



The Yemen Review

January and February 2022

When Giants Strike

January and February 2022



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

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

Cover Photo:

Military vehicles from the Giants Brigades advance through Al-Ain district in Shabwa governorate on January 9, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo

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Executive Summary

The Houthi threat to Marib that dominated 2021 set in motion a shift in strategy by Saudi Arabia that restored the vanguard role to the United Arab Emirates and its allied Yemeni forces. The turning point came in January when the UAE-backed Giants Brigades pushed Houthi forces out of Shabwa and entered southern Marib, forcing the Houthis to divert resources away from their campaign against Marib city. The Emiratis' renewed influence prompted Houthi drone and missile strikes on Abu Dhabi, resulting in an intense and sustained round of Saudi-led coalition airstrikes on Sana'a and other parts of Houthi-controlled northern Yemen.

While the risk of Marib and Shabwa falling to the Houthis has eased, the shifts within the anti-Houthi alliance and on the battlefield have set in motion a new phase of the war. The uncertainty this has created has been further compounded by fuel shortages, rising food prices and the prospect that Russia's war on Ukraine will cut into humanitarian assistance to Yemen.



Ma'ashiq Presidential Palace in Aden, Yemen, on February 21, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling

The Political Arena

Casey Coombs

Local, Regional and International Actors Drawn Deeper into War

The Houthis launched a barrage of drones and missiles on an oil facility and the airport in Abu Dhabi on January 17, killing three civilians. The attack came amid an Emirati-backed ground offensive led by the Southern Giants Brigades that pushed Houthi forces out of Shabwa and parts of Marib governorate. It also marked the first time the Houthis targeted the UAE since 2018, contributing to an escalation between Yemen's warring parties and their regional and international backers. Houthi spokesperson Mohammed Abdel Salam **met** with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi the day of the attacks, and before the day was over, Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed had **asked** the US to redesignate the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) during a phone call with Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The Houthis followed up the strikes with further drone and missile attacks targeting the UAE on January 24 and January 31; the latter occurred during Israeli President Isaac Herzog's **inaugural visit** to Abu Dhabi. The attacks triggered Emirati and U.S. air defenses and forced American troops at Al-Dhafra air base outside Abu Dhabi to briefly take shelter. The Pentagon responded by **deploying** the USS Cole guided missile destroyer to the UAE, along with F-22 fighter jets to the air base. It also **pledged** to help restore the UAE's missile defenses, which include US-made THAAD and Patriot systems.

On January 19, following the first round of Houthi attacks, President Joe Biden told **reporters** that FTO re-designation was "under consideration." Axios later reported that during an interagency meeting on the topic at the White House, the National Security Council was more open to redesignating the Houthis as a group, while the State Department supported targeted sanctions, such as those **announced** by the US Treasury Department in the last week of February.

On January 22, dozens of **protesters** in the Gaza Strip led by the pro-Iran Palestinian Islamic Jihad group chanted “Death to the House of Saud” and held posters of Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi. The demonstrations followed a surge in Saudi-led coalition airstrikes across Yemen, which caused a nationwide internet outage and killed dozens of people, including **at least 91 people** in a Houthi-run detention facility in Sa’ada city that held pre-trial detainees and African migrants (see: ‘**Coalition Airstrikes Knock Out Internet, Hit Detention Center**’). The day after the protests, “#Palestinians Support the Houthis” trended on social media, and the Palestinian Hamas movement, which authorizes public gatherings in the Gaza Strip, attempted to distance itself from the protests. Hamas has tried to balance relations with Iran on the one hand and its Arab neighbors on the other, and released a **statement** asserting that Palestinians’ chants against Gulf Arab countries “do not reflect the movement’s well-known and firm stance and policies of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries.”

On January 23, in response to the UAE attacks, the Arab League convened an emergency session and issued a **resolution** calling for the Houthis to be designated “a terrorist organization”. The same day, the Iran-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah **launched** a fundraising campaign to help the Houthis acquire more drones. The largest pledge came from Abu Ali al-Askari, a Kataib Hezbollah official who committed to donating US\$685,000.

On February 2, a Kataib Hezbollah-affiliated Iraqi group, Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq (True Pledge Brigades), **claimed** responsibility for launching four drones targeting critical infrastructure in Abu Dhabi. In a statement, the group said attacks would continue until the UAE stopped interfering in neighboring countries like Yemen and Iraq. In January 2021, the same group had claimed responsibility for a drone strike on Saudi Arabia and posted images threatening a drone attack on the Burj Khalifa in Dubai.

Developments in Government-Controlled Territory

Tensions Rise in Al-Mahra After Houthi Strikes on UAE

On January 15, Al-Mahra governorate’s local authorities, led by Governor Mohammad Ali Yasser, called for a consultative meeting to discuss the security situation in the governorate. The local branch of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Al-Mahra refused to participate unless the local authorities condemned the recent Houthi missile and drone attacks on the UAE. Abdullah Issa bin al-Afrar, an STC-aligned politician and son of the last Sultan of Al-Mahra and Socotra, also boycotted the meeting and **criticized** Yasser on Twitter for not condemning the Houthi strikes. In a **speech** during the January 19 meeting, Yasser said, “I look at Yemen from Al-Mahra to Sa’ada as a united country, not as one divided between north and south.”

In recent months, the STC has **warned** of the spread of Houthi influence in Al-Mahra and has accused prominent anti-Saudi figure Ali al-Hurayzi of facilitating Houthi operations in the governorate. On January 2, Al-Afrar called for the **formation** of a 5,000-strong military force from Al-Mahra to drive out “northern forces,” referring to the Houthis and forces affiliated with the Islamist Islah party, which Al-Afrar and the STC accuse of facilitating the smuggling of Houthi weapons from Iran. The STC has sought to establish influence in Al-Mahra since its founding in 2017, but has met with little success.

