



# The Yemen Review

January and February 2023

## Saudi-Houthi Talks Sow Cracks in Coalition

January and February 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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*Cover Photo:*

*A girl collects water in Kaedna district in Hajjah governorate on January 22, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Ghader Murad.*

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Ongoing bilateral talks between Saudi Arabia and the armed Houthi movement have renewed optimism that a negotiated political settlement in Yemen might yet be possible. But the talks are an exclusively Saudi initiative and threaten to serve only the narrow interests of their current participants. To date, their primary effect has been the easing of restrictions on imports to Hudaydah, a development quickly weaponized by the Houthis, who have sought to coerce traders to use the port exclusively, which would deprive the internationally recognized government of much-needed customs revenue. Importantly, the talks include neither the government, whose sidelining does little for its popular legitimacy, nor Saudi Arabia's primary coalition partner, the UAE. On the heels of its massive military reengagement in Yemen over the last eighteen months, the UAE has so far rejected Houthi overtures.

The divergent interests of the coalition have come to the fore in Hadramawt, where the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council has sought to extend its influence by agitating against forces affiliated with the Islamist Islah party. This has come up against resistance from local tribal groups, increasingly supported by Saudi Arabia, who are now recruiting thousands of local fighters and protesting outside interference. Increased Saudi involvement in Hadramawt is a blow to the aspirations of the STC and has been compounded by the formation of the new Nation's Shield forces under President Rashad Al-Alimi. Paid directly by Saudi Arabia, the force could go some way toward enshrining Alimi's administration; unlike most other members of the council, he previously had no military forces of his own.



Southern Transitional Council supporters demonstrate in Seyoun city in Wadi Hadramawt on January 14, 2023, calling for the removal of Islah-affiliated 1st Military Region forces // Sana'a Center photo by Rajeh Al-Omari

## Politics & Diplomacy

# Coalition Competition in Hadramawt

Hadramawt witnessed growing tensions in January, as protesters affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) demonstrated in the streets of Seyoun, demanding the replacement of Islah-affiliated 1st Military Region forces with locally recruited fighters. But the STC faced pushback for its unbridled efforts to extend its influence into the governorate. Powerful tribal blocs ordered them to leave, calling them a threat to local security, while echoing calls for the recruitment of local fighters. Counter-protesters also held demonstrations in Seyoun to oppose the establishment of STC military camps in the region.

Demonstrations continued throughout the month and were soon accompanied by military mobilization. The 2nd Military Region forces, based in Mukalla in Coastal Hadramawt, moved a battalion of 500 fighters to a zone near Seyoun. An STC force was moved from Al-Rayyan airport near Mukalla to a strategic position on the southern plateau overlooking the 1st Military Region's area of operations. Saudi Arabia worked with the Hadramawt Tribes Confederation to recruit at least 10,000 fighters and establish new military sites on Al-Kathiri tribal lands, with the aim of preventing STC-allied forces from moving into the Hadramawt Valley. Competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and their respective proxies in the governorate, has soured the relationship between the coalition partners, as has the former's decision to pursue bilateral talks with the armed Houthi movement.

In February, the first international flight in four years arrived at Al-Rayyan airport. A Yemenia Airways flight, carrying around 100 passengers, landed on February 4 before returning to Jeddah. Governor Mabkhout bin Madi indicated that the reopening is intended to be permanent.

## Saudi-Houthi Talks

Saudi-Houthi back-channel talks increasingly came out into the open in January, with the UAE increasingly suspicious of where they might lead. The Houthis demanded that the Saudis respond to their proposals in writing, part of their strategy of extracting formal recognition of their rule in northern Yemen. An Omani team – which has acted as go-between – provided some insights into the talks to the UN Special Envoy's office, indicating that although they were going well, they had not yet gone beyond general points of agreement. Saudi Arabia reportedly agreed in principle that it would pay civil servant salaries for one year, including those of military and security personnel in Houthi-controlled areas, but the specifics of the payrolls haven't been laid out. In return, Riyadh wants security guarantees, including a buffer zone on the border and an end to the Houthi blockade of government energy exports, enforced through drone attacks on oil infrastructure along the southern coast. Other issues include concessions related to the further reopening of Sana'a airport and easing imports through Hudaydah, while Saudi Arabia is also looking to end the Houthi blockade of Taiz and bring the government into the talks.

Saudi Arabia's overtures indicate its willingness to move on militarily, though it certainly wants to maintain and extend its influence. The two parties appear to be moving closer on a host of issues. Having failed to dislodge the Houthis from Sana'a while gaining international opprobrium, the Saudi aim is currently to present its kingdom as a neutral facilitator of peace rather than a party to war. Similarly, the Houthi demand to fully reopen the port of Hudaydah may no longer bother Riyadh, as under the current UN inspection mechanism no arms shipments have been found. Regarding the Saudi-Yemeni border, in addition to demanding an expanded, depopulated buffer zone, Saudi Arabia is proposing that Omani or international forces play a part in monitoring on the ground. The Houthi position on these issues isn't clear.

A key element of the talks has been their exclusive nature. Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) chief Rashad al-Alimi has only been able to protest to Saudi Ambassador Mohammed al-Jaber that southerners will not accept any unilateral deal and that the Houthi side can't be trusted. Notably, Al-Jaber has not given any specific assurances to the STC, and there has been no mention of power-sharing arrangements or the shape of government in the event of a deal. Questions remain about the UAE's position. Abu Dhabi could use ongoing STC activity in Hadramawt to influence the talks, and its involvement there is a sign that the UAE may act independently in territories outside Houthi control.

In February, a senior Saudi source told the Sana'a Center that Riyadh was planning a conference that would publicly announce the outcomes of the negotiations, but it was quickly postponed until after Ramadan (which ends around April 21), apparently to gain more time to secure Houthi attendance. The conference is a chance for the Saudis to actualize their proposal for Houthi President Mehdi al-Mashat to visit Riyadh. In the Saudi view, this is a critical concession they expect from Sana'a that would also boost the status of the Houthi authorities. The Saudis believe Mashat's appearance at the conference would be another milestone in their international rehabilitation after the debacles of the Jamal Khashoggi murder, the Qatar boycott, and their conduct in Yemen, all of which drew the ire of Western political circles. Senior diplomats note a new, relaxed attitude among Saudi officials regarding the Yemen situation in particular, as they sense for the first time since the intervention in 2015 that the international community now sees them as a force for peace rather than an aggressor.

For its part, the UAE has rejected talks outright. A danger remains that as soon as an agreement is announced, the STC will declare the secession of the south, with Emirati backing, which could in turn provoke other parties – for example in Hadramawt – to agitate for the same. This would play into the Houthis' hands, giving them the excuse they have perhaps been waiting for to declare the territories they control an independent state. Despite their rhetoric, it is not clear that they still harbor the ambition to control the whole country.

## Hudaydah Port Access

In late January, Houthi authorities began instructing shipping companies to head directly to the port of Hudaydah without following past procedures, which entailed passing through Saudi inspections after completing the UN inspection mechanism in Djibouti. The government has been unable to enforce compliance as Saudi Arabia has taken no action, in a further sign of its newfound cooperation with the Houthis and emblematic of Riyadh's desire to place management of the conflict in international hands.

The Houthi push to fully reopen the port continued in February. While the government has objected, media reports suggested the loosening of restrictions was part of confidence-building measures agreed at the Saudi-Houthi talks. But reopening the port is also part of the Houthis' broader efforts at economic warfare. Merchants bringing goods into Houthi territories by road after importing the cargo through government-controlled ports are being asked to sign a written commitment to use Hudaydah ports in the future. This is an ominous development for the government, and could significantly deepen its financial woes. The simplified customs system at Hudaydah is faster and cheaper than the multiple costs involved in off-loading in Aden and then transporting goods to the north, though these may be offset by higher insurance premiums and concerns over past confiscation of shipping containers. Houthi forces also appear to have cut the main road between Aden and Hudaydah in Al-Tuhaytah district.

## Tribal Decline

The January 6 death of Sadeq al-Ahmar, sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation and a founding member of the Islah party, marked the waning influence of Yemen's once powerful tribes under Houthi rule. Thousands of tribal figures attended Al-Ahmar's funeral in Sana'a on January 8, demonstrating that the confederation is still somewhat united under its new paramount sheikh, Sadeq's brother Himyar, who wore Sadeq's jambia (dagger) as a symbol of his new status. One of the keys to Houthi rule has been the movement's ability to subjugate northern tribes – confederations such as the Hashid and Bakil are a shadow of what they were in the era of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Al-Ahmar family itself was humiliated during fighting with Houthi forces in Amran in 2014 when their ancestral home was demolished with explosives. The funeral was a chance for confederation figures to come together after difficult times but seemed to mark the end of an era more than it signaled renewed strength.

## Oppression of Women

The Houthi crackdown on women's rights was highlighted in Sana'a in January, as authorities arrested a well-known broadcaster and two of her colleagues for allegedly traveling between governorates without a male escort, in violation of mahram (guardian) restrictions imposed last year. Houthi leaders in the capital ordered shop owners to stop selling women's abayas that are short, form-fitting, colorful, or have frills.



In February, a group of 25 prominent women in Sana'a presented a letter to Houthi Prime Minister Abdulaziz bin Habtoor calling to end a new trend of gender discrimination against women in Houthi-held territories. The text talks of "a general trend to exclude women from public work or to marginalize them," through hindering movement unless accompanied by a male guardian and with permission from the authorities, segregating women inside ministries and other institutions and replacing them with men, and warnings in Friday sermons against women working and studying. The letter was striking in that it came from women largely from the Hashemite class, many of whom work inside Houthi ministries and are from families inside the Houthi movement. The letter implicitly acknowledged Houthi legitimacy, warning that the increased repression would create an opening for anti-Houthi forces to drive a wedge between society and the authorities. Reading further between the lines, the letter also appeared to reflect a fear that Sana'a will not be spared the Houthi ideological plan that has been rolled out in the northern highlands, shutting down a relatively liberal environment that has allowed women to work. More broadly, the letter highlights the Houthi regime's tricky balancing act in appeasing different sectors of society, including religious ideologues, Hashemite families, and military cadres, not least at this critical juncture, when authorities see the possibility of finally securing regional and international recognition.



