

The Yemen Review Quarterly: January-March 2026



Residents crowd together in rural Taiz for the arrival of life-sustaining water delivered by a local charity, March 14, 2026 // Sana'a Center Photo by Al-Baraa Mansour



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Executive Summary

Following a rapid military advance into eastern Yemen, forces affiliated with the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) were **pushed out** of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra in early January by Saudi **airstrikes**, Saudi-backed troops, and local tribal forces. STC leader and Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) member Aiderous al-Zubaidi reportedly **fled** into exile. All Emirati soldiers have now **left** the country, the STC has been officially **dissolved**, and other UAE-backed forces are being brought into the Saudi fold. Through a broad political and military restructuring, Riyadh is now seeking to remake the balance of power in the government-held Yemen, where it holds unrivaled sway for the first time since the war began.

A new Yemeni government was **announced** on February 6, following weeks of contentious horse-trading. An agreement was reached for a 35-member cabinet, with portfolios distributed between the north and the south, but with specific seats reserved for eastern Yemen, underscoring its importance to Riyadh. Three women were included in the cabinet; there had been no female ministers for the past six years.

The Saudi Foreign Ministry announced it would host a **dialogue** in Riyadh, bringing together southern factions to develop “fair solutions that meet the legitimate aspirations of the people of the South.” But plans for the talks were scaled back and then postponed. It now appears that the dialogue may not take place at all, or at least not in the first half of 2026.

One month into the United States and Israel’s war on Iran, the Houthi group (Ansar Allah) belatedly joined the hostilities, firing missiles at Israeli military sites on March 28, and announcing a string of further attacks the following week before a ceasefire was announced. The Houthis’ apparent restraint raised fresh questions about the group’s intent. The group has repeatedly threatened to attack shipping in the Bab al-Mandab, which would put further pressure on oil prices and the Gulf economies, but would also bring the group into conflict with Saudi Arabia. The Houthis are likely holding out hope that a mooted Saudi peace plan could be revived.

Yemen’s frontlines have largely withstood the sweeping changes to the anti-Houthi coalition. The Houthis made a number of probing attacks, particularly on frontlines in Hudaydah, Marib, and Taiz, but have refrained from exploiting the turbulence on the government side. The group is thought to still be recovering from last year’s US and Israeli airstrikes.

Thousands of STC supporters have taken to the streets in numerous protests across the south over the past three months. With the STC's activities still banned in multiple districts, these protests have emerged as a primary vehicle for southern resistance, creating a dynamic that threatens to deepen the longstanding tensions between the state and the thousands of pro-STC civilians who still see the group as the legitimate governing authority. Some of the demonstrations have turned violent – clashes with security forces led to **deaths** of protesters in Shabwa, Aden, and Hadramawt.

Saudi Arabia **announced** a US\$90 million package to pay delayed public-sector salaries, including those of military and security personnel, and a further 1.9 billion Saudi riyals (US\$507 million) **to** fund development projects in the health, education, energy, transportation, and water sectors. The support is intended to bridge the funding gap left by the UAE's **withdrawal**. Riyadh later announced a 1.3 billion Saudi riyal (US\$347 million) grant to help cover the budget deficit and national wage bill. Riyadh has also begun directly sponsoring security and military forces previously funded by Abu Dhabi.

In early March, the new cabinet enacted an official state budget for 2026, the first since 2019. The move was a prerequisite set by Riyadh for continued aid, designed to ensure transparency and fiscal accountability. However, the budget was not based on realistic fiscal indicators, but instead built on the 2014 budget, which had **projected a deficit of approximately US\$3 billion**.

OCHA **reported** that the 2025 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan received only US\$687.9 million, or 28 percent of the requested US\$2.48 billion, representing the lowest funding level in ten years. Despite escalating needs, the severe funding shortfall forced all clusters to scale back critical services.

The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) escalated its campaign to financially isolate the Houthis, **designating** 21 individuals and entities and one vessel that have transferred oil products, procured weapons and dual-use equipment, or provided financial services for the Houthis.

The government has initiated a series of interventions to address the dual crises of electricity blackouts and cooking gas shortages, which have severely affected citizens in Aden and neighboring governorates. Supply disruptions are being driven by a combination of localized blockades disrupting supply routes and broader political instability.



A young man looks out over Taiz city from his home on Jabal Saber on August 25, 2025 // Sana'a Center photo by Al-Baraa Mansour

The Sana'a Center Editorial

Time for the Gulf to Treat Yemen as Part of the Solution

Sana'a Center Editorial Board

Regional war has forced Gulf states to confront urgent questions about their security architecture. They require defensive capabilities and frameworks that extend beyond their borders, preserve their strategic autonomy, and allow them to press ahead with their ambitious development agendas. It also revives a question that Gulf capitals have long left unanswered: Can a sustainable regional security order be conceived without Yemen as part of its design?

From November 2023 to September 2025, the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*) attacked over a **hundred** vessels in the Red Sea, driving a **60** percent drop in shipping at the height of the crisis and costing the global economy tens of **billions** of dollars. A US military campaign, which included airstrikes on over one thousand targets between March and May 2025, eventually led to a ceasefire between the two parties, but it failed to eliminate the Houthi threat to shipping or deter attacks on Israel. The Houthis have since **entered** the regional war sparked by US and Israeli attacks on Iran by striking Israel, and have threatened to resume their Red Sea operations. Should they blockade the Bab al-Mandab in tandem with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, two of the world's most critical trade arteries would be shut simultaneously — a scenario without precedent in modern economic history. These developments demand a fundamental rethink of what Gulf and regional security requires.

For decades, Gulf states invested heavily in building their economies and security systems, while managing their relationship with Yemen through containment rather than partnership. Since the Gulf Cooperation Council's founding in 1981 (from which Yemen was excluded), Yemen has been treated as a geographic periphery, a security problem to be managed when necessary, or a sphere of influence to be maintained but not warranting any serious strategic investment.

While the primary responsibility for Yemen's development and state-building rests with Yemenis themselves, regional actors have played a damaging role in deepening the country's fragility. They have failed to recognize Yemen as an integral part of the Arabian Peninsula's security environment, overlooked its strategic geographic location, and disregarded the dangers posed by local instability. Gulf states built islands of prosperity, believing they could insulate themselves from the poverty and violence spreading around them. This current war has shattered that illusion.

Weak economic development, the absence of meaningful investment, and political instability left Yemen with a power vacuum, and armed groups of every stripe moved in to fill it. Regional actors with destabilizing agendas found an easy footing. The Houthis grew out of this environment, and over a decade built military capabilities that now reach far beyond Yemen's borders, threatening regional security and global supply chains as they sit astride one of the world's most critical maritime corridors. With over 2,000 kilometers of coastline along the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea, Yemen could have become the southern gateway to the prosperity of the Arabian Peninsula, a geographic asset connecting the region to global trade routes. Instead, it is a source of sustained and significant regional threat.

Gulf states possess formidable military capabilities, but a decade of conflict has shown that conventional military power has its limits against asymmetric threats posed by non-state armed actors such as the Houthis. The idea of prolonged conflict or the perennial threat of attack is a threat not to be taken lightly for the countries of the Gulf, which have staked their reputation on regional stability, with economies built on openness, investment, and long-term development. They have everything to lose from prolonged conflict or the perennial threat of attack.

For Yemenis, the Houthis' most recent escalation abroad risks further deepening the suffering caused by more than a decade of war on the home front. Renewed strikes by the US and Israel, particularly against civilian infrastructure, could devastate an economy already on its knees. Whatever prospects remained for a political settlement to Yemen's domestic conflict are fast disappearing, and a return to full-scale war, once ignited, could outlast the regional conflict that triggered it.

Over 18 million Yemenis are acutely food insecure. This year's UN humanitarian response plan has received just 10 percent of its required funding. The World Food Programme has been forced to cut its beneficiary lists in half — a result of both funding shortfalls and the suspension of its operations in Houthi-controlled areas in response to continuing restrictions on humanitarian access and the detention of aid workers.

With Yemen's oil exports at a standstill since the 2022 Houthi attacks against export terminals, the Yemeni government and economy are now run almost entirely on Saudi support. A recently announced national budget — the first in nearly six years — lays bare the scale of the imbalance: according to Sana'a Center calculations, the deficit could reach 1.4 trillion Yemeni rials (over US\$890 million) if projected external grants fail to materialize, threatening the government's ability to pay salaries and deliver basic services. The Saudi lifeline is itself at risk, as Riyadh may be forced to redirect its resources to deal with the fallout from the war. Further disruption to Yemen's food supply chains or a rise in prices could tip millions of Yemenis into famine.

The Yemeni government now faces a reckoning. Amid declining external support and mounting pressure, government spending remains misaligned with current needs, continuing to serve large patronage networks at the expense of the most vulnerable. This moment of crisis is an opportunity to push through reforms that have been deferred far too long. Chief among them is redirecting resources toward basic food needs. Developing an emergency response strategy with the international community, before the food security situation deteriorates further, is paramount. The government's responsibility in this regard extends to all Yemenis, regardless of which armed group controls the territory where they reside.

This moment also demands a fundamentally different approach from Gulf states. Yemen is not a problem to be managed — it is a neighbor that, by virtue of its geography and demography, is central to any viable project of regional economic development and stability. Yemen is the most populous country on the Arabian Peninsula, and by 2050, its population will be equivalent to roughly 85 percent of the combined population of all six other Gulf states. This human capital can be either an enormous asset or a liability. Which one it becomes depends entirely on the choices made now.

Any Gulf approach to Yemen must move beyond crisis response toward genuine political and economic engagement and investment in Yemen's stability and development. This means backing an inclusive political process that does not sideline any faction or deepen fragmentation. It means channeling support into state institutions and shifting away from the default strategy of backing armed groups. Above all, it means treating support for Yemen not just as aid but as a strategic investment in stability and regional security. Whether they like it or not, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula share a stake in each other's stability and, ultimately, a common fate.



A solidarity march in Taiz city in support of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states following Iranian attacks, March 30, 2026 // Sana'a Center Photo by Ahmed al-Basha al-Basha

Politics and Diplomacy

Ned Whalley

Saudi Arabia Takes Control

The December **incursion** of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) into eastern Yemen appeared at first to be a resounding success for the UAE-backed secessionist movement. It was accompanied by triumphal pronouncements in southern media about the imminent **resurrection** of a southern state. But the rapid advance into the oil-rich hinterland, displacing pro-government and tribal forces, quickly unraveled in the face of Saudi pressure and local mobilization.

Forces affiliated with the STC were **pushed out** of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra in early January by Saudi **airstrikes**, Saudi-backed troops, and local tribal forces. STC leader and Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) member Aiderous al-Zubaidi reportedly **fled** into exile – first by boat to Somaliland, then by plane to the UAE. The government has since charged him with treason.

Abu Dhabi, whose sponsorship of some of the most experienced and effective armed groups in Yemen appeared to give it the whip hand, quickly backed down. Under immense pressure from Riyadh, all Emirati soldiers have now **left** the country, the STC has been officially **dissolved**, and other UAE-backed forces are being brought into the Saudi fold. Through a broad political and military restructuring, Riyadh is now seeking to remake the balance of power in the government-held Yemen, where it holds unrivaled sway for the first time since the war began.

The STC's offensive appears to have been an enormous miscalculation by both the group's leadership and its Emirati backers. There are several reasons why they might have misread the scale of Riyadh's response. Chief among these was Saudi Arabia's long-standing reticence to act quickly or forcefully in Yemen, both during operations against the Houthis and in past rounds of fighting between STC and government forces. After its initial intervention in Yemen in 2015, the Kingdom's administration of the war progressed slowly, with general dithering over financial support, political appointments, and military aid. The rapid deployment of Saudi air power, which had been dormant since 2022, seemed unlikely, and the speed of the STC's advance cast doubt on the capabilities and loyalties of the local forces Riyadh supported, namely the Nation's Shield forces, Yemen Emergency forces, and local Hadrami tribesmen. The STC and UAE also underestimated Riyadh's sensitivity to developments in the governorates of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra, which the Kingdom views differently from its involvement elsewhere in Yemen. Hadramawt's direct access to the open sea makes it a locus of Saudi attention for economic reasons, including a long-mooted pipeline that could bypass the Strait of Hormuz, but the vast, shared border and historical social ties with the governorate were probably even more consequential.

Much has also been made of the timing of the STC's offensive, which came on the heels of a trip to Washington by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Another arena of Saudi-Emirati competition – Sudan – was reportedly on the agenda, and Saudi officials allegedly asked for sanctions against the rebel Emirati-backed Rapid Support Forces, and perhaps even against the UAE itself. Abu Dhabi may have seen Yemen as a venue for retaliation or rebalancing, anticipating diminished influence elsewhere. Israel's near-simultaneous recognition of Somaliland was also highly conspicuous. From Egypt and Turkey to Qatar and Oman, there was significant concern about what appeared to be a rapid, coordinated reconfiguration of the regional order and an expansion of Emirati and Israeli influence across the southern Red Sea. The UAE's normalization with Israel may have won it friends in Washington, but in the region, its stance became increasingly unpopular during the war in Gaza. The STC's own reported olive branch to Israel was likely a bid to secure American support, but it cast the group as part of a broader rebalancing of regional power.

Finally, the UAE might simply have overestimated the local power and influence of the STC. The group had repeatedly demonstrated that it was the leading movement in the anti-Houthi coalition, with a distinct political project and substantial military capabilities. It had previously fought pro-government forces successfully in Aden in 2019 and in Shabwa in 2022. But its appeal and power were largely untested outside its traditional strongholds. Wadi Hadramawt has been politically contested by local groups seeking greater autonomy, pro-government forces with connections to the Islah party, and local tribal organizations, none of which subscribed to the STC's secessionist ideology. The STC's political organization and agitation in Seyoun had gained local traction, but also significant pushback.

Ultimately, the STC's military capabilities and local appeal were simply insufficient. When the airstrikes came, the governorate's topography provided little cover. Widespread looting in Wadi Hadramawt turned locals against STC soldiers. As they were quickly pushed out of Seyoun by tribal and Saudi-backed forces, the STC appeared to lose the confidence of the UAE, which began winding down its support. The few remaining Emirati soldiers still in Yemen were evacuated, abandoning the Hadramawt coast, the liquified natural gas facility at Balhaf, and the Socotra archipelago.

Saudi Arabia has been left as the sole sponsor of Yemen's anti-Houthi alliance, and has sought to reorganize the political and security administration across the South to empower loyal forces, bring Emirati proxies under its wing, and diminish and dilute support for the STC and its remaining supporters, who continue to protest the group's official dissolution and a government ban on its political activities (see Military and Security)

New Government Unveiled

The downfall of the STC precipitated a massive reorganization of Yemen's political landscape, with the internationally recognized government now under the sole suzerainty of Saudi Arabia. A new cabinet was **announced** on February 6, following weeks of contentious horse-trading over its composition. Riyadh exerted pressure for a breakthrough amid widespread demonstrations by STC supporters. At one protest in Seyoun, demonstrators reportedly chanted slogans condemning Saudi Arabia and tore up photos of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, before being violently **suppressed** by security forces.

Appointments to the cabinet were contested between PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi and fellow PLC member Abdullah al-Alimi, who has attempted to position himself as the primary representative of the South following the proscription of the STC. Alongside Riyadh, the pair seem to have been the primary decision-makers regarding who would join the government. An agreement was eventually reached for a 35-member cabinet, with portfolios distributed between the north and the south, as well as the inclusion of specific seats for eastern Yemen, underscoring its importance and recently elevated relevance to Riyadh. The geographic allocations also reinforced the waning influence of Yemen's political parties, which had been pushing for party quotas instead.

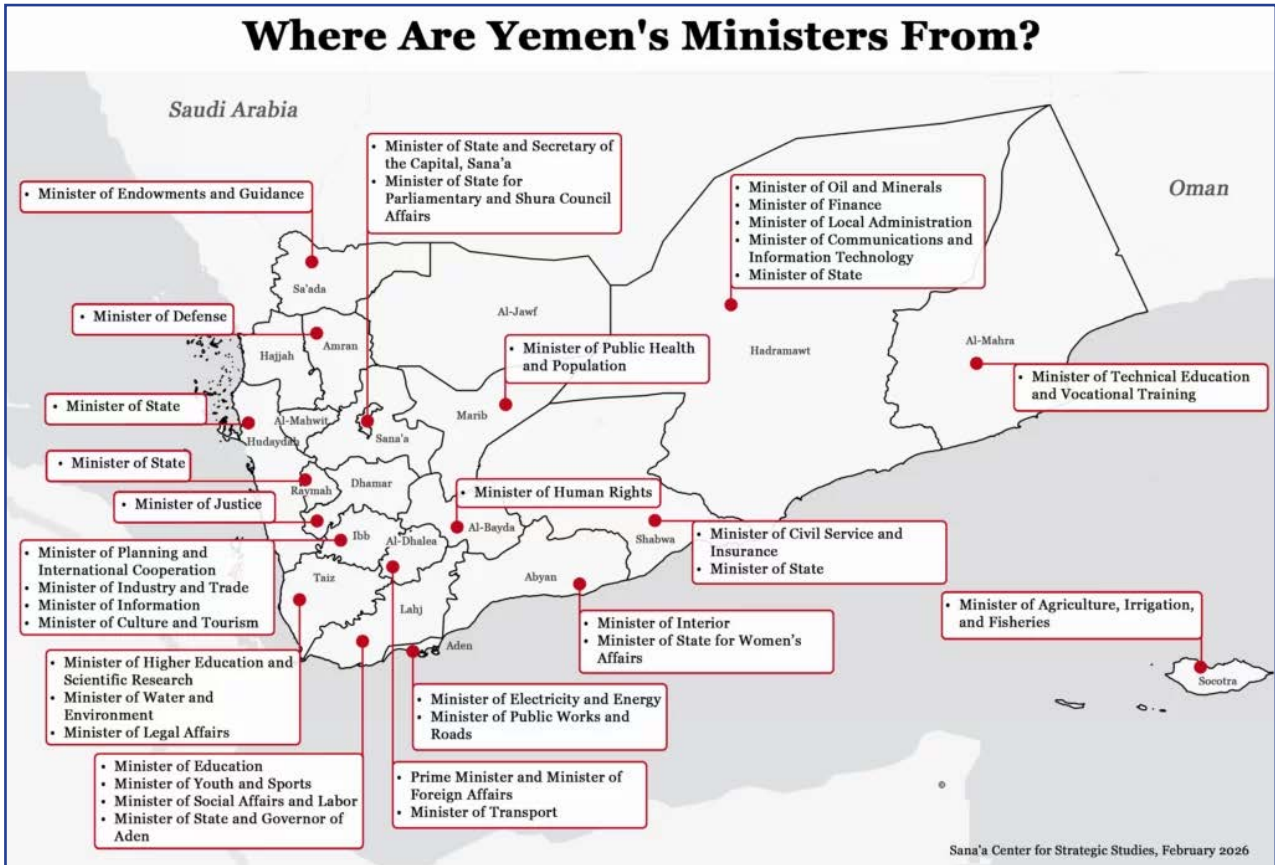
Representatives from southern Yemen were given two of the four sovereign **ministries**, leaving one for the north and one for the east. Ibrahim Haidan retained the post of Interior Minister, while Taher al-Aqili, a former army chief of staff, was named Defense Minister. Recently appointed Prime Minister Shayea al-Zindani retained the post of Foreign Minister for himself. One surprise came at the Finance Ministry, with Marwan bin Ghanem named to the top job. Bin Ghanam, who has little government experience, is the son of Faraj bin Ghanem, a well-respected figure from Hadramawt who served as prime minister in the 1990s.

The appointment of three women to the cabinet represented a positive shift, reversing a trend of total exclusion that began with the government formed in late 2020. Afrah al-Zuba, a development professional, was named Minister of Planning and International Cooperation; Ishraq al-Muqtari, an investigator and spokesperson for the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations of Human Rights, was selected as Minister of Legal Affairs; and Ahd Ja'asous, a human rights activist and UNICEF coordinator at the Social Welfare Fund in Aden, was named Minister of State for Women's Affairs.

Several officials formerly affiliated with the STC were included in the new government, part of Saudi efforts to peel southern leaders away from the group and its Emirati backers. These included Civil Service Minister Salem Thabet, Social Affairs and Labor Minister Mukhtar al-Yafii, Electricity and Energy Minister Adnan al-Kaff, Agriculture, Irrigation, and Fisheries Minister Abdullah al-Socotri, and Minister of State Abdelrahman Sheikh, who was also appointed Governor of Aden in January.