Saudi-led Coalition Forms Saba Giants Brigade in Marib

On January 29, the Saudi-led coalition **appointed** Abdelhadi Abdelatef al-Qabli commander of the newly-formed 1st Saba Giants Brigade. Al-Qabli is the son of a prominent anti-Houthi tribal sheikh in Marib's Murad tribe, whose house in Al-Jubah district was targeted by a Houthi ballistic missile in late October 2021, killing more than a dozen people. Al-Qabli was appointed to lead the new brigade following the withdrawal of the Southern Giants Brigades from Marib's Harib district in late January and was tasked with fighting Houthi forces in southern Marib. The Saba Giants Brigades were named after the Saba federal region (consisting of the northern governorates of Marib, Al-Jawf and Al-Bayda), one of six federal regions **proposed** in February 2014 following the National Dialogue Conference.

UN Workers Abducted in Abyan

On February 11, five UN workers were **abducted** by suspected Al-Qaeda militants in Abyan governorate. Identified as four Yemeni nationals and one foreigner, the UN Department of Security and Safety staff were returning to Aden after a field mission when they were abducted. Tribal leaders involved in negotiations for the release of the UN workers said the militants have demanded a ransom and the release of some of their forces imprisoned by Yemen's internationally recognized government. On March 6, Reuters **reported** that an armed group in Hadramawt governorate had kidnapped two Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) workers, a German and a Mexican. A security source told Reuters that the MSF employees were taken from their car by gunmen believed to be linked to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Developments in Houthi-Controlled Territory

Houthi Forces Seize Emirati Ship off Yemen's Red Sea Coast

On January 2, Houthi forces **seized** the UAE-flagged cargo ship Rwabee off Yemen's Red Sea coast, claiming it was carrying military supplies. After the Houthis released footage of military-style inflatable boats, trucks and rifles on the ship, the Saudi-led coalition issued a statement accusing the Houthis of "armed piracy" and claimed the ship was carrying medical equipment from a Saudi field office on the Yemeni island governorate of Socotra. Saudi state TV alleged the Houthis had transferred the rifles onto the ship. The Rwabee was seized on the second anniversary of the US drone strike that killed Qassem Soleimani, head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force, which has sought to assist the Houthis through much of the war.

On January 13, the UN Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement said its team saw the Rwabee from a distance and spoke to its crew members. A day later, the UN Security Council **condemned** the seizure of the ship, noting the "increasing number of incidents off the coast of Yemen, including attacks on civilian and commercial ships, which pose a significant risk to the maritime security of vessels in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea." The Rwabee and its 11-person crew are still in Houthi custody in Ras Issa port.

Coalition Airstrikes Knock Out Internet, Hit Detention Center

On January 20, a Saudi-led coalition airstrike on a TeleYemen building in Hudaydah city killed at least four people, including children, and caused a nationwide **internet outage** that lasted four days. On January 21, Saudi-led coalition airstrikes targeted a Houthi-run detention center in Sa'ada city, resulting in **one of the deadliest** airstrikes since the coalition intervened in 2015. **Casualties** included at least 91 dead and 236 injured, with many of the deaths coming from the collapse of an upper level of the facility, where about 1,300 pre-trial detainees and 700 African migrants were being held. Some of the injured had been **shot** by Houthi forces at the prison, according to the local human rights group, Mwatana. The day after the airstrikes, Saudi Arabia **claimed** the **recently built** detention center had not been reported to the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross as a non-military site and was investigating the matter. On January 28, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) urged the Saudi-led coalition to ensure that their investigation was independent and transparent, adding that during an OHCHR visit to the detention center after the attacks, "we saw no signs indicating that this site, formerly a barracks, continues to have a military function." The Hudaydah and Sa'ada airstrikes were part of a **major spike** in Saudi-led coalition airstrikes during January, undertaken in reaction to the Houthi missile and drone attacks on the UAE.

Houthi Court Shuttters Esteemed Sana'a Bookstore

On February 6, a Houthi-run court in Sana'a ordered the **closure** of Abu Dharr al-Ghifari bookstore, which had operated in the capital for nearly 40 years. The bookstore was well known for its selection of philosophical, intellectual and political titles, and its closure was viewed as part of a broader campaign to restrict viewpoints that challenge Houthi power. Several independent and opposition newspapers also have been shut down.

Houthis Shut Down Six Radio Stations in Sana'a

On January 29, the Yemeni Journalists Union **announced** that Houthi authorities in Sana'a had closed six community radio stations in the capital for allegedly broadcasting without licenses and failing to pay fees. Majili al-Samadi, the head of Voice of Yemen Radio, one of the six stations shuttered, **said** on Facebook that 10 journalists were now out of work. "Most people know our professionalism and independence ... we are not politicians," Al-Samadi said. Journalists in Sana'a **said** the authorities wanted the radio stations to broadcast Houthi war songs, which some of them refused to do.

In its annual **report**, the Yemeni Journalists Union documented 104 violations against journalists in Yemen in 2021. The main perpetrators of the violations were the Houthis (46), the internationally recognized government (26) and the STC (18).

Houthis Detain Another Yemeni Employee of US Embassy

In mid-February, Houthi forces **detained** the former Yemeni press secretary of the shuttered US Embassy in Sana'a. He joined 10 Yemeni colleagues who were detained in the weeks surrounding the Houthis' seizure of the embassy compound in October. The Houthis also have held **two UN employees** since early November.

Houthi Leader Backs Russian Claims in Ukraine

On February 23, senior Houthi leader Mohammed Ali al-Houthi [tweeted](#) support for Russia's recognition of two breakaway regions in Ukraine as independent republics. Al-Houthi, who is a member of the Supreme Political Council, joined only a handful of leaders around the world in backing the Russian move, which preceded a military invasion of Ukraine. "We support the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent republics," Al-Houthi said in the tweet, adding "We call for restraint and to avoid slipping into a war intended to drain Russian capabilities."