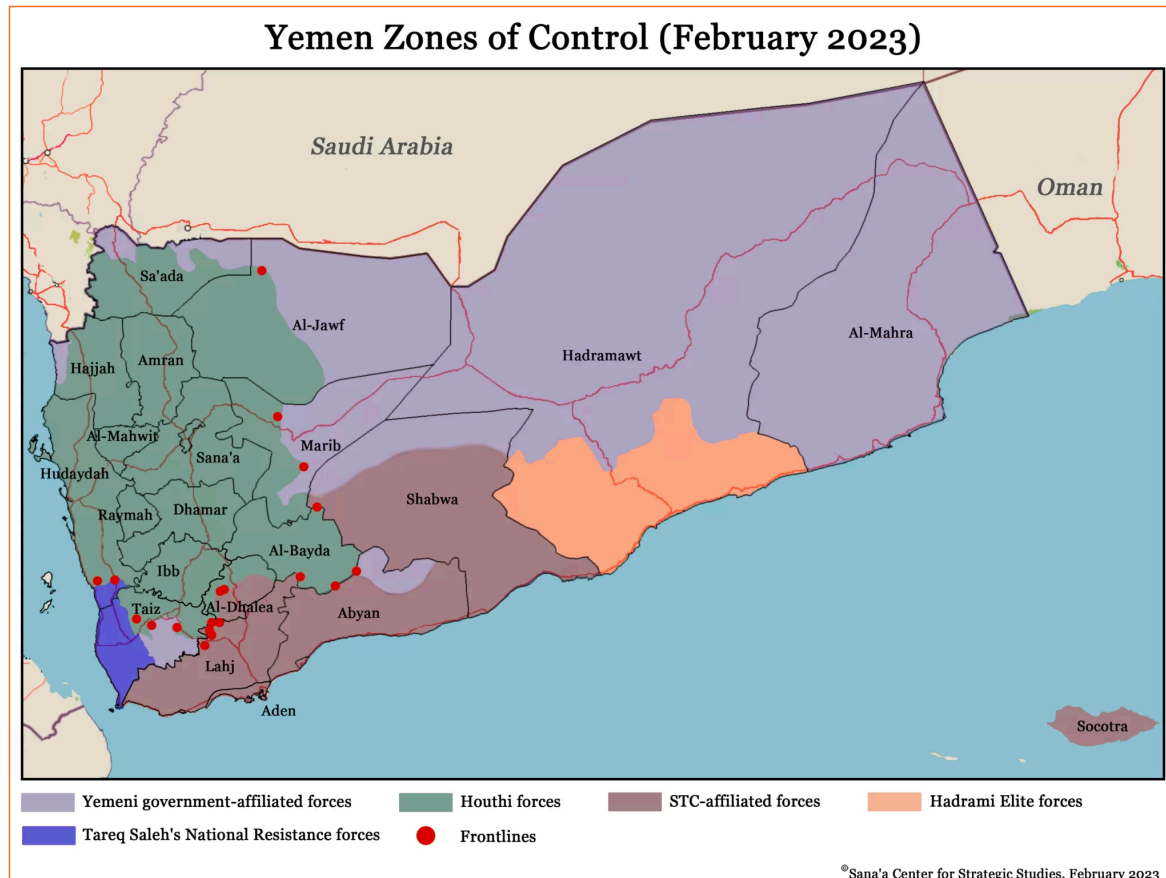
A woman and child visit the grave of a relative at a cemetery for Houthi fighters in Dhamar city on December 22, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo

## Military & Security

# Nation's Shield Forces Bolster Al-Alimi's Influence

Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) chief Rashad al-Alimi formally announced the formation of the Nation's Shield forces in late January, a Saudi-funded military force of eight battalions led by Salafi commander Bashir al-Madrabi that was officially declared last September, but which is composed of Al-Yemen Al-Saeed brigades formed over the previous year. The units operate directly under Al-Alimi, who, unlike most other members of the PLC, had no military forces of his own. So far, units have been deployed to Al-Dhalea, Abyan, and Lahj. There are also efforts to bring three Giants Brigades battalions commanded by Hamdi Shukri al-Subaihi under the Nation's Shield umbrella. Last year Al-Subaihi refused to get involved in the UAE-Southern Transitional Council (STC) battle to oust Islah-affiliated forces from Shabwa after his battalions had helped eject Houthi forces from the northwest of the governorate earlier in 2022. He was subsequently the target of several assassination attempts, suspected to have been perpetrated by pro-STC groups. The STC is uneasy over the creation of the new force, which it perceives as a threat to its control of Aden and other southern areas.

Further military bases are being planned, as the Nation's Shield forces apparently already number between 16,000 and 20,000 soldiers. A further 120 armored vehicles have been sent via Al-Wadea on the Saudi-Hadramawt border. Riyadh is having cash brought over the border to pay the group's personnel directly, avoiding the Aden branch of the Central Bank of Yemen. The aim is apparently to avoid demands for Riyadh to restore frozen salaries to other military and security forces, notably those affiliated with the STC. This circumvention highlights the extent to which governance has broken down amid PLC bickering, and the willingness of Riyadh to take extraordinary measures to prevent southern Yemen from slipping outside its sphere of influence. By March, soldiers were reportedly leaving STC-affiliated Security Belt forces to join the Nation's Shield ranks in search of a steady income.



## Fighting Heats Up in Hudaydah

Intense clashes continued between the Houthis and the Joint Forces along the border between Hays and Al-Khawkhah districts in southern Hudaydah in early January and continued for much of the month. Houthi forces carried out regular drone attacks and reportedly utilized heavier weapons, including a tank, in their attempts to advance south. At least three Joint Forces soldiers were killed and 27 others wounded in the first week of January, while on the Houthi side two were killed and 27 wounded. Fighting on the same fronts during the last two weeks of December claimed the lives of five members of the Joint Forces and injured 42, and killed 13 Houthi fighters and wounded more than 110 others.

The fighting continued in southern Hudaydah later in the month, with clashes between Houthi forces and Joint Forces along coastal areas in southern Al-Tuhaytah district and in the Al-Sard area in the north of Hays district. In neighboring Taiz, Houthi forces clashed with Islah-affiliated forces in the Taiz Military Axis on several fronts. Houthi forces also conducted naval exercises near the international shipping lane off the coast of southern Al-Tuhaytah district. The site of the drills was likely chosen for its proximity to the shipping corridor and Zuqar Island, where the Joint Forces' naval operations are based. Houthi forces also continued to build out and reinforce a network of trenches and fortifications in southern Al-Tuhaytah, consisting of several tunnels and interspersed with landmines disguised as rocks.

Hostilities in southern Hudaydah heated up again in late February. Houthi forces launched eight drone attacks on Joint Forces stationed in Wadi al-Mareer in southern Jabal Ras district, amid simultaneous advances by Houthi forces to the west. Six Houthi fighters were killed and 37 wounded, and one pro-government soldier was killed and 17 wounded. Fifty kilometers to the south in northern Taiz, Houthi forces attacked Joint Forces in the Al-Barah area of Al-Maqbanah district. The northern Taiz front had been quiet since November 2021, when the Joint Forces redeployed south from Hudaydah city.

## Al-Qaeda Threat Remerges

Khaled Batarfi, the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), issued a rare video message in January, in which he attacked the PLC for allowing US influence in the country and the STC for their recent operations against AQAP in the southern governorates of Abyan and Shabwa. Batarfi, who took over leadership in 2020 after Qassem al-Raymi was killed in a US drone strike, accused the STC of working with US forces in Hadramawt and Al-Mahra and called on local tribes to help AQAP fight back. The speech marked a rhetorical if not a strategic shift, in that Batarfi included the Houthi movement and its Iranian backers in Al-Qaeda's list of enemies, which also comprises STC forces and the Saudi-led coalition. The AQAP strategy laid out in 2021 had focused on the "far enemy" of Western powers and their regional allies, an approach that reflected AQAP's withdrawal from areas where it had fought Houthi forces early in the war, but also [the growing influence of Iran-based senior Egyptian Al-Qaeda leader Saif al-Adel](#). Batarfi's attack does not appear to indicate a new policy of targeting Houthi forces, but rather a rhetorical move to win the support of southern tribes who oppose the STC's attempts to extend its influence into eastern Yemen and to placate internal critics who have been unhappy with the soft approach toward the Houthis. Indeed, the speech gave the impression that AQAP is planning on doubling down with operations against PLC and STC targets, possibly in the major southern conurbations of Aden and Mukalla.

The STC's counterterrorism operations have not been without consequences. In recent months, Al-Qaeda has planted hundreds of roadside bombs targeting counterterrorism forces in Abyan and Shabwa. A US drone strike in the Al-Samda area of Marib's Wadi Abidah reportedly killed three suspected members of AQAP, including one of AQAP's top bomb makers, Hassan al-Hadrami. But the unrelenting death toll from IEDs has brought STC forces into conflict with locals. Armed tribesmen in central Abyan's Mudiya district rose up against STC-affiliated counterterrorism forces after the latter carried out a series of home raids and arrested suspected Al-Qaeda members accused of a roadside bomb attack. Nine people were killed in the ensuing clashes and dozens of families were displaced before a ceasefire was mediated. Following a meeting between representatives of the aggrieved tribes and the STC-affiliated commander of the Abyan Military Axis, an agreement was reached to release the detained tribesmen, although the situation remains tense.