The government was **sworn in** on February 9 at the Yemeni embassy in Riyadh, still unable to return to Aden due to the volatile security situation. Its first meeting in the interim capital was not held until February 19, when a crowd of protestors reportedly linked to the STC attempted to storm the presidential palace, resulting in deadly clashes with the security forces (see *Military and Security*). Government ministers have since observed a curfew in Aden.











As part of the government overhaul, PLC chief Al-Alimi **appointed** three new governors to southern governorates on March 13. During individual meetings with new Lahj Governor Murad al-Halimi, Abyan Governor Mukhtar al-Rabbash, and Al-Dhalea Governor General Ahmed al-Qubba, Al-Alimi framed their mandates explicitly in state-building terms, emphasizing the need to remove illegal checkpoints, unify decision-making on security issues, and improve service delivery. Al-Halimi, a former transport minister and member of the STC presidium, is viewed as a pragmatic figure who could help stem pushback from STC loyalists. Al-Rabbash previously served as a Deputy Minister for Religious Endowments and was a military commander in the Southern Resistance during the Houthi invasion of Aden. A well-respected Salafi, his perceived independence from both the Islah party and controversial Salafi networks may give him more room to maneuver politically and confront security challenges. In Al-Dhalea, the appointment of Al-Qubba, the governorate's security director, a commander in the National Security forces (formerly the STC-affiliated Security Belt forces), and head of the Al-Dhalea Military Axis, indicates that Saudi priorities there are dominated by security concerns. Al-Dhalea is the heartland of the STC and the ancestral home of its now-fugitive leader, Aiderous al-Zubaidi, and has several frontlines facing Houthi forces.



Sovereign Ministries

Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs	Minister of Interior	Minister of Finance	Minister of Defense
 <p>Shayea al-Zindani</p> <p>Home Governorate: Al-Dhalea Party/Affiliation: General People's Congress (GPC)</p> <p>Bio: Foreign Minister in the previous government. Previously served in diplomatic posts, including as Yemen's ambassador to Saudi Arabia.</p>	 <p>Ibrahim Ali Ahmed Haidan</p> <p>Home Governorate: Abyan Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Graduated from the Naval Academy in Hudaydah, which he later commanded. Has served as Minister of Interior since 2020.</p>	 <p>Marwan Faraj Saeed Bin Ghanem</p> <p>Home Governorate: Hadramawt Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Served as Director General of the General Investment Authority. Previously worked in Arab investment institutions and on economic policy.</p>	 <p>Taber Ali Aida al-Aqili</p> <p>Home Governorate: Amran Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Major General who previously served as Chief of the General Staff of the army. He held several leadership and operational positions within the Yemeni Armed Forces.</p>
Southern Share	Eastern Share	Northern Share	

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Ministers with Portfolio			
<p>Minister of Planning and International Cooperation</p>  <p>Afrah Abdelaziz al-Zuba</p> <p>Home Governorate: Ibb Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Development and institutional reform expert. Previously served as Executive Director of the Executive Bureau for Accelerating Aid Absorption, as an advisor to the prime minister, and as Deputy Secretary-General of the National Dialogue Conference.</p>	<p>Minister of Industry and Trade</p>  <p>Mohammed Mohammed Hizam al-Ashwal</p> <p>Home Governorate: Ibb Party/Affiliation: Islah</p> <p>Bio: Held administrative and oversight positions in various government institutions, including Deputy Minister of Endowments, where he was responsible for administrative planning and financial oversight.</p>	<p>Minister of Information</p>  <p>Moammar Mutahar Mohammed al-Eryani</p> <p>Home Governorate: Ibb Party/Affiliation: GPC</p> <p>Bio: Graduate of the University of Baghdad. Has held several ministerial positions since 2012, including Minister of Information, Youth and Sports, and Tourism.</p>	<p>Minister of Public Health and Population</p>  <p>Qasim Mohammed Qasim Bahibeh</p> <p>Home Governorate: Marib Party/Affiliation: Islah</p> <p>Bio: A specialist physician and academic. Was appointed Minister of Health in 2020 after a long career in medicine.</p>
<p>Minister of Justice</p>  <p>Badr Abdo Ahmed al-Aradah</p> <p>Home Governorate: Dhamar Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Judge who worked in the Public Prosecution and the Higher Institute of the Judiciary. Participated in training programs and initiatives to develop the criminal justice system.</p>	<p>Minister of Legal Affairs</p>  <p>Ishraq Fadl al-Muqtari</p> <p>Home Governorate: Taiz Party/Affiliation: Yemeni Socialist Party</p> <p>Bio: Lawyer and human rights activist who documented human rights violations. Served as an investigative judge and spokesperson for the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Human Rights Violations.</p>	<p>Minister of Water and Environment</p>  <p>Tawfiq Abdelwahid Ali al-Sharjabi</p> <p>Home Governorate: Taiz Party/Affiliation: Yemeni Socialist Party</p> <p>Bio: Worked in the water and environment sector for many years. Served as Undersecretary of the Ministry of Water and Environment and later as acting minister.</p>	<p>Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research</p>  <p>Amin Noman Mohammed al-Qudsi</p> <p>Home Governorate: Taiz Party/Affiliation: Nasserist Unionist People's organization</p> <p>Bio: Geophysicist and expert in geological and environmental studies. Managed a scientific research and consultancy center for many years.</p>
<p>Minister of Culture and Tourism</p>  <p>Mutea Ahmed Qasim Dammaj</p> <p>Home Governorate: Ibb Party/Affiliation: Yemeni Socialist Party</p> <p>Bio: Worked as a telecommunications engineer before entering government service as a political advisor to former Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed. Later served as Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, coordinating government work.</p>	<p>Minister of Endowments and Guidance</p>  <p>Turki Abdullah Ali al-Wadieci</p> <p>Home Governorate: Sa'ada Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Salafi preacher and cleric who participated in the resistance against the Houthis in Dammaj.</p>	<p>Minister of Human Rights</p>  <p>Mashdal Mohammed Omar Ahmed</p> <p>Home Governorate: Al-Bayda Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Lawyer who worked with the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Human Rights Violations.</p>	

Southern Share

Eastern Share

Northern Share

Ministers with Portfolio

Minister of Electricity and Energy	Minister of Transport	Minister of Civil Service and Insurance	Minister of Public Works and Roads
 <p>Adnan Mohammed Omar al-Kaf</p> <p>Home Governorate: Aden Party/Affiliation: Former STC</p> <p>Bio: Served as Deputy Governor of Aden for Development Affairs, working on public services and infrastructure.</p>	 <p>Mohsen Ali Haidara Qasim al-Omari</p> <p>Home Governorate: Al-Dhalea Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: A pilot and executive at Yemenia Airways, where he worked in the operational and commercial management of the sector.</p>	 <p>Salem Abu Bakr Mohammed Thabet al-Awlaqi</p> <p>Home Governorate: Shabwa Party/Affiliation: Former STC</p> <p>Bio: Held political and media positions within the STC. Later chaired the Land and Survey Authority and caused a major crisis in the council by confronting corruption networks.</p>	 <p>Hussein Awadh Saeed al-Aqrabi</p> <p>Home Governorate: Aden Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Civil engineer who held leadership positions in the Ministry of Public Works. Supervised infrastructure and road projects in Aden and other areas.</p>
Minister of Education	Minister of Social Affairs and Labor	Minister of Youth and Sports	Minister of Oil and Minerals
 <p>Adel Abdelmajid Alawi al-Abbadi</p> <p>Home Governorate: Lahj (Radfan region) Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Academic specializing in educational administration. Served as Vice President of the University of Aden for Academic Affairs and as acting president on several occasions.</p>	 <p>Mukhtar Omar Saleh al-Yafeai</p> <p>Home Governorate: Lahj (Yafea region) Party/Affiliation: Former STC</p> <p>Bio: Southern political and media activist. Worked at media outlets affiliated with the STC.</p>	 <p>Nayef Saleh Abdelqader al-Bakri</p> <p>Home Governorate: Lahj (Yafea region) Party/Affiliation: Islah</p> <p>Bio: Minister of Youth and Sports since 2015. Previously served as Governor of Aden but was removed from the position amid tensions with the UAE related to his affiliation with Islah. Popular resistance leader during the battle to liberate Aden from the Houthis.</p>	 <p>Mohammed Abdullah Ali Banga</p> <p>Home Governorate: Hadramawt Party/Affiliation: Southern National Coalition</p> <p>Bio: Academic specializing in petroleum engineering. Held academic and administrative positions in the energy sector and at the Yemen Oil Company.</p>
Minister of Local Administration	Minister of Communications and Information Technology	Minister of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Fisheries	Minister of Technical Education and Vocational Training
 <p>Badr Mohammed Mubarak Basalmah</p> <p>Home Governorate: Hadramawt Party/Affiliation: Hadramawt National Council</p> <p>Bio: Engineer and development expert. Participated in the National Dialogue Conference and served as an advisor to the chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council for Local Administration Affairs.</p>	 <p>Shadi Saleh Basarah</p> <p>Home Governorate: Hadramawt Party/Affiliation: Hadramawt National Council</p> <p>Bio: Professor of computer science who held senior academic and leadership roles at universities in the UK.</p>	 <p>Salem Abdullah Issa al-Socotri</p> <p>Home Governorate: Socotra Party/Affiliation: Former STC</p> <p>Bio: Military officer who held security and political positions in Socotra, including Governor and Director of Security.</p>	 <p>Anwar Mohammed Ali Kalshat al-Mahri</p> <p>Home Governorate: Al-Mahra Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown</p> <p>Bio: Academic who previously served as Minister of Electricity. Currently serves as President of Al-Mahra University.</p>

Southern Share

Eastern Share

Northern Share

Ministers of State			
<p>Minister of State and Governor of Aden</p>  <p>Abdelrahman Shreikh al-Yafeai Home Governorate: Lahj (Yafa region) Party/Affiliation: Former STC Bio: Participated in the southern resistance during the war. Former Deputy Governor of Aden and member of the STC Presidium who has grown closer to Riyadh in recent years. Played a major role in the founding of the pro-STC Security Belt forces.</p>	<p>Minister of State for Women's Affairs</p>  <p>Abd Mohammed Salem Ja'asous Home Governorate: Abyan Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown Bio: Activist for women's issues and community development. Has worked in social protection programs and women's empowerment projects in cooperation with international organizations.</p>	<p>Minister of State</p>  <p>Ahmed Saleh Ahmed al-Awlaqi Home Governorate: Shabwa Party/Affiliation: Southern Movement Bio: Political analyst and media commentator. Has worked as a political advisor and spokesperson for southern youth organizations.</p>	<p>Minister of State</p>  <p>Akram Naseeb Ahmed al-Ameri Home Governorate: Hadramawt Party/Affiliation: Inclusive Hadramawt Inclusive Conference Bio: Judge who held various judicial positions in Hadramawt. Member of the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission and has participated in political dialogue processes.</p>
<p>Minister of State for Parliamentary and Shura Council Affairs</p>  <p>Abdullah Ali Hussein Abu Huriyah Home Governorate: Sana'a Party/Affiliation: Political Bureau of the National Resistance Bio: Held administrative positions in the Office of the Presidency and other government institutions. Participated in prisoner exchange negotiations on behalf of the government.</p>	<p>Minister of State and Secretary of the Capital, Sana'a</p>  <p>Abdelghani Hifzallah Jameel Home Governorate: Sana'a Party/Affiliation: GPC Bio: Previously served as Secretary of the Capital and Governor of Sana'a. Has held multiple security, administrative, and local government positions.</p>	<p>Minister of State</p>  <p>Walced Mohammed Mohammed al-Qadecmi Home Governorate: Hudaydah Party/Affiliation: GPC Bio: Served as First Deputy Governor of Hudaydah. Has also worked in local administration and political affairs.</p>	<p>Minister of State</p>  <p>Walced Ali Ismail al-Abara Home Governorate: Raymah Party/Affiliation: Unaffiliated/Unknown Bio: Prominent human rights expert who has held various positions in government. Head of a research center specializing in public policy and regional affairs.</p>

Southern Share
Eastern Share
Northern Share

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Southern Dialogue Postponed

Riyadh's plan for the political and military reorganization of the south was to be accompanied by a grand southern dialogue, in apparent, belated recognition of long-festering grievances. The marginalization of the South after unification created strong currents of resentment. Grievances range from land appropriation to political representation and remain the primary mobilizing factor for many southern Yemenis, fueling the emergence and popularity of the broader Southern Movement (*Al-Hirak*) and the STC. Reportedly at the request of PLC chief Al-Alimi, the Saudi Foreign Ministry announced it would host a **dialogue** in Riyadh to bring together southern factions and develop "fair solutions that meet the legitimate aspirations of the people of the South." The announcement received **international** backing, support from governors across southern Yemen, and was even welcomed by the **STC**.

Initial proposals for the dialogue envisioned delegates from across the south gathering in Riyadh during Ramadan for comprehensive talks on reconciliation, sparking immediate speculation about who would take part. PLC member Abdullah al-Alimi angled for a leading role in selecting delegates and managing the process, as did PLC head Rashad al-Alimi. Riyadh reportedly intended to host a wide spectrum of prominent southern and eastern figures, even including former STC members.

But plans for the dialogue were scaled back and then postponed. Rather than the in-depth deliberations previously anticipated, Riyadh narrowed its ambitions, recasting the talks as part of its ongoing efforts to stabilize the situation in southern Yemen and reorganize UAE-backed forces under the umbrella of the government. It is now unclear when the dialogue will take place and in what format. Riyadh, with its attention no doubt elsewhere due to the US-Iran war, is seemingly content with the political progress achieved through the reorganization of forces. While still a serious security concern, pressure from the STC has so far failed to prevent the government from exercising its functions. The thinking was that Riyadh would be able to absorb or head off any dissatisfaction and disillusionment through increased service provision – a Saudi fuel derivatives grant had improved the once moribund electricity supply in Aden, and military forces were receiving their salaries on time.

But the Kingdom may rue its decision to postpone talks and the chance to address issues of southern resentment and division. Saudi Arabia now has a full plate with the damage and disruption caused by the US-Iran war and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Electricity provision in Aden has again begun to decline, and the city has endured a shortage of cooking gas since the beginning of the year. After a lull during Ramadan, STC demonstrations have resumed in earnest, and the group is reorganizing politically and reopening its offices across the south.

The government is struggling to respond and is now threatened not only by a resurgent STC but by fragmentation and competition among the local political actors seeking to replace it. Further violence at STC demonstrations could undermine the government's fragile claims to legitimacy and provoke wider unrest. The political and military reorganization of the south would be difficult even with full Saudi support and attention, facilitated dialogue, and institutional coordination. None of these conditions is in place, and with international attention elsewhere, the political crisis of December and January could fester and metastasize into further instability.

US-Iran War Clouds Road to Peace

One month into the US and Israel's war on Iran, the Houthis belatedly joined the hostilities, **claiming** to have fired a barrage of missiles at Israeli military sites on March 28. Israel later **confirmed** it had intercepted a missile fired from Yemen. Limited attacks were announced on April 1, 2, 4, and 6, but the Houthis' apparent restraint raised fresh questions about the group's intent, and what the response might be from the United States, which concluded a ceasefire with the Houthis after a bombing campaign last year, and Israel, which targeted Houthi military and political leaders and civilian infrastructure in response to a Houthi missile and drone campaign last summer and fall.

The group's apparent hesitance can be attributed to a range of strategic calculations, including conserving the capabilities of the Axis of Resistance, preserving its relationship with Saudi Arabia, or simply timing the operation for maximum effect. Still, there were early signs that the Houthis were preparing to act. In Hudaydah, sources reported that the Houthis had been activating military positions, including missile platforms and mobile radar vehicles, along the Red Sea coast as early as late February. On March 14, a popular Houthi radio channel **concluded** a fundraising campaign collecting more than YR317 million (US\$598,000) to support Houthi military operations.

The Houthis' decision to target Israel weeks into the conflict has fueled speculation over the degree of coordination with its Iranian benefactors. As the conflict progressed, Houthi rhetoric increasingly aligned with Tehran's, with the group openly framing itself as part of the "**unity of battlefields**" that make up the Axis of Resistance. To this end, both Iranian and Houthi officials repeatedly **threatened** to close the Bab al-Mandab, which would amplify the economic cost of Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. The status of Hormuz has emerged as the key element in talks to end the conflict. The Houthi attack may have served as military signaling, strengthening Iran's hand in negotiations and reminding the US that it still has options for escalation. The additional leverage would be particularly useful if Iran seeks a broader deal that includes Lebanon's Hezbollah.

But the choice to attack Israel rather than maritime shipping reflects the Houthis' own careful strategic calculations. The situation in Palestine, the stated cause of the Houthis' previous campaign against Israel, is a far more resonant issue in Yemen than the plight of Iran. While it added weight to Iranian economic threats, attacking Israel also serves the Houthis' domestic propaganda. The group's domestic power largely derives from its ideological cohesiveness, and such rhetorical campaigns have been a key component in maintaining it.

The Houthis have not launched any further attacks since April 8, when the US and Iran agreed to a ceasefire to halt hostilities, but the agreement quickly faltered over disputed interpretations of its scope. Talks are still ongoing, but with the Strait of Hormuz still **closed**, the resumption of Houthi attacks in the Bab al-Mandab still looks like an important card, multiplying disruptions to shipping and shocks to energy prices, and helping Iran exact a high toll for any future US and Israeli attacks. But there are different considerations than when the group launched its Red Sea campaign in 2023. Renewed attacks would put further pressure on oil prices and the Gulf economies, but would also bring the Houthis into direct conflict with Saudi Arabia, which has **diverted** oil shipments to its west coast ports for export.

The conflict will not last indefinitely, and when it is over, the Houthis will still be in dire financial straits. Under the weight of sanctions and aid cuts, the economic situation in the north continues to deteriorate (see *The Economy*).

The Houthis may be holding out hope that a version of the UN-backed Saudi peace plan could ultimately be revived, which envisioned payouts to public-sector workers – including Houthi military forces – in exchange for peace. In an Eid speech, the head of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat, **criticized** the US and Saudi Arabia for stalling the peace process and preventing the implementation of the so-called “roadmap.” If the Houthis impose a blockade in the Bab al-Mandab or otherwise harm Saudi economic interests, the plan could be scrapped entirely.

Most consequentially for Yemen’s civilian population will be an Israeli military response to the strikes, which seems all but inevitable. Israel could move to target the Houthi leadership, as it has in the past, or seek to degrade the group’s military capabilities through a similar campaign as the one the US waged last spring. In either scenario, civilian infrastructure, such as ports, airports, power plants, and factories, could be targeted. Israel has undertaken such strikes **before**.

The prospect of Israeli airstrikes appears to have the Houthis worried. The environment in Sana’a remains tense, and Houthi leaders remain on high alert for potential airstrikes. Wary of public unrest and **espionage**, the group has divided the capital into security districts and launched a security campaign with dozens of civilian detentions. Both the scale of the campaign and the number of arrests make it clear that the group is targeting anyone it suspects could play a role in political mobilization.

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An armored vehicle belonging to the Giants Brigades bearing the slogan "Aden is a safe city," during the withdrawal of STC forces from Aden's Jabal Hadid area, January 16, 2026 // Sana'a Center photo

Military and Security

By William Clough

Saudi Leadership Revamps Southern Security

Following the dissolution of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the UAE's sudden withdrawal from Yemen in early January, the country's southern security architecture has undergone significant upheaval in the first quarter of 2026. In the three months since the STC withdrew troops and heavy weaponry from Al-Ma'ashiq Palace, Saudi Arabia has quickly moved to fill the resulting power vacuum, and is now attempting to impose a new order on the fragmented anti-Houthi camp through a sweeping overhaul of southern security forces.

Early efforts to impose control in the south centered on securing Aden, which had been under STC stewardship since late 2019. Leadership in Riyadh has tasked the Giants Brigades forces under the command of Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) member Abdelrahman al-Muharrami (Abu Zara'a), along with Saudi-trained-and-funded Nation's Shield forces, to secure the city. But while the troops were able to consolidate control over the interim capital's core areas, Saudi leadership was still left with a broader security challenge: despite the official dissolution of the STC and the departure of several of its leaders from Yemen, the majority of military forces in Aden and across the south were still administratively affiliated with the STC, and the loyalties of dozens of commanders remained unclear.

