana'a, Horizons House for Printing and Publishing, 2007.



An elderly woman wearing a traditional costume (sitar) in the Old City of Sana'a on February 8, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Asem Al Posi

## Q&A

# Yemeni Women and Changes in Public Space Over Time: An Interview with Helen Lackner

Helen Lackner is one of the foremost scholars focused on the history of the conflict in Yemen. A renowned and prolific author, she lived and worked in Yemen for more than 15 years, working on social aspects of rural development. Currently a non-resident fellow at the Sana'a Center, Lackner sat down to detail observable changes to women's daily lives and dress since the 1970s during her time in the country.

**Sana'a Center (SC): You worked and traveled extensively in Yemen prior to unification in 1990. What was the focus of your work during that period?**

**Lackner:** I lived in Yemen at different times and in different places between 1977 and 1990. In the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), known as South Yemen, I worked in various institutions in the education and cultural sectors, and I traveled widely throughout the country, interviewing people, observing, and collecting information for the book I later published on the PDRY.<sup>[1]</sup> In the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), known as North Yemen, I worked in various rural development projects in different governorates and, of course, spent time in the major cities. Prior to unification, the two states had different policies with respect to women, though daily life for women was fairly similar in rural areas, with more pronounced differences in the major cities.

[1] Helen Lackner, "PDR Yemen, Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia," Ithaca Press, London, 1985

**SC: The PDRY was known to have more liberal gender policies than the YAR. What were your impressions of women in South Yemen at the time?**

**Lackner:** In the late 1970s and 1980s, in Aden itself, during working hours, one came across many women employed in the education sector or in government offices, though rarely in senior positions. When I later worked at Aden University, it was clear there were definitely fewer women than men in the administration, although more women were employed in the health and education sectors. Aden University's College of Education already had a majority of women students, and by the late 1980s a casual visitor would justifiably have been misled into thinking that it was a women's institution, given how few male students were seen there.

In the mornings, at work, women wore 'western' style clothing, including a head covering, while students wore uniforms. The only women wearing chadors in the early hours of the day were those working as helpers in the home, or employed in other lower-status activities. In the afternoons, by contrast, most women usually wore deras, a loose-fitted cotton voile garment that Adeni women commonly wear as a house dress, or at formal events such as wedding parties. Women of all social groups and statuses wore the chador outdoors. Deras had to be covered by something more discreet when in public places. The chador might need some explanation. Now commonly worn in Iran, the chador is a large black garment worn over the head and shoulders, with one half far longer than the other, and is now hardly present in Yemen. I do not recall seeing either baltos or the now standard abayas in the 1970s or early 1980s in Aden itself.

**SC: Outside of Aden, what was your impression of rural life in the former PDRY?**

**Lackner:** In the smaller towns, and in Hadramawt in particular, far fewer women worked in offices, even in educational and medical establishments. The status of women remained far more conservative; my recollection of Mukalla, for instance, is that all women I saw there in public spaces wore chadors and even covered their faces. I particularly remember visiting a girls' secondary school in Al-Shihri, probably in 1980, where all the students wore black cloaks, complemented by the niqab. While this is a completely standard practice today, it was the first time I was faced with a room full of young women completely covered in black, whose features were not visible. In that period, in rural areas, women working in agriculture were a common sight. Hadramawt was the only area where I saw them wearing black full-body coverings; in the Wadi Hadramawt region they also wore the still common pointed hats over their black head scarves and niqab.

**SC: What were your impressions of women in the YAR?**

**Lackner:** In Sana'a, in the 1980s, there were far fewer women in offices than in Aden. Many women working in Sana'a had spent their early years in Aden where they had been educated, often to the university level. Then, the standard clothing for public spaces for professional women, Yemeni and foreign alike, was a 'Western' raincoat with a headscarf. Like today's abayas, the coat was worn at all times outside the home. These came in a wide range of colors; mine were sent by friends in Europe who wondered why on earth I needed so many raincoats while in Yemen! Other Sana'ani women wore a black shirshaf, composed of a pleated long skirt and cape, or sitaras, which come in blue and red patterns, the former being considered more 'modern' and 'fashionable,' and the latter more 'traditional,' with rural associations. I don't remember when the overcoats went out of fashion and the baltos and abayas replaced them; I think by the mid-1990s the shift had been completed.