US strikes on Al-Qaeda figures continue. In February, top AQAP leader Hamad bin Hammoud al-Tamimi, aka Abdulaziz al-Adnani, was reportedly killed in a US drone strike on his home in the Marib al-Wadi district. Al-Tamimi was the most prominent Saudi leader in AQAP and the head of its Shura Council.

The Houthi movement also announced a prisoner exchange with AQAP in February, after it was first made public by Al-Qaeda. The Al-Qaeda statement, made through local affiliate Ansar al-Sharia, said two prisoners had been released by each side. Head of the Houthi prisoner affairs committee Abdelqader al-Mortada tweeted on February 19 that three Houthi fighters had been returned, in exchange for two Al-Qaeda prisoners captured during fighting in Al-Bayda governorate. The swap was later defended on Twitter by deputy foreign minister Hussein al-Ezzi, who said the movement was prepared to make deals with any group to secure the release of prisoners. Houthi-AQAP prisoner exchanges go back to 2016, but have never been acknowledged publicly.



## Houthis Reinforce, Reengage

With the relative lull in frontline violence that has persisted since the expiration of the truce, the authorities in Sana'a continue to rearrange their military affairs, strengthening their position on various fronts. The government has noted that Houthi forces are renewing efforts to win the support of tribes in critical locations – the Al-Abidah in Marib, where Marib city and the oil fields in the east remain under government control, and the Al-Subaiha in Lahj, who reside in lands near the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the area controlled by Tareq Saleh's UAE-backed National Resistance forces. The Houthi authorities' ongoing conflict with the Bani Nawf tribe in Al-Jawf, on the other hand, is connected to the movement's effort to establish control over rebellious tribes and lands in the south and southwest of the governorate. The Houthis also seem to be beefing up their air capabilities, calling back pilots for active duty following the surprise appearance of helicopters at a series of military parades in September. It is unclear whether Houthi forces possess the parts to repair or maintain the aircraft for operational use.

Apart from the ongoing fighting in Hudaydah, the Houthis have renewed operations on fronts in Taiz. In January, Houthi forces launched simultaneous attacks on Islah-affiliated Taiz Military Axis forces on fronts in and around Taiz city. Fighting was reported on the following fronts: Asifrah, Wadi Al-Zanouj, and the Air Defense camp, north of Taiz city; Jabal Habashi district, Al-Siyahi, and the vicinity of Mount Han in the Hathran area of Al-Taiziyah district, to the west ; Tashrefat, Wadi Sal, and Kalaba area, to the east; and the Al-Shaqab front in Sabr al-Mawadim district in southern Taiz governorate. While the decline of violence since last year's truce and the ongoing Saudi-Houthi talks suggest the possibility of progress toward a negotiated settlement, violence continues on fronts across the country – including outside Marib city, in Al-Dhalea and Lahj, and along Al-Bayda's borders with Abyan and Shabwa – and could easily escalate should groups see opportunities to extend their control or improve their relative negotiating position.



Food aid provided by the World Food Programme is sold at Qafil Shammar market in Hajjah governorate on January 10, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Ghader Murad

## The Economy & Finance

# Govt Receives New Financial Support

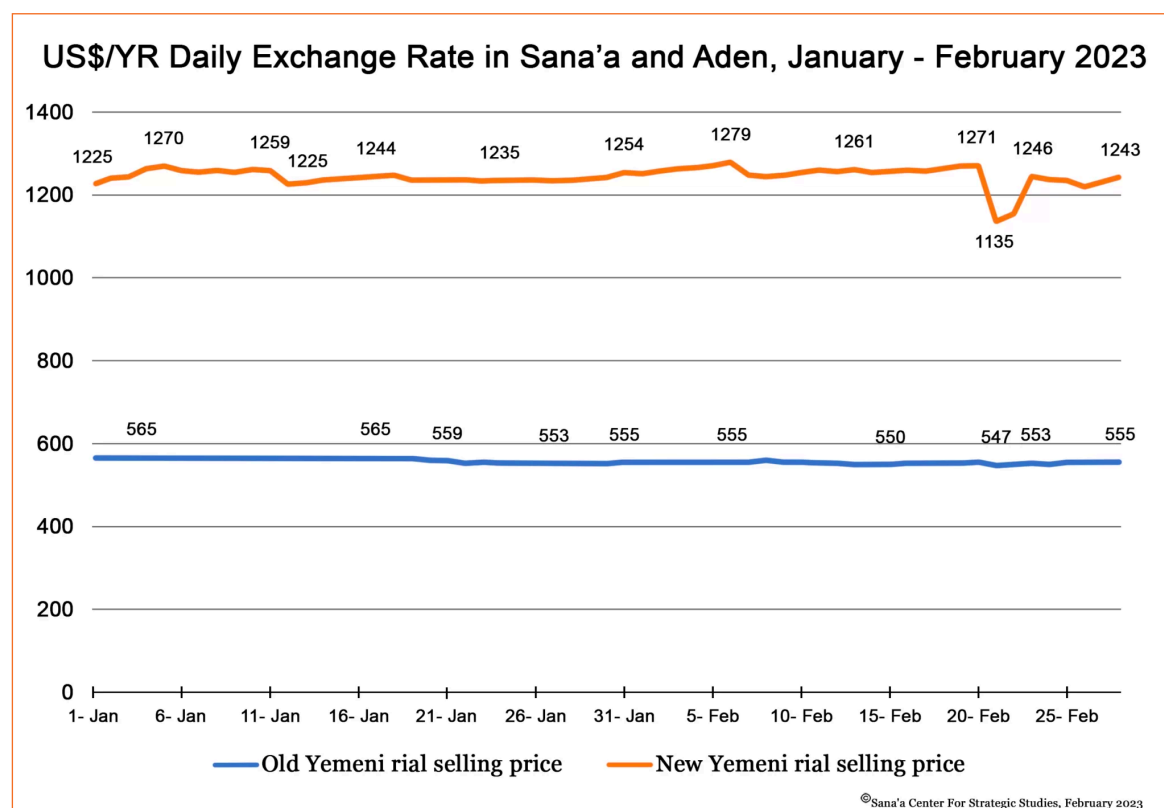
On February 21, Saudi Arabia agreed to supply the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) in Aden with a US\$1 billion deposit to prop up Yemen's faltering economy and support the value of the rial in government-held areas. The aid will not be deposited directly with the CBY-Aden, but rather handled through the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF). The new aid is in addition to US\$1 billion and 1.1 billion dirhams (nearly US\$300 million) that Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) respectively provided in November last year. Access to the new money is expected to be granted soon given the progress the government has made to implement reforms demanded by Saudi Arabia, but the inflexible structure of the support could limit the central bank's capacity to auction foreign currency to stabilize the rial and finance the import of basic commodities.

The timing of the Saudi deposit is fortunate. Public revenues have dropped substantially following the halting of oil exports after Houthi drone attacks on ports in Shabwa and Hadramawt last fall. More recently, the government has witnessed a loss of customs revenue as Houthi authorities have begun to pressure commercial importers to redirect goods from Aden to the port of Hudaydah. The shift could cost the government YR45-50 billion in monthly customs duties.

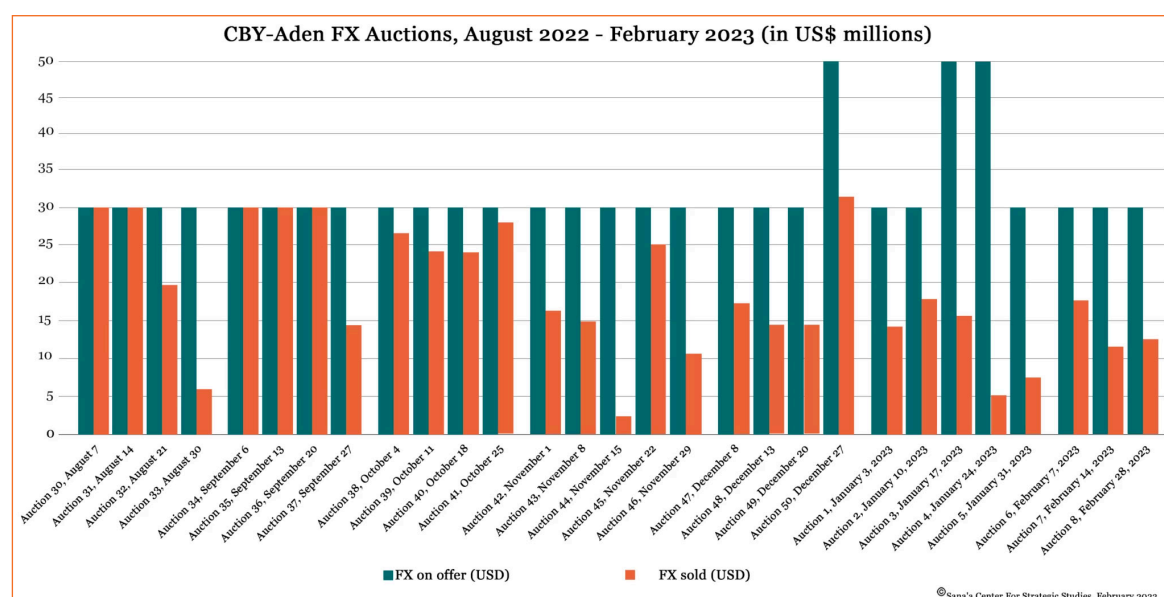
## Currency

The Yemeni rial (YR) experienced slight fluctuations in both government- and Houthi-held areas in January and February. New rials in government-held areas depreciated by almost 4 percent, from YR1,225 per US\$1 on January 1 to YR1,270 per US\$1 as of February 19. They regained some value after the announcement of the new Saudi support, trading at YR1,243 by month's end.