To address this, Riyadh adopted a top-down approach, placing power in the hands of a few trusted individuals on whom it could rely to assess the loyalties of lower-ranking commanders and "trim the fat" accordingly. To this end, the Kingdom quickly dispatched

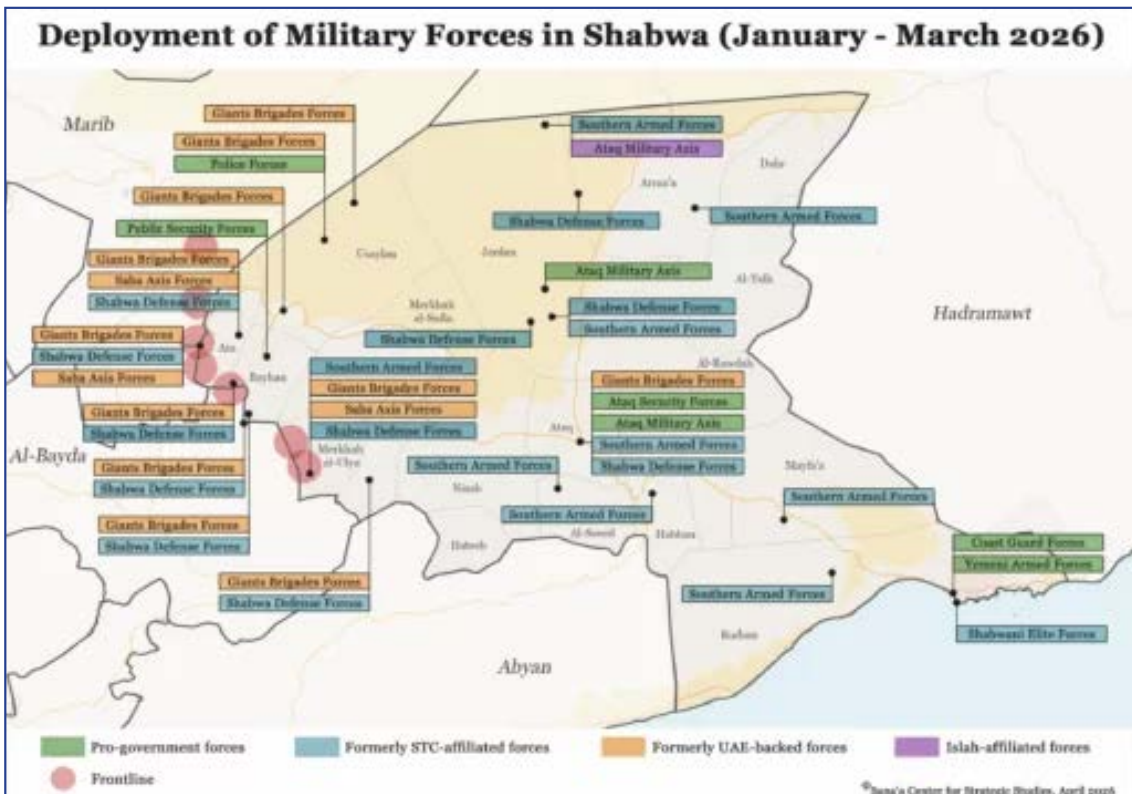
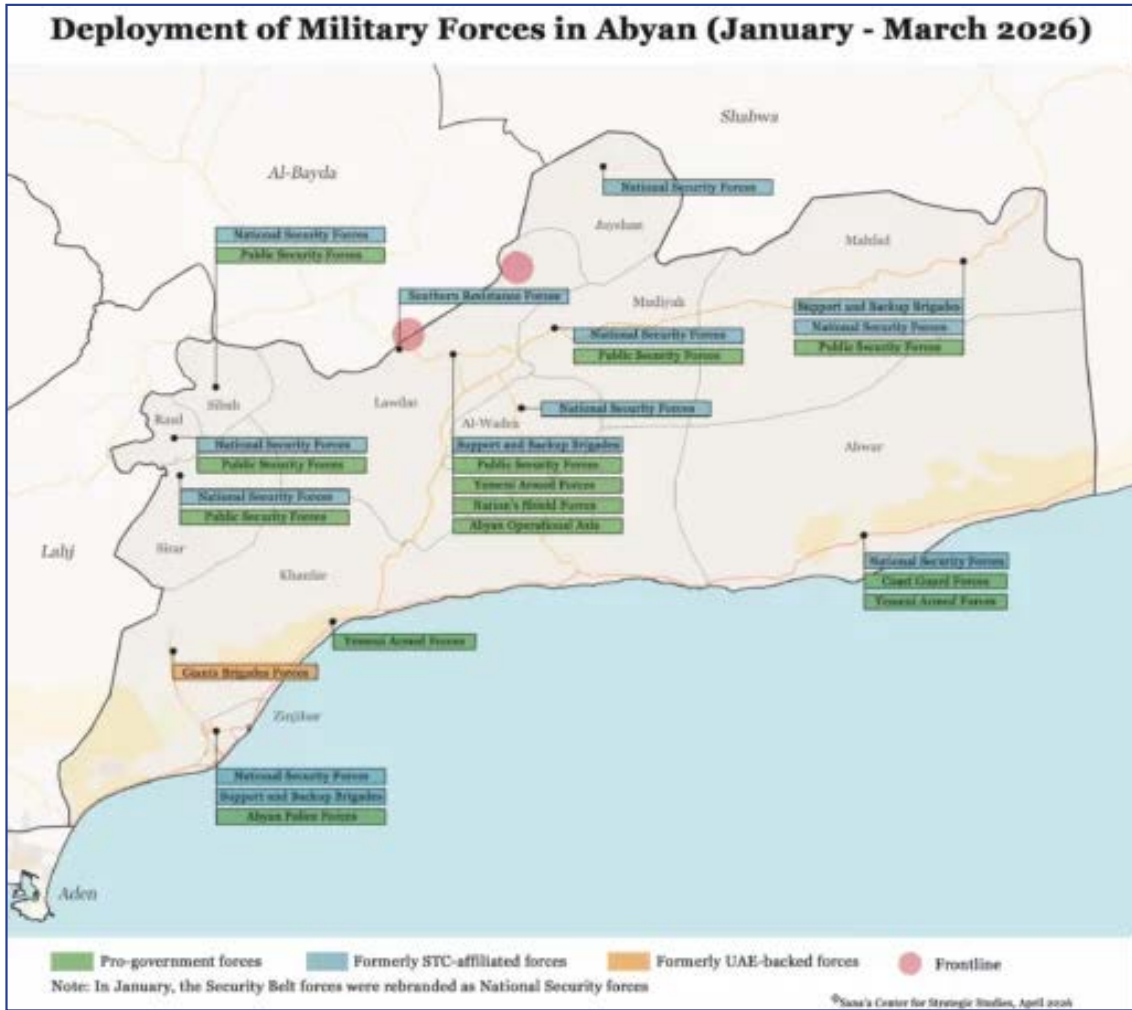
senior military adviser Falah al-Shahrani, whom it tasked with centralizing decision-making through a newly formed Supreme Military Committee. This body reports directly to the Saudi-led coalition and is effectively intended to streamline command structures under close Saudi oversight.

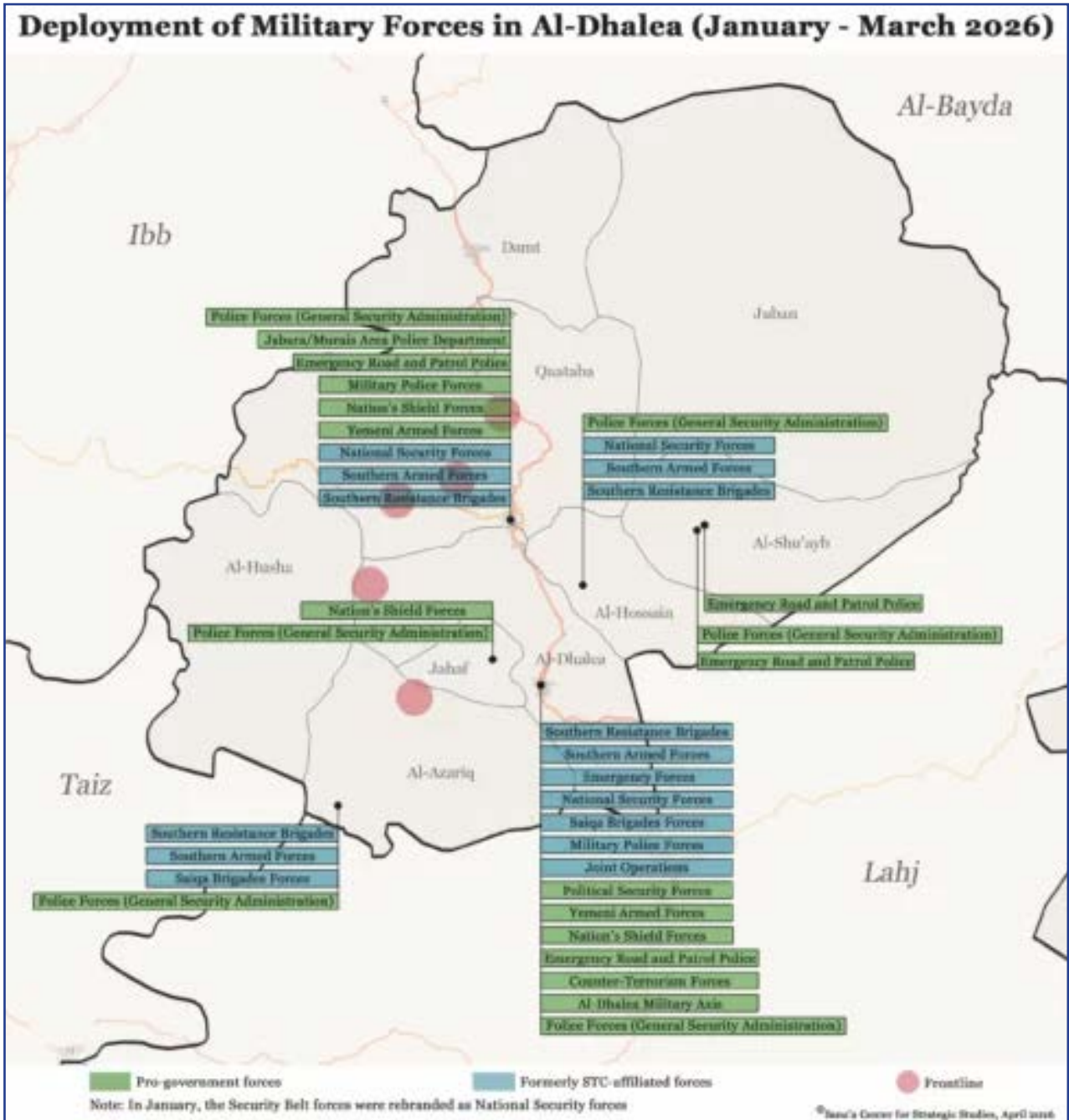
At the same time, Riyadh has moved to empower key members of the PLC, placing Abu Zara'a in charge of Aden's security, alongside newly appointed PLC member and former defense minister Mahmoud al-Subaihi. Together, the two are leading the coordination and restructuring of military and security forces in the interim capital and other southern governorates. Saudi Arabia has also installed Taher al-Aqili – a former army chief of staff – as Minister of Defense. At the local level, the security overhaul in Aden began in early January with the appointment of Abdelrahman Sheikh as governor. Sheikh is a co-founder of the Security Belt forces, one of the most prominent security units in the interim capital. With strong Yafei roots and a Salafi orientation, he brings both the tribal credibility and military standing needed to command authority.

With Sheikh in place, attention shifted to preparing the interim capital for the new cabinet's arrival from Riyadh in mid-February. For weeks before the government's formation, Aden had experienced weekly pro-STC demonstrations (see *below*), with protestors demanding a return of ousted STC leader Aiderous al-Zubaidi and local STC branches threatening to prevent the new government from setting foot in the city. In response, military leaders elected to relocate military camps outside the city limits. Units with uncertain loyalties would be distanced from the seat of power, while more trusted forces would be allowed to remain.

Units that have been kept in the city so far include the Aden Police, the Emergency Road and Patrol Police, and the Security Belt forces, the latter of which have since been placed under the Ministry of Interior, rebranded as the "National Security forces," and stationed at checkpoints across Aden and its environs. A number of other STC-aligned units in the city, including elements from the Saiqa Brigades, have also reportedly been folded into this structure. The movement of units and forces in Aden is indicative of another Saudi approach at play: rather than dismantling groups altogether, the Kingdom is attempting to carve up and repackage the myriad of southern militia networks into a more state-centered framework. No stranger to checkbook diplomacy, Riyadh has facilitated this effort with a generous US\$90 million grant to pay public-sector and security salaries.

Beyond Aden, Saudi Arabia has pursued a similar approach to securing leadership in key STC strongholds, including Lahj, Al-Dhalea, Shabwa, and Abyan. As part of this effort, a number of southern military leaders were summoned to Riyadh in late January, including commanders from the Saiqa Brigades, the Support and Backup Brigades, and the Security Belt forces (now National Security forces). At the same time, several





Editor’s Note: Locations shown on the maps above are approximate and intended for illustrative purposes. Data was collected by the Sana’a Center between January and March. Military and security forces in southern Yemen are still undergoing significant restructuring and redeployments; some recent changes may not be reflected.

The first major redeployment of ground forces came in mid-March, with the **movement** of Shabwa Defense forces to Marib’s Hareeb district and Shabwa’s Bayhan and Ain districts, where they replaced units from the Giants Brigades. Shabwa has so far led the way in security reorganization and military redeployments. There is less clarity regarding Saudi plans for the former UAE-backed forces stationed on Yemen’s West Coast, including the National Resistance forces led by PLC member Tareq Saleh, but local sources reported that forces from Saleh’s 2nd Commando Brigade began to redeploy in late March from frontlines in Al-Dhalea to Taiz’s Al-Makha city, Saleh’s base, and on frontlines in southern Hudaydah.

The Saudi approach to restructuring, which has relied heavily on high-ranking individuals, risks alienating lower-level actors and fueling resentment. By privileging a narrow circle of elites, the process could leave rank-and-file personnel feeling excluded from the emerging order. To its credit, Riyadh has taken some steps toward institutionalizing the system. In March, the Supreme Military Committee **announced** plans to create a comprehensive database of military personnel and integrate them into a unified command structure under the Ministries of Interior and Defense. The government has also rolled out a biometric census linked to salary payments, allowing authorities to inventory forces more systematically and formalize their incorporation into state institutions.

While these measures remain limited in scope, they represent meaningful steps toward centralized control of Yemen's military sector, something the government has long struggled to achieve. Saudi Arabia has an opportunity to shift the country's fighting forces from a patchwork of militias toward a more coherent military structure. Realizing this, however, will require sustained engagement and greater investment at the operational level. The Kingdom's past involvement in Yemen has demonstrated patterns of intense activity followed by disinterest and passivity. More fundamentally, the challenge of securing loyalties remains unresolved. While payroll integration and personnel registries are important tools for reestablishing a semblance of state authority, they are still operating within a system that remains largely unconstitutional and vulnerable to fragmentation. Without a strong, institutionalized security and military apparatus, Yemen, and particularly the south, will continue to be shaped and divided by overlapping affiliations to tribe, family, political identity, and material incentives. The central challenge for the government – and its Saudi backers – will be consolidating authority across this fragmented landscape without provoking backlash from competing actors.

STC Protests Plague New Government

While Riyadh has worked to mitigate the high-level security challenges stemming from the STC's dissolution, it has had more difficulty containing the group's grassroots base. The sudden shift in power ushered thousands of STC supporters to the streets, where they have staged numerous protests across the south over the past three months. With the STC's activities still banned in multiple districts, these protests have emerged as a primary vehicle for southern resistance, creating a dynamic that threatens to deepen the longstanding tensions between the state and the thousands of pro-STC civilians who still see the group as the legitimate governing authority.

Initially, demonstrations in Aden and beyond focused on political representation and opposition to the STC's dissolution, but over time, they have become more reactionary, decrying many of the strict security protocols imposed by Abu Zara'a and the new cadre of Saudi and southern military leaders. A repeated challenge for the government has

been maintaining the delicate balance between asserting control and avoiding draconian measures that risk further alienating the STC's base. While protests have largely been tolerated thus far (the government simply does not have the capacity to fully suppress them), government officials have repeatedly signaled that violence and attacks on state institutions would not be tolerated. This message was driven home following a January 21 **car bombing** targeting the convoy of 2nd Giants Brigade commander Hamdi Shukri. Although Shukri survived, five soldiers were killed in the attack. In response, Saudi-led coalition spokesperson Turki al-Maliki **warned** that any future attacks targeting Aden would be met with an "iron fist." But such warnings have done little to deter demonstrators, and only two days later, a fresh protest was **held** in Aden's Khormaksar Square.

The following weeks were marked by ever-more tenuous confrontations, as protestors grew more aggressive in response to authorities imposing tighter restrictions on public activity. The result has been a self-exacerbating loop that has pushed Aden and the southern cities closer to the brink. Tensions **rose again** on February 1, after Abu Zara'a ordered the closure of the STC General Assembly headquarters in Aden. The building has since become a central point of contention, with protestors repeatedly reopening it and the government again shuttering it as political leverage. The PLC has justified the closure by claiming that the building had been illegally seized by the STC, and has announced plans to repurpose it as an office for the Tax Authority. In response to the February 1 closure, hundreds of pro-STC demonstrators gathered outside the building before **forcing** their way inside and compelling security forces to reopen it. On the same day, unarmed pro-STC protestors **stormed** the offices of the *Aden al-Ghad* newspaper, looting and damaging equipment after the outlet published commentary critical of the STC.

By mid-February, protests had spread across much of the south, with demonstrations breaking out in Hadramawt, Lahj, Al-Dhalea, Abyan, and Shabwa. STC offices were similarly shuttered and activities banned, **drawing** hundreds of tribesmen, particularly from Lahj's Radfan district, to the interim capital to participate in demonstrations in Khormaksar, creating a growing sense of anxiety across the south. On February 11, tensions came to a head after a demonstration in Shabwa's capital, Ataq, celebrating Southern Martyrs' Day. While the event started peacefully, protestors moved toward the local authority building, against the scheduled program, and began throwing stones and tearing down the Yemeni flag. Security forces opened fire, **killing** at least four people and wounding 30 others, including minors.

Violence soon spread to other cities. On February 19, bullets fired by security forces in front of Al-Ma'ashiq Palace, where demonstrators were protesting the government's return, left one person dead and 11 others wounded. On April 4, two demonstrators were killed in Mukalla after security forces opened fire on protestors who defied a government ban on STC-affiliated gatherings in the governorate. PLC head Rashad al-Alimi called for an investigation into the incidents.

Despite a brief lull in protests in late March, confrontations have since resumed with heightened intensity and following a series of government crackdowns. Security forces again closed the STC General Assembly building on February 21 and March 9, while protests in Aden were restricted to Khormaksar Square. The government ordered the arrest of Lahmar Ali Lasoud, head of the STC's Shabwa branch, on suspicion of involvement in the Ataq clashes. In Hadramawt, tensions likewise intensified, and Governor and PLC member Salem al-Khanbashi threatened to ban public displays of Aiderous al-Zubaidi's image. Officials in Aden took similar steps to curtail the STC's visibility, removing images of the exiled secessionist leader from public spaces. In response, thousands of people gathered in Aden on April 1, condemning another closure of the group's General Assembly headquarters and punitive measures against other branches. Despite the deployment of security forces, protestors broke into the General Assembly building and forcibly reopened it.

The absence of any major political concessions in favor of the STC and or the broader Southern Movement (*Al-Hirak*), particularly the postponement of an envisioned South-South dialogue (see [Politics and Diplomacy](#)), raises questions about Saudi Arabia's long game. For its part, the STC has managed to carve out limited space for itself in recent weeks despite the mounting pressure. Its General Assembly has remained open for over a week following government concessions after the deadly protests in Hadramawt, and the Mukalla office has been reinstated. Looking forward, the group's trajectory will likely depend on its ability to assert authority without provoking further government repression. Both the government and its Saudi backers face a similar constraint. A key test of whether this stalemate will hold will be the upcoming May 4 celebrations, marking the anniversary of the 2017 Aden declaration, the STC's founding charter. Protestors are likely to be out in full force, and the government's handling of the demonstrations will be an important marker of its standing and ability to manage the transformed political landscape.

Notable Pro-STC Protests

January 8 – Al-Dhalea: Pro-STC demonstrations are held across Al-Dhalea governorate. Protesters, carrying flags of the former South Yemen and the UAE, chant against Saudi Arabia and denounce Saudi airstrikes against STC forces in the governorate.

January 10 – Aden: Thousands of pro-STC demonstrators hold a **rally** in Khormaksar Square in Aden, rejecting the group's dissolution and carrying photos of STC chief Al-Zubaidi. Many **appear** to be from Lahj and Al-Dhalea.

January 16 – Aden: A large **pro-STC demonstration** is held in Khormaksar Square, with demonstrators chanting in support of Al-Zubaidi.

January 23 – Aden: A new round of pro-STC **demonstrations** is held in Khormaksar Square, with protestors raising the southern flag and decrying the party's dissolution.