International Developments

Security Council Calls Houthis 'Terrorist Group' in Sanctions Resolution

On February 28, the UN Security Council passed a [resolution](#) that described the Houthis as a "terrorist group" and expanded an existing arms embargo that targeted seven Houthi leaders to cover the entire Houthi organization. The practical implications of labeling the Houthis a terrorist organization were unclear, although [experts](#) described it as a "major development," given that the Security Council has only used the label for a handful of groups, including Al-Shabab and the Islamic State. The resolution noted the importance of humanitarian assistance and commercial imports and allowed for exemptions that are necessary to facilitate humanitarian activity. The UAE [lobbied](#) for tougher language, including the implementation of asset freezes, travel bans and expanded authorities for maritime interdiction, but these did not materialize in the final text.

The resolution, which renewed and expanded Security Council sanctions on Yemeni actors for one year, received 11 votes in favor (including Russia's) and four abstentions (Brazil, Mexico, Norway, Ireland) from the 15-member Security Council. The four explained that they had concerns about the lack of an agreed upon definition of a terrorist group and the potential impact the designation might have on political efforts and the humanitarian situation.

Observers [suggested](#) that the Russian vote was secured in exchange for UAE abstentions on Security Council resolutions condemning the invasion of Ukraine or requests that the General Assembly address the situation there. The [resolution](#) also featured language about the need for "a political process that includes and meets the legitimate aspirations of all Yemen's multiple and varied parties." Previous resolutions defined the parties to the conflict as the Houthis and the internationally recognized government. The latter reportedly lobbied against more inclusive language. The resolution also included stronger language on women's participation, demanding the "full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in the peace process," recalling the 30 percent minimum target for women in Yemen's National Dialogue Conference.

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Yemeni army troops battle Houthi forces near the Um Reish military camp in Marib's Al-Jubah district on January 14, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Abdulmajeed Al Khadhmi

State of the War

Confrontation between the armed Houthi movement and the forces arrayed against it appeared to reach a turning point in January, with a new push by the UAE-backed Giants Brigades in Shabwa and Marib. The governorates have been the focus of the conflict over the past year, as Houthi forces closed in on Marib city and the governorate's strategic oil and gas facilities. The advances by the Giants Brigades were followed by Houthi strikes on the UAE, prompting an intense round of retaliatory airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition (SLC). Fighting then shifted toward the Hajjah governorate border town of Haradh, where a new Saudi-organized force, backed by coalition airstrikes, struggled to dislodge Houthi forces. This Salafi-oriented force, the [Arabia Felix Brigades](#), also took over from the Giants Brigades in southern Marib.

Total reported civilian casualties spiked as result of the fighting in airstrikes, reaching 426 in January, [according to Yemen Data Project](#). Coalition air raids were at their highest level since October, with 401 individual airstrikes in January and 716 in February, making October-February the longest period of heavy bombing since 2018. January 2022 was the most violent month for coalition air strikes in more than five years, with 139 civilian deaths, taking the casualty toll to over 19,000 civilians killed and injured since the bombing campaign began in March 2015. [A UN report](#) issued on January 29 said nearly 2,000 children recruited by the Houthis had been killed in battle between January 2020 and May 2021.

The Giants Brigades Push Houthi Forces Out of Shabwa

It remained unclear how far the Giants Brigades were willing or able to push into Marib after their January successes in Shabwa. The UAE and Southern Transitional Council (STC)-backed force scored a rapid victory in the first week of the new year, removing Houthi forces from three districts in northern Shabwa after redeploying from the west coast. Critically, they also advanced into Marib, where Houthi encirclement of Marib city had portended the fall of the last government-held stronghold in the north.

The surprise operation in Shabwa appeared to overturn the military balance of power and put an end to predictions of Marib, and its oil fields, inevitably succumbing to the Houthi advance. At the same time, differences emerged among anti-Houthi forces over how the operation should proceed. The recently appointed UAE-backed Shabwa governor Awadh bin al-Wazir al-Aulaqi said the Giants Brigades would go on to fight in other governorates, but the head of the STC, Aiderous al-Zubaidi, appeared to choose his words carefully in a [January 10 interview with UAE-based Sky News Arabia](#) when he said the aim of the operation was to secure southern governorates against the Houthis, while making more rhetorical allusions to taking the war all the way to Sana'a. His comments seemed to suggest that the Giants Brigades' southern leadership was uninterested in committing forces in Marib or on other northern fronts.

Giants Brigades operations did continue initially in Al-Jubah and Harib districts in southern Marib, aiming to shore up control of Shabwa's border regions, as well as into [Nate' and Na'man districts](#) in Al-Bayda governorate. Harib district fell on January 24 and remains outside Houthi control while Al-Jubah which remains contested.

The Giants Brigades

The Giants Brigades (Amaliqa), also known as the Southern Giants Brigades, were formed with UAE support in 2016 to regain control of Yemen's Red Sea coast around the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the city of Mokha. The Giants Brigades currently consist of at least 13 brigades, each varying in size between an estimated 800 fighters to more than 3,000. They are not formally part of the internationally recognized government's military and receive salaries and other support directly from the Saudi-led coalition.

In 2018, the Giants Brigades joined other UAE-backed forces in a military campaign aimed at expelling Houthi forces from the port city of Hudaydah. The campaign was aborted in late 2018 with the signing of the Stockholm Agreement, but the Giants Brigades remained in military camps on the outskirts of Hudaydah city. The Giants Brigades for the most part have remained neutral in conflicts between the internationally recognized government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). For this reason, some Giants Brigades units were deployed to Abyan in late 2019 to separate government and STC forces.