Old rial banknotes circulating in Houthi-controlled areas fluctuated between YR540 and YR560 per US\$1 during January, in reaction to news reports claiming progress in negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi movement. Old rials remained stable during February, trading at YR554 per US\$1 on average.



The central bank in Aden held eight FX auctions over January and February, with US\$280 million on offer. However, only US\$104 million, or 40%, was purchased. The January 24 auction was the most undersubscribed of the year, and only 11 percent of the US\$50 billion on offer was sold. The February 28 auction drew funds from the CBY-Aden's account with the National Bank of Saudi Arabia. The central bank temporarily suspended the auctions in late February due to dwindling foreign currency reserves.



Limited participation coincided with an intensifying battle between the central bank branches in Aden and Sana'a over control of banking sector data. The former has attempted to regain unlimited access to Yemeni banks' data records, while the latter has threatened increasingly restrictive measures to prevent compliance. In mid-January, the Houthi-run CBY-Sana'a issued a decree banning Yemeni banks and commercial traders headquartered in Sana'a from participating in the FX auctions or utilizing Letters of Credit under the CBY-Aden's scheme, hampering demand for hard currency. Houthi authorities justified the move by saying that the auctions had resulted in the transfer of FX liquidity from areas under their control to government-controlled areas. Banks that have refused to share their data have been banned from participating in the currency auctions. Prior to the ban, Sana'a-based commercial traders purchased almost 60 percent of the FX offered via commercial banks.

## CBYs Freeze Accounts of Money Exchangers

The rival central bank branches both issued circulars targeting money exchangers in an attempt to curb currency speculation. On January 26, the CBY-Aden froze the accounts of 17 money exchange shops that had been accused of currency speculation, and ordered other entities to cease doing business with them. Two days later, the Houthi-controlled CBY-Sana'a issued a circular targeting other money exchangers. By the end of January, dozens had had their accounts frozen and been cut off from conducting financial transactions. Bans have mainly targeted unlicensed money exchangers, persons, or companies that have conducted business with unlicensed firms, and individuals accused of speculating and manipulating the market over social media networks.

## Unpaid Money Transfers

Transfers totaling billions of Yemeni rials (YR) and millions of Saudi riyals (SR) from money exchange outlets and hawala networks in Houthi-controlled areas have reportedly gone unpaid. At the end of January, a list containing 64,000 outstanding hawala transfers, amounting to more than YR2 billion and SR30 million, along with the names of beneficiaries, was leaked on social media. The leaked transfers were from the Al-Imtiaz network, one of the largest in Yemen, and are the result of beneficiaries having died or having not been notified of pending transfers.

On January 1, the CBY-Sana'a issued a memo demanding transfer networks commit to its Circular No. (6) of 2021. Similarly, the CBY-Aden called on money exchange outlets and money transfer networks to hand over detailed statements of all outstanding hawala transfers. The circular mandated that money transfer networks send text messages to beneficiaries every 30 days notifying them of uncollected transfers. It also provided a mechanism for senders to collect unclaimed transfers. However, most money transfer networks didn't comply, instead accumulating rial liquidity and refusing to honor numerous hawala balances.

During February, several hawala networks announced their intention to honor billions of Yemeni rials in unpaid money transfers. On February 6, Al-Najm Financial Remittances Network, the biggest hawala network in the country, said that it had made it possible for beneficiaries to check on the status of unpaid transfers. Other hawala networks, including Al-Hazmi, Al-Imtiaz, Al-Bareq, Al-Akwaa Al-Amery, and Yemen Express, announced the launch of their remittance inquiry tool to enable beneficiaries to track and check outstanding transfers.



Outstanding transfers likely total in the tens of billions of Yemeni rials. A source in the money exchange market in Sana'a reported that there are at least another 80,000 transfers pending at the Al-Najm Network, amounting to billions of rials. The largest portion of outstanding transfers is owed to commercial traders and businessmen, who rely heavily on money exchange companies and hawala networks to facilitate business and carry out overseas trade. After outlets announced they would pay outstanding transfers, thousands of Yemeni citizens hurried to collect. While some have been able to claim their funds, many encountered difficulties. Some transfer networks sought to prevent payouts by intentionally letting their liquidity fall or putting in place arduous bureaucratic requirements.

The largest challenge is the lack of a unified money transfer network to settle payments. On February 3, the CBY-Aden announced the imminent launch of a network for financial transfers, involving 47 money exchange companies with total capital of YR5 billion. The network could bolster the CBY-Aden's efforts to track transfers from banks, money exchangers, and hawalas, and mandate the deposit of funds at banks subject to CBY-Aden supervision and control.

## Govt Custom and Fuel Increases Draw Wide Criticism

On January 10, the government's Supreme Economic Committee issued three decrees, raising the custom exchange rate and the prices of locally produced fuel, electricity, and water. The first decree increased the customs tariff on imported goods by 50 percent, from 500 to 750 Yemeni rials (YR) per US\$1, in all government-controlled areas. A second decree raised the price of locally refined petrol by almost 180 percent, from YR175 to YR487.5 per liter. The price for a 20-liter gas cylinder was raised by 43 percent, from YR2,100 to YR3,000.

The hikes came as the government suffers large fiscal deficits, compounded by the halt in oil exports. At the end of last year, the Presidential Leadership Council issued Resolution No. 30 of 2022, ordering the government and its Supreme Economic Council to adopt urgent measures to mitigate the current crisis, implement economic reforms, and develop state resources. A crisis cell was formed, headed by Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed. On January 16, the crisis cell attempted to assuage concern about the custom exchange rate increase, noting that the decision will not affect basic commodities such as wheat, rice, cooking oil, baby formula, and medicine, which are exempt from tariffs, and that the policy is primarily targeting luxury goods. However, given its limited capacity constraints, it is unlikely that the government will be able to contain the scope of price inflation.

The reform package was met with widespread criticism. Parties in and out of government denounced the measures and warned of their catastrophic effects. Speaker of Parliament Sultan al-Barakani criticized the proposed reforms, saying they failed to take into consideration people's living conditions. The customs hike drew the most opposition. Several commercial traders and commodity importers ceased customs transactions and shipment clearances, opting instead to stockpile goods at Aden port and explore options for unloading the goods elsewhere. Other groups threatened non-compliance. On February 6, the Administrative Court in Aden suspended the government's decision to raise the customs exchange rate.

## Battle to Control Imports Intensifies

Following the government's decision to raise the customs exchange rate, Houthi authorities offered economic enticements in a bid to steer imports to the Houthi-held port of Hudaydah, at the same time imposing punitive measures on merchants who import via Aden by preventing their cargoes from entering Houthi-controlled markets. In February, hundreds of commercial trucks carrying thousands of tons of various commodities were held at Houthi customs clearance centers at the entrances to Sana'a and Dhamar governorates.

Houthi authorities pressured commercial importers to provide written guarantees that they would no longer import goods through government-controlled ports and would direct them to the port of Hudaydah. On February 9, during a meeting with officials from the Houthi-run Ministry of Industry, merchants from the Sana'a-based Chamber of Commerce and Industry raised concerns that shipping companies would refuse to ship goods through Hudaydah or ask for high insurance fees. Houthi officials promised to provide an alternative shipping line. While some traders have folded to the Houthi pressure, others have been hesitant to do so. The Hayel Saeed Anaam Group, the largest business conglomerate in the country, has yet to commit, given the risk and cost associated with shipping to Hudaydah.

In reaction to Houthi pressure, Transport Minister Abdelsalem Humaid sought to reassure merchants following a joint meeting of the ministries of transport and trade and the Chamber of Industry in Aden on February 21. Humaid said that procedures for vessels entering Aden and other government-controlled ports had not changed. But he indicated that the government would soon pass new rules that limit foreign exchange support and insurance reductions to importers that brought in goods through its ports. On February 22, the government-run Gulf of Aden Ports Corporation issued a memorandum to the Hudaydah Shipping and Transports Company warning against the redirection of imported goods and threatening to blacklist shipping companies that acquiesce to Houthi demands.

On February 13, the head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Aden, Abu Bakr Baabid, claimed that many commercial ships had changed course toward Hudaydah and warned of the negative consequences on the economy in government-controlled areas. Credible sources indicated have that restrictions previously imposed by the Saudi-led coalition have been recently eased, even though ships continue to be inspected by the United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM).

The move to increase import traffic comes in parallel with Houthi efforts to pressure the government and Saudi-led coalition to suspend UNVIM. The Houthi-affiliated Ministry of Industry reiterated its call for merchants to redirect imports to the port of Hudaydah and offered reduced customs duties of up to 50 percent. Merchants would pay custom tariffs only once if they redirected imports to the port of Hudaydah. Goods imported through Aden are currently subject to dual customs, first when they arrive, and again when they enter Houthi-controlled areas.

The rerouting of imports to Houthi-held ports would mobilize additional customs revenue for the Houthis while further harming government finances, which are already in a critical state. On February 23, the head of the government-run Central Bank of Yemen in Aden (CBY-Aden), Ahmed Ghaleb, indicated that the government could lose YR45- 50 billion in monthly customs duties should the Houthi gambit find success.



## The Environment

# National Environment Day Sheds Light on Plight of Endangered Species

Musaed M. Aklan

February 20 marks the annual celebration of National Environment Day in Yemen. Article no.35 of Yemen's constitution mandates the preservation of the environment as a responsibility of the state and society, and as a national duty for all citizens. This year, events, symposiums, workshops, football matches, and cultural activities were held across the country to increase awareness on preserving and protecting the environment.