February 1 – Aden: Pro-STC demonstrators protest in front of the group's General Assembly building in Aden and force security forces to **reopen** the building. STC branches across the south hold executive council meetings despite a ban. Protestors raid the *Aden al-Ghad* newspaper headquarters and loot office materials, reportedly in response to comments critical of the STC.

February 2 – Hadramawt: Hundreds of people **march** in Mukalla during a nighttime demonstration in support of the STC.

February 6 – Hadramawt: A large pro-STC **rally** is held in Seyoun city in Wadi Hadramawt. Rally organizers publish a statement decrying the storming of STC buildings in the Tarim and Al-Qatn districts and a **raid** on the home of local leader Mohammed al-Zubaidi. A number of protestors are **arrested**.

February 7 – Aden: Tens of thousands of STC supporters **gather** in Aden for a rally calling for the return of the STC. Additional **marches** are **held** on February 10 and 11.

February 10 – Hadramawt: A large pro-STC rally is **held** in Mukalla. Aiderous al-Zubaidi **posts** on X for the first time in nearly a month, calling on supporters to "continue the struggle" in a new chapter in the revolution for a free South.

February 11 – Shabwa: The STC's Shabwa branch announces plans for a public commemoration of Southern Martyrs' Day, leading to **clashes** between pro-STC demonstrators and security forces, who reportedly opened fire on stone-throwing protesters. Armed protesters, who local sources indicated were ununiformed members of the STC's armed forces, fire back, leading to hours of **fighting** that leave at least four people killed and 30 wounded.

February 12 – Aden: Pro-STC demonstrators hold a **march** in Al-Buraiqa district to condemn violence against STC supporters in Hadramawt and Shabwa.

February 14 – Abyan: Pro-STC demonstrators stage a rally in Zinjibar district in response to a call by the local STC branch in Abyan.

February 16 – Al-Dhalea: Thousands gather in Al-Dhalea city for a pro-STC demonstration. It is the first protest in Al-Dhalea, the STC's main stronghold, since the group's official dissolution.

February 20 – Aden: Violent clashes **break out** around Al-Ma'ashiq Palace after Nation's Shield forces open fire on pro-STC demonstrators, who were reportedly attempting to storm the seat of government. One person is killed in the clashes; the number of wounded is variously reported as between **11** and **23**.

February 20 – Hadramawt: Pro-STC **demonstrations** break out in Mukalla.

February 27 – Aden: Thousands of pro-STC demonstrators **protest** in Khormaksar Square after an STC call to rally.

March 3 – Aden: Members of the STC General Assembly **stage** a protest in Aden, rejecting the government's decision to dissolve the STC, close its offices, and remove the southern flag.

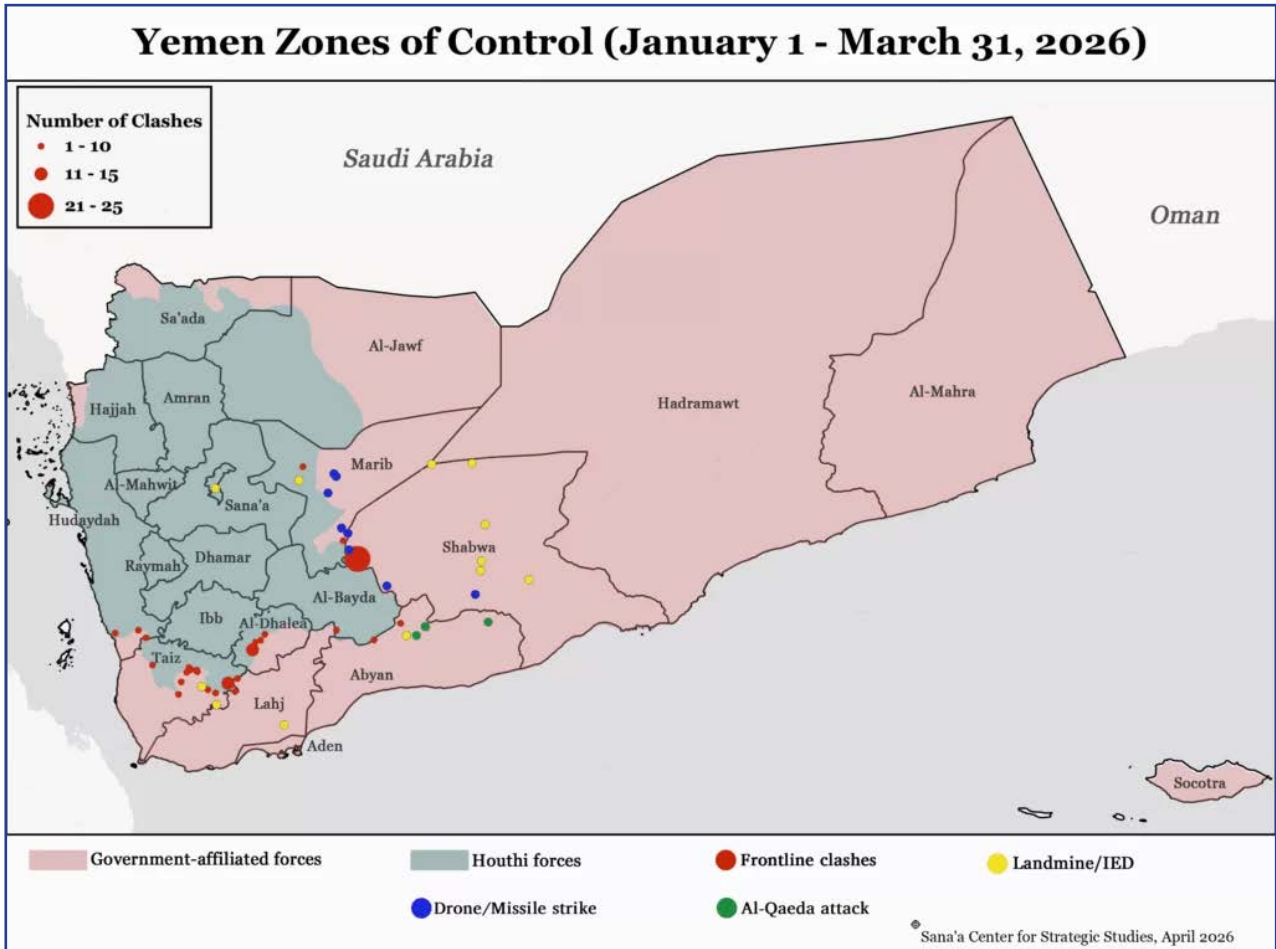
March 20 – Aden: Dozens of STC supporters **gather** near Al-Ma'ashiq Palace to protest during the Eid al-Fitr prayer being held on the palace grounds.

April 1 – Aden: Thousands of people gather for a pro-STC rally in Aden, **condemning** the closure of the group's General Assembly headquarters by government forces and crackdowns against its other branches, particularly in Hadramawt. Despite the deployment of security forces, protestors managed to break into the General Assembly building and **forcibly reopen** it.

April 4 – Hadramawt: Dozens of STC loyalists **take to the streets** of Mukalla, despite **warnings** against public gatherings. Clashes break out between **security** forces from the 2nd Military Region and protestors, leaving at least two STC supporters dead.

April 5 – Aden: Dozens of soldiers loyal to the STC gather in Aden's Al-Buraiqa district to **protest** the new biometric fingerprinting system linked to military salary payments, which the government recently implemented in coordination with the Saudi-led coalition.

April 7 – Lahj: Pro-STC rallies are held in Lahj in the districts of Radfan, Habil Jabr, Halimeen, Al-Milah, Al-Hawtah, Al-Musaymir, Yafea, Al-Hadd, Yahr, and Al-Muflihi.



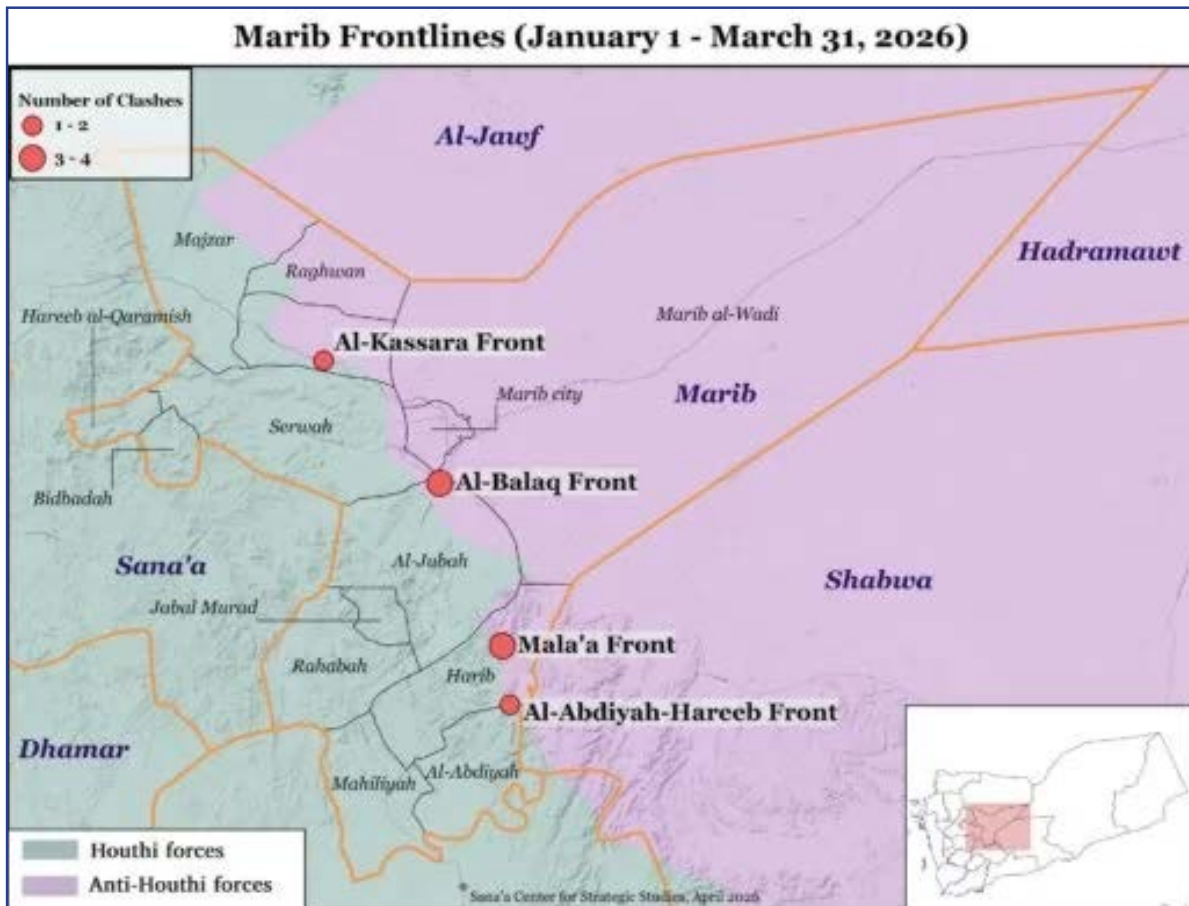
Frontline Developments

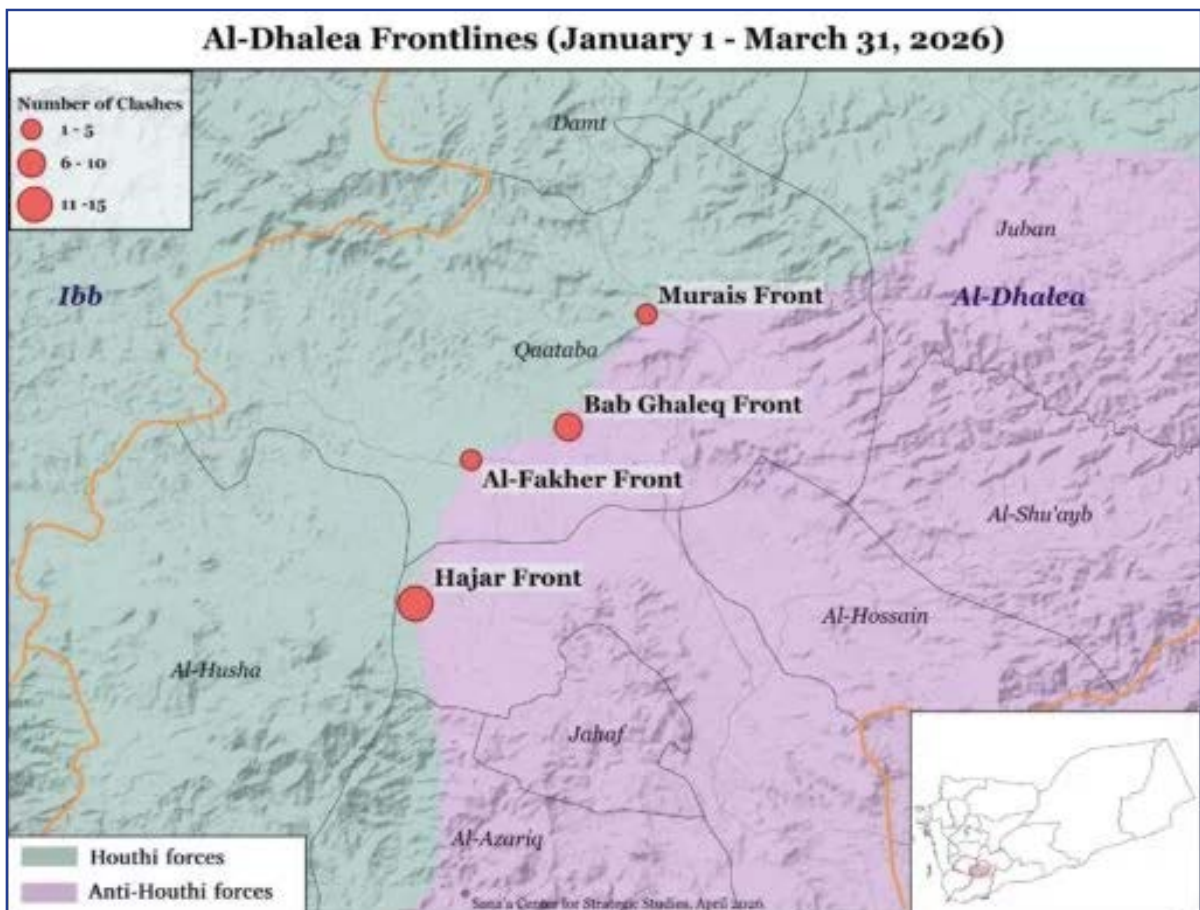
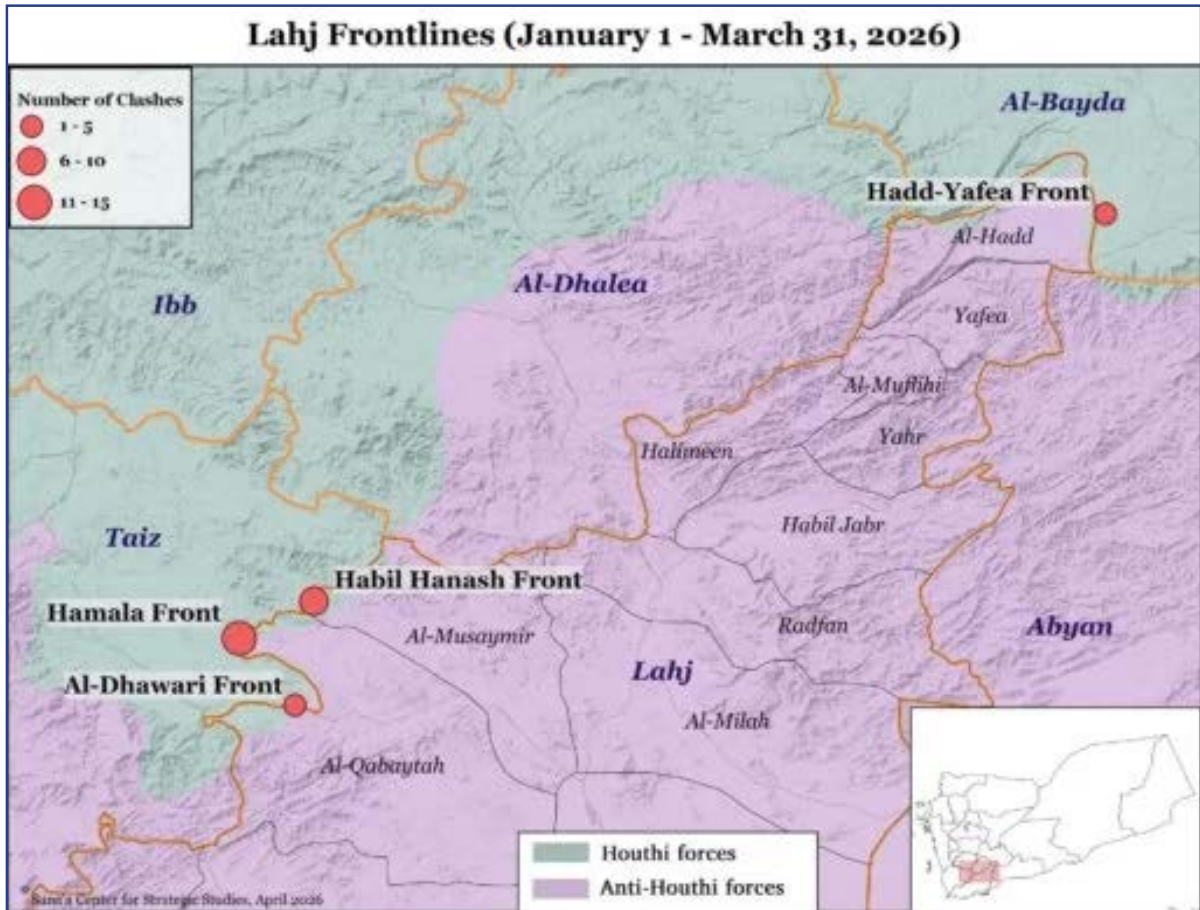
Yemen's frontlines have largely withstood the sweeping changes to the anti-Houthi coalition's security landscape, remaining mostly unchanged since the beginning of the year. While the Houthis made a number of probing attacks, particularly on frontlines in Hudaydah, Marib, and Taiz, the group has refrained from exploiting the turbulence on the government side. This is not entirely surprising. The Houthis are still recovering from last year's devastating US and Israeli airstrikes, are managing a series of internal security crises in Sana'a, and have now become participants in a broader regional conflict.