From November 9–12, 2021, the Giants Brigades and other UAE-backed forces withdrew from most of their frontline positions near Hudaydah city. Some massed in Mokha city, while others redeployed to nearby frontlines in southern Hudaydah and western Taiz's Maqbanah district. In late December, several Giants Brigades units were redeployed to Shabwa governorate to regain control of three northern districts that Houthi forces had seized in September. Accomplishing that mission, the Giants Brigades helped dislodge Houthi forces from Harib district in neighboring Marib governorate. In late January 2022, the Saudi-led coalition formed the Saba Giants Brigade in Marib governorate, following the withdrawal of the Southern Giants Brigades.

Most of the commanders of the Giants Brigades are conservative Salafi figures like Abu Zara'a al-Muharrami, a graduate of the Dar al-Hadith Salafi institute in Dammaj, Sa'ada. Abu Zara'a and other Salafis were driven from Dammaj and other Houthi-controlled areas in 2014 and 2015. The Giants Brigades' rank-and-file fighters were generally recruited

from the Southern Resistance that formed to expel Houthi forces from Aden in 2015. Most of these early recruits are from southern tribal areas in Aden, Abyan, Lahj and Al-Dhalea governorates, which is why they are often called the Southern Giants. Others were recruited from Salafi groups, and a small number of Giants Brigades fighters are from northern governorates like Hudaydah, Raymah and Al-Mahweet. They have remained united in their opposition to the Houthis.

Houthi Attacks on the UAE

Subsequent Houthi drone-and-missile attacks on the UAE that the group explicitly linked to the Shabwa operation seemed to play into the calculus to keep the Giants Brigades mostly confined to Shabwa. The first Houthi attack, on January 17, hit an oil storage facility near Abu Dhabi airport, killing three people as well as construction work within the airport grounds and causing a fire. A [second attack on January 24](#), apparently targeting the Dhafra military base, which houses US military personnel, was thwarted by US Patriot missiles.

In response, the coalition increased its bombing campaign, hitting targets around Sana'a and Hudaydah in particular. [Airstrikes on January 17](#) killed more than a dozen people in Sana'a, including a former head of the air force academy; internet and other communications were knocked out for four days after [a January 21 airstrike](#) on a telecoms building in Hudaydah; and more than 91 people were killed and 265 wounded in a January 21 airstrike on a [Sa'ada detention center](#) housing migrants. This followed an attack that struck a water reservoir in Sa'ada, which aid agencies said put access to clean water for 120,000 people at risk.

Following these attacks, the US administration resisted UAE pressure to redesignate the Houthi movement a terrorist organization, though the UN Security Council [agreed on February 28](#) to expand a arms embargo targeting several Houthi leaders to include the whole group while the text also referred to the Houthi movement as a terrorist organization. The UAE, which proposed the resolution, surprised observers in securing Russian support for the vote, possibly as a quid pro quo for two UAE abstentions in Security Council votes on Ukraine.

On January 29, the Giants Brigades [announced publicly](#) they would halt operations after taking the Marib-Shabwa border area. [Reuters reported](#) that a new unit of northern Salafi forces called the Arabia Felix Brigade had deployed near Marib city with the aim of securing the route to Shabwa, suggesting again that the Giants – seen as one of the more professional forces – would go no further. A further report on February 13 said that residents of Marib governorate would also [form their own force](#) within the framework of the Giants Brigades. Despite this recalibration, a [third Houthi missile strike](#) was intercepted on January 31 as the UAE hosted Israeli President Isaac Herzog on the first-ever visit by an Israeli head of state.

In addition to its maneuver with the Giants Brigade, the UAE reformed the Shabwani Elite, a group it helped form early in the conflict for counterterrorism purposes. After defeat in clashes with government military forces in 2019, the Shabwani Elite were largely disbanded, with remnants of the force stationed at two coalition bases – the Balhaf LNG plant on Shabwa's southern coast and the Al-Alam camp, north of the capital Ataq.

However, following the appointment of Al-Aulaqi as governor, the Shabwani Elite repositioned to Ataq airport, under the rebranded title of the Shabwa Defense Forces. The reactivation of the Shabwani Elite involved the recruitment of around 5,000 personnel, according to a source at the Balhaf facility. The move indicated a new Emirati proactiveness in asserting political, security and economic interests in Shabwa, to the detriment of the Islamist Islah party.

In Wadi Hadramawt, to the east of Marib and Shabwa, STC-aligned tribal sheikh Hassan al-Jabiri announced the formation of training camps on January 8. Al-Jabiri said the camps would be formed to protect the region and aid the UAE-backed Hadrami Elite Forces. However, the plan was rejected by Faraj al-Bahsani, governor of Hadramawt and commander of the government's 2nd Military District. While Al-Bahsani is also head of the UAE-backed Hadrami Elite Forces, he has had a poor relationship with the UAE-backed STC since 2019, emerging as a more independent figure who maintains good relations with the government and President Hadi.

Low-Level Clashes Continue on Several Fronts

Conflict in the region of Al-Bayda, Shabwa and Marib continued in late January and February, albeit at a decreased intensity. In Marib, Houthi forces launched a drone attack that [struck a school in Harib](#) operations against [Umm al-Resh military camp](#) and other locations in Al-Jubah district. A Houthi missile [killed five people in Marib city](#) on January 27 and there were [reports of further civilian deaths](#) from Houthi missiles on February 20. Houthi forces mounted new attacks on government troops around Al-Jubah on March 7.

In Shabwa, a Houthi [missile struck a mosque in Jordan district](#) where pro-government soldiers were gathering on February 19, killing five people. The same day, three soldiers were killed and 14 injured when a Houthi [missile hit a mosque near Al-Alam](#) military base. Overall, coalition air raids were down by more than 60 percent in Marib, to 52 in February from 145 in January, while Shabwa and Al-Bayda also saw a drop off. This seemed to reflect the lack of military push-back by Houthi forces after their territorial losses in Shabwa, a southern governorate outside the main theater of Houthi operations. Retreats from Houthi positions north of [Jabal Habashi in Taiz](#) governorate also appeared to be the reason for government gains there in early February.