In areas under the control internationally recognized government, the plight of Yemen's endangered species was chosen as this year's campaign, with various events held in [Aden](#), [Abyan](#), [Lahj](#), [Socotra](#), and other governorates, and across various education [institutions](#), spreading a clear message of "[Zero Tolerance for Trafficking and Hunting Endangered Species](#)." Yemen is home to a wide variety of habitats, which are inhabited by rare terrestrial and marine species, including Arabian leopards, Arabian oryxes, gazelles, and different species of sea turtles. In the absence of the rule of law, hunting and overfishing are threatening local wildlife. Yemen's Socotra Archipelago, a UNESCO World Heritage Site renowned for its rich biodiversity, was the focus of its own event celebrating National Environment Day.

## A Nesting Place for Rare Turtles

The Gulf of Aden hosts a variety of coastal and marine ecosystems that contribute to the genetic and biological diversity of the region and are home to a concentration of turtles. Five species of marine turtles inhabit Yemeni waters: green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*), hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), olive ridley turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), and leatherback turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*). According to a 2022 study conducted in 13 countries with coastlines on the northwest Indian Ocean, nesting by loggerhead turtles is only documented in Oman and Yemen, of which Yemen has 50 to 100 annual nesters. According to recent estimates, approximately 6,000 green turtles also nest annually in Yemen, as well as 500 hawksbill turtles.

Some of these species are currently under threat of extinction. Destruction of their natural habitats, as well as pollution of the sea and beaches with plastic and solid waste, presents huge obstacles to their survival. Other threats include climate change, which can impact the temperature of the sand where turtles lay their eggs, and rising sea levels can also affect the beaches where turtles nest, making them vulnerable to flooding and erosion. The most immediate threat, however, is the widespread illegal hunting of turtles that has gone unchecked during the last decade of instability.

## Rampant Hunting of Turtles Threatens Species' Survival

Turtle hunting in Yemen is still prevalent, despite efforts to curb it. Minister of Water and Environment Tawfeeq al-Sharjabi emphasized that the killing and selling of turtles is still ongoing, despite a ban on hunting and trade, and said turtle traders have used the ban as a means to extort restaurant owners and sell turtle meat at higher prices. The demand for turtle meat and eggs is driven by traditional beliefs observed in some parts of Yemen, which attribute health benefits to their consumption. Many Yemenis, including hunters, remain unaware of the precarious position of these rare and endangered species. Deputy Minister for Environmental Affairs Abdul Hakeem Rajeh confirmed that turtles are being hunted in many areas of Yemen, even in officially declared protected areas such as Socotra, Aumira in Lahj, Al-Azeezia in Aden, and Sharma in Hadramawt. Rajeh added turtle hunting is carried out mostly at night, while turtles are at their feeding and nesting sites. The high demand for turtle meat and eggs has led to an increase in hunting of endangered turtles. Moreover, the economic instability and hardship experienced by coastal communities and the lack of enforcement of laws and regulations have made it easier for hunters and traders to pursue their illegal activities.

## Treaties and Agreements in Place but Protection Inadequate

The Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) in Yemen has conducted several campaigns to raise awareness on the importance of protecting sea turtles and their habitats. In 2019 and 2020, the EPA organized a campaign to clean up the beaches in the governorates of Aden and Hudaydah, where sea turtles nest and lay their eggs. The government has also taken steps to implement laws and regulations that protect turtles. In 2014, the government passed a law prohibiting the hunting and trade of all sea turtles and their products. Some areas have also been officially declared protected environments.



In response to the decline of turtle populations, various international treaties and agreements have also been put in place to protect turtles. For example, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (**CITES**), of which Yemen is a signatory, regulates the international trade of endangered species, including turtles. The Convention on Migratory Species (**CMS**) aims to protect migratory species, including sea turtles, and their habitats. Furthermore, since 2007, the Marine Conservation Society (**MCS**) has been working with local communities in Yemen to protect sea turtles by establishing a network of volunteers to monitor turtle nests, protect them from predators and poachers, and collect data on turtle populations.

## Preservation of National Treasures

The protection of turtles is still far from adequate, and concrete steps will need to be taken in order to safeguard what are ultimately national treasures. The first step should entail strengthening the current legal framework. Yemeni laws and regulations related to wildlife protection need to be reviewed, strengthened, and enforced to provide better protection for turtles and their habitats. This can be done by imposing higher penalties on those who violate laws related to turtle protection. Second, the establishment of more protected marine areas along the Yemeni coast in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden would go a long way to recognizing the importance of protecting sites with rich ecosystems. Third, more engagement of local communities in turtle conservation might reduce illegal hunting and poaching, while also helping raise awareness among communities and promote responsible tourism. Fourth, improving coordination between the EPA, local councils, security authorities, fishermen's associations, and environmental associations to report illegal hunting of turtles. Fifth, protecting and restoring turtle habitats is crucial for their survival. Turtles rely on specific habitats for nesting, feeding, and breeding. This can be done by reducing coastal pollution and restoring degraded habitats. Finally, conducting rigorous and regular biodiversity studies, research, and monitoring is essential to track population trends, identify threats, and measure the effectiveness of conservation efforts. This would entail closer collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and research institutions.

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## The Sana'a Center Editorial

# The Saudi-Houthi Talks Are Dangerously Exclusive

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Reports of bilateral peace talks between Saudi Arabia and the armed Houthi movement have been trickling out since last October, and their recent confirmation in media reports has fueled widespread optimism and speculation. The talks should be welcomed as a step toward ending Yemen's disastrous war. But to establish a lasting peace, they must quickly expand to include representation of all Yemenis.

The current status of Saudi-Houthi negotiations is unclear. They have broached issues that have been on the table since last year's truce talks, including the provision of public sector salaries, the easing of restrictions at Houthi-held ports, and guarantees on border security. But of fundamental importance is their current exclusivity. The government believes they will soon be brought in, as President [Rashad al-Alimi recently suggested](#), but Houthi leaders have [publicly](#) stated they will not sign a deal with the government's Presidential Leadership Council. At present, the talks only serve the interests of their participants. The Saudis are looking to end their disastrous intervention. Unable to unseat the Houthis, they appear satisfied to cast themselves as peacemakers and end an expensive, decade-long public relations nightmare. For the Houthis, the talks are the closest they have come to international recognition of their long-standing military supremacy and go some way toward international legitimation of their authority to govern. A bilateral deal would allow both parties to wash their hands of the death and ruination they have visited on most of the country.

The salient feature of these talks is that only one delegation is Yemeni, and that despite their military dominance, Houthi authorities are hardly representative of the population that now live under their control. The limited participation ensures two things: first, that the negotiators will suffer from an informational deficit, and will fail to comprehend or address the myriad grievances of those not present; and second, that they are unlikely to elicit buy-in from the numerous actors denied a place at the table. There is a further consideration – the talks openly delegitimize the internationally recognized government. While hardly a representative body, further emasculating the fragile domestic coalition is an invitation to further dissolution and disaster.

The best way to avoid these scenarios is to facilitate the inclusion of a broad swathe of Yemeni actors, along with the country's other Gulf partners. Both need to be involved in negotiations and any future deal. Recent history suggests that Yemen's diverse and complex political environment harbors plenty of forces capable of disruption if left out in the cold. The country has been here before, and not long ago. The Gulf Cooperation Council and UN-sponsored National Dialogue Conference of 2013-14 was intended to promote an inclusive transition away from the authoritarian regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. But the undoing of the process, and a portent to war, was in its failure to adequately include or address the aspirations and grievances of certain parties and constituencies. It is also of paramount importance that the UAE is involved in the dialogue. Abu Dhabi has established itself as the underwriter of numerous anti-Houthi

forces, and its entrenched influence must be harnessed for the greater good. If divergent Saudi and Emirati agendas flower into increased military competition, the results will be disastrous. The recent stand-off in Hadramawt does not augur well.

Though they naturally invite skepticism, the negotiations could have immediate positive externalities if handled correctly. Opening the talks to other parties would go some way to reducing tensions in government-held territories and removing the temptation for some groups to play spoiler. It would also reduce the scope for Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – still a destabilizing force – to maneuver in a fragmented state. It is partly because of these ongoing Houthi-Saudi contacts that the lapsed truce has remained an informal reality. And while there have been negotiations like this before, this is the first time they have reached anything approaching the seriousness we see now.

Left to their own devices, there is every possibility the participants will make a deal that suits their interests alone, and not those of Yemen and its citizens. Instead of peace, the result might be the institutionalization of an unstable political configuration, which will ultimately invite further violence. The Saudi and Houthi sides both appear to be arranging their affairs ahead of the formal consecration of a new relationship – let that include bringing the other parties on board as soon as possible. Further, a guarantee should be given now that the results of any final settlement agreement will be put to a referendum. After so much tragedy, Yemenis deserve to have their say.

## Book Review

### Yemen: Poverty and Conflict

Helen Lackner's *Yemen: Poverty and Conflict* // Photo from Routledge



## Commentary

# Book Review – Yemen: Poverty and Conflict

Ned Whalley

**Yemen: Poverty and Conflict**, by Helen Lackner, Routledge, 2022, 184 pp., \$48.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780367180508, \$170.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780367180492.

An explosion of writing accompanies a war. Conflict journalism typically focuses on immediate outcomes of the fighting, humanitarian publications highlight the terrible human cost, and political and diplomatic observers proffer opinions on various strategic implications. But there is often a temporal gap in English-language literature between descriptions of contemporary violence and the most recent available histories of the belligerents. This is perhaps unavoidable. Comprehensive histories take time to research. Government archives and accurate data, and the trends that can be ascertained from them, are not available right away. Any modern history concludes the day the author finishes writing. They cannot know what crises await, or when they might degenerate into violence.

And as wars drag on, the sheer volume of reporting and analysis takes on a stature of its own. Explanatory timelines shorten as causation appears more immediate, and peace efforts drive speculation on postwar settlements and future prospects. Conflicts have internal dynamics – cyclical violence, the promulgation of war economies, and the destruction and reconstitution of political and social bonds. But shorn of recent political and economic context, the descent into violence can never be sufficiently understood, nor a sustainable peace appropriately formulated.