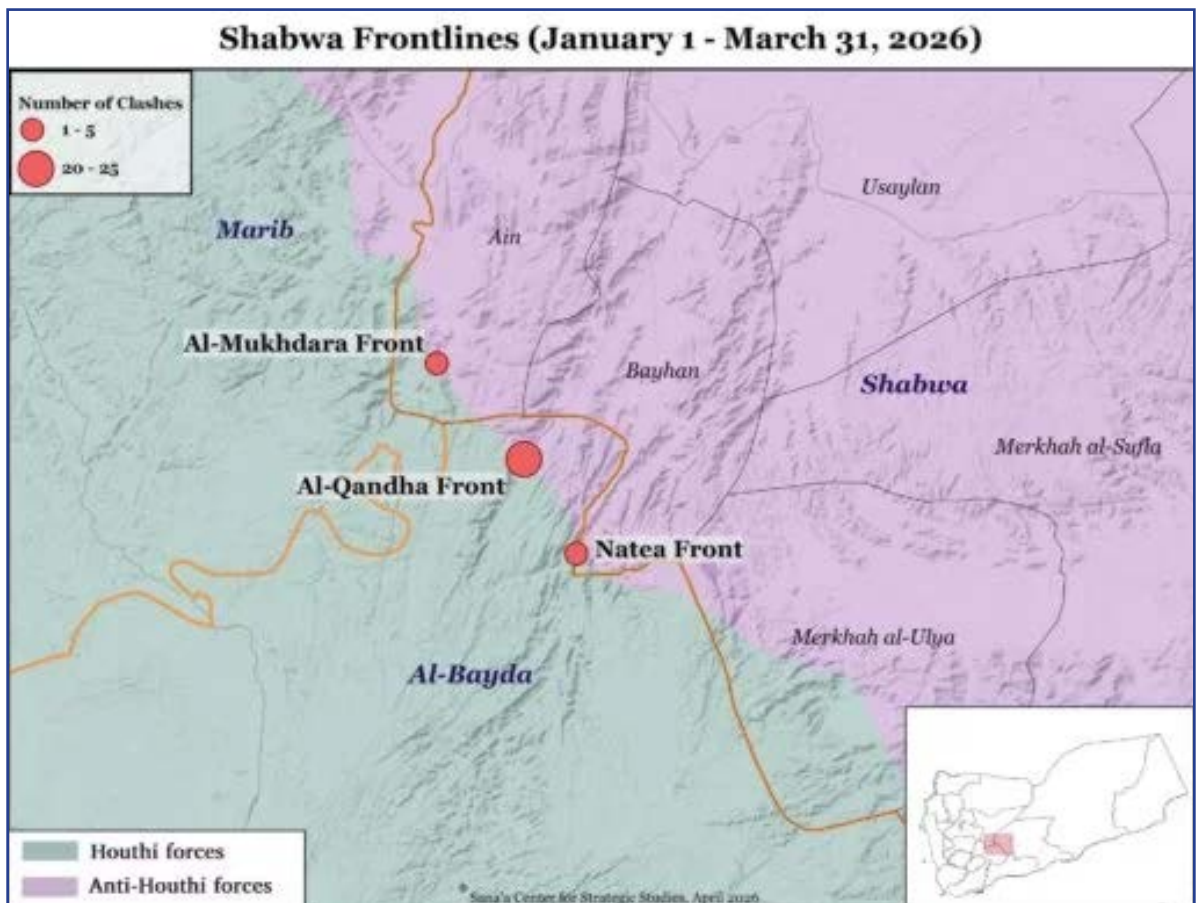
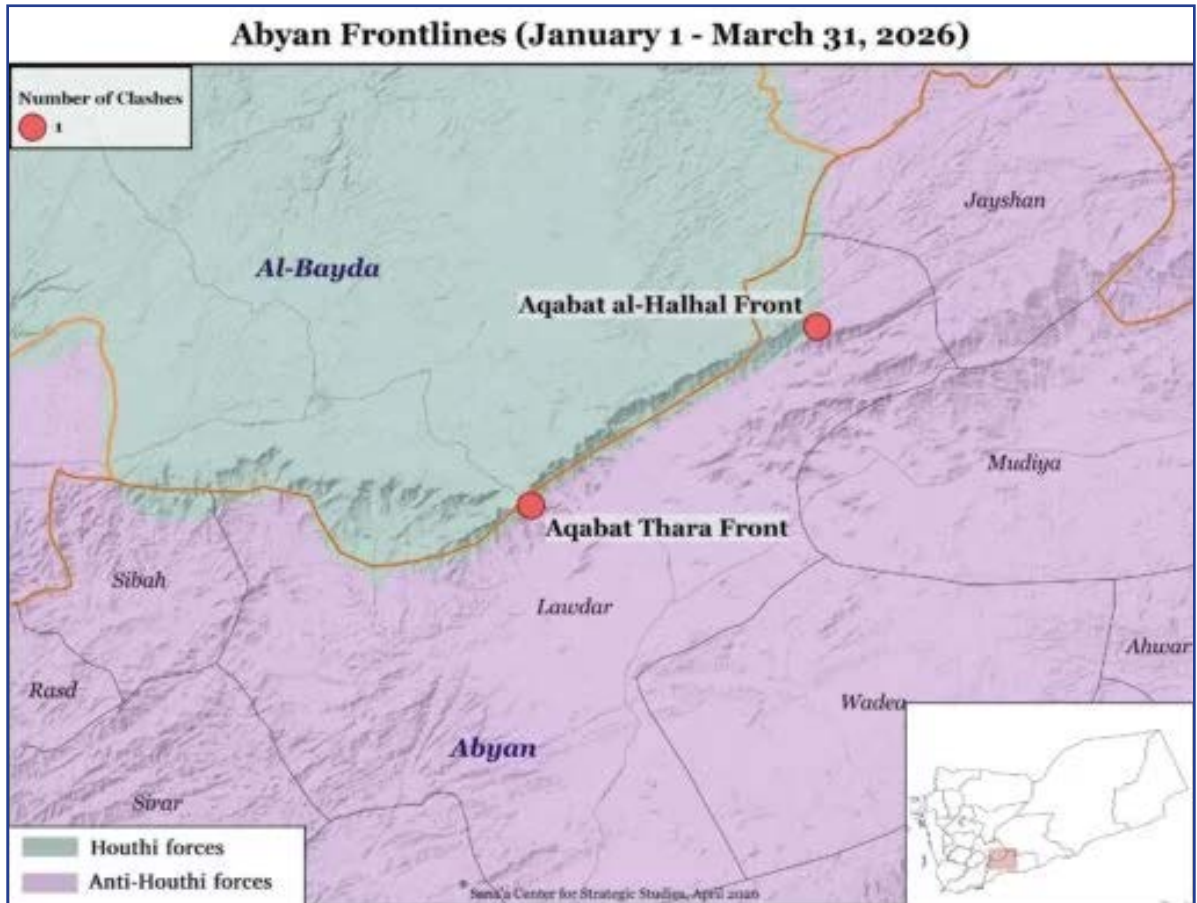
But fighting continues to flare up on several fronts as both sides work to adjust to the evolving security situation, and the Houthis have sent reinforcements to a number of governorates to counter new government deployments. Hudaydah experienced one of the most intense periods of fighting in recent years. Between February 11 and 24, heavy clashes were reported across four frontlines, with 18 soldiers killed and 57 wounded in just one week. The situation has since stabilized, but security sources say the fronts remain heavily fortified. In Marib, clashes continue to erupt along the Mala'a front in the southern Hareeb district, where Houthi forces appear to be testing the capabilities of Shabwa Defense forces, following their recent deployment to replace Giants Brigades

forces there. In Taiz, recent weeks have seen increased fighting on fronts to the west of the city, with reports of Houthi troops and heavy equipment arriving from Hajjah in early April. While these flare-ups remain contained for the moment, they are key pressure points for a government already grappling with internal instability. Should the Houthis gain greater operational bandwidth amid a cooldown in the regional escalation, these fronts are likely to emerge as hotspots for any renewed fighting.

Frontline activity elsewhere has followed existing trends. Lahj, Al-Dhalea, Abyan, and Shabwa all witnessed periodic clashes along established lines of contact, with no significant territorial changes. While Al-Qaeda still maintains a presence in several governorates, most notably in Abyan, there has not been a noticeable rise in operations amid the ongoing reorganization of counterterrorism forces, many of which were previously backed by the UAE. However, local sources in Abyan report that militants affiliated with Al-Qaeda are now operating with greater visibility, including holding meetings in the open.







Other Developments in Brief

February 5-9: The Kamaran Battalion of the Houthi naval forces conducted land and sea maneuvers in areas along the Red Sea Coast, including on **Kamaran Island**. The simulation included attacks on naval vessels using speedboats, drones, and unidentified objects floating on the sea surface, possibly mines. Fighters also practiced blockading, seizing, and boarding various ship types.

February 16: Al-Qaeda militants attacked several positions held by members of the Arrows of the East counterterrorism campaign in the Omayran Valley in Muadiyah district. The clashes came in the wake of a redeployment of former Security Belt (now National Security) forces from the Omayran Valley to Zinjibar.

March 26: Journalist Samed al-Qadi was **fatally shot** in the center of Taiz city by unknown gunmen, reflecting the ongoing battle against rampant insecurity in the governorate, now six months after the assassination of government official Iftehan al-Mashhari. The killing is believed to have been committed by individuals connected with informal security forces in the city.

March 31: The final mandate of the United Nations Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA) **expired**. UN Security Council Resolution 2813 **terminated the mission** in January, seven years after it was created to support the 2018 Hudaydah Agreement. The UN is working with government officials to clarify the transfer of responsibilities to the government and the UN Special Envoy's office, which are now assuming the mission's former duties.

April 6: A National Resistance drone **mistakenly killed** a 20-year-old man, Burhan Ali Taha, on the roof of his home in Al-Waziyah district during a raid related to the hunt for a wanted crime ring leader. The killing of Taha, the son of Ali Taha, one of the leaders of the battles to liberate Al-Waziyah from the Houthis in 2016, sparked outrage in the governorate, with a number of groups calling the strike part of systematic aggression and demanding the withdrawal of National Resistance soldiers from the area. In response, Tareq Saleh personally ordered an investigation into the incident, and following tribal mediation, the National Resistance forces **handed over** nine individuals involved in the killing, while the Ministry of Interior **ordered the arrest** of 22 individuals believed to be involved in the aforementioned crime ring.

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Women and children in rural Taiz wait for water distributed by a local charity, March 14, 2026 // Sana'a Center Photo by Al-Baraa Mansour

The Economy

Wadhah Al-Awlaqi

Government Adopts Fiscal Discipline Amidst Regional Shifts

The first quarter of 2026 has witnessed a significant shift in support for the internationally recognized Yemeni government, following the sidelining of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the termination of its military operations. Seeking to restore the government's legitimacy amid a massive political and military reorganization, Saudi Arabia has launched a series of financial packages to prevent a fiscal collapse and improve service provision.

On January 15, the Kingdom **announced** a US\$90 million package to pay delayed public-sector salaries, including those of military and security personnel. Shortly after, another package worth 1.9 billion Saudi riyals (US\$507 million) was **announced** to fund development projects in the health, education, energy, transportation, and water sectors. The support was intended to bridge the funding gap left by the UAE's **withdrawal** earlier that month. It was followed in late February by a 1.3 billion Saudi Riyal (US\$347 million) grant aimed at covering the budget deficit and national wage bill. Riyadh has also begun directly sponsoring southern security forces previously funded by Abu Dhabi.

In early March, the new cabinet enacted a 2026 state budget, a milestone after years of informal, ad hoc spending, and the first official budget since 2019. The move was a prerequisite set by Riyadh for continued aid, designed to ensure transparency and fiscal accountability. However, the budget was not based on realistic fiscal indicators, but was instead built on the 2014 budget, which had **projected a deficit of approximately US\$3 billion**.

Notwithstanding the fiscal challenges, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) formally approved the 2026 government program, a strategic blueprint designed to address Yemen's political and economic instability. The program is built upon three core pillars: a situational diagnosis, a strategic framework, and a practical implementation matrix. The objectives are anchored in the Economic Recovery Plan 2025–2026 and PLC **Resolution No. 11** of 2025. The government further clarified that the implementation matrix will focus on six strategic priorities: political and security stability; economic and monetary recovery and stimulating growth; sustainable access to essential services; strengthening governance and the rule of law; enhancing social resilience to protect livelihoods; and maintaining proactive international development partnerships.

The government asserts that its new plan is feasible and that it will shift from vague promises to concrete policy interventions by year-end, but in practice, the plan echoes past reform efforts. The overly ambitious approach overlooks complex, entrenched realities on the ground and the significant institutional gaps that have historically hindered implementation. A close analysis of the highly inflated state budget projections reveals fiscal superficiality: total revenues are estimated at YR3.96 trillion, with 41.5 percent from taxes and 35 percent from property income and sales of goods and services. Recurrent and capital grants, heavily reliant on Saudi support, are estimated at YR858.7 billion (22 percent of revenue). These figures are nearly double the YR2.07 trillion actually collected in 2024, of which 61 percent consisted of external grants, according to the last published **annual report** from the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden (CBY-Aden).

On the expenditure side, the budget was estimated at YR4.8 trillion, a 180 percent increase over the YR2.7 trillion spent in 2024. Projected spending on salaries and goods and services was set at YR1.35 trillion each, significantly higher than historical figures. While the inflated wage bill reflects the integration of various military and security units into the state budget, the government's capacity to meet these immense obligations remains its primary challenge. For instance, the plan proposes increasing the budget for goods and services by 355 percent (from YR298 billion in 2024 to YR1.35 trillion) to address collapsing essential services—a target that would severely test the government's actual fiscal capacity. Without addressing entrenched realities and existing institutional gaps, the 2026 program risks repeating the failures of previous attempts at fiscal and institutional reform.

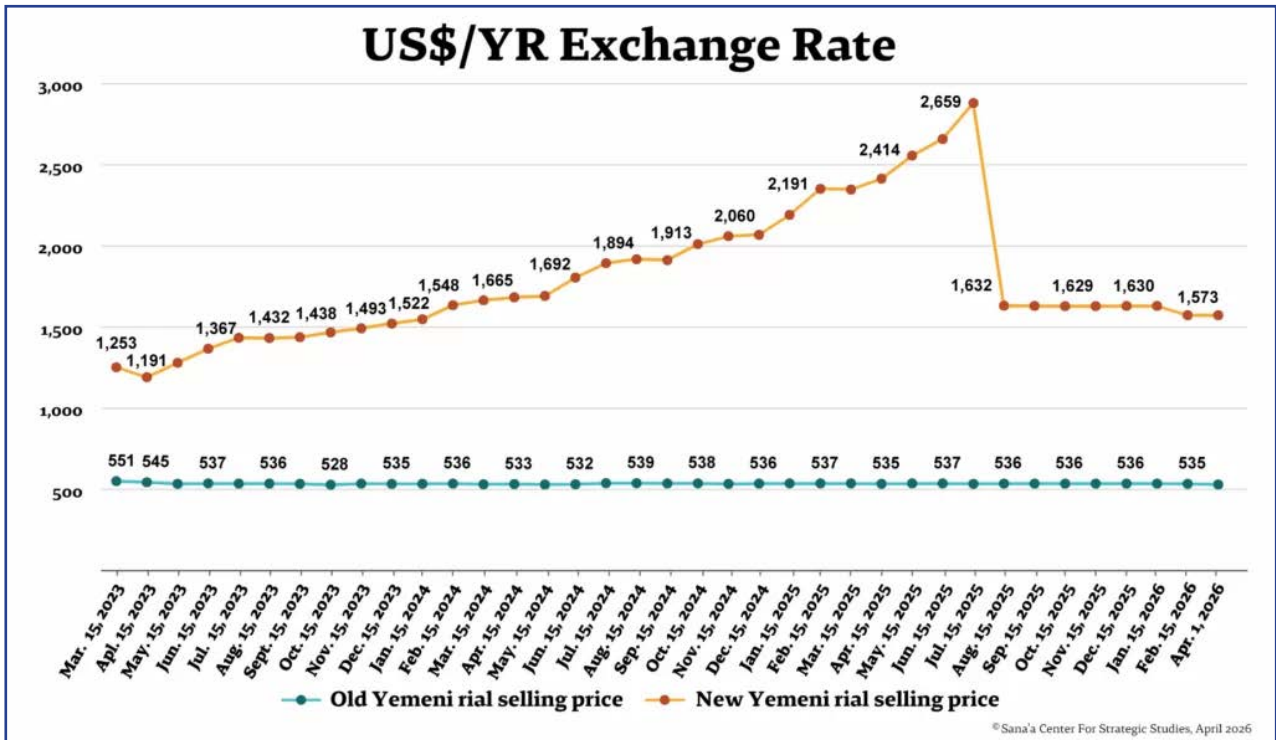
Rial Remains Stable

The price of the new rial appreciated by over 3 percent toward the end of February, from YR1,630 to YR1,573 per US\$1 on average. The currency then maintained this price through the close of the reporting period.

This recovery followed a series of trends that temporarily improved the government’s monetary and economic position. The major determinant has been the Saudi financial grants, and the rial is expected to retain its current value in light of continued support.

The rial has been stable since mid-last year, following the government’s implementation of wide-ranging reforms to institutionalize import financing, curb destabilizing speculation, and enforce the use of the rial in all domestic transactions. In early February, the National Committee for Regulating and Financing Imports **announced** that it had approved US\$600 million during January to finance the import of basic commodities. This brought the committee’s funding for imports since it began its work in August of last year to over US\$3 billion. The CBY-Aden has also maintained rigorous oversight of the banking and exchange sectors. Conducting regular on-site inspections of money exchange outlets, the bank has identified and revoked the licenses of dozens of entities involved in currency speculation.

The price of old rials circulating in areas controlled by the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*) remained relatively flat, trading between YR531-536 per US\$1 over the first quarter of 2026.



Yemen's Humanitarian Situation Remains Dire

Yemen continues to face a severe food security crisis. Driven by the worst funding gap in a decade and a dramatic escalation in operational risks, Yemen remains one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, with over 22 million people in need of assistance.

The latest **Food Security Update** from the World Food Programme (WFP) paints a complex picture of the humanitarian landscape as of February 2026. While the report highlighted a temporary seasonal improvement in food consumption, the gains were precarious and sit atop a foundation of severe systemic deprivation and a shrinking humanitarian footprint. Nationwide, food consumption improved by nine percent month-on-month, bringing the prevalence of inadequate intake down to 57 percent in February. This shift was largely driven by the unique economic and social conditions surrounding the holy month of Ramadan. Increased religious charity and a surge in remittance inflows provided a vital lifeline for many families, while the appreciation of the rial in government-controlled areas and the distribution of partial public sector salaries offered a brief moment of financial stability. By the end of the month, inadequate food intake stood at 61 percent in government-controlled regions and 55 percent in areas under Houthi control.

However, the WFP warned that these marginal improvements mask a much harsher reality. Despite the seasonal uptick, severe food deprivation continues to plague nearly one in every three households across the country. Due to severe funding shortages, the WFP began implementing its new targeted emergency food assistance program in government-controlled areas in early February, reducing the number of beneficiaries from 3.4 to 1.7 million across 53 districts. By mid-March, around 1.1 million people had been assisted under the first cycle of the program. In Houthi-controlled areas, all WFP operations have remained suspended since September 2025, due to the constrained operational space and the arrest and detention of humanitarian workers. The WFP **decided** to suspend food aid distribution across northern areas due to security risks and critical funding shortfalls. As part of this operational downsizing, the WFP notified 365 employees in these areas that their contracts would be terminated by the end of March. Houthi authorities have further hindered relief efforts by **seizing** UN equipment, confiscating vehicles, and blocking the UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) from flying into Sana'a. While the internationally recognized government has urged organizations to relocate to Aden, this could sever a lifeline for the densely populated northern highlands.

The UN's 2026 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan, which requested US\$2.16 billion to assist 12 million people, has seen a severe funding shortfall. As of late March 2026, **OCHA data** showed that only about 10 percent of the required funds had been secured. The current crisis is rooted in the unprecedented financial shortfall of 2025: OCHA **reported** that the 2025 aid plan received only US\$687.9 million, equivalent to about 28 percent of the requested US\$2.48 billion. This represents the lowest funding level in ten years. Despite escalating needs, this severe funding shortfall forced all clusters to scale back critical services.

With a muted response from Yemen's major foreign donors, severe underfunding is expected to continue. This will force aid agencies to further cut critical services, despite Yemen remaining one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with escalating hunger and disease.

Hadramawt Bears the Economic Cost of Military Escalation

The STC's military escalation in Hadramawt in early January had far-reaching economic consequences, leading to the disruption of state institutions, the looting of economic assets, and the interruption of essential public services.

On January 5, both Seyoun and Al-Rayyan airports were subjected to **widespread looting** by people taking advantage of the turmoil. As a result, both airports were taken out of service, preventing thousands of passengers from reaching their final destinations. The government **announced** the resumption of flight operations following a brief suspension.

In addition, Hadramawt witnessed a decline in service provision, including electricity. Since late last year, Hadramawt has **experienced** severe power outages due to a fuel shortage for power plants. Following military clashes in areas surrounding its oilfields, diesel supplies from state operator PetroMasila declined still further, causing massive power failures and cutting off over 85 percent of the electricity grid's generating capacity across most of the Wadi Hadramawt region.

In response to the worsening situation in the governorate, recently appointed PLC member and Hadramawt Governor Salem al-Khanbashi **threatened** escalatory measures against the central government on March 28. He warned that the governorate could halt oil exports and withhold revenue transfers if its financial demands remained unaddressed. The heart of this dispute lies in a 2017 presidential order that was intended to decentralize Yemen's oil wealth. The order mandated that 20 percent of oil revenues generated within oil-producing governorates—specifically Hadramawt, Shabwa, and Marib—be returned directly to the local administrations to fund regional budgets and infrastructure. Al-Khanbashi argues that the central government has failed to honor this commitment, leaving Hadramawt to face what he described as systemic injustice.

Power and Gas Crises Worsen Despite Temporary Respite

The government has initiated a series of interventions to address the dual crises of electricity blackouts and cooking gas shortages, which have severely affected citizens in Aden and neighboring governorates. Through a combination of emergency fuel grants, strategic supply allocations, and promises of enhanced regulatory oversight, the government has attempted to restore basic services while navigating complex political and security challenges.

In late January, the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY) **initiated** a fuel derivatives grant to operate over 70 power stations across government-controlled areas. The grant includes provisions for a total of 339 million liters of diesel and mazut, valued at US\$81.2 million. In mid-January, Saudi Arabia also **announced** 1.9 billion to support vital infrastructure, including the energy sector. Accordingly, the SDRPY and the government-run Ministry of Energy and Electricity signed an agreement to regulate the provision of the fuel grant. The deal involves purchasing fuel derivatives from PetroMasila, which began transporting supplies to power plants on January 25. The impact was immediate: by mid-February, electricity provision in Aden surged to over 20 hours per day, a dramatic improvement from the 15-hour daily blackouts that plagued the city throughout 2025.