In Abyan, Houthi forces [damaged bridges and roads in mid-January](#), fearing an advance by the Giants Brigades now [based in Azzan in neighboring Shabwa](#). On January 12, Houthi forces destroyed the only road linking Abyan's capital Lawdar with Mukayras, a northern region bordering Al-Bayda. Fighting also broke out between Houthi forces and the Saudi-backed Amjad Brigades on January 11 in the Jayshan area, after which the Houthis destroyed part of the road linking the area with Lawdar. On January 15, Houthi forces clashed with government-allied Tharah Resistance forces northwest of Lawdar.

Meanwhile, SLC airstrikes continue to focus on Houthi drone capabilities, targeting the [telecoms ministry in Sana'a](#) on February 14, after a [drone attack on Abha airport](#) left 14 people wounded, and an alleged [drone command center](#) west of Sana'a on February 18. In February, there were 20 air raids on Sana'a, marking the first time since 2016 that the city has seen three consecutive months with at least that number.

Fighting in Northern Border Areas

In northern governorates, inconclusive fighting continued in Jawf's western Khabb wa Al-Sha'af district in January, as Houthi forces tried to take the last government-controlled camp at Tayyibah al-Isim. On February 14, the Saudi-led coalition bombed a water drill in Al-Matmmah, killing and wounding at least three civilians. In Hajjah governorate, a Saudi-organized offensive began in early February. The aim was to take Haradh, Yemen's largest border crossing with Saudi Arabia, using Arabia Felix forces backed by SLC airstrikes. After initial successes, Houthi forces holding the town appeared to have retaken the surrounding mountains and a military camp by February 12. **Fighting continued there** and in the neighboring Abs district into early March. In Sa'ada, government forces, supported by SLC airstrikes, captured territory in Safra district on January 20; the government claimed on February 17 to have taken further positions in Safra. According to the Yemen Data Project, Hajjah witnessed its highest monthly rate of air raids since March 2018 with 51 strikes, causing 15 civilian casualties.

UN, MSF personnel abducted in Abyan, Hadramawt

In Abyan, five United Nations employees were **kidnapped** on February 11 while returning to Aden after a field mission. In Hadramawt, foreign employees of Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) were **taken from their car in eastern Hadramawt** governorate on March 6. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is suspected of carrying out both abductions.



Men stand beneath a billboard advertising wheat flour, in Aden, Yemen, on February 21, 2022. Yemen buys almost all of its wheat from abroad and rising costs of imports are set to inflate bread prices in the country // Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling

Economic Developments

Sana'a Center Economic Unit

Fuel Crisis Erupts Nationwide

In January and February, a fuel crisis erupted in both Houthi- and government-controlled areas of Yemen. In Houthi-controlled areas, the crisis emerged in mid-January, intensified thereafter and continues at the time of writing. Thousands of cars line up, sometimes for days, in front of the few commercial gas stations that remain open, while on the black market, where fuel remains plentiful, sellers jack up prices. By the end of February, the price of a 20-liter tank of gasoline reached YR40,000 on the black market, more than four times the price at commercial fuel stations, set at YR9,500. The price of a 20-liter tank of cooking gas increased to YR20,000 on the black market in Houthi-controlled areas, almost four times higher than the official price and **twice the average black market price in 2021**. In response, massive demonstrations, permitted by Houthi authorities, took place in Sana'a and other Houthi-controlled cities.. Houthi authorities have criticized the Saudi-led coalition for the prevailing fuel shortage crisis, decrying the blockade that has kept fuel shipments from entering the port city of Hudaydah, and condemning the silence of the international community, particularly the United Nations.

Though the internationally recognized government has imposed restrictive measures regulating the import of fuel into Houthi-controlled areas, the shortages are partly due to manipulation and illegal exploitation by the Houthi movement, aimed at increasing international pressure on the government and coalition to lift their naval and air blockade. Media sources have **leaked images** showing hundreds of fuel trucks in long queues in the deserts of Al-Jawf governorate, prevented from entering Sana'a governorate by the Houthis. When interviewed by **local media**, Houthi officials claimed that convoys from government-held territory contain fuel that is of poor quality and fails to comply with safety guidelines.

In addition, electricity stations in Houthi-controlled areas introduced two separate price hikes in January. Private electricity dealers raised prices from YR300 to YR350 per kilowatt, and later to YR460 in response to fuel shortages.

The crisis comes amid a new phase of escalation between the warring parties over the supply and sale of fuel throughout the country. In late December, the internationally recognized government issued **Ministerial Decree No. (30) for 2021**, which limits the distribution, marketing and sale of oil derivatives to the government-run Yemen Petroleum Company (YPC). The decree's second article stipulates that the YPC will purchase oil derivatives from qualified and approved companies and traders to cover the needs of the local market; the third article establishes an implementation mechanism, under which the YPC will coordinate with the Central Bank in Aden, the Aden Refinery Company (ARC) and the Technical Office of the Supreme Economic Council to shore up foreign currency reserves to secure the import of fuel derivatives.

Following the establishment of the new mechanism, the interim capital of Aden and other cities under the nominal control of the government witnessed a severe fuel shortage and price hikes. The crisis was partly attributed to an ongoing strike at the Aden Refinery Company Syndicate. On January 6, the ARC Syndicate released a **statement** and organized a comprehensive work stoppage in Aden, protesting the decree granting the YPC full authorization to regulate imports and distribution, and seeking to restore the refinery's role as the established authority for regulating fuel imports and distribution. The Syndicate also demanded the payment of overdue financial allowances and the cancellation of a government decision to appoint a new Executive Director.