Helen Lackner's excellent new volume, *Yemen: Poverty and Conflict*, is thus a welcome and necessary addition to these discourses. It is invaluable reading for anyone interested in the war in Yemen and the country's future, or in the political and economic drivers of conflict and



the nexus between them. What sets it apart is its lucidity in laying out Yemen's diverse and complex political history, and how long-running questions of political and regional identity and elite competition engendered and shape the current spate of violence. This is interwoven and accompanied by an outstanding survey of Yemen's recent economic trajectory, which makes for depressing if necessary reading on the sheer scale of contemporary challenges that will remain even after the conflict ends.

The book, which covers the contemporary period to late 2021, is divided in four: a history of the formation of the modern Yemeni state; a discussion of the contemporary political environment and its devolution into conflict; a survey of the Yemeni economy and its prospects; and a chapter on Yemen's relations with other states in the region and further afield. The topic areas are well chosen. The political players, parties, and allegiances of pre-unification Yemen remain of critical relevance. The rise of secessionism, the salience of tribal identities, and the political role of religion are all given due attention, and former president Ali Abdullah Saleh's increasingly corrupt and autocratic regime is well analyzed. Particularly impressive is the examination of the complex series of events that precipitated the 2011 political crisis, the 2013-14 National Dialogue Conference, and the onset of conflict. Analyses of 'Arab Spring' events have mercifully matured to better consider national variation in causes and effects, but rarely are the origins and influences of complex political environments elucidated as well as they are here.

The chapter on international relations is just as necessary – as the entire work makes clear, Yemen has time and again been at the mercy of its more powerful and wealthier neighbors. Saudi Arabia and the UAE hold the fate of the government in their unsteady hands, Oman remains a conduit for Houthi negotiating teams, and Iran's overstated involvement has still meaningfully improved the Houthi arsenal. The US has played a key role, from its 'War on Terror' to the present, and Europe, through arms shipments, aid disbursement, and endorsement of the UN peace process, remains intimately involved. Any peace deal, postwar reconstruction, or rehabilitation of Yemen's morbid economy will involve numerous outside players.

Lackner's outstanding economic analysis is the most remarkable feature of this work. Aid appeals and discussions of Yemen's dire humanitarian situation often point out just how poor the country was before the war began, likely to highlight how few local resources exist to cope with subsequent destruction and deprivation. But the scope and clarity of the survey presented here, detailing the deep challenges to economic development, make clear just how dire the situation had become by the eve of the conflict. And the forecast appears resolutely bleak: long-term issues of unchecked population growth, depleted aquifers and fishing stocks, mismanaged agricultural policy, a woeful training and education system, and a general lack of exploitable resources beyond minor oil and gas reserves. Lackner reserves special ire for failed International Monetary Fund and World Bank liberalization policies, whose widespread implementation in the 1990s and 2000s left a global legacy of increased inequality and political destabilization. But it is hard to envision a rosy trajectory even without them. And the traditional response to such circumstances – economic migration and the provision of remittances – now face pushback from a nationalizing Saudi Arabia.

This abysmal outlook has been downgraded by the war. The book gives special attention to the war economy, and notes how a lack of salaried employment pushes young men to enlist in various foreign-funded armed groups. It is likely such dynamics will lengthen the conflict, and increased securitization poses its own problems, particularly if military funding ultimately dries up. Perhaps the most surprising conclusion presented is Lackner's insistence that Yemen could

well be economically viable given its potential for tourism, renewable energy, and fishing. This would also require enormous agricultural and educational investment, and the Gulf Cooperation Council opening its doors to Yemeni workers. This may well be true, but the deterioration and ingrained mismanagement detailed elsewhere suggest it is unlikely to come to pass.

Quibbles are few. The historical section is quite lightly cited. The enforced brevity occasionally strips out narrative in favor of listing events. But its rapid availability for observers, researchers, and practitioners is an important part of its value, particularly given the speed of political developments in Yemen and ongoing efforts to end the conflict.

In short, this timely book is the work of an expert, and excels through the author's ability to discern important details and convey them clearly and concisely. In a brief conclusion, Lackner sketches out possible outcomes of the conflict, should the sides ever agree to stop fighting. The truce and subsequent cessation of major operations has been an enormously welcome development in the period since this book was written. But Lackner makes clear the extreme difficulties that await any political reconfiguration, and the desperate need for enormous development assistance to prevent an exodus into neighboring states. The book serves as a reminder and warning that even a peace deal cannot be considered a finish line if Yemen is to avert catastrophe. The end is just the beginning.

Editor's note: A new and updated edition of Helen Lackner's 2017 book, *Yemen in Crisis*, has just become available, now subtitled "Devastating Conflict, Fragile Hope." Readers looking for a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of the country's plight would be well-served to find it.

**Yemen in Crisis: Devastating Conflict, Fragile Hope** by Helen Lackner, Saqi Books, London, 2023, 416 pp., £12.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780863561931, 342 pp., £25.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780863561931.

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## Abubakr Al-Saqqaf

### Legacy of an Unarmed Warrior



Abu Bakr al-Saqqaf at an event at the Sana'a Cultural Center in 1980 // Sana'a Center photo by Abdelrahman Al Ghabri

### Commentary

# Abubakr Al-Saqqaf: Legacy of an Unarmed Warrior

Tawfeek Al-Ganaad

Under Moscow's snow, a Yemeni flame of enlightenment was extinguished. There lies buried Abubakar Al-Saqqaf, Yemen's most prominent theorist of liberties, human rights, and a civil state, who passed away on December 13, 2022, at the age of 88. Together with his Russian wife Lina, Al-Saqqaf left Yemen in April 2015 on board a Russian evacuation flight, leaving behind a career spanning 40 years as a Professor of Philosophy at Sana'a University. A staunch critic of government policies, Al-Saqqaf was targeted, kidnapped, and assaulted more than once under Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime.

Al-Saqqaf was born in Ethiopia in 1935 to a Yemeni father and an Ethiopian mother. At the age of 10, he returned to his father's hometown of Al-Wahat in southern Lahj governorate, where he went to school, first at Al-Jafariyah school and then later Al-Muhsiniya. In 1954, he was nominated by Lahj's Youth Club for a scholarship in Cairo, and in 1956 he was elected as First Secretary of the General Congress of Yemeni Students in Egypt, the first Yemeni entity publicly calling for the unification of Yemen. In 1959, he won a scholarship to Moscow where he continued his education, earning a Ph.D. from Moscow University before returning to Yemen in 1974 to teach at Sana'a University.

As a southerner residing and working in Sana'a, Al-Saqqaf was highly critical of Yemen's May 1990 unification agreement, despite the fact that he had repeatedly called for it since 1956. He was insightful and believed that outcomes can only be achieved through deeds rather than words. The outbreak of the 1994 Yemen civil war proved his point and validated his fears about the fate of a unification he deemed superficial. In spite of this, following Saleh's victory and defeat over Yemen's southern forces, he remained in Sana'a, from where he declared war on Saleh's regime and its policies in the South.

From the capital, Al-Saqqaf continued to write, contributing regularly to Yemeni newspapers such as Al-Ayyam, Al-Tajammu' and Al-Shura, and spoke whenever he was given the opportunity, often describing the capital's control over the South as an 'internal occupation'. He was outspoken in his defense of the southern cause and the Yemeni Socialist Party, though he did not approve of the latter's policy either, having rejected an offer to serve as Minister of Education in the breakaway government of Ali Salem al-Beidh in 1994.

Although he embraced leftist ideology, Al-Saqqaf was an independent figure, outside of Yemen's political parties, exhibiting courage unmatched by opposition party leaders. With this courage, and equally unmatched vision, he observed, analyzed, and predicted growing authoritarian practices. For this, and his outspoken criticism, he paid a heavy price and was suspended from work under both Ibrahim al-Hamdi's and Saleh's regimes. But this would be the least of his troubles. Unassimilable and difficult to lure, he was cruelly oppressed by the authorities throughout his years in Sana'a.

As a well-known dissident, he was closely monitored by Saleh's security services and in 1978 was arrested and brutally tortured.<sup>[1]</sup> Two decades later, again in Sana'a, he was kidnapped and subjected to similar forms of torture. Friend and writer Qadri Ahmed Haidar, who visited him after he was kidnapped said, "I deliberately checked the torture marks on his back. We were appalled by what we saw. He didn't like that we uncovered the marks of electric shock torture that covered all of his body, from his neck to his lower back, with bruises [...] He carried on talking as if he hadn't just been subjected to torture."<sup>[2]</sup>

Undeterred, he continued to write and criticize the regime, with unrelenting force in language and approach. As an advocate and devotee of the civil state, he was openly critical of what he saw as an attempt to impose a regime with a religious ideology. "As long as we recognize religion as a criterion of civic duty," he once observed, "it seems impossible to achieve national unity and create a unified nation."<sup>[3]</sup> In an article published in 2007, he notes how "a military state is a lethal germ to civil politics, because authoritarianism is the antithesis of politics."<sup>[4]</sup>

Fully aware that people were wary of befriending someone on the radar of the regime, Al-Saqqaf went out of his way to attend events where he could engage with others. In seminars and events that advocated for people's rights and liberties, he was always there, at the forefront, with an unwavering commitment to accumulate knowledge and monitor events. Blessed with an encyclopedic mind, he went beyond national narratives and drew on cases of injustices committed from across the world.