This stabilization occurred during a period of upheaval in the renewable energy sector. In mid-January, the Ministry of Electricity **reported** that the Emirati firm Global South Utilities (GSU) abruptly and remotely shut down solar power plants in Aden and Shabwa without any prior coordination with the ministry or the relevant local authorities. In response, GSU confirmed that its action was part of arrangements for a complete withdrawal from Yemen. The company clarified that, following the Yemeni government's request for the exit of all Emirati firms, it would evacuate all maintenance and operations personnel from the 120-megawatt Aden and the 53-megawatt Shabwa power plants, handing operation over to the government's Public Electricity Corporation. The solar power plants in these two cities are among the most prominent renewable energy projects to come online over the past two years, helping reduce the near-total reliance on expensive fossil fuels and decrease longstanding power outages, especially during the summer months. The Emirati company had operated and provided maintenance services for the power plants, but its role had become controversial amid complaints about its operating procedures and coordination with government entities, **according to sources in the electricity sector**.

Aden has also been plagued by a severe cooking gas shortage crisis in the past three months. In mid-January, the Ministry of Oil and Minerals **announced** an agreement to allocate 2 million liters of liquefied petroleum gas to meet market demand across the provinces of Aden, Lahj, and Taiz. This immediate relief was intended to alleviate supply shortages caused by disruptions to tanker deliveries.

Supply disruptions are being driven by a combination of localized blockades disrupting supply routes and broader political instability. There have been recurring tribal clashes in Marib that have prevented shipments from moving from Block 18 in Marib city, operated by the Safer Company. Even after these shipments were released, their progress toward Aden has been further obstructed by roadblocks in Abyan. The fragmented status quo of security and governance systems has fostered an environment conducive to the creation of artificial shortages, with poorly regulated gas distributors seeking to maximize profits by charging inflated prices on the black market.

There have been widespread accusations of extortion and monopolistic practices. Dozens of gas tankers were seen waiting for hours at the Al-Alam checkpoint at the entrance of Aden, where they were charged illegal tolls. On leaving the checkpoint, they were not directed to distribution stations but instead reportedly diverted to private traders' yards, part of an effort to create artificial shortages, inflate prices, and generate illicit profits. In mid-January, the price of a 20-liter gas cylinder **was** at YR14,000, over 64 percent above the official price of YR8,500.

The government's **stated** intent to enforce the rule of law, as evidenced by directives from both the prime minister and the Ministry of the Interior, signals recognition that long-term stability will require more than imported fuel alone. Despite emergency measures, Yemen's energy and gas sectors remain highly vulnerable. Chronic power outages and supply shortages have consistently eroded public trust and triggered waves of popular unrest. While the Saudi fuel grant provides a necessary degree of breathing room, long-term stability remains elusive. Progress continues to be threatened by aging infrastructure, inefficient distribution networks, and deep-seated institutional deficiencies.

Government-Held Areas Suffer Liquidity Shortage

Government-controlled areas continue to suffer from an unprecedented liquidity crisis. The shortage of rials has challenged the CBY-Aden's efforts to maintain equilibrium in the currency market and monetary stability. The shortage has also affected the state's ability to meet vital spending requirements and hampered commercial trade and financial transactions across government-controlled areas.

By the end of February, the Yemeni rial had largely **disappeared** from the exchange market. Hard currency holders have had to stand in long queues at banks and money exchange companies. This has led money exchangers to refrain from converting foreign currencies altogether, while others set a limit of only 100 Saudi riyals or US\$50 per person per day. In electronic cash transfers, banks now allow account holders to transfer only 200 Saudi riyals or US\$50 into Yemeni rials per day. The Saudi riyal in particular has been widely traded in the money market following increased Saudi support for the Yemeni government to address the massive budget deficit.

The current currency shortage has been driven by a number of factors, but is primarily caused by the disintegration of the state's traditional monetary and fiscal functions. In a healthy economy, the monetary cycle operates as a continuous loop: the central bank issues currency to the market, which enters the private sector to facilitate trade and investment, before being reclaimed by the government through tax mobilization and then re-injected via public spending. However, this whole process has been dysfunctional in government-controlled areas. While the monetary base in these areas—totaling

approximately **YR4.4 trillion** as of December 2025—is theoretically sufficient to meet market needs, the CBY-Aden has failed to effectively control it. Yemen’s economy is heavily cash-based, with extremely low financial inclusion, a situation driven by conflict, a divided banking system, and low levels of trust. Shrinking public confidence in formal financial services has created a mass migration of financial flows outside the banking system. The amount of money circulating outside the system now stands at YR3.3 trillion, limiting the CBY-Aden’s capacity to influence the supply through primary and secondary monetary interventions. The monetary base is now dominated by a less-regulated network of commercial traders and exchange outlets that operate beyond the reach of the state and central bank oversight. These actors have leveraged the large cash base to influence monetary conditions and exchange rate dynamics. When hard currency inflows rise, these traders and exchange outlets tend to withhold local currency in anticipation of its appreciation, later releasing it at more favorable exchange rates to maximize gains from arbitrage.

To address the scarcity of Yemeni rials, the CBY-Aden has adopted a series of measures, including **ordering** Yemeni banks to purchase foreign currencies from citizens with a daily ceiling of 10,000 Saudi riyals. The CBY-Aden also elected to adopt a fixed exchange rate policy, setting the price of one Saudi riyal at YR410, down from YR420. The Yemeni rial was set at YR1,558 per US\$1, down from YR1,617. While this policy is intended to curb outward speculation and the CBY-Aden has largely succeeded in maintaining the stability of the rial, it has struggled with internal liquidity management, unable to force hoarded rials back into the formal economy.

The crisis is compounded by the staggering fiscal deficit, exacerbated by the 2022 Houthi drone attacks on hydrocarbon facilities. These attacks halted oil exports, depriving the government of its primary source of revenue and causing a massive contraction in revenue mobilization. By late 2025, public expenditures **reached YR2.8 trillion**, against revenues of YR1.43 trillion. This creates a dangerous fiscal paradox: the government continues to inject liquidity into the market to cover public salaries and essential services, but it lacks the fiscal “vacuum” in the form of taxation and export returns necessary to pull that currency back in. This one-way flow of cash further empowers informal money exchangers who capture the injected liquidity, deepening the state’s dependency on external aid to bridge the gap.

US Expands Sanctions on Houthi Networks

On January 16, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) escalated its campaign to financially isolate the Houthis, **designating** 21 individuals and entities and one vessel that have transferred oil products, procured weapons and dual-use equipment, or provided financial services for the Houthis.

Building on previous Treasury actions, the new sanctions targeted financial channels between the Iranian government and the Houthis in order to restrict the Iranian regime's use of its oil wealth to fund regional terrorist proxies. Targeted networks included key front companies, facilitators, and operatives located in Yemen, Oman, and the UAE. These networks have been accused of enabling the group to sustain its ability to conduct destabilizing regional activities and attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea.

The sanctions targeted four categories of Houthi smuggling and illicit revenue generation networks. The first concentrates on oil companies and financial facilitators that have enabled Houthis to mobilize US\$2 billion annually from illicit oil sales, despite the pressure of international sanctions. These companies receive financial support from the Iranian government and maintain ties to Iranian nationals.

The second category of sanctions targeted Houthi procurement operatives that rely on a sprawling network of front companies, logistics firms, and shipping facilitators to transport weapons and other military-grade materials into Yemen. Among the most notable was the Wadi Kabir Co. for Logistics Services, a shipping facilitator based in Sana'a with a branch in Oman that has allegedly conducted weapons smuggling for the Houthis.

The third category of sanctions targeted Houthi aviation companies and procurement networks. OFAC indicated that Houthi procurement and financial operatives have attempted to utilize the group's international networks to purchase aircraft for use in smuggling and revenue-generation schemes. The group has collaborated with a US-designated, Houthi-aligned Yemeni businessman, Muhammad al-Sunaydar, to establish two new airlines based in Sana'a: Barash Aviation and Sama Airlines. Barash Aviation, an air cargo transportation company, has assisted the Houthis' efforts to purchase a commercial jet aircraft, which Houthi leaders planned to use to transport illicit cargo through Sana'a Airport. In early 2025, Barash Aviation and Sama Airlines attempted to partner with US-designated and convicted arms dealer **Viktor Anatolijevitch Bout** to purchase suitable commercial aircraft.

The last category of sanctions targeted vessels, as well as their owners and operators, that violated US sanctions by discharging oil derivatives at the Ras Issa port after an April 4 deadline. The Albarraq Shipping Co. and its sole director, Ebrahim Ahmed Abdullah al-Matari, were designated for facilitating the delivery of oil products to Ras Issa via the vessel *Albarraq Z*, as was the ship's captain, Ahmad Ismail. OFAC also designated the captains of four previously designated vessels that delivered petroleum products to Houthi-controlled ports in Hudadyah between April and June last year.

The new sanctions are part of an intensive US campaign to suffocate the group financially. But the Houthis' established black-market activities and trade with other sanctioned entities make it unlikely that sanctions will erode their funding sources completely.

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Damage to the National Museum in Sana'a following Israeli airstrikes, September 11, 2025 // Sana'a Center Photo

The War on Yemen's Antiquities

Mohammed Ali Thamer

Yemen's antiquities have endured centuries of looting, smuggling, and trafficking, rooted in a consistent pattern of colonial exploitation that dates back to the 19th century. In his travel memoir *Vision of Yemen*, Yemeni-Jewish scholar Hayyim Habshush captured Western orientalists' fascination with Yemeni cultural and archeological wealth, drawing on his experience accompanying French orientalist Joseph Halévy on an archaeological expedition to Yemen. Such fascination often turned predatory. Under British colonial rule, Aden emerged as a major hub for the trafficking of antiquities. Yemeni scholar and archaeologist Mohammed Abdulqader Bafaqih, in his 1980s book *Orientalists and the Antiquities of Yemen*, notes that "law in Aden was the will of the colonizer, which did not conflict with encouraging the trade in antiquities despite knowing that they were stolen." Consequently, British museums today remain replete with thousands of Yemeni artifacts."^[1]

A significant number of Yemen's valuable artifacts have been smuggled out of the country, with many now residing in museums around the world. Compounding matters, Yemen's ongoing conflict has led to a substantial increase in violations against archaeological sites, historical landmarks, and museums. These violations include aerial bombardments, ground attacks, bombings, demolition, and other forms of damage; many of these attacks were coordinated and intentional. Some cultural sites have been deliberately used for military purposes by warring parties involved in the conflict. Cultural sites have also been indiscriminately targeted, including aerial raids by the Saudi-led coalition and, more recently, US and Israeli strikes, the damage from which still needs to be adequately assessed. Taken together, these attacks have created a profound and irreplaceable loss,

¹ Mohammed Abdulqader Bafaqih, *Orientalists and the Antiquities of Yemen*, Yemeni Center for Studies and Research, Sana'a, Vol. I, 1988, pp. 33–34.

rapidly undermining Yemen's cultural heritage.

The attacks on cultural heritage listed in this article cover a twelve-year period from 2014 to 2025. Information is drawn from the author's experience and expertise as the Director General of Cultural Statistics at the Sana'a-based Ministry of Culture^[2] since 2011, his own contributions to the development of the Yemeni Archaeological Atlas (2014), "A Storm over History", a catalog on cultural heritage destruction (2018), and various annual cultural indicators reports prepared by the ministry. While several of these works, including the annual cultural indicators, remain unpublished internal records, they constitute data-collection efforts by the ministry's technical staff during this period. The analysis also draws on data from the Sana'a-based Yemen's Central Statistical Organization and the Yemen Data Project, an independent initiative to collect and disseminate data on the war for purposes of transparency and accountability.

A Legacy Under Threat: Attacks on Heritage

The Yemeni Archaeological Atlas, published by the Sana'a-based Ministry of Culture, documented 2,318 distinct archaeological sites throughout the republic as of 2014, the year surveys and expeditions in Yemen were halted.^[3] Based on data synthesized from the Annual Indicators of the Ministry of Culture for 2015-2025, the 2023 Annual Statistical Book from the Sana'a-based Central Statistical Organization,^[4] and the Yemen Data Project (2015-2025),^[5] approximately 477 of these sites have been destroyed in Yemen over the course of the war (Figure 1). This destruction, whether total or partial, extends to Yemen's most prestigious landmarks, including damage to the five Yemeni cities inscribed on the World Heritage List—the Old City in Sana'a, Zabid, Shibam in Hadramawt, and the Ancient Kingdom of Saba in Marib and Sirwah. In addition, eight sites from the World Heritage Tentative List — Sa'ada, Thula, Baraqish, Jibla, Taiz, Al-Makha, Hareeb, and Shibam Kawkaban — have sustained damage, as have other nominations submitted to UNESCO, including the Old City in Ibb and Aden, and several locations in Hajjah.

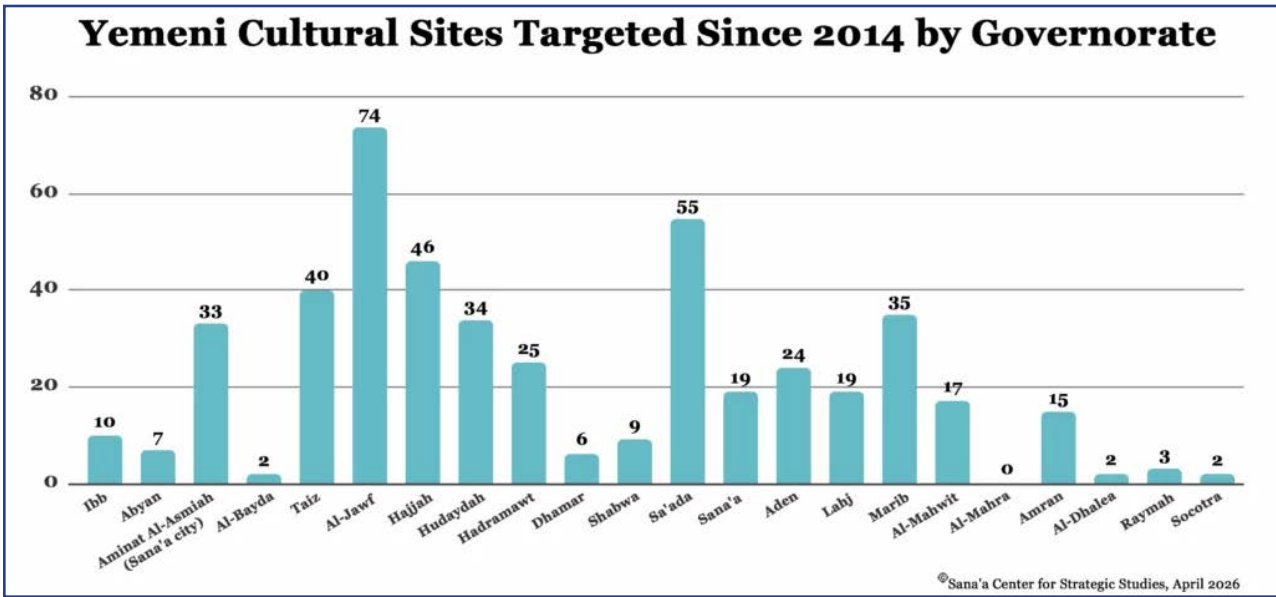
² The Ministry of Culture, like all Yemeni governmental ministries, has been bifurcated during the conflict, with one entity operating under Houthi authorities in Sana'a and another operating in Aden under the internationally recognized government.

³ "The Yemeni Archaeological Atlas: Archaeological Sites and Historical Landmarks Across Yemen," Ministry of Culture, Sana'a, 2014, pp. 1-10.

⁴ The Central Statistical Organization has also split during the conflict, with one entity in Sana'a and another in Aden.

⁵ The Yemen Data Project database is publicly accessible and provides excel datasets documenting airstrikes conducted by the Saudi-led coalition, the US, and Israel. See: <https://yemendataproject.org/>

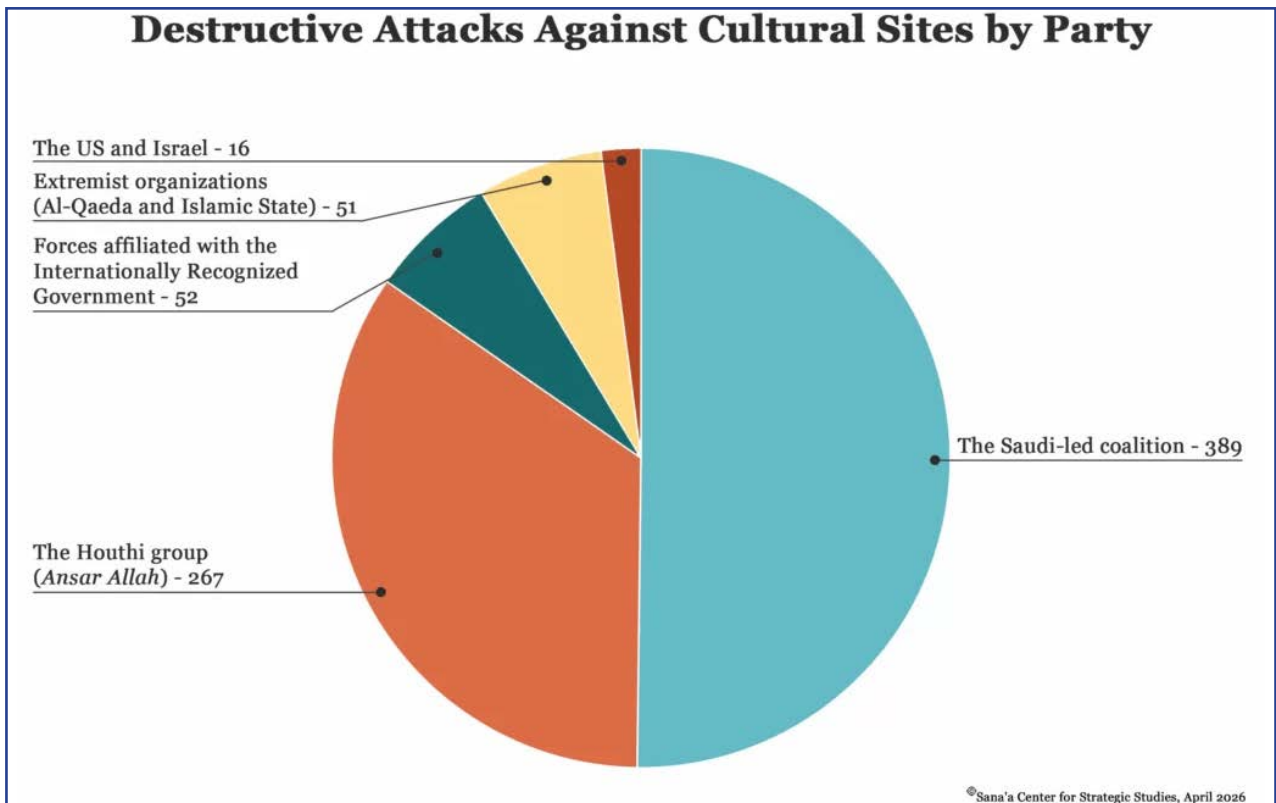
Figure 1



Source for Figures 1-3: Data synthesized from the Annual Indicators of the Ministry of Culture for 2015-2025, the 2023 Annual Statistical Book from the Sana'a-based Central Statistical Organization, and the Yemen Data Project (2015-2025).