**SC: What shifts did you witness in other rural areas, such as in Yemen's highlands?**

**Lackner:** In the mid-and highlands, whether in the PDRY or the YAR, rural women did not wear black cloaks of any variety. In most places, their outfits were colorful and included multicolored headdresses, often 'cushion' shaped to serve as supports for the water and other items women carried on their heads

to the fields, or home, or wherever they were going. In regions where it was cold, most wore long-sleeved dresses gathered at the waist with wide skirts to mid-calf length over trousers with embroidered sections above the ankles. These were worn whether working in the fields, collecting water and firewood, caring for livestock, or indeed anything else. Differences between rural and urban wear, as well as representing status, were noticeable. I vividly remember giving a lift to a village woman who wanted to visit Radaa when I worked in Al-Bayda governorate – when we left the village she was wearing a bright dress and headscarf. By the time we reached town, she had covered these with a full-length black outfit and her face was completely concealed. I would not have recognized her in the street. The situation changed over time. With the strengthening of Islamist education, as well as the increase in the number of vehicles going through people's villages, women and girls started wearing baltos and more head and face coverings when going to work the fields or collect water, as the likelihood of crossing paths with unknown and unrelated males grew.

Other than clothing, women's work and activities, particularly in rural areas, have changed less over time than one might expect. Women at the time, however, actively participated in building their own houses, as well as those of friends and neighbors through collective community initiatives. Then as now, women work in the fields doing all kinds of agricultural work, including activities which are officially defined as 'men's' work, such as plowing. Water collection work has decreased where projects have improved the supply. For others, the task has become even more onerous as water sources dry up and are further away. Although gas has become the norm for cooking, when people can't find or afford it, women go on long and difficult trips searching for firewood in an environment where there are fewer and fewer bushes or other suitable combustible items.

***SC: You were working in Yemen at a very interesting time politically. What were the hopes of Yemenis expressed to you during the period of unification?***

While unification was the dream of millions of Yemenis throughout the country, some of their hopes and expectations were crushed almost immediately. The two that stand out most obviously in the memory of those of us who lived through that period concern legislation on women's rights and regulations on the use of qat. Yemenis throughout the country had hoped that the systems prevailing in the PDRY would apply throughout the Republic of Yemen, limiting qat chewing to weekends and holidays, and empowering women with far greater rights and authority in public and private spheres. What happened was the opposite: qat remained unregulated throughout Yemen and the 1992 Family Law, based on conservative interpretations of Sharia, was imposed in the southern governorates, where women formerly had broader rights.

***SC: Thank you for sharing these reflections with us.***

**Lackner:** The above recollections of women's lives are certainly sketchy and are neither a comprehensive picture nor a full analysis of the situation, something which I have partly done elsewhere in recent decades.<sup>[2]</sup> I wanted, however, to illustrate some of the wide range of different situations that existed during these decades. I hope these brief sketches encourage others to add their own memories to help build a more comprehensive picture of the complexities, varieties, and subtleties of the reality of women's public lives and activities in Yemen over time and in different parts of the country. I'd like to end with two important points to remember. First, there is no 'one size fits all' when thinking about women's social and economic circumstances. Second, people's position in the social hierarchy must be taken into consideration and this is true for women too: for instance, Muhamasheen women's lifestyles are vastly different from those of sada women, as the most extreme case.

[2] Nabil Khoury and Valentine Moghadam, eds., "Gender and Development in the Arab World," Zed Books, London, 1995, Chapter 5, pp. 71-97. Also, see recent books by Helen Lackner.

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