The strike was suspended on January 27 before resuming in early March, causing a near complete closure of fuel stations in Aden and other southern governorates. Workers at the ARC have **threatened to escalate** the strike until their demands are met. As a result of the government's inability to replenish depleted fuel reserves, the black market in Aden has proliferated, with a 20-liter tank of gasoline **selling** at YR40,000, equivalent to approximately US\$36. Between January and February, the Aden Oil Company issued a number of circulars raising the price of fuel derivatives. In mid-January, it **set** the price of a 20-liter tank of gasoline at YR17,700, up from YR13,200, attributing the move to the increase in global fuel prices and depreciation of the rial. A month later, the company **increased** the price to YR18,960, or YR948 per one liter.

The internationally recognized government, through **Ministerial Decree No. (49) of 2019**, had previously named the Aden Refinery Company the sole entity authorized to import and distribute fuel derivatives across the country. The ARC operated in cooperation with the government-led Economic Committee, which handled import and application documents to ensure compliance. At the time, the YPC **rejected the decree**, considering it a violation of laws regulating its mandate and the mandate of the ARC, which stipulate that the former has the prerogative to market oil, while the latter is responsible for the refinement and import of fuel derivatives.

The fuel crisis has had knock-on effects across the country, disrupting electricity supplies, halting water pumps and stranding people in critical need of medical care. The provision of

basic services has been adversely impacted as hospitals, highly dependent on electricity-fueled generators, cannot run at full capacity. Households have been financially strained, many obtain water via costly pumps and trucks, whose prices have now risen. Public transportation has been largely unavailable and its cost has skyrocketed, driving up the prices of vegetables and locally produced crops and making mobility highly challenging, impeding many households' ability to earn income.

Russian Invasion of Ukraine Impacts Yemen: Wheat, Fuel and Aid

On February 24, Russian forces invaded Ukraine. Western countries responded with the most extensive economic sanctions in modern history against Moscow and a massive multifaceted campaign in support of Kyiv. Widespread disruptions to global financial networks and supply chains have ensued. In Yemen, the likely immediate impacts relate to the price of wheat and fuel. A significant redirection of international aid away from Yemen also appears likely.

Russia and Ukraine are the world's top and fifth largest wheat exporters, respectively, **accounting** for 17.6 percent and 8 percent of global exports. Global wheat prices, which had already increased more than 50 percent in the six months preceding the invasion, **surged** almost 34 percent between February 24 and March 7, before receding slightly in the days following.

Wheat is Yemen's single largest food import, with wheat grain and flour accounting for nearly 70 percent of the country's total food imports. From late December 2021 to the end of February 2022, Ukraine was Yemen's largest source of imported wheat, accounting for roughly 40 percent, or slightly more than 755,000 metric tons, during that period. While Yemeni importers will likely be able to source wheat from new suppliers relatively quickly, the rapid increase in cost will have major implications for living standards and the humanitarian situation, especially within the context of the Yemeni rial's **dramatic depreciation**.

The surge in global fuel prices will increase the transportation costs of most goods, impacting commodity prices in Yemen across the board. Oil rose more than 40 percent in the six months preceding the Russian invasion and jumped almost another 30 percent between February 24 and March 8. While the government will benefit from its crude oil exports being priced higher, any gains will be dwarfed by the increased cost of fuel imports. In September 2021, CBY-Aden **estimated** fuel imports and oil exports for 2021 at US\$2.69 billion and US\$1.26 billion, respectively. Increased demand for US dollars to purchase these imports will put further downward pressure on the value of the Yemeni rial.

Aid for Yemen, which **dropped substantially** during the COVID-19 pandemic as donor countries redirected resources to address related financial pressures, is expected to decrease further in light of the massive western effort to support Ukraine. Various donors are already in the process of redrawing their aid budgets. The Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan was only **58 percent** funded in 2021. In an address to the UN Security Council on February 15, UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths said millions face a "death sentence"

if funding levels are not restored. Noting that nearly two thirds of UN programs had been dramatically scaled back or closed, he added: “We have never before contemplated giving millions of hungry people no food at all.”

UN Says Govt, Houthis, ‘Agreed in Principle’ to Resolve FSO Safer Crisis

On February 5, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen David Gressly **announced** that following “constructive meetings” with senior officials from the government and Houthi authorities, the parties had “agreed in principle” on how to address the catastrophic environmental threat posed by the FSO Safer. The decrepit, 45-year-old single-hulled oil tanker moored off Hudaydah governorate with more than one million barrels of oil aboard has received almost no maintenance in **more than seven years**. Without a functioning ventilation system, **explosive gasses** have been building in the holding tanks. The UN-coordinated proposal would see the oil transferred to another ship. However, the Houthis have **established a pattern** over the last few years of agreeing in principle to UN plans to address the ship, only to renege on their commitment. According to Gressly, “We need to translate the good will being shown by all interlocutors into action as soon as possible.”

Paris Club Suspends Yemen’s Debt Payments

In mid-January, the Paris Club of creditor countries **announced** it had extended its suspension of Yemen’s debt, meaning the country would not be liable for debt servicing payments that had been due at the end of 2021. As of 2020, Yemen **owed** US\$1.68 billion to members of the Paris Club. The announcement stated that the Yemeni government had “committed to devote the resources freed by this initiative to increase spending in order to mitigate the health, economic and social impact of the COVID-19 crisis,” and to seek debt relief from other international creditors.

Hadramawt Oil Production: Governor Halts Exports, Canadian Company Pauses Operations

On January 25, Hadramawt Governor Faraj al-Bahsani **announced** that he was threatening to halt oil exports from the governorate. The two-page memorandum Al-Bahsani directed to the prime minister, Maen Abdelmalek Saeed, included a number of popular demands, including raising Hadramawt’s share of oil sales from 20% to 30%; promptly implementing a 100-mega power plant project; completing maintenance of Al-Rayyan power station; and approving the recruitment and financial allocation for an additional 10,000 soldiers to the Second Military Zone as well as payment of its past-due salaries. Al-Bahsani has repeatedly used pressure tactics during his years-long dispute with the government over the distribution of oil revenues.