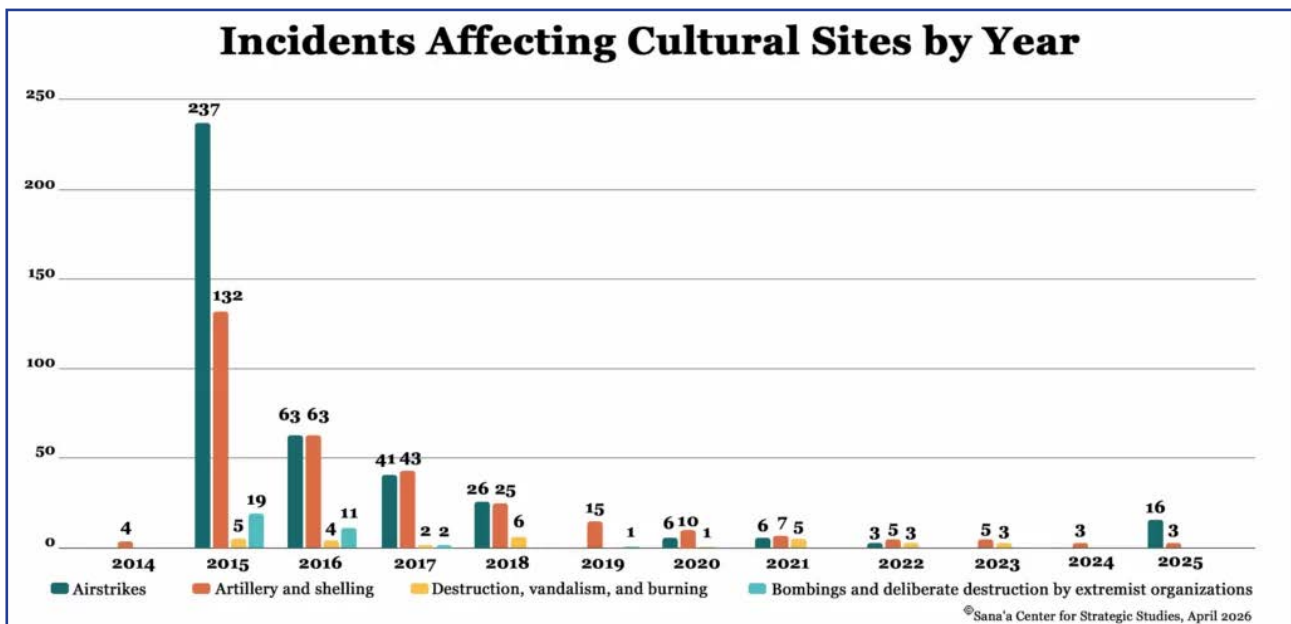
The governorate of Al-Jawf ranked first in the number of attacks on cultural sites, followed by Sa'ada, Hajjah, Taiz, Marib, and Sana'a city (Amanat al-Asimah), with the remaining incidents distributed across other governorates, culminating in a total of 775 documented destructive operations carried out by the various warring parties (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



The Saudi-led coalition **accounted** for the lion's share with 389 attacks,^[6] followed by the Houthi group with 267. The Houthis have also been documented using archaeological sites for military purposes and launching hostile actions from historic fortresses. In August 2014, their fighters seized the ancient city of **Baraqish** and used it as a military site, which resulted in it being targeted by numerous Saudi-led coalition airstrikes by the coalition. Before their withdrawal in early April 2016, Houthi forces **planted landmines** on its outskirts. Elsewhere in Yemen, several religious shrines have been damaged or completely obliterated, including in deliberate demolitions by extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Figure 3



The year 2015 stands as the most devastating period for Yemen's archaeological heritage. While airstrikes accounted for a significant portion of the damage, the date reflects a complex reality: a single military operation often comprised multiple strikes and bombings, though these are frequently recorded as a single event. Beyond aerial bombardment, cultural sites were further decimated by ground-based attacks, including the use of landmines and car bomb attacks by extremist organizations, foremost among them Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

⁶ The Yemen Data Project database provides detailed information on the number of airstrikes targeting Yemen during the period 2015-2025, with Excel dataset provided for each actor. These include: air raids conducted by the Saudi-led coalition (Published Air Raids Database from March 26, 2015 to April 30, 2022); Israel (Israeli Strikes, July 2024-June 2025); and the United States (Operation Rough Rider, March 15-May 6, 2025).

The Plundering of Yemeni Museums

During the conflict, Yemen's national museums have faced extensive looting and destruction of their artifacts. **Twelve** of the country's **22 museums** were looted or damaged. Foremost among these was the destruction of the Regional Museum in Dhamar, which contained **12,500 pieces**. The War Museum in Aden and the National Museum in Taiz, which housed **45,000 artifacts, were destroyed**. Other museums in Aden, Mukalla, and Ataq were looted. The museums in Ibb governorate (Al-Oud, Al-Mashneh, Dhafar, Jibla) were almost completely looted, and most of the War Museum's collection in Sana'a was confiscated. Museums that were shelled during the conflict became especially vulnerable to looting, and several thefts of their collections occurred, all of which happened with the consent or facilitation of the warring parties, despite repeated international **appeals** to protect antiquities.

Looting and Illicit Trade

The ongoing war has also ushered in a new wave of looting of Yemen's cultural sites, particularly in Marib, Al-Jawf, and Shabwa. Looters, who have grown increasingly ruthless, now fall into two categories: gold hunters and artifact hunters. Gold hunters often target ancient tombs, especially those carved into mountains by the Sabaeans and Himyarites, digging, vandalizing, and tunneling in pursuit of treasure. This often results in the desecration of these historical sites, as seen in regions such as Mawiya in Taiz and Dhafar in Ibb Governorate, and in the vandalization of ancient mummies.

Meanwhile, artifact hunters have turned the antiquities trade into a lucrative black market, with **brokers** and dealers facilitating the flow of stolen goods to international auctions and private collections. As demand grows, looting has become more precise, further damaging Yemen's archaeological heritage. The security vacuum, ongoing military operations, and the lack of coordination between warring factions make it extremely difficult to protect these sites.

Hundreds of archaeological sites have reportedly been subjected to **looting** during the war, with **2023** recorded as the peak year. However, there are no comprehensive national statistics that provide precise figures, as data typically comes from field studies, local documentation projects, or reports and assessments from international organizations, none of which have been possible amidst the war.^[7] As a result, it is impossible to determine the exact number of artifacts stolen or the precise sites from which they were looted. Many artifacts have lost a significant part of their scholarly value and the contextual information that could have been obtained from them because the sites from which they were taken are unknown^[8]. Estimates of the number of Yemeni artifacts abroad **range** from 10,000 to 14,000. According to the Sana'a-based General Authority for Antiquities and Museums, which has **issued** lists of looted antiquities, 8,000 were

⁷ Interview with Dr. Hussein al-Aidarous, Director General of Antiquities in Seyoun, September 11, 2025.

⁸ Munir Ariki, "Yemeni antiquities and the dangers of war and natural disasters [AR]," *Journal of the General Union of Arab Archaeologists*, Issue (24), 2021, p. 560.

smuggled out of Yemen during the war.

An Absence of Oversight and Transparency

Yemen's antiquities have traditionally fallen under the **authority** of the General Organization for Antiquities and Museums (GOAM) in Sana'a, the official body mandated to protect, study, and promote them.^[9] The institutionalization of Yemeni archeology began in the wake of Yemen's 1962 September Revolution. This led to the creation of the General Directorate for Antiquities in 1963, followed by the General Authority for Antiquities and Libraries in 1973. Parallel efforts took place in southern Yemen, where an antiquities department was established in Aden in 1962. Following unification in 1990, these entities were merged under the Ministry of Culture. GOAM serves as the primary successor to these early initiatives, overseeing the preservation and promotion of Yemen's vast historical legacy.

Since the war, however, GOAM's work has largely ceased, archaeological surveys have stopped, and foreign missions have departed. Antiquities are no longer a priority for any of the warring parties, who are preoccupied with the conflict and unwilling to assume responsibility for preserving cultural heritage.^[10]

But this responsibility cannot be shirked or blamed on others, nor can it be addressed simply through press releases and condemnation. It is grounded in local and international legal frameworks, including Yemen's Antiquities Law (1994), the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property, the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Illicit Trade in Cultural Property, and the 1972 World Heritage Convention, among others. The repeated calls from UNESCO further underscore the responsibility to act to protect cultural heritage. Initiatives have included a UN Security Council meeting focused on the protection of cultural property on **November 30, 2017**, the **adoption of UN Resolution 2347** on the protection of cultural heritage, and a demand by French researchers for the Security Council to issue a resolution banning the smuggling and trade of Yemeni antiquities, similar to those for **Iraqi and Syrian** antiquities. Antiquities authorities, international experts, foreign diplomatic missions, civil society organizations, and **Yemeni professors** have all made appeals to hold the parties to the conflict responsible for what is happening to Yemeni antiquities.

⁹ The General Authority for Antiquities and Museums (GOAM) in Aden previously operated as a branch of its counterpart in Sana'a. Since the war, it has become a separate entity, with no coordination between the two.

¹⁰ Munir Ariki, "Yemeni antiquities and the dangers of war and natural disasters," *Journal of the General Union of Arab Archaeologists*, Issue (24), 2021, p. 557.

How Do We Save Our Heritage?

If the situation remains as it is, Yemen's antiquities face a very grim future. There is an urgent need to raise awareness and educate the public on the importance of antiquities and cultural sites as invaluable historical treasures that must be preserved, and to advocate for their inclusion in school curricula, development plans, and national policy. A comprehensive guide should be issued that catalogs and describes destroyed archaeological sites and antiquities smuggled and sold abroad. This would serve as a legal reference for competent authorities and an academic reference for researchers. Concurrently, all parties to the conflict should be urged to sign a code of honor to refrain from targeting antiquities and their sites. Additionally, a UN resolution should be issued to criminalize the sale and trade of Yemeni antiquities.

The Yemeni civil war has not only claimed human lives but has also struck at the very soul of Yemen, embodied in its ancient heritage and antiquities. If urgent measures are not taken, the world stands to lose the legacy of one of humanity's oldest and richest civilizations.

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This publication was produced as part of the second phase of the Yemen Peace Forum (YPF), a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues. The YPF is funded by the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.



Houthi supporters in Dhamar demonstrate in solidarity with Iran and Lebanon, April 3, 2026. // Sana'a Center Photo

The Houthis Face a Fateful Choice

Abdulghani Al-Iryani and Bilqees Al-Lahbi

Yemenis and the wider world are watching closely to see what the Houthi movement (*Ansar Allah*) will do if Iran asks them to participate in its defense and join other members of the “Axis of Resistance” in fighting against the military aggression of the United States and Israel. There has been a heated debate over the Houthis’ relationship with Tehran between those who believe that the group follows Tehran’s instructions and executes plans conceived in the Iranian capital, and those who contend that the group maintains an independent strategy and that its decisions often merely intersect with Iran’s interests. To shed light on this question, it is useful to compare the Houthis with the other members of the Axis of Resistance that have already engaged in the current regional war.

The Houthis have key differences from other Axis members. The level of doctrinal affiliation is an important distinction. Houthis are Zaidi Shia whose theology is so similar to that of the Shafi’i Sunni majority that they are often described as “the Sunnah of the Shia and the Shia of the Sunnah,” in essence positioning them in the middle of the great sectarian divide of Islam. The main difference between Zaidism and Shafi’i Sunnism concerns the leadership of the *Umma*, the body of Muslim believers. The Zaidi school reserves the right to rule over the descendants of Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein, grandsons of the Prophet Mohammed through his descendants Ali and Fatimah Al Zahra’a – a bloodline to which the Houthi leadership traces its roots. As such, Zaidis believe in the leadership (*wilayah*) of Abdelmalek al-Houthi. In contrast, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq are both Twelver Shia groups that subscribe to the concept of *wilayat al-faqih*, a jurisprudential concept that can grant political and

religious authority to Islamic jurists, including those who may be outside the Prophet's bloodline. Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's first Supreme Leader and the primary proponent of the doctrine, was not descended from the Prophet, while his successor, the late Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, was a descendant (*sayyid*).

Some militants on both the Twelver and Zaidi sides consider the other to be heretics. Although a notable proportion of the group's mid-level leadership has reportedly adopted Twelver Shiism,^[1] the majority of these do not pledge allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader. Moreover, their connection to the Shia concept of *wilayat al-faqih* is looser than that of their counterparts in Lebanon and Iraq, and is based more on politics and values than on doctrine and ideology. For the Zaidis, Abdelmalek al-Houthi is seen as the learned guardian and imam who meets the conditions for political and religious leadership. There are also cultural distinctions due to the geographic distance between Yemen and Iran. Iran and Iraq share a border and a long history of contact. Iran and Lebanon's Shia communities have links stretching back to the Safavid Empire, and, in more recent decades, Tehran has actively fostered political, social, and cultural connections with Lebanon's Shia community, particularly since the emergence of Hezbollah. Meanwhile, Yemen's geography places it more squarely into the geopolitical and religious sphere of Saudi influence.

However, the decisive difference is political. Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces have no viable alternative to their alliance with Iran. Hezbollah would not find support from any other party if it abandoned Iran; its military power would dissipate, and it would dissolve into the sectarian Lebanese state. Likewise, the Popular Mobilization Forces, which have leveraged Iranian support to control important revenue streams, would lose access to those resources.

The Houthis, by contrast, have an alternative: the proposal put forward by Saudi Arabia during negotiations in 2023, under which the group would agree to distance itself from Iran in exchange for Saudi support and legitimation of its power. It is important to remember that the demographic base from which the Houthis emerged has historically been more socially and economically tied to Saudi Arabia than to the rest of Yemen. Until the mid-1980s, the "Arab riyal" (i.e., the Saudi riyal) was the dominant currency north of Sana'a, starting from Amran, just 50 kilometers away. In some northern regions, it is still used more than the Yemeni rial. While sectarian radicalization may have distanced the Houthis' demographic base from Saudi Arabia, peace and normalization after the war could restore those ties, offering a reasonable alternative to the alliance with Iran.

1 A Houthi leader in Beirut, Lebanon, claimed in a 2017 interview that some 20 percent of the membership of the Houthi movement had embraced Twelver Shiism.

The organizational differences between the Houthis, Hezbollah, and the Popular Mobilization Forces are even more pronounced. The Houthis control state institutions in Sana'a and most revenue streams, including taxes and zakat. Their reliance on Iran is largely based on military cooperation—arms, training, and planning—which is useful in wartime and constitutes Iran's primary instrument of leverage on the Houthis. In peacetime, however, Iran lacks the capacity to provide financial and developmental support. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, can offer economic and developmental aid—as it already does in most government-held territories—along with something Iran cannot provide, regardless of its economic strength: employment opportunities for millions of Yemeni workers and professionals. Remittances from Yemeni expatriates in Saudi Arabia have been among the most important sources of national income over the past fifty years. It is difficult to imagine a successful Yemeni economy without such revenues and a special Yemeni-Saudi relationship.

The Houthis actively supported Gaza in alignment with the Axis of Resistance, disrupted international shipping in the Red Sea, and entered into direct confrontation with Israel, the United States, and the West. Despite the magnitude of the challenge, they endured a massive US military campaign until Washington decided to halt operations against them. The source of their resilience was popular support from Yemenis, given the central place of the Palestinian cause in the public imagination. But despite the casualties it has suffered, Iran does not elicit similar sentiment. Most Yemenis supported Saddam Hussein during the First Gulf War, and many even fought alongside the Iraqi army.

The Houthis are aware that they became a card in Iran's hand due to the mismanagement of Yemen's political elite during the Sa'ada wars. A faction of that elite—aligned with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh—sought to use them to weaken a rival faction led by General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and his allies in the Islah party. Saleh's faction supported the Houthis in the first five Sa'ada wars, even supplying them with anti-tank missiles, which they used to defeat the 1st Armored Division led by Ali Mohsen. In the sixth war, however—when Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, commanded government forces—the support came from Ali Mohsen's faction, which handed over at least 10 fully equipped military camps to the Houthis.

The Houthis also know that Iran understands that its influence will not retain the same value after the war in Yemen ends. Iran is not blind to the fact that the Houthis nearly concluded a deal with Saudi Arabia in 2023, which would have weakened Iranian influence. During nuclear negotiations with the United States in Vienna in 2021, Iran even offered their assistance in ending the Yemen war, but the Americans refused to engage in side discussions at the time.^[2] The prospect that Iran may make a concession on its support of the Houthis in its negotiations with the United States is a significant possibility with historical precedent.

² Interview with a US official in Muscat, March 2023.

Another reason for the Houthis' reluctance to fully join the battle alongside the Axis of Resistance lies in the restraint shown by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Despite being targeted by roughly a third of Iranian missiles and drones, they have refrained from participating militarily. They are aware that Israel and the United States want to drag them into a confrontation with Iran that would exhaust both sides, allowing Israel to emerge as the dominant regional power and continue advancing its "Greater Israel" project. If the Houthis were to engage seriously in the conflict, their role would likely involve disrupting Red Sea shipping and closing the GCC's only remaining maritime outlet—thereby contributing to the American-Israeli plan to draw Gulf states into war. This would eliminate any future opportunity for a deal with Saudi Arabia and make a military resolution the only option for dealing with the Houthis, which the US and Israel have already shown a preference for.


The Houthis understand that their long-term survival depends on reintegration within their Arab neighborhood. Several Yemen observers reported that the group reassured Saudi officials that it would not participate in the war in a meaningful way unless the threat to the Axis of Resistance became existential.

In the early days of the war, Houthi media **focused** on the need to reach a deal with Saudi Arabia, coupling calls for agreement with blunt threats to strengthen their negotiating position. This reflected their concern that a crushing Iranian defeat might embolden their Yemeni rivals to the south, now fully backed by Saudi Arabia, to confront them militarily. While such an outcome would not serve the primary interests of Yemen or Saudi Arabia—namely restoring stability in Yemen and rebuilding the countries' special relationship—it is a rational concern from the Houthi perspective. Saudi Arabia has wisely kept the door to peace ajar at this critical moment. However, it is clear that the agreement proposed by the Houthis in 2023, which would have enshrined Houthi control over northern Yemen, is no longer viable. Riyadh now realizes the risks posed by the Houthis' adventurism and their ideological commitment to controlling Mecca. Looking forward, the Houthis are likely to continue participating in some action against Israel in the coming period, but take no impactful measures to block maritime commerce in the Red Sea. Such action would kill any chance to be part of a peaceful settlement to the Yemen conflict and could instead risk prolonging it and, even worse, could ultimately lead to the disintegration of the Yemeni state. In the coming period, the group will be faced with a decision that determines their fate – and that of Yemen as a whole.

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This commentary is part of a series of publications produced by the Sana'a Center and funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Reimagining Yemen's Peace in the Regional Landscape program. The series seeks to bolster peacebuilding efforts in Yemen by strategically examining the country's security and economic ties with the broader Gulf and Red Sea region.



Gas flaring at the Al-Uqla oil facility in Arma'a, Shabwa, August 4, 2025 // Sana'a Center Photo

Oil Spills in Shabwa: Residents Bear the Heavy Cost Alone

Nasser Jameel and Hana'a Abdurabu

The governorate of Shabwa possesses a unique geography, ranging from fertile plains to long coastlines, mountain highlands, and vast deserts. It also holds rich natural resources, such as oil and gas. This natural wealth made it the site of the largest investment project in Yemen: the Balhaf liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal.

However, Balhaf and other hydrocarbon projects in the governorate have affected both the environment and the population without sufficient consideration of long-term consequences. Oil spills and pollution from the poorly regulated sector have caused damage to residents' health, killed livestock, and contaminated farmland. In recent years, residents have reported an increase in cases of cancer and kidney disease in Al-Rawda and Mayfa'a districts in eastern Shabwa.^[1]

Amid growing community concern about a potential link between these cases and oil spills in the area, the governorate's oncology center has neither officially confirmed nor denied the fears. Emerging **studies**, however, have begun to shed light on the **effects** of oil spills in Yemen, including **recent** research focusing on Shabwa. Yet the current level of attention is nowhere near adequate. Residents of affected areas are calling for urgent and sustained government intervention to address the mounting threat to their lives and livelihoods.

¹ Interview with Adel Bamahriz, resident of Qarn Bamahriz, Al-Rawdah district, September 1, 2025; and Head of the Agricultural Development and Rehabilitation Association in Ghurair, Al-Rawdah district, December 7, 2025.

The Decay of Shabwa's Oil Infrastructure

Oil was discovered in Shabwa more than 38 years ago, in 1987, when a Soviet company, Technoexport,^[2] found the first reserves west of Block 4 (Ayad). Discoveries then continued across four main blocks, managed by local and foreign companies. These discoveries represented a significant economic turning point, opening the door to extensive investment in oil infrastructure in the governorate, but they fell short of providing adequate risk-management regulations.

The expansion of investment in Shabwa's oil sector has brought with it significant challenges. Sector governance **remains weak** and is largely oriented toward the interests of foreign companies and the central government, with limited consideration for local communities, environmental impacts, or regulatory oversight. This exclusion has fueled tribal sabotage, as residents see no tangible benefits, such as jobs or infrastructure, further exacerbating underlying tensions between local communities on the one hand and the government and operating companies on the other hand.

Local residents have complained of widespread oil leaks that have impacted large areas of agricultural land and contaminated water wells. There are several underlying causes, mainly the deterioration of the supply line infrastructure due to technical and security failures, and the lack of replacements for aging pipelines. These systemic failures have led to a contaminated landscape and a local population that navigates this contamination on its own.