Despite being one of Yemen's most prolific thinkers, having profoundly engaged in historical and philosophical critiques of oppression, the erosion of civil rights, and the state, his publications were surprisingly limited. Five drafts of his books are still missing since the mid-1990s when his home was raided by the authorities. Al-Saqqaf thus left us with two of his books, *Literary and Intellectual Studies* (1977) and *Republic Between the Sultanate and the Tribe in North*

[1] Taha Al-Numan's testimony to Muhammad Al-Ghabari can be found in his book, "Contrasting views of the years of conflict in Yemen [AR]," (Cairo: Arwiqa publishing, 2021)

[2] Qadri Ahmed Haider, "Abu Bakr Al-Saqqaf : Search for a complete man in incomplete details [AR]," Khuyut, December 31, 2022, <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/a-alsaqaf>

[3] Mohammed Abdulsalam, "Republic Between the Sultanate And the Tribe in North Yemen [AR]," (Cairo: Al-Amal Printing & Distribution, 1989), p. 19 (Mohammed Abdulsalam was the pseudonym of Abubakar Al-Saqqaf)

[4] Abubakr al-Saqqaf, "The Great Absent Cause: The Civil State [AR]," published in 2007 and reposted on Facebook on December 22, 2022: <https://de-de.facebook.com/abubakerassakaf/>

Yemen (1988). The latter, in which he criticized the regime with his characteristic boldness, was published under the pseudonym Mohammad Abdelsalam and reprinted under his real name in 2021. In 2011, Mansour Hayel, a Yemeni poet and journalist, compiled his writings in a book entitled *Defending Freedom and Man*, which offers an intimate portrait of Al-Saqqaf's life. Presently, a group of his fans are compiling the rest of his writings in a book under preparation, based on the author's conversations with Yemeni poet and journalist Mohammed Abdelwahab al-Shibani.

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A ship off the Yemeni coast near the Bab al-Mandab on February 25, 2018 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha

## Analysis

# Israel's Maritime Security in the Red Sea: Historical Competition and the New Houthi Challenge

Ahmed El-Deeb

Since the early days of the conflict in Yemen, the Houthi movement has been in control of much of the Red Sea coastline. The waterway serves as the main artery for trade between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, estimated at about US\$700 billion a year. Some 4 million barrels of oil pass through Bab al-Mandab Strait every day en route to Europe, and about 25,000 ships, or 7 percent of world maritime trade.<sup>[5]</sup>

As a result, Houthi control over parts of the Red Sea has been a subject of international concern, including in Israel. Asian imports and exports account for about a quarter of Israel's total foreign trade, transiting mainly via Red Sea routes, making the safety of the waterway a national security issue.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Houthi movement has planted mines, threatening maritime navigation and used fishing boats to facilitate arms smuggling and to monitor the movement of US and other vessels in the

[5] Yoel Gozansky, "The Red Sea – in a tangle of cross-rivalries [HE]", IDF Maarachot Magazine, September 21, 2020, [www.maarachot.idf.il/2020//](http://www.maarachot.idf.il/2020//) - - - - /; Doron Baskin, "This is how impoverished Yemen is shaking up global oil prices [HE]", Calcalist, March 29, 2015, <https://www.calcalist.co.il/world/articles/0,7340,L-3655726,00.htm>

[6] Eyal Pinko, "The naval battle against Houthi rebels in Yemen [HE]", Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy & Strategy, Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2018/2019, [https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/HE\\_Report\\_2018\\_19/Eyal-Pinko-Two.pdf](https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/HE_Report_2018_19/Eyal-Pinko-Two.pdf)

Red Sea. In response, Israel has pressed its international allies to protect the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and improved regional relationships, most notably with the Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 with the UAE and Bahrain. It has participated in naval exercises in the Red Sea alongside the US, UAE, and Bahrain. Israel began to establish close ties with the UAE in particular given its own maritime security network, encompassing Djibouti, Eritrea, Somaliland, and Yemen's Perim Island and Socotra archipelago. Israeli concern about the threat emanating from Yemen is unlikely to end with the cessation of hostilities, and the relations it has built in the Gulf will likely be the basis for further cooperation and perhaps even a new stage of low-level conflict with the Houthi movement.



## Historical Rivalry in the Red Sea

Rivalry between Israel and Arab states over control of the Red Sea dates back to March 1949, when Israel occupied the village of Umm Al-Rashrash<sup>[7]</sup> and established a presence on the Gulf of Aqaba. In response, Egypt and Saudi Arabia cooperated in 1950 to place the islands of Tiran and Sanafir, located near the Straits of Tiran at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, under Egyptian military control. Egypt then took a series of measures in the early 50s to restrict Israeli shipping through the gulf.<sup>[8]</sup> This severed Israel's links with Asian and African markets and prompted Israel's failed operation in Sinai in 1956, and later its successful occupation in 1967, which also included control of Sharm el-Sheikh, overlooking the Straits of Tiran.



[7] Israel renamed the town Eilat on June 25, 1952.

[8] Abdullah Abdul Mohsen al-Sultan, *The Red Sea and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Rivalry Between Two Strategies* [AR], Beirut: The Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1988, 3rd ed., p. 184.

Attention began to shift to the southern end of the Red Sea in the 1960s. Nasserist Egypt supported the republicans in North Yemen after the 1962 revolution and sent troops to the country, gaining further influence along the coast.<sup>[9]</sup> The Red Sea came into the spotlight at meetings of the Arab League, as both North and South Yemen raised concerns about Israeli activities. In September 1970, the Cairo-based organization delivered an intelligence report to the Egyptian foreign ministry about Israeli activities in the waterway.<sup>[10]</sup> In June 1971, leftist guerillas from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine fired on an Israel-chartered oil tanker near Perim Island.<sup>[11]</sup>

In response, Israel began to work to undermine Yemen's control over the southern passage into the Red Sea.<sup>[12]</sup> From the Israeli perspective, the Red Sea was an international waterway and it resisted efforts to frame the Red Sea as an Arab waterway,<sup>[13]</sup> pursuing a strategy of providing support to non-Arab neighboring countries. In the early 1970s, Israeli Defense Forces Chief of Staff Haim Bar-Lev visited Ethiopia to start talks aimed at securing access to the Red Sea islands of Halib, Dahlak, the Hanish islands, Zuqar, and Dar al-Ayl, which at the time were under Ethiopian control.<sup>[14]</sup> Israel later began training the Ethiopian navy, providing patrol boats, missile boats, and a radar network, which was set up at the mouth of the Red Sea. In March 1973, Time magazine revealed that Israel had sent secret commando units to occupy uninhabited Zuqar island and established a radio and radar station.<sup>[15]</sup>



[9] Abdelazim Ramadan, *The Egyptian-Israeli Confrontation in the Red Sea 1949-1979* [AR], (Cairo: Rose al-Yusuf Press, 1982), p. 136.

[10] Ibid., p. 185.

[11] "Tanker bound for Israel attacked near Red Sea," *The New York Times*, June 14, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/14/archives/tanker-bound-for-israel-attacked-near-red-sea-tanker-attacked-on.html>

[12] Ibrahim Khaled Abdulkareem, "Israel's strategy toward the Arabian Peninsula [AR]," *The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research*, Abu Dhabi, 2000, vol. 1, p. 22.

[13] Egyptian journalist and Nasser confidante Mohammed Hassanein Heikal wrote in the late 1960s: "The whole of the Red Sea can be considered an Arab sea because the countries that overlook it are all Arab: the United Arab Republic and Sudan on the west and Jordan, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen and South Yemen on the east." See, <http://nasser.bibalex.org/TextViewer.aspx?TextID=BSA-706-ar>

[14] Al-Sultan, "The Red Sea and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," pp. 138-198.

[15] Ramadan, *Egyptian-Israeli Confrontation in the Red Sea*, p. 143.

Later that year, during the October War, Egypt coordinated with North Yemen, and South Yemen closed the Bab al-Mandab Strait to Israeli shipping. North Yemen also dispatched forces to some Red Sea islands in an effort to prevent Israel occupying them, though there are no known incidents of conflict with Israeli vessels.<sup>[16]</sup> Still, Israeli designs on the waterway persisted, and in October 1977 North Yemen sent a secret memorandum to the Arab League confirming an increased Israeli and Ethiopian military presence on the coast facing the Bab al-Mandab, in what is now Eritrea.<sup>[17]</sup>

The normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel from 1977 allowed the latter freer maritime navigation through most of the Red Sea. By the 1980s it had returned the entirety of the Sinai Peninsula to Egyptian control, including territory overlooking the Straits of Tiran.

But geopolitics was to complicate the situation once more. The Iranian revolution in 1979 ended Israel's close ties with Tehran, through which it had been able to obtain most of its oil needs via the Red Sea, and birthed a new rivalry in the Middle East.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Iran Begins to Develop Ties with the Houthis

Following the Iranian revolution, Iran became an anti-Western force that looked for ways to support Shia populations in the region. That opportunity arose in Yemen with the rise of the Houthis, first as the Zaidi revivalist Believing Youth Movement in the early 1990s, and later in its later emergence as a military force in the 2000s. Amid unconfirmed reports of Houthi visits to Iran for military training, Yemen had become a politically salient issue for the Iranians by 2005, when hundreds of demonstrators protested outside the Yemeni embassy in Tehran during the third round of the Sa'ada wars between the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement, demanding the expulsion of the Yemeni ambassador. The name of the street where the embassy is located was subsequently changed to Al-Houthi Street.<sup>[19]</sup>

Estimates by the International Institute for Counterterrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya<sup>[20]</sup> indicate that Iranian support for the Houthis was initially minor, but Saudi Arabia's intervention in the Sa'ada wars in 2009, and the formation of the Saudi-led coalition in 2015, changed the rules of the game in Yemen.