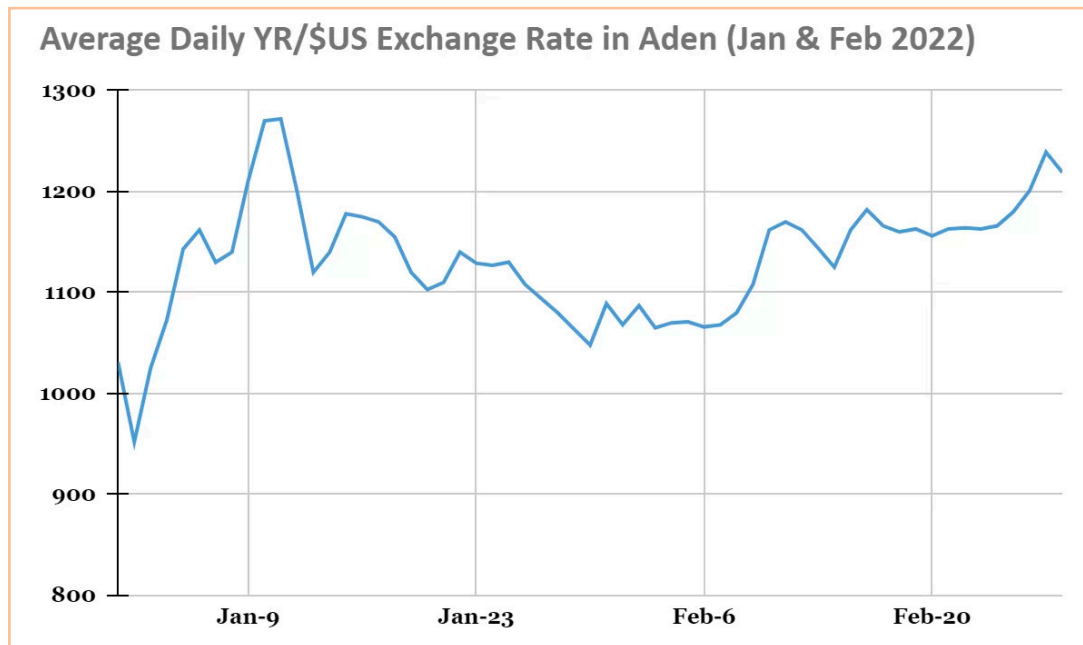
On January 30, Reuters **reported** that Canada’s Calvalley petroleum company had suspended operations in Hadramawt governorate due to deteriorating security conditions. Calvalley notified staff and contractors on January 17 of the suspension of operations in block 9, “citing production and transportation disruption since Dec. 14 from checkpoints outside the company’s gate and road blocks.” For several months, protestors in Hadramawt

have held demonstrations over deteriorating economic conditions. In early January, in neighboring Shabwa governorate, reports emerged of multiple explosions along pipelines leading to the Al-Nushayma export terminal.

Further Depreciation of the Yemeni Rial in Govt-Held Areas

The new Yemeni rial notes witnessed historic depreciation over the course of 2021, losing close to two-thirds of its value and falling to YR1,726 to the dollar. President Hadi responded in late December by replacing the board of governors at the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden, in an attempt to regain the trust of foreign backers and halt the devaluation of the rial. The previous management was accused by the UN Panel of Experts of colluding to embezzle nearly half a billion dollars from a US\$2 billion Saudi deposit. The rial began recovering in the last month of 2021, rebounding to YR781 to the dollar by December 27.

The late year stabilization of the rial's value was fleeting. By January 2, it was trading at roughly YR1,210 to the dollar in Aden's parallel exchange market. In response, the CBY-Aden continues to intervene through foreign exchange auction trading, but the impact so far has been negligible. The rial has depreciated steadily, to YR1,200 per dollar on February 27, after minor appreciation in late January and early February. In contrast, old Yemeni rial banknotes have maintained their value in Houthi-controlled areas, trading between YR604 – YR600 to the dollar during January and February.



Source: Sana'a Center Economic Unit



A soldier with forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council performs evening prayers overlooking Aden, Yemen, on February 22, 2022. //Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling

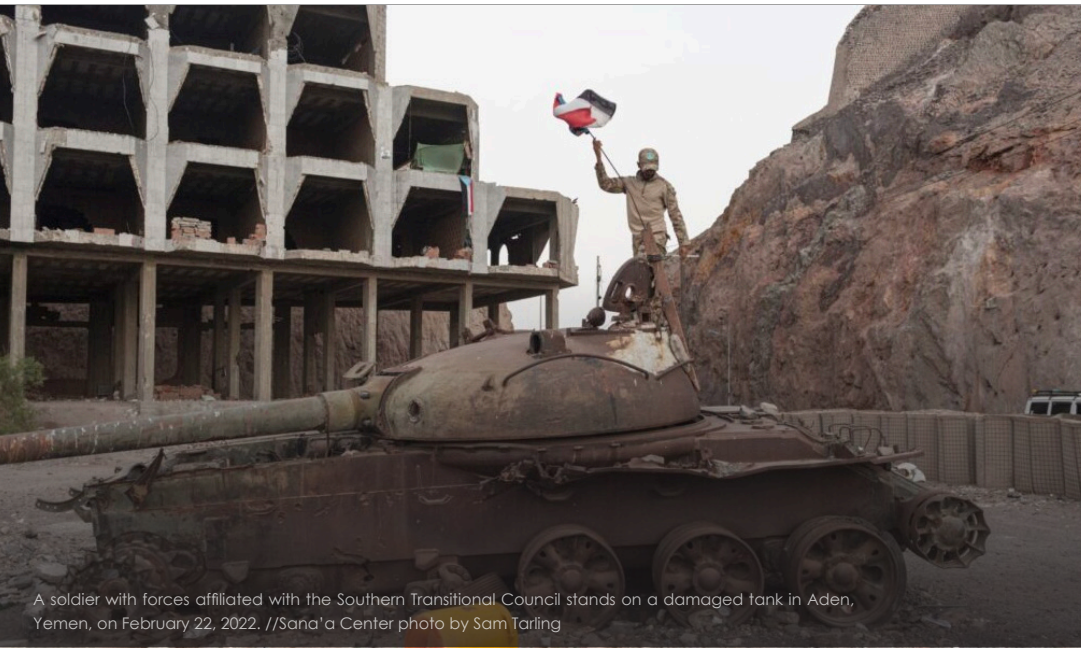
Photo Essay: Life in Aden

Aden, the internationally backed Yemeni government's temporary capital, makes only the slightest pretense of accepting the authority of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Local government offices dutifully display the president's photo, but it is the old South Yemen flag that hangs above the main doors and throughout the city, that is painted on walls and sewn on the uniforms of the armed forces securing Aden. At the moment, Aden belongs to the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), and although the STC is part of Hadi's government, it often behaves more like a disgruntled and well-armed opposition party waiting for others to get the city functioning again.

Aden was heavily damaged in 2015 by the Houthis, who attempted to take the city by force, and by the Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes that drove Houthi forces back toward Sana'a. It saw more heavy fighting in 2019, when the UAE-backed STC wrested control of the city from Hadi's government, their nominal allies in the war against the Houthis. In recent months, armed clashes in the city have resulted from disputes between the STC and local warlords. Little of the damage incurred during the past seven years has been repaired.

Today, Aden's residents face severe electricity shortages, rising prices and general security concerns. And although the STC and Hadi's government have largely refrained from open warfare in recent months, their adversarial relationship continues. These current challenges, left unchecked, could wear thin public patience with the STC's tendency to deflect all responsibility for the city's woes to its governing partners.

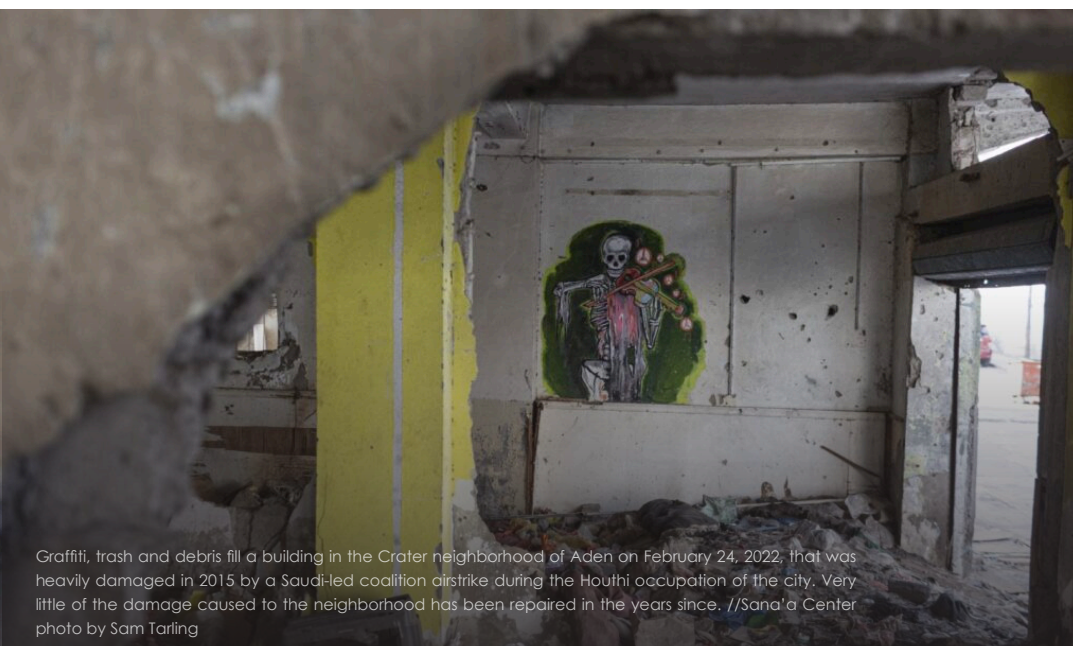
Photographer Sam Tarling spent a week in Aden in February, capturing images of a city away from the frontlines, but still suffering from the war and from a divided government's struggle to govern.



A soldier with forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council stands on a damaged tank in Aden, Yemen, on February 22, 2022. //Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling



A child rides his bicycle in front of a war-damaged building in Aden on February 22, 2022. //Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling



Graffiti, trash and debris fill a building in the Crater neighborhood of Aden on February 24, 2022, that was heavily damaged in 2015 by a Saudi-led coalition airstrike during the Houthi occupation of the city. Very little of the damage caused to the neighborhood has been repaired in the years since. //Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling



A woman walks past faded murals of the South Yemen flag in Aden on February 22, 2022. //Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling



A tuna is placed on ice at the fish market in Aden on February 24, 2022. Fish, long an affordable staple for many Yemenis, is increasingly expensive because of soaring fuel prices. //Sana'a Center Photo by Sam Tarling



A patient is treated in the intensive care unit at Al-Jumhuriya hospital in Aden on February 23, 2022. The once-modern hospital is now largely run-down and crumbling, serving those in Aden who cannot afford treatment elsewhere. Two floors have been taken over by local militias to treat their fighters. //Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling



Bezait Toderos Abrera, 20, originally from Ethiopia, sits in the hut where she lives at a makeshift camp in Aden less than 100 meters down the beach from a seafloor resort on February 25, 2022. Abrera came to Yemen 17 years ago with her mother, and was arrested in Sana'a last year after protesting a fatal March 2021 fire at a detention camp for migrants. Houthi authorities arrested protesters, mainly other migrants, and sent them in trucks to the southern edge of territory they control. Abrera was among a group that walked two days to Aden. //Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling



A soldier with forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council eats an ice cream bar on the back of a technical mounted with a machine gun in Aden, Yemen, on February 24, 2022. //Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling

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