According to a **statement** from the Shabwa Branch of the General Authority for Environmental Protection Agency, the pipeline extending from the Ayad facility to the port of Al-Nushayma has not undergone maintenance since its construction in 1987, but it remains operational despite repeated sabotage from local tribesmen who feel they are not benefiting from the oil in their lands. Without maintenance, oil leaks have become a permanent condition, creating chronic pollution in the districts through which the pipeline passes. Oil spills originate in the Lahya area of Habban district, pass through the Azzan area of Mayfa'a district, and reach areas in Al-Rawda district, such as Ghayl al-Sa'idi and Qarn Bamahraz. The leaks pollute agricultural lands, wadis, and the water sources upon which residents rely.

Prompted by the hardship faced by local residents, an agricultural association in the Ghurair area of the Al-Rawda district appealed in December 2025 to the local authority and operating companies to maintain the pipeline, clean up oil spills, and remove contaminated soil. Yet, no substantial action has been taken; visits by specialized committees have been limited to assessing the problem and performing emergency repairs, without addressing the root causes.

² "A brief history of oil exploration in Yemen," Ministry of Oil and Minerals website: www.mom-ye.com/site-ar/interestson/تاريخية-نبذة

An Extended Impact

Adel Bamahriz, a resident of Qarn Bamahriz in Al-Rawdah district, noted that persistent oil leaks have had wide-ranging impacts on local life, affecting water sources, soil quality, vegetation, and public health.^[3] According to him, leaks have contaminated the community's primary water sources and caused significant damage to crops and arable land.

Abdelsalam bin Samaa,^[4] the Executive Director of the Al-Ata Foundation, a local initiative for environmental protection, notes that agricultural output has declined significantly. In the Ghayl Al Sa'idi area, local farms, once full of palms, mangoes, and fodder, a primary source of livelihood for local families in the area, have been lost, along with Al Thaqba trees (*Thespesia populnea*) extending from the Al Rawda junction to the Lamatar area. Livestock have also been affected, poisoned by consuming oil-contaminated water. Even worse, residents' health has been directly impacted, with local reports of extensive skin and respiratory problems among residents, in addition to an increase in cases of cancer and kidney disease.^[5] A study published in March assessing soil pollution near the crude oil pipeline in Shabwa confirmed soil contamination with hazardous substances, including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). These compounds persist in the soil for extended periods and are notoriously associated with genetic mutations and cancer, posing a significant threat to both human health and the environment.

Turning a Blind Eye

There are clear fundamental problems in the management of the country's oil sector, and the government's policy of turning a blind eye to the crisis in Shabwa demonstrates the prioritization of economic interests over residents' safety. This violates Yemeni law, specifically Articles 35 and 36 of Law No. (26) of 1995 concerning Environmental Protection, which outlines accountability for damage in such cases. The persistent disregard for communities' safety also undermines trust in official authorities, further complicating efforts to address the damage and threatening local stability.

In response, notable local initiatives have emerged. These include efforts to document the damage caused by oil leakage, the formation of local committees to follow up on the issue with the governorate's local authorities and the relevant ministry, and the organization of local campaigns to raise residents' awareness of the impact of oil leakages. Despite limited resources, communities in Shabwa have shown incredible self-reliance in their

³ Interview with Adel Bamahriz, resident of Qarn Bamahriz, Al-Rawdah district, September 1, 2025.

⁴ Interview with Abdelsalam bin Samaa, Executive Director of the Al-Ata Foundation and a resident of Al-Rawdah district, December 6, 2025.

⁵ Unpublished report submitted to the Shabwa local authority and the Ministry of Water and Environment. The report was written by a local environmental team formed in Shabwa on March 2, 2020, to assess the environmental impacts of oil leakages in the areas of Ghurair in Al-Rawdah and Lahiya in Habban district.

efforts to mitigate the effects of this pollution. But oil spills in Shabwa can no longer be treated as accidental or emergency events. Instead, they must be analyzed as a problem within the structural framework of oil sector management. Both the government and locally operating oil companies must comply with national and international laws and safety standards to protect the environment, the health and livelihoods of affected communities, and the sustainability of natural resources.

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Hana'a Abdurabu is a Yemeni writer who focuses on social issues and political transformations in Yemen, particularly in Shabwa governorate. Her work highlights the conditions of women living in isolated rural communities. She has published articles in various local and regional media outlets, combining field engagement with social analysis. Hana'a holds a Bachelor's degree in English from the University of Aden.

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Anonymous hackers carry out a cyber attack. // Photo credit: Alamy/Dragos Condrea

Electronic Blackmail in Yemen: A Digital Weapon Exploiting State Fragility

Bashar al-Aqab

Cybersecurity has become an inseparable part of national security and stability, as the digital realm now encompasses communications, administration, services, and vital data. With the growing reliance on digital services, the potential risks from technical vulnerabilities and the absence of institutional protection are rising. In Yemen, cybersecurity is constrained by limited technical infrastructure and weak institutional frameworks governing data access. Those who control the telecommunications sector can regulate information flows, monitor individuals, and direct public discourse, turning «digital infrastructure» into a tool of control rather than a mere technical service. This makes implementing cybersecurity a complex issue, as technical factors intersect with institutional structures and societal norms. In the meantime, the lack of legislation, enforcement, and digital protections leaves many at risk of exploitation, particularly Yemeni women.

Data from the [Digital 2024 – Yemen report](#), an annual report that compiles digital data on internet usage and social media trends worldwide, and [from Internet Society Pulse](#), a non-profit platform that aggregates data from reliable sources, highlight the limitations and underdevelopment of Yemen's digital infrastructure. The Digital 2024 report estimated that internet users numbered approximately 6.16 million, 17.7 percent of the total population, while active mobile connections reached nearly 20.83 million,

representing 59.8 percent. The number of social media users was 3.6 million, or 10.3 percent of the population. Mobile networks remain the primary means of internet access, and the digital divide among segments of Yemeni society persists, reflecting the fragility of the communication infrastructure and the limited reach of modern digital services. Connectivity is treated by users as a scarce resource that requires careful management. Internet use is tied to periods when the network and power are available, and most rely on low-cost Android smartphones, which account for the majority of smart devices in Yemen.

The weak institutional structures in Yemen have given rise to local initiatives. Small technical support networks have been established in neighborhoods and shops, where maintenance and app cloning are conducted informally. Over time, these activities have given rise to a social-digital system based on expertise and practical knowledge, alongside attempts to develop electronic payment services and simple digital transactions. However, these practices open the door wide to cyber risks, as they prioritize low costs over security and grant access to personal data that can be exploited, including for digital blackmail and fraud.

Data from Digital 2024 and a special [Reuters](#) report indicate a digital gender gap; Yemeni males constitute the vast majority of internet and social media users. Women make up just 13 percent of Facebook users in the country. This disparity reflects a set of economic, social, and knowledge constraints that limit women's access to technology. The high cost of devices and connectivity, a lack of technical skills, and cultural restrictions on internet use lead to cumulative digital marginalization.

Yet women are increasingly the victims of cybercrime. Digital loopholes are exploited to create one of the most dangerous and complex forms of gender-based violence, as criminals manipulate societal norms to carry out electronic blackmail and online harassment. Personal photos and information are exploited in threatening practices that damage reputation and social standing. Yemeni society places the burden of "family honor" on women. Any breach of privacy, even if accidental or the result of a hack, becomes a source of social punishment and isolation. Consequently, the [threat](#) of publishing photos or personal conversations is often an effective means of silencing victims, given a deep-seated fear of reputational damage.

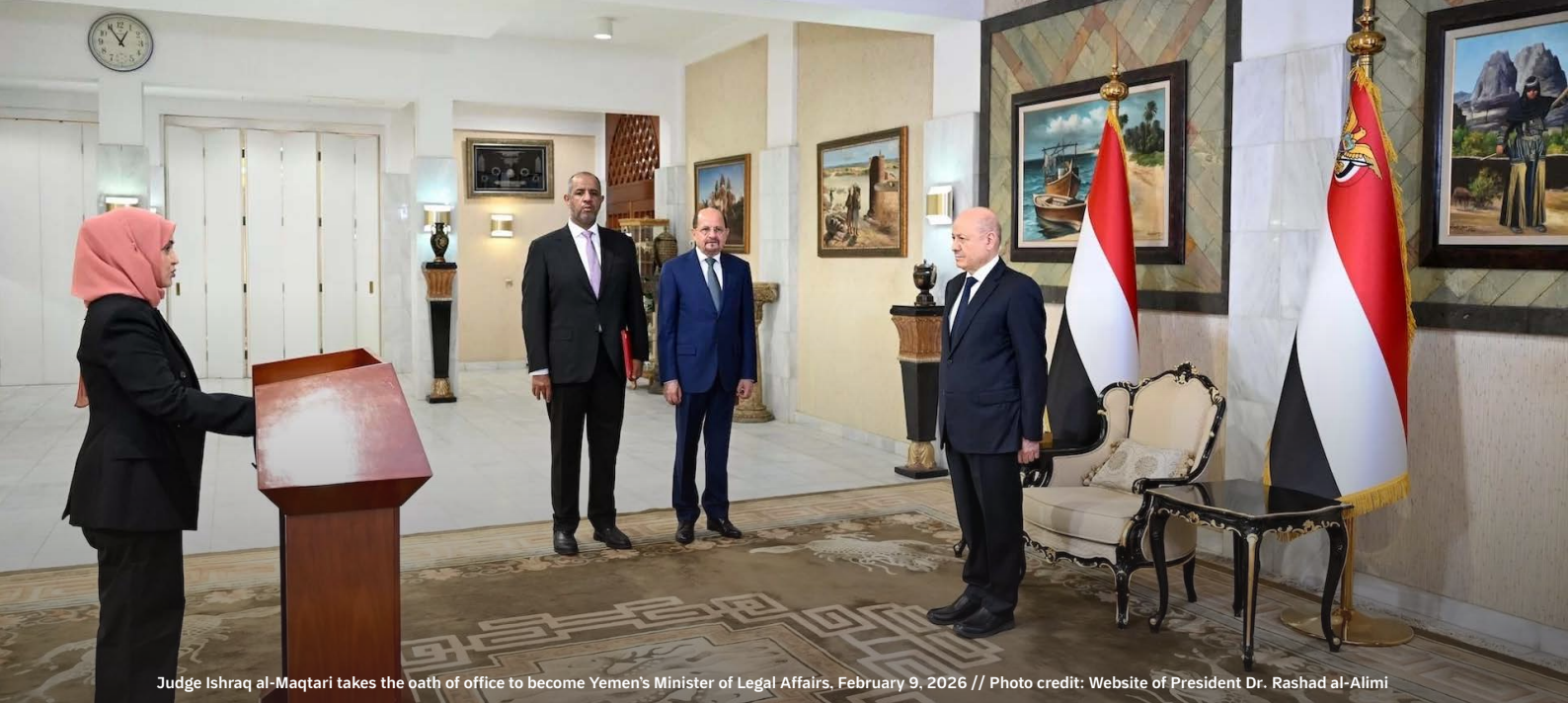
Social and educational constraints exacerbate the problem. Many Yemeni women lack [access](#) to secure personal devices and the digital skills and equitable education needed to use them safely. The gap is not only a technical one; reliance on local intermediaries or informal maintenance shops, combined with restrictions on women's freedom of movement and ability to seek help directly, increases their susceptibility to exploitation and turns privacy violations into mechanisms of social and financial pressure.

Another challenge is Yemen's weak cybersecurity: the country lacks a national cybersecurity strategy, legislation to protect personal data, or laws to combat cybercrime. This legislative vacuum leaves individuals and institutions exposed to data breaches, ransomware attacks, and digital surveillance activities. The weakness of the justice system and the failure of existing laws to adapt to the nature of digital crimes allow perpetrators to escape punishment, making victims, particularly **women**, even more vulnerable. Often, these cases are handled through the prism of protecting honor rather than protecting rights, allowing perpetrators to escape punishment while victims are punished with stigma and blame. In the absence of specialized cybersecurity agencies or technical and legal support centers, Yemeni women remain exposed to a predatory digital space where blackmail is entrenched as a tool of social and economic oppression. The lack of legal frameworks for governance and an institution to monitor violations and prosecute offenders has turned the digital realm in Yemen into an open space for blackmail and surveillance, with the government unwilling or unable to protect its citizens.

In a conflict-affected state like Yemen, with weak political stability or institutional capacity, alternative approaches may be necessary. Digital literacy could be strengthened to protect citizens, with support from informal education, community initiatives, media, and civil society organizations. Public discussions could be held about digital privacy and dignity as rights in themselves. With sufficient engagement, the normalization of digital violence can be curbed, even in the absence of legislative frameworks. But until the government implements substantial reforms to strengthen cybersecurity, Yemeni society will be left to face escalating digital risks, with few tools to fight them.

Bashar al-Aqab is the Chairperson and Founder of the Jaadal Center for Peace and a Cyber Security student at the University of Jordan. Bashar has a strong interest in digital security, peace, and community coexistence. He has extensive experience in engaging youth, managing cultural projects, and leading community initiatives. His writings and contributions emphasize the importance of promoting digital security and fostering peace.

This publication was produced as part of the second phase of the Yemen Peace Forum (YPF), a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues. The YPF is funded by the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.



Judge Ishraq al-Maqtari takes the oath of office to become Yemen's Minister of Legal Affairs, February 9, 2026 // Photo credit: Website of President Dr. Rashad al-Alimi

Weaponizing Slander: The Dark Side of Defamation Campaigns Against Yemeni Women Leaders

Rim Mugahed, Bilqees Al-Lahbi, and Lara Uhlenhaut

The beginning of the year brought good news for Yemeni women: after six years of total **absence** from government, three women were appointed to the **new cabinet** formed in early February, followed by the historic naming of Yemen's first female **ambassador** to the United States in April.

Yemen's new administration emerged from a year of profound turbulence, shaped not only by the sweeping **events** reshaping the political landscape at the beginning of the year, but also by the tragic assassination of **Iftehan al-Mashhari** last September. Iftehan, a civil servant, was murdered in broad daylight, shot twenty times by **gunmen** linked to powerful local political factions in Taiz. The targeted assassination of a woman, unprecedented in Yemen's history, marked a new turning point in political violence in the country, rupturing long-standing informal "red lines" protecting women from physical harm and highlighting the growing risks faced by Yemeni women in leadership.

Last month's online targeting of high-profile women — from newly-appointed members of government to grassroots advocates — overshadowed the brief spell of optimism that greeted the new cabinet. Malicious, unsubstantiated, and thriving on an atmosphere of impunity, these defamation campaigns were deliberately launched, amplified with ease, and carried out with no personal cost to those behind them. Finding fertile ground in pre-existing social biases and rising discriminatory practices, the attacks required little proof to gain traction. To those watching, they served as a stark reminder of the heavy costs involved for women trying to enter an increasingly hostile public sphere.

Three Women, Three Patterns of Defamation

In late March, social media platforms were flooded with an incitement campaign targeting **Misk al-Maqrami**, the Director General of the Taiz Cooperative Park,^[1] a government-run recreational facility. What began as a dispute over a group of local residents entering the park without tickets became a case that exposed multiple layers of social inequality. Chief among them was racism, evident in the fact that Misk is a member of the muhammasheen, one of the most marginalized communities in Yemen, whose women are increasingly facing **well-documented** heightened risks since the war. Derogatory comments against Misk went viral on social media, with posts that alluded to or explicitly insulted her background. “It was both inhumane and terrifying,” said Misk, in an exchange with one of the authors. “If this is what is said to my face while I am in a position of authority, what is being said to our daughters in schools?”^[2]

Other factors were at play, not least impunity and the absence of law and governance. Taiz’s Cooperative Park is a revenue-generating scheme in a governorate where many resources are controlled by armed political factions, making its administration a point of contention among competing interests. Misk faced accusations of management failures and of deteriorating park conditions that, in reality, stemmed from broader governance failures.

As AI-manipulated images of Misk—depicting rats crawling all over her body—circulated across various social media platforms, leaks about Jamila Ali Raja’s appointment as ambassador to the US also surfaced, prompting a wave of online vitriol. Across social media platforms, she was described as unsuitable for an ambassadorship due to alleged associations with the Houthis, a well-rehearsed tactic often used to discredit candidates in a politically charged environment, regardless of gender. But scrutiny of Ali Raja extended beyond that. Both in the digital sphere and within private homes, her credentials were **questioned** with exacting, if selective scrutiny. Her age, credibility, familial ties, and professional competence were all **called into question** by segments of the public, despite her prominent position on the Consultation and Reconciliation Committee (CRC) and a distinguished career spanning decades.

Such targeting was not spontaneous. As regional dynamics shift and the “Yemen file” reaches a critical crossroads, the appointment of a woman to the US ambassadorship — one of the country’s most consequential diplomatic posts—follows six years of complete absence of women from government and unprecedented political marginalization. Landmark legal victories against defamers, won by **Dr. Olfat al-Daba’i**, a fellow member

¹ The Taiz Cooperative park includes a swimming pool, a restaurant, recreation spaces, and halls for entertainment events and meetings. While some amenities, such as the swimming pool and event halls, require an entrance fee, other recreational spaces are freely accessible to visitors.

² WhatsApp exchange between one of the authors and Misk al-Maqrami, March 24, 2026.

of the CRC and herself a victim of a defamatory online campaign, could help redefine the landscape of accountability by demonstrating that unhinged defamation campaigns carry legal consequences. Yet, instead of deterring perpetrators, attackers have resorted to the old playbook. Accusing individuals of serving local or regional agendas, a “ready-made” charge, is effective because it bypasses nuance and poisons public perception.

Not spared by the wave of hostile online commentary was Judge Ishraq al-Maqtari, the newly appointed Minister of Legal Affairs. The **scrutiny** she faced followed a more familiar path for Yemeni women. After taking the constitutional oath, observers took to social media to comment on her appearance and attire, reflecting a broader pattern in which women in the public eye are judged on their appearance to discredit them or question their moral character. In this framing, attire is no longer treated as a personal choice but as evidence of “depravity,” “deviation from values,” or “association with foreign entities,” familiar tropes women have become accustomed to. The female body itself becomes an alternative arena through which judgment is produced. It can simultaneously be used as a powerful tool of defamation, as the discussion immediately shifts to: “Is this woman—morally—qualified to hold this position?”

Beyond these inherent social and political dynamics, these campaigns gain exceptional momentum from one fact: these leaders are women. Their gender is fundamental to the intensity and nature of the backlash they face. Numerous reports and surveys highlight that Yemeni women are **disproportionately targeted** online, in a local context where reputational damage carries far-reaching consequences, impacting both physical and mental well-being. In Misk’s case, her story represents a complex intersection of historical marginalization, racism, and gender-based violence. For all three candidates and hundreds more before them, criticism and scrutiny come with a hyper-focused lens reserved for women stepping into positions of power, against the backdrop of a decline in women’s rights within an increasingly polarized social and political climate.

A Silver Lining: When Bystanders Become Allies

More often than not, women fight these battles alone, receiving none of the support of political, partisan, or tribal entities that a man of the same background or position would. This leaves them navigating a maze of tensions that stretches from the private home to the street and ultimately into the public eye. Unquestionably, the **digital space** in Yemen has become a primary site for harassment of women, yet it has also introduced a powerful new variable: in response to unprecedented digital violence and defamation, spontaneous, unorganized avenues of support have started to slowly emerge, mostly led by other women.

This support—bridging identity, political orientation, and generations—has drawn in young Yemeni women and men, who share the same values: rejecting inequality, violence, incitement, and racism. Support for the women subjected to these attacks has come from official political representatives, including the **Yemeni Socialist Party** Secretariat in Taiz, among others, and official institutions such as the **National Committee for Women**. These acts of vocal solidarity and resistance, however small, may lay the groundwork for a more organized movement capable of establishing accountability and checking the rise of defamation campaigns in Yemen. Broader civic actors, however, must be prepared to assume greater responsibility for supporting women.

Such support takes on renewed importance in a context where incitement can lead to tragedy; recent events have shown us with chilling clarity how unchecked rhetoric can become a prelude to deadly violence. The consequences of targeted violence against women in public life—regardless of rank or form— extend far beyond the harm done to the individual targeted. Such violence steadily shrinks the already deteriorated public space in which women move, day by day. It dims the ambitions of others who have not yet arrived. More worryingly, it emboldens those who face no accountability, whether shielded by arms and influence or by the anonymity and impunity afforded by social

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This publication was produced as part of the second phase of the Yemen Peace Forum (YPF), a Sana’a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues. The YPF is funded by the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

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The Yemen Review is produced by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. Launched in 2016, it aims to identify and assess current diplomatic, economic, political, military, security, humanitarian, and human rights developments related to Yemen.

In producing The Yemen Review, Sana'a Center staff throughout Yemen and around the world gather information, conduct research, and hold private meetings with local, regional, and international stakeholders in order to analyze domestic and international developments.

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