In the Israeli view, Iranian policy in Yemen rests on three basic pillars: providing support to the Houthis; harming the interests of Sunni Arab countries, specifically Saudi Arabia; and controlling access as much as possible to the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The IRGC is the executive body tasked with implementing these policies through funding, arming, and training the Houthis.<sup>[21]</sup>

Israel also sees Yemen as an Iranian testing ground for weapons and tactics that could be used

[16] Hussein Ali Hobeishi, "Yemen and the Red Sea: Geographical, Historical, Economic, Political, Marine and Legal Position and Location [AR]," (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-Muasir, 1992), p. 290; Al-Sultan, "The Red Sea and the Arab and Israeli Conflict," p. 185.

[17] Al-Sultan, *The Red Sea and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 191.

[18] Jamal Ali Zahran, "The Development of Iranian-Israeli relations between the Shah and Khomeini eras [AR]," *Journal of Palestinian Affairs*, no. 138/139, Jan-Feb 1993, p. 41.

[19] Adel al-Ahmadi, "Cast and Stone: Shiite Rebellion in Yemen and the Position of Shiite Minorities in the New Scenario [AR]," (Sana'a: Nashwan Al-Hamiri Centre for Studies and Information, 2006), p. 166.

[20] "Iran and the Houthis in Yemen [HE]," International Institute of Counterterrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, situation assessment of January 2019, [www.ict.org.il/images/בתימן.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/images/בתימן.pdf)

[21] Jonathan Saul, Parisa Hafezi, and Michael Georgy, "Iran steps up support for Houthis in Yemen's war," Reuters, March 21, 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R)





five Yemenis and seizing 1,400 Kalashnikov rifles and 226,600 rounds of ammunition. For the whole of 2021, the US Fifth Fleet – based in Bahrain – confiscated 8,700 illegal weapons across a 2.5 million square mile area, including the Red Sea and Persian Gulf.<sup>[33]</sup> In January 2022, Houthi forces seized a UAE-flagged vessel in Yemeni territorial waters, in what Iran's IRGC-linked Tasnim News Agency said was a warning to Israel that the Houthis could target its vessels.<sup>[34]</sup> Another Israeli report in January 2022 claimed that Houthi authorities had established a special force under IRGC supervision to carry out piracy operations and attacks in the Red Sea, deployed with Iranian Noor missile systems.<sup>[35]</sup> In April 2022, the US Navy said it would establish a new force with its allies to patrol the Red Sea.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Proliferation of Military Bases

One of Israel's main security concerns related to Yemen is in preventing the Houthis from acquiring weapons capabilities to attack Israeli assets in the Red Sea or in Israel itself.<sup>[37]</sup> Houthi forces reportedly have access to an Automatic Identification System that can identify Israeli-owned vessels, increasing worries over coastal missiles and sea mines.<sup>[38]</sup>

The UAE has become especially important to Israeli security aims in Yemen. Along with Saudi Arabia, it is among the eight countries that have established military bases in Djibouti – which directly overlooks the Bab al-Mandab Strait – and in Eritrea, Somaliland, and Yemen's Perim Island and Socotra archipelago, giving it extensive capabilities to monitor the area.<sup>[39]</sup> Reports in Israeli media suggest the UAE presence in Socotra includes a joint spy base with Israel. A delegation of Israeli and Emirati intelligence officers reportedly arrived on the island in August 2020 to investigate prime locations, identified as central Jumjimouh in the Momi area, east of the main island, and central Qatanan, in the mountainous west.<sup>[40]</sup> Other reports from security and intelligence observers indicate that since 2016, Israel has established bases at Mount Emba Soira near the town of Senafe, south of the Eritrean capital Asmara.<sup>[41]</sup> Israel has done nothing to dispel such reports, often claiming that its security and intelligence arms operate freely around the region.<sup>[42]</sup>

[33] "U.S. Navy says it seized arms from Iran likely bound for Yemen," The Times of Israel, December 23, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-navy-says-it-seized-arms-from-iran-likely-bound-for-yemen/>

[34] Seth G. Frantzman, "Yemen's Houthis claim they targeted UAE ship as a 'warning' to Israel," Jerusalem Post, January 5, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-691669>

[35] "Under Iran's directions, the Houthis establish a special force to launch attacks in the Red Sea [HE]," Nativ.net, January 21, 2022, <https://nativ.net/73963/>

[36] "A message to Iran? The United States announces the creation of a new task force in the Red Sea [HE]," Maariv, April 13, 2022, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/Article-911273>

[37] Ari Heinstein, "Yemen's civil war changing course: Where is it headed? [HE]," Adkon Strategy Journal, Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), April 2020, <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/articles/yemeni-civil-war/>

[38] Eyal Pinko, "The naval battle against Houthi rebels in Yemen [HE]," Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy & Strategy, Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2018/2019, [https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/HE\\_Report\\_2018\\_19/Eyal-Pinko-Two.pdf](https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/HE_Report_2018_19/Eyal-Pinko-Two.pdf)

[39] Joel Gozansky and Gilles Horowitz, "The Arabian sea ports race – an international and regional competition for control of trade routes [HE]," Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), August 5, 2019, <https://www.inss.org.il/he/publication/a-port-rush-competition-for-control-of-trade-routes/>; "Abu Dhabi establishes an air base in Perim island [HE]," DEBKAfile, 28 May 2021, [www.debka.co.il/בסיס-אוויר-perim-אבו-דאבי-מקימה-על-האי-פארים](http://www.debka.co.il/בסיס-אוויר-perim-אבו-דאבי-מקימה-על-האי-פארים); Joel Gozansky and Gilles Horowitz, "The Arabian sea ports race – an international and regional competition for control of trade routes [HE]," Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), August 5, 2019, <https://www.inss.org.il/he/publication/a-port-rush-competition-for-control-of-trade-routes/>; "Abu Dhabi establishes an air base in Perim island [HE]," DEBKAfile, 28 May 2021, [www.debka.co.il/בסיס-אוויר-perim-אבו-דאבי-מקימה-על-האי-פארים](http://www.debka.co.il/בסיס-אוויר-perim-אבו-דאבי-מקימה-על-האי-פארים)

[40] Hanan Greenwood, "Israel and the UAE establish joint intelligence bases [HE]," Israel Today, August 30, 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/military-life/world-news-military-life/article/7742169>; "Report: Israel will establish intelligence bases on the island of Socotra in cooperation with the UAE [HE]," Nativ.net, August 26, 2020, <https://www.nativ.net/51459/>

[41] "UAE and Israel plan to create intelligence bases on Yemen's Socotra island," SouthFront, August 28, 2020, <https://southfront.org/uae-israel-plan-to-create-intelligence-bases-on-socotra-island/>

[42] Roy Kays, "Israeli submarines en route to Iran: 'The navy operates everywhere' [HE]," Kan, December 25, 2020, <https://www.kan.org.il/item/?itemId=81879>

Houthi authorities responded to reports of UAE-Israeli cooperation via Iranian media, threatening to target Tel Aviv, the UAE, and Israeli military bases in the Red Sea.<sup>[43]</sup> Saudi Arabia publicly denied claims of a UAE military presence on Socotra and Perim,<sup>[44]</sup> but Tareq Saleh – a UAE-backed member of the Presidential Leadership Council – acknowledged the presence of Saudi-led coalition forces on Perim in 2021.<sup>[45]</sup> Saleh's UAE-backed National Resistance forces are stationed at Al-Mokha, where they are charged with securing the Bab al-Mandab Strait.<sup>[46]</sup>

## Future Prospects

So far, Houthi drone attacks on Saudi and UAE targets have had limited impact, but its recent attacks on southern Yemeni ports<sup>[47]</sup> have been a blow to government revenues. The potential still exists for more damaging attacks on Red Sea shipping, which could have effects on global maritime trade and oil markets.

Israel now views the Houthi movement as one of its most serious regional threats. It is an Iranian partner that has demonstrated increased military capabilities over the course of the ongoing conflict. It has shown a willingness to act in the interests of Iran when the occasion calls for it, such as claiming the 2019 Aramco attacks that are widely believed to have been carried out from Iranian or Iraqi territory.<sup>[48]</sup> All of this suggests Yemen could remain an area of contestation between Israel and its regional enemies in the years to come.

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[43] "The Yemeni army will thwart any Israeli attempt to infiltrate the region with the help of the UAE [HE]," Nziv.net, September 18, 2020, <https://nziv.net/52722/>; "Aziz Rashed to Tasnim: Our capabilities are ready to strike any Zionist presence on the Yemeni islands [AR]," Tasnim News Agency, September 16, 2020, [www.tasnimnews.com/ar/news/2020/09/16/2349401/الجزر-اليمنية-في-الجزر-الصهيوني-تواجه-عسكري-صهيوني-في-الجزر-اليمنية](http://www.tasnimnews.com/ar/news/2020/09/16/2349401/الجزر-اليمنية-في-الجزر-الصهيوني-تواجه-عسكري-صهيوني-في-الجزر-اليمنية)

[44] "Saudi Arabia denies that UAE has built military bases in the Bab al-Mandab Strait area [HE]," Nziv.net, May 27, 2021, <https://nziv.net/64366/>

"Tariq Saleh reveals to Sputnik important details on Yemeni complex files [AR]," Sputnik Arabic, June 14, 2021, <https://sputnikarabic.ae/20210614/طارق-صالح-يكشف-للسبوتنيك-تفاصيل-مهمة-بشأن-ملفات-شائكة-عن-اليمن-1049248488.html>

[46] "Yemen loyalists take control of Bab al-Mandab," Middle East Eye, October 2, 2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-loyalists-take-control-bab-al-mandab>

[47] Ahmed al-Hajj, "Yemen: Houthi drones attack ship at oil terminal," The Associated Press, November 22, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-yemen-sanaa-houthis-c115994692a5c2db28f14d74895e00c3>

[48] Michelle Nichols, "Exclusive: U.N. investigators find Yemen's Houthis did not carry out Saudi oil attack," Reuters, January 8, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-un-exclusive-idUSKBN1Z72VX